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Cut Bank
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All correspondence to:
CutBank
English Department, LA 133
University of Montana
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We're driving to Youngstown, my wife Mavis and me, for the funeral of a man Mavis slept with many years ago, who also happens to be her uncle. The first time I heard about this, it sounded like the stuff of daytime talk shows, where people lunge out of their seats to kick each other's asses and every third word is bleeped out by the censor, but actually my wife's uncle was only her uncle by marriage, and a marriage that didn't last very long to boot, so it's not as dramatic a situation as it seems at first. Nevertheless, it's the kind of thing Mavis doesn't like to talk about much. I didn't know about it when I married her, though of course it wouldn't have made a difference if I had. She's made her mistakes and I've made mine. It's like I always tell her: we're too old to start pretending now that we don't have a past.

For the first hundred miles or so, this trip feels like a bit of a vacation: last time we took a long drive like this, just the two of us, it was to Niagara Falls for our honeymoon. On our way up we drop in on Katie, my eight-year-old daughter, who lives with my ex-wife Gladys in Columbus, just to say hello, and after that there's something exciting about it being just the two of us on the open road, though our destination isn't exactly a thrilling one. At home, I asked Mavis why we had to go in the first place. "The old bastard's not even your uncle anymore," I said, which is true, though of course I know better. Mavis's family is Russian Orthodox; her grandparents were from the old country and didn't even speak English, and the word family has a broader definition for her than it does for me. As Mavis is fond of pointing out, I can't even bring myself to send Gladys a Christmas card, and we shared six years and a daughter together. In the car, I try reaching for Mavis's hand and, when she ignores me, settle for putting mine on her thigh, though she just keeps on staring out the window like she's in the car all by herself. In all of the silence I get
to thinking about her family. We’re staying the weekend with her mother, which means we’ll end up running into her sister, one of my least favorite people in the world, and thinking about that kills whatever jovial vacation mood I had so that before long we are both just staring out the window, like two strangers who happen to find themselves sharing a seat on a bus.

An hour out of Youngstown we stop at a bar for lunch. “This is silly,” Mavis complains in the booth, spreading a paper napkin over her silk pantsuit. “There’ll be mountains of food all afternoon.”

“I’m hungry now,” I say, which is a lie, though I am in need of a drink. I order a double shot of Jack Daniels and a white wine for Mavis, her favorite, though over the years I’ve found that the more I drink, the less she tends to. As the wine works its way through her, Mavis starts telling stories about growing up in Youngstown: the constant hum of the steel mills at the bottom of the hill she lived on, and swimming at the public pool, and the abandoned amusement park, riddled with gangs, where high school kids used to go to screw under the skeletons of forgotten coasters. I’m hoping she won’t get too drunk and start talking about her uncle, the dead one. I’ve heard the story only once, and that was enough for me. Mavis was seventeen, and her aunt and uncle were over for dinner. He touched her thigh under the table, and then later that night he pretended it was an accident when he walked in on her getting undressed for bed. He was young, Mavis told me that time — she was drunk then, too — in his late twenties. “Charming,” she said. “I was flattered.” At the time I stopped her, told her that was all I wanted to know, and I’ve never asked to hear the story again since. It’s an arrangement that works out well between us: I don’t ask about her past affairs, and she doesn’t ask about Gladys, which is good because then I’d have to tell her about what all went wrong, the drinking and neglect that led to
Gladys calling me a no-good father before kicking me out on the street. Part of what works between me and Mavis is that we can put all of that in the past behind us.

Back in the car, we drive over a small lake and past many of the steel mills of Mavis’s stories, now long abandoned, tall and gray like streaks of rain on a windshield. Because we stopped off for food we’re running a little late, so instead of dropping our stuff off at her mother’s house first, we drive straight to the funeral home. Already the empty cars are lined up behind a black limousine, cheap-looking magnetic flags stuck to their roofs, all ready for the procession to the cemetery. Inside, the place is bustling with people in dark suits and dresses, despite the fact that it’s June and nearly ninety degrees outside; everyone is walking around, talking to each other like they’re at a party, except for the oldest ones, who sit in their wheelchairs parked right up next to the casket, as if standing in line for a show they don’t want to miss. I point them out to Mavis: “I guess if any of them drops dead today this is the right place to be,” I say, trying to hide my smile behind my hand.


I pretend to look around for her mother, though really I’m checking for Mavis’s sister, Gwendolyn, who I know is here somewhere. She’s a few years older than Mavis and, because of that, thinks she has a right to comment on everything in Mavis’s life, including me. Twenty years ago, when I was still a very young man, I fell in love with a girl and because she was sixteen and I was twenty, her father kicked my ass and then pulled some strings to get me put on a national list of sexual offenders. I told Mavis this and she told her sister, and since then Gwendolyn has not let me within fifty feet of her child, as if I am some kind of child molester or the kind of guy who sits around playgrounds getting his kicks out of taking pictures of little girls. It’s a shame, too,
because her daughter, Amy, is a sweet little thing. She’s good at school and looks a lot like I imagine Mavis looked when she was that age, freckled and lean.

Before Gwendolyn found out about me, I used to pick Amy up from preschool sometimes when her parents were too busy or working, since they only live about a half-hour from Mavis and me. I’d take her to McDonald’s for a Happy Meal even though she wasn’t supposed to eat any meat, and then usually we’d go for a drive someplace. I’m a big fan of garage sales – it’s truly amazing what some people will give away for pennies – and many times I’d take Amy with me as I drove around searching for good ones. She liked digging through boxes of fifty-cent stuffed animals while I looked at tools and other household stuff, and usually I’d buy her whatever she wanted, though I had a pretty good idea that Gwendolyn would just throw it all out anyway the second I dropped Amy off at home. My own daughter has always preferred Gladys to me, even as a baby, and so it was nice to spend time with a little girl who liked the same things I did, who was happy just driving around country roads eating Chicken McNuggets and listening to whatever garbage happened to come on the radio. But all of that’s over now, long over; even Mavis isn’t allowed to go anywhere near her own niece, and she and Gwendolyn don’t even speak to each other except once or twice a year, at Christmas and at funerals like this one.

Eventually Mavis’s mother comes over to say hello, and asks if we’ve been up to the coffin yet to pay our last respects. This is something else about Mavis’s family I’ve never managed to get used to: the way they put dead bodies in open boxes for all the world to admire. Everyone in my family gets cremated; the way I see it, this is either because of a lack of funds or a lack of faith or both, although I’ve always felt there’s a certain dignity to it, no makeup or embalming fluid required. What gets me too are
the things people think to put into the coffin with the body, as if the dead person is King Tut and will need framed photographs of their grandchildren or their lucky golf shoes in the next life. But Mavis takes my hand and says, “Well, we might as well go see the old bastard, right?” and nudges me toward the coffin anyway.

I hold Mavis’s hand in line, and when it’s our turn I stand next to her as she peers inside. The dead uncle is younger than I would have expected, handsome even, his hair not quite all the way silver yet, and leaner than I am, though that is probably a side effect of the cancer. I look at this man lying in the coffin and try to imagine him holding and kissing my wife, knowing, like I do, the dimples in the sides of her thighs and the tiny mole on the small of her back. I steal a glance at Mavis, but she’s as stone-faced as always. Her lack of emotionality at home can drive me nuts, especially during arguments, but this is one of the times when I’m grateful for it. I try to keep my face neutral to match hers. I keep on holding her hand as we kiss her aunt, who is sitting in a folding chair near the head of the coffin – apparently since neither she nor the uncle ever remarried she has been assigned the role of the grieving widow – and as we walk back to our seats, past the old relatives who sit staring at us with unseeing eyes from their wheelchairs, a few of them nod as if to say, I know you.

***

After the funeral there is a big wake at the aunt’s house out in the country. Her backyard is huge, bordering what looks like a couple of privately-owned farms. My people are from Cincinnati as far back as I can remember, and I never can get used to the sight of a bunch of land all stretched out that way, like the ocean. The entire back porch of the aunt’s house is lined with tables full of food and bowls of punch and piles of white linen napkins arranged in perfect rows, everything set out and waiting for us,
almost as if the funeral was just a detour to give them time to set up the party. I tell Mavis that and she whispers, “Don’t be crass.” Her mascara is streaked from when she cried during the service, at the part at the end where the priest sings Ave Maria and everyone always cries. The funeral was an odd experience for me. Many times I’ve sat through similar services with Mavis, staring at the coffin and wondering if the person really would get into heaven, as the priest was saying. This time, though, I was pretty certain that he wouldn’t, no matter how many prayers they chanted and how much incense they swung over his body. Married men who sleep with young girls, especially those who are related to them, don’t make likely candidates for eternal salvation. But you would never have known that from all of the wailing that was going on in that church, Mavis included, though I imagine that it was her guilt making her cry as much as anything else.

We help ourselves to cold cuts and take a seat at one of the picnic tables set up in the yard, next to Mavis’s mother and her aunt Janice, the divorced widow. Janice is wearing a low-cut blouse, playing absentmindedly with the crucifix around her neck, and saying, “He wouldn’t have been half-bad if it hadn’t been for the gambling. Other than that, I had no complaints.”

“He could have been an alcoholic,” Mavis’s mother says, looking at me a little sideways.

“Yes, he could have,” agrees Janice. “That would have been a lot worse.”

I try to change the subject by asking Janice about the farms that back up against her property, beyond a line of evergreen trees and stretching out as far as the horizon. “Soybean, mostly,” she says. “Some cattle too, though the land here’s not much good for grazing.”

A few tables over, Amy sits with her parents, wearing a frilly navy blue dress that I know has to be making her miserable

Cumming
in the heat. She's polite as always, talking to the other adults at their table, nodding away like a miniature grown-up. It's terrible, how Gwendolyn tries to stifle the child right out of her. I nudge Mavis, but she's still locked in conversation with the aunt.

"He always liked you," Janice says to Mavis. "He always had a soft spot for you. He told me once that he wished we'd had a daughter of our own to spoil, that's how highly he thought of you."

I decide that's my cue to head back to the porch for a drink, though I can feel Mavis watching me go, her disapproving eyes. I'm helping myself to some Jack and mopping off my forehead with a napkin when I hear Janice again: "Now, the bedroom was a different story. The bedroom, at least, was one place where there was never a problem."

I walk out across the yard, past where Janice and Mavis are yapping away, past Amy, who smiles up at me as I go by. I'm thinking, for no reason at all, about Gladys, about how things were between us the night we got married fifteen years ago, when we couldn't even wait to get upstairs to our room and ended up consummating the whole thing right there in the fancy men's room outside the Hilton's Silver Ballroom. All of that passion, and look where it got us. I've always appreciated Mavis for that reason, for her even keel, her lack of highs and lows, but the thought of her having that kind of passion with some other guy, a corpse no less, is making me crazy.

I walk out along the edges of the fields, where the grass is cut short. I've smoked and drank for most of my life, and I've never been one for exercise, and the heat combined with the walking makes everything blurry and a little bit hazy. Once or twice I think I might throw up, but I keep on going, out to a low fence with a group of cattle on the other side, just lazily munching on the stubbly grass. That's when I hear someone pushing through
the weeds behind me, and turn around and see Amy standing there, her white tights all scratched up and muddy. She’s a good head taller than she was the last time I saw her; like Katie, she’s growing up too fast. Already, Gladys tells me, boys are calling the house for Katie, asking about homework assignments. “You let her talk to them?” I demanded when she first told me, and she rolled her eyes and asked what I wanted her to do, call the cops? I wonder if boys have started calling around for Amy yet, though of course that’s the kind of thing I’d never be allowed to ask.

We stand there for a while, just watching the cows, the slow way they chew without even bothering to lift their heads. “They’re so beautiful,” Amy breathes, in that way that kids have of being awed by the simplest things.

“They don’t smell so great, though.”

She makes a face at me. “How can you eat them?”

“Makes me want a Big Mac right now, just looking at them,” I say, grinning at her. “Hey, you,” I call to one of the big ones. “Come on over here, lunch.”

“You’re disgusting,” she says, but she’s smiling.

“Your mom still got you eating bean sprout sandwiches and tofu?”

“Not just tofu,” she says. It’s an old joke between us, and I’m pleased she remembers it.

“I hear they’ve got tofu ice cream that’s just fabulous,” I say. It feels good to spar a little with her this way, like we’ve never been apart. “Tofu pizza, tofu cotton candy.”

“Cotton candy’s not an animal product,” Amy says, with her hands on her hips in a way that reminds me uncomfortably of Gwendolyn. “I can have cotton candy.”

“So you can have cotton candy but not a turkey sandwich?” I shake my head at her. The Jack has left a bad taste in my mouth and I spit into the tall grass at the edge of the fence.
“Spit stays in your mouth,” Amy says.

“See, this is the country, though,” I say. “It’s okay if you spit in the country. It’s good for the soil.”

“Really?” she asks, believing me for a second before I wink at her. And then, almost before I realize I’m doing it, I reach out and ruffle her hair a little bit with my hand. It’s a gesture that reminds me of Katie, back when she was small and she and Gladys and I were all still living together. I remember her climbing into bed between us each morning, how I’d ruffle her hair and tickle her armpits until she was kicking so much that Gladys would give up and get out of bed. But the minute I touch Amy, she flinches and steps away, a motion so sudden and almost violent that even the cows seem to stop chewing to notice it.

“My mom says you’re never supposed to touch me,” she says, looking at the ground. “Never, not ever.”

“Well, your mom says a lot of things. That doesn’t make them true.” I can feel the anger welling up in me, choking me in the throat and behind the eyes, but there’s no sense in letting it out at Amy; she’s just a little girl after all, and only repeating what she’s been told. Instead, I try to smile. “You know I’ve got a little girl too, right? Katie. She’s eight.” I get out my wallet to see if I’ve got a picture, but the only one I have is all frayed, and besides it’s at least two years out of date. So instead I grab a five out of my billfold and hand it to Amy. “Here you go,” I say. “Buy yourself a real ice cream when your mama isn’t looking.”

She looks down at the bill in her hand, turns it over once or twice like she doesn’t know what to make of it, and reaches it back out to me. “Here,” she says. “I don’t have any pockets.”

“Hell, you don’t need a pocket,” I say, wiping a fistful of sweat out of my eyes. “Just fold it up and put it in your shoe or someplace.”

She keeps on holding it out. “I can’t, though,” she says,
her voice whiny, like at any second she might start crying. "I can’t take money from -- " She starts to say “from strangers,” but at the last second she changes it to, “From anyone.”

“Well, I’m not anyone,” I say, feeling more angry than I know I should. “I’m your goddamned uncle.” She hands the bill back to me and I toss it into the grass. “Either you take it or the cows eat it,” I say, trying to make light, like I’m joking. “Your choice.”

I watch her watching the five dollars just sitting there in the grass, tossing back and forth a little bit in the humid breeze. The stench of cow is thick around us, and yet all I want to do right now, in this moment, is hop the fence and lose myself among them, wrap my arms around them, lean my face against their warm, brown sides, feel their hearts vibrating deep in the caverns of their bodies. But instead I keep on standing there, watching as Amy stares at that money with a look on her face like she’s trying to decide between good and evil, life and death; then she turns away and heads back in the direction of the party, picking her way carefully to keep from getting her tights even dirtier. I know that I should say something to her right then. Maybe I could remind her of the good times we used to have together once, or ask her about school. But it’s been too long for me to know what to say, and so instead I just watch her leave, the weight of her almost too slight even to divide the grasses. When she’s almost too far gone, I call after her. “Hey,” I say, cupping my hands around my mouth. “You want to go for a ride?”

“No,” she calls back. The Amy I remember from the old days was always full of stories and chatter, her mouth never stopped moving, but now she’s like a smaller version of her mother, all tense and buttoned-up, like she even forgets how to smile. I feel the Jack sloshing around in my stomach and toy with the idea of puking, but I know that wouldn’t help matters much,
so instead I just bound along after her like a puppy in the grass, surprised at my own speed. She just stands there, watching me come, like she's too shocked to move. I have about two seconds to decide what I'm going to do when I get to her. I don't want to go back to the party, that much is for sure. Mavis will be all pissed at me for drinking and leaving her alone, like I'm such an embarrassment to her, when I'm the one who has spent the whole day shaking hands with near-strangers, wondering how many of them know that the dead guy used to sleep with my wife.

When I get to Amy, I pick her up. She's lighter in my arms than I would have expected; I pick her up and swing her around the way I used to do with Katie when she was maybe three or four. I say, "Let's get out of here, go for a ride, just you and me."

She waits until I set her down, too dizzy from heat and booze to spin her anymore, and then takes a step away. "This is a funeral," she says. "You can't just leave a funeral."

"Sure you can," I tell her, happier than I know I ought to be that she at least seems to be considering the possibility. "Hell, the body's already in the ground, right? What's he gonna know? And I happen to know that he was a pretty big sonofabitch in the first place anyway."

"You can't say that about dead people."

"No?" I kneel down in the tall, scratchy grass so that I'm practically at her level. Between the row of pine trees I can see patches of the wake still going on, dark spots of black moving around the yard, hot and bored but unwilling or unable to leave. "Well, I'm sorry. I was rude. Forgive me."

"You should say, I beg your pardon."

"I beg your pardon, then." I reach out my hand for her to shake and after a second, she actually takes it: just the fingertips, but still, it's a start. I don't know what it is about this kid that makes it so important for me to win her over. Most kids with her..."
attitude I would be happy telling to just fuck off. Maybe it's all those afternoons we used to spend in my truck together driving around. Those were good afternoons. The only other time I've ever been that happy was with the girl I loved when I was twenty, the one whose parents called the cops on me, and for the first time the irony of it hits me, that the two females I've most loved being with in this life are the two that I've been forbidden to see.

"I'll buy you anything you want," I tell her. "You want some kind of tofu milkshake, you got it." I'm already picturing her sitting in the cab beside me, that long navy blue dress of hers billowing around in the wind from the open windows. I picture her wiggling out of her tights and throwing them in a sweaty bundle under the seat. I wonder how long it would take for anyone to notice we're gone, how far we could get before the cops catch up with us: ten, twenty, fifty miles? I imagine us driving all the way up around the lake to Canada, to the little group of cruddy cabins near Niagara Falls where Mavis and I went on our honeymoon. The cabins weren't much to look at, it was true, but I'd sleep on the soggy couch and give Amy the bed, and during the day we'd walk around with all of the other tourists, taking pictures of the falls and drinking hot chocolate. "You ever been to a wax museum?" I ask her. "I know a place with some of the best wax museums. You'd swear those bastards were real, standing there looking at you. You want to go?"

"What's a wax museum?" she asks, screwing up her nose. "Ah, forget it. You're probably too young for that kind of thing anyway." I lick my lips in the heat, wishing for a drink. "What are you into these days, anyway? Makeup and boys and shit?"

"Boys?" she says, and laughs, and I feel my shoulders relax. She thinks a minute and says, "I take piano lessons. And soccer, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday."
I laugh. "Gonna be a jock, are you?"
"What's a jock?"
"Like an athlete."
She shrugs, but she looks proud. "I like piano better."
"What about school?" I ask. "You still liking that?"
She shrugs again. "All but math."

It's nice, sitting in the grass this way, chatting with her, but I get the feeling that we're running out of time, like any minute now someone from the party, Gwendolyn or Mavis maybe, is going to come looking for us and won't like what they find. "You sure about that ride?" I ask her, trying to make my voice as soft and gentle as possible. "I don't know about you, but I've had enough funeral to last me a lifetime."

"I'll get in trouble." She cuts her eyes at me then and adds, "You'll get in trouble."
"For what? Going for a ride?"
"With me," she says, shaking her head like she's frustrated with me for not understanding. "For going on a ride with me."
"And why is that? If you're so smart."
She fidgets a little, pulling at the sides of her tights, and then says, in a voice barely above a whisper, "Because you're bad."
"I'm what?" I lean closer, cup one hand around my ear, all of the insects in the field buzzing so loud all of a sudden that I can't tell if the sound is coming from inside my own head. "I'm what, little girl? Speak up."
"Bad," she says, and this time her lip wobbles.
"Bad?" I start laughing then, because I've been called many things in my life, mostly by women, but never bad, never something so simple, and yet it hurts more than pretty much anything else that anybody has ever said about me. "You don't know anything about me," I say.
But then Amy looks up and meets my eyes and it's like
she does know me, like she can see every bad thing I've ever done, every rotten thought inside of my old drunk head. It's more than I can stand, her looking at me that way, so I wipe my hands over my sweaty face so that she won't have to see me. "Well, that's great," I say, all sarcastic. "Why don't you get along on out of here, then, if I'm so bad?"

I look up and she's still standing there, watching me that way. For a second, all I want to do is hit her. I've never hit a woman in my life, but I imagine that this is what people are feeling right before they do. My hands shake with it. "Get out of here," I say again, and wave my hands around my head like the crazy person I know she thinks I am. "Boo," I shout, wagging my tongue at her, and finally this is enough to get her to turn and run back in the direction of the party, not worrying about keeping her tights clean this time, just running like the devil himself is after her, which maybe, according to her at least, he is.

***

Mavis's room is like a shrine to her childhood, though her mother has made a nod to change by moving the nightstand out from between the two twin beds and pushing them next to each other so that they are almost, but not quite, touching. I hop onto one of the beds and wait for Mavis, who goes into the bathroom and comes a few minutes later wearing her nightgown, her hair brushed into a fluffy brown cloud around her shoulders. She still isn't talking to me. One great thing about Mavis is that she's not the type of woman to play games, to tell you everything's fine when it's not, and she's also not one to hold a grudge. One night we got into a discussion about children and I told her I wasn't sure if I wanted another one or even if I ever would, and she cried, but she still let me hold her; she curled her body around mine and let me put
my chin on the top of her head while she breathed slowly to calm herself down. Tonight, though, she climbs into the other twin bed and snaps off the light like she’s ten years old again, like I’m not even lying there on the other bed, fully dressed, watching her.

It’s been too long since I slept in a twin-sized bed, and it feels disturbingly like lying in a too-narrow box. Next to me, inches away, Mavis is staring at the ceiling, breathing. “You’re not being fair,” I whisper, not even sure what I’m in trouble for, but she doesn’t say anything back. It’s odd, sleeping in Mavis’s old bed, surrounded by her old stuffed animals and trophies, listening to the floorboards creak as her mother moves around in the next room, getting ready for bed. I wonder what Mavis was thinking about all of the nights that she stared up at this ceiling, hugging the dolls that now sit in an antique rocking chair against one wall. If it were daylight, I could see the skeletons of the old steel mills from her window, the same rusted gray as the winter sky. Maybe it’s the sound of the trains moaning in the distance, but being here always makes me feel lonely, even when Mavis and I are getting along. I look over at Mavis to say something, but then I see that she’s crying. At first I think it’s out of anger, but her shoulders are shaking too hard, like she doesn’t care if I see her or not, and then I know that it’s about more than me. It occurs to me that maybe she left out a part of the story about the dead uncle when she told it to me, that maybe she was in love with him too, all of those years ago, when she and I were teenagers in two different beds in two different parts of the state, living two completely different lives, each of us making our own mistakes. I think that maybe she has been trying to tell me this, in her own way, all day long. I want to tell her that I understand. Sometimes when I get low I get to thinking about that girl I loved, the one whose father got me into trouble, and how she may have been the only person I’ve loved who ever truly loved me back. Maybe
Mavis feels the same way about the uncle. Maybe there's plenty we should have been telling each other about ourselves all along, that just because we don't want to remember something doesn't mean it goes away. So I wait a minute, until her crying dies down a little, and then I reach for my wife in her childhood bed, reach out across the few inches that have sprung up suddenly, wide as a valley, between us.
UNSENT POSTCARD

It's not that I miss you, I just want to keep telling you everything. How the girls here are lovely, and covered in paint, but they don't do to me what they used to. How the mountains hold ghosts of your tent, our fire, hunters neon as tropical fish. Today I walked uphill out of town and then uphill back home, the whole time thinking,

Don't go, don't go, but to no one in particular. It's not that I'm lonely, it's just things are slightly peculiar—the barn's crooked smile of windows, its mouthful of cows, the bridge that straddles the river that keeps going,

shhhh. I'm quiet, I'm quiet. Talk to the birds, the shuddering trucks, the cicadas back from the dead to tell us everything. I'm telling you, all long tall things bring your body back to me, the muscular tree trunks, their hard brown arms, and the one struck by lightning whose wound I keep wanting to tend. And the clouds, of course, but you can't trust clouds, they're as bad as my mind, which also keeps changing, going, Rabbit, no, bear. It's not that I wish you were here, it's just—it's the deer, they keep hurling themselves at my car in the night, but I'm fine, fine, it's just it's a zillion degrees in the sun and I can't bear swimming, how the current keeps touching me everywhere at once like your hands.
All day we've been fighting, and it's left us starving, so now we've gone shopping. You're choosing produce, an arduous process, and I'm left lugging our dumb plastic basket, which I realize is filling with all the components of something delicious—but I can see only the mess in the kitchen, the guts of tomatoes, the sloughed garlic skins, the fat trimmed from the huge bloodless breast of this chicken. Your hands are still running, you're squeezing, you're bruising—refusing what too many others have touched—and now you've been swallowed by this abyss of avocados, this mountain of melons, insurmountable. Look, darling, how everything's freezing or dying. How dinner is something we do using knives and our teeth. How lemon juice comes in lemon-shaped bottles, how my body is yours but my heart's not in it. How hunger's a wound always begging for salt. How there's too much of everything we love.
NEOLITHIC REVOLUTION

I'm tired of the way love turns us into animals. I'm tired of roaring. I'm tired of you tearing my flesh with your teeth, stalking me like prey in the shower, lunging and growling; I'm tired of pawing, and panting, and hunting and wagging. Of course at first it was thrilling. The we have no words for this. The we are just our bodies. But look at my cortex. Look

at my opposable thumbs. I want out of this stew, I want to use tools, I want to develop agriculture and walk upright towards you through this field of corn that we planted, on purpose, because we were hungry, and human, and knew exactly what we were doing.
I had a girlfriend named Doreen who had a liver like a heavy bag. To hell with drinking me under the table, she could drink me out of the house, into and back out of the woods, and the eighteen miles down 51 North to the ER if she had wanted.

She lived in a one bedroom single-wide with her parents up in the hills south of Carbondale. Her dad grew tomatoes and raised a few chickens. He was a small man with thick hands I would grow to envision strangling me. They had a pig named Wally. A pig as big as a fridge and about as mobile.

Doreen took me to see this pig. They had a trashcan full of beer near the pen. She said, “The Hamm’s isn’t meant for irony. It’s the cheapest they got at the gas station.” She picked one up and leaned over and held it out to him. Gentle as a nurse. He pierced the can with his teeth and swallowed the beer as it foamed into his mouth, then he chomped the can a couple times and spat it out.

“Jesus, where’d he learn to do that?” I said.

“One for him, one for me,” she said and cracked open a warm Hamm’s and handed one to me.

One beer after another. I don’t know how many, but I was in college at the time and it was more than I ever drank in one night in the dorms. At one point Doreen lit a cigarette. I thought she might give Wally one too, but instead she just took a few drags and said, “A minute ago even my bones wanted this smoke. Funny how that works.” She had a way of talking like that. Saying things I couldn’t respond to.

I stayed the weekend. One for Wally, one for Doreen, one for me. Eventually her dad refilled the trashcan of Hamm’s. Then it was one for him too.

After the semester ended that spring, I didn’t re-enroll. I set up a tent near Doreen’s trailer and stayed for a time. I’d split
wood. Doreen’s mother taught me to hunt mushrooms. Sometimes I’d hunt mushrooms while everyone else slept, then I’d drink beer with Wally. One for me and one for him.

There are other things I could tell you about. Those eighteen miles to the ER, or prying one of Doreen’s dad’s canines from between my third and fourth knuckles with a Buck Knife. There’s more I could say, but all I care to tell you now is about Doreen and that pig. I’ve been with more attractive women, but I’ve never been more attracted to a woman.

I never saw anyone touch Wally. Just reach out and hand him beer. He barely spilled a drop.
I once saw a photo of someone stranded in an Iowa blizzard, a figure covered in flurry—
the white, sleetting lines erasing all edges of body. Hopper-solitary in the flatness. A year later,
I couldn't even begin to locate it in a book or museum, couldn't remember anything at all except snow. Most days, half the mail I get is for others. Or, it isn't even addressed to a name: Current Resident. I pile it all in a shoebox and keep it up, away on a shelf. Most days, I want to research a trip somewhere new. I look up the logistics, the to and from: the airport, the taxis, the buses, and trains. I will always know what to do if I get there. I want to go somewhere that requires goggles to protect my eyes against snow blindness, to avoid flash burns of the cornea. They say it's like an eyeful of sand. Do I enjoy the feeling of standing in a field, full of it, alone? Polar explorers treated this exposure with drops of cocaine in their eyes. I research that, too. Visitors to Antarctica still arrive by sea, on a boat from Ushuaia, the southern tip
of Argentina. Thousands of people go each year, wanting to witness that which disappears. I see them trekking over ice. On my daily walks home, it's not winter yet and I can only retrieve what's fallen—I collect buckeyes, pinecones, horseapples, walnuts. I fold and store leaves like small paper receipts.
WE ARE A SYSTEM OF GHOSTS III

The moving trucks all came on the same day.
In Lakewood, California, in 1950, a new suburb began.

I imagine the trucks unloading, their leaving, unpacking. People in new structures:

*here we are.* In the 1950s, single-family homes diffused on treeless plots near highway.

So many residents could wake up and feel: *nowhere.* In an Iowa coffee shop, on the edge of once-prairie, I write long overdue letters to friends. A little girl approaches, sticks her head in my lap. She taps a key on my laptop.

She types a series of O's. *This is a ghost story,* she says.

*Is it scary?* I want to know.

She types EEEEE.

I ask: *is somebody screaming?*
WE ARE A SYSTEM OF GHOSTS IV

On the bus, I read about Japan’s suicide forest. Aokigahara, near the base of Mount Fuji.

People say it’s the best place to die. They tie rope along trunks, a trail for whomever comes after. The bodies get cleared out once a year by volunteers and officials. Park ranger Azusa Hayano has talked hundreds of people out of their plans. He’s rescued so many half-dying already.

Hayano puts a hand on their shoulder. He asks them to speak as they sit near the trees.
The morning you fly from Paris to Monte Carlo to meet Helmut Newton you have a cold and feel like hell. As you pull up in front of the Hermitage Hotel, where Newton makes his home, the taxi driver asks if you would like a prostitute for the evening. His offer comes as a shock and seems out of character with your lavish surroundings, but then you realize that this is a place where people spare nothing to get what they want. “Non, merci,” you say. Everything about Monte Carlo is dazzling and expensive-looking—the streets, homes, cars, gardens. Everything looks freshly washed and meticulously cared for. And, filtering down from above, the Mediterranean sun bathes it all in a pinkish, crystalline light, as if shot through a diamond.

You give your name at the front desk. “Monsieur Newton is expecting you,” says the concierge. As you stand in the antique elevator, rising to the top floor, you think of his indelible images—long-legged, big-breasted women, powerful, erotic, unapproachable, often wearing nothing but high heels, vaguely sadistic. He is one of your heroes, someone who has devoted his entire life to expressing his fantasies without compromise.

Your all-too-cool agency in Paris had called with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. “Newton wants to see you!” Normally, Newton only booked women, never men. It was like being summoned by the king. Even Lindbergh, Weber and Ritts labored in his shadow. He was beyond needing clients, accolades or compensation. In the fashion world, it was not too much to say that a Newton project was like a revelation; it would alter the course of the industry.

You call Paris home, though you live out of a suitcase most of the time. Your suburban American past seems like a distant incarnation. Paris is where your mother agency is, where
your girlfriend is, and where you need to live in order to command a Parisian model rate. You are nearly thirty and have been modeling for five years—despite your family's reservations—and are on the verge of breaking into the big leagues. And you know that working with Newton would put you decisively there.

A young, muscular girl dressed in shorts, boots and a white tank top greets you at the door, her blond hair pulled taut into a ponytail. She leads you to a sitting room filled with books, antiques, large black-and-white details of women's bodies. "Do you have your book with you?" she asks with a German accent. You hand her your modeling book. She flips through it rapidly. "Take a seat," she says and disappears. You imagine her showing it to Helmut and then Helmut summoning you. And though you know it's ridiculous, you can't help but be thrilled at the prospect of meeting the man. You begin to cough, then sneeze, phlegm rattling in your chest—intrigued that on this day of all days you should be sick. From the sitting room, you see an older woman, dark-haired, with bangs, sunbathing on the porch and, beyond, a line of palms and the deep blue of the Mediterranean.

You hear what you assume is Helmut laughing. Is it your book he's laughing at? After a while the girl reappears. "Helmut is busy," she says, "but June will see you." Crestfallen, you figure you have just been blown off. You follow the girl out onto the porch, where the actress June Browne (a.k.a. Brunell)—Newton's wife and muse, and the subject of countless photo studies—reclines in a black bikini. Though in her sixties, she looks years younger. You introduce yourself, tell her you're American and, when not modeling, a poet. She raises her sunglasses, looks you over. She lights a cigarette and smiles. "Well, Jay..." she says, "we look forward to seeing you in L.A."

A month later, you arrive in Los Angeles. They put you up at Cha-
teau Marmont, where Helmut keeps a suite year-round, known for its ambience of excess and as the hotel where John Belushi overdosed. It's elegantly rundown, tucked away in a grove of palms, with a nice view of the city from your balcony. Models, stylists, hair and makeup artists fly in from all corners of the globe. No one knows the concept of the shoot, not even the client. All you know is that you are shooting a campaign for an Italian fashion designer. It's obvious that the shoot is only an opportunity, an excuse really, for Newton to live out his latest fantasy.

The first few days you only have fittings to go to and spend your time by the pool reading and spotting movie stars. You still haven't actually met Helmut, though you have been studying his images, trying to prepare yourself, imagining the hour when you stand face to face with his lens.

You see June one morning in the hotel lobby, wearing sunglasses, heels, an elegant black suit. You greet one another French-style, pecking each other on the cheek. "Why are you alone?" she says, concerned. "Such a handsome man shouldn't be alone—not in L.A... Gracious, do I need to fix you up with someone?"

"No, no, I'm fine," you say.

"Sweetie, you don't understand... You are in L.A. What cars are to Detroit, young, beautiful, single women are to L.A. Go have some fun."

That night you go out with two girls from the shoot, C. and E., both of whom happen to be deemed supermodels. Every once in a while, C. tosses her long blond hair, flashes a breathtaking smile, and E. sinuously dips a shoulder, cocks a hip, looks at you with her dark, bedroom eyes, and you see why they are so sought after, paid so much. Wherever you go, first a restaurant, later a disco, people appear stupefied, continuously staring and hovering at the periphery, as if struck by some neurological disorder. At first, you get a kick out of being seen with them, but very
soon the constant scrutiny grows unbearable. You realize even your greatest dreams of success are insignificant compared to the realm in which they reside. No one dares approach the girls or speak to them. Even talking is awkward as every word that passes between you is overheard by strangers. It becomes impossible to relax.

"My God," you say as you sit in the disco's VIP lounge, "how do you stand it?"

"Stand what?" says C., shouting over the pulsing music.

"All this attention!"

They laugh. "This is nothing compared to when I'm out with Steven," says E., referring to her rock star boyfriend.

"Yeah," says C., who won't even mention her boyfriend's name, "it can get really crazy."

So here you are, experiencing the overspill of fame—which, as they explain it, is nothing compared to their boyfriends' fame—and yet even this is far more than anything you can stand. You think of the countless people who long for fame as if it were the height of aspiration. But to experience even an hour of such notoriety would leave almost anyone reeling, desperate to have their anonymity restored.

E. grabs you by the hand and pulls you to your feet. "I feel like moving," she says, and it's clear she's accustomed to getting what she wants. You dance a few songs together. She moves languidly like a bored cat. You think of that music video in which she rolls on the beach in a bikini—sand powdering her olive skin like sugar—and the singer fondles her while she looks at her nails. You imagine her being impossible to satisfy.

Later, back at the hotel, you and E. sit alone at the bar for a nightcap. You have the insatiable desire to reach out and touch her, like that singer in the video, only you can't shake the thought that this is E., the face (and body) of L'Oréal, Victoria's Secret....
June walks in and sits down next to you. “So?” she says. “Happy now? Does Auntie June know best?” You have no idea what she’s talking about. She nods toward E. in a knowing sort of way. And suddenly it dawns on you that it was June who arranged the evening, who convinced C. and E. to ask you out in the first place. She lights a cigarette. “So much beauty...” she says of E. “How in the world can you resist?”

E. rolls her eyes. “She’s trying to fix us up... in case you were wondering.”

“Ah,” you say, though you had figured E. was out of bounds, out of your league—the inamorata of a rock star.

June gets to her feet. “Do not ignore what the gods hath wrought...” she says with a smile. “Goodnight, my dears.”

The next morning, as you lie in bed next to E., she says that she feels so incredibly alone and isolated. She had clung to you half the night as if she might drown or fall from a great height.

“Sometimes,” she says, “I feel like everyone is looking at me like I’m deformed or something.”

She stuffs her hair in a cap, puts on baggy sweats, sneakers, sunglasses—“my schlepping clothes,” she says—and still people recognize her. You note the frequent double takes as you stroll along Venice Beach. A pack of rollerbladers streaks past. It’s morning and already the sun scorches your shoulders, the top of your head. An elderly black woman says you make an adorable couple. E. smiles and takes your hand, swinging it back and forth, like you’re a couple of teenagers walking down the halls of junior high.

“So, where’s Steven?” you ask, his name dropping like a stone between you.

“On tour,” she says, looking away, “in Europe some-
where... Milan, I think."

You walk for a while, still holding hands. You seem to share the same guiltless, fluid sense of what a relationship can be in this business. You pass a vendor, enveloped in steam that smells of hot dogs.

"He’s probably with someone as I speak," she says.

You notice the crowds milling by—so many transparent faces. It’s a cruel vision, but this is how the industry has formed you: you automatically disregard anyone whose appearance is less than extraordinary.

You stop and buy her an ice cream cone, which she licks as if it were a magnificent art. You continue down the boardwalk, passing a fortune-teller in a turban, a guy on acoustic guitar playing bad Dylan. She tells you about the small Scandinavian village where she grew up, about her beloved mormor and ice skating and eating pickled herring on rye.

You pause to watch the weightlifters at Muscle Beach as they make their masochistic sounds, plates clanging together, bodies like overstuffed sofas—as though you’re watching an alien species on display.

One of them recognizes E. You can see it by the way he keeps looking at her, sweeping back his bleached hair, adjusting his crotch. He turns to another bodybuilder, a black guy with dreadlocks, and points to her. In unison, they call out her name. You perceive others turning, recognizing her. The weightlifters draw closer, flexing their muscles, laughing, asking if E. would like to touch. You stand motionless together as the rank smell of their sweat surrounds you. You sense their steroid-laden bodies brimming with barely contained aggression. "What are you doing with this skinny pretty boy?" asks the one with bleached hair. It feels like half of Venice is watching. She turns to you with panic.

Kauffmann 39
in her eyes, then looks down at her sneakers. “Take me away from here, please.”

At dawn, a location van drives you north of Malibu to a grassy bluff high above the Pacific, a glow building in the hills to the east. The air smells clean and salty and of seaweed. Already a half-dozen trucks have gathered in the twilight. An army of workers scurries about setting up tables, chairs, racks of clothes, movie lights. Generators hum continuously.

The Italian designer rises from his lounge chair to greet C. and E., giggling with uncontainable enthusiasm. You, he almost entirely ignores. He looks like a wax figure, with a jet-black toupee, impeccable tan, tautly renovated features. “Molto bella!” he says of the girls. “Bellisima!” His entourage eagerly agrees: “Si, bellisima!” The art director, another gay Italian man, dressed in a rose-colored suit, explains the premise of the shoot, which, as he points out, can change at a moment’s notice depending upon the whims of Signore Newton: “There is a wedding party,” he says. “And you may or may not be the groom... Or maybe it is just a party....”

Now that you are finally on the verge of shooting with Helmut, you feel jittery and self-conscious. They dress you up in a tuxedo, blow dry your hair into a duck’s wedge. The girls put on long, sequined gowns that look sprayed on, their hair mounted in elaborate buns. You are told not to sit down, for fear of wrinkling your clothes, though the girls collapse almost immediately.

A long, elegantly set table stands at the center of the meadow, draped in a pristine white tablecloth. A string quartet sits before their instruments in evening gowns and black-tie. Everyone is waiting, though no one has seen or heard from Helmut.
Even his photo-assistants have no idea where he is, explaining to the designer that Mister Newton is probably just waiting for the right light. "I do not wait," says the designer. As the day wears on, he grows more and more irate, lashing out at his entourage in vehement Italian.

The sun beats down from directly overhead. A general malaise settles over the crew. E., perhaps bored, leads you behind a catering truck and French kisses you till your knees go wobbly. By afternoon, one of Helmut's assistants receives a call and reports that Mister Newton is about to leave L.A.; he has just one more thing to take care of...

An hour goes by, then another. C. and E. persuade the caterers to break out the caviar and champagne (intended as photo-props). The string quartet, at the girls' request, launches into Mozart. Amazing what a pair of supermodels can get people to do. A breeze picks up off the Pacific. The sun tumbles over the bay in a blazing arc. After working himself up into such a state, the designer has fallen asleep beneath a beach umbrella.

You hear the helicopter before you see it. Then it appears to the south, moving towards you along the coast, sweeping in fast. The crew goes quiet and turns. Before long, it hovers just above you, maybe thirty feet off the ground. You assume it will begin to descend, but, instead, it simply hangs there as if by a cord.

Meanwhile, violent, swirling gusts from the propeller blades upend chairs, clothes' racks, a movie light, which appears to explode as it hits the ground. Sand and bits of grass fly up into your face. Dresses, suits, overcoats shake off their hangers, sail across the bluff and vanish over the cliff's edge, like a procession of martyrs hurling themselves without hesitation to their deaths.
Tablecloths rise and fill with air, tossing plates and glasses, scattering silverware like pick-up sticks. C. and E.'s perfectly coiffed hair instantly turns frizzy and lopsided. Their skirts billow up around them like Marilyn Monroe's in *The Seven Year Itch*, revealing their delicate under-things. Everyone is in a state of motion, chasing all manner of flying, cart-wheeling things. And looking utterly bewildered, the designer stands there watching his beach umbrella capsize and scud away.

Then you spot Helmut, leaning out of the helicopter with camera in hand, and immediately recognize the floppy hair and bulbous nose, the eternally boyish, handsome face. You see him firing away—something almost fanatical about his concentration—filling one roll after another, pausing only to grab a fresh camera.

A moment or two goes by like this and, when it is clear that the helicopter will not be landing, the designer succumbs to a paroxysm of rage, shouting and stomping his feet and stabbing his hands into the air.

Then it comes to you, with absolute certainty: the photos will be extraordinary, a tremendous success, worth every penny—a brilliant, deconstructive, self-mocking take on haute couture. You can even imagine the designer declaring himself a genius for giving Helmut free reign.

For an instant, Helmut seems to be looking directly at you from the cockpit, with a broad smile, as if this is all a priceless, private joke between you. Without fully realizing it, you find yourself smiling back. It will be the first and last time you see Helmut Newton.

A moment later, the helicopter turns and speeds down the
coast towards L.A., soon vanishing around a bend in the shore-
line.

Years later, you read of Helmut’s death in the Herald Tribune, how
he sped from Chateau Marmont one night and smashed his car
into the front gate, instantly killing himself (another footnote in
the hotel’s salacious history). And though you will never see June
again, she sends a postcard one year from Monte Carlo, inquir-
ing about your love life, closing with, Love, Auntie June. In the
end, you will have your success—a few years of stardom. But, like
everything in this business, nothing lasts.

You see E. one more time in the early 90’s, during show
season in Paris, on Place de la Concorde. She is just stepping out
of a taxi with her new boyfriend, the famous French tennis star.
She wears a short skirt and boots, her rich brown hair shorter,
fashionably disheveled. She is decisively on, in full supermodel
mode, strutting down the sidewalk, apparently at ease now in her
celebrity role. From across the intersection, you call her name.
She turns and looks, first one way then the other, unable to place
the voice. And for a fleeting instant, you see the vulnerable girl
who clung to you half the night. Then, taking the tennis star by
the hand, she continues along Rue Royale, into the growing swell
of admirers.
BEE: LATE SEASON

After the first frost I'm an air slug. Bloated with cold, I ache in my sugar frock of bones. Too many bristles stiffen even as I work to bristle, a beacon for someone to warm me.

A fine but finite design, good to work or guard the summer's work, our flitting straight-laced factory, there is always much to do with chore-girls left do it.

Caught in the first frost I slug it out for dawn, drone along, numb, nearly mindless, and hum to warm until I feel another hum, a stuttering day, the watery sun.

Who's not saved far from home will never know what lost means; a lone finite dance, the one map I have, is worth less than I had hoped. Toward a stranger home I home.
CROWS ON THE LATE EDGE OF YOUR BLACKOUT

Farer, poorly back from there,
you did not suck a clod
of spent coal all night.
It just tastes like that.
We know the story,
witnessed all you can't
remember. Our minutes
are minutely detailed
and mimeod for the typist
as we speak. Speaking of
speaking, your fat tongue
is also a slow one. Forgive
us if we must amend
or garble your mush to keep
the arc the least bit crisp.
Thank you. You understand
the brown noddies are busy
in AC, tending a death nod—
some costal junky tucked
and guttering in a stairwell.
It's just our night job, and this
doesn't ruffle us a nit. Look:
we don't blame. We can't bless.
MEG WADE

THE DEFENSE

There's a thing in my chest
    a punch table I'd like to swallow.
    I cannot be afraid to tell it all wrong.

Here are the facts:

    *I know that I know how to kill* that makes me an adult.

    I know I might not leave here with the amnesty
    I hope for, but that the rest will
    become clear in the short time I'm allowed.

So what if I didn't give up
    the ship
    let the record show I drew flags
    signaling
    I carried dangerous goods

—A proper wolf whistle
    more leg
    my prowl fearsome as a waitress
waking up from a Blue Ridge/ wedding, lips/swollen, and twenty-two/ rounds
gone from the pistol.

When I mentioned the gun, just now, what did you imagine my body doing?

    Something like dancing, but not dancing?
    A shameful celebration?

This is what surviving feels like—

    the fact is, he didn't kill me and now I have a long time left to live.

    Clearly, I'm doing the best I can.
I had to take my spoiled body and build lights around it.
Get down on my knees and pray
I'd be visible again.

I witnessed every terrible thing my right hand would show me.

I can only hope to be judged
not by the precision of my actions
but the consequences of my confession.

Half lullaby half field-holler

I'm not just chewing with my mouth open.

If the saying's true if you love someone
you should get to know them as best you can then I have tried—

All that drinking I did over Christmas,
blown-out / hose and skint knees, my dress / ghosting floor after foreign floor,

I was just trying to take my body back.
Ford Arbeiter and I were assembling a model airplane, the de Havilland Mosquito, when he said I should know something about his origins. The word origins spoke to me of comic book beginnings—baby Superman rocketing out of doomed Krypton and coming down in a Kansas cornfield—but Ford didn’t read comic books, he just talked this way. He would tell me once, he said, but I must promise never to mention it again. The morning he was born, two airliners left Los Angeles International within three minutes of each other, one bound for St. Louis, the other for Chicago. An hour and a half later, the planes collided over the Grand Canyon. No one survived. Ford’s father was on the Chicago flight.

I realized, to my horror, that he was about to cry, the first of only two times I ever saw him close to tears, and was relieved when he returned to our model, his tapered fingers fitting the Mosquito’s multi-paned canopy precisely into place. This was, in fact, my model. They were always my models, which we always built at my house and at my invitation, though we never spoke in those terms or of the fact that I’d never set foot in his house. Once, uninvited, I bicycled six and a half miles to the city, to Ford’s neighborhood, but when I saw where he lived—one in a dreary block of run-down row houses—I turned back around. I never mentioned this to Ford, just as I never mentioned his father or the crash. I kept my promise.

Still, I couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d told me, and soon I was poring over library-bound volumes of Time, Life, and Newsweek, ravenous for details. There was no “black box” aboard either aircraft in 1956, so the question of how a Douglas DC-7 Mainliner and a Lockheed Super Constellation crossed paths 21,000 feet above the Painted Desert without seeing each
other remained a mystery as insoluble as the assassinations of my childhood. Identification of the victims was largely impossible, and Ford’s father’s remains were buried along with those of twenty-eight fellow passengers in four coffins on the southern rim of the canyon. A decade after the crash—even now over half a century later—bits of wreckage would turn up among the cliffs. My imagination lingered longest over the more personal artifacts: a fork twisted into the shape of a pretzel, a dime and a penny fused in a lady’s change purse, a man’s wristwatch stopped at 10:32, the very instant of Ford’s birth, or so I imagined.

Our models were mainly World War II fighters—Messerschmitts and Stukas, Spitfires and Lockheed Lightnings—and as with most things, Ford’s engagement went deeper than mine, reaching into history and the specific role each played in the conduct and outcome of the war. But in the seriousness of purpose Ford brought to their assembly, I sensed something that transcended historical interest: a symbolic attempt to undo the crash and his father’s death, to put things right, to reverse time.

His hands were what I first noticed about him, his long fingers carving words out of the air. My parents had pulled me out of public school and into Catholic high school, not because they were religious but because where we lived it was the closest thing to prep school, which better suited their conception of themselves. I was an especially larval thirteen and rarely spoke. One October afternoon, as we changed back into our clothes after gym class, a sophomore named Danny Wetzel called me “dum­my,” and though I didn’t know Ford, he took Wetzel by the throat and pushed him up against the lockers. “You know I could kill you, don’t you?” he said, as mildly as asking about the weather. Wetzel’s face went purple. “Don’t you?” Wetzel nodded, with pop­ping, pleading eyes. A week later his neck was still striped with five long bruises.

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Ford wasn't like other people; he wasn't like me. We were both only children and solitary by nature, but he was better at it than I was, smarter and stronger. He had a deep, honeyed voice and a rich vocabulary. He read real books and believed in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection of the body. He never swore. Though our school imposed a dress code, there was wiggle room even within those constraints, but Ford's haircut and clothes looked leftover from the Eisenhower administration, as if, like that watch forever frozen at 10:32 A.M., June 30, 1956, he were stuck in the cultural moment of his father's death. His entire demeanor—fastidious, patrician, prudish—seemed transplanted from an earlier era. To my mind this lent him a surefire sense of tragedy and mystery, and when we turned our attention from model airplanes to the untouchable girls who moved among us in their regulation plaid skirts, it pained me that he did nothing to exploit this—though, of course, I didn't say so. We talked in terms of love, by which I meant sex. Ford really did mean love. He spoke of it like a mystic contemplating the nature of heaven, but without a single thought to, say, its infrastructure; whereas my approach was all about infrastructure, as if I were planning the most complicated of heists.

These were the early seventies, the last days of Nixon. Ford was staunchly conservative while I was fashionably liberal. Yet we never discussed politics—and by now you must realize that discretion was our modus operandi, the glue that held our friendship together. The single time I breached our code of silence we stopped talking. It was the night my parents hauled me away to college in Iowa—Ford stayed behind to attend the local community college—and in the course of a telephone conversation, I vented my righteous indignation over Nixon's pardon, granted that very morning by another Ford. Ford hung up on me. The phone still warm in my hand, I convinced myself that I'd out-
grown him, and twelve hours later I met Loretta.

We met in my first class, sociology, taught by a loose-breasted, barefoot radical feminist named Sally Tucker. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning, Professor Tucker made the case against sex, deconstructing it, desexing it, stripping away the veneer to reveal the patriarchal underpinnings behind power and powerlessness, behind everything. Though her lectures on topics like “Our Sexist Language,” “Organs and Orgasms,” and “The Mask of Beauty” were meant to put us off sex, they worked the opposite effect on Loretta and me. Enflamed, we’d go back to her room, pack her gloomy roommate Margie off to the library, and have at each other. With all our talk, talk, talk, Ford and I had turned sex into a puzzle, but it wasn’t metaphysics or even robbing Tiffany’s. It was easy, and Loretta and I were easy together. Both of us basked in being seen for the first time, two virgins gorging ourselves on each other. I would marvel at the way her parts so precisely fit mine, at the incredible living fact of her, until she’d say, “It’s just me, Larry.”

But soon we began to argue over this and that, and then we seemed to do little but argue. Around Halloween she missed her period and refused to take a pregnancy test, afraid this would somehow “make it real” and force choices she wasn’t ready or willing to make. I wanted to know, to clear up any doubts, and insisted there was really only one choice and the longer she waited the harder that choice would be. In her hesitation I sensed a sort of biological trap. We went home at Thanksgiving, and when we returned to school Loretta sat in the back of the lecture hall, as far from me as possible. Neither of us contacted the other and I prayed things would take care of themselves.

Gloomy Margie, her roommate, called before dawn a few days later. “Loretta’s in the hospital,” she said. “She lost the baby.”
I stood in the dark, my hand cupped around the mouthpiece. I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t. “I think you better get over here,” she said. “I think you better get over here now.”

I took a taxi to the hospital. Sunrise flared through the windshield like the torches wielded by the ignorant, bloodthirsty villagers in some Frankenstein movie. I was the monster, clumsy, mute, misunderstood. Even the cabdriver’s silence felt contemptuous. At the hospital, I went up the elevator, past a nurse’s station. Margie had told me where to go. The nurse at the desk switched off a transistor radio and snapped to attention. “Excuse me, sir,” she called after me. “Sir? Visiting hours aren’t till—”

“I’m the father,” I said, as if that explained everything, and she didn’t argue.

The door was open. I saw Margie first. She sat in an orange chair with her feet up on the bed, covered by a thin beige blanket. Loretta lay propped up by pillows. They stopped talking when they saw me. Loretta usually wore contact lenses, but now she had on her big bulky glasses, which magnified the accusation in her eyes. In the short-sleeved hospital gown, her arms seemed more naked than when she had all her clothes off.

“Hey,” I said and touched her stomach. It felt strangely warm and distended, even through the blanket.

Margie swung her feet down off the bed and pulled on her boots. “If you need me, I’ll be downstairs in the cafeteria.” She refused to look at me.

I listened to the swish of her nylon parka as she marched to the elevator. The doors whooshed open and shut. “If you need her?”

“Don’t start,” Loretta said. “Margie’s been a saint. I don’t know what I’d have done without her.”

I asked what happened and she told me. The night before, she’d begun to ache and bleed and it got worse and worse until
finally she came to the emergency room. It was a cyst, she said, not a pregnancy but an ovarian cyst the size of a quarter. With the tip of her forefinger, she drew a tight circle in the air between us, and as she continued to speak, words returned to their normal weight and size and I understood that none of this had anything to do with me, that she'd have wound up in this bed in this room in this hospital whether our lives had collided or not.

"It hurt a lot, Larry. It still hurts." She flipped back the covers and there was a hot water bottle where I'd touched her. She asked me to empty the bottle and fill it up again. Before I reached the sink she said, "I need another favor. Margie'll need a ride back to campus."

The red rubber bottle had gone cold in my hands. "Are you telling me I took a cab over here at the crack of dawn because Margie needs a ride? Why doesn't she drive herself?"

"She can't. She hasn't got her license."

"You drove yourself here?"

"I told you: Margie came with."

"So why doesn't Margie take a cab?"

"I can't just leave my car here, Larry. It costs money."

I came closer. "Why'd she tell me you lost the baby?"

"Because I did."

"No, you didn't." I stood at the foot of the bed. "You can't lose something you never—"

"But I did lose a baby. I mean, I thought I was pregnant and then suddenly I wasn't. It's still a loss." I didn't know what to say to that and continued to stare down at her until she looked away. "Would you even have come if she hadn't said that?"

"Jesus, Loretta." I was practically shouting. "It was my baby, too."

She looked up at me through those colossal lenses. "What baby?" she asked softly, and I wanted to run, to get as far from her
as possible. We’d failed and we were embarrassed by our failure, by biology, by each other.

“Oh, Larry,” she said, with a pained expression I’d never seen before. It was almost a smile.

“It hurts?”

“No,” she said. “I mean yes, but that’s not—”

A nurse came in, the one who’d tried to stop me earlier. “You really can’t be in here,” she said, ready for a fight, but this was just what I wanted to hear. I handed her the bottle, as if it contained all the poison between Loretta and me.

“So long, Larry,” Loretta said. I was nearly out the door when she called my name again. “The car keys.” Ill-used and unmanned, I fished through her purse while the nurse tended to her. I found the keys and dangled them between us. A thermometer jutted from the corner of her mouth and she waggled her eyebrows by way of goodbye.

The elevator opened onto the ground floor and I turned the corner to the cafeteria, the poison still fizzing in my blood. Though it wasn’t yet nine, a mist of chicken noodle soup hung in the air, and I could see Margie at a table with her back to me. I knew I was the bad guy in her eyes, a monster of selfishness, and the prospect of sharing her company for the fifteen minutes it would take to drive to campus was more than I could bear. I turned around and walked through the lobby and out to the parking lot. It didn’t take long to find Loretta’s car, a robin’s egg blue Chevy Vega. I drove out of the lot and through the city. Clouds curdled in the eastern sky. The Interstate opened up before me and I drove on, tucking Loretta, Margie, and their lies behind me. I wanted to go home, to go back in time, back to riding bikes and building model airplanes. But I’d been home less than two weeks earlier, and my parents hardly knew what to do with me then. My reappearance would be impossible to explain, yet it seemed just
as impossible to go back to Des Moines, so I kept driving, with no clue of where I was headed or what I might do when I got there.

It began to rain outside Iowa City, the temperature falling fast, and by the time I reached West Branch the windshield wipers were freezing up, so I decided to get lunch and wait out the weather. I took one wrong turn after another, until I found myself in the parking lot of a roadhouse called The Horned Toad. A sign out front, dripping with icicles, read, “FASHION SHOW 12 – 3.”

The place was crowded with men, maybe a couple dozen, professional types, Elks and Rotarians in jackets and ties, each on the cusp of middle age, each at his own table. Three young women—one blonde, one redhead, and one mousy brunette—wandered from table to table in translucent lingerie and high heels, while between drinks the men tucked dollar bills into the models’ panties, but there was no joy in it, none that I could see. These men seemed to breathe one collective sigh, just audible between the songs on the jukebox. The songs were sad, too, pathetic and full of yearning—“It’s Only Make Believe” by Conway Twitty, “Bobby’s Girl” by Marcie Blane, “Tears on My Pillow” by Little Anthony and the Imperials—each at least a dozen years old, each with a sob in its throat.

I was eating a BLT at a corner table when the brunette approached. She wore a mesh bra and matching G-string. Despite a mask of makeup, her face looked ghostly pale, almost incandescent in the dim light. A price tag dangled from the left cup of her bra. It read “$30.”

“What’s your name, honey?”
I was afraid to give her my real name. “Ford,” I said.
“No, honey, your first name.”
“Ford is my first name.”
“You’re kidding,” she said. “Mine’s Randy.” I couldn’t look her in the face; I was that shy. “You don’t like me, Ford?” She tilted
her pelvis toward me. Washington and Lincoln peered solemnly through the mesh.

“No,” I said. “I mean, yes. Yes, I do like you.”

“Then why don’t you buy me a drink?”

“They let you drink on the job?” My voice wobbled.

“That is the job,” she said. “Come on, Ford. Buy me a Tab?”

I handed her a five-dollar bill. She stashed it with the others, kept the change, and sat down next to me. She leaned closer, squinting. “Wow,” she said. “You’re just a kid. What do you need to come to a place like this for?”

“I don’t need to,” I said. “I was just hungry, is all.”

“So you came here? To The Horned Toad?”

I looked around and imagined Loretta, Margie, and Professor Tucker, condemning me to death, if only for my disingenuousness. But I hadn’t come here for sex; I’d come for lunch. “I’m just passing through.”

Randy put her hand on my thigh and, with sudden urgency, asked, “You passing through Davenport?” My leg trembled under her fingers. “You going east on 80?”

I nodded.

“You want company?”

“Sure,” I said, though I wasn’t sure at all. She told me her shift was over in fifteen minutes and she’d meet me in the parking lot.

The sun was out but the air felt colder. One of the models, the redhead, stood at the entrance wrapped in a man’s checkered sports jacket, scattering fistfuls of salt like a farm girl feeding the chickens. Loretta’s car was lacquered with ice, and it took me a while to get the door open. I turned on the engine and scraped the windshield. The ice was like a second windshield bonded to the first, and it was hard to tell where the ice ended and the glass
began. Then Randy emerged, wearing glasses and a long black Cossack coat that trailed along the ground. She waved to me and started across the parking lot, haltingly, practically lurching, and I wondered if she had a clubfoot or had suffered some injury I'd somehow missed. Halfway to the car she stopped and just stood there. As I stepped toward her, she threw open her coat and a little girl emerged, as in some magic trick. The girl looked four or five years old, with orange hair, a pink down jacket a couple sizes too big, and a matching plastic purse. Randy made brisk introductions. "Ford, Chloe. Chloe, Ford." A cloud of sexual threat had lifted, and idiotically, gratefully, I offered my hand. Chloe shook it, then dove headlong into the backseat. Randy settled in on the passenger's side.

Before I'd put the car in gear, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned around. Chloe thrust a small square of folded newspaper at me. I unfolded it gently—its creases were turning to lint—and there was a photograph of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"It's the king," Chloe said matter-of-factly. "He's gonna get shot."

It had been six years since Dr. King was killed and I didn't know whether or how to say so. He stared out at me here in the future, his eyes heavy with foreknowledge and loss. I refolded the picture tenderly and handed it back to Chloe, who returned it to her purse, snapping it shut.

Randy guided me back to the interstate, while all around us wires and branches shed glittery husks of ice. Once we joined Route 80, a suffocating silence filled the car, and to break it I said, "I like your glasses," which were as big and clunky as Loretta's.

"Yeah?" she said. "They won't let me wear them while I'm working."
“There’s always contacts.”
“No way I’m gonna stick glass in my eyes. And then you gotta clean them and all.”
“I had a girlfriend who used to clean hers in her mouth.”
“That’s not cleaning them,” Randy said in a tone of dark disapproval. “The human mouth carries more germs than a dog’s.”
“I had no idea.”
“Well, it does. The mouth’s the dirtiest part of the body.”
Her hair was pulled back in a severe bun, her face as pale and porous as the moon. Chastened, I ran my tongue over my teeth.
“Anyway, it’s just as well they won’t let me wear them,” she said. “When I take them off, I disappear. That helps a lot.”
She went silent again but I felt word-starved, desperate for talk. “Randy,” I said. “Is that short for something or—”
“You steal this car, Ford?”
I glanced at Chloe in the rearview mirror, then past her out the back window. “Of course I didn’t. Jesus, Randy. Why would you even ask me that?”
“Cause this is a girl’s car.”
“Oh, yeah? And what makes you say that?”
“It just is.”
“You’re right,” I said quickly, less afraid of her thinking I was a thief than that I would own an effeminate car. “It is a girl’s car. But I didn’t steal it.”
“Then whose is it?”
“My girlfriend’s.”
“The one with the contact lenses?”
I nodded.
“Yeah?” she said. “Then why isn’t she driving it?”
“She can’t.”
“Why not?” She turned the lunar pallor of her face on me like a spotlight. I felt stripped. “Why not, Ford?”
"Because she's—" I looked up again at the rearview mirror. "Because she's D-E-A-D."

Randy went still, her hands in her lap. "How?"

"She was flying home for Thanksgiving. See, we'd broken up and it had been weeks since we talked, and then—"

"And then what?"

"And then the plane C-R-A-S-H-E-D."

In the backseat, Chloe began to chant, "Mommy and Fordy sittin' in a tree K-I-S-S-I-N-G. Hirst comes love—"

"All right, Chloe," Randy said. "Crazy Time's over now."

"Then comes marriage." Chloe leaned over the front seat, her face floating between ours. "Then comes Fordy in a baby—"

"Sit yourself down right this minute and quit acting crazy."

"I'm not car-ray-zee." Chloe rested her chin on my shoulder. Her breath smelled of chocolate milk. "Are you car-ray-zee, Fordy?"

"I said, sit down."

She sat back with such a solid thump that I was afraid she'd hurt herself. Then came the snap of her purse and the rustle of paper. "Yes, sir." She heaved a rueful sigh. "The king sure looks like he's gonna get shot."

"So, go on," Randy said. "Tell me what you were telling me."

"Well, it seemed the least I could do was drive her car to her mom and—"

"No." There was heat in her voice; she sounded keyed up, excited. "Tell me about the you-know-what," she said. "About the C-R-A-S-H."

So I gave her what she wanted, my very best Ford Arbeiter, an ecstatic's vision of hell transposed to the outskirts of Des Moines. In my version, the plane came down in a cornfield.
shortly after take-off, the fuselage bursting like a piñata, spilling fuel and fire and suitcases and seat cushions. Long-stemmed orange flags marked the bodies and the parts of bodies. The flames rose higher than the plane’s highest altitude—three times higher. I pulled out all the stops. I out-Arbeitered Arbeiter, and threw in the pretzel-shaped silverware, the fused dime and penny, and the wristwatch stopped at the moment of impact. I let no one survive.

Neither of us said anything for a mile or so. An almost post-coital calm had settled over us, an afterglow, and though I’d made it all up—or most of it—I felt variably guilty, ashamed. Not only had I killed off my girlfriend; I’d appropriated the defining tragedy of my best friend’s life and turned it into entertainment, pornography, a lie.

“That’s been happening a lot, hasn’t it?” Randy said.

“What has?”

“You know.” A note of intimacy had entered her voice, an easiness, as if there were something between us now, something we’d shared, and I felt guiltier and guiltier.

“Has it?”

“Sure, it has. Otis Redding, Jim Croce, that Watergate wife, Mrs. E. Howard What’s-her-name, going down in the Everglades. Lots of people. Why do you suppose that is?”

I shrugged.

“Wanna know what I think, Ford? I think it’s about doubt.”

“Doubt?”

“Belief, disbelief. Faith, doubt. I mean, the whole idea of flying’s already so crazy, isn’t it? It’s like driving.” She swept her hand in front of her, in front of me. “Look at us barreling down this blacktop at—what?—seventy, eighty miles an hour, cars zooming toward us, in all directions, just inches away, just as fast, even faster. What if one of those drivers sneezed? Or had a heart
attack or a stroke or just wasn’t paying attention?” She folded her hands in her lap. “Yeah, I think the whole thing’s about faith. One leak and the whole Hoover Dam comes rushing in.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said, and I didn’t.

“It’s like thinking about your own heartbeat. Lub-dub, lub-dub. Or breathing. Start thinking about breathing and you can’t breathe.”

“So what are you saying? That it was a self-conscious airplane? The Little DC-10 That Couldn’t? An airplane’s not a person, Randy. An airplane’s not thinking about anything.”

“All I’m saying is, it’s a mystery,” she said, and I remembered the plastic model parts spread across the table, the human debris littering the canyon, the tears welling in my friend’s eyes, and in that moment I knew where I was going, where I’d been headed all along. I wasn’t running away. I needed a witness, a confessor, someone who understood, who knew me. I needed to testify, to wash the lies of this day out of my system. I needed to see Ford.

“It’s no mystery,” I said. “It was a bolt.”

“A bolt?”

“The pylon’s connected to the engine and the engine’s connected to the wing by a little bolt only so big.” I traced its circumference in the air with my finger. “The portside engine fell off. No mystery.”

“Well, that’s one person’s opinion.”

“It’s not opinion, Randy, it’s—”

A sheet of ice, molded to the hood and thawed by the heat of the engine, flew up and slapped against the windshield with a loud, hard whack, exploding in a sparkling cloud. Randy screamed, then she laughed, and then we all laughed. “Do it again, Ford!” Chloe shouted from the backseat, jubilant, her
breath warm on my neck. "Do it again!"

It was near dark when I left Randy and Chloe in Davenport, and by the time I got to Ford's house three hours later the rain had started up again, turning the snow on the ground to slush. Ford's car was in the driveway, a '63 Impala lacy with rust, but when I rang the doorbell, no one answered. I knocked; still no one came. I'd traveled too far just to turn around and drive back, so I walked around to a lighted window at the rear of the house, where I found Ford hunched over the kitchen table with his back to me. I tapped on the glass. He glanced over his shoulder and quickly got up and walked out of the kitchen, switching off the overhead light on his way out. By the time I came around to the front porch, he was standing in the open door, dressed in a red cardigan sweater, a green plaid shirt, and brown corduroy pants, the wale worn thin in the knees.

“What are you doing here?” He seemed neither surprised nor pleased to see me.

“What do you think I'm doing here?” My voice cracked. “I haven't seen you in months. Do I need a reason?” He didn't answer. “For Christ's sake, Ford, I've just been to hell and back and needed to tell someone. Is that such a crime?” He held my stare for a moment, cast his eyes down one end of the block, then the other, and without another word ushered me inside.

The living room was shabby but clean, and lit by a single table lamp. I took off my coat, draped it over the back of a sofa, and sat down beside it. Ford sat across from me in a chair whose upholstery was as worn as his corduroy. There was a wire birdcage with no bird; a picture that might have been cut out of the parish calendar, showing the Sacred Heart of Jesus; and the print of a painting of a lamb lying in the snow with a collie standing over it, its head raised and its mouth open, as if baying to alert
the shepherd. The bookshelf behind Ford held a threadbare edition of the *Great Books of the Western World*, and at its midpoint, in the vicinity of Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift, sat a framed photograph, an old studio portrait in black and white. I pointed at it. “Is that—”

“Yes,” he said without turning. “My father.”

He wasn’t what I’d imagined. I’d always envisioned a cross between Ford and Gregory Peck, but the father had none of the son’s dark good looks, much less Gregory Peck’s. All they seemed to share was their taste in clothing. He seemed impossibly young, with ears that stuck out from a terrible haircut, and wore a stupid smile, guileless and gullible.

“So tell me of your travels to hell and back,” Ford said, two fingers laid alongside his nose, but now that I was here, I felt acutely self-conscious and didn’t know how or where to begin. Steam knocked and hissed in invisible pipes. Water gurgled. Radiators rattled and ticked. My strategy had been to drop some intriguing detail into the conversational mix, something sure to pique Ford’s interest, whereupon he would proceed to cross-question me, in the course of which the panorama of my experience with women and the world would unfold itself to his great envy and amazement. Instead, I took the basic facts and improvised, leaving out certain pieces—the pregnancy scare, the hospital, The Horned Toad. But without those pieces, my story held no shape, and the epic tale I’d travelled this great distance to deliver seemed a collection of banal facts leading to the most predictable consequences. No matter what angle I took or what fact I omitted, I couldn’t seem to come out any kind of hero, and as I talked, my thoughts circled back, not to Loretta, but to Margie sitting at that Formica-topped table in that hospital cafeteria in her boots and parka, and somehow this made me sadder than anything else that had happened.
Ford listened, leaving me to twist slowly in the wind. An indulgent smile played on his lips, and I was about to reach for my coat, slumped beside me on the sofa like a third presence, when he asked, “Were you in love with her?”

“Of course I was in love with her,” I said. “What do you think I’m talking about here? But once the toothpaste’s out of the tube it’s hard to get it back in.”

“Ah, so now you’re quoting H. R. Haldeman to me.”

“Jesus, Ford, don’t tell me you’re still—”

“And she lent you her car?” His smile grew wider. “To come here?”

“What does that matter? It’s complicated. I needed time to think, to heal.”

“But you said it was over.”

“It was, it is, but—” I looked down at my wet shoes. “It’s still a loss.” This wasn’t going the way I’d planned, nothing was.

But then Ford became restless, as if my story, for all its artlessness, had stirred something in him. He shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. His fingers fiddled with the buttons on his sweater. Then he clasped his hands between his knees and leaned forward. He looked me straight in the eye. “Tell me, Larry—” I braced myself. “Do you believe in love at first sight?”

“Do I believe—” At first I thought he was mocking me, but from the pained expression on his face, I knew he was serious, that he sought my opinion as a man of the world, a veteran of love, a survivor. “Sure,” I said. “Sure I do.”

“You see, Larry, I met a woman.” His wariness fell away and he talked openly. “Some fellows from school cajoled me into visiting a discothèque in Lake Geneva. Reluctantly, I accompanied them, out of anthropological curiosity as much as anything. There was a group of young women at an adjacent table and one of them—well, she and I got to talking. Before I knew it, we were
sitting together. At the same table.” He spoke with increasing excitement, his hands shaping the space between us. “We hit it off, Larry, we struck sparks, and after talking for maybe half-an-hour I touched her foot with mine. Deliberately. I encountered no resistance. Our conversation continued, and after a while I touched her leg.”

“Touched how?” I moved forward on the sofa, my elbows on my knees. This was important. “I mean, with what? Your foot? Your leg?”

“My hand,” he said. “My right hand.”

“Where exactly? What part of her leg?” I asked as if heaven and earth hung in the balance.

“Her knee. Her left knee.” I nodded approvingly. “Again, I met no objection. We talked and talked—and all the while my hand was on her knee. Soon, it traveled to her thigh.”

“Jesus,” I said. “Then what happened?”

“I threw caution to the wind and asked her to dance.” The notion of Ford Arbeiter tripping the light fantastic—at a disco, no less—was laughable, but I didn’t laugh. “I took her hand, but as I led her to the dance floor I noticed that she walked with a limp, a pronounced limp. It was only then I realized—” He paused. “You see, Larry, she’d been in an accident, a dreadful accident, and her leg—the leg was prosthetic.”

“Prosthetic? You mean—”

“It wasn’t made of wood. That much I know. Perhaps some plastic or polymer.”

I thought of Margie’s legs propped up on the hospital bed that morning, the red rubber bladder cold in my hands. “The leg you—”

“The left leg, yes.” He nodded grimly. “She explained as we danced. An intersection collision. The other driver blew a stoplight, wasn’t paying attention.” He closed his eyes. “Just
imagine that, Larry. Imagine the force of impact that could send a beautiful, blameless girl hurtling through tempered glass.” He opened his eyes. “And here she’d landed—in my arms.”

“So you danced?”

“One song. And notwithstanding that pulsating music, I could feel her heartbeat. I think I even heard it.”

“And then?”

“And then we kissed—or I kissed her. And she kissed back. At least I think she did. No, no, I’m almost certain she did. But then her friends were leaving and she had to go, too, and everything was all higgledy-piggledy. Yet I had the presence of mind to ask for her number and she gave it to me.”

“That’s terrific,” I said. “That’s thinking on your feet.”

“Yes, but when I rang her up the next morning I got an orthodontist’s office in Waukegan.”

“Well, you said it was a chaos, right? She must’ve written the number down wrong.”

“You think so?”

“Sure I do.”

“I’m not so sure.” He’d talked himself into an agony, wringing his hands and rocking slightly in his chair. Tears gathered in his eyes. “You see, Larry, what I fear most—more than her finding me a threat or even a figure of fun—is that she mistook my shyness for—well, for revulsion. Perhaps that’s why she gave me the bogus number.”

“But you made her feel beautiful,” I said. “In spite of the leg.”

“It wasn’t about the leg.”

“I know that, I understand, but—”

“She was beautiful. She is beautiful. I couldn’t give a rambling damn about the leg.” He breathed a long serrated sigh. “Don’t you see, Larry? I loved her. I love her even now.” His voice
broke; his face lost its balance.

I looked away; it killed me to see him cry. On the shelf behind him, his father looked on, positively beaming, not a doubt in his head. He just couldn’t see it coming. I imagined him in the window seat reading *The Power of Positive Thinking* at the very instant the other plane hit. To add insult to injury, the photographer had tinted the picture, applying color to his cheeks, lips, and eyes, creating a sort of embalmed effect. I couldn’t stand the sight of him and wished there were some graceful way I could turn the photo around. What was I supposed to do with all of this? What was I supposed to say? Still, I was Ford’s friend, his best friend. I had to say something.

“You’d just met her, Ford. How could you possibly love her?”

He sat back in his chair and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. “You really don’t know what the fuck I’m talking about, do you?”

The blunt force of that fuck hit me first—I’d never heard him talk this way, never heard him swear—though what hit me hardest was the realization that it wasn’t spoken out of anger but pity, the same pity I’d seen magnified in Loretta’s eyes that morning. An awkward silence set in. I wanted to leave, to flee, but I’d already fled once that day and this is where I’d come. Where could I go now?

A key scratched in the front lock. I sprang from the sofa, grateful for this interruption, this reprieve, and moved toward the door to greet Ford’s mother—only it wasn’t his mother. It was a man, a middle-aged man. He wore a shiny yellow raincoat and held a collapsed umbrella with a wooden handle shaped like a duck’s head. His back was to us and he seemed lost in thought, kicking the slush from his galoshes. He carefully removed them and set them on a dark brass radiator grate built into the hard-
wood floor. When he turned around and saw me, his face lit up, greatly pleased to find me there, as if I were some long lost friend, and the effect was complete. Here was the face in the photo, Ford’s father.

We stood face to face in the passage between the living room and the kitchen. I couldn’t put one word after another and stuck out my hand. He took it in both of his—graceful hands, Ford’s hands—and shook it warmly but said nothing. We stood like this for what seemed a long time, while Ford watched from his chair. The refrigerator purred behind us. His father glanced from my face to Ford’s, then let go of my hand and gestured excitedly, specifically, to Ford, who signed back, less excitedly.

“This is my father,” Ford said with no trace of embarrassment, as if I’d disqualified myself from such considerations. This was followed by another burst of gesticulation. “But he would prefer that you call him Herman.” His father punctuated the invitation with a brisk nod of his head. I looked at Ford helplessly; it seemed bad form to talk. “You’re allowed to speak, old scout. Just because he can’t doesn’t mean you can’t.”

“Your father,” I said through ventriloquist’s lips. “Herman. You’re saying he can’t—”

“Neither can—pater nor mater.” Their fingers stitched the air. “My father wants to know if you’ll stay for dinner.” Before I could say anything, Ford said, “Have no fear. I conveyed your regrets. Your parents are expecting you. In fact, you’re already late.”

Ford’s father took a step into the kitchen, switching on the light, and in the scatter of plastic pieces strewn across the table I recognized the component parts of the Boeing B-17, the Flying Fortress. He hung his raincoat on the chair I’d seen Ford sitting in earlier and laid the umbrella across the sink. Indicating the mess on the table, he gave me a resigned but cheerful shrug,
which I translated as, "Boys will be boys." Then his expression changed, as if something had just occurred to him. He returned to the sink, and with a hopeful glow in his eyes, offered me the umbrella.

I smiled and shook my head, mouthing, "No, thank you," wordlessly protesting that I couldn't possibly. This prompted him to perform a brief pantomime of standing in the rain, shivering and hugging his arms to his chest, and then he thrust the umbrella at me, still smiling that big, broad smile, his eyes shuttling back and forth between Ford and me, father and son's fingers aflutter with illegible signs and symbols, as I stood by, mute.

"He insists," Ford said from his chair in the lamplight. "He says it's raining pedigreed animals out there."

"But I'm going far away," I said. "Very far." His father stood clutching the umbrella in both hands. "Tell him that."

"He says the umbrella is insurance," Ford said. But his eyes were no longer on his father; they were on me and wouldn't leave me. "It guarantees you'll return to us soon." His father nodded enthusiastically and pressed the duck's head into my palm, closing my fingers around it. He walked me to the door. I touched the doorknob, then pulled back and tried once more to change his mind. "He says you got yourself a good Catholic education," Ford said, though his father's arms hung at his sides. "So he knows we can always count on your guilty conscience." Ford raised two fingers in a papal blessing. Then his father shook my hand one last time and sent me back into the dark.
Envelope first, 1953
A ring of adults holding hands, burning candles, chanting, a series of levitations visible through the window—Tía Veronica claims she and Mama witnessed a séance from their cousin’s backyard.

Inside the living room, their frumpy aunts, half-drunk uncles, parents (my future grandparents), and strangers summoned spirits with one synchronized hum.

First an envelope floated off the table, then the gingham tablecloth spun off in a gust. Finally the table bobbed as if riding a cosmic wave.

Fried chicken and white biscuits Tía Veronica and Mama agree is what they ate for dinner that night, thighs and a twilight game of tag or hide and seek, depending on whom you believe. The levitations Mama refutes. When asked to explain them, she shrugs. Her tightened shoulders suggest a mental ruse, a hologram of boredom.

Esoteric Knowledge, 1955
Flying was out of the question given their income so they drove from San Antonio to Anaheim. Apart from a beach trip to Corpus Christi, Disneyland was Mama’s first official vacation. Tía Veronica, afflicted by motion sickness, stayed home playing card games with a relative, asking only for a mouse keychain.

It was not the thrill of rollercoasters that led my grandparents, my great-aunts and uncles west, but an international Rosicrucian convention held nearby. Masters and disciplines, the practiced and the novice all congregated in one coliseum. Statues and paper pamphlets trading hands.

The adults rotated attendance at the conference, a mea-
sured relay to keep Mama's attention fixed on the theme park's talking animals, costumed rodents with plastered smiles.

Of Pesadillas, 1987
Sundays at mass the same gitano sat at the end of our pew. Unruly gray hair, striped linen shirt, black trousers, a hat on his lap. Without fail, he sought out my great-aunt Fatima's hand for the sign of peace.

Who is he, I asked her one afternoon at home while we took turns filing each other's nails. It was clear he knew her from another vector of youth.

Don't talk about him, she hushed, clicking her tongue.

Already Fatima had observed me turning off radios with my mind, overhead lights. Occurrences I had not exerted energy to control or hide.

Nights later I intercepted Fatima in her dreams. We lingered in front of my grandparents' house, the sky musky with secrets. A business envelope rested securely in her hands. My adolescent naivety failed to recognize the ritual of initiation.

She warned me, before turning away, "He’s coming to meet me. It's best you leave, Tatum."

The back of her head, a maze of black zigzags, pointed to future generations.
He shows me where to enter the field, which direction to mow first—
then he gives me forty days of silence, benign quiet, apart from the tractor, a pasture where I can recall all there was, aboard the wide mothership winter, my first Quaker meeting, all of us gathered, nothing said, aloud.
Later, in the same hayfield, Believe tracked out in boot-prints: whomever leapt into the letter, doubled back to make one part touch another. --both instrument and ink, their whole self, written in snow, not disappearing ink-- disappearing paper.
PART OF AN ARGUMENT

My girl tells me the droning in the sky is the sound of our canted planet turning on its ancient axis, and she thinks our heart is pupate, maybe three eons from flight. I'm afraid of both:

carrying to term; carrying interminably.
Now it's October, my last asters and tattered cosmos drape over the rim, slant away from their vase, their stems,
a galaxy of axes.
In the back, encased in glass, on a pedestal like a shrine: the original filament from JFK's eternal flame: thin wire heated by electric, gas breath sighs over, igniting, just a coat hanger or piece of trash, filament from his original fire. A strand of genes is also a filament, holding your blood's code, the element that will form your bones. How many wept at this fire? Who came to pour their lament—and then it began to falter, new element installed, this one boxed up, sealed in its own coffin, we no longer even know what these elements help us remember: They have the programs from Lincoln's funeral—small element of history; they have the bill of sale for McKinley's embalming, fiber
weave paper burning yellow at the edges.  
A new two inch wire filament

burning at Kennedy’s grave,  
surviving the elements,

wind ruffles its glow, snow melts in a circle, rain  
cannot douse its light. You must know

by now what I’m talking about.  
You must know what I mean by filament,  

element, strand of DNA. In one there is a thin wire flame  
at a grave in Virginia. The other heats up

inside a bulb, and the bulb—frosted—emits light.  
In one it is all the elements

that make a body. In another, it is all the elements  
that do not.
UNPACKING THE STONE BUDDHA

Like all weaklings, I desire
something else—
intangible, but shaded and cool,
just on the other side
of this high, stone wall, the loose clear chime
of ice in glasses, and someone diving
into a pool. It's only Wednesday afternoon
but there's a little garden party, tuxedoed men
with silver trays, quiet laughter, you catch glimpses
through the hedges, or ivy-covered
iron bars. They have a shaded grass median
to jog through. There is a quiet intersection
with stone gazebo and fountain.
You can turn the corner
and relax in the sculpture garden
among ancient masterpieces, among modern works
few people understand.
Across the street, in the Museum of Fine Art,
they're unpacking the stone Buddha
from its wooden crate. At 11 a.m. it's 99 degrees
and 80% humidity. The lawn crews throughout the city
seem unfazed. In the basement, unseen
by Houston's millions, they unpack the stone Buddha
on loan from Ho Chi Minh City. Sandstone,
2,000 years old, removed from the earth in 1863, buried there,
they believe, by flood. No one knows
about this, no one comes to see it
three months on display—a basement gallery
where no sun can touch it, the dimmed lights
and dark painted walls, most guests mistake it
for under construction.
I leave my office with headaches

Beaven
from the cold air we're piping in
and walk the rich neighborhood.
By living here, they can keep everything at bay—even seasons:
when the flowers stop blooming
they're dug out. With money, they have conquered
landscape, the drab moments
between color. In the basement, the stone Buddha.
Cut from the rock, polished down to these
thin fingers, one foot raised as if about to step down
from the 2x4's surrounding it, into a strange kind
of afterlife. Down in this dark room
we're trying to bury it like the river, to put it back
where it belongs. We're holding our breath
with a crowbar, popping each board.
It can only be lifted out by hand;
we must touch it, although the contract says
no one can touch it. I go look at it,
squinting through the dark.
When our three months expire
we send it back.
What’s the use in a nest, love,
in this palace of fine particulates?

In America we won’t repeat ourselves
on the long drive from nowhere to nowhere.

Admission to America will be lightning
dust over corn fields in Rogue’s Hollow.

I don’t want to be an amplifier in cutoffs
anymore, love. I don’t want to house

heaps of lag bolts in my body.
I don’t want the dead to cut wakes

through my sleep or anything else you’re beside.
I will sing better in America, which is to say at all.

I will rim the bomb’s nose with soap.
I will rope the dead in closer,

feel for their candles because I’m useless.
When I get to America I will write a poem

that will make my friends and family proud
or at least forget they’re sitting in a chair

because, girl, those are the first things banished
there. Lie, float, or get gone.
From my grandpa, I inherited an even demeanor and good luck. With nothing but a middle school diploma from 1937, he co-founded a pipeline company and bought an estate on a ten-acre apple orchard, and when he wasn't gardening or golfing or tending to his Arabians, he was winning $10,000 jackpots at the casino. The other gamblers, usually trailer folks from my neighborhood, spilled entire paychecks into the machines and only made it home if they had enough gas in their pickups.

My twenty-five Bellott cousins lived in real houses with foundations, took gymnastics and dance, enjoyed vacations at the beach. My uncles worked in offices with nameplates on the doors while my aunts stayed home and made éclairs. I was the Bellott who lived in a singlewide with no father and a Jehovah's Witness mother who didn't take me anywhere except the Kingdom Hall. For fun, I foraged in the fridge and baked.

At family reunions, my grandpa sat in his designated chair, smiling and sipping scotch and water. The children ran circles around him, and eventually one would end up in his lap, asleep. My grandma, meanwhile, maintained conversation and good spirits, organized Scrabble and Boggle competitions, replenished veggie and cookie trays, perpetually wiped up spills—Grandpa's and ours. He rarely noticed her there, scrubbing the floor at his feet.

He racked up DWI's that never landed him in jail, collected girlfriends my grandma wouldn't leave him over. He didn't talk much and most people thought he was wise, but my mother said that, in truth, he was foolish-- he'd been in the right place at the right time and that was the only reason he wasn't a bum. Well, that and his smile. I said, "So luck is the only difference between
him and us?” and she said we had brains, and that according to my latest report card, it was high time I used mine. She still lives in that trailer, still checks groceries at Safeway.

I grew up and made my own way in the world—a dandelion among rosy girls who’d come of age in regular houses. Yellow was in that year, and I snagged the best boy. I shared an opinion at the right party, skipped college and got a job writing for the Food Network. I take plenty of time off now and it’s not called vacation. Handsome waiters serve me free dinners in nice restaurants, and I sip expensive drinks and give them the eye. I don’t have wrinkles because I don’t work hard, and people assume that because I’m young and landed this job, I’m some kind of special. I drive home, full and buzzed, and my husband vacuums the living room while I sit on the couch and open the mail. A check, a travel digest, a birthday card from Grandma. The winnings from a sweepstakes contest spill into my lap.
Kenny reached in for the damper handle and brought down flakes of rust—water signs. The fireplace leaked in the rare Southern California rain. They never used it, but Kenny worked to keep it out of his mind. Home repair was an addiction—the desire to fortify what one owned; build on it; preempt its wear. He used a baseball bat to shove a wadded towel up the flue. Since he was sealing the fireplace in plastic, he didn’t think the towel was necessary, but Nicole wanted it.

"Do you remember that old PSA," he asked her. "Where a home gets too insulated and builds up radon?"

Nicole was tired, having sealed two casement windows with duct tape. She peeled off tape until her fingers gave out.

"I never heard of radon around here."

"But are we in danger; you know, in the same way children suffocate if they put a plastic bag over their head?"

She kept an anger beamed at the tape roll. "It’s what they said to do."

He had the compulsion to throw his family in the car and race out of town, but when he thought of his job, it paralyzed him. He halfway expected to get rehired and Nicole seemed to be carrying on as if he would. Nothing had changed for her. Ever since she pulled their son, Jacek, out of the Waldorf School to become his teacher, the two of them rarely left the house.

Something alive rustled the river rock outside the window. She stopped taping and the house was silent except for the distant beeps of Jacek’s game.

"A dog," whispered Kenny, moving carefully on the creaky floor. He parted the Roman blind no wider than an eyeball’s pupil to find the back of a looming, gray head trying to see in from the opposite edge. The closeness startled. He mouthed the name,
“Gerber.”

*Fred Gerber—hermit neighbor.*

She shook her head violently. Kenny didn’t like the idea of hiding in his own living room, especially since Gerber looked healthy. It was a cause for celebration. Seventy-seven, living at an accustomed level of filth, Gerber was driven by a secret dynamo. Footsteps clapped on the porch and the door cracked with adult weight leaning in. She whispered, “Can he see through the door? I smell him.”

Kenny shook his head, “If we ask him, he’ll go.”

“No. He’ll never stop talking. It’s dangerous.”

When footsteps receded, Nicole peeked out and watched Gerber head back to his paint-chipped house, surrounded by stacks of white, five-gallon buckets. His immaculate El Camino stood out, sparkling olive with shining hubcaps. El Caminos were a cultish item in Eagle Rock.

“He’s healthy enough to wash that truck.”

“It’s an El Camino,” Kenny corrected.

She moved to the door and clawed at the roll. “I hate this tape.” Her scream wiped away the quiet.

Jacek stomped in, pear-shaped body shaking like Jell-O. “Why are you yelling?” In public school, he would have been a sixth grader, naively telling bullies his name was taken from a Polish grandfather. Bulging from under one of his tighter Gap T-shirts, his chest suggested a pubescent girl, and his fine, shoulder-length, blond hair was identical to his mom’s.

Nicole looked up, flustered, recalling the vows of homeschooling. “Yes, why am I yelling? That’s a good question. Shouting makes me feel better but everyone else has to suffer my complaints, don’t they?”

“We’re a little tired from the rationing,” his father said.
They considered the lentil soup, but chose minestrone. Food was a daily topic and Kenny was sick of it. Nicole was sick of it, but couldn't help herself. She waved a match over the burner until a medieval blue ring whooshed in a circle, vanishing dread. They had no idea how the gas came. Kenny peeked around the side of the sunshade on the kitchen window. A squirrel moved across the garage roof, but no sign of Gerber. A year ago while they were vacationing, he rolled their trash bins behind the house. No one asked him to. He kept an eye on the street and would likely shuffle down their drive at some point and make note of Kenny's generator vent. Or he might withdraw for weeks. To couples old enough to have lost a parent, there was no mystery how Gerber lived: widowed, childless, without family—only Joe, his scavenging partner across the street. The can of lentil soup sat alone on the floor. Kenny took a marker from the mug of pens by the dead phone and squatted on his left leg. The right one hurt if he sat on it, having ruined his calf muscle painting the garage. The can was labeled “1.” He crossed it out.

“I guess we can add lentils to the last day, when we’ll really need something extra.”

In the corner of the kitchen was an ungainly stack of cans and boxes. It looked like something Gerber hoarded. They had eaten carelessly for a week before buckling down and rationing. The cans were numbered with a Sharpie from 3 to 44. Sandwich bags full of rice, nuts, crackers, raisins, and scoops of oatmeal were taped to the cans and jars. Boxes of mac & cheese had an index card with a day number and serving sizes.

Peaches and powdered milk were to start Day 1, a way of weaning Jacek off cereal. He previously liked peaches, but complained and asked for the next day’s ration of Honey Nut...
Cheerios, quite possibly the last box of cereal in Eagle Rock, purchased from Won Liquors. Nicole believed a child had the right to choose meals. The best she could do was set an example. The peaches were pushed ahead with hope that a good night’s sleep might change his mind. She and Kenny were also denied a share of peaches, since they couldn’t open the can and save some for Jacek without a working refrigerator.

At the evening meal, Jacek had complained and they handed over the last of the Cheerios, pulled from Day 4. Worried and with little appetite, Kenny and Nicole decided to save the lentil soup. There wasn’t even a remote chance Jacek would eat a lentil.

When Day 2 came, before they could eat the canned pears, Kenny and Nicole waited for Jacek to wake up, since he went to bed well past midnight and slept until noon. They had a plan for the pears. Jacek said pears made him gag but they thought the pears might make the peaches look attractive.

There were gunshots and a swaggering muffler belched down La Roda Street. Kenny peeked around the shade.

“Gerber’s window’s shot.”

“A drive-by?” The phrase seemed out-of-place, but accurate.

“I bet it’s something to do with that El Camino. He’s had offers, but he’ll never sell.”

“Those fucking El Caminos,” Nicole said softly.

She checked Jacek. He was still asleep. At midday, he got up and drank chocolate powdered milk (a blessing, he accepted milk made from tap water). It fortified him for game play. After a battery change in the afternoon, Jacek’s hunger came on full-force, but he wanted the mac & cheese rationed for dinner. That gave his parents the go ahead on pears, including Jacek’s share, which they devoured like hyenas.
As light fell on Day 2, the effect on the casement windows gave Kenny an empty sense that the day was lost and anything hopeful would have to start tomorrow.

"Minestrone soup," Nicole pitched her voice toward Jacek's room.

"He's full on mac," Kenny said, but headed there anyway. He saw Jay's back against the bed, his stomach and knees forming a shelf holding the game console. The air was moist with dirty clothes; a sea of prickly game figurines threatened bare feet. Gerber's house came to mind, filled with other people's junk, perhaps some of it plucked from Kenny's own trash bin.

Nicole had instructed him not to criticize Jacek's room. Having studied the ways of Delight-Driven Learning, Nicole believed she alone possessed a formula for guidance. Kenny would have to wait until their private time in bed to learn more, since Jacek stayed up so late.

"How 'bout some delicious minestrone?" he asked his son. "It's got pasta shells."

When Kenny pulled the sheet over him, his stomach rumbling, he realized the sound was not muted as Nicole had asked and he was tracing Jay's mind in game play, decision speed and fluency marked by whirls of navigation. Soldier voices cried for help; others offered Jay congratulations: "Good shooting, mister."

"I don't like him up all night," he said when Nicole crawled in. "It would be easier if he ate with us."

"I know. I think one idea is to sleep on his schedule."

"I can't. I have to be up in case the National Guard comes by. That's how they might distribute vaccines if everything's still down."

She lowered her voice. "It's crazy, cut off like this. I can't
blog or talk to Jennifer. I know she had a sleep problem with Zeke, but I don't remember what she did. I'm thinking I could set the alarm at 'two' and get up and suggest he come to bed."

"Can I clean his room? How do you make cleaning a room delightful?"

"The delight-driven way is to suggest; show excitement about his choices. Now when that doesn't work—and sometimes it's important for health, like brushing teeth—you still can't force a child, but you can withhold approval. Remember when I wouldn't look him in the face until he brushed because I said it was yucky? That only took a few days."

"Is he brushing? His breath seems foul."

"He says he is but we're asleep, so that's another reason for me to get up at two. I can casually smell his breath. Let me figure out a reward."

Kenny was only too happy to. His chest felt as if a horse was standing on it. Most of their friends had abandoned the city, but he and Nicole thought the quarantine was safer. The problem was trying to think with a car alarm going off. If Jay got the sickness and died, would Nicole want to live? Kenny pushed his hands like a paddle; water flowed in currents between the fingers. He clawed at the surface, reaching for air and light, trying to get away from that alarm and awful dread. In a moment as pure as oxygen, he had the kind of pointed, intense revelation only found in nightmares: he didn't like his son.

Kenny was clutching a battery-powered Braun clock that read 2:10. Nicole had hit the snooze button. He found her and Jacek in the kitchen, illuminated by stabs of lantern light. She was cooking mac & cheese.

"Jacek's stomach hurts."

"I think I have the sickness, Dad. My eyes are burning."

"It's called eyestrain, Jay."
Nicole poured noodles in the pot, carefully, but the boiling water splashed her hand.

“You had the sickness, didn’t you, Mom?”

“I had regular flu.”

“We don’t know what your mom had. It could have been a mild case of sickness.”

“I think I have a mild case.”

“Do you feel like eating?”

“I’m starving.”

“Then you don’t have nodding disease.” This was a tiresome routine but Kenny thought it might be the beginning of Jay’s adult understanding of death.

Kenny shined his precious Maglite on the mac & cheese and then remembered his own rule not to waste batteries if another light burned.

“This mac is for Day 5. What are you going to eat on Day 5?”

“Dad, I can see the mac & cheese sitting there. If you don’t want me to obsess over it, you should hide it like Santa Claus—until Christmas.” He referred to Santa in a way that made Kenny wonder if Nicole had told him. The rationing was falling apart. There was no handyman he could call to fix it.

Jacek counted aloud, “One, two, three…” pointing out the mac & cheese appearing every fourth day in the stacks. “Thirteen boxes. I could eat one a day. That’s almost two weeks. See, just because I’m in Fun-School doesn’t mean I can’t count.”

“I never said that.” Kenny raised his voice louder than he meant to. “I know you can count, but we rationed for forty-four days.”

“You told Mom I couldn’t be a scientist, because I can’t count.”

“You can count whenever you want,” Nicole said. “If you
want to be a scientist, you’ll learn math when you want it. Then you’ll learn it faster because it’s fun.” She was rubbing her eyes. “Ken, this is a learning moment. He’s discovering math.”

bathing:

At noon, alone in the living room, Kenny was trying to remember what day it was. Nicole hadn’t stirred when he left the bed. That meant she took Ambien.

Shower day. They took showers every three days. Kenny enjoyed them with a pleasure equal to Jacek’s dislike—another way his son resembled Gerber.

He worked out a schedule for the generator. A fleeing neighbor loaned it to power Kenny’s electric water heater, which he unfortunately upgraded from natural gas before the crisis. With the Shell and 76 stations shut down, Kenny scrambled to find nine gallons of gasoline, siphoning most of it from one of their two cars.

His public school math told him they had twenty-five minutes of hot water, every third day until the food ran out. The priority was their bodies. Cookware received a sink of hot water in the kitchen, and the last part was to fill the tub for laundry before shutting off the generator, timed to the Braun.

A fifteen-amp cord snaked up the basement, feeding a power strip that serviced the TV, computer, and battery charger. Kenny unscrewed the Maglite, but he could tell it was empty. Jacek took the batteries for his game, and there was usually no working Maglite the night before shower day.

He peeked out at Gerber’s. The last car heard was the shooter’s. His foot poked at the plastic sheet around the fireplace and he noticed old, black water stains on the floor. He tried not to worry but the less he understood, the more it cost. Chimneys
were specialized. The house also needed a new roof and the connection to the chimney, the flashing, might be the source of the leak. That’s how it went. One repair spread to the next like a virus. He heard game sounds.

“Shower day,” he said when Jay came out for milk.

“Recharge day,” Jay insisted. “My batteries are weak and sucking.”

“Were you guys up late?”

“I don’t know. Mom was on the couch and I woke her and told her my idea. Listen. If I was an angel and had huge wings, how would I go to bed? Would I have to sleep on my stomach or could I fold the wings around me like a blanket?”

Kenny remembered going to bed alone. “Are you talking about a videogame?”

“No, it’s an idea I invented: If I was an angel. Mom said it was very original.” His fingers jabbed the game buttons. “These Mag batteries are shit.”

Kenny had the urge to reprimand him, but there was no cable TV to blame since the grid was shut down. He and Nicole cursed a lot during the first stage of the pandemic.

Kenny lifted the grill from the hall floor. It was intake for central air, but he had dismantled the ductwork and used the hole to reach the basement. Otherwise the only entrance was from the backyard. Sitting at the edge, resting his feet on a stepladder, the cool air hit his cheeks.

After filling the reservoir, he returned the gas container to a safe nook by Jay’s old tricycle and a shelf of 1993 Encyclopedia Britannica. On the second pull of the cord the basement came to life. Anybody on the block would hear the generator, perhaps a mile away in the hills. He climbed out and put a blanket on top of the grill to muffle sound, pressed down with a couple Britannicas.
The shower sprayed warm and strong. He recalled the first day home, cut loose from his job, and wanted to bring back that feeling, the joy of family vacation. It didn’t make sense during a crisis but they all had it.

“I’m out, I’m out.” Nicole was ready to take his place. He checked the clock and walked briskly to Jay on the couch, picking his big toe. “Jay, eleven minutes. Let’s do it.” Jay moaned and hugged his robe around him like the angel he invented.

“Shower day. Let’s do it.”

His voice broke. “I don’t need a shower, I haven’t sweated.” Kenny took hold of a wing.

“Ouch, you’re hurting me.” All Kenny could think: he should have showered last, making Nicole handle him. He realized she was deaf in the bathroom.

“If you don’t get in the shower I will accidentally step on your game console.”

Jay bore teeth and left. Another three days and they would do this again. He powered the TV while drying himself, flipping across blinks of white noise—no images at all, he supposed, were better than ones of African peasants streaming out of plague-ridden villages, viewed from helicopters.

Nicole raised her face to the warm jets, luxuriating. “Jacek, get in.” She rinsed off soap while he stood with one foot on top of the other.

“Hey, what about your hair,” he chided.

“I don’t need to wash it every time,” she pointed out.

He shook off the robe and stumbled through the curtain as she turned to face him, partly blocking the spray. The water seemed to emanate from her physique. “Did you know it’s exactly two months till Smile at Life?”

“I’m freezing, let me in the hot.” Their wet hips and arms slid past each other as they traded spaces. She noticed threads of
black hair sprouting above his crotch.

"How can we go?" he said. "We can't leave the house."

"We'll be out by then," she said, squeezing shampoo over
his hair. "We have to. The food'll be gone."

"I don't want to wash my hair either."

"Please? It's really oily. I can shine it up." A dramatic
sigh indicated approval. "Even if the electric is out, some people
will get to the conference; maybe not everybody. It's a two hour
drive."

Kenny poked in. "Five minutes."

"Mom, do you think anybody died, of the Fun-Schoolers?"

"Well." She considered it. "Of about twenty people in
our group, it's possible. I just know whoever is healthy will get to
Smile at Life."

the nodding sign:

Nicole had one leg over the arm of an Ikea chair, reading Britannica Vol. Twelve. "Dehydration can be controlled with fluid ther­
apy and headaches with aspirin—can you believe this shit? That's
all they have about flu. I can't believe I wrote school reports from
these books."

Kenny was studying the more general macropaedia.
"There's a full page about viral categories—nothing practical.
I'm beginning to see how monks learned, hand-copying the same
books over and over."

She was in the next volume. "They don't have Marburg
disease."

"Mom, I got a new level." Jacek was wrapped in a blanket
on the couch. "I just killed about a hundred people."

"Somebody compared it to Marburg," Kenny said. "But
Marburg might have happened after 'ninety-three. I don’t know. Dad got these *Britannica* when he retired in 'ninety-three."

Jacek coughed from the chest. “Uh-oh, sounds like Marburg.”

Nicole got up and put her hand flat to his forehead. He moaned and shook his body hard enough to make the sound undulate, clearly enjoying himself. “Stop it,” she said.

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Yes, you are. You’re acting like you have the nodding sign and you’re hurting our feelings.” Jacek had reacted to the news clips as many American children had—semi-naked African boys and girls nodding their heads looked strange, even funny. Nicole had explained that the children were in a trance.

Worried, she skipped her bathroom chores that night.

“He’s sweating, Kenny.” Jacek’s bedroom was humid, the door always shut once Jay was in bed, Nicole wedging a towel underneath. It reminded Kenny of his pot-smoking days in high school.

The next morning, something hot on his chest woke him. It was his burning hands. Kenny had the same crushing panic when they laid him off work, and Nicole realized he was sick the moment she saw his face.

“Oh my god. I’m giving you all the fruit Jacek won’t eat,” she said.

“He won’t eat any fruit,” Kenny said, suddenly accepting his freedom, his household duties at an end. There was nothing left but to wait for the ferryman and proceed across the River Styx.

Nicole washed her nightclothes in Epsom salts and boiled water on the stove and moved into Jacek’s room on a pallet. He hopped in with her as if it was a Smile at Life sleepover.
She dug out a soup pot to use for a toilet. Kenny's thinking was impaired, but he was able to convince her it was more sanitary to use the bathroom and clean up while he was able than to empty a contaminated bucket. "It's Middle Ages," he said. "You start playing with chamber pots—," and he fell asleep.

She found the lid and he compromised: use the pot for urinating. Empty with potholders to keep hands clean. Wipe down the toilet. She cleaned again if Jacek wanted to pee, pacing outside the bathroom, heckling her to hurry.

As his temperature climbed, Nicole spoke through the door in muffled tones, relaying that Jay missed him. Night and day merged and the generator's whine filled his head at all hours. One morning he saw "get well" and "best dad in the world" on the panels of a crude paper box pieced together with Scotch tape on the nightstand. He gradually realized Jay had colored the fat letters outside the lines like someone who had never used a crayon. Kenny once read about Special Needs on a website and suggested to Nicole that Jay might have Asperger's Syndrome. She explained to Kenny that gifted was also a Special Need.

After Jacek depleted the mac and cheese, he beat his stomach as if it was a giant leech and howled. Nicole suggested he tear pages from the Britannica one at a time to calm himself. Days later, there was a pile of pages and empty covers.

"Kenny, we have to talk." She pounded the door until he opened his eyes and knocked over his lamp. Something had changed. She was saying goodbye.

"Do you think your body's giving up?" she said.

He labored, "Yes."

"When you die, I have to move you. It's unsanitary." She was quiet for a long moment. "I can help you to the basement if you can walk. When the time comes, I'll drag you in the storage room."
Kenny tried to raise his leg. “I can’t.” The conversation seemed to resume later in the day.

“Listen, if you can stand for a second, I’ll push the bed close to the window.” The heat from that side was already unbearable. “Then I can push you out to the neighbor’s yard. They’re gone and I don’t think they’re coming back.”

Tears rolled down his face. She was crying on the other side.

In his fever, he waded across a flooded floor, his parent’s old tract home or one he’d visited on a Sunday “open house,” snaking his shoulders through a constricted passage, sometimes opening to a palatial estate.

The sound of rain filled the room. His head ached to raise it. The pot was too heavy to move. He pushed through the plastic curtains over the door and came to the living room. It was bright, but not as hot in the main rooms. Jay was on the couch, squealing at the sight of him.

“You’ve got to put bowls under the fireplace, Jay. To catch leaks.” Jay held his blanket in front like a student matador.

“Dad, you’re killing us. You’re killing us.” Nicole’s head appeared from a hole in the floor. Kenny pleaded with her to get the stainless steel mixing bowls.

“It’s not raining,” she shouted. “I’m running the generator for Jacek’s batteries. They don’t hold charge, Kenny. I’m sorry.” He didn’t understand why her head was disembodied.

She raised her arms and herded him back to the room. “Jacek has to keep playing if he wants to be a game designer someday.”

The bed caught him, swallowing his face in pillow. It was so soft he fell asleep at once without strength to make a channel for air, an infant smothered by the weight of his head; all but lost, save for the involuntary flexing of his body. It had a will of its
Some time later, he was bruised on the floor. Nicole had left a tray and he managed to sit against the wall, sucking the straw—apricot it said on the can. He never cared for apricot, he realized, as he drew it in. As the walls wavered, contractions and releases of muscle made his head move slightly back and forth. His jaw slackened and his mouth hung open as in autopsy, eyes dilating without sight. Rhythmic thumping sent sloshes of blood to the edges of his skull, to an endless horizon. Apricot juice and saliva rolled off his chin in undulating tides extending for miles, each drop to the puddle on the floor as big as an El Camino.

the neighborhood:

When self-awareness came back, Kenny pondered that it was the essence of humanity. Unfamiliar food or drink induced the nodding sign. It was discovered early on; new foods were a catalyst for the nodding sign, which took the form of a seizure, often followed by cardiac arrest. But you had to be infected with nodding disease first. The TV reported rumors by the end. Survival rates were a guesstimate; everything was. He felt drained and beat up, but something good was happening. He loved the neighborhood in summertime and wanted to see it. A hopeful excitement shot through him.

Leaning, pulling the door aside, he staggered smack into a web, momentarily held by a translucent wall. His mind sparked— took the sharp edge of the pot lid and cut the plastic like butter. He was also barricaded by the old loveseat. Nicole had stood it on end, blocking his exit. Jay slept on it only a year ago, situated at the foot of their bed. He spent his first eleven years nestled between them—attachment parenting—until Kenny said enough already. They were a warm family in winter, sharing the same cov-
ers until Jay finally migrated down to their feet on the loveseat like a Saint Bernard. Kenny had little strength in his arms, but he squeezed past.

His scratchy voice and lyrics from his youth about “flying like an eagle” drew Jay into the bathroom.

“Dad, you’re showering without the generator,” he said.

“Cold shower,” he answered.

From the living room, Nicole thought she was hallucinating. Kenny lapped up a bowl of lentils like a dog. He had badgered Jay every step of the way to open them, his first use of a can opener, and he excelled.

The males wanted out. She asked if Kenny could live for awhile at the neighbor’s next-door and see what food they abandoned and bring it to the porch until she was sure he wasn’t contagious. He responded by ripping tape off the backdoor. Fifteen pounds lighter, he threaded a belt through the loops in his shorts. Jay followed him to the back deck holding a handkerchief over his nose.

The patio glare was vicious. Jay watched him limp down the steps.

“I don’t want to leave Mom,” he cried out and Kenny waved.

He walked around the house up the slope of the drive, the Santa Anas stirring the air. La Roda was silent as Sunday morning. He could walk the boulevard if he had the strength, two miles to the Pasadena Bridge and across the Arroyo Seco.

Gerber’s gait caught his eye. He rounded the corner of his house bouncing like a giant rabbit with an armful of white buckets. Dizziness came and Jay startled him climbing the drive, huffing through his handkerchief, and they walked side by side, his son taller, not hunched over a game. He pictured Jay swinging a bat and running bases.
They reached Chickasaw Drive and the silence continued. The drone of traffic was absent.

“Dad, it stinks.” He revealed his face, but covered it when the full force of putrefaction hit, walking past the first story garage of an apartment full of cars. They came to a cherry red, plastic Vons cart. Abandoned carts had always incensed him. They were like the worn parts of his house, demanding attention.

Colorado Boulevard was a Grand Canyon of vacancy. It resembled library photos of Eagle Rock in the time of cable cars. His throat hurt and he wondered why they’d lived to see it, resisting the notion his family was blessed.

Taco Bell was carved into a space between the old, commercial two-stories. A hand-made sign read: “We’re open! No chicken.” Something moved behind the glass.

“Dad, I want three tacos, no lettuce or tomatoes.”

An older teen came to the window. Over the years, Kenny had dealt with somnambulant, minimum wage cashiers dragging out words and offering incorrect change, but this boy was raving.

“I opened yesterday and had three customers. People told their friends and today a carload almost cleaned me out.”

“Are you the only employee?”

“Yeah. The manager died. I got plenty of beans. They’re in a mix you heat with water. I was training for assistant manager and the owner died too, so this isn’t exactly a regular Bell. I set my own prices. The owner was sick but willed me his store because his family died. I got it on paper.” He produced a handwritten note. Kenny felt a stirring of admiration, guessing by ethnicity that the boy was public-schooled.

“How much is a beef burrito?”

“Nine dollars,” the teen said. “I have to get things at Vons.”

“Vons is open?” He turned to Jay, relieved.

cunningham 97
"In the parking lot. It's a flea market on Saturday. That's why the burrito is nine. If you want a super, it's thirteen. It's the best I can do. Prices are going crazy and people are trading alcohol."

The boy was charging thirty-nine dollars for three super beef burritos, but money might already be worthless. He wanted to say it, but something stopped him. The boy was clever. He could take care of himself.

Jay ate as they walked, moaning and gulping, but Kenny was too shocked. A world without money could not expect mortgage payments. Jay laughed out a clump of food. "I never tasted a burrito this good in my entire life."

Nicole was sitting in the front lawn, weeping in a tearless way. The grass was barely hanging on without the automatic sprinkler. They were away too long and Kenny knew it. He offered her a burrito.

"Since when do they use aluminum foil?"

"Mom, these're good. It tastes different because the guy had to get different cheese than Taco Bell uses. Ingredients are supposed to be delivered from a central warehouse. That's why all the restaurants taste the same."

Kenny explained the new ownership while she flung open the burrito and massaged hot sauce out of a packet. "He got a lesson in franchises." Kenny was proud of his part. By the time Nicole took a bite, Jay had finished and asked his dad for the rest of his. The sudden intake of food had made Kenny light-headed and he readily handed it over. He was weak but happy to stand in the breeze with his family eating.

In the garage, he found the swing blade that the previous owner had left. Arms trembling, he managed to chop a few weeds along the patio until the sickness hit. He sprinted to the toilet downstairs. From the floor above were cries too terrifying to con-
nect with his own pain. The enemy clinched his gut every step up the back stairs.

The house was an oven. Jay was screaming in his room and Nicole shouted, her voice coaching from the bathroom. “Come in here and vomit.”

“Fuck vomiting,” Jay shouted. That word. It stung Kenny in his misery. He locked onto Nicole’s face, reflected in the toilet water as the flush settled. “You trusted a kid. We ate dirty meat or lettuce.”

Jay was heaving from his bed, holding a coyote stance on all fours. “I hope that kid gets nodding sign,” he screamed.

*a trip to the local market:*

Kenny and Gerber broke down the door across the street and found Joe on his couch, hands gripping a Diet Dr. Pepper in rigor mortis. There was no mac and cheese in the kitchen or any other item on Jay’s short list.

Saturday, Kenny decided to walk. He wanted to save gas and had to admit the abandoned cart was on his mind.

“Are you so old you forgot how to work a simple analog device?” Jay said to his father, reviewing the walkie-talkie operation. They hadn’t used them since his first year at Waldorf. It seemed to Kenny a long enough time to forget, but Jay’s world was too circumscribed to forget anything. There wasn’t any space taken up with worry.

The sidewalk radiated. He came to the cart and wrapped his hands over the handle, pushing and slowing under the occasional awning. Six hundred dollars were in his pocket, five in hundred dollar bills, but he wondered if they had value. The spots of shade were hard to leave. He untied his shoes and slipped the hundreds in.
At Taco Bell, he decided to complain. Kenny rolled the cart past the fallen sign in the parking lot to the drive-thru window and saw the boy lying next to stacked cases of hydrogenated beans. His chest and head were speckled with bullet holes, his face chalky white.

The smell came.

He raced the cart over gaps between the parking lot and boulevard to get away from that bean and death smell. He couldn't tell Jay, not on a walkie, and was suddenly pleased they took him out of the Waldorf. Schools were finished now.

He pushed the cart in the middle lane by the median. The bakery, Tritch Hardware, and Casa Bianca Pizza were closed. The donut shop windows were destroyed. He wasn't aware of the heat, his life on fire.

“Hello, Jay.” He released the button.

After several seconds, “Yeah.” Jay was drowsy and the signal was weak on four double-‘A’s.


“Your batteries suck.”

Kenny was nostalgic about last month, pleasantly sliding into a pair of loose jeans. He heard an engine far away.

“Dad, I thought of another cereal.”

“I can barely hear you.”

“I told you Honey Nut Cheerios or Frosted Flakes.” The voice crackled. “I want to add Lucky Charms. I can live with any of those.” The batteries were fading in the heat. “Did you get that, Dad?” The words became barks of static, like game samples but they originated from his flesh and blood. Jay was probably cursing.

It came over the horizon at ungodly speed, a griffin or dragon from Greek mythology—the Hummer, largest SUV made, this one long as a limousine.
He abandoned the cart and crossed the boulevard, limping close to the houses one lawn at a time. The vehicle passed without incident and Kenny headed toward Hill Drive, north of Colorado, where homes grew tall and roads widened. He could circle back to Vons, avoiding the main road. Birds called, but ground life was quiet, the backyard dogs having dehydrated. A car door was left open. Half a lawn and bushes toasted black. He craved water. The more he climbed, the greener it became.

Resting against a pine trunk, breathing it in, he realized he didn't have the walkie.

Pines and hundred-year oaks joined branches over the street in arches. The breeze returned and a sliver of freeway was visible, the 134 to Pasadena, quiet as before the Europeans arrived. Only wafts of putrid odor were recent. He sat down and pictured his family in the broiling house on La Roda. If neighborhoods were empty, the survivors could live where they wanted. The reprieve was so intense, his eyes filled up.

These were his favorite homes, appraised countless times on walks to the park: the endless ranch on the corner lot; the two-story Spanish with a fourteen-foot picture window; the magisterial stone and wood craftsman. He limped up the ranch's porch and knocked on the enormous door. The key under a plant led him to a spacious living room Nicole would have died for.

Breeze from a sliding glass wall in the back drew him to light reflecting off water and he had the sensation that he was back in college, house-sitting. There was a trace of cooking odor.

On the far side of the pool, a woman was twisted awkwardly over a shaded recliner. Her arms dangled, hands resting on Saltillo tile. She wore jeans, a short-sleeved blouse and sunglasses, and didn't appear long dead. He wanted to fall in the pool and quench his thirst. After an eternity, she raised a hand and scratched her neck.
He crossed the threshold, edging to the house-side of the pool. He announced himself and she bolted upright.

“What do you want?”

“I didn’t know anyone was alive—I’m a neighbor.” He saw bags under her eyes and long, disheveled hair.

“Did you walk here?”

“I was walking to Vons. There was a shooting.” He paused and could hear the wind tapping a chlorination buoy against the side of the pool. “I’ve always admired your house,” he said. “And your landscaping.” He shifted his weight to his good knee. The bad one throbbed.

The woman swung her feet to the side and leaned forward. She appeared sluggish or possibly hung over. He thought she was going to cry, her voice pained and smoky. “Have you lost anyone?” she said.

He nodded, staring into the clean aquamarine water that separated them.
When The Stimson Lumber Co. was shuttered in 2008 a chapter in Bonner, Montana history closed. A few years later, the site is being repurposed. These are photographs of the time in-between.
what kept me
from shooting myself
when i was ten
was going to the river bridge
fish like flags that's all
all i have ever had
to say
fish like flags and i probably stolid
that from v woolf
sometimes comfortable
with the current sometimes advancing on it
like life
mmm long time remembering
the tug of the waters against my ankles
in the days before hairs
something like time is a rinsing thing
or star a alabaster start or
like a river i am always just begin
if how you approach things is clean
then poke this way along
up over the lane where
the creaking and the fans and the more
more belts watch
your fingers around them friend
behind the beautiful rocking
never will quite quit tip
this grace friend
you don't have to wait for what i am talking about
hug me out airy fear manure carts
throwing turkey tail of you know what
till the land stands so green
them golfing radicals
dream and drool
a pillow so heather in linnet
you could wring it and
satiate an birdie
for least one two moon
IAN GOLDSING

NOTABLE DEATHS IN MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL
(1900 TO PRESENT)

“Big Ed” Delahanty (b. October 30, 1867 – d. July 2, 1903) is currently the only player enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame who died tumbling down Niagara Falls. Despite career highlights (the fifth highest batting average in history, the only player to win batting titles in both the American and National Leagues, and hitting four inside-the-park homeruns in one game), his death outshines his life’s accomplishments. Removed from a train at the Canadian border for drunkenly threatening passengers with a straight razor, he decided to cross the bridge to the United States by foot. “Big Ed” never reached the other side. Seven days later, his battered body, missing clothes and a leg, was pulled from the base of the majestic waterfall.

Keith Alberton (b. November 20, 1982) has a Ferrari and a tattoo on his chest stating “I’ve got my tongue down karmas[sic] throat” and he is my brother. After breaking fourteen state high school records, he was drafted by the Pittsburgh Pirates on his eighteenth birthday. Though he refused to play until traded, he has since batted above .315 every month except twice (May 2005, July 2008). This season he is fifth in total hits, sixth in most jerseys sold, and in seven days he will be dead.

Michael Riley “Doc” Powers (b. September 22, 1870 – d. April 26, 1909) was both a catcher and a licensed physician. He was behind the plate for the grand opening of his team’s new stadium. The bleachers filled, the air buzzing with excitement, as an opponent hit a routine foul ball behind the plate. “Doc” Powers, unfamiliar with the dimensions of the new field, gave chase and promptly collided headlong into the wall. Failing to recover, “Doc” stated that a pregame cheese sandwich had made him ill;
however, this diagnosis was wrong. It was, in fact, extensive internal injury. He was dead within two weeks.

Lauren Alberton (b. August 10, 1958) has been unable to work since breaking her hip and two vertebrae in a bizarre gardening accident. Her personal post-accident record for most consecutive days in bed is thirty four. During her prime, she held three jobs (secretary, newspaper delivery, and house painter) while Keith and I were in grade school. Both children received standard education and enjoyed a relatively comfortable youth, but due to her busy schedule also experienced a household lacking a certain degree of attention and nurturing. Her inability to provide a weekly allowance is often referenced by Keith as proof of her negligence. When asked by reporters why he refuses to help his mother, Keith stated that his “income tax pays for her and a million other leeches every year.” While it is true that government assistance paid for Lauren’s replacement hip, ambulance transportation, and the anesthesiologist, the bill remains unpaid for three vertebrae surgeries, eight weeks of hospital stay, and extensive rehabilitation. There are bill collectors, threat of bankruptcy, and a lien on her modest home, but as the baseball season nears the All-Star break, Lauren’s attention is often on the small black and white television beside her bed, eyes fixed on the son who has not seen her in years.

Dernell Stenson (b. June 17, 1978 — d. November 5, 2003) was the son of a lumberjack, and he played thirty-seven games with the Cincinnati Reds before he was bound, shot three times in the chest and head, and run over with his own vehicle. His ex-girlfriend, who had at times faked both pregnancies and suicides, had texted him “I swear Dernell U R worth a Murder charge 4 & that is all U R worth.” Four men were eventually arrested and
found guilty of first-degree murder, kidnapping, armed robbery, auto theft, and hindering prosecution. Charges against one suspect were dropped upon discovering that he was a government informant in witness protection.

Antifreeze (colligative agent) has become the primary method in the automotive industry for not only lowering the freezing point of water, but also increasing the boiling point. Cheap and readily available, it can do more than protect vehicles from the elements. As reported by the U.S. poison center, antifreeze caused more human deaths in 2003 than any other chemical. Due to its sweet taste and emerald color, the liquid is often consumed by children out of curiosity, though the majority of adult cases involve accident or foul play. Upon mixing with any sweetened, colored beverage, antifreeze becomes almost impossible to recognize.

Lyman Wesley Bostock, Jr. (b. November 22, 1950 - d. September 23, 1978) finished twice in the top four for American League batting averages. Upon a rough start to the 1978 season, Lyman attempted to return his April salary, stating he had not earned it. When the team refused, he reviewed thousands of charities to find the most deserving of the money. After a game in Chicago, Lyman visited a woman he tutored as a child. After the meeting, Lyman agreed to give the woman and her friend a ride. While they were stopped at a red light, the estranged husband of one of the women pulled up beside the car, leaned out the window, and fired a .410 caliber shotgun into the vehicle, catching Lyman in the temple. He was killed instantly. The murderer was found not guilty by reason of insanity. Seven months later he was deemed mentally sound and released.

The Kansas City hotel (Hilton, complimentary) management's
request for lowering noise goes ignored as Keith, currently locked in his room with an Eastern European model and a clip of himself on Sports Center’s top 10 plays for that Tuesday, continues his rampage. For fifteen hours the two watch the diving-grab-turned-triple-play on repeat while consuming enough cocaine to kill an average user; however, it is apparent that both are professionals and have little fear of an overdose. At four A.M. Keith calls Mom, his throat weak from screaming, his nose crusted with dried blood. He does not talk about her health, his childhood. He does not call her mother, but Stephen, and he demands a large pepperoni pizza. Though Lauren begs for him to calm down and talk, he continues yelling, ordering breadsticks and ranch dressing. When he hangs up, Mom calls me in tears, like she does every time, and despite the constant assurance of my love, she still sobs because I am never enough.

“Marty” Bergen (b. October 25, 1871 – d. January 19, 1900) played 344 games as a catcher for the Boston Beaneaters. Prior to his murder-suicide, “Marty” was known for his quick throwing arm and overwhelming paranoia. Base runners feared him and he feared everyone’s role in his suspected eventual murder. Once removed from a game for dodging pitches, hallucinating them as knife thrusts, he refused medicine, believing that another player had tampered with it. After the investigation, it was concluded that “Marty” used an axe to kill his wife, son, and daughter before nearly decapitating himself with a straight razor.

The digestive system (human gastronomical tract) is responsible for the adverse effects of antifreeze consumption. Shortly after ingestion, the victim will appear disorientated as though he or she is intoxicated. Chances of stomach pain, nausea, and vomiting...
increase as the fluid is broken down. As the antifreeze is metabolized and absorbed, it begins affecting different portions of the body, causing an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, and muscle reflexes, often resulting in congestive heart failure. Within twenty-four hours the brain and kidneys stop working. Urine is no longer produced and the victim falls into a coma. If treated immediately, recovery is possible, though survivors suffer permanent internal damage. Four teaspoons can kill a dog, one ounce is potentially lethal to an adult, and while Keith travels to Kansas City, five ounces will be ready in his Gatorade for his return.

Charles Sylvester "Chick" Stahl (b. January 10, 1873 - d. March 28, 1907) won the first World Series and four pennants in seven seasons. Already a star player and flush with love affairs across the country, his luck continued when he was promoted to manager. With expectations high, "Chick" began the 1907 season by drinking four ounces of carbolic acid. Known for his sunny disposition, the suicide was made even more mysterious by his suicide note: "Boys, I just couldn't help it. It drove me to it." Perhaps "it" refers to the team's poor play, the pressure for improvement, or Chick's being blackmailed for impregnating a woman out of wedlock.

Keith's trainer (brown belt in taekwondo, eight years steroid use) has created a special routine that focuses on the abs. With an upcoming west coast trip, Keith wants to look good. Real good, he orders. He does crunches, hundreds of them, for hours. The spare key to his suburban mansion is to be used only for feeding his pit bulls and, today, murder. Upon returning home, Keith does not notice anything other than his reflection in the stainless
steel refrigerator. He strips down and likes what he sees. His pecs, tattoos, and, of course, his abs, still glistening with post-workout dew. The admiration is paused briefly as he grabs the Gatorade, a picture of himself mid-swing running up the side. In eight gulps, he finishes the bottle and returns to flexing at the appliance. In the shower, he lets the hot water splash against his shoulders, lets it flow down his firm body as he rests his head against the wall. He reaches for the soap but falters, ripping the vinyl curtain from the rings as he falls. Damp and disoriented, he stumbles to the mirror, and though he tries to wipe away the condensation, he is unable to focus, to see himself. After a few tries, he types the right number into his phone. The person on the other end informs the star athlete that intensive exercise often causes feelings of intoxication and grogginess, and, according to medical professionals, the best solution is to relax and let the feelings rush over him. Through slurred words, Keith agrees, believing that things will be better tomorrow as he lies down on the cool marble tiles.
I remember the story about the woman in the woods in a house with chicken feet. I remember the horses on the beach I thought I saw horses running a house running away. The beams of my house rolling away in a flood of sand, crabs carrying splinters from each rotten room. Each crab is a key to each room each splinter a tooth that has fallen from my mouth the gaping doorway.
Bone not bone, at the coronet band a circle of chalk, where leg becomes hoof
the short soft hairs at the edge to mark the line between body and bone
the hard foot the closed foot the hidden soft center
where the anatomy tells a ghost story
splitting hoof wall the turning drain of soft tissue
a horse drafts his own death
We have sealed rooms already contaminated by our thought, our observation. Setting up a lab in the midst of our imprint. Did you put your face shield on? Which is nothing more than surface and overflow. Did you pocket the telescope arm of your action, arson, sequestration? What we found was more than ancient echo, spotted horses or starfish symmetry. One of the things that won't tame, one of the things that won't translate, won't cooperate, won't draw itself because the mirror will never be invented, because exit signs, escape hatches, exit ramps will never be invented. We were already there at the source of contamination. The altar was the first machine. Always already irritable for the more, the making means of, the fallen soft ceiling of spores the size of whims, the most auspicious antlers as candelabra, as time capture, as whole flash fiction. We did not set out to study cave art or hang ourselves from the cave mouth. The guts of the question contained the bacterial answers. One of the things that won't be rendered innocent, innocuous, one of the things that won't be renditioned. You can't draw yourself out of the rock, the footprints collapse into deeper footprints. We have sealed the rooms. There will be no further questions.
METONYMY

Bury me face down like Diogenes

or naked
like those stoned lovers
in their separate pits
to make the point about the poverty of part for whole

before words were free standing

a pair of sculptures heedless headless joined at the hips

their island of quarries queries

how we clamor to lay foundations thigh-deep

strike against the body

in the name of a book
Seven blocks away from my apartment in New York is a small park, which is really just a triangle of space with a large statue of a sitting man. I like to sit next to him. His name is Peter Cooper. He has a long beard with glasses, which make him look both serious and kind. I think he was a good man because he built a locomotive and a school, was against slavery, and had a fondness for the telegraph. He was also the first to patent instant gelatin, where on the boxes he wrote, “Purity and Honesty.”

One day I found another girl sitting alone in front of Cooper Union, the university he established in 1859, which is located next to the park with the statue. I asked her if she was a student.

“Yes.”

“Do they serve Jell-O in the school cafeteria?”

“You mean processed animal bones?” she said. “No.”

“Do New Yorkers hate Jell-O?”

“I’m from Oklahoma City. We hate it there too.”

***

Instructions for molded gelatin, as eaten by Richard II, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Maria de Medici:

Scald two calves’ feet.
Take off hair.
Slit them in two, and extract the fat from between the claws.
Boil them, remove scum, and boil again (6-7 hours) before straining.
Let the product cool.
Skim fat.
Boil again, adding shells and whites of 5 eggs (to pick up impurities).
Skim again and strain through a jelly bag (must be made in advance).
Add flavoring, sugar and spices.
Pour into mold and pack with ice.

***

At the turn of the century, my home state of Iowa was declared the largest consumer of Jell-O in the United States. It upset Utah. They retaliated. During the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics, Utah made green Jell-O a mascot, calling it their state snack. They sold collectable pins of molds that opened up like lockets. Antique dealers now discuss the value of this item as climbing, due to its iconic nature.

My favorite kind of Jell-O is cherry, which is also the nation's top choice in flavor. I think it looks stately.

***

Last week I visited Peter Cooper at the Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. He is buried among men like Samuel Morse and Leonard Bernstein, and it took me a long time to walk along the plots, in order to pay respects to each notable individual. Joaquin Miller, the writer who created the poem for Peter's memorial stone left laurel leaves on the graves of similar men of fame, which is charming. But, I couldn't find any laurels in the city. I hear Joaquin was disliked in any case. An Indian shot him through the jaw with an arrow, and his wife filed for divorce, leaving Joaquin for a group of circus men.

I took pictures instead, taking digital frames in all kinds of angles. My grandmother always went on long walks in cemeteries, taking photos of gravestones, putting these images into binders.
When I was in grade school, she made an alphabet book for me where each letter began with a name from my family tree. It made me feel like a bead on a necklace. She told me that she could trace me back to the Mayflower, and that one of my ancestors was Mary Queen of Scotts.

Peter is Scottish too. We could be related.

***

In the 1900’s, Jell-O became popular because of its travelling salesmen system. But these men who hung up posters and went door to door were often in danger. Farmers shot at them, and in one case, didn’t miss.

Today, we can study the effects and pathways of bullets using Ballistic gelatin, because according to specialists, it has the same consistency as human flesh.

***

My grandmother bought a concealed weapons permit along with a super single six cowboy style 22 in the fall of ‘68, so that she could lean out the grain truck to shoot at corncobs while her husband worked the male rows. She would load the first round in the kitchen every morning, while making sure her son ate his cereal.

One day, she accidentally shot the dishwasher and covered the hole with a refrigerator magnet.

I used to play with these magnets, rearranging them into neat rows or plotting them out by colors while I waited for the Jell-O to sit. She was the only person who made it for me, as my parents
said it took up too much room in their fridge. My grandmother only knew how to cook three dishes: stew, coleslaw, and salmon patties. So, she always had space. My favorite magnet had a picture of a pecan that said, “We’re Nuts,” which my grandmother picked up in Georgia years ago when her husband took her on a trip. Sometimes he would open the door and poke at the film for me when I got too restless, but I was usually patient.

***

I’m earthly and serious. My astrological map also says I’m a goat, because my parents had to schedule my birth around spring and fall. My grandfather insisted there was too much farming to be done.

My grandfather was often unaware of other people’s feelings.

Once, at a party, a waiter accidentally spilled a tray of Jell-O down my grandmother’s back, and my grandfather laughed. But this detail isn’t significant to my story, even though it upset my grandmother.

What’s more important is how the more I grew, the more he held my hand like I was a child. And how he would tell me that, during WWII, he spotted a German Red Cross woman running through the woods and had let her go.

This, I won’t forget.

***

Spoken by Peter Cooper during a party in his honor, several years before his death:

Gallentine 121
I have endeavored to remember that the object of life is to do good.

Often, I think of his upright goal and imagine that, he too, must have been an excellent grandfather.

***

I used to fix my grandfather his drinks when he visited my parent's house. He liked 4 ice cubes in his scotch, and I'd place the same amount into my own glass, filling it with gingerale. After which, my grandfather would ask me to play piano, sing, or perform taps on my bugle. He wanted me to do one of these things at his funeral, but I laughed and said I'd be too sad, which is true.

In the hospital, my grandfather refused Jell-O. The liquids my father tried spooning into his mouth, I had to wipe off his beard with a paper towel. For days, he never opened his eyes, but merely reached for my hand. His skin was soft and had freckles, which were covered up by make-up during his visitation at the funeral home. Everyone said he looked nice, which was a kind thing to say, but not true.

***

While inside Green-Wood Cemetery, I stood on Peter Cooper's gravestone and read Joaquin's poem, neatly inscribed into the rock in bold letters. I imagined the bones underneath the rock, still orderly and dignified, then pictured all the graves, peaceful people stacked like logs in a cabin. It made me feel relieved.

'Give honor and love for evermore
Once I left Green-Wood, rounding the gate towards the south, I heard a firecracker that was actually a gunshot. I say this, because the event doesn’t seem real. Within the first couple of months of living in the city, I’d watched a man on a bike get hit by a taxi driver, flipping high into the air like an acrobat. But he magically stood up, and was okay. I had also witnessed a person get his wallet stolen. But the victim was a fast runner, and the chase ended with loud applause from those sitting outside a restaurant. I had thought that, in ways, people living in New York City were untouchable.

When I saw the gun, my intuition was to walk back to the cemetery, as casually as I had been walking towards the shooting, since I was worried I would be noticed if I broke out of my regular pace. I took a few steps. I’m not sure what this actually looked like: maybe a slow motion cartoon tiptoe. Or maybe my meander gave me a laid-back air, of one who had seen guns many times before. This was not a falsity. For years, I had shot round after round into paper targets back in the Midwest, under a bridge by some railroad tracks in a neighboring town, collecting the brass so that my father could melt the shells and mold them again. Before farming, he had gone to a gunsmithing school, which, he had told me once, were two of the best years of his life. One of my earliest memories was of him shooting a rabbit that was in my...
mother's garden. My father never had to aim twice. He said I had good form too. I took my time to breathe deeply before becoming as still and dead as ice, and I didn't get too frustrated. I had to control my body into accepting the heavy weight of the gun, like a friendly expenditure, solid and unmoving. He set my rifle out on display on a table at my high school graduation reception. The only time I had shot at anything living was a pheasant, and I missed, which I think made my father secretively happy.

I turned around. 15 feet in front of me a man was lying on the ground. According to a bystander, he had been waiving a .357 in the face of a plainclothes policeman. I watched the policeman's partner who was wearing green and didn't look quite forty. She covered her face with her hand, and walked slowly away from the scene, while a girl not yet thirteen took a picture of his body from the sidewalk, spilled and goofy. And then what? Nothing much happened. Police cars came, they blocked off traffic, and I became very hungry, spending the rest of the afternoon nibbling carnitas at a tiny restaurant where they played television soaps in a language I didn't understand.

The next day, the New York Post described the incident. The policewoman had put a hole through his shoulder, and the angle hit his chest, leaving a mortal wound. His name was Romero.

***

I'm beginning to learn nothing goes as expected.

***

In 1897, Pearle B. Wait took Peter Cooper's instant gelatin and invented flavored recipes. Two years later, he sold the recipes to
his neighbor Orator Francis Woodward for $450, who made target trap balls, a precursor to clay pigeons, and a form of coffee substitute nobody liked, but drank anyway.

Later, Orator's son Ernest bought Amelia Earhart's "Friendship" and built a private airport behind his first mansion. 60,000 people came to the opening to watch stuntmen contests that involved landing, eating a bowl of Jell-O, and then taking off, again, into the sky.

Peter Cooper would have been jealous. He built a flying machine that blew up in his face.

Pearle and his wife, May, filed for bankruptcy.

You can see photographs of all these historical figures at the Jell-O Museum in Le Roy, NY. The townspeople are very proud.

They will tell you that gelatin is even used in preparing silver halide emulsions, which is necessary in the production of photograph paper - along with numerous other facts you'll immediately forget.

***

In my apartment, I used blue sticky tac to hang a small photograph of my grandfather in his army uniform above the kitchen sink. He's located next to a postcard of Pollock's blotted Number Seven. Its painted design used to remind me of messy whiskers, but now makes me think of Romano and where he might be buried.

My grandfather's burial was in the winter. It was cold and snowing, so everything was sped up. In fact, I don't remember much,
except that the man who was chosen to perform taps played a recording instead, and my father cried. Afterwards, we went to the church, where there were egg salad sandwiches and mush of other things, sitting out on plates. It didn’t taste like anything at all.

***

Jell-O is currently sold in flavors:
Apricot, Berry Blue, Black Cherry, Cherry, Cranberry, Cranberry-Raspberry, Grape, Green Apple, Green Tea, Kiwi, Lemon, Lime, Melon, Mint, Orange, Peach, Pineapple, Raspberry, Strawberry, Strawberry-Banana, Strawberry-Kiwi, Watermelon, Wild Cherry, Wild Strawberry

Recipes from The New Joys of Jell-O, published in 1975 include:
Alaska Surprise, Cool Cubes, Creamy Blue Cheese Salad, Dream Parfait, Fruit Delight, Frosty Mandarin Dessert, Jellied Ginger-Upper, Kicky Cooler, Pink Lady Pie, Pop Art Parfaits, Ring-Around-the-Fruit Mold, Winter Fruit Mold, Florida Seacoast Salad, Keep Fit Luncheon Platter, Sequin Salad

***

When I got back to New York, I cleared out the contents of my refrigerator, shoving items into two big garbage bags, which I left in the corner of my room. I then walked to the nearest bodega, gathering celery, cream cheese, walnuts, grapes, and Bartlett pears in heavy syrup for my planned feast.

My friend came over to help me; she thought it sounded like fun and giggled at the voyeurism. I thought she made it seem normal.

It took all day for the Jell-O to set up, and we split a bottle of champagne between the two of us to pass the hours, but we made

126 Gallentine
an Easy Fruit Tart in a pre-baked piecrust with raspberry Jell-O glaze, a Jellied Waldorf Salad, spiked with a little lemon juice, a layered Under the Sea Salad, a Melon Bubble with Sprite, and last but not least, six cherry Jell-O cupcakes, with whipped cream.

We called friends and left invitations for a "tasting" on their voicemail inboxes, while listening to Willie Nelson sing "The Rainbow Connection."

We thought it would be a party, but were disappointed when nobody came.

***

When Peter Cooper died in 1883 at age 92, 3500 Cooper Union students marched alongside his body, casting flowers upon the wood of his coffin as he was carried towards Green-Wood Cemetery. Businesses beyond the East River were closed and draped in black. The flags on all public buildings, and on the ships in the harbor, were hung at half-mast, and the bells of every church were tolled. Such shared mourning had not been displayed since the funeral procession of George Washington in 1799.

And the church asked, "What comes next?"

And the students asked, "What comes next?"

And the factory workers asked, "What comes next?"

And the city asked, "What comes next?"

And the nation asked, "What comes next?"

***
It got late. My friend had to work the next morning and waved goodbye, taking a Tupperware of gelatin to share with her boyfriend.

I was sad to see her go.

I looked at the picture of my grandfather, and wondered if he was the reason I had a table full of Jell-O, noticing the similarities of our mouths, full and quiet. He looked like a person I might meet on the street, young and handsome with his tie tucked into his shirt. Never overwhelmed.

There was a pile of dishes in the sink, the garbage in the corner had begun to smell, and I could hear the toilet dripping in the silence.
The cat biting my leg with my swings and bashes unlatches his fangs it's like how many uses for a wall anyway? But Blackie likes it, Blackie does. We clean out the cupboards they hate it being empty when filled's the only thing they ever knew. On the counter: pills and pills. Some are big fucking big and the label tells me everything possible is natural so glug it on down and get big too.

At dinner we sit at the table. At dinner the holes in my calf are burning. A breath begs out, I do not listen. I shut my eyes count backwards in silence, I think, for nothing. The faces at the table come off like putty and flop into the elders' drinks. A scowlish lisp of something ordered transmogrifies my Auntie's drink but do I still listen if her only ever ask was done in transformation?

Blackie chews the yardstuff as night comes dragging its legless slit across the parlor rug. All the shoes I've ever worn writhe in the yard where they were thrown. A funeral of mathematics stings the air. Their laces and eyelets and leather tongues coil and throb like earthworms in a cataracted puddle, paying no mind to the pretty piglet corkscrews busting from the white-flecked dirt.

But fuck the flowers. It's like Blackie doesn't feel a thing. Tomorrow the elders will wake and sprinkle the lawn with my stuff, the only three stuff I've got. It will rain. I need something like a synthesis, I say, to get smaller, tiny, so no one can think or expect anything of me. Look, says the cat with a look, what prosthetic mode? What turbulent bone would help? The candelabra quivers like nerves upon the tablecloth. The water waits like a spider, ready to drop on every head at once.
Ralph Hamilton

The Mother, Broken
A semi-cento from Charles Olson & John Berryman

1. I have had to learn the simplest things last
First you break
Main Street is deserted
The heart is a clock
Grief is fatiguing

2. I am a vain man
I've never been good at math
or gluing bits back together
I don't know one damn butterfly from another
It shouldn't be hard to believe damage is final
I have strained everything except my ears

3. When my mother broke I tried (but not too hard)
I am two eyes—a pelican of lies
The heart is a cloak
Love me love me love me
The only way I'll ever be whole, milky
and smooth like seaglass
Cling to me and I promise you'll drown

4. Is being ground into more and more parts, fine
and sharp as sifted sand, democratic
as dust, really the end
How small is this news
I'm only a glass, says the glass: Sometimes
I hold the sea, sometimes the sun,
but never more than this dark wine
Break me
This is the fantasy fruit: it can awaken desires lodged deep inside a person but stuck, like an almond clogging the windpipe. The smell of a durian may erase a child's immediate memories. So I am addicted, of course. Not to eating but to sniffing it like glue, my fingers probing its dry, spiked surface until they bleed and I eat. But the feast disappoints me because its taste replaces the corpse scent with something sweet and eggy, a benign tang I flush down with wasabi.

For there is nothing much a kid like me can do except awaken to loss and wish for a seven-piece suit of armor. The desire always returns: durian as a weapon of truth.

Even if I don't know how to pull a trigger or whet a knife, it's tempting to imagine throwing a dangerous fruit at the head of the person who has failed you, hurt you, and for all these years, tried to break you. But this desire is lodged deep
to resist. So I do by taking a spoonful
to my lips, savoring the smear, the din

of my cleaver hacking the husk, the juice,
the sweat ripping open the rind.
THE AZALEA EATERS  DAEHONGDAN COUNTY, NORTH KOREA, 2008

Mother begs us not to eat the flowers.  
We scrape the pots for blubber. Fat scalds our dreams, broils our sweat.

Softly, azaleas kill our hunger.  
Because we believe in pink spadix,  
the fragrance pollinates our tongues.

Before the farmers bulldoze them,  
we smuggle fistfuls into our knapsacks.  
Now we are sick but only as sick

as the river that fed us golden tadpoles.  
The river is a gutted diorama: the dire wolf, awakening, spits out teeth and fur.

* * *

In our retching, we summon the aphids.  
We enter the malnutritive night.  
Stag beetles and horntails

swarm the wax leaves, calm  
the poisons in our too-hot cotton mouths.

In our fevers, we summon summer.  
Weevils swim the length of lake. Toads tease us with their fat slime.

No water makes us believe we have gills.  
Frogs hatch from fuzz. We pity their birth.

* * *
It's the eleventh season of hunger. *Ding dong,*
belts the frog in the muck. *Ding dong,*
sings the salamander.

Fetal and feral, we curl
in our beds.
Fetal and feral, we drink
in the dusk,
hands damp with loam. Old cures
for sadness
don't work anymore—

* * *

ailing, we lean against the window,
mother's ailanthus,
& mother, panicked,
wilt on the sill. We grow red welts.
We ask her will we grow red whiskers.
We ask her will we grow red feathers.

She covers our mouths,
breathes *hush hush.* How will we fall asleep
now that the skink has grown a new tail?

* * *

We've eaten toad, weevil, roe. We'd eat a houseplant
or your pet. We've kissed poison flowers and retched
it all but we're hungry still. In the forest we pantomime
guns with our hands. *Bang, bang:* let's kill the deer, drag
it by its hooves to the fire pit. Gather its juices, grease
the grasses. O, hunger strikes—our teeth, our laughter.
We eat & eat & eat: it is our rebellion and our disaster.
They wear the same size—this had come up in the interview, when Carly was shivering in the air conditioning and Alexis, without a word, picked up a cardigan from a chair and put it around her shoulders. Like a mother. Carly knew then she had the job. Two weeks later Carly was shepherding Tatum and Jack in the Range Rover to their Episcopal day school in Manhattan and planning the family vacation to Virgin Gorda. Brad, the husband, was relieved; he said she had saved their lives.

She wasn’t in the house long before she understood about the weekly sessions with the marriage counselor: every Wednesday Brad home early from his law firm in the city so he and Alexis could drive off together at 3:00 and return at 4:30, Alexis red faced and puffy in the eyes, Brad going off to pour a Scotch, slamming the study doors. Divorce written all over.

Carly wanted the kids to come through it intact. She tried to motivate. She called her mom. You’ve got to bond, her mom said. What do you mean, Carly asked. Her mom said, Do things together. You used to babysit your nephew. You know about this. He was six months old, Carly said. He slept and he pooped. I held him sometimes.

She was halfway through the make-your-own-sock-puppet how-to from Alexis’ Child magazine when she noticed Tatum and Jack were no longer at the kitchen table. They were huddling in the corner. “What’s wrong with you guys?” “You’re scaring us.” This was from Tatum, who had once tried to microwave her hamster. “Can we watch TV?” “Get over here,” Carly said. “And let’s do crafts.” Then Alexis emerged from her artist’s studio, a bright white structure that had once been a carriage house, and strode across the lawn toward them in her canvas smock. Carly scrapped the whole idea and thrust a bag of chocolate chips into Tatum’s waiting hands. “Cheer up,” Carly said.
Brad comes home later and later each night. Alexis forms a book club. At meetings she serves finger sandwiches and coffee, and because the maid has weekends off, Carly has to come up from her subterranean living quarters at dawn to get started on the prep and scrub out the burr grinder.

"We need a caterer," Alexis remarks after six months of this. Carly is laboring over a chicken curry sandwich. "Really," Alexis says. "Not that you're not brilliant."

"I don't mind." Carly waves her hand.

"I just never know how many are going to turn up from one month to the next. I could never possibly give a caterer a head count. Half of the members cancel at the last minute for some random reason."

"Why do you always end up hosting?" Carly asks.

"I'm a pushover," Alexis says, and she smiles.

The group reads, always, a memoir or self-help on the topic of motherhood or anxiety or invigorating the marriage. In the book jacket author photos are women who look like they could be perched there on the ottoman next to Alexis' best friend, Stephanie Emmons, dropping fifty-cent words with that same kind of earnestness. The key term in all of these discussions, once they turn from the actual book, is balance: how to attain it, how to maintain it, how to defend it. "Really," Stephanie says. "We owe it to ourselves. We are the CEOs of the household. No one questions Josh's right to golf on a Saturday afternoon. Why should anyone question my trip to the city to hit Barney's?"

Alexis is quieter than the rest, more solicitous. She helps Carly bring out the sandwiches and the napkins. "Aly," Stephanie says. "Sit down. Relax. This is exactly the problem."

After the meeting Stephanie corners Carly and makes small talk. "You know, anytime you want to hang out with us in there you're welcome to. No one considers you the help. We're not
feudal lords.” Periodically, the topic is ambition. “You’re smart, Carly. How much longer are you planning to change diapers and run carpools?” Stephanie produces a key, wields it like a flag. “If you ever need a place to be alone, we have a guesthouse; it’s hardly ever used.”


Of the rotating fifteen who turn up for the meetings, only Alexis has what can be construed as a profession, but she never talks about it. Carly is willing to bet not one of the others, not even Stephanie, have been in the studio, much less know about Alexis’ fellowships and M.F.A. Carly, who is in the habit of visiting the studio when the family is out, took Jack once while Alexis and Tatum were at a playdate for the afternoon. When she slipped the key in the deadbolt and turned she’d taken his small hand to help him with the high step up. He had been late to walk, nearly eighteen months, and even after all the physical therapy, wore shoe inserts and couldn’t manage stairs, but in Alexis’ studio he had nearly run from mirror to mirror, pressing his nose to the glass, leaving imprints in the shape of a snout. Don’t, Carly said sharply, she’ll know you’ve been here. Tiny handprints smudged the glass. Mirrors! he said, and then mommy and pointed, and Carly saw the shape of a woman sketched out in a corner of a huge stretch of canvas. The woman’s face was bent away but she wore her hair tied low with a scarf, like Alexis. Over the next few weeks, when Carly returned, the abstracts gradually disappeared, replaced by studies. Shapes—not human exactly, but the beginnings of faces, and limbs—and the colors darkening to something murkier, like the color of the pond near the edge of the property when the water was filled with leaves. It was color that was the beginning of decay. “This is what she does,” Carly said to Jack. “When I come to get you up from your nap and you ask for her
instead and you cry, I want you to remember next time, instead of crying—all of these paintings and her painting them.” He looked at her solemnly. “All right?” she said, and he said yes.

Saturday nights in the summer, when her friends are home from college, she does the round of parties at the lake, and it is just like senior year. One night she ends up on the dock with Aerin and Chelsea and a boy she’s never seen before. The house pulsates with music, screaming, laughter. Beneath them the lake murmers at the pilings. Carly lays down on her back and puts her feet in the water, and Aerin says, “Shitty much?” She and Chelsea laugh. “This is what you feel like,” Carly says, “after working eight hours.” As soon as she says it she regrets it. The other three are silent. “I had an internship this fall,” Chelsea says. “Fucking grueling. Accounting. If it wasn’t my uncle’s firm I would have quit the first day.” “You have no idea what you sound like,” Aerin says. “And by the way, I have worked eight hours. In a row.” The boy is lightly rubbing Aerin’s shoulders, working outward in the shape of wings. Her head drops forward, lolling slightly. “Amazing.”

Chelsea looks down at Carly. “What kind of work are you doing anyway?” she asks.

“Phone sex,” Carly says.

People are emerging from the house, scattering over the lawn, and as the first few reach the water’s edge, Aerin and Chelsea stand, strip down to their bikinis, and dive together off the edge of the dock.

“Go in,” Carly tells the boy.

“I don’t know how to swim,” he says. He looks at the bodies, silvery as dolphins in the moonlight, plunging around them. He looks at her. “I’m Radames,” he says. “Who are you?”

“Are you Aerin’s boyfriend?” she says.
"Something like that."

"I'm Carly," she says. "Let's go inside."

The house is quiet and dim, strewn with trash, abandoned shoes. She takes Radames' hand. In the light from the great room she sees that he has the face of a Botticelli. Beautiful, passive, benign.

They head down the hallway from the kitchen. She opens doors as she goes, but all the bedrooms are occupied. Radames' presence behind her, docile and quiet, reminds her of Jack, and as they begin up the stairs to try the second floor, she feels her energy flag. Say something, she wants to say to him. Nothing is right.

They end up in the trophy room. Three walls of antlers and glass eyes, and a picture window swathed in taupe velvet drapes. Radames kneels at the fireplace, arranging kindling, striking matches.

"They're all the same," he is saying. "These occasions. Get drunk, jump in the lake."

"It's a sound ritual," Carly says. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing," he says. "Are you angry with me?"

"No," she says. "Why would I be angry?"

The fire bursts heartily to life, snapping at the crown of tinder and newspaper before settling into a steady burn. As she leans toward it, Carly feels as if she has been divided in two: the heat vivid in her face and hands, the cold like a wall at her back.

"How come you're not in school?" he says.

"I don't know," she says. "I have no life plan. Obviously."

He says, "You are angry with me."

"Why would I be angry with you?"

She goes to the window, ties back the drapes with their silky cords. Below the lake stretches, broad and black. A misting rain is setting in. People are scurrying in circles, gathering their
clothes, their beer bottles from the narrow crescent of beach. They shiver, shoulders pulled up around their ears. The glare of the fire behind Carly swells, filling the lower panes of the window with orange light. She puts her palm to the glass, almost expecting to feel warmth. Downstairs someone puts on the music again, the reverberation of the bass like a tremor in the floor. In the window’s reflection she sees Radames feeding the fire, stirring it with a kind of hook, and her own arm illuminated from wrist to shoulder, the rest of her body dark inside a weak silhouette. “All right,” Radames says. “Let’s start over, yes?” Beneath her fingers the beach is empty. Someone opens the door of the trophy room, says oh there you are. Radames laughs, a narrow little loop of a laugh, edged with irritation. Come in, come in. She lifts her hand from the glass.

By the time she gets home the sky is fading to grey, a strata of golden pink rising from the east. No one is up except for Tatum, in the kitchen in her Supergirl costume, whistling something that sounds like Beethoven, twisting the legs of her Barbie.

“You’re in trouble,” Tatum says.

Carly opens a coke and drinks it down without stopping. Her head throbs.

“You were supposed to watch us last night.”

“It was my night off.” She thinks. “Wasn’t it?”

Tatum shrugs. “She won’t say anything.” She fills an eye dropper with purple food coloring and begins applying it to the head of the Barbie. “Did you get drunk?”

“Of course not.”

“Let’s go to the park today, after you sleep it off.”

Carly thinks of pushing Jack on the swing, the creak of the chains, the pointy little screams of children darting over the playground. The pain in her skull tightens. There is a faint rus-
tling upstairs, the beginning of movement. The sun arcs through the French doors in a broad blade of light.


Brad goes to L.A. for a deposition and Alexis says she isn’t sure when he’ll be back; these things could go for a day or for weeks. It is a serious case—a collapsed playard, a strangled infant. There were at least a dozen cases brought to the company’s attention before this one, she says. We’ve pretty much got them cornered. Carly thinks, we? Alexis’ face is taut the way it always is when Brad travels on business. She is talking too fast. She is banging cupboards.

The house seems quieter than usual with Brad gone. Alexis and Tatum and Jack head into the city for their Sunday morning ritual of scones and clotted cream at the Plaza.

When Carly opens the door to the master bedroom she finds it, as ever, dustless, spotless, the bed perfectly made: a virtual museum. The closet door is slightly ajar and the track lighting is on, and as Carly moves closer she sees the shopping bags.

Her first thought when she pulls out the clothes is that there has been some kind of mistake. Alexis of the baby cable knit sweaters, the peacoats, does not belong to the bags that, Carly sees, have been stuffed, and seemingly at random, with python T-strap Manolo Blahnik sandals, a pleat skirt in hot pink shantung, a sheer silk chiffon babydoll with matching panties, a pheasant feather cape. Here, a pinafore dress with baby blue satin sash, as if she would be Alice in Wonderland; slouchy suede boots with a kitten heel, a Balenciaga bolero jacket, leather cigarette pants in a mirror finish. Carly lays out the clothes on the Ralph Lauren bedspread: they seem to posture, as if they have taken on a life of their own.

Carly finds herself in her underwear, her own shorts and
tank top ditched on the floor, buttoning herself into a tulle-tiered dress that billows out behind in a fabulous train, bride-like. When she drags the whole ensemble over to the mirror it is as if she has never seen herself before, not really. The overpowering silence is like a second presence over her shoulder, evaluating her plainness. What she has to work with, she admits now to herself, is not much, even if she does have more color than Alexis on account of those afternoons chasing Tatum around the pool while Alexis holes up inside claiming she is allergic to sun; Alexis is all long legs and razor-blade cheekbones. At best Carly is in the league of that Dirty Coeds porn she caught Brad checking out online once when she walked into his study to ask about her paycheck. But as she abandons the tulle and climbs into the leather dirndl, she begins to come around, rather as she had in sophomore biology lab, dissecting that sad-eyed toad she had selected from the batch that had come in dry ice in Styrofoam coolers in the spring. She had come to lab straight from A.P. English, where in the last weeks of the semester they would spend the hour reading and re-reading the last pages of *The Bell Jar* and she had had the sense of something always on the verge of naming itself in her mind, the teacher’s voice getting in the way, all those hands going up, arms waving, that kind of overeager me me me as if it were fifth grade. And then there was the shrill sound of the bell and it was all lost somehow. Standing over the pinned toad, the polished lab table, surrounded by rows of jars of piglet fetuses floating in formaldehyde, she had wielded her blade for the incision, and it had nulled that frustration, assuaged that namelessness, and she had felt order again in the universe.

Her eyes now feel heavy, her fingers fatigued by so much buttoning, unbuttoning, zipping, dismantling. She looks at the clothes cast across the floor. In her skull there is a faint humming, not
altogether ominous.

She decides to spend the rest of the afternoon on the pool chaise with a hard lemonade and work on her tan. The master bedroom had been left immaculate, she is sure, but as she inflates the chaise, she can’t help looking back at the window as if to check her work. But the drapes are drawn, as always.

The chaise drifts past the row of zero-gravity recliners and into the range of the oscillating misting fan, and she closes her eyes, nearly asleep when distantly, a car door slams. She considers getting out of the pool but this will involve either slipping from the chaise into the deep end where she is now cast adrift, or else, humiliatingly, lowering herself onto her stomach on the chaise and paddling to the edge where she might edge off onto the stairs and climb to the deck. At some point in working this all out in her head she realizes Alexis is standing at the gutter staring at her from behind her Wayfarers. Carly squints into the sun. The house looms behind Alexis, a vast Gothic abomination of architecture.

“Come in the studio,” Alexis says, her voice very small. “Let’s talk.”

Carly slips, feet first, into the blue. The cold swallows her, tendrils of hair sucking toward the surface as she sinks. Bubbles ripple past her nose. She curls her toes against the gritty concrete floor of the pool, her lungs, empty now, beginning to strain. When she breaks the surface, her mouth makes a hollow whistle; she pulls down air, treads, breathes again, and sees that Alexis is smiling. Carly folds into the first stroke, a stitch in her side, disturbed by that glimpse, realizing that Alexis’ face in a smile looks unnatural, more like an animal, a dog, baring its teeth in nervousness, an attempt at placation. Carly’s technique is poor; water swirls between her fingers. She slogs finally to the side of the pool and grips the gutter, gasping, pushing her hair out of her
eyes with her wrist.

"Where are the kids?" Carly asks.

"At a friend's," Alexis says.

The studio smells strongly, nearly chemical, as if Alexis has been burning something, and when she hits the lights Carly can see she's changed the fixtures around so that the lamps are trained entirely on the far west wall, where a massive canvas leans, her biggest yet. Its place in the lights conveys the impression of a stage. It seems blank until Carly walks to it and sees the penciled silhouettes, the vague floating forms that appear to be drowning in this whiteness, arms outstretched, fingers dangling weightlessly as if buoyed. Headless. The sketches are so light it is as if they have been not drawn but traced.

Alexis removes her sunglasses, drops them on a drafting table. She stares at her palette, the stand of brushes soaking in turpentine, all around her, as if she's never seen any of it.

"None of them have faces," Carly says.

Alexis picks up a pencil. "I'm going to have to let you go," she says. She begins to sketch, casually, with the air of jotting a note. But Carly can see the slightest quiver in the arc of the line that is a shoulder on the page. "I'm sure you understand," Alexis says. "You were careful enough putting the room back together but I could see that you'd been through the clothes. You were trying them on, weren't you?"

Carly says nothing, tightens the beach towel around herself. She is standing, by now, in a small puddle of pool water that has dripped from her bathing suit onto the floor.

"Not to mention," Alexis says, "that you've been in here, many times. Jack tells me. Not that I would have minded," she says. "Except you never asked. And so I have to wonder, what else you're capable of." Now Carly can see that she is almost fully formed on the page. Just a few brief strokes and she is there, per-
fectly recognizable. Genius, she thinks, despite herself. Alexis sets down the pad.

"You're right."

"You must not think much of us," Alexis says. "But even so why would you bother? Did you think I'd never notice?"

"I don't know," Carly says. She wonders if Alexis will cry, like she did when Tatum called her a bitch. But Alexis only stares at her, as if Carly must be lying, as if she's had reasons all along. Carly starts to feel her skin puckering in the cold. She realizes she's freezing.

"Go ahead and change," Alexis says, "before you catch your death."

A year later, after Carly gets off her shift at the daycare, she and Radames will drive past the Webers' on their way to smoke pot in Stephanie Emmons' guesthouse while the family summers in Maine. He drives and she rides shotgun, and they argue over what station to play on the radio. Sometimes she looks right at the Webers' house and sometimes she doesn't, and either way it passes more quickly than she expects. Sometimes the kids have been careless, left out a hula hoop or a bicycle overturned on the lawn, and there has been a different car in the drive for many months in place of Brad's Mercedes.

Inevitably she will say to Radames—who has never thought to ask how she got the key to the Emmons' guesthouse, who drives steady and slow as a grandmother—to get on with it already, and they will find their way through the woods to the dank guesthouse and make out. In the dimness he is all grasping hands, a weight on her chest. But afterward, she feels gentleness. He offers her the mouth of the pipe, pushes the lighter into the bowl, nursing the flame until she is done. She wonders what became of that sketch, if it ever evolved to something more: a
portrait that an acquaintance might look at in a gallery and say of it, Carly, or if her body drifts on in that page, half finished, in limbo like Alexis' body on the mural. He asks what she is thinking about. She looks at him, searching the darkness for some recognizable line of his face, and cannot think what to answer.
CARAJO

The night you don't come home,
the crows in our elm jilt

their brood. I hear their young
shriek until their tongues must be calloused.

I dream I climb the tree, rub my hands
raw, never reach their nest.

In the morning, they are quiet. I find a chick
crushed—an ashen heap, its mouth

a wound. The cat musses it, liking the way
its neck moves. I would need to see its entrails,

see the way its wings tried to lighten its body,
to understand your leaving. The omen is in its

sinking. Your sisters can point at the divine
pattern of freckles on my thigh,

the tattoo of your ship's hull behind my ear.
They know I desire the edgeless

darkness, of being the one that leaps
to find the one that left.
PATRICIAN

She told me once, my aunt, about how she was out walking in my grandparents' neighborhood and let a bee land on her head and sting her because she didn't want to be seen waving and swatting and give anyone who might be watching the chance to say Look at crazy Patty, the hospital case. Look at Jerry and Agnes's daughter, out there having a fit.
We’re sitting in a circle for group discussion in the anorexia ward, and the new girl, Janice, is telling us about her parents. They sound like a real prize pair. We all talk about our families in here, eventually. Janice pauses and shifts in her chair. I should tell her that no amount of squirming is going to make things more comfortable.

The name Janice makes me think of a wholesome babysitter or a robust piano teacher. Not a girl with bluish skin and hair so brittle there should be a “combustible” tag hanging from her ponytail. She better keep that stuff away from open flames. Not that we have any open flames in here. No lighters. Nothing to light, except maybe our own self-images.

She’s pretty, Janice. Or, she was. Blond, slim, perfect. She says that’s what her parents always told her. I guess they laid it on real thick. Funny, how too many compliments and none at all can lead to the same disease in two different people. Janice is tired now, after all that talking. It’s unusual in a new recruit, to be so ready to share. Her mouth opens in a wide O that she tries to stifle. Those chompers aren’t so lovely, I’m sorry to report. I lick my lips and brush my sweatshirt sleeve across them to wipe away any white junk that’s accumulated on the inside edges. Plenty. I take another swipe with the other sleeve.

After group discussion I get a Styrofoam cup of water, drink until my eyeballs are floating, and slosh myself down on the couch next to Janice. She raises her arm in what could be a gesture of self-defense, like my presence is a physical assault. Then her wrist flies back to rest on her shoulder as if she were just stretching. Her elbow remains suspended, pointing at me. I’m afraid the bone might bite right through the translucent skin. Then she calmly places both hands in her lap. Under control.
“Hey,” I say, and I start to chew on the edge of the cup. It makes squeaking noises as my teeth move against it. I watch her over the rim.

“Hi,” she says, with about as much warmth as a dead frog. She gazes at her unmoving hands. “What do you want?” She’s not hostile. More like totally resigned. She’s like a zoo animal that knows it can’t get away from the gawking people, so why resist, why struggle? I’m not the audience, though. I’m in the next cage down. I tell her it sounds like her parents are two of the seven wonders of the world.

“There are eight,” she says.

For a second I don’t know what she’s talking about. Eight parents? Not even I have eight of them. Four, sometimes five. Then I get it.

“There are eight wonders?” I ask.

“Yeah.” And I think, here’s the eighth wonder right here: the fact that Janice thinks it’s worth making the effort to correct me on the number of wonders in the world. I wait for her to fill me in further, but apparently I’m going to have to keep asking her questions to get anything out of her. Maybe she wants to make me beg. I wouldn’t blame her. God knows, the prospects for entertainment in here are pretty bleak.

“Are you going to keep chewing on that cup?” she asks.

“Because if you are, I’m going back to my room.” Well, how about that. Look who wants to be my friend.

I crush the cup in one hand and throw it toward the garbage can. I miss, by a lot.

Janice twitches like she’s about to heave off and pick up the cup—she is closer, after all— but she stays put. I do too. I’ll pick it up later. It feels good to leave trash on the floor for a while. Just sitting and not moving and thinking about the fact that you aren’t doing what you’re supposed to do, what everyone
would expect you to do.

"So," I say, and I hope Janice will look up, but she doesn’t. All of a sudden she’s pretty skilled at sitting perfectly still. “So, tell me your story.”

“I just did that. You weren’t listening?” She’s irritated, but I don’t mind.

“I want to know more. Like how you really got here. Your whole journey. You know?” Journey is a word we use a lot in group discussion.

She looks up, meets my eye, and looks more sad than mean. More sad than defensive. “That’s not really the point, is it? The question is how I’m gonna get out.”

Wow. I thought I had her pegged. She’s so dried up I thought she might be another Gigi.

Gigi arrived when I was only a few days into my first visit. I wasn’t so into making friends then. I was a little raw around the edges, you could say – and there wasn’t much to me other than edges. So I didn’t get to know Gigi. I don’t think anyone did. I never thought about it before now, but maybe it was Gigi that turned me into this social butterfly. Maybe I decided it would be better to have loved and lost, and all that. Who knows?

When Gigi first got here she was pretty sick, pretty far gone. She didn’t even talk during the group sessions. She refused, which is hard to do, what with all the jabbering the social workers do. You start talking even if you don’t want to, just so their tweety-bird voices don’t drill holes in your brain. But Gigi was as silent as a rock at the bottom of the ocean. And no wonder. Her heart was failing. How can you tell your worst secrets to a room full of strangers when your organs don’t even function right? Jesus Christ in heaven, as my grandmother would say. Jesus Christ in heaven, just eat another piece of pie and consider yourself lucky to have it.
That advice wouldn't have worked any miracles on Gigi. She actually couldn't eat at that point. They fed her with a needle in her arm, but I guess it didn't work. Died of a heart attack or multiple organ failure, it was never explained which. Really, of course, she died of a broken heart. I know that's a terrible pun or cliché or whatever you call it, but I think it's also true. Anyone who dies of this disease dies of a torn-up heart. Gigi wanted to die, of course — we all do by the time we get here. And given that, how come some of us manage to pull through? Life is full of mysteries, I guess.

Maybe Janice is one of the survivors. Maybe she'll get out and write a best-selling book about her struggle with anorexia, a book about her battle and how she won it and how you can too. The first thing her book will say is to get the hell away from your parents as quickly as you can. Janice's parents sound like people on a bad daytime soap opera — people with fake hair, fake smiles, fake clothes, fake personalities. Only thing real about them is their obsession with fakeness. They tried to get Janice to have plastic surgery when she was ten years old. Ten. They were worried about how pointy her nose was getting.

I look straight into Janice's washed-up-movie-star eyes and nod my head. "Yes. Yes, how to get out of here is the important question. And I'd like to know the answer, so when you complete the calculations, be sure to stop by and feed them into my IV bag."

Janice cracks a smile, the first one I've seen since she arrived, and a tingly feeling rises up from my toes to my middle. Sort of like when you pee in the swimming pool, except the warmth is moving in the opposite direction.

It's freezing in here. It always is. We sit around in loose, bulky layers of fleece and wool, like we think we're about to be shipped off to a windy day at the beach. Our visitors think it's
because we want to hide our bodies from the world due to our neurotic misconceptions, but really it’s because we’re straight-up cold as a bunch of bags of frozen peas. Janice, though, seems immune to temperature, in spite of the fact that her exposed skin is one shade short of indigo. She’s wearing an oversized T-shirt with a running team spelled in orange block letters on the front. JEFFERSON CROSS COUNTRY. The orange looks pretty nice against the blue backdrop.

“Do you run cross-country?” I say.

Again she’s facing her apparently fascinating lap, but then she moves her whole head toward me, slowly, like an owl on the Discovery channel. Her eyes are enormous. “I used to,” she says. “But this isn’t my shirt.”

This is what I’m talking about. She wants me to plead for it. “And, so, whose is it?” I’m happy to do the asking. I restrain myself from pronouncing whose with an extended “oooooo” to sound like an owl’s hoot.

“It’s my boyfriend’s.” Janice once again looks straight into my eyes when she says this, as if she’s afraid the news will wash me clear away if she doesn’t nail me in place with a sharp stare. This is very refreshing. Looking people in the eye isn’t a great strength of most of my compatriots here, and I get to feeling lonely when all my conversation partners find the empty wall behind my head more engaging than what I’m saying.

“What’s he like, your boyfriend?” I say, without leaking any trace of surprise at the idea of flimsy Janice having a beau. “He’s...” She closes her eyes and hesitates for so long I think she might have fallen asleep. “He’s...” Again, she stops. She’s killing me with the thoughtful pauses. “He’s nice.” She completes the sentence, and it feels like a major accomplishment. It’s not the most enlightening piece of information I’ve heard today, but, for Janice, it verges on the profound.
“That’s excellent,” I tell her. “No one is better off with a boyfriend who isn’t nice. I’m glad to hear it.”

And then Janice finally takes the reins. This is a topic she can chew on, I guess: the superiority of a nice boyfriend over a not-nice one. She tells me about her previous boyfriend, a sort of homecoming king with gills and little sprouty legs, continually circling the top of the pond waiting for someone to stick out a branch so he could make his way onto land. He dropped Janice like a maggotty apple, as soon as he caught the attention of someone more popular. And that was after their two-year perfect teenage romance. They first met when she was only thirteen. I can’t imagine having had a boyfriend when I was thirteen. I was barely out of diapers then. Actually, I can’t really imagine having a boyfriend now. Or ever, for that matter. I ask her if she has a picture of her current boyfriend, and she does.

She gets up, all stick-insect arms and legs, and I follow her to her room, which she shares with Miranda. Miranda doesn’t look up from her book when we enter. She’s an old-timer, like me, here and gone, here and gone, who knows how many times. We’re yo-yos: better, worse, better, worse. It’s a way of getting through life, a way that has a certain seductive rhythm. Miranda and I can relate to each other, I guess, though sometimes I feel like we’re boxing opponents or something, always keeping some distance between us. Her family is like mine; I don’t think they notice where she is, whether she’s here or there or even alive for that matter. They’ve never visited.

At least two of my numerous parents have been here once or twice. Not my two original parents, of course, but two from the outer orbit of circling, shuffling guardians. Janice pulls on a string around her neck and lifts a key out from inside her boyfriend’s T-shirt. I wonder what else she’s hidden inside there. She
unlocks the top drawer of her bedside table, and my jaw hits the floor. I never knew those drawers locked. Never thought to ask for a key. What the hell would I lock up? My ratty old underpants? She takes her purse from the top drawer—the kind of purse I knew she'd have: small, leather, red, with big silver zippers and snaps—and she lifts out a photograph. It's the two of them, Janice and the runner. He's nice-looking, harmless, with brown hair swinging across his eyes, but it's Janice that stops me cold.

In the picture she's so pretty. I could tell she was once pretty, but I had no idea. The difference is unbelievable. In the picture she looks like a shiny, juicy grape, while right in front of me she's a raisin, the last raisin in the pack with crusty, cloudy stuff on it. I keep looking at the picture. I don't look at Janice. My brain is vibrating so much I want to grab hold of it and squeeze. "How long ago was this taken?" I ask. I'm a little short of breath and I wish I could go backwards in time and avoid Janice altogether.

"Who cares how long?" Janice says, and her brow is all scrunched together in the middle. I have the urge to iron it. She takes the edge of the picture between her finger and thumb and pulls and I know I have to let go but I can't. My grip is stuck on the picture, like when I ripped out a chunk of my brother's hair because I couldn't loosen my fist and he jerked his head away. Janice and I are locked like that for a few seconds and then she chokes out, "Maddie, please." Her voice is gray, and my name comes at me on the edge of a dull knife. Something made of thick glass shatters inside me. I'm being stabbed by a million shards, but I don't let go. Then Janice puts her other hand on my arm, and even though her fingers are icy, her touch is hot. It'll leave a scar and I'll be branded. She opens her whole palm and folds it around my arm and I wonder how long I can stand the pain. Mi-
randa looks at us and holds her hand above the nurse-call button at the side of her bed. I let go of the picture, snatch my arm away, and run.

A couple days later I think about calling home. I haven’t called once during this stay. I wonder what’s happening there, whether my brother Chad is still suspended from school for starting a fire in the cafeteria. There’s a bank of pay phones at the end of the ward. I envision the phones for a long time before heading over there. I imagine myself dialing, and my mom picking up. She doesn’t recognize my voice at first. When she does, she laughs and hangs up, like it’s a good joke. I stand there running through imaginary scenarios until I get to one that’s tolerable. Then I dig in my pockets and, lo and behold, there’s some change. Who knew?

It rings for a long time. We don’t have an answering machine. Finally Chad answers, which is what I expected. “Hey, Chad.” Silence. “It’s me, you dork. Maddie.”

“Oh hi, Ugly.” We’re big on terms of endearment in my family.

Silence again. I know if I don’t say something he’ll hang up. “Chad, have I ever looked like a grape to you?”

He doesn’t answer at once. I can hear the TV. “What are you talking about?” There’s no edge to his voice. He’s probably high. “What’s going on, Maddie? I thought they were supposed to be fixing your mental retardation in there, not making it worse.”

I ask him if Mom is there, and he says he doesn’t know, maybe she’s in her room. I encourage him to investigate, and then he’s gone for a long time. It wouldn’t be unheard of for him to get distracted halfway across the living room and end up leaving the phone off the hook for days. But he does come back and says he thinks she’s there, but she doesn’t come to the phone.
I wait for more, but it’s obvious I’m not going to get much out of him right now. I ask him to tell Mom it would be great if she came to visit. I say maybe they can all come to visit. I tell him there’s a microwave here and we can make some popcorn.

“Sure, Maddie. I’ll tell her. Hey listen, I gotta go.”
Yeah, I think. Don’t we all.

At dinner, Janice sits down next to me with a cup of soup and three crackers. I guess she’s not a binge-and-purger, in spite of her bad teeth. Some of the girls load up their plates, but they’re not fooling anyone. Day after day they stuff their pie holes with mashed potatoes and gravy, and I could still gather them all up in one hand, let them fall, and play pick-up-sticks with the result. Skinny and stiff as pine needles in winter.

Like Janice, I don’t vomit. After the tug of war with the picture I did feel like throwing up, but all I managed to bring up was some watery bile. There was nothing else there. It was comforting, knowing I was empty. Sometimes I imagine that if I could become empty enough, flat enough, I could slip through a crack in the floor and never come back. Apparently anorexia takes many forms — so say the social workers. Some of you think you’re fat even though you’re not. (I’m sure those weren’t Ms. Moore’s exact words.) And some of you know you’re thin but still want to be thinner, as if you want to disappear. When Ms. Moore said that, it was the first time in my life I felt like someone understood me. Then I pointed out to her that she’d described only two forms of the illness, not “many.” But she was unimpressed by my attention to detail.

Janice is perched next to me on the bench, just far enough away that we won’t bump each other accidentally. She doesn’t look at me, and I certainly don’t try to catch her eye. We haven’t spoken since the incident. She’s avoided me and everyone else,
and I haven't tried to break her isolation. I figure she can stew all she wants in her red-purse, locked-drawer, cross-country-boyfriend juices.

"Hi, Maddie," she peeps.

"Why hello, Janice."

"Why are you so pissed off?" Her voice is strained and high-pitched, like a yappy little dog.

"Why are you not pissed off, Janice?" I snatch up my tray and leave. I don't know where this comes from. It's not like me. But the image of Janice as she used to be has lodged in my sinuses, a gluey wad of phlegm.

I deposit my entire dinner at the clean-up area and ride a weakening wave of anger to some windows down the hall. There's not much to see outside the hospital. It's raining, and the buildings and streets and cars are dark and slick against a black background. The window reflects a vague purple outline of me. I can almost stand to look at this blurry version of myself. Streams of rain spill down the outside of the glass. I trace one of them with my finger but it jumps into others, which then split apart, and it's too hard to decide which branch to follow.

Maybe Janice's question is a good one, something I should think about — why I'm pissed off. I sweep my hand across my stomach. Flat. I hold the small of my back with the other hand and suck in my breath until there's very little space between my palms. I close my eyes and hold myself like that for a while, breathing as shallowly as possible. Someday I'll be able to feel the imprint of one hand with the other.

I don't answer Janice's question. My family doesn't visit. We don't make popcorn. But I do crawl back into my own skin. It's comfortable there. No more gazing at rivers of rain on the window. No more phone calls. I empty my pants of change. Carrying change
around in my pockets was bulky anyway — not nearly as bulky as
three meals a day, but still a relief to be rid of, and easier. A social
worker asks me why I keep smoothing down my pants pockets,
but I don’t know the answer so instead I tell her the joke about
the elephant and the aspirin. She doesn’t laugh.

A week goes by and with it ten exhausting group discus-
sion sessions. No one new has arrived since Janice and no one has
left. I always manage to sit next to someone with breath like a
sour dishcloth. I imagine us all stuck as we are, hurtling through
space, traveling fast against a black, star-studded universe into
the future, forever unchanging. But just as that image is settling
in, something shifts. Janice and Miranda start to come and go
together and chat in low tones before discussion starts. They both
develop a sort of bruised glow I’ve never seen before, as if they’ve
been polishing each other with large, smooth stones. Sometimes
they laugh. The rest of us cringe. Every day Janice’s ponytail has
a little more bounce, a little more kick. Pretty soon she’s going to
need a lasso.

Janice finally talks about her boyfriend in a group ses-
sion and I realize I’ve been waiting for this. I wonder if she’ll
acknowledge our earlier conversation, maybe with just a glance in
my direction, but she doesn’t. It’s OK with me. There aren’t many
things I’m good at, but being ignored is one of them. Someone
asks Janice if she has a picture of her boyfriend and she says no
without hesitating. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised by anything
she does at this point, but this still sets me spinning. During the
rest of the session I ponder her response. Maybe I ruined that
nugget of show-and-tell for her, and if that’s the case I’m actually
a little bit sorry. Not to worry, though. If any true guilt leaks in I
can always wipe it out by looking in the mirror. I’ve never looked
like Janice the grape, and I never will, even if I get well. Even if
my middle were to swell, even if my arms and legs were to become

Schuyler 159
thick and hearty, I’d still be as raw-looking as a freshly dug radish. Janice, though. Janice has something to lose.

For the rest of the afternoon I obsess about Janice’s unwillingness to share the photo with the group. But I don’t look in the mirror, all the same. Ages ago I covered my mirror with a tacked-up towel and no one has complained about it, so why ruin a good thing? I figure I don’t need a mirror to measure my progress. My two palms, pressing against my front and my back, are a reliable gage. Right now they can practically smell each other’s sweat through the gauzy film of my body.

The next morning the doctor visits my room; the nurse draws my blood. They make me stay in bed. I try the food that’s delivered on a peeling plastic tray, but it tastes like chicken feathers and gets stuck on the way down. They hook up an IV. I wonder when Janice will come and spill the will to live into the plastic bag of cloudy fluid, but she doesn’t stop by. I guess she hasn’t figured out the solution yet.

I’m allowed out of bed for group discussion, and when it’s my turn to talk I just keep my mouth shut instead. I slide down in my chair and wait for Ms. Hill’s badgering. When it comes it’s more like a few prods with a pair of blunt scissors than a round from a machine gun. Easy to dodge. I don’t even look at her while she forks out questions, and what a relief that is. Instead I take in Janice. She’s more grape-like than ever. Her face is filling out, all the creases smoothing as if injections of silicone were crawling along under the surface, packing themselves into all the hollow spaces. And I’ve never seen Miranda looking more bright-eyed. She sits upright, shoulders thrown back, chest thrust out — the posture that’s recommended in these parts, as if we were all living in a 1950s sitcom. These girls are practically cherubic, glistening with life, bursting at the seams, yodeling from the green hilltops.
I mentally paint bright red circles on their cheeks, and the picture is complete.

And then I see it, I see what’s going on. It’s gruesome. And it’s glorious.

They are feeding on me, Janice and Miranda. The others are, too, everyone in the circle. They were nibbling at first, and now they’re feasting. I offer myself up. I hoist myself onto the platter and stretch out, jaw unhinged around a waxed apple. With every bite of theirs I lose a burdensome chunk of myself. With every bite my flesh is transformed into their shapely muscles and silky skin. They become ravenous. They fly and shriek, clawing at me with talons and beaks, ripping out my insides, drinking my blood, tearing away the deflated organs. I am an empty sleeve. They grow robust. I swirl down the drain. They become whole.

I come back to partial consciousness later, who knows how much time has passed. My head feels like a water balloon stretched beyond capacity. The circle is gone, the shiny faces of my peers are gone, those butt-numbing chairs: gone. Thanks be to Jesus, Grandma.

I have been useful, so now I’m free. I’m suspended in a pool of bleach, where everything is clean. My nostrils are cold but every other part of me is warm. Every time it seems like I might surface I drag myself back down. My arm tingles and I scratch at it. Nurses’ voices are behind a thick hedge of white cotton. There’s no wind. The ocean is pouring into my brain and then out. In and out. Fierce and calm. Salty.

Eventually I arrive somewhere else but I don’t want to be there. I’m cold again. I open my eyes and Chad is standing right above me, so I close them again. This isn’t what I had in mind. I was devoured and I should be gone. Not lying in a bed at the mercy of my brother’s bug-eyed confusion. I’ve never known any-
one who's more easily astonished.

"Maddie?" He sounds anxious, so he's been in here long enough that he's no longer stoned. I open my eyes, focus on his face. His eyes are red. "Maddie?"

I want to ask him if he knows any other words, but when I open my mouth to speak, my lips are stuck together and a big chunk of skin rips off. I can taste my upper lip bleeding. Chad looks like he's going to either pass out or throw up. At least there's a new expression on his face.

"What are you doing here, Chad?"

He smiles, showing his broken tooth. Most people who'd lost half a front tooth would learn to smile with their lips closed, but not Chad. He doesn't give a crap. "I got hungry," he says. "I thought I might swing by for some popcorn."

"I lied," I say. "There's no microwave in here, and no popcorn."

He snorts. "I know that, Maddie. It's a fucking hospital. I'm not dumb." He drops into the chair next to my bed, and it creaks under his weight.

"Christ, Chad, be careful. Maybe if you didn't eat so much Cap'n Crunch you wouldn't break the furniture."

"Shut your face, Maddie." He kicks his legs out straight, looks at the ceiling for a few minutes. Goes into one of his trances, then returns.

"How about a story?" I offer. "I'll tell you a story about this hell hole. About all the other freaks in here. You just sit there and listen and I'll talk."

"That'll be a nice change." Chad never passes up an opportunity for sarcasm.

I press the button to adjust my bed so I can sit up. The motor is slow and sounds like a wheezing parrot. Prime equip-
ment. For us, nothing but the best. I punch my pillows into shape. "You want me to tell you a story?"

He rolls his eyes. "I'm not gonna beg."

"OK then. Coming right up." I look down at the floor, where a single crack splits the surface from the corner of my bed to the far wall. I breathe in, and the crack seems to breathe too, to widen and invite me in. Then I breathe out in a rush and the crack slims up, closing me off. "Yeah," I bark. "I guess I've got nothing better to do."

And I start talking. I tell him about Gigi. About Miranda and Janice. About Ms. Moore and Ms. Hill. About towel-covered mirrors and pigs on platters and flesh-eating girls. Even about hope-filled IV bags, and about IV bags filled with nothing at all. Eventually Chad falls asleep in the chair, his shirt scrunched up to reveal a slice of flabby belly. The nurse comes and wakes him up and says visiting hours are over. He stumbles out. The nurse looks back at me over her shoulder before shutting the door, the side of her neck tripling into soft diagonal folds.

And me, I just keep on talking. To myself. To the crack in the floor. To the rain tapping on the window. Maybe these stories are the reason I'm still here. I'm not empty yet. The words keep welling up and spilling out, my own bleating rhythm, never-ending, like waves unburdening against the sand. I chant. I mumble. I hum. Maybe my yo-yo is whirling up. Or maybe it's spinning down. Up or down. It's always a little hard to tell.
At the end she mostly slept, had little to say. They swabbed her skin to fend off fever but still her tongue cracked like old leather. Still her lips peeled, hips thinned, legs shrank in their sockets and turned to baggy, flesh-colored stockings. They cut a slit in her nightgown—pink, puffed sleeves, washed and returned her to sleep.

The afternoon she died, she was lying on her side when, from beyond the frame of body and bedside came a glow that bathed her skin with an uncanny luster. Sprays of light from the cut face of her wedding ring, gold flecks sent spinning across the ceiling.

What they remember: her eyes, opening, blue-gray and rheumy with wonder. Ah! she said, like a child, pointing at the wild inflections of light as they lept harum-scarum across the room. Washbowl to Vaseline jar to windowpane; look! she said, hands flying through air, and again, look!
HOG

I'll never breed such beasts again.
Her ears and half her face eaten,
what a way. The ladder come down.
Pinch of seven hundred pound savory,
succinctly put to it, an attack or accident
wherein some way she fell and then they
ate her. Dentures left on the floor
of the enclosure, and part of an entrail.
Joyfully the local paper comeuppanance
with it, shiver of silver hog meat
and blue ribbon wins, prize money
going to funeral costs. I heard the pig
smoothly butchered, packed in plastic.
I heard he was an hour in the dying.
I heard, and this is true, the meat rotten
and the veins like the cables of a bridge.
C DYLAN BASSETT

THE CAR IS A CAR LEAVING

1. Ignore the road. Inky green moonlight suspended like a fish on a hook. Stars spin in chronological order. Snow falls against the windshield like a sideways tear.

2. We were only yesterday dreaming in circles. I said When will I become invisible? and you said People see each other in everything. I saw your face in my empty bowl and I tapped it with a spoon.

3. Cold gets in through the vent. Imagined smell of warm bread. This is what happens to a man's shoes when he dies, to a traveler who understands the words but not the language. Broken radio reception mimics voices of the dead. The car tires hum into the donkey-headed nowhere.

4. Disaster means lack of star. The last time you were in this car we rolled the windows up. You said a bird breaks into petals the moment it hits a wall. Already your red hair waved in the wind like a goodbye handkerchief.

5. Consider the road: every lovescape is in a rearview mirror: black feathered lightening: a bleat of migrating birds: the car is a car leaving: a pinwheel of light in the solitary confinement of the universe.
Bird in my hand, flushed
with new blood and fragile.

Unfold the paper and read what I have
written: *Hate my Mother, Hate my Father,*

*too.* I suck this meat until it is bone
in my throat. Fat comfort: that I could open

my hand—let go       Clench my fingers,
a fistful of feathers shut inside my drawer.
My son is into birds. Really, really into birds. He is riding in the back in his car seat, clutching a voluminous hardback copy of *The Sibley Guide to Birds* in his two year-old hands. He flips through the pages, reciting the names of each finely-detailed painting as the scorched Rio Grande Valley landscape scrolls by outside the car windows. *Great egret. Snowy egret. Great blue heron. Yellow-crowned night heron.* We are traveling in our black station wagon with tinted windows that my friend Martha has nicknamed *la carrusa*, the Hearse. Our two dogs, the elder recently diagnosed with clinical depression, are in the back back. To the luggage rack, my father-in-law has attached a beige Sears car topper, acquired at a Winter Texan RV Park auction. We are the Addams family meets National Lampoon's Family Vacation meets a buddy movie in which one of the leads harbors a pathological fear of truck-stop restrooms.

"You're going on a trip," my son proclaims from the back-seat. For whatever reason, he tends to mix up pronouns. *You* is *I* and *I* is *you*. "You're going to Amarillo. You're going to see birds."

I am driving on the two-lane Expressway 83, which one could theoretically take all the way across the country, from Brownsville to Saskatchewan. I avoid the interstates, in part because I have a borderline paranoid fear of breaking down and being stranded in traffic with my son and two dogs. And in part because I am hoping to see another piece of America, the less-traveled open spaces that the interstates rush on by.

I have lived in the Valley, on-and-off, for nine years, but I have never before found reason to venture this far west. Century-old haciendas crumble down scrub-brush hills into forgotten streambeds. In the lane of oncoming traffic, I spot a crested caracara lunching on the bludgeoned carcass of a mid-sized mammal.
Two months ago, its existence wouldn't have even registered in my consciousness. That was before my son's most recent fascination. It is a carrion bird, but infinitely more beautiful than a buzzard. Its downward-pointing bill is fiery red-orange at the base, powder blue at the tip, its chest emblazoned with a variegated pattern of brown and white, like a hand-woven Mexican blanket. And the name. Just the mention of it—the alliterative “c,” the repetition of the same word—is enough to elicit a sidelong smile from my son each time we turn to its page.

This is the first time either of us has ever seen the bird in the flesh. Eating flesh. I glance back, anticipating the glee radiating from his face. But he is asleep. The upturned Sibley Guide rises and falls on his chest. I try to take a mental photograph of the caracara as we whoosh by, startling the magnificent bird over to the opposite shoulder.

If only Laura were here to appreciate the sighting with me. I wasn't supposed to be making this leg of the trip alone. At the last minute, the high school asked her to attend a two-day training. We're expected at a wedding in Denver on Friday night, and today is Monday. In a former life, we could have made the trip in two-and-a-half days, no problem. That was then, this is now. We bought her and my two month-old daughter a plane ticket to Amarillo. My son and I set off on the first leg, solo. After Denver, our final destination is my mother's house in Iowa City, the place new acquaintances are referring to when they ask, innocently enough, the inevitable follow up question: But where is home home?

I glance down at the trip odometer, which I set at zero as we pulled out of the driveway of the house we bought just this year. Thirty-five miles down, a thousand more to go. I pop a Lifesaver mint into my mouth from the jumbo-size bag on the
passenger seat and stare at the road ahead. Two-and-a-half days in a car with a two year-old gives you a lot of time to think.

West of Roma, my son informs me that he needs to go potty. We pull off the highway and look for signs of life. Nine o'clock in the morning and no one is around. Passing through a downtown straight out of my father’s spaghetti Western imagination, a gold-leafed plaque informs us that this was the location for the filming of Zapata, starring Marlon Brando. I can’t escape the feeling that I’m actually on a Hollywood sound stage, a presentiment exacerbated by the many buildings that are only façades, the insides gutted in preparation for some long-hoped-for renovation. Finally, I spot a sign for a World Birding Center visitor center, which sounds promising. Turns out it’s closed, but we park anyway. I unload my son and the dogs and head in the direction of a forlorn observation deck overlooking the River. Twenty-five feet downstream, a Border Patrol SUV is idling. I stake out a position on the other side of the only tree in sight, a spindly ebony, and hope the officer doesn’t notice my three traveling companions simultaneously doing their business.

When they’re done, I hold the leashes in my left hand and my son’s hand in my right. We scamper back to the deck. I scan the branches of the craggy mesquites clinging to the crusted embankment, looking for one of the specialty birds featured on the faded signage. Altamira oriole. Green jay. Clay-colored robin. A crumpled-up Whataburger bag has been stuffed between the guardrails through which my son gazes out at the expanse below. Upstream, the river cleaves in two to circumnavigate a large island. The trees there are more expansive, leaves thicker and darker green, perhaps the remnants of the slender swath of riparian forest that used to press against the River’s fertile curves, in another century.
El otro lado is a sandy bank with a few benches, the peeling paint visible even from our far-off vantage point. A trio of bony dogs rummages through pieces of litter next to a half-upturned metal trashcan. Beyond, a few semis traverse the international bridge, spouting plumes of thick black smoke into the cerulean sky. Just a few weeks ago, I read in our local paper, nine men were found dead in this city, their bodies dismembered and left on display. How far was that from the spot where we are standing?

“Look,” my son says, pointing above it all. I try to follow the invisible line extending outward from his finger into the infinite blue space. “It’s a crow.” He reaches out as though to touch it. “It’s flying to Mexico.”

Sure enough, a single crow swoops high above us, its black feathers incandescent in the mid-morning sunlight. By now my son is jumping up and down with excitement. “It’s flying to Mexico,” he repeats, punctuating each syllable for emphasis, raucously indifferent to my indifference. He is two years old, I remind myself. He doesn’t care if the bird is a specialty or not. He loves birds, and the crow is a bird—even if it is, like the caracara, a harbinger of death. And it’s flying to another country. True, he chases the same bird around our backyard on a regular basis, but maybe the fact that the crow is so quotidian makes it even more impactful. So familiar, and it is flying to another country.

Something else I read recently: American Crows are cooperative breeders. Meaning that their offspring don’t leave—they stay with the family for four or five years, sometimes even longer. Siblings raise siblings. Children care for parents. Nesting territory is inherited from parents only when they die. Crow families stick together.

Ever since the birth of my son, my mother has been making not-so-veiled hints. There’s an opening at the U of I, colleagues will soon retire at her university in Cedar Rapids. Com-
Community college teaching is such a heavy load. Laura’s parents, up the road in Wisconsin, are even more explicit. “Your mother and I just want you to know,” my father-in-law says, as we got ready to pull out of their driveway after last year’s now-annual Midwest Summer Baby Tour, “that the thing that would make us happiest in our later years is having you closer to home.” His sincerity was colossal. Now that my daughter has arrived, of course, things have only gotten worse. “It’s hard to feel emotionally close,” my mother-in-law tells Laura, “when you’re so geographically distant.” Only my father, his skeleton pock-marked by metastatic cancer, seems at peace with our decision.

The crow makes a wide turn, traces the River’s gently winding path upstream. My son has moved on to investigating a bottle cap nesting between two floorboards. According to the Sibley Guide, crows are only partially migratory. Some individuals spend their entire lives in one place. Others travel thousands of miles. Is this home? I wonder, as I gather the crew and prepare to hit the road. Or do you have a long journey ahead of you, too?

When I see the caracara pair perched on an oil pipeline overlooking Laredo, I know it’s time to stop. By all indications, no one has used the gravel road leading up to the picnic area in a very long time. But everything seems to have been built in anticipation of a future date like today, when no one would stop, or make any effort at repair. The picnic table to which I lug our cooler—filled by Laura with enough tuna fish and PB & J sandwiches to last us a month in the wilderness—is a solid hunk of concrete, as is the shade structure overhead, strong enough to survive the apocalypse. Then again, isn’t there something already apocalyptic about the landscape: the thorns and burrs of the wind-stunted vegetation, the listless gray-brown of the land underneath, the industrial wasteland of the city splayed out like a corpse in the
desiccated basin at the rest-stop’s feet? The Rio Grande Valley is not a beautiful place, at least not in any conventional sense. The ravaged complexion of the landscape makes no effort to hide hardship, loneliness, pain. “I never knew that I grew up in a forest,” Laura is fond of saying, “until I moved to the Valley.” When people ask where she is from, she does not hesitate in her response. Wisconsin. I, on the other hand, have taken to calling this place home, even if the answer feels tentative on my tongue, and no one believes my answer anyway.

The caracaras watch us with interest, perhaps in hopes of their next meal. Meanwhile my son is in ecstasy. I set down the cooler and sprint after him, bending down to pick up a lost shoe along the way. “A crested caracara!” he exclaims, his expression conveying unmitigated glee. “The crested caracaras are sitting on the pipe!”

I catch myself in the throes of parental pride. It’s one thing to memorize the pages of a book, I think, in their pre­scripted order. It’s another thing altogether to be able to identify them in the wild. The jacket of the Sibley Guide informs readers that its author, the world’s foremost authority on all things birds, began serious study “at the tender age of seven.” During my son’s last pediatrician visit, we were asked if his vocabulary exceeds two-hundred words. Two hundred words? How about two hundred birds?

Laura worries—at moments, for instance, when my son feels compelled to whip out the bird book to demonstrate his ability to distinguish Baltimore, Orchard, Hooded, Bullock’s, Audubon, and Altamira orioles to a bewildered fellow toddler—that the intensity of his passions will prove, in the long haul, socially problematic. I’m less concerned than fascinated by the origins of his singular concentration. Why birds?
Like many of the mysteries of parenthood—why does he throw a histrionic tantrum in the backseat any time I attempt a song that is not Raffi’s “Take Me Out to the Ball Game?” on the car stereo—I don’t totally understand it. I do suspect that it is his parents’ fault. His middle name is Byrd; he was named for a family friend who was found, many hours after his death at age fifty, on an ice-crusted Ohio ski trail. Like my son, the friend had been nicknamed Birdy, and names are destiny. My father’s friend also was into birds, fascinating me as a child with his encyclopedic ability to mimic the strange click-and-whistle language of their calls.

_Cotorrito,_ Martha calls my son, on afternoons when she comes over to feed us both _hoja de plátano_ tamales while Laura is at work. _Little parrot._

It may also have to do with living in the Valley, apparently the Mecca of North American birding. A sign at the Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge—a thirty-minute drive from our new house—claims that more bird species have been spotted within the refuge’s borders than in every state besides Texas, combined. Every winter, thousands of binocular-eyed Midwestern septuagenarians flock south in hopes of catching a glimpse of a _yellow-green vireo_ or a _ferruginous pygmy-owl._

But does all this explain why Birdy gravitated, unprompted, toward the dusty birdwatching book on our shelf—another item in a growing catalog of unrealized projects? Or the fact that, unable to read or consistently construct a complete sentence, he has been able to memorize all four-hundred pages of the novice _Birds of Texas,_ to the point where has now graduated to the advanced _Sibley?_ What, in view of all the entities to which we could choose to attach our passions—if, in fact, choice is involved at all—makes us love what we love?

I sweep my son into my arms and carry him back to the
concrete-block picnic table. We sit next to each other on the bench, eating sandwiches and drinking cans of Jumex mango juice, mirror images to the pair of caracaras watching us watching them in the distance. When we get up to continue our trip, the caracaras take flight as well, their extended wings propelling them in formidable bursts out over the bluff. We watch them until they are indistinguishable from the dust-hazed outlines of the city below.

I have been worried about the Border Patrol checkpoint since before we left. The topper is my main concern. What if the officers decide they need to inspect it? I struggled for a half-hour to stuff our camping gear into its whale-like belly and secure the elaborate hand-rigged system of U-bolts and clips meant to keep it from disgorging its contents onto the highway. I imagine myself standing in the door frame—screw driver and monkey wrench in hand, my son bawling inconsolably, my mentally unstable dogs snarling at the gigantic drug-sniffing German Shepherds—as my hands fruitlessly fiddle. The memory is still fresh of our last trip, in which a blue-shirted TSA agent seized Birdy’s Raggedy Andy doll from his clutches to run it through the X-Ray machine. His reaction was not one I care to have repeated.

The road veers to the north, away from the border. As the miles accumulate on the odometer, the hope buds that there will be no checkpoint on this section of highway, as there is on the now-familiar interstate connecting the Valley to San Antonio. Of course, it wouldn’t make sense, but I’ve seen the border wall. After that made-for-TV amalgamation of second-hand scrap metal appearing only intermittently on the River’s northern bank—I no longer expect these things to make sense.

No houses, anywhere. Just one endless, unfenced field of electric green mesquite, and yet, the traffic. A truck caroms by
every two seconds in the opposing lane, shoving us brusquely to
the side. More trucks, unsatisfied with my speed—I haven't yet
convinced myself that the topper will not blow off—bully their
ferocious grilles into my rear-view mirror, demanding that I move
over to the shoulder so they can squeeze their way through. No
is not an acceptable answer. Where are all these vehicles going?
Tracing my planned route on our newly-purchased road atlas,
Laura had keyed in on this section with a concerned look. "Looks
pretty desolate," she'd said. Unlike me, fearing the crush of traf­
ic more than anything, her greatest fear is being stranded in the
wilderness. But who knew there would be so many people in such
a hurry to get nowhere?

Billboards sprouting from the brushland begin to advertise
corporate housing communities with wi-fi, satellite TV, kitchen­
ettes. Only fifty-five miles to go! In the interim, entire villages of
eighteen-foot camping trailers have been set up alongside newly-
graveled side roads, apparently in haste. I vaguely recall hearing
something on the radio about a natural gas boom, or was it oil?
Outside my window, a worker sleeps in a fold-up camping chair, a
newspaper draped over his head to shade him from the sweltering
sun.

Just as I allow myself to relax, take in the curiosities of the
landscape, and forget the impending doom of the checkpoint, a
brown sign with white letters warns of a slow-down in a quarter-
mile. I glance back at my son. Asleep. Meaning things won't be
pretty if he wakes up unexpectedly. Six semi-trailers form a single
line in front of me. I turn off the stereo, and Birdy tosses his head
from one side to the other. I take a deep breath, thinking about
the first time, nine years ago, I had driven north and discov­
ered the checkpoint, tucked away like a hunting blind sixty miles
north of the border. A checkpoint inside my own country? It had
felt like something out of Baghdad or Palestine, the security ap-
paratus of a military state. Almost a decade later, I can tell I've become accustomed to it. The concentrated anger I'd felt burning in my chest then has been diluted into a generalized feeling of apathetic unease.

The officer who waves me forward is a Latino man who can't be older than twenty-three. His partner, an Anglo man about the same age, holds the leash of a dog, not German Shepherd, but a black dog of no recognizable breed, that sniffs at my tires. My dogs scuttle to their feet, still getting their bearings.

"U.S. citizen?" the officer asks. He has the air of someone with better things to be doing. I exhale.

"Yes, sir," I say. I don't do well with authority.

The sir waves us on ahead. "Have a good one," he says, already looking toward the next car.

I put my foot down on the accelerator, never having felt so relieved to have been the beneficiary of racial profiling. In the back back, the dogs resettle, negotiating their positions in the limited space allocated to them. The same stunted mesquite jungle scrolls past my window. The same dilapidated trailers.

"Take Me Out to the Ballgame," Birdy croaks, eyes still closed. Somehow, even in his state of semi-consciousness, he has managed to apprehend my transgression. I pop another mint into my mouth and wonder what new country I have entered, or left behind.

We spend the first night in Hill Country, at a state park campground so popular that you are issued a number, DMV-style, and line up in a seat-less lobby where a sign flashes—or does not flash, for the first half-hour—above a reinforced wooden door. Our linemates warn us that, although the Texas Parks and Wildlife website boasted over 500 campsites, none will be available. Everyone has made their reservation months in advance. I glance
at my son, on the precipice of a car-fatigue-induced tantrum for the last hour. The next green pine tree and triangle on the map is ninety miles away.

At last, our number flickers. The besieged summer intern behind the window apologetically assigns us a site in the “primitive” section. Relieved, we join the current of silver Civics and burgundy Priuses winding their way into the campground. Apparently, the entire thirtysomething population of Austin and their offspring has decamped here for the summer. I see them on our trip to the camp store to purchase fire wood in the heart of the main “developed” campground. We are in the shadow of a postcard-perfect granite bluff known nostalgically as Old Baldy. Clusters of smiling children frolic carelessly in the Frio River on rented plastic inner-tubes.

“You want to go home,” my son informs me, repeatedly, from the back seat.

“We’re camping,” I say, attempting to muster up some enthusiasm. I swerve to avoid a cabal of parents sipping Blue Moons from the cup holders of aircraft-inspired jogging strollers, in the middle of the road.

“You want to go home,” he repeats, building to a climax of whine as the shrieks of happy children needle into my brain. One of the parents I am edging by says something witty, and everyone laughs. I cringe, involuntarily.

This could have been your life, a voice whispers from somewhere inside my brain. If only you hadn’t been such a burro.

Shut up, I answer.

You could still move to some place like Austin, the voice intones, ignoring me. Like your brother and your siblings-in-law. Like nine-tenths of your graduating class.

I’m not my brother or my in-laws, I think, feeling the heat rise. Half of my graduating class is on Prozac.
Someplace in the Midwest, maybe. Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Louis? Closer to home...
I'll pass, thanks. I prefer the road less traveled.
Think of it: Fair-trade groceries, functional schools, well-adjusted children.
I'm happy where I am.
Are you?
Yes. I think so. Yes.
You think so? It's not too late—
Would the children of these parents pee in front of a fucking Border Patrol officer?
"You want to go home!" Birdy cries. His face reddens, nostrils flaring. "You want to go poop!

Back at the primitive area, he goes in the woods, the pit toilets having been deemed insufficient. Thankfully, in contrast to everywhere else, almost no one is around. I take this as a doubly good thing, since my primary aim for our family camping trip is to not get in trouble on account of dog barking, children crying, or unseemly breakdowns of parental authority.

In search of distraction, I strap Birdy into our thrift-store backpack and set out to explore the campground, a leash in each hand. There is only one other family out of the twenty or so sites. A young Latino father directs our entourage to a path that leads from a campsite down to a five-foot ledge abutting the river. A small waterfall cascades directly beneath the Expressway 83 bridge, still rumbling with traffic. It is sufficiently unpicturesque to not attract a crowd, or anyone else for that matter.

We don't stop to take off our clothes. The water isn't as cold as the name suggests. In the deepest places, it only goes up to Birdy's knees, but the current is surprisingly strong. He picks his way along the uneven rocks beneath his shoes. I resist the urge—really, he resists it for me—to cling to his hand. I unhook
the dogs from their leashes and try to spot him, gymnastics-style. When he falls, instead of screaming, he squeals in delight. The current carries him, legs extended in front of him at a right angle to his torso, quickly downstream.

“You’re swimming,” he cries. “You’re swimming in the current!”

I can’t tell if he is laughing or shivering. I don’t care. I give thanks to the liquid god that has succeeded where a day’s worth of Raffi, Blow Pops, and PB & J has failed. The claustrophobia, the tedium, the potty anxiety, the Mommalessness—it’s all washed away, at least for a few precious minutes.

“One more swim, real quick,” Birdy says, when I finally carry him, teeth chattering, flowerets of purple blooming across his cheeks, back to the riverbank. “One more, real quick.”

The sign reads Paint Rock, population 273. Somebody has crossed out a four in the ones column with a Sharpie marker. The next town is another fifty miles or more away. Birdy isn’t going to make it. Since there is no sign of any commerce whatsoever, I follow a sign that reads “Paint Rock City Schools” down what appears to be a gravel alleyway. Until I realize that the entire town is a grid of one-lane gravel alleyways.

Paint Rock City Schools consists of two buildings. The first calls to mind a dollhouse version of a school, as if it were designed in an earlier, pre-vitamin-fortified-breakfast-cereal era, when the land was inhabited by a smaller race of people the size of present-day horse jockeys. Or maybe the people were so small because they were starving, like the emaciated gray steed across the street from the school, nose to the ground as it gingerly scavenges through fields of yellow-needled nopales.

This being Texas, the second building, almost twice the size of its sibling, is a brand spanking new gymnasium.
I park and unstrap Birdy from his carseat. It is hot. The Valley is one of the hottest places on earth, but it feels hotter here somehow. Maybe it’s because we have just stepped out of air-conditioned comfort, or because of the lack of any shade anywhere, or because of the fact that there doesn’t appear to be anyone around anywhere, or anything even, unless you count the horse that appears to have been left on its own to die.

Except that this isn’t true. “Howdy,” a voice says, from somewhere on the other side of the car. I squint. A woman, her back still facing away from us as she hangs laundry onto a rusted metal line, looks back in our direction, gray hair blowing across her face. Not only is it hot, it’s windy, too. The breeze feels like somebody opened an oven door.

“Hi.” If there was ever any doubt about how to proceed, my son has resolved it. He is sprinting barefoot in the direction of the horse, having wriggled away before I could slip his shoes on. The woman turns. She is wearing a pair of short pink jogging shorts and a white t-shirt advertising one of the lesser-known Caribbean islands, the sleeves ripped off. Her skin, dark and freckled, is like another layer of clothing. She could be sixty and she could be thirty-five. She doesn’t say anything more, as if my mere presence in Paint Rock is enough of a question.

I explain where we’ve come from, where we’re headed. She nods unresponsively and says she needs to run back into the house. While we wait, I play defense—knees crouched, hands at the ready, move your feet, move your feet—as Birdy attempts to grab onto the barbed wire fence separating him from the horse pasture. I have warned him five times not to touch it. The horse approaches us, making eye contact with my son. Its jaw pantomimes a slanting motion of chewing. “He doesn’t listen well,” I hear Laura saying, on days when I have graded student essays until too late in the evening, and she has reached her wit’s end. I
was supposed to call her last night from the state park, but there wasn’t any service. I figured I would call her here, at our first stop. No service in Paint Rock, either.

When the woman finally reappears, she is carrying a bag of freezer-section soft pretzels. From out of nowhere, an entire herd of brown and white goats materializes, looking decidedly better fed than their equine counterpart—when I asked, for my son’s benefit, if the horse could be petted, the woman had responded with a libertarian shrug. *Not mine.* She hands a pretzel to Birdy. He knows what to do. “I’m having lunch,” he screams, as he spends the next five minutes emptying the pretzel bag.

The summertime staff of Paint Rock City Schools emerges from the school, approaching the pasture. In as few words as humanly possible, we are alerted to the presence of a picnic table, a shelter, a playground. The people of Paint Rock have a way of being friendly without betraying any outward indication of friendliness. Before long, we have bid farewell to the goat lady and are set up in unexpected luxury in the school playground. Birdy scuttles up and down a last bastion of lawsuit-indifferent climbing equipment, while I attempt to channel my inner goat and ingest a sopping-wet tuna sandwich by chewing as little as possible.

I daydream about telling Laura, when I finally reach her, that I want to move to Paint Rock. About what it would be like to raise a child in a place where words are so manifestly pathetic in the presence of so much nothingness lurking around their margins. Part of me sincerely wants to find out. I imagine the bemused look on her face, followed in sequence by the moment of recognition—*oh no, he’s half serious*—and the knowing *my husband is crazy, but not that crazy.*

Then again, isn’t this what people think of us already, having moved across the country to a place that most Midwest-
erners—ourselves included, a decade ago—don't even know exists. Not that the Valley is really nowhere. A million people live there, for crying out loud. Nowhere is a matter of perception, not reality.

A flash of orange darts above me. I quickly scan the sky, blue in name only, like the color of old jeans washed too many times. An oriole! Its breast is somehow more orange than I'd imagined, the color of the H-E-B mac-n-cheese stowed away in the topper for the night's dinner. Before I can call Birdy's attention, though, it's gone.

"I saw an oriole," I say.

"An oriole!" he exclaims, not even needing to see it with his own eyes. The glowing world of his imagination blazes, even if all he has to spark the flames is a word, a coded flicker of the crowded alleyways of the sky.

When I finally get a hold of Laura, we are at a one-pump gas station located at a point on the map where a town apparently once stood. I tell her things are going swimmingly—which, relative to my expectations, has been true. There have been no fully-realized meltdowns, no moments of existential despair. We're doing great!

Five hours later, as the sun inches toward an impossibly flat horizon line, I am still driving, having committed my first critical error of the trip: I have underestimated the inestimable vastness that is Texas. A mere inch on the road atlas requires a full hour to cover, and there are no other campgrounds for a full three inches. My son wakes from his afternoon nap and we begin the slow ascent to his I-can't-be-in-the-car-one-more-instant breaking point. I find myself imagining some alternate map scale in which measurements correspond not to miles but to emotional state. Quarter inch—optimism. Half inch—doubt. Inch—despair. Inch-and-a-half—I am questioning my fitness as a parent. And so on.

When we finally arrive at the campground, the sun already
a deep red orb, I commit my second critical error of the trip: I drive an extra twenty minutes to find the perfect campsite. Leaving behind the fair-haired plains of West Texas, we descend into a red Martian landscape of indescribable beauty and desolateness. Thousand-foot deep canyons crisscross the earth in tragic, quilt-like patterns, carved by water that must exist only in the conjectures of alien scientists peering down at us through the lenses of telescopes on some distant planet.

“You want to go hooooome,” Birdy manages to exhale, between sobs. He draws out the last word with a sloping uptick as precipitous as the canyons walls beneath us. The car performs what feels like several figure eights in succession. Bordered on either side of the ridge by sheer hundred-foot drop-offs, my fists clench around the steering wheel in a death grip.

“Daddy needs to concentrate,” I say, unconsciously violating my new-parent vow to not talk in third person.

“Concentrate, concentrate, concentrate,” he parrots. And continues parroting for the next twenty minutes. How long would it take someone to find us here, at the bottom of the canyon? A day? A week? A month? Would they ever find us?

In another life, the campsite we finally arrive at would have been perfect, a peninsular outcropping that levitates halfway between the jagged tears of the ridges and the snaking path of the canyon floor. There is no one else at the campground, possibly for many miles. It feels almost gluttonous. All this view, all this solitude, all for us alone.

But there is a tent to be set up, a fire to be laid and then set aside, an inconsolably homesick son to shoo away from the sentry cacti guarding vast chasms of nothing. In the end, we are reduced to me holding Birdy in my arms as we eat a packet of macaroni cheese dumped in a pot of cold water. Birdy snifflies as I spoon it into his mouth with my left hand. With my right,
I hold a stick and draw, at his direction, the outlines of herons and egrets, inscribed in the earth like petroglyphs from a distant aqueous age.

There is no water at the site. Before I put him to bed, I attempt to wash off the layer of clay-dust that has accumulated over his entire body by holding him under the spout of our blue traveling thermos. It is dusk. Without warning, and in a matter of seconds, the entire campground is invaded by a multitude of translucent moths, each beat of their wings a tiny brush of crepuscular light.

The red earth. The tent. The unlit fire. The panting dogs. My son, writhing and naked in my arms. Everything is suffused in this pulsing, other-worldly halo of light. In a former life, I might have been overcome by a sublime feeling of calm, or wonder, or bittersweet awareness of my own insignificance in the awesome sweep of the universe. Now, as I transport my son through a mystical, golden-winged cloud, all I can feel is annoyed. Annoyed and tired. Beauty takes a backseat to potty, toothbrush, story, bed.

By the time he finally falls asleep, the sun has set. The moths have gone with it, disappearing as abruptly as they first appeared. Indistinct outlines of clouds sweep across the fast-darkening sky. I have heard that here in West Texas is the starriest place in North America, on account of our distance from any big city, but tonight there is not a star to be seen. No moon, either, but that doesn't stop the coyotes from baying at some hereditary idea of it. Their howls echo from canyon face to canyon face until there are hundreds of them, calling to us from every possible angle and direction. I had planned to let the dogs sleep outside, tied to the sun shade, but I change my mind and invite them into the tent. We huddle up, the four of us, as the temperature begins to drop. Birdy flings himself around for a little while, then settles
down. The dogs quiver against my stomach—from the cold or
the coyotes, I'm not sure which. In the blackest, loneliest night
on the continent, I listen to my son's gentle breathing and wait
for sleep to come.

At mile 851 of the trip, having returned from the canyon to the
great landmark-less plains of West Texas, I reach my breaking
point. I decide that I prefer a full-on tantrum to another round
of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," which we have now listened
to consecutively approximately 748 times. Birdy instantly starts
screaming. I loop through a cacophony of Christian stations un­
til I arrive at an orphan oldies station. I jack up the volume and
sing along, in full voice, to "I Can't Get No Satisfaction."

We are strong-willed, the both of us. I am certain that
the day will come when his resolve will prevail, but for now mine
is stronger. After a half hour of this, he falls asleep, tears still
streaking down his cheeks. I feel no shame.

Laura is waiting for us outside the airport, holding our
daughter Ana Gloria in her carseat. I have never been so happy to
see another person in my entire life. Birdy wakes, closes his eyes,
opens them again. "I am here," he says.

"Remember the days when we traveled with one backpack
between the two of us?" Laura asks, as she finishes installing Ana
Gloria's carseat and begins stuffing reusable grocery bags filled
with clothes and diapers into every conceivable crevasse. She sits
in the front seat, but within five minutes both children are crying
sympathetically, straining to be heard over the noise of the other.
She manages to exchange places with a pile of bags, wedging her­
self between the two carseats. "By the way, happy birthday," she
says, as she simultaneously offers a breast to Ana Gloria and a box
of raisins to Birdy. The din from the back subsides. I've forgot­
ten. Today I turn 32.
The car's trip odometer completes its first thousand miles and automatically resets to zero. "You're going on a trip," Birdy says, as if everything we have endured in the past two-and-a-half-days has been a long dream from which he—or is it R?—is now waking.

We merge back onto the highway, and immediately we're passed by an eighteen wheeler. The driver glances down, looks back at the road. "Thank god for tinted windows," Laura says, still nursing Ana Gloria in the backseat.

Somewhere at highway's end, my mother tries to send birthday wishes through a dead cell phone. Meanwhile la carrosa flies across West Texas on a minor highway of impossible straightness. Laura reaches up to massage my neck. Ana Gloria is asleep already. "You're going to Amarillo," Birdy says again, though by now we've left it far behind. "You're going to see birds."
I flew to Paris with my girlfriend. We stayed at a cheap hotel at the edge of the Red Light District. Our concierge warned us not to walk too close to doorways, somebody might pull us in. On our last night in the city, we ate dinner at a café a few blocks from our hotel. The waitress was the owner and her husband the chef. The place was decked out in reds and greens, the tables made of solid oak. I’d never eaten escargot. It was delicious. My girlfriend ordered us a bottle of white wine, then a bottle of red. She drank most of it. When the bill came, I was almost drunk, but it was the waitress who fumbled with the credit card machine. “It will not operate,” she said. Her husband emerged from the kitchen, his forearms decorated with miniature wheels of cut chive. He, too, fumbled with the machine. He shook it, he checked the batteries. My girlfriend found the whole thing funny. I felt her bare toes crawling up my pant leg. Her neck and chest were flush. “Can you bill our room?” I asked the waitress, my pulse quickening. I pointed to the door, intending the gesture to mean that our hotel was a block in that direction. The waitress clapped her hands. She seemed quite pleased. Addressing her husband in French, she retrieved for me my coat from the rack she’d hung it on when we’d arrived, then she disappeared into the kitchen. I had the coat on when the waitress came back with a bottle of Chianti. She filled my girlfriend’s glass, and my girlfriend, who found all of this hilarious, flashed me thigh beneath her skirt and raised her glass to toast me out the door. It was raining. I followed the chef, who wore no coat. He spoke no English. The night was cold and I felt almost sober. I walked cautiously in the street while the chef sought cover from the rain under the sidewalk awnings. He eyed me queerly. I tried to explain about the doorways and the concierge and murder. He did not understand. It was only when
I uttered “puerto” on a whim that we discovered he and I spoke Spanish, enough to complete a handful of exchanges. I told him, more or less, what the concierge had said about the doorways, and the chef wrapped his hands around his throat and let his tongue roll out. I went ahead and joined him on the sidewalk. We awning-hopped for several blocks until we found an ATM. The chef stood next to me. I typed my passcode incorrectly and my card slid out. My hands were wet, the buttons were slick. The chef frowned and touched my shoulder, misunderstanding. He started to walk off. I forgot the word accidente, so I called out: “Por favor, tengo dinero!” Just then a tall man in a dark coat emerged from the shadows on the opposite side of the street. I typed my passcode correctly and a menu appeared on the screen. But the tall man in the dark coat was crossing the street, heading straight in our direction. I cancelled my transaction. Pocketing my wallet, I motioned for the man in the dark coat to go ahead. I stepped out from under the awning and approached the chef. The chef gestured for us to go, but I touched his arm and said, softly: “un momento.” He waited, but I doubt he understood. I thought about wringing my neck or lolling my tongue, but I felt embarrassed. By now the rain had washed the herbs off the chef’s arms. My coat was soaked through, but nevertheless I pulled the collar tight around my throat. The chef resumed our conversation. How long, he asked, had I had been married? “No esposa,” I said, and in correcting him I tried to find the Spanish words to explain with some kind of merit how my girlfriend and I had just graduated college, how we planned to move together to Chicago, how we’d both finds jobs and earn money and be happy and no matter what, we’d have each other. I think he understood. He smiled every time I said “amor.” Then he asked how old we were, and I said “Twenty-two.” He burst into laughter, and the tall man in the dark coat, having finished his transaction, joined us in the
street. He said something in French to the chef, and the chef said something back. The chef pointed at me. Both men burst into laughter. Speaking rapidly, as if they were old friends who shared a sacred bond, the two men conversed in French while I stood by and watched their mouths contort wildly in the dim-lit street. The rain did not let up. There were no red lights in this area. Everybody was a liar and a fraud. I stepped up to the ATM and slid my card into the slot. Behind me, the two men talked and laughed and made commotion. A menu appeared. ENGLISH, I selected. But I didn’t use my passcode. Instead, I input random numbers. My card slid out, and I slid it in again. I punched another set of random numbers. My hands were cold from the rain and when I pushed my finger hard against the buttons no blood showed beneath the nail. I repeated my transaction six, maybe seven times. The laughing had stopped by now. I put my card back in my wallet, and when I turned around I saw the tall man walking off. He disappeared around a corner. The chef was waiting, sopping wet but smiling. He turned his palms face up. “No tengo,” I answered. We headed back the way we’d come. The chef asked me questions but I acted like I did not understand. I had this feeling. I couldn’t shake the image of my girlfriend, flush and drunk on stolen wine, waiting alone, and as I walked with the chef in the rain I knew for certain that she wasn’t mine and that I’d take her anyway.
CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES
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Kristin George Bagdanov is an M.F.A. student at Colorado State University. Her poems are forthcoming or have recently appeared in Redivider, Rattle, Relief, and other magazines. Her chapbook We Are Mostly Water was published last spring by Finishing Line Press.

C. Dylan Bassett’s poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Columbia, Copper Nickel, DIAGRAM, the Pinch, Tar River and elsewhere. He attended the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and has received an Academy of American Poets Prize and three Pushcart Prize nominations.

Craig Beaven is a visiting assistant professor at the University of Houston. His work is out or forthcoming in Carolina Quarterly, Green Mountains Review, Rattle, Southern Humanities Review, and others.

Chris Chapman is a photographer hopelessly addicted to the landscape and history of Montana. He travels by canoe, foot, and automobile in search of remnants of the quiet places.

Patrick Culliton is the author of the chapbooks Hornet Homily and Horse Ballast. He co-founded and co-hosts the Talus, Or Scree podcast.

Valerie Cumming is a freelance writer, teacher, and editor based in Columbus, Ohio, where she lives with her husband and four young daughters.

A UCLA graduate, g c cunningham lives in Los Angeles, sometimes working in film post-production, other times in Birmingham, Alabama, state of origin. Online pieces can be read at Potomac Review, Fringe and McSweeney’s.

Judson Evans teaches courses on utopian societies, ancient Greek literature, and Japanese poetry at The Boston Conservatory where he is Director of Liberal Arts. He is a member of Off the Park Press Writers’ Collective, N.Y.C., and was recently chosen as an “emerging poet” by John Yau for the Association of American Poets.

Molly Gallentine grew up in rural Iowa as a farmer’s daughter and loves to tell stories about food. Molly is a performance artist and a graduate of the Creative Writing Program at The New School. Her work has been published in places such as The Rumpus, The Brooklyn Rail, and the New Delta Review. She’s also one of the co-producers of Tyneside Novel, a Twitter-based, community-written noir novel, which
was launched this past summer in Newcastle.

**Ralph Hamilton** has an MFA in poetry from Bennington College and is editor of *RHINO*. Recent publications include *Court Green, Talisman: A Journal of Poetry & Poetics, Fjord*, and the anthology, *A Writer's Congress*. He also serves on the board of the Ragdale Foundation.

Poems by **Ally Harris** appear in *Agriculture Reader, Sixth Finch, Tar­paulin Sky*, and *Poor Claudia*. She was a finalist in BOMBLOG’s 2012 Poetry Contest judged by Ben Lerner and has a chapbook called *Floor Baby* out on dancing girl press.

**Kim Henderson**’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in *H_NGM_N, River Styx, New South, The Southeast Review*, and elsewhere. A Montana grad and New Mexico native, she now lives on a mountain in California and teaches at Idyllwild Arts Academy.

**Justin Herrmann** is currently a janitor in Kotzebue, Alaska. His fiction has appeared in *River Styx, Green Mountains Review, Natural Bridge* and others.

**Adam Houle** lives in Lubbock, Texas. His poems have appeared in *AGNI* online, *Willow Springs, Cave Wall, Best New Poets 2010*, and elsewhere. He serves as Outreach Coordinator for *32 Poems*.


**Mia Ayumi Malhotra** is the associate editor of *Lantern Review*. Her most recent work has appeared in *Best New Poets 2012, DIAGRAM, Collagist, Volta*, and others. She currently lives and teaches in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**Sally Wen Mao** is the author of a forthcoming book of poems, *Mad Honey Symposium* (*Alice James Books, 2014*), which is the winner of the 2012 Kinereht Gensler Award and a finalist for the 2012 Tupelo First/Second Book Prize. A Kundiman fellow, she holds a B.A. from Carnegie Mellon University and an M.F.A. from Cornell University, where she is currently a lecturer.
Tara Mae Mulroy is a former Managing Editor of *The Pinch* and a graduate of the MFA program in poetry at the University of Memphis. Her work is forthcoming in *Third Coast* and others.

Montreux Rotholtz is from Seattle, lives in Iowa City, and is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her work appears in *Diode*, *LIT*, and *The Cream City Review*, and is forthcoming in *Fence* and a few other journals.

Josh Shaffner studied painting and media arts at The University of Montana, Missoula and Utrecht School for the Arts, The Netherlands. He currently resides in Los Angeles, CA where he is working towards a Masters Degree in Experimental Animation at CalArts.

Tamara Schuyler grew up in Portland, Oregon and Brussels, Belgium. She's a linguist by trade and hiker by temperament. When she's not outdoors, she writes fiction by a window in a foggy neighborhood of San Francisco.

Ali Shapiro is an MFA candidate at the University of Michigan. She's the recipient of two Dorothy Sargeant Rosenberg Poetry Prizes and a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship. Her poems have appeared in *RATTLE*, *Anti-, Redivider*, *PANK*, and *Linebreak*, among others.


Abraham Smith hails from Ladysmith, Wisconsin. These poems come from his new manuscript, *Only Jesus Could Icefish In Summer*. He teaches at the University of Alabama.

Lindsay Tigue writes poetry and fiction and has work published or forthcoming in *Indiana Review*, *Moon City Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *Barnstorm*, and *LIT*. She won the 2012 *Indiana Review* 1/2 K Prize and currently attends the MFA program at Iowa State University.
Daniel Tyx originally hails from the upper Midwest, but for almost a decade has lived at the country’s other extreme in Texas’s Rio Grande Valley. His work has appeared in the *Blue Mesa Review*, *Gulf Coast*, and *The Gettysburg Review*.

E.B. Vandiver's fiction has most recently appeared in *Shenandoah*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *Ninth Letter*. She is a former Poe-Faulkner Fellow at the University of Virginia. Her work has received the A. David Schwartz Prize from the *Cream City Review* and the Yemassee Prize in Fiction.

Ursula Villarreal-Moura is a recent MFA graduate from Sarah Lawrence College. Her fiction and nonfiction appear or are forthcoming in *Toska*, *NAP*, *shady side review*, *Eunoia Review*, *Van Duzer*, and elsewhere. She contributes book reviews to *The Fiddleback*, *Necessary Fiction*, and *Nib* and is an assistant editor for *Cream City Review*.
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