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CutBank
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KILLY 

O'NEILL'S DAUGHTERS

O'Keeffe's daughters had names, which were Barbara and Kathleen. They made a story about my uncles.

They were three sisters and two brothers.

They lived in a small village and worked on their farms.

And they made the story sound so simple! They made the story sound so巡游! They made the story sound so simple.

But what did their father think of them? Did they have a good relationship with them? What did their father think of them?

They were not like the other children.

When they were young, they were not like the other children.

What was the story about? What was the story about?

O'Keeffe's children were not like the other children.

They were never going to end well with them.

This was what everyone said. But what everyone said.
Orion's daughters had names, which were Rhonda and Kathleen. They made the story smaller by existing, by a red triple-decker. They lived in Fairfield, and made the story smaller.

Did they make the story smaller? They made the story smaller.
Did they wear their father's work shirts? They wore their father's work shirts.

When they left, what was it like? When they left, it was like nothing. When they left, they took with them the Ferris wheel and the skyline,
   and the space between land and sky
   and line and scape.

What was the plague? They were the plague. What was the sacrifice? They were the sacrifice.
Where are they now? Rumor says among crowds.
Where are they now? Rumor says going blind, each in their middle age a cloud-eyed child.
Where are they now? They're under the ground.

It was never going to end well with them, that was what everyone said. Is that what everyone said? That's what everyone said.
I decided to stop talking about it, a hand on the shoulder, stack of green lawn chairs, a boy wearing a Halloween mask or falling on his face laughing—the fence ran away behind a row of houses—and now I know that something else was on tap, amazing sleep and motion, not panic or collateral damage, but the kind of sorrow that haunts you when you find something priceless and it's taken away, and your teacher tells you the cafeteria is off-limits, and you want to say something, but it doesn't make sense, it's not what you really feel—and learning how to express those feelings is difficult, so you write letters to the editor, and every page is like two ribbons of ink, and every new something is taken from the air like a diamond.
I have hated her for twelve years. I have hated her like I have never hated anyone else in my life. I have never hated anyone else in my life.

I hated her guts. I also hated her thin body, long slender limbs, transparent wrists, shiny red hair, pale freckles on porcelain skin, smoky grey eyes, affected gestures, and the classy way she drawled her ‘ah'-sounds which signaled at least two generations of educated Muscovite ancestors.

I hated her so much that at some point I was going to write a novel about how much I hated her, but then I read Irvine Welsh’s The Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs and had to abandon my plan since he wrote my book for me.

I hated her so much that I could not live in the same city with her. So much that I would forbid my friends to mention her name in front of me, and acted out if they forgot about the prohibition. So much that I would stop reading books, listening to music, watching movies, basically anything that I knew she liked too.

I deleted her phone number from my cell.

I blocked her on Facebook.

The very few emails that I ever got from her are kept in an old mailbox I hardly use these days in a folder named “Ihateyou”.

I hated myself for keeping those emails.

I hated myself for hating her, because as I have said above I do not hate people. If I say that I hate somebody, it at most indicates the feeling of mild disgust. In my world of strong negative emotions there was only one Everest—my hatred for her, then the ever so permanent Mont-Blanc of
self-deprecation, and finally the Great Russian Plain of my negative feelings for everyone else, with an occasional low-rise here and there, ever so slight, almost always unnoticeable.


Pure and simple: cherchez le dude. Duh.

***

We were undergraduate students at Moscow State University, and at one point we happened to form a twisted love triangle, in which I loved him, he loved her, and she, I have no idea who she loved. Sometimes when I feel vain, I think it was me. But then she dated him for a while, which means that she probably loved him more than me. Mostly likely she loved herself, but I did not know it then, because if there was an obtuse angle in that triangle, it was me. I was such an idiot.

And really, I can't blame him for choosing her over me. When that happened, it did not surprise me. Any man would choose her over me. I would choose her over me.

Men usually find me cute and entertaining, like a puppy or a toddler who says unexpectedly intelligent things, which I don't really mind because how could I mind being a puppy? There is only one serious drawback of being a puppy that manifests itself in cases when I have the prospect of sleeping with someone. Alas, even the basest and shallowest of men retain enough moral principles to dissuade them from harming small creatures. In other words, no one wants to fuck the puppy. Too loyal, too open, too sweet.

No, no, they want the enigma, the puzzle, the conquest, the green light, the Holy Grail, and she was the one who promised them all that, with her
feline languor and slight lightheadedness—not the one which comes from foolishness, because boy she was smart, but the one which results from basking in admiration for just a little bit too long. If I was a puppy, she was the Sphynx, and everybody, everybody wanted to fuck her.

So I could not really hate him for the choice he made and continued faithfully loving him for two more years (if anyone needed proof of me being the obtuse angle). I could not really hate myself more, because I was already heartbroken enough. So I started hating her with all the power of my foolish puppy heart.

And I noticed that she never left me without more reasons to hate her. She was smart, outspoken, successful. Our professors adored her, every lecturer would know her name out of one hundred because she asked those complicated, intelligent questions which they sometimes would not be able to answer on the spot. I was a shy incoherent mumbler. Speaking up in class left me drenched in sweat every time I mustered the courage to do it. I only got noticed by those professors who had a chance to read my papers. She did not have a single B for a single final exam in five years of studies. I had three, and my mom still regularly reminds me of my B in English, even now when I live in the States.

We learned that she was a poet when she won a literary prize for new authors. I shuddered with hatred, took my pitiful scribbles and hid them somewhere deep in the drawers of my desk. I have never tried to write a short story or a memoir sketch in Russian ever since. It was also the time when I declared that I hated poetry and all poets.

I stopped admiring all red-haired actresses who I used to like a lot. The worst was to give up Polina Kutepova, a most talented Russian actress, who I enjoyed seeing in many films and plays, but she was a redhead, and hence my love for her had to die. It was tough. Later I was capable of finding a loophole for Tilda Swinton, who I claimed to like only in the role of the
White Witch, because she was more blonde than red-haired there.

Then we started a PhD program at Moscow State, and because the advisor she worked with in undergrad school did not have enough credentials to advise graduate students, she was placed in care of my advisor. Of all professors that I have ever liked and admired in ten years of studies, I have liked and admired my advisor the most. Tatyana Dmitriyevna was able to see past my non sequitur ramblings during discussion sections. She trusted my writing and said that my papers were immune from plagiarism because I had a unique recognizable style. It was pure magic to have somebody so cool believe in you. I was flattered, proud, and extremely grateful.

I worshipped my advisor, no less, thanks to an extreme affinity for personality cults that sits deep in every Russian’s genes. I fancied myself my advisor’s pet, and to prove that I deserved the title I helped her tirelessly when she organized conferences or invited visiting lecturers. I remember one conference when I traveled from Moscow to Leo Tolstoy’s mansion in Yasnaya Polyana (two and a half hours in a rattling bus one-way) back and forth every other day for a week running all kinds of errands, from filing immigration documents for visiting professors to making copies of handouts, because as we had discovered, it was hard to find a working copy machine outside of Moscow. By the end of the week I was a zombie, but a happy one because my advisor was grateful, and it was her approval that I sought most.

Enter the redhead bitch, and I was no longer the pet. Or rather, I was the neglected one, the one who was not intelligent enough, not critical, not edgy. I became a disappointment. I was still needed for running errands, and, true, was thanked warmly for that, but I lacked the ability to soar in the intellectual highs, bound to earth by my desire to please, to help, to worship.

In a desperate and misguided attempt to win my advisor back, I knitted Tatyana Dmitriyevna a scarf for her birthday. I did it on an impulse, and
what seemed so great in theory turned out hard to perform in reality: I had no idea how to present it to her. I waited for her after the department's end of the semester meeting. I pulled the scarf out of my bag and handed it to her. "Happy Birthday, Tatyana Dmitriyevna!" I mumbled. I felt so embarrassed that I could not lift up my eyes. I looked at the light purple stripe of the scarf on which I knitted the letters "TD" in dark blue yarn and kept thinking that I should have gift-wrapped it. "Oh thank you, Katya," she said startled. 'This is so sweet." Then she hesitated for a little and hugged me. It was all awkward as hell.

We stood in silence for a short while, then she noticed my rival in a distance, and called out to her: "Don't go yet, please, I wanted to discuss the last email you sent me." She sounded relieved. She turned away from me, and they walked to the elevators together, and the last thing I heard from them was my advisor's excited: "So you see, what you are claiming is actually Lacanian!" I knew it then—I was dropped at the shelter. The info card on my cage read: "Good, obedient, hard-working puppy. Doesn't understand Lacan or Derridas. Unlikely to achieve that even with rigorous training."

A year after that, I won a Fulbright grant to study in the US, and a year later, still in the middle of my master's program at Fordham, I dropped out of grad school in Moscow. I had discovered creative writing classes by then, and I could no longer see myself performing the literary criticism my department at Moscow State wanted me to. My advisor is still very disappointed with me.

By the time I was getting ready to travel to the US, I had already come to terms with my hatred problem. I admitted I had it and looked for ways to get rid of it. I was practicing "letting go" hard: I stopped loving the one who preferred her over me, I made one of the first independent decisions in my life by getting a tattoo, and I had an affair with my student from the language school where I taught English as a foreign language. When I boarded my first ever Delta flight to New York, I felt elated, even if I shed a
fair amount of tears over separating myself from my lovely disciple.

Another reason why I found going to New York so exciting was that I had an acquaintance there, one of the visiting professors who my advisor invited to Moscow State when I was still an undergrad and with whom I spent a lot of time then. I helped him to find an apartment for the two weeks that he was there, showed him the city and, in general, was my best people-pleaser self. After he left, I felt unusually sad and empty for a couple of weeks, during which we exchanged emails almost everyday. In those he made fun of me and I tried to reply something witty back, with varied success, but then everyday routine swallowed me, the emails stopped coming, and I forgot all about it.

Or so I thought, until a month or two later my nemesis told me about going to a concert with our visiting lecturer when he was in Moscow. I matched the dates in my head and realized that it was on the day when the professor under my care called me to say that he felt really sick, and decided not to go out (as he told me we would before) and instead would stay at home to get better. I was hurt, but as I was in my “letting go” stage, I brushed what I heard aside and tried to forget it. The seed had been planted, however.

To be fair to Professor (that was and still is his code name when I discuss him with my friends), he was not a liar. Throughout our two year relationship while I was in New York, he was almost always honest, painfully honest at times, and I won’t exaggerate if I say that I can count the lies he told me on one hand. But that was the first lie he had ever told me, and it had always remained at the back of my head.

It was in the morning, on the third or fourth time that I stayed overnight at his place, when I raised my eyes to his bookshelf and felt an impulse to pull out a thin gray paperback from the stack. When I am in love, I become
attuned to everything my love does: I know the exact moment when to turn my head to the window to see him approaching, I feel when he thinks about me, I know when the interest starts to subside. I am very intuitive in general, but in the first moments of being in love I am a goddamn fortune-teller, and even more so—when I am jealous.

As I looked at the cover of the book, my hands started shaking. I opened it and there was a dedication in the top left corner that designated Professor as the person who understood her as no one else did in her life. I fought the desire to tear the book into pieces and throw them out of the window. I managed to put it back onto the shelf and sat down on the bed trying to make my hands stop shaking. Professor entered the room with two coffee-mugs. He put one on his desk where he had been working since 5 am. "Are you all right, tsarina?" he asked as he gave me the other mug. I nodded. "You are probably groggy because you only slept eight hours, not your usual twelve hours, and I am partly responsible for that. Come here, polar bear, let me make up for it."

So much for "letting go." I returned home in the afternoon a raging lunatic—Othello paled in comparison. I remembered that she had a blog, I spent hours trying to find it, and when I did, I binge-read and reread it every night, examining every sentence, every word, every smiley emoticon for the clues of how Professor was actually in love with her, not with me. I did find the proof that they exchanged emails, but there was nothing that would suggest an actual physical relationship. I never talked to Professor about it.

After a month of active insanity, I managed to calm down, as Professor was still by my side, so lovely, and suave, caring. Our relationship had a predetermined expiration date, and since I knew that this would be over with at the end of my Fulbright, I focused on living in the moment, of enjoying him while I could.
I made a decision to ignore her then. I forbade myself to read her blog, I asked my friends not to talk to me about her, I made sure I was not invited to parties where she could be present, I did not friend her on Facebook no matter how often Facebook reminded me to do so.

I learned to live with my hatred as one learns to live with a chronic disease. It became much harder, however, when I returned to Moscow after my two-year bliss in New York. Megalopolis as it is, Moscow is still just a big village. After three years of accidentally bumping into each other, I once again moved out of the city.

In Chicago I felt relatively safe. It was unlikely that she would ever be interested in such a small city (the only way up for a Muscovite is New York), she was too smart for my university (plus, she already had a degree, a fact that my also very intuitive mother likes to point out to me every time she has a chance) and since I got into tango, I have met more men who would be less likely to see me as a puppy, at least until they get to know me better, and then, more often than not, I am again a puppy, but this time a puppy who wears sexy clothes and has a hell of an embrace.

And as irony would have it, more than a half of the people who I met in Chicago and who I love dearly are redheads, most of them are poets, and I think I bought more books of poetry than fiction since I came to the US the second time. I also wrote a play in Russian, which I keep sending to the literary contest she won, mostly to annoy the hell out of the reading committee.

***

Two years ago I got a message from her that said: “I’ve heard you are dancing tango too. Wanna chat about it some time?” I almost cried. Not tango! If there was something that I thought was mine, it was this dance. Why,
I whined, why does this stuff keep happening to me? I gave up so many things because of her, and now I would have to relinquish this? My tango friends, my tango shoes, the incredible elation one feels after a good dance? Fuck no!

I blocked her on Facebook, picked up my favorite pair of cross-strapped Comme-il-fauts and rushed for my private class with an Argentine maestro. And in two years since I became good. Of course, not as good as I want to be, but good enough to have guys securing a dance with me at the beginning of the milonga (a tango dancing party) because they know that otherwise they might not get any, as now I sit down only when I want to.

Still not good enough for Moscow, however, as I learned this summer. It was my first ever try to go to a Moscow milonga. Moscow tango community is notorious for being snobby and exclusive, and so I researched my options carefully and chose a supposedly easy milonga where people dance on the open-air stage in a park. The similar outdoor event that I organize in Chicago is probably the most casual and laid back milonga in the city. People come to dance wearing their regular street clothes, everybody dances with everybody, and those who are not dancing at the moment, chat.

I thought it would be similar at the park milonga in Moscow, but as I waited to be invited for an hour and had my cabeceo—an eye-contact with a prospective dancing partner—declined by men who were just above average and who I wouldn't even think about inviting back in Chicago, I knew that Toto was no longer in Illinois. I felt extremely underdressed in my light linen pants and simple summer top among the ladies in glitzy cocktail dresses and revealing dancing costumes. People came in small groups and talked only inside those groups. In the first two hours I got two dances: one with a beginner who was sweet but very tremulous and who kept running me into people and one with a dancer who was relatively good—maybe imperfect from a technical point of view, but his embrace was comfortable,
and he smelled nice which is not that often the case for Russian men. Yet I didn’t despair. All I needed before I left home was one good tanda (a set of three or four tango songs one dances with the same partner) and I was firmly determined to get me one.

And that was when I turned my head and in the opposite corner of the stage I saw her. She raised her brows and I probably did the same, only that she did it with the grace of a movie actress, and I could tell from the spasms of my facial muscles that I looked as if I had just swallowed a wasp. But what could I do—she seemed to know the crowd, and there is no better way to get to the higher-level dancers at the milonga than through locals. So I walked to her. We kinda hugged and started chatting about tango, as if two or three years had not passed since we last saw each other. She pointed out to me all the good guys in the crowd (though she did not introduce me to any), warned me against the ones to avoid and indicated the ones who could be either perfect or horrible depending on how the stars lined up that day.

Then somebody invited her. As I watched her dance, I knew that I was trying hard to find faults in her dancing. She didn’t collect feet here, oops, got off her axis here, ouch, that might have been uncomfortable. Soon I gave up because she was good. I could not really tell whether she was better than me, probably we were the same, since once you reach a certain level of dancing ability in tango, you stay at that level for a long while, but she looked good, and the guy who danced with her seemed to enjoy it. And as I continued watching, I caught myself thinking that I hoped that she enjoyed it too. There was something about the way that guy held her right hand that suggested that it could be uncomfortable, and in tango you never wish on your fellow follower what you do not want to experience yourself.

I still didn’t get any luck. She returned after the tanda, we chatted some more, thanks to the limitless possibilities that discussing tango shoes offers
to tangueras. We saw a performance of an Argentine couple, and I noticed that she and I liked the same moments in the couple's dance. Then milonga, a fast type of tango music, started playing, and I understood that I would not get any milonga tonight unless I led one. And I knew that inviting a girl would kill off my already non-existent chances to be invited by advanced people as it would cement my reputation of the night as an out-of-town lesbian weirdo, but milonga is my drug of choice in tango, and there was no way I was leaving without dancing it.

"You dance milonga?" I asked her.

"You can lead?" she asked, and I could hear the surprise in her voice that I had never heard from her before.

"Well, a little." I said (a necessary tactic for a leader, not to raise expectations too high). "But I hate to miss this tanda—they are playing my favorite music!"

As I was saying this, I was already working on the straps of my shoes because I can not lead in heels.

"You are going to lead barefoot? How do you do that?"

The more surprised she sounded, the more I wanted to get on the dancing floor.

As I put my left arm around her and drew her nearer to my chest, because no decent leader dances milonga in an open embrace, I had an out-of-body moment—I saw myself on the dancing floor, hugging tight my enemy of twelve years, and I started to freak out. I suddenly forgot all the moves, and the dancing couples around threatened to run into us because we were not moving.
“Breathe, and shift weight for a while.” I commanded myself, and as I started transferring my weight from right to left foot, from left to right, and she started doing the same, I calmed down. Soon the music and the technical issues were my main worries. The dance seemed to be developing well: we walked together and turned together, and she got most of my double beats which is always a challenge, and she seemed to be most of the time in tune with my interpretation of the music. Then I noticed that I could not get her to transfer her weight in a particular movement, and so I tightened my embrace and forced her to do it a little bit stronger. And she followed me.

She was the follower. I was the leader. I could walk in whatever direction I wanted. I could do whatever I wanted. And she had to, or rather, it was her pleasure to do whatever I wanted. The more confident I was, the more she would enjoy dancing with me, the more memorable the experience would be for her.

And as I kept dancing with her, I concentrated on how she felt when she danced and very soon it was all that mattered. Advisors, old lovers, books, dissertations, favorite cities—there was no such thing as mine or hers anymore. The world now revolved around the way she moved and I moved, and how the music made us both smile—not because we liked each other, but because we liked the dance.

When the music ended, we walked back to the place where I left my shoes, one hundred years ago.

“Sorry about the last song—I started freaking out because of all the traffic.” I apologized (another tactic of a successful leader—preemptive apologies illicit additional compliments)

“Oh no, no, it was good. You are quite good, actually,” she replied.
Quite good. I will take it. I have led for about a year, so that's a huge com-
pliment. Soon after that, since my dancing fate was sealed at least on this
dancing floor, I changed my shoes, so I could get to my temporary home in
the suburbs of Moscow.

"Thanks for the dance. I really needed a milonga tonight. It was fun!" said I.

"Thanks. See you at some other milongas then?" she replied.

"Oh no, I am not dancing in Moscow ever again. See you somewhere else
around the world."

As I walked to the metro, I suddenly felt very empty. It was very cool to feel
that.
ON THE FERRY TO SEATTLE

Fishermen, their heads of hair like fire-blankets,
shovel ice on the morning catch.

They look back with the same
pair of liquid black eyes;

the same pair of rubber boots
that shake the planks beneath me.

I wonder if I've been away
too long, this time.

You forget how to field
a lingering smile.

It is as though a stranger's
touch might sever

you on a fault-line—
split you right up the middle.
ESCAPED HOUSEWIFE TAKES WORK AS TEAM MASCOT

This isn't like her. Exile is about making yourself small, blending in. She should be seated in Section J, wagging an index finger at the hog dog vendor, keeping stats on the back of her program.

She has run away to disappear yet on Sundays after double-headers she is the center of attention, circling the bases, a hundred children in tow.

She dances on the dugout roof with exaggerated steps, slaps each huge yellow foot, heel to toe, against the concrete. Sometimes words come unbidden to her arms and she spells them for the crowd, which crows each letter back to her. Hers are unlikely cheers. So much for forever, they chant, their fists pumping the air.

What kind of bird is six feet tall, has plumage the color of a house on fire, makes no noise but communicates through gestures, arms as frantic as a woman drowning, legs thin and white as weathered bones?
The stadium is a cold nest.
It is her job to warm it,
to meet the open mouths
with something like comfort.
So on kazoo night she sings.
She shoves the toy deep
inside the abyss of her beak
and cuts loose, wails her plastic blues.
By the seventh inning she's convinced
the crowd, which joins her as one brood,
not caring if they ever get back.
ESCAPED HOUSEWIFE GIVES THREE GOOD REASONS FOR TAKING UP THE BAGPIPES

1.

On occasion she has cried herself out—out of breath, out of salt, her head hot and humming, she has heard her voice wane before she has said all she had to say.

2.

This instrument holds screams like a camel. With the bag tucked in the V of arm to body, she can howl through her sleep and rise ready to start again.

3.

One voice isn't enough. She likes how each pipe's stiff tentacle makes its own reedy hiss to release her heart's ugly harmonies, to deflate the leather sack she lives in.
We staggered up through the brush, Ann first, brandy bottle and trowel in hand, and me behind, clutching the box that held our cat, Orvil. We loved him more, perhaps, than humans should love an animal. He had left us before his time, caught beneath our neighbor's pickup. We'd spent the day crying, but now, neither of us could stop laughing. The sunlight strained through the trees, dappling Ann's bare shoulders.

You still got the brandy, Annie, I called to her.
Right here, she said, hoisting the half-gone bottle above her head to tap it with her trowel.
We're going to bury him on top of a goddamn mountain.
Hell, yes.
It will be a sweet funeral, better even than your aunt's.
If by better you mean drunker, Ann said.
We busted up laughing. We'd been drinking for several hours from a dusty bottle of no-name brandy from our reception two years ago, fished from a back cabinet. There was a reason no one had drunk it. After I took a couple swigs, my lungs wanted to climb from my throat. The way this manifested was chuckles.

The wooded slope felt warm, the humidity wedding our bodies somehow. Our path was one deer had used, maybe, and poison ivy ringed it. If it were a happier time, I might grab Ann by the torso, edge her toward the trifoliate leaves, say, uh oh, watch out! She'd whack my hands away then we'd kiss.

Right then I was the smartest person in the world, and Annie was second, and when we got home, we'd fuck, maybe on the floor in the kitchen. I'd slap her ass with a spatula, and she'd blindfold me with a dishtowel that smelled like Windex, and everything would be all right. The prospect added gloss to this moment. We would remember it fondly. We could still have fun. Ann would say years from now, remember when we climbed... Yes, I would reply, of course. We sure were something back then. Something? More like something else. You got that right. My aged eyes would do a wistful crinkle. She'd say how well I'd acquitted myself that day,
tell me that's when she learned for the first time just how strong I was.

I doubled over, hiccupping with laughter now, slipping on accreted layers of rotting leaves. Something else indeed. I had to hold Orvil's casket with both hands, so I couldn't reach to steady myself, and the casket slid, studded my fingers with splinters, thumped the ground.

I scrabbled for him as he slid away. I caught him up again, deep in a poison ivy patch, grasped with all my might.

You dropped him, Ann said, the joy gone from her voice.

Shit, shit, shit, I thought. That tore it. Sometimes Ann's emotions got to rolling so I couldn't keep up. This would be one of those times. But why? Why did it have to be? Orvil couldn't feel anything. Carrying on wouldn't resurrect him. I said I was sorry, for all the good it would do, modulating my tone, articulating like a champ.

You don't even care, I can tell, Ann said, her voice cracking. She turned and charged up the mountain, grabbing low branches for balance. I chose to think that she was grieving quietly up ahead, not plotting just the right words for a message very mean and very true. She turned around and I braced myself. You don't even care, she said again. I didn't say anything.

She was right, dropping him didn't bother me, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt that he was dead. It was so preventable. That was the hard part. I was sure she would point that out to me, day after day after day. Even though he was my cat. Or I had found him, at least, outside my office.

After work one day I had heard his weak mew. I thought he was a bird, but then I realized that the sound came from under a dumpster, so I knelt, slicking my good pants with garbage juice. I lured him with some pickled meat from the office fridge. He crawled out, and you couldn't even tell he was orange, he was so dirty, and his body shook. He held his ears back until he got a taste of the meat, which perked him right up. I tucked him in my jacket and zipped it around him. Together, Ann and I fed him and cleaned him. We took turns kissing his pink nose. Orvil bit my feet under the covers every morning, piercing the quilt with his teeth. As he grew, he nibbled more gently, so it just tickled. He tried to chew Ann's feet, but
she kicked him in her sleep so he always came for mine.

Orvil arrived at just the right time for us because Ann had been working up a head of steam about the difference in our salaries. Fair enough, too, 'cause those kids put her through hell. But it wasn’t my fault, either, that the office thought I deserved the money.

Doesn’t it seem ridiculous, Ann had said, that you fix computers and I mold young lives and society has deemed your work more valuable.

Seems from what you tell me, I said, you do less molding of young lives and more keeping them from beating each other with xylophone mallets. She wouldn’t say anything after that.

We used to talk to each other about any old thing, all the time. She’d tell me her theories about how there was only a finite amount of happiness in the world and it didn’t always go to those who deserved it, and I’d teach her the names and calls of all the birds in our yard—cardinal, nuthatch, yellow-bellied flicker.

Now hurt silence ruled our relationship. We’d speak, then one of us (usually Ann) would get offended.

When Orvil felt nervous, he’d do what we called loafing, because he looked like a loaf of bread, haunches pushed up, paws hooked under the torso. Perfectly self-contained and remote. Ann and I loafed too. We would prod the other one with a paw—either tenderly or hard—then curl back up inside ourselves. Orvil changed this a little bit, but then, too, we’d use him against each other, saying things like Orvil doesn’t like it when you listen to that music so loud or you’re petting Orvil wrong or Orvil can tell you’re lying when you say you love me. One day after Ann had been poking me for an hour about various shortcomings of mine she said, her hand against a red welt on her cheek, I can’t believe you hit me in front of Orvil.

Orvil wasn’t an outdoor cat, but this had been a fine spring, and he’d been so certain that we finally just let him go. He stalked birds, though his bulk and warning-cone-orange fur held him back. He warmed his belly in the sun. He ate grass, which he puked on the carpet. He had a delicate digestive system.
This morning, a Sunday, I'd heard him meowing at the back door to get inside—half-heard, really, because I was watching baseball on TV. Ann had heard him, too, she told me later, but she thought I had let him in. But she knew how I zoned out. One of her critiques of me was that I ignored her when the TV was on. Even at restaurants, I'd see a screen glowing over her shoulder and be helpless. Wasn't marriage about accepting each other's failings? Too bad Annie had so few.

And then our neighbor Jim knocked on our door, head hanging. He cradled a lump in his arms. His truck idled in our driveway. I didn't see him, he said hoarsely. He ran right in front of the truck.

I stood gaping for a second before my manners kicked in. I said that was okay, there was nothing he could have done, we never should have let him out in the first place, etc., while Ann glared over my shoulder.

I was sorry for Jim. I was sorry for Ann. I was sorry for me. I was very sorry for Orvil. I hoped he hadn't felt pain.

I had taken Orvil's body, still warm, from Jim's hands, him saying, if there's anything else I could, and Ann interrupting, saying, you've done quite enough. I gave Jim a grimace, like, you and me both, friend, and let the screen swing shut.

Ann ran into the bedroom and closed the door. You asshole, I thought I heard her yell from inside. Probably wasn't that. Probably was something milder. You. You're a hassle. You're a pill. Maybe a burst of patriotism: USA! Nope. Not that.

I started to follow her, but I couldn't while I still held Orvil, and it didn't seem decent to set his body in the hallway. So I carried Orvil out to the garage and laid him on my workbench. I found some rough pine boards left from the privacy fence Jim and I had built together. I held a board beside Orvil to gauge size. His eyes were shut tight, thankfully, like he was asleep, one fang poked from his pink lips. I don't think I could have gone on if his eyes were open. Even as a kitten he made eye contact. Most cats avoided your eyes. I fired my jigsaw. An hour and a half later, I had a lopsided cuboid with a lid that nearly fit, perfect for a cat or, I realized, a baby.
Some blood spackled my white t-shirt, so I wadded and arranged it like a pillow. I set him inside, tucking his tail around him. He didn’t look peaceful. He looked wrecked. I nailed the coffin shut. I had a beer, then another.

I knock-knock-knocked at the bedroom door. She didn’t answer right away so I went in and found her folded tight on the bed, clutching her feet in her hands like a monkey. Her face was splotched and tears glued strands of hair to it. I picked her up by the armpits and set her upright. She rolled back down. I scooted her to the edge of the bed and nudged her closer, closer to the edge. She balanced for a second then tipped forward. She took her hands from her feet just in time to catch herself. When she rose back up, she said, he was just a little animal and now he’s dead.

I told her to raid the liquor cabinet because we were going for a drive.

As we sat in our driveway in the Scout, casketed Orvil in the back seat, Ann asked, where are we going?

A mountain, I told her, my voice powerful. Moving would save us, the climb would purify.

Now, as my flip flops flipped up leaf litter on my calves and the branches of sycamores and white oaks stung my face when Ann released them, I knew we had been weighed and found wanting. Proper cat care required more good sense than we had. I hugged Orvil tighter, the rough wood scraping my arms. I could hear Ann’s ragged breathing, and I could imagine her slick face. Her nose, so delicate, so patrician, swelled and reddened when she cried.

We kept up the mountain. The long pods of a catalpa tree pointed down like daggers. I jogged toward Ann, the coffin tucked football-like under my armpit.

Ann stopped so I could catch up. I don’t want to go back to school tomorrow, she said. The students. They’ll know something is wrong. They’re like that, little hyenas. They can smell sorrow. Jen had a dog that died, and she told her class about it, just to explain why she was sad that day, and
do you know what they did? One of them started saying: Dead dog, dead. Dead dog, dead. They all picked it up, then, chanting: Dead dog, dead! I can't face that. These were grade schoolers. Can you imagine a class full of thirteen-year-olds?

Take a day, I told her. We'll be hung over anyway. I sort of leaned toward her, rubbed her upper arm with mine.

She wrapped her arms around me and said maybe I will. It was awkward because I still held Orvil's box. My grip began to slip, so I broke free.

After more hard climbing, during which Ann fell and skinned her knee and the alcohol beat sharply in my forehead, my arms already tickling from the ivy, my fingers aching to the point where I thought I'd have to give up, throw him in the air and bury him wherever he landed, we reached the mountaintop. The trees stood sparser—a few scraggly clumps of pine. I thought at first that we must have climbed so high we'd reached the timberline. But when I looked down, I could clearly see my old Scout, its powdery yellow shining like a beacon, the crust of rust around the wheel wells still visible.

There's the Scout, I told Ann, pointing.
She didn't look.
She said, let's just get to digging. Where's the trowel?
I don't have it, I said.
What?
I don't. You had it.
No, I didn't.
I could have argued, but instead I said, I must have lost it when I fell. I'm sorry. We'll have to use our hands. Ann sighed long and hard, like I was the stupidest individual she knew. I hated when she did this. She was too nice to say she thought I was a dumbass, but not nice enough to let things rest. That insult she'd been working on since I'd dropped him now would be refined to diamond hardness. Still she held it on her tongue. Fine, I could wait.
We both scoured the ground for a good spot, and that's when we noticed that the mountain was not made of dirt, but rock. Native Missouri limestone. Not ideal for digging. The sunlight was weakening. Darkness would come soon.

Well, shit, I said.

Goddamn it, Jack, Ann said. Why does everything have to be so hard? You're the one who's supposed to be good at this.

What, I asked.

Nature. Knowing what mountains are made of. I plan everything. Make sure we pay our bills on time, make grocery lists in my head, remember to feed the cat, because if I don't, who will?

Purple rimmed her sunken eyes. I shivered. The sun was taking the warmth of the day with it. I was actually relieved. That could have been so much worse. My first instinct was to tell her guess what, I was exhausted too, just because I had an office job didn't mean I wasn't working hard, and she liked cooking so why shouldn't she shop because she knew what kind of shaved coconut to get and I sure never did, she was the one who lost the trowel, and how the hell could anyone know that a mountain was stone on top just by looking at it from the ground, but if I did that, she'd start crying again, and she might dole more blame. The dead cat seemed a likely place to start, and I couldn't stand to hear her say he was my fault. So instead, I said I know, you're right, I'm sorry. If you could just tell me what I can do.

That set her off. No, she barked. If I have to tell you what to do, I still have to think about it. I thought you were going to take control here. Now we've got a dead cat on our hands.

I set Orvil down and my brain started going, really trying to think about what she had said, to remember instances. Ann crying because I forgot to bring that little pillow she'd embroidered with our initials to the wedding, so we had nothing to strap the rings to, which had been my only job, her head thrown back so tears stayed in her eyes, didn't furrow down her made-up cheeks. Ann sighing copiously, scraping up stems and buds crusted to the counter from my attempts to microwave skunkweed.
so I could smoke it. Ann always letting Orvil in and out even though I sat by the door, could, in fact, reach the door handle if I had leaned ever so slightly to the left. Nearly every time she'd kick my chair, say hey, he's your cat, too, or ask, how could you not hear him? I didn't know how. I really didn't. If it had been a commercial, or the seventh inning stretch, maybe. But really? That was lame. Hearing was natural, like smelling. It just happened, except in my case. Shit. It was my own stupid fucking fault that his bones got crushed like that, that his last seconds were pure terror. But she just nagged and nagged. She accused me of having no testicles. So help me, my balls twitched in pleasure when my fist met her cheekbone. And that lady, my wife, smiled. She actually smiled like, now I've got you, you piece of shit. And I've felt like a piece of shit ever since. But the problem wasn't her, it was me. Wife beater. Cat killer. Why shouldn't she have hated me?

I hugged her, the coffin pressing against our chests. My arm clenched the sticky skin of her upper back, her damp tank top, her hard shoulder blades. I wished we could blast off then, just the three of us, and dwell in the sky, not living or dead, not fighting, not talking, just there together, looking down to earth and up to stars.

It was probably just a hug to her. I'm sorry, I whispered into her salty hair. She pushed me away. My legs got caught in a fallen tree limb, and I went down hard. She came at me then, scratching and hitting with fists half the size of mine. I used the coffin to fend her off, deflecting blows meant for my arms, my face, my eyes. She caught my hair and pulled. I struck her with the coffin just on the shoulder, not hard. She ripped the coffin away and flogged me with it. I shielded my face with my forearms. The rough wood cut me. I wriggled from side to side to escape the blows. The sting on my arms turned to sharp pain. The bones would break if she kept it up, or the coffin would. Stop, I yelled, please stop.

She fell beside me and we both lay there panting. I carefully wiped my arms and face on my shirt. I knew then my big idea about outer space was wrong and could never be. We hated each other. But we were bound by this grief and by our hatred. Stronger, maybe, than love.
You know what, I said. The roots of those pine trees over there broke up the rock. I’ll bet we could dig there okay.

Great, Ann said.

I set Orvil under some bushes. We kicked a hollow in the gravel, and it was clear that she had said great unironically, not like great, another idea from dumbass, but like great, at last dumbass has a good idea, and maybe, just maybe, in her head, she had replaced dumbass with my actual name and we had a chance. At last, we made the hole big enough so Orvil’s casket could fit with ten inches of leeway between the top of the box and the top of the hole. We refilled the gravel and set pinecones in a heart shape over his resting place. It felt sad, but good, too, like we had done right by Orvil in the end.


Okay, I said. Orvil was a good cat. His fur felt soft, and it was a nice color. He loved us, but not as much as he loved tuna. Remember how he’d tear into the kitchen as soon as he heard the can opener? He was very tidy. Every time he threw up, he’d find something to cover it with, like a plastic bag or a sock. And he spent so much time sharpening his claws, then he’d come stand on you and knead your stomach with them. He bit to show affection. I admired him for that. He was his own little man. The day I found him under the dumpster was one of the happiest days of my life.

That was kind of lame, Ann said.

I ignored her because I knew the words were true. As the twilight swallowed us, Ann grabbed my hand, and we looked at the spot where we’d put him.

I worried that we wouldn’t reach the car before dark—I had neglected to bring a flashlight—but we made it in time. We gulped the brandy on our way, and I threw the bottle deep into the woods. I handed Ann into the Scout.

As we bumped down the road toward a quieter house, Orvil began the long process of decay, his skin just starting to loosen from his flesh, which separated from his bones. In time, my poison ivy blisters would pop,
the scabs on my forearms would heal, and night crawlers would gorge on Orvil’s bloated form. Six months later, we would get a new cat, and my flawed carpentry job would make Orvil’s box collapse. In another three months, Ann and I would celebrate our third wedding anniversary and much of Orvil’s flesh would have rotted away. When we finally would decide screw it, let’s get pregnant, the harder tissues—the cartilage, the tendons and ligaments, would have gone. And by the night we would conceive our baby, nothing stayed of Orvil but a small rib cage and a handful of orange fur.
Perhaps they should seem precious now, but how sick I am of looking at my blunt-fingered hands. I am unrecoverable now, locked inside this wet machine, braiding my dreads. Time's come to speak at last of what it's like to operate the body, now this finicky machine I toggle, twist, and nudge toward working order. Don't get me wrong—this isn't suffering just yet, just a sort of Cartesian estrangement that every day wakes you up to how Herculean and homuncular existence always was, even before you knew the thriving, over-sweetened bloodstream was mixing chance and choice so recklessly. Or was it you? Rash, unlicensed operator, negligent descendant, parent, accidental creature inside the creature that idiom cannot honestly (or can it?) blame: *It's in his blood*...? Yes, to seek the sea, to cherish flight, to fiddle with the lexicon, but the little scarlet beads I draw each day from deadened fingertips won't ooze from any old smooth stone of metaphor. Oh where is the fault? Not stars but selves, of course—inside the body's hot, red, crowded cavities, but no more there than in the mind that knows of them the way Romans knew of distant, seething provinces, and went on with their lives.
PUlSUIT

Stacked and locked and braced
snug along the deck, freight boxes
improvise upon their linkages
and stress points, inside their sun-
ovened atmospheres—staccato
cadenzas, flourishes of groaning as
the ship climbs and surfs indifferent
swells. Manifest of time-- beaten,
beating out into the vast Atlantic
sky. This is what we've been
lugging, then, a thousand miles out
into eternity—time—loud, erratic,
yet almost musical tempo— time,
manifest in the noise matter makes
on its way somewhere, out here
across eternity. Three flights up
on the gleaming bridge, time's
a measure of space and position.
Back in Carolina, where monstrous
cranes so deftly swung all these
containers into place, back ashore
there, time is someone's money, units

Far wor th
of expectation and responsibility.
Back there even the sea is working,

laying quays, collecting rank larders,
compiling and excavating shores.

Out here the sea is only up to itself.
No mere figure, but incomparable

presence no language can use
without revealing its poverty.

Originating, extravagant,
a reckless beyond beyond

handling, wherein the tonnage
this keel heaves ahead is abstracted,

and memory's cargo dwindles
further into dream. Seven decks

aloft in the white stern-castle,
the passenger savors the sway

and rise beneath him, the vast
swath of northern stars, and off

southeast: wild, silent lightning
behind ranges of black cloud!

In the sheer spaciousness his
whole body knows at last, soles
to thrilled nape, out here who
knows where, he's as close
to longed-for self-forgetfulness
as he will ever be-- awareness
incarnate. Oh stop, then, he tells
himself, stop making sentences of it.
TRUCE

I want you marsupially. I want
to pouch you in soft nap, want you
as a shopping spree
before the smug retreat of ownership.

Let's fall back.
*No Man's Land* was coined
at Flanders Field, yet
those soldiers crossed

at Christmas. Let's waltz
among mines. There is not
much to do about the chemistry
of a burn. Still
Psychogeographically speaking, a shadow’s shaped by mishap. A dove’s meaning of *in-flight* overhead misshapes itself, spiraling “down-to-earth” as a tarry tarpaulin of creosote wades through the asphalt like an asterisk of debt the sky owed. There’re more subtle pursuits the right masseuse can caress from non. Sometimes I get so sick of the in-situ dialectic of the universe’s expanse & the I I am I stare at the wall of my apartment until I stare myself out. Until I’m a béton brut wreck of myself, until I’m non again, (some odd no-on-no on&on...). In May of ’68 (Paris), they ripped up the pavement to reverse the escargot any Parisian’ll tell you absorbs their city on a daily basis. They hurled it at riot police. They tied a mantra to it: *sous les pavés la plage.* (Under all’s paved a beach). Last summer in Istanbul’s Taksim Square, I saw the people tear down whole buildings to do the same. Fortitude’s resistance requires a moment’s tranquility revolve in a piece. Of asphalt. Of tissue. Of a dove’s tufted-enough feather petrified a weapon: Of. Does a world in a grain of sand still hold true? The marvelous won’t coagulate if a peace can be reduced to pieces—& then might we all be on the brink of owning insignificance?
Suddenly a Wayward to Thinking Words

To understand a scene, one maneuvers a chess board in their favor. Like applying a moustache on the Mona Lisa, sentences ply a referent like the pleasure of stretching a rubber band between the fingers, moments before the penultimate rupture. That's why I prefer the word dove & bomb side-by-side: to think, divebomb is to think, a more present dove. Suddenly a wayward to thinking words it's a wonder some nouns run away with some verbs & for doing so, violently are, while we harangue white noise as if it were the genealogy of wind. It's a wonder we war like hell with the irrational to conjoin, while what woos us wants us; or, wants us dead; or, wants us to enter dead air. By the way, how many warplanes are named after birds?
You buy a candy apple red Ford LTD—eight cylinders, seventeen and a half feet from hood ornament to rear emblem—hitch a small trailer to it, and at five miles over the speed limit you drive away from El Paso and the Chihuahuan desert. You drive past the Guadalupe Mountains, you drive through the Ouachita Forest in Arkansas, through Memphis, Nashville, and Knoxville, forgoing motels for rest stop naps, feeling high and familiar on the pavement you've spent so much of your life traversing—all the while, your six-year-old son buckled in next to you, learning firsthand how to cross the country.

When you come out of the Holland Tunnel the sun is rising. Benny sees the buildings in Manhattan lighting up and his mouth opens and you think that you have undoubtedly done right. He needs to know more than just the border.

You drive to Queens and sign the paperwork for the room you've leased. After this you unload the contents of the trailer: one futon, one red cutler recliner, an end table and a lamp, a TV and a telephone, a box of plates and pots, four boxes of clothes and towels and sheets, and one box of toys. Then you take a shower, make Benny do the same, and, too awake from the drive to sleep, take the A-Train to Aqueduct Station.

It's December and the kick of anticipation in the crisp air has you talking for two as you walk up the steps from the subway: "The first time I came to this track I was fifteen," you tell your son. "I was tall for fifteen and wore a jacket with padded shoulders and a wool hat pulled low. No one batted an eye."

At ground level, in front of you, is Aqueduct Racetrack, multi-leveled and magnificent in its endless glass, as if the purpose of the structure was to view the world from the position of royalty; but your eyes focus only on the entrance, the internal organs of the machine. "I almost blew it when I went to cash my first winner," you say. "The horse paid $3.20 and I'd put down five. When the
lady behind the window handed me eight bucks I started to argue; but a guy in line pulled me aside and explained how things work, that it was $3.20 for every two, not one, that I bet."

"Why aren't we going to the turf club?" Benny asks as you walk through the glass doors, handing a leather-skinned woman with thick, bright-blue eye shadow twenty-five cents for a racing program.

"Because this is 'The Big A.' The turf club here costs money," you say, aware he's at best half-listening. "Are you shivering?" you ask. His arms are wrapped around his torso, making his sweater look like a straitjacket, even though it was only a short walk from the subway to the front doors. You go on: "That was when I was living in Pleasantville Cottage Home. Me and a few guys put together about twenty dollars and came down here to get rich. We didn't get rich, but we did win. Or I won. They just waited outside."

You remember getting back to Pleasantville that first day, all the other abandoned teenagers wanting to see the money. The next time you went you had a pool of forty-five dollars, then sixty. Around the time one of the cottage parents started pitching in you realized you didn't even have to make bets for them. Half the time you could keep their money and tell them you lost; the occasions you gave them something back were enough to keep them going. They just wanted to be involved enough to feel the vicarious kick from a safe distance. The same way people watch movies about criminals living lives they'd never live themselves, and yet get so invested they trick their adrenal glands into giving them a comped squirt or two. You began to think of yourself as providing a service. You were a charitable window through which the meek absorbed indirect rays of defiance.

You had not yet heard the term bookie, though you'd later apply the same logic.
Benny stops to stare at the menu on a concession stand, his arms now at his sides, the steady pump of the heaters working him over. He won’t find any chile con queso or enchiladas, you think. “Hey,” you say, and he starts to follow again. Maybe if you told him about how everything came to an end, how when the cottage home management learned about your trips they confiscated everyone’s money and made them sign for what they needed to buy things, how the cottage parent who’d been involved got fired and had to leave, how it changed the way everyone there looked at and treated you, in this place that was forever a knee-jerk away from violence. Maybe then Benny would be interested, because you’ve noticed in the last months that the only kinds of stories that hold his attention are sad ones. As if he’s finished believing in all others.

The first race is five minutes to post and you walk faster, telling Benny to keep up, and when you look back to check on him you see him watching everyone he passes as if he’s looking for someone he knows. You stop again, aware of the heaters, the smell like burned hair in a blow-dryer. No one here’s going to comment on how tall he’s getting, no one knows his name, or yours. ‘Pay attention,’ you want to tell him. ‘These people will walk through you if you get in their way.’

***

You moved to New York for two reasons. One is that Bobby, your oldest ‘friend,’ is waiting to introduce you to a man named Jackie, a bookie with a business so big—“I mean like entire office floor big,” Bobby told you—that it’s gotten out of control.

So you drive to Brooklyn to meet Bobby for coffee at a deli in Bensonhurst. He looks bad, like a vegetable someone forgot to refrigerate.
“This is your thing, Benjamin, this is what you do,” Bobby tells you. Since introducing Benny you haven’t had much to say, and Bobby is starting to ramble. “You overhaul. You build up operations. I told Jackie he needs someone like you.” He waits. He goes on. “Remember the trucking company? How you took it and built it up?”

“I was a kid then. And that was legal,” you say, watching Benny play with the two action figures he brought from home—something to do with cats, he’d said. Lightning cats maybe, though neither look like any cat you’ve ever seen, and you can’t imagine what they have to do with lightning. You can’t even tell which is the good cat and which is the bad.

“Only by coincidence,” Bobby says. “Not by requirement.” He’s trying to sell you on this. People like him can sense hesitation like a wife can sense when a husband’s lying. They smell it a mile away. You never thought you’d be one of those—the type of person who carries his nerves on his sleeve.

“I have a son now,” you say.

Bobby closes his eyes and breathes in audibly. His hair is as curly as it was the last time you saw him in Vegas over a decade prior. Even though the front half is missing. The same is true for yours, as well. Not the curls part, just the missing.

“Lot’s of people have sons. Some have daughters, too,” he says, and you think that you couldn’t care less about his daughter. “This is what you came here to do, Benjamin. Let me introduce you to Jackie. You and him will get along. Just give it a chance.”

You consider the person you were when you first knew Bobby. It was after the cottage home, when you lived briefly with your father, in Brooklyn, while finishing high school. This time taking bets from students and teachers. This time not getting caught. Living was effortless and you walked with a margin of air between you and the ground. The world on a platter. As you
entered adult life—riding in subways or sitting in the back of taxis, a young man with a bankroll—you felt like you'd unlocked an obvious secret most people were either too vapid or dumb or skittish to capitalize on. You couldn't understand how a human being could spend thirty or forty years going to the same buildings and rooms, their limbs and tongues making the same movements, the strings attached to those limbs and tongues being pulled by hands they'd never see or understand. Wind-up toys bobbling back and forth, shucking out their days like dead weight. Just a kid, deciding the world was comprised of half-dead sacks of flesh that settled for laughing and crying as evidence of their existence, each one waiting for time to sweep them under the rug.

"Give me a few weeks to settle in. Let me get Benny in school and then we'll talk."

Bobby runs his hand over his milk-curd face and you wonder if you could have possibly rotted as much as him, only you can't remember yourself in the mirror this morning let alone a decade ago. Which is just as well—who wants to contemplate accelerated aging?

"I told Jackie you were coming this week. I told him that because that's what you told me. You told me you were on your way." He stops, leans back. You think how Bobby never was good at hiding his emotions. You don't ask, don't care, don't want to know.

"Bring Benny with you," he says. "Plenty of space for him to mess around."

You reach over and scramble your son's hair and he fakes anger and bats at your forearm. "Next week is the holidays, two weeks later school starts. We'll get into it then."

Bobby sucks air, nods his head, and pulls out a goodwill smile. "Sure. Then. What's the difference, right?"
Your older sister had her first daughter when she was eighteen and before the end of the year, because it seems like the right thing to do, you take Benny to meet his adult cousin, Claire, in Long Island, where she lives with her husband, Joel, and their two children: a son, Elton, who is Benny’s age, and a daughter, Marissa, who they call Mari, and is halfway through her first year of high school.

At the dinner table—from which Joel is absent—among soup, gefilte fish, and carrot tsimmes, Benny asks why they don’t have a Christmas tree.

“Because we’re Jewish, silly,” Mari says as she reaches across the table to pinch him. She’s at an age in which she likes to pretend-mother anyone younger than her. “We celebrate Chanukah,” she says.

From behind a fistful of bread roll, Elton asks, “Your dad is, too. Isn’t he?”

You can feel your son’s eyes, even though you don’t look up from your plate.

Claire breaks the silence, saying, “Remember Uncle, when I was a teenager and you’d pick me up by my elbows?” She turns to her daughter. “I’d squirm and tell him to put me down. I hated being picked up like a little kid. I wanted to be treated like a woman.”

“Imagine that,” Mari says.

Claire ignores her. “And gifts! He always showed up with gifts. Coats, hats, sometimes jewelry even. Every visit was like a birthday.” At the word ‘coat’ you and her make fleeting eye contact.

After dinner Claire disappears upstairs, and later, as you get ready to leave, she pulls a down jacket from a box of clothes she’s
placed by the front door and helps Benny into it. “There’s some
thermals, some wools socks, a couple sweaters in there,” she says.
“Elton just got new winter clothes. He’s not going to use these any-
more.”

The sleeves don’t go all the way to Benny’s wrists, but he’s
already zipping up. “I’ve been meaning to take him to a depart-
ment store,” you say. “Let me give you some money.”

“Joel gets reduced rates. I would’ve just donated them, any-
way.” You almost say something about this being a donation if she
won’t take your money.

When Claire drops you off at the Ronkonkoma Station in
her blue Honda hatchback, she says, “You know, retail isn’t bad,
Uncle. Joel doesn’t mind it. He makes good money as a manager,
gets paid vacations, health benefits, a retirement plan. The works.”

Half your age, talking about retirement plans. “He ever
make it home for dinner?”

“He’s working overtime tonight. It’s a busy time of year.
And it’s not mandatory.”

“Overtime? That’s good. Good for him.”

She turns to the back seat. “Did my favorite cousin have a
good time?”

Benny looks back blankly. The one time they met he was an
infant, when you brought his mother to New York for the first and
only time in her life.

“The fish was good,” he says.

You lean over and kiss Claire on the forehead. “Tell Joel
hello.” You open the door and climb out, pulling the seat forward
for Benny.

As the Long Island Rail train moves southwest toward
Queens, Benny asks you about being Jewish.

“What do you want to know?” you say.

He looks at the ceiling and your eyes follow. It’s thick with
marker and spray paint lines you can't come close to deciphering.

"Are we Jewish? I thought we were Catholic. Can we be both?"

You slide down in your seat, draping your forearms over your thighs and folding your hands together. "Your mother was Catholic. She took you to church because she wanted you to have religion." A small smile creeps into your face. "Sometimes she'd get worked up about me and her living in sin because we'd gotten married in Vegas."

Benny waits, but after the train passes through a tunnel of quiet he asks, "So then you're Jewish? And I'm Jewish too because I'm your son?"

"I never really considered myself a Jew," you say. "People are going to look at your name, Benjamin Natan, and assume you're Jewish, but it's not like we participate."

"Because we don't go to church?"

"Synagogue," you say. "It's called a synagogue."

He plays with the word in his mouth, pronouncing each syllable separately, and you think about a year prior when you took Benny to a synagogue in El Paso to ask the Rabbi for a loan. You told your son there was one thing you had to hand to the Jews: they took care of their own. The Catholics were all about sacrifice and the collection plate.

"So we're not really Jewish? Should I be Catholic then?"

You look at the veins on your hands that look bluer than they should. Or maybe the skin is just whiter. In the desert, the sun kept you brown even in the winter—especially the left arm, which you hung out the car window whenever you drove. Could your tan be fading already? You look at Benny's hands, small and soft, no lines or scars, but similar in shape to your own with protruding knuckles and long fingers. You think about how reserved Benny is, how careful he is with his words. Not at all like a child.
The thought that Benny is less impulsive than you floats into your mind.

"When I was a little older than you my father sent me to Hebrew lessons," you say. "I sat in a drafty talcum powder-smelling apartment with four other kids, all of us on wood chairs, while an old bearded guy with yarmulke and back bent from too many hours hunched over The Torah read in Hebrew. We were supposed to write what he read and recite it back. That lasted about a week before I started taking the money for the lessons to the movies—at the time, a dime got you into a double-feature. When my father found out he smacked me around pretty good. He was from the old school. I was going to get Bar Mitzvah."

You stop talking but it's apparent he's waiting for more.

"You want to know what 'yarmulke' and 'Bar Mitzvah' mean," you say. He shakes his head. "You want to know what the point of the story is." He nods, and you look back to the ceiling, able to make out the word 'break' from the collision of letters.

"What I'm saying, buddy, is I'm not going to force you one way or the other." You look back at him and place your hand on his head, running your fingers through his hair. "I'm not going to try to tell you what to do." His eyebrows scrunch together, reminding you of the way he'd focus all his attention on the numbers in his racing program back in El Paso when you'd let him make two-dollar bets.

"But you got to tell me," he says. "If you don't who is? I'm not even a teenager yet."

Before you can answer him you realize you've missed the transfer at Jamaica. You get off at an unfamiliar station, go up some stairs, go left, down some other stairs, left again, and hop on another train. Only this one's going the wrong direction. You study the maps while you ride, trying to decipher a once memorized system that's now as foreign as Hebrew. It takes three hours to make
what should have been an hour and a half trip home, and by the
time you walk through the front door Benny is asleep in your arms.

***

You look out your apartment window at the Van Wyck Expressway, the telephone held to your ear. “Why are you talking
to your daughter about me?” you say to your sister, Shirley. Your
over-a-thousand-miles-away sister who you brought to El Paso from
New York but now lives in Florida.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she says.

“You don’t know? Is that right? Then why’s she trying to
sell me on the virtues of retail?”

“Because Joel can get you a job, Sonny!” she says, and of
course she’s a little buzzed to have slipped that easily.

You take a deep breath and hold it in longer than you
should as the semi-trucks roll by making the innards of the apart­
ment building rattle with exhaust-spiked eighteen-wheel noise.
Your sister knows the sound well, you think, having lived in similar
buildings.

“Come on,” she says when the rumbling stops. “This is
family we’re talking about.”

“Forget it. Me and her already talked.”

“Why can’t you just give it a try? You’re a natural sales­
man.”

You consider starting the kind of fight that will keep her
from calling for a while. By telling her what you think of her and
her advice you’ve made her mad enough in the past to keep away
for months. Years even.

“Sonny,” she says.

“Next time you talk to Claire,” you say, “tell her I’m doing
fine. That’s all she needs to know, that her uncle’s fine.”
The facts are facts, you think. Sometimes the horses don’t do what they’re supposed to, sometimes the jocks. Sometimes a long shot decides it’s his day and alters the course of everyone involved. Such is life.

“When the front door’s locked, you go in the back,” you say to your library-quiet son as you drive him down 144th toward PS 82, Hammond Elementary.

It’s mid-January and the mornings are filled with shovels, salt, and coffee that cools before it can be finished. In Central Park the homeless are dying nightly on their cardboard floors, their blood frozen. Under Benny’s jacket he’s dressed himself with every layer of clothing Claire gave him.

“Now that you’re in school, I’m gonna get serious about that thing I’ve been going over with Bobby, see what I can put together for us.” Benny looks ahead, maybe searching for school signs.

When you reach the four-story brick building, you pull into the cul-de-sac entrance, get out of the car, and go to open Benny’s door. You reach into the back seat and grab his Rambo-decaled camouflaged backpack into which you’ve tossed a notebook and a pen.

Benny stares at the building. “This is a school?” he asks. “Where’s the portables, the playground?”

Amidst the flow of children and occasional parents, you kneel in front of your son. “Would I leave you here if it wasn’t?” you say, though he’s still fixated on the bricks, his eyes wide and motionless, like a person receding into theirself.

“Hey, look at me,” you say, needing to move his chin with your hand to get him to do so. “You go in there and knock ‘em
dead, got it?” When he stares blankly at you, you cup his jaw and make him nod. When he starts to nod on his own you say, “Okay, buddy, give me a kiss.” He looks away. “I know, I know, not in public. But just so you know, if I’d ever acted embarrassed to kiss my father I’d have gotten it good.” You put your hands on his shoulders, turn him around, and give him the lightest of shoves. “Go get ‘em.”

***

Never have you seen something like this: an entire lung cancer room filled with men and women of all ages endlessly smoking and taking calls. Also, another room lined with a counter of coffee pots for the people who research and analyze odds by comparing betting lines in Vegas, Reno, and other places. Here they keep tabs on not just the latest statistics, but also on which players might have a hidden knee injury, or which manager might have just been left by his wife.

Unseen are the runners, a network of people on the streets collecting, making drops.

“And everyone involved is diluting the bankroll by skimming a percentage of their action,” Jackie tells you. “A kid makes a hundred dollar pickup, he puts ten in his pocket.” Jackie is a bald antique of a Jew with thick, black-framed glasses and who wears shorts that expose his pale blue-veined legs despite the freezing temperatures outside—‘getting ready for retirement in Florida,’ he says when he catches you staring. ‘Maybe I’ll introduce you to my sister,’ you think. He also, as Bobby mentions later, regularly breaks out in stress-related hives. “I’m handling five hundred grand a day and watching my accounts go the same direction as my sperm count,” he says.

“So what do you want me to do?” you ask, sitting in front of Jackie’s desk while the old man reclines in a massive leather chair.
which tops out a foot above his head, kneading hands that look like they were carved from an oak tree and jutting out his mouth like a frustrated child. Bobby is to your right, beaming.

“Most of the cash either exists on paper or is being passed around on the streets,” he says. “So first, just work the books. Go over everything like you’re looking for your girlfriend’s missing birth control pill.” He narrows his eyes. “You married?”


“Only for the preceding week, then we make them get lost.”

Jackie reminds you of an old man you almost worked for in Reno. The guy had recruited you from Vegas when you were living there in the early 70’s, flown you in and offered you big money to help with his sports book. But it’d been winter and you couldn’t handle the Reno snow. Snow was the reason you’d left New York.

“You ever been busted?” you ask.

“Gone bust or been busted?”

“Been,” you say.

Jackie stares at you, crosses his arms, and you understand he doesn’t like being asked questions. “What’s your point?” he asks. But what can you say? That when you left Texas for New York you left a place where gambling’s a misdemeanor—pay a fine and go on about your day—for a place where gambling’s a felony? That you already have one felony in your past and that another would devastate your family? That every time your mind wanders back to the cottage home you lived in you picture your own son there?

“No point,” you say, because this job is a good thing. This job is what you need.

“Bobby said you know numbers like a Rabbi knows the Torah,” Jackie says. “Show me.”
"How'd your first day go?" you ask as you drive your son home.

Benny shrugs.

"What's that mean?"

"I went to the office like you said and told them my name. They asked where you were."

"And what'd you say?"

"That you said to go to the office and tell them my name and that they'd put me in a class."

"And did they?"

Benny nods.

"Good. What else?"

"The rooms smell like wood. And the ceilings are really high. The building's a lot bigger than it looks from outside. There's five floors, one's underground. I got lost going to the bathroom. I had to go back to the office and the same lady from the morning took me to class again."

"Well," you say. "That'll happen. How about the teacher?"

"She's got white hair and big glasses and she talks like she's trying to knock you down. She said I need school supplies."

"I gave you a notebook," you say.

"She says I need folders for all my subjects, a ruler, book covers, glue—"

"I get it. We'll go to the store. And the other kids?"

"There's a lot of white kids. I share a table with one named Sebastian. You ever heard that name?"

You nod and say you have.

"I had to stand in front of the class and tell them my name and where I was from. No one said anything about my last name."
But when I said I was from El Paso one girl asked if that was in Mexico."

"And what'd you say?"

He shrugs again and you wonder if this is his new thing. "I told her 'sort of.'"

***

Two months go by and the sky is clear and in Central Park the elms, maples, birches, and countless other types of trees are showing signs of sprouting leaves, of someday reasserting their shade over the walkways and grassy knolls.

Having dived into Jackie's books and swam through more weekly cycles than you can remember, you come to the same conclusion again and again: the problem is in accountability. There's nothing to stop a collector from pocketing a percentage and cutting in whoever took the bet to change the amount on paper. The solution is both simple and colossal: for every transaction there needs to be someone in between the people taking the bets and the people collecting. Also, there needs to be projections of what's coming in and from whom, so a red flag goes up if the expected number doesn't line up with the actual cash brought in. Which is fine. You understand. You know what to do.

Jackie's gotten away with the honor system to a point—call it chivalry amongst thieves—but half these people don't know him from the doorman. And worse, he doesn't know them. Which is fine. Personal connections only beat back greed for so long, anyway. This is a problem with a solution. You've dived in and you're swimming. You're waking up those dusty muscles and quieting your red-alert mind. What purpose can do. All it's going to take is restructuring—mammoth restructuring, but who knows about that better than you.
"Why'd you leave El Paso?" Claire asks you as you eat lunch together at Portofino's on Ascan Avenue. You've got money in your pocket and that feels good and so you had the urge to take someone out to eat. She focuses on her linguini as she speaks, keeping her head close to her plate, blowing on and then slurping up the pasta.

The other reason you left El Paso is that you were a bankrupt bookie trying to scratch out a living when someone with money made an investment in restarting your business and the long and the short of it was that it didn't work. Apparently, it wasn't as easy as you told him it would be to build your client list back—the difference a small amount of time can make. You picked up a handful of weekend warriors, people who liked to put a few dollars on their favorite team to 'make the game interesting,' but you were mostly just a second option to people who had accounts elsewhere. Gamblers, who are always looking for the best betting lines they can get—why lay a favorite at plus eight when someone else has them at plus seven—like to have accounts with as many sport books as possible. This goes double when the book is small and doesn't have a network of people studying factors and constantly moving the line. The only people with any real money who contacted you were people trying to hustle you by making large bets early in the morning before you could check Vegas and adjust your lines. You'd have been crazy to take their action.

After a handful of months of mediocre business with small accounts you decided to call it before you became desperate. Unable to repay what you'd lost and been living off of, you took the last of the investor's money, bought a car, and left.

"Didn't I tell you I had a business opportunity here?" you
say. You’ve been slowly eating a dish of eggplant, chewing each bite carefully.

Claire bobs her head, glances up at you. “Yeah, I know. I just thought there might be something else.”

You lean back in your chair and look around at the racks of wine bottles and the dark walls, thinking about all the restaurants there are in this city and how you’ve often echoed your father’s words that a good meal is one of life’s fine pleasures, but how until recently every meal has been little more than an attempt at feigning hunger.

“What the hell did your mother tell you?” you say.

Claire shrugs. ‘Shrugging is contagious in this city,’ you think.

“She didn’t tell me anything. I can just tell from talking to her. She calls me asking about you. As if I know what you’re doing every minute of the day.”

You wipe at your mouth with your cloth napkin and lean onto the table. “Look, we both know your mother. You just gotta baby her. You take her too serious and she’ll drive you as crazy as she is.”

Claire nods in agreement before slurping up more linguini. You place your hand on your fork. You also have a belief about finishing your food. As a child you’d been forced to, and as a result, in your early adulthood you always left a symbolic amount of food on your plate, both a gesture toward your immigrant father’s will and a nod toward your feelings about life—an attitude that in recent broke years seems egotistical at best, ignorant at worst.

“Besides, what the hell was left for me in El Paso with Adela gone?” you say.

Claire brings her eyes up to look at you and you think how she has the same slender and sleek face your sister had before her lifetime of Marlboros and vodka.
“How’s Benny dealing?” she asks.
You raise your eyebrows. “Benny’s fine. Sometimes I think he doesn’t remember too much about it, the cancer, the operations, the treatments. He’s young enough to forget.” You sip your water. “He asks me questions about her, trying to remember. He’s a tough little guy.”

***

At home, lying on the cutler recliner that’s been doubling as your bed, the TV playing the opening theme song of Cheers—the part about going where everybody knows your name—your son hands you an envelope. “What’s this?” you say, even though it’s obviously from the school.
“My teacher wants you to read it,” he says.
“I get that. What’s it say?” you ask, thinking that if he shrugs, you might just lose it.
“I don’t know. Something about my math.”
You look at him and he looks away, sensing your frustration with his inability to be specific. You open the envelope and unfold the letter. You read. You read again and laugh.
“She thinks you’re cheating at math but she doesn’t know how?”
“She kept me in at recess and asked why I didn’t show any of my work on our test. I told her I did it in my head and she didn’t believe me.”
“She didn’t believe you.” You lean back into the cushions and let your knees fall loosely away from each other, chagrined. “What’d you tell her?”
“That you taught me numbers already. She wrote some problems on the board, problems she said would be in the next grade. So I did them. She asked how, and I said you taught me. She asked what you taught me, and I said how to take out weird numbers—”
“Odd numbers,” you say.
“Odd numbers. Then add the easy ones, and put the others back. She didn’t get it.”
“Listening to you, I don’t get it either,” you say, feeling like father of the year.

***

Only now that you’ve begun the task of renovating the operation and micromanaging the droves of people making their butter through the cracks in the system, you find that the only person not against you is Bobby, who you realize owes Jackie money he can’t pay. For skimming or from betting, you don’t know.
The irony of being on the other side of the cheats isn’t lost on you. Nor have you forgotten how greed is a steroid that always keeps the cheats one scam ahead. And beyond that: you’re not an authority figure. Is it trite to say this is why you prefer to operate alone?

This is work, and you throw yourself into it. You channel your obsessive tendencies into the numbers. You forget they represent dollars and you live inside their world of paper, opting for the comfort of abstraction over the concrete goal of money. You even assign numbers to the employees so you can forget you’re dealing with real and angry people.

Which helps make this seem no more dangerous than a word jumble in a newspaper.

Except that you feel danger. Not in the looks employees give you, but in unseen danger. In your car, the subway, the apartment—every moment outside the numbers—this obsession wraps its arm around you, whispers in your ear, pokes its finger in your chest, its argument always the same: something this size doesn’t go on unobserved. This can’t last, it says.

You blame the thoughts on your recent track record. You’re gun-shy, you say, shell-shocked. Time and a splash of success is

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all you need to wash away the neurosis. You shrug off the edges of panic. You clear your throat. You swallow Alka-Seltzer.

Still it whispers.

What does last? you argue back, but aren't surprised when the paranoia doesn't bother to answer. Do what then? you ask the silence.

***

"New York in 1988 is not New York in 1958," you say into the phone. Outside your building the clouds have left and the wind has ceased. The temperature is high for early April and although every afternoon a storm meanders in and rain falls, the sky always clears too quickly, leaving the nighttime air an oppressive blanket.

"You're not twenty anymore, either, Sonny," your sister says.

You open and close your mouth. When you moved her ten years prior she'd been mid-forties, not much younger than you are now—her previous twenty-something years spent cooking and cleaning, raising children and mixing drinks. You realize you're still standing, holding the receiver to your ear with one hand and the phone unit in the other, and you sit down on the edge of the cut­ler, lean forward and place your forearms on your knees, your gaze dropping to the dust-ridden hardwood floors.

You'd been standing in front of the window-mounted A/C when the phone rang and your first thought had been to not an­swer.

The only light in the flat comes from the muted ball game on the rabbit-eared television. The Mets are ahead by a single run in the bottom of the eighth. Winning, but not by enough to cover the run line you have a hundred dollars riding on. Darryl Straw­berry—Benny's favorite player—is at bat, two outs and a runner on
second, the count against him.

You exhale before speaking, something you’ve been doing disproportionately lately. “Look, it was just money. If I’d worried about every time someone didn’t pay a bet or come through with their debt, I’d have died of worry a long time ago.”

“Five months away isn’t long enough. You should wait another five,” she says.

You lean back and look at the blue-lit ceiling. Five? It feels like an epoch has passed since those days on the open pavement. Remembering that drive feels like another life.

You hear the sound of ice being dropped in a glass on the other end of the line.

“What do you say, Sonny? Another five months and then maybe go back?”

You look at the futon in the corner where your son is sleeping after having been told a bedtime story about a jockey being paid off to pull a horse, causing the horse to be thought a cripple and later get placed in a lower grade race, an easy win with high-paying odds. Benny hadn’t been interested in how much you’d made. He only wanted to know why the jock would risk his career, wanted to know what happened to him after.

Benny’s a tangle of sheets, limbs, and a sprawl of brown hair that covers his ears and which you’ve never let grow so long before. You think about how it’d been in El Paso where you’d had a barber who was paying off an endless debt with scheduled haircuts for both you and Benny—how life is when you’re owed.

On a shelf behind the bed are the action figures you never learned the names of.

“Another five and Benny’s hair will be so long people will think he’s a girl,” you say.

“Look, are you crazy?” she says. “You’re not thinking rationally here. There’s times you gotta listen, Sonny. Listen to your

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sister. I know what’s what.” Her voice rises and wavers from the spurring of emotion and from her vodka-soaked tongue.

You listen to the hum of the A/C in the window, feel the damp air pushing through, and you hang up.

You watch Strawberry strike out, thinking that you should know better than to take a run line on a Mets game.

***

Benny tells you about the math races they do on the board, how no one can beat him and how he has to switch teams regularly to keep things fair. You think how school is progressive—the tallest kid; the shortest; the fastest runner; the class clown. Now he’s somebody too. He has a place. The teacher wants to put him in an advanced math class the following year and you think this is good but worry it might mark him as an outcast.

He already has one close friend, though: Sebastian, at whose apartment he spends nearly every afternoon after school. Sebastian’s mother often invites Benny to stay for dinner, and on Fridays he spends the night. She’s also started taking them to the local pool and is teaching Benny to swim. You wonder what it’s like for him to have female hands holding him while he learns to tread water, to kick and make strokes.

***

Shortly before the semester ends you get a pre-coffee call from work. “Don’t come in.” You spend the next five hours with your hands clasped behind your back, sometimes walking the perimeter of the room, mostly looking out the window. Every ten minutes or so you tell yourself to relax, to sit down, to eat something, to go out for a newspaper, to maybe even head to Aqueduct.
for the early races. Instead you carry on your self-imprisonment, your mind continually floating through time—which is apparently the next best coping mechanism to a shrug. When you were twenty or thirty this job would’ve been just another new-world-exploration. You would’ve been da Vinci in a fighter jet, with little interest in anything but the potential for how much you could accelerate without blowing off the track.

When you get a second call saying everything’s okay, you go straight to Jackie.

“We heard another place got raided,” he says from inside his chair, looking like a little kid in a grown up seat. “Usually they hit everyone at once, try and catch us holding our peckers. So we locked up for awhile. Can’t be too safe, you know.”

“Usually,” you say. You’re standing in front of him wanting to ask if his picture is hanging on some Fed’s wall. Instead you walk out of his office and for the thousandth time say to yourself ‘this isn’t Texas.’ You walk past your office, on to the elevator, thinking about risk and return, and suddenly, you can’t imagine anything in your life that even remotely resembles a payoff. The excitement is gone, you understand, because excitement was the goal, not just a consequence of the means but the end in and of itself. The thrill was the payoff. And without that you feel nothing but risk. Even the elevator feels like a gamble as you plummet from floor to floor, and by the time you reach ground level, you’ve sunk to a squatted position, bracing yourself for the impact.

***

Looking out the blurred Plexiglas of the phone booth, you watch the pavement saunter, see the passing cars’ exhaust visible in wavy patches. Your home phone is packed, the line disconnected.

“The weather’s better in El Paso, anyway,” you say to your
sister. "When we got here I thought the winter was gonna bury me. Now it's the humidity." You remember Benny asking you why the air was so thick—a novelty for a Southwest boy—while walking him home from his last day of school.

"C'mon, Sonny. You get used to the weather."

"A week ago I had the first asthma attack I've had in years. I had to go through boxes to find an inhaler."

"Then go somewhere else. Vegas is desert. Why don't you go back to Vegas? I used to love visiting you there."

You wave your hand in front of your face. "Vegas is no good. You gotta either be connected or work for the casinos. Or both. I'm out of the loop." You once again find yourself examining your aging hand. "El Paso's easy. I'll figure something out."

"And Benny? What about Benny?"

"Don't tell me about my son," you say. "I moved out here for my son, okay? Now I'm gonna move back for him." All she does is worry the same worries and all she says are the same damn things. Every day is like day one with her. You wonder your same wonder: if the booze has completely fried her brain. "Just don't think about it. Things will be fine."

From the corner vendor you buy a couple hot dogs and pretzels, food Benny's now addicted to. Upstairs, the two of you sit on the floor eating. Everything but the TV you're watching and Benny's action figures, which have been abandoned in a corner, has been loaded and locked into a small U-Haul trailer hitched to the LTD.

A rerun of Taxi is showing. Jim's come back to the dispatch with a kid asleep in the back of his cab and Danny DeVito is in hysterics. Elaine has taken the boy to the side and is trying to play with him, trying to make him laugh.

"How come you never play anymore?" you ask your son.

"Play what?"
“With your toys,” you say, nodding toward the dumped pile. “You used to line ‘em up and have ‘em knock each other around.”

Benny looks toward them and then back to the TV. “I don’t know,” he says.

You keep your eyes on your son, who, legs crossed, leaning over the half-eaten hot dog in his hands, seems oddly focused on the show. “You don’t know? Then who knows?”

“I don’t know,” he says again, not turning his head.

The kid on the screen is a smart ass, and the conversation on the show has turned adult. What makes the scene funny is the kid doesn’t belong in this adult conversation, even though he’s the reason the conversation turned adult, him having gotten fed up with being talked down to. Now he’s talking down to the adults, letting them know how it feels.

“I play at school,” Benny says.

“Yeah, what do you play?”

He shrugs and you clench your jaw. “Baseball mostly.” He gives you a quick glance, knowing this will make you happy because you played baseball as a kid; you even grew up dreaming of playing professionally.

“And I play Nintendo with Sebastian at his house while you’re at work,” he says, breaking the moment.

“But you don’t play with toys anymore? You don’t play made up games? Pretend to be Spiderman or Rambo?”

The knees of Benny’s crossed legs bounce restlessly. “I guess I’m too old,” he says.

“What do you mean you’re too old? You’re a little kid.”

Finally he gives you his full attention, and you think how there’s nothing childlike in his eyes or in his stare.

“First you want me be to be an adult. Now you want me to be a kid,” he says.
“Who told you to be an adult?”

“What am I supposed to do when you won’t tell me what to do?” He turns to his hot dog, but doesn’t take a bite. He looks as if he’s forgotten it’s there in his hand and for some reason this strikes you as tragic.

This is the closest your shy and reserved son has ever come to yelling at you and you don’t know how to react. You don’t know what to say or how to say it.

You don’t know how to be a parent to this child. “You should finish your food,” you say.

He looks at you again and you want to pick him up and hide him in your arms, suddenly aware that you can’t remember the last time you lifted him off his feet and swung him above your head the way he used to love for you to do.

“Sebastian has a dinner time, dad. And a bath time and a bedtime. And he can’t play outside unless someone watches him. And he only watches shows his parents let him watch.” You feel the inside of your throat contract; you feel the squeezing of your lungs, as if you’re having an asthma attack.

“His mom and dad tell him what to do.”

You wish you were anywhere but this flea-box soul-trap of an apartment.

“He can’t spend the night here because they know you won’t tell us what to do.”

You wish your son understood how little you or anyone else controls.

“I know what a real family looks like,” he says.

***

As you load the TV but leave the toys, you think how Benny’s always preferred true stories over made up stories. Maybe it has
to do with him being an only child and being only around adults all through his first years. There was no hide-and-seek, no fantasy games. Even most of the movies he watched were for grown-ups. What's strange to you, though, is that he likes sad stories above all others.

Still, you—who often say life isn't all empty pockets and flat tires any more than it's all puppies and ice cream—don't mind telling him sad stories.

So when he asks for a story as you pass from Virginia into Tennessee on I-81, hours deep into the night, your stalled-in-the-past mind picks this:

"My father used to have a lot of different things going on, but mainly he worked in restaurants, usually as a maitre d' in some high-end joint. There was a time, though, when he had a luncheonette. He owned the place. And it did all right for a while. Al Capone even used to drop by when he was in town. Capone was from Brooklyn, like me. My old man said he was a friendly guy, even offered to help my dad out if he ever wanted to get ambitious. But that wasn't my father. Anyway, things eventually went downhill. There was a lot of debt and he was hurting bad.

"This was after I'd gotten out of the cottage home. I'd had it so good there I didn't want to leave, but when I turned sixteen they caught up with my old man and had him put me up till I finished high school.

"So me and him were living together in an apartment building, even though we hardly saw each other. I didn't know how bad things were getting until we got evicted." You pause here, nodding to yourself as if you are only now acknowledging this fact.

"Yep, we got evicted. I don't remember the details of everything, but I guess he just couldn't put together what he owed. What I do remember was how they came and put our furniture on the street. Right on the street they put it. Whatever department
that was.

"My father had to see about getting a truck, you know, to take it all to storage or whatever, and I was left to make sure no one stole anything. And that's what I remember. Not so much what happened to the furniture, or where we ended up, but sitting on the couch that had been in our living room, only now it was on the sidewalk. And the people who left it there, they kind of placed it how it'd been in the house—not consciously I don't think, it just had to do with the order it came out—so there was an end table next to me with a lamp on it. There was no electricity, but there was the streetlight, so in a strange way it almost felt the same.

"Of course there'd never been people walking back and forth across our living room the way they were now. But it wasn't like I didn't know them. I knew 'em all, even though no one said a word to me as they came home from work or the bars or whatever and had to walk in-between the coffee table and the sofa I was sitting on to get to the stoop. There wasn't anything they could do, I hadn't been abandoned or anything. I just had to wait.

"That really struck me as something, how he let that happen."

You drive in silence for a few minutes before looking down at your son, who's fallen asleep. The nighttime shadows give his face depth and you think about the toys he left behind. Then you smile, remembering how after you'd gone through the Holland Tunnel and passed through New Jersey, Benny said while reading the 'Welcome to Pennsylvania' sign, "We'll be lucky to get any decent food out here." And how at the first fuel stop he'd asked how you were doing on mileage.

You wonder if he's dreaming, and you slip into a kind of half-dream yourself. You're on the road and leaving New York, like so many times before, and you find that old feeling down by your foot and the gas pedal, inside your grip on the wheel, beyond
the reach of your headlights and the faith of unseen highway. But somewhere between the truth of the road and truth of your life you are aware that the failure of New York isn’t the failure of a sloppy sportsbook, or of a fractured family. It is your failure. The failure of the father.

You slip back again and start talking, about what you’re not even sure. Fifteen years ago, thirty, a hundred years ago—what’s the difference. When you look at your son his eyes are open and watching you.

“You gotta understand now,” you say. “America back then was very much a ‘love it or leave it’ kind of place. And I’ve always felt both ways. I love it. But if I gotta walk a certain way or talk a certain way, forget it. Show me the door. But that’s America, too, you see? There’s always another door.”

You give a shrug of your own, just one shoulder, and say the words, “Get up and go. Pack it together, rebuild.” But how many starts does a single life allow?

“The open road, starting over. Venture and adventure and people looking, searching. You see what I’m saying?”

The horizon is becoming visible.

“Yep, get up and go.”

The new sun of the approaching day lights the road and splays the LTD’s shadow on the pavement. Flat pastures of green in all directions. You take off your seatbelt. You roll down the window and put your elbow out and wonder how many times in his life your son will have to get up and go.
I'm drawn to the way in which things come together in mixed media collage. The interaction between found materials is unpredictable and, often, what you thought might work doesn't and then something new forms. Add to that the sometimes intentional, sometimes accidental embellishment of other media like ink and paint, and everything just comes to be sort of on its own.

My process begins with collecting as many images as I can. I scour books and magazines and compile pages that I respond to immediately or find myself spending time to inspect. I have some images that have sat for years, some I've looked at a hundred times before using, and some I'm eager to use immediately. A lot of times my materials are just things I happen upon or gifts from friends. Often, it's free books and magazines given away by the public library. I try to cut out what is usable, how I think it might be usable, without removing anything excess before I know more clearly how and where it will go. From there I put images together, move them around, put them with other images, and mostly just stare and think about whether I'm ready to commit something I'd love to use a million different ways to one thing. I'll take pictures of various configurations and stare at those for some time, too. Eventually I'll get impatient and just take the plunge. I'll cut and paste and draw and splatter ink—whatever feels right—almost with abandon until it's all done, and it feels like it's been there all along. I just couldn't see it until it happened and finished itself.

Like most of my collages, these pieces were subject to whatever limited source materials I had to work with at the time. Most often, any themes that appear in my work are governed by a combination of this and things by which I am personally fascinated. Outer space, rocks and minerals, creatures of all sorts, and the interplay of color mixed with black & white images are things I continually gravitate toward. Perhaps subconsciously, perhaps coincidentally, the titles for all of these pieces contain the word "in."
BECKONING IN
INTERSTELLAR RECONSTRUCTION
INCognito
DAVE NIELSEN

IN Poems About Life

dave nielsen

there are blue pillows
or blue leaves
or the moon coming down in blue light
in almost every poem.

At one point the image
of the man's daughter
between home and school,
transfixed by her
own blue shadow
(inside the school
blue fish swim
and swallow one another).

If life kicks the man,
as it does, in the head,
it is with the pointed steel toe
of a blue leather boot,
with delicate blue flowers
stitched into the leather
in darker blue.
When we came upon the rotting corpse of the dolphin, it was almost no longer a dolphin, muscle melted around the ladder of the ribcage, flipper de-fleshed to ghost. The tide backed away, making apologies.

Things the dolphin could have been:

driftwood log expelled from the throat of the ocean, chokedamp

a seal sleeping like a god—closing her eyes, waiting for this century to pass

vision of my childhood dog lain down

the silence that took shape between us after we touched each other

my loneliness in the form of a horse, his body gone sour

gray balloon ballasted by the fear we rebranded as dignity

rock in the shape of your liver

the ocean’s bloated heart, cast out
III.

I twisted a tooth from what remained of the jaw, cartilage clinging and relentless. Minutes, and I tore one tooth free—then another, for you, afraid to touch. We walked away with the wind between us, teeth huddled in my pocket. I kept them both.
I spin a pistol on a plywood desk. Unloaded, it is no threat—a scant resolution molded by machines. To hold it is another thing—to load it, to continue to hold it, and finally, to pull it from the desk—to cock.

The trigger is hardly important, though why mention it? I place the pistol back in the drawer. I walk to the kitchen, then stand in the dumb air, while the motor drones. I pull a jar of beautyberry jelly from the door and build a sandwich. I pour a glass of milk. There is still a loaded gun spinning in my desk, but I am eating lunch.

Hence, a vision, a stalemate, a blown fuse. I replace the garbage disposal with a 3/4 wrench and a flathead screwdriver. I flip the fuse, then wash my hands, running the garbage disposal. It works.
Irena had a baby, but her fiancé Eddie didn’t come to the hospital when it was born, which meant that the wedding was probably off. Her two brothers were in the waiting room, nervous, drinking coffee from flimsy paper cups. “Like two fathers in some kind of a polyandrous marriage,” that’s what my husband Dex said.

Aleksy, the short one who worked in shipping at Office Depot and paid the rent on the apartment all three siblings lived in, had a flask of whiskey hidden in his coat pocket. After the coffee, he tipped a drink into their cups.

“Na zdrowie!” he said. “To life!” It was Aleksy who told Irena that their mother would have wanted her to marry the man who got her pregnant. He was also the one who paid for Irena’s doctor and bought the diapers in advance.

Fabian, the tall brother whom Dex sometimes had to bail out of jail when he got booked for petty larceny, had a christening gown that he kept smoothing out across his knees, stroking the ruffled fabric and beaded embroidery. God knows where he got it. He wouldn’t tell Dex. All he would say was that in Poland the Godfather gave his Godchild its first swaddling clothes. The doctor told the brothers that if they put on surgical masks and scrubs, they could watch the birth, but they didn’t want to see their sister like that, so they all stayed in the waiting room and Irena gave birth to the baby by herself.

Dex and I got married the year after we graduated from college. We had the ceremony at the United Church in Crystal Lake where my parents were married and we had the reception in the basement where they usually held Sunday school and Easter Supper. Dex’s mother had pressured him to get married before we moved in together, but my parents had paid for the small wedding. Neither of us thought it was a good idea to spend a lot of money on a wedding. Instead, we starting saving for our house. Dex wanted a place that belonged to him, that wasn’t rented like all the apartments that he shared with his mother when he was growing up. Not to say
that his mother didn't do well by him. It was for his sake that she worked herself into an early old age at the complaints department at Sears. She also taught him the importance of education. It would be a lie to say that my parents didn't have misgivings about Dex because of the way he grew up, but he proved himself to be a responsible husband and a sensible man.

The day after the baby was born, while Irena was still in the hospital, Irena's fiancé Eddie locked himself and a man named Michael Pelleire inside the men's room at the Matador Bar and beat him unconscious. When the bouncers broke down the door, there was blood and teeth in among the urinal cakes. Eddie was sitting on the floor and cauterizing the lacerations on his arms with the cherry of a cigarette. Michael Pelleire had defended himself with his keys; Dex told me that the puncture wounds on Eddie's arms and chest were surprisingly deep. Most impressive though, Michael Pelleire had pierced Eddie's left cheek. In the photographs that the police took, one of Eddie's back molars showed through the jagged tear in his face. "A key hole," the cops joked in the Emergency Room while a nurse sedated Eddie and sewed him up.

Eddie was lucky that Michael Pelleire didn't die. The surgeons were able to stop the bleeding in his brain. And when he woke up he wasn't a simpleton, though he couldn't remember the night of the assault. The police called it attempted murder and posted an officer outside Eddie's hospital room. When Dex went to pick up Irena and the baby from the hospital and take them home to Aleksy's apartment, the police officer let Irena look in through the door at her fiancé. His face was stitched up like a baseball. "Better late than never," she said.

I was making dinner when Dex got home and told me the news. I ruined a pot of asparagus, left it on the stove until all the water boiled away. I just stood in the middle of my kitchen, transfixed. Dex kept shaking his head, like he was disagreeing with the words as they came out of his mouth. Like he couldn't believe it. He said that no one in the neighborhood knew Michael Pelleire, but Dex had found out that he was a plumber from Glen-
dale Heights. He and some buddies had been drinking in a bunch of West Garfield Park establishments the night of the incident. No one had seen him talk to Eddie at the Matador Bar and the waitresses said he'd tipped well and kept his hands to himself. Dex clipped the items about Eddie out of the *Chicago Tribune*, which deemed the violence yet another example of the neighborhood's deterioration. "Why'd he do it?" I asked Dex. He didn't know.

At the baptism, baby Nicholas—Fabian chose the baby's name and Irena let him be Godfather, despite Alekys's obviously superior qualifications—vomited on his white organza dress when the priest poured the second handful of water over him. Irena wore the ivory suit that she'd bought for her wedding and watched impassively as her son was born into the Catholic Church. Fabian sobbed through the ceremony. "I will cry also at my Godson's wedding," he said.

Dex pointed out Eddie's mother among the attendees, a hard-bitten woman with Eddie's oversized, raw bones. The baby had Eddie's last name, but Eddie's mother was seated in the back pew. The Anderssens had never been particularly religious, and they were Lutheran if they were anything. Dex had grown up with Eddie, Irena, and her brothers in West Garfield Park. Even though we now lived in a different part of the city, the four of them always needed things from Dex and called him up, and he'd go back to the old neighborhood several times a week. I didn't go out there with him except for weddings, baptisms, and funerals, so it seemed like I spent most of my time there at St. George's even though Dex has given up Catholicism and joined the United Church when we got married.

Dex bought a brand new highchair for Nicholas for 170 dollars. We dropped it off when we gave Irena and the baby a ride home after the baptism. Dex was the only one with a car, so he did a lot of picking up and dropping off.

The night after the baptism, in the bathroom while I was preparing for bed and putting in my diaphragm, I thought, *Why is it always the girls*
who aren't prepared for motherhood that get to have babies? I have a college degree, a steady job at an elementary school, and I've have been married for four years. I could get paid maternity leave so we could still make the mortgage payments on the house.

After we turned out the lights and Dex slipped his hand onto my thigh, I asked him if seeing Nicholas made him want a baby of his own. “We'll see.” He pulled his hand away. “Maybe after we've both been teaching for a few more years. Kids are expensive.” We didn’t make love that night. I waited until after Dex was asleep to go back to the bathroom and take out my diaphragm.

Irena went back to work at El Flamingo two weeks after the baby was born. She put Nicholas on formula even though Aleksy said that, back in Poland, mothers nursed their boys until their first haircut at three years old. In the evenings, when she left Nicholas at the apartment with Fabian, she must have put menstrual pads in her bra to keep the milk from soaking through the front of her shirt. Aleksy complained that he'd often come home to the flicker of the muted television and Nicholas awake as he sucked on Fabian's fingers while Fabian slept on the living room couch. “Irena's not a natural mother,” Aleksy said.

Dex lent Irena money, partly to buy things for Nicholas and partly because her tips wouldn't be good until she got her figure back. Fabian had never held down a job, so he was the one who spent the most time with Nicholas. It was Fabian who called Dex in a panic whenever Nicholas had a cough or a rash. “I change the dirty diaper all the time,” he'd say. “What am I doing wrong?” Dex would put me on the phone with him, as if because I'm a fourth grade teacher I knew something about babies.

“Calm down,” I would tell Fabian, “it's just regular baby stuff. Don't worry, he's just fine.”

Dex bought Fabian classical music CDs to play to Nicholas after I read him an article that said music increases infant intelligence. “That kid needs every chance he can get,” Dex said.
When I met Dex in a sociology class, I would never have guessed he was from West Garfield Park. His accent betrayed nothing of his background, nor did his manners. He admitted later that he'd adopted certain tastes and etiquette. He taught himself to enjoy Japanese food and quit smoking. "You'd be disgusted about how far a superficial knowledge of wine will get you at a snobby dinner party," he said.

He didn't talk about his childhood with anyone except for me. Once after Nicholas was born, during dinner at my parents' house, I mentioned how generous Dex was with the people he'd grown up with: single mother Irena, crazy Eddie, good-hearted but slow Fabian. Dex's face got all red and he wouldn't look at me. "I've started volunteering with the United Way," my mother said. "Charity work is very rewarding, don't you think?"

Eddie was held in jail while he waited for his hearing. Dex went to visit him, but Eddie wouldn't see him. Irena didn't visit, even though Aleksy told her that she should let Eddie see "the fruit of his loins." On February 14, the day that Eddie and Irena had planned to get married, Eddie was transferred back to the hospital after he tried to cut out his tongue with a sharpened pen casing.

"The idiot was trying to escape his own skin," Dex said. But he didn't make it far with his tongue. It hemorrhaged like a dam had burst, and he lost a quart of blood before the guards noticed he was bleeding.

The hospital put him on suicide watch. Irena still didn't want to see him. "Why would I?" she asked. "He obviously doesn't want to talk."

Dex was reading in bed next to me, his magazine folded in half and held in one hand. I was pretending to read a historical romance, a bodice-ripper my mother had lent me. I turned to Dex and pushed his magazine down. "Does it scare you that you thought you knew Eddie, but you didn't know what he was really capable of?"

Dex sighed and checked the time on his alarm clock. "You want to talk about this right now?" he asked. I turned my bedside light off and turned my back to Dex. "Don't sulk," he said. He put his hand on my hip, a conciliatory gesture. "Yes, it scares me."
The judge said Eddie posed a danger to the public and wouldn't set bail for him. When the court-appointed defense attorney met with Eddie's mother, she asked Dex to come with her. "You were always a good friend to Eddie," she said, "and I don't trust lawyers in their fancy suits." I bought Dex a silk tie to wear to the meeting.

"Edvard won't explain why he did it," the lawyer told them. He thought that Eddie should try for an insanity plea.

"How do we know that Eddie wasn't just defending himself?" Mrs. Anderssen asked. The young lawyer was polite enough not to laugh in her face.

"You're lucky you haven't seen the crime scene photographs," Dex told me. "You can't think of Eddie the same way after you see them." The lawyer asked Dex to convince Irena to be a character witness for Eddie.

"I can't force her to help him," the lawyer said, "but she is the mother of his child. Weren't they going to get married?"

Eddie had always wanted Irena. Dex said it was obvious. Large, awkward, teenaged Eddie had walked Irena home from middle school until she turned thirteen and told him she was old enough to walk by herself. Three years later and drunk for the first time, Irena'd kissed Eddie in the parking lot of the 7-Eleven, but the next week she'd kissed Gregory Orlick. Eddie called her a whore, pinned her up against a wall in the Burger King, and rubbed the makeup off her eyes and lips with a spit-dampened napkin. They didn't speak much after that, but when Irena started working at El Flamingo after she turned eighteen, Eddie would sit at the bar with a Budweiser in his hand, and watch her as she earned her tips serving cocktails in her short skirt. Some nights after closing, he'd follow half a block behind her all the way from Independence Boulevard to S. Pulaski Road and watch from across the street as she turned lights on and off in the hallway, the bathroom, her bedroom. "It doesn't help that she's beautiful," Dex said. She had long pale hair and round blue eyes inherited from the peasant farmers of the Baltic coast. She looked innocent despite her sharp tongue. "With a tongue like that she should look more like Eddie," Dex said. "You know,
hatchet-faced."

Baby Nicholas was also beautiful. I saw a Sears portrait of Irena seated with the baby on her knee and her brothers standing behind her wearing wholesome-looking sweaters. "All you'd need to add is a sheep or two to the tableaux and you'd have a messed-up nativity scene, with two Josephs," said Dex.

"Does that make Eddie God?" I asked. Nicholas was six months old, all fat cheeks and curly blond hair. They could have put him on the labels for baby food; looking at him made me ache for a child of my own.

Fabian didn't get into trouble anymore after Nicholas was born. Dex would see him at the grocery store buying cabbage and canned beets and pushing Nicholas in a second-hand stroller. He told Dex that Nicholas loved Borsht even more than Nicholas's poor departed grandmother, "bless her soul." Fabian had cared for his mother while she slowly died of uterine cancer. Aleksy said Fabian had bleached the blood out of their mother's sheets when she started bleeding like a teenaged girl again. Dex said Fabian had made food for her that she couldn't eat as the cancer metastasized inside her abdomen and gave her the thin limbs and bloated belly of a starving child. That was before I met Dex, back when he, Eddie, Fabian and Aleksy were all still in high school. Fabian used to go with his mother to have fluid drained from where it gathered just beneath her skin; the doctors would tap her like a tree. Dex said it wasn't lost on Fabian that his mother's illness had originated in the same place that he had, and somehow he must have felt responsible. Fabian was the only one with her when she died; her lungs filled up with fluid and she drowned in front of him on the hospital bed. Fabian didn't call for a doctor.

"He just watched her die?" I asked. Fabian had climbed out the 3rd story window of the hospital room and walked home to tell Irena that their mother was in heaven.

"Fabian was never right after that," Dex said. The siblings had no other family in America. Everyone was back in Poland. If Aleksy hadn't been eighteen, Fabian and Irena would have had to go into foster homes.
when their mother died. Dex had to do what he could for them, even after he left the neighborhood to get a teaching certificate at the University of Chicago. That's why I didn't mind that Dex was always driving out there, why I didn't begrudge the time they demanded. I didn't know anyone as unlucky as those three, and their bad luck kept multiplying, spreading like a disease.

No one had known that Irena had finally surrendered to Eddie's attentions until after her belly started to show. Not even her brothers. When Aleksy figured out what was going on, he demanded to know who her boyfriend was. He locked her in her room for a weekend and she missed two shifts at work before she told him. Fabian delivered plates of meat dumplings and noodles to her. "For the baby," he explained.

Aleksy didn't believe her when she said it was Eddie. "But you've never liked Eddie," he said, "I thought you hated him."

Irena shrugged. "Eddie would do anything for me," she said. "We'll see about that," said Aleksy.

Eddie agreed to marry Irena. "I love her," he said. "I would have married her anyway." He still lived with his mother, but he started saving for an apartment for them to live in after the baby came. It was summer then, and there was a lot of work for him in construction. Dex and I went to the engagement party. Fabian festooned the dingy living room with white crepe-paper streamers and served sparkling wine in mismatched tumblers. Irena consented to a traditional hand-tying over a loaf of bread. Aleksy did the honors and joined Eddie and Irena together at the wrist with a satin ribbon.

"My brothers are more superstitious than old women," Irena said. "They're practically pagans." In photographs from the party, Irena looks like a porcelain doll next to hulking Eddie, her lips smiling and her eyes blank. Eddie seemed happy.

Dex said, "He looks like a cat that swallowed the canary." Eddie drank too much and, after Irena went to bed, I overheard Eddie confess
to Dex that one night, months before, when he'd followed Irena from the bar to make sure that she got home safe, she'd left the bedroom curtain open and let him watch her undress. She stood in front of the window and pressed her palm to the glass before she switched off the lamp. Eddie had waited outside all night for something else to happen, even though it was November and cold. He'd walked home in the grey twilight of early dawn, certain that Irena could love him. He followed her home again two nights later, allowing her the usual distance of half a block, and she stopped and waited for him to catch up.

"Why deny the inevitable?" Irena said—Eddie found this line very funny in the retelling, he laughed until his eyes were wet slits—and they'd fucked in the parking lot behind her apartment building between two parked cars with only her long winter coat protecting her back from the icy cement.

When we got into the car to drive home, I asked Dex if he'd ever felt like Eddie felt about Irena. "I feel that way about you," he said.

"No, not like this," I said. "You know, crazy. Unhealthy."

Dex took his eyes off the road to look at me, like he was trying read my thoughts, then he said, "I guess I'm not that kind of man." Out the window, we passed a boarded-up brick tenement bordered by an empty lot that had been turned into a community garden, squalor and an attempt at rehabilitation side by side.

Irena refused to appear in court, but Aleksy, Dex, Mrs. Anderssen, and a psychologist who the lawyer found all testified that Eddie was crazy. No one asked Fabian to be a witness and he stayed home with Nicholas. The courtroom reminded me of St. Georges. The seats were like pews. Michael Pelleire sat as far away from Eddie's friends and family in the gallery as he could and he used a cane when he walked down the aisle. A dentist had fixed his teeth up pretty nice. Mrs. Anderssen told a story about how Eddie had been put in a psychiatric hospital when he was a third grader after he'd broken two of his teacher's fingers. "He was a male teacher though," Mrs.
Anderssen said, “I don’t think he’d ever hurt a lady.” Eddie still wouldn’t speak. He sat silently at the defendant’s table wearing an ill-fitting suit and his scarred face.

“He looks like a real monster, doesn’t he?” Dex whispered to me. Eddie wouldn’t look up at any of the people he knew, not even his mother. He just stared down at his oversized knuckles laid out on the dark tabletop. The psychologist bandied about terms like late on-set schizophrenia and antisocial behavior disorder and the judge said that Eddie was not fit to stand trial. I watched Michael Pelleire cry after the ruling was handed down. Eddie just stood up and followed the bailiff out of the room, stiff-legged from hours of sitting. I asked Dex if he really thought Eddie was crazy. “I don’t think so,” he said. “It’s something else.” Eddie went to live on the forensic ward at the HartGrove Hospital.

For several months, everything seemed settled. “Any news about Irena?” I’d ask Dex, but there wasn’t any. Dex spent more time at home. He replaced the sink in the powder room and repainted the upstairs hallway in Robin’s Egg Blue. On days when the spring weather was especially nice, we drove to antique stores in Manteno to admire chest of drawers and vintage porch swings we couldn’t afford. “I think we could afford this,” I said, running my finger through the dust on the rail of an old crib.

“Maybe we could,” Dex said.

Irena started seeing a man named Luis who she met at El Flamingo. “He’s a businessman,” Dex said. “He’s rich. He has an apartment here and a house in Costa Rica.” Luis was thirty-eight years old and Irena was only twenty. Dex didn’t trust him. Luis flew Irena and Nicholas out to Puerto Limon for a week.

Fabian said Luis was good to Nicholas, bought him toys. Still, Fabian was scared that Irena might move to Costa Rica and take Nicholas. He told us as much when we took him and Nicholas to the Navy Pier to watch the Fourth of July fireworks over Lake Michigan. “Nicholas needs a real father though,” Fabian said, “a boy should have a real father.” He stroked Nicholas’s round scalp when he spoke, worried the baby’s curls with his
fingers. Nicholas was almost a year old, and Fabian had never cut Nicholas's hair, so it was growing long, past his ears.

Aleksy didn't think Irena and Luis were moving too fast like Dex did. "You don't just date a woman who has a child," he said.

Irena liked Puerto Limon. "I could learn Spanish," she said. "It never gets cold there. I could live like a queen."

On our way to Crystal Lake to visit my parents, I found a dozen photographs of Nicholas in the glove compartment of Dex's car and he told me that he'd been visiting Eddie at HartGrove. "They're safer if I hold on to them," said Dex. "The other patients steal things." He said he'd been driving Mrs. Anderssen there once a week and then after a few weeks, instead of waiting in the car, he'd accompanied her past the electronic doors and sat with the two of them in a day room with windows made of Plexiglas. "Not only can't you jump out the window," he said, "you can't break it and use it as a weapon either." He said he had the pictures of Nicholas for Eddie.

"Does Eddie speak?" I asked him.

"He's on medication, he's getting better," Dex said.

"Why didn't you tell me you were visiting Eddie?" I asked. He didn't say.

I'd had lunch with a friend from college and she told me about her job and the new house she'd bought in Highland. I ended up telling her about Dex and West Garfield Park. "He really loves his friends, in spite of everything," I'd told her.

"You don't get upset that he goes over there all the time?" she asked. "You don't worry that he's involved with criminals?"

I took a bite of salmon, carefully avoiding the parchment paper with my fork. "No, I think I'm lucky," I said. "He has a big heart."

In November, when Irena came to our house for the first time, she still had a tan from her second trip to Puerto Limon. Nicholas crawled on the carpet in the living room while we talked. He gripped the edge of the leather armchair where Dex sat, and then pulled himself up to standing.

Irena had never been to our house before. She complimented the quality of
our furniture and the luxury of our neighbor's cars. She was wearing a navy blue dress cut low in the front, and she looked at once businesslike and ridiculously young as she sipped the tea I'd offered her. "If I want to take the baby with me to Costa Rica permanently," she said, "can Eddie's family stop me?" Nicholas wobbled and fell backward onto his diapered bottom, but he didn't cry.

"I'm not a lawyer," Dex said. Nicholas picked a piece of lint off the carpet and put it in his mouth. Irena used her index finger to fish it out again, and gave him a pacifier that she removed from her breast pocket.

"I could give him a cookie," I said. Irena shook her head no.

"What do you really want, Irena?" Dex asked. "You want to leave your brothers and the father of your child and move to a foreign country with a man you hardly know?"

Irena uncrossed and then re-crossed her tan legs. "Luis has more to offer me than any of you ever did," she said.

Nicholas died while Irena was at work. Aleksy came home and found him in his crib, blue-lipped and rigid. Aleksy said Nicholas's veins showed through his thin skin as if he were becoming transparent. When he picked him up, Nicholas felt heavy and cool to the touch. Aleksy yelled for Fabian, but Fabian wasn't in the apartment. Aleksy carried Nicholas into the kitchen and called the police, then he sat in one of the dinette chairs and waited with Nicholas's face tucked into the crook of his throat.

The paramedics unbuttoned Nicholas's striped cotton sleeper and found red marks on his legs and the bottoms of his feet, so the police brought Aleksy into the station for questioning. They also picked up Irena at El Flamingo. Irena called Dex and before he went to the police station, he gave me the keys to Aleksy's apartment so I could wait for Fabian in case he called.

"Why would he leave the baby?" I asked Dex. "Do you think he hurt him?" Dex said Fabian wouldn't hurt a fly.

When I arrived at the apartment, Fabian's coat and shoes were
missing, but his keys and his wallet were still on his dresser. The dryer was full of clean baby clothes, socks the size of tea bags. I turned on the radio and washed dishes in the cramped little kitchen and tried to lend a little order to their messy lives. If Nicholas had been my son, I would not have put him in the care of an idiot uncle. I wouldn’t have let him live in a crummy little apartment in West Garfield Park.

Aleksy must have called Mrs. Anderssen and she must have called Eddie. There was a knock on Aleksy’s apartment door. I slid back the dead bolt, and Eddie elbowed past me into the living room, craning his neck to look into the kitchen, the dinette area. “How did you get out of the hospital?” I wanted to know, but he didn’t answer me.

“I’m going to kill him,” he said. “Where is he?” He checked the bedrooms, opened the closet doors, even pushed back the shower curtain, then he stood in front of me and stared down his long nose at me. “Where’s Fabian?” he asked. “Did he shake him? Did he drop him? Did he hit him? Did he bang his head?” Eddie gripped my upper arm and squeezed until my hand went numb. Dex said that Eddie had held Michael Pelleire by his hair and bashed his head against the edge of a porcelain sink until he stopped struggling.

“I don’t know,” I said. Eddie went to the crib and touched the yellow baby blanket with his big-knuckled hands.

“Fucking bitch,” he said. “Fucking Polack whore.” Then he told me.

Eddie had overheard Michael Pelleire boast to his friends that night at the Matador Bar that he was fucking another man’s fiancé. “She can’t get enough of it,” Michael Pelleire had said. “She wants it all the time.” Eddie had waited until Michael Pelleire got up to pee and then he’d followed him into the men’s room. He didn’t say a word; he just locked the door, and hit Michael Pelleire from behind as he stood in front of the urinal with his penis in his hand. Eddie’d been saving up that first blow for three days, ever since Irena told him that she didn’t want to get married anymore and that she wasn’t even sure that the baby was his.
“It could be yours,” she said. “I won’t know until I see if it grows up big and dumb.” It had taken everything in him not to kill her. He didn’t know who else the father could be, if it wasn’t Michael Pelleire—and he didn’t think it was now. Maybe it was Fabian. Why did Fabian act like the child’s father? It could be anyone. Maybe Irena seduced Eddie because she’d already known she was pregnant. Eddie didn’t know.

At the funeral, Irena wore dark sunglasses and hugged one of Nicholas’s teddy bears throughout the ceremony. Luis sat on one side of her and Aleksy on the other. Luis would take Irena to Costa Rica a week after the funeral and after that we’d only hear about her from Aleksy when she got married, then when she had a daughter. The police had apprehended Eddie after he’d wandered through the backyards of several West Garfield Park homes trying cellar locks and twisting back door handles. He’d run from them, resisted arrest, but two of the cops tackled him to the ground and eventually he ended up back at HartGrove. Eddie’s doctors didn’t let him out for Nicholas’s funeral. Instead HartGrove doubled their security in the outdoor smoking area where Eddie’d escaped over a ten-foot wall. Eddie’s mother was at the funeral. Again, she sat in the back pew. Fabian didn’t show up. The cops had an APB out on him for a few months. “They’ll never find him,” Dex said. “I bet he put rocks in his pockets and walked to the bottom of Lake Michigan.” I preferred to imagine that he had left Chicago, and that he was living incognito in California, somewhere warm and far away.

The doctors had done a post-mortem examination on baby Nicholas and concluded that the cause of death was bacterial meningitis. The funeral was closed casket. Irena deferred to Aleksy who said they never had open caskets in Poland. But the funeral director let Irena look inside the three-foot wooden box. Nicholas wore a stitched-up incision—from the back of one ear, over the crown of his head, across his fontanel, and then down behind the other ear where they’d pulled away his scalp and then opened up his skull with an electric saw. His christening gown covered the
petechial rash on his legs that would have been the first signs of his illness. "His bleeding brain killed him," Dex said, "but he didn't suffer too much, just slipped into unconsciousness." After a little over a year on earth, Baby Nicholas went back to God with his chest cavity empty but for cotton wool.

The night after the funeral, I woke to Dex's sobbing. He hadn't turned on the light, but the mattress shook with his silent heaves and when I reached out I felt his pillow was wet with snot and tears. I put my palms on his naked back and tried to love him, tried to pity him. "St. Nicholas is the patron saint of babies," he said. "He can make them come back to life. He just kisses them and they come back to life. I loved Nicholas."

I was cruel then, and I said, "I don't believe in saints." But I was also generous, because I let him remain a good, sensible man. I never asked Dex if he'd loved Irena more than "like a sister" like he said. I didn't ask if they'd been lovers since they were teenagers or if they'd slept together just once. I don't know if she'd thought he was a way out of West Garfield Park or if he figured that she wasn't the kind of woman a good man should marry. It's possible that Dex never slept with Irena and that the baby was indeed Eddie's. I pitied her either way.

I never asked and we stayed together, so our life never resembled the sordid soap opera of West Garfield Park. But two years later, when Dex wanted to name our first daughter Nicola, I refused. "It's a trashy name," I said. "Besides, who wants to think of sad stories every time they look at their child."
In closets, skeletons smoked cigars, told dirty jokes in Russian. Jason said, "Imagine dancing at a rave in space?" then did the Thorazine shuffle. In one, the bass of S&M music cut my heart-beat in three and I said "Thank you, Master Volume." Samurai, swords in obscene colors and orifices. Lucille Ball was still alive and walked through a grand marble archway and wore a ball gown. My roommate, not even eighteen, told me she could no longer have sex the regular way. After making love to a sunflower, her skin was bronze. I took a photo, enlarged it, and wrote in black marker, all caps: "I APOLOGIZE." Tried to blame guilt as a side effect to dreaming. You stood on the fifth floor balcony of a white cathedral, held aloft by our admirers' cheers. Crowd worthy of a Charlton Heston epic. By tens of thousands, I was forced to marry the Pope. He knew I did not believe in marriage, or God, and "This is why", he said, "you are the one." I found the answer to untarnishable happiness hopped in a kangaroo's pocket. What a shame I left it behind.
SAD ANIMAL

Under the thin blue blanket, phantom limbs shift, animaing the night. Where are you among fixed points? Why does this compass tremble in your direction? Last night I stood in the center of a frozen lake and listened to the ice, it felt like holding a tuning fork in my teeth—in a good way, that is to say that for a moment I could hear something other than the memory of your voice, by now just some watch springs without a watch. Mostly, I get by. My body bathes and speaks. No one is watching. I have the longest dreams, and mornings, I slit open the belly of sleep. I step outside. I keep time—the rest is what time keeps.
We are being watched by…
We have lost communication with…

[...technically, anything orbiting].

All our names for them were auspicious;
It was circumstances that didn’t live up.

And so, phosphorescent ejaculation,
angelic castoff,

robot drudge with solar-powered foresight.

With each pass, you tell us we are beautiful,

and we are starting to believe you,

the snow on the screen ourselves,
our smithereens.
PROPHECY

There is no telling what I am, what I’ll do, so I lift the lighter to my hair. The thumb-sized flame crackles as it meets the hard ridge of my Aqua-Netted, Morrissey-inspired pompadour. My audience laughs, four boys like me who have endured the first week of college orientation, their faces smiling each beneath baseball caps. The odor of singed hair fills the room. I would burn my head bald for them. But I would singe every hair on my body to kiss Jamie, a constantly-grinning boy whose worldly ease I want to possess. He lays on his stomach on the bottom bunk of his bed, his pale face propped up by his hands, enthralled as my hair dissolves into smoke. He’s the one who has kidded me into doing this, into making my hair an effigy. “Dude,” he said, grinning at me the way boys do when they want to dare you, “your hair is so gay.”

Tony, a skinny twin who can’t dance and is thus always dancing, sprays the Aqua-Net into the lighter’s flame. My head ignites, an orange periphery surrounds me, and the laughter is harder to hear, beyond the quick ball of fire. Jamie rushes a recently-used shower-towel over my head, and I am dampened, smoldering, laughing, even though I know my hair, my pride, is a disaster. I laugh even though I feel the fire scorching down into the soft part of me, where I hate myself. Self-immolating fool, clown who tries to make boys love him—boys who would, without doubt, feel betrayed if they knew who I really am.

That night, I dream his face closer to mine, our heads making a tent underneath the wet blue cloth. He says, “I want to fire you.”

That year, at frat parties where guys unzip and wave their dicks around, at the urinals in the Student Union bathroom, in the showers where my dorm-mates pass out drunk in their underwear while the water streams down and over their innocent bodies, at times in the common rooms where jocks lounge in shorts that ride up when a leg is thrown casually over the arm of a lucky chair, I avert my eyes. I live in a double-occupancy room in Gordis Hall,
on a Baptist campus, in the small town in which I grew up but left. I live a returned townie life. I live it in fear. If I don’t keep the flame of me buried, it will engulf me, send a signal into the dark sky of common brotherhood, dissolve me into so much putrid smoke.

What I am should be extinguished.

***

We know the morality of characters in our fairy tales by their hair. “Golden sunshine in her hair,” Merryweather opines, blessing the infant Princess Aurora before she is cursed to sleep. The same words fall from Malificent’s mouth, but are twisted into curse, as if she is pleased that all that sunshine will go to waste, as if by rendering the maiden unconscious the land itself is cured of sun and moral righteousness. All over peroxide and conditioner.

Think of the Little Mermaid, the sacrifices that were made for her form. Her devoted sisters, having heard through the underwater grapevine that Ariel forever forfeited her fins because her beloved wed another, offer their own hair to the Sea Witch. In exchange, the hag gives them a knife which Ariel must use to kill the Prince in order to regain her mermaid form. Of course, her heart breaks at the sight of her shorn sisters, their bald heads bobbing like jellyfish in the open blue water. But she cannot bring herself to kill; her sisters’ hair has taught her nothing if not self-sacrifice. Think of Rapunzel, letting that stud traipse up her trellis of locks. Think of the hero, lost in the glorious folds of her hair, exalting in the thick ropes of what he must tactiley come to think of as Rapunzel’s most private, lush self. So that when the witch, with her overprocessed permanent and wretched split ends, divests Rapunzel of her hair, the hero has no clue he is climbing into the clutches of evil.

Hair bewitches men. It is the currency of desire. Hair is the prophecy I listen to.
Once, I dyed my hair red, let the front of my hair grow out long, until the thick strand reached the nape of my neck. Unfurled, it was a little flame in the wind. I wanted hair I could let down.

Once, I car-flirted my way down to Key West with a man who sped up and smiled. The hair flew over my face, out the window, toward him. My hair, a bridge that beckoned, a line not strong enough to cross.

Once, I watched two South-American men play tennis on the courts outside a friend’s apartment. They played badly while I smoked. My lips left my Marlboros red-kissed. One of them hit the ball over the fence, and it bounced onto the concrete and landed on the second-floor level, where I caught it. The players stopped still. I held the ball out in my hand, Eve proffering an apple. The retriever soon came loping up the steps, the more athletic one with short hair and a liquid smile. I made one up when he asked my name. I asked if he wanted a drink, and he waited there on the terrace. He drank the water while looking into my eyes. The sweat made his skin shine through his shirt. I wanted more when the cup was empty.

Once there was no artifice, only a real body, a hand touching it, saying, You are my beloved, and that is how I know I am real. But that was just a fairy tale: no body is real.

I tried giving up desire. The prayer would start, Please let me wake up different.

Once, I was a man below, a woman on top, a palimpsest that made me less clear to the world and made the world clearer to me.

Once I was not a satyr, a eunuch. Once I was not trans- or bi- or uni-. I could not be prefixed.

Once I was afraid my roots were showing. Then, I was afraid no one would see them.
Hours spent standing behind my mother, her hair unwashed and knotted, a cigarette smoldering down to its filter in the ashtray beside her chair. Hours taking the brush through the matted blond mess, my mother saying, “Brush it harder,” telling me how when she was a child her brother used to drag her through the yard, caveman-style, by her hair. Me raking the comb along her scalp. I grew up in front of the T.V. Behind my mother’s head, I watched Merv Griffin, Sally Jesse, reruns of Green Acres. I loved how the comb organized the hair, then reorganized it, again and again. My middle-parted, side-parted, zigzag-parted mother; feathered mother; faux-beehived mother; diagonal mother; mother waiting to be French-braided, pigtailed, side-ponied, a woman waiting to be made, unmade by my hands.

While manning the counter with two other African American women, my boyfriend overhears an older white woman say to his co-worker Yoli, “Why do you and that other woman have such different hair?”

Yoli is East African and wears her hair natural, while Charlotte, the coworker to whom Culturally Insensitive Crusty White Lady gestures, has her hair locked into long dreads. They are all working in a discount bookstore in Rice Village, in Houston, a semi-posh 16-block outdoor shopping center. For Brandon and Charlotte, time slows. They can sense that this old lady in her Anne Taylor powder-blue suit has morphed for Yoli into The Very Last Straw.

“Maybe because we’re two fucking different people,” Yoli snaps.
The manager, a white man who cheats on his black wife, reprimands her, says, "For Chrissakes, Yoli, it's only hair!" He demands she apologize. She does. Then he fires her.

***

When I was a kid, my grandmother's chief responsibility in life was to visit her sick elderly friends and gift them the potted, unflowering plants which she grew in her greenhouse. She is visiting one such a friend, a half-hearing woman whose muumuu looks plastic. Dustin and I pass the time in her large dark house by playing hide-and-seek, crawling behind the couches, hiding on the enclosed porch. When it was time to go, grandma's friend remarked how nice it was to meet "Janie and Dotty." Afterward, in the heavy car-ride silence, I could see in my grandmother's tight-drawn mouth a plan forming.

My first haircut, then, took place in a barber shop, complete with Marvy barber pole and townsmen reading the paper, my grandmother standing by, her pocket-book cradled in the crook of her arm. The barber was rough. He'd grab a length of hair, pull it taut between two callused fingers, snip. His belly pressed against the back of my head while he cut the front of me, transforming me. "These boys look...different," he said to my grandmother, who sent him an imploring look: yes, change them.

"...different" meant I looked like a little girl. A few weeks earlier at the park where my older brother played soccer, a man asked to photograph me on the monkey bars. I was flattered. He told me to "Ask your mommy first," which I did. My mother met the man, and then retreated back to my brother's soccer game. I posed on the bars, on the ground, smiling at and for the man, his quickening shutter finger. At the end of our session, he reached a trembling hand out. He stroked my hair and said, "You are such a pretty little girl." Inside, my heart broke and quivered: I was pretty.
was true if I was a girl was true. He resheathed the camera, faded out to black.

My scalp throbbed under the barber’s hands, his long, flat black comb, which he pulled out of his cutter’s belt, where he kept scissors and razors and other instruments of torture. My hair was cut across my forehead, lifted above my ears, nearly flat in the back and on the sides. After he was done, my grandmother stooped to the ground, collecting a handful of hair that she then deposited in one of those opaque plastic envelopes she’d brought for the occasion. She paid the man, but did not tip him. She took me and my brother, my clean-cut twin, for ice-cream. I ordered a banana split because I’d never had one before. The white fruit cleaved by three scoops of chocolate. It was disgusting. I relished the maraschino on top but let the black-and-white dessert turn to soup. Sitting on a picnic bench along the town’s main drag, my grandmother beamed at the passersby. She ate her sugar cone expertly, saying more than once, “I’m so glad to be out on a date with my handsome young men.” We were her courtiers, minted heterosexuals, out for granny delights.

“What the fuck did you do to my kids,” my mother said, upon sight of us.

“Now, Marsha. Just gave them hair cuts. It’s what grandmothers do.” She sniffled. “They needed it.”

They needed it was my grandmother’s motto, what she said after we unwrapped socks on Christmas, or after she’d refolded all the towels in my mother’s bathroom closet on the nights she babysat us. They needed it was also what my mother called “fightin’ words.”

My mother hugged us to her body, hands crisscrossed in front of my brother and me. We were little human shields in the yelling that passed over the trenches of our bodies. It ended when my grandmother slammed out, and my father opened the door and said to her retreating form, “This is how you slam a door.” It
rattled the windows.

Later, Dustin and I would come home from grandma's house with our nails painted and our cheeks rouged, our lips reddened by the thick-tasting lipstick my grandmother used. Dustin couldn't stand to use the eyeliner or mascara. He preferred rooting in my grandmother's closet for the finer of her costume dressing-gowns while I sat at her powder-blotched vanity, pulling my eye open with a finger and running the pencil along the lid until it tickled and itched, perfected. My eyes darkened and sultry, a silver-screen film star's smoky almonds. Finally, the eyes of a woman who looked into a camera and did not shy from its glassy stare.

***

When I told my Grandmother I wanted blue hair, she said, "Don't ask your grandmother to go with you anywhere." She was an oracle decrying the would-be embarrassed woman, guilty by blue-hair association. At nine years old, I was her shame, threatened with excision.

My grandmother permed her hair every two weeks. At the beauty school. Where she paid ten dollars. And asked the woman to please clean her ears out. She was devoid of shame. And she let me waste reams of paper at her typewriter on rainy afternoons. I'd sit at the card table and hammer the keys just to hear the language strike home. Nothing was more satisfying than the zing and swoosh of the carriage return. Or replacing the miracle of corrective tape. Only at her typewriter did I want to be a mechanic, to understand machine parts moving in concert.

And she gave me Harlequin Romance novels to read for inspiration. Genuine bodice-rippers, with covers depicting cotton-bosomed women swept into some Fabio's embrace.

Once, after loving one of those novels so much, I typed a fan letter to the author. My grandmother wrote the cover letter,
explaining my young age, saying how I'd spend hours at her type­writer. "Budding writer," she called me, and if she had said them aloud, I think her voice would have had an air of pride about it. I wanted hair that would be shocking, off-putting in a comely, bold way. I wanted words that way too.

***

My mother's father had a full head of hair when he died in 1995, the summer after my freshman year of college. He was 70, living alone in one of those comfortable houses on a tree­shaded street in Orange City, a few towns over from where I went to school. He called where he lived "Sun City," erasing the gap between the two words. My mother hadn't talked to her father in years before he went into the Volusia County Hospital. But I had.

My roommate, Sean, and I used to prank call my mother's father. It started innocent enough, with Sean phoning as a lost pizza­delivery man. My grandfather, always polite to strangers, thought he was delivering to a neighbor: "If you pass Mano's, well now you've gone too far," my grandfather advised. When Sean repeated the address, Pa sputtered out, "But well that's my house!" Sean concluded, "Old man, you are paying for this pizza."

If Pa was proud of one thing, it was his virility. After all, as a senior citizen, he'd had two 17­year old girlfriends, and had been arrested for soliciting sex from an undercover police officer in a park. (A male officer, at that). My grandfather was nothing if not a man of vim and vigor. And so Sean's off­the­cuff taunt got Pa steaming mad. He informed Sean that he wasn't, "Payin' for no pizza from a little pussy." Sean got real quiet, his face gained its Irish blush. "You're paying for this pizza, asshole, or I'm going to kill you." I muffled my guffaws with a pillow.

Pa didn't see the humor. He screamed into the phone, "Bring it on! Bring it on, pizza man!" We could hear someone—a
woman—in the background saying, “Clayton, honey, who IS it?” It was either Mentora, the woman he was seeing before my grandmother’s funeral, or Anne, who my aunts told me, worshipped Satan. Which means she was probably Presbyterian.

After that first prank call, my grandfather opened his front door to a dazzling array of pizza boxes strewn over his lawn. My dorm-mates called him weekly, hollering into the receiver, “Bring it ON!”

Two things surprised me. One, that he never called the cops. But, I guess a natural distrust develops between felons and “the fuzz.”

The other thing that surprised me: my grandfather kept his hair throughout this ordeal. “He looks like Hitler,” my cousin Shanda said, looking down into the coffin at his funeral. His head was propped up on a pillow, as if he were just about to lurch out of that box. He did look like Hitler—he had a thin mustache growing at the time of his death, and his hair was cut short and swept from the left side to the right. His forehead was pale and shiny, his hair dark and oily. But I don’t know if Shanda would have said that about Pa if the stories about him hadn’t been handed down, circulated now among the grandkids.

Shanda kept cracking jokes. My cousin Travis kept laughing, looking less awkward in a borrowed suit now that he was throwing out jokes. I smirked my allegiance to my cousins and their irreverence but somehow my eyes kept wandering over to the dirty old man in the box. I kept thinking, I will inherit that receding hairline, I will inherit that head, the way the eyes recede, sink back into the skull. With one ear locked on the jokers’ world, I wanted to lock the other to the dead man, I wanted to hear him answer: what other parts of me will be like you?

***
I never saw my father cut his hair in my life. He never went to a barber, a salon. He cut it himself, with an electric razor. His hair is fine, black, and wavy. In pictures of a younger self, my dad is clean-cut, shaved beneath controlled locks of hair, which he parts on the side. Though I have my mother’s straight hair, it’s my father’s hairstyle I emulate. Parted on the side, brushed straight over, though now I flip mine up in the front, much to my boyfriend’s chagrin. I like this hairstyle, its forthrightness.

In a picture of my dad reading the newspaper, I am reading over his shoulder, hunched down next to him, nearly cheek-to-cheek. It’s a posed photograph, though I can’t remember what for. My dad is wearing a green shirt, and I’m dressed for school in a red Roman-collared shirt, my hands tucked into my jeans. But what is striking about the photograph is not the age of the people in it, nor the fact that I am seemingly interested in the Sports Page. From the downward angle of the lens, my dad and I look like hair-twins, the parts in our hair smiling identically for the camera.

My father can’t comb his hair anymore. He used to have a special brush with the extended handle that angled the brush back and away. It was designed for people who can’t lift their hands above their head, for people like my dad who have had cardiac surgery and can’t manage yet. Now, though, he can’t even use that.

He can’t shave.
He can’t wash his own laundry or cook his own meals.
He can’t brush his teeth.
Now he has no more teeth to brush.
Some days he doesn’t remember how to stand.
After it is washed and combed, his hair is smooth against his scalp, he is almost restored, nearly again the debonair and mischievous man my mother fell in love with.

Look at his hair. Even now, catching the light.

***
I go to Harmar, Pennsylvania to be changed. The man is shaving my head in a hotel room that I have paid for. It has a Jacuzzi tub and a late check-out time. He brought electric clippers and a cache of blue Gillette razors, the disposable kind, which he opens with his teeth.

"Only real men have hair," he says. The cuttings fall in clumps down my face. I lick my lips and stalks of hair lodge on my tongue.

I have given up my right to say when the sacrifice is enough. It is never enough.

My chest is next. He holds the razor to my lips. I look up at him, a twenty-something anyone with the hard edge of nowhere in his eyes. "Go on," he says, and I do. Two blades, one laying over the other, a small gap between. I kiss the metal lips.

He slides the twin blades over my pectorals, over where I breathe and bleed. Then he shaves his name, three block letters, on my left thigh. My right leg goes completely. My groin.

I am hairless, powerless as Samson. I feel raw as silk.

"Now," he says, "kiss my hairy chest."

After it is over, giving in, giving over, his body sated, gone, I, who will normally close his eyes in order to put on deodorant lest a glimpse of naked body be caught, gaze into the full-length mirror. I trace the flexed muscles of my smooth legs, my hairless chest, my soldier buzzcut. The stubble on my neck seems the hairiest part of me. What stares back from the mirror is ready for whatever comes next. I am stripped, vulnerable, and ready, world. Do your worst.

In the car, driving home, I roll down the windows. I turn up the radio. I sing along to the anthems at the top of my lungs all the way home.
COCO OWEN

A COLLECTION OF PROVERBS AND COMMON-PLACES REMIXED TO DEPOTENTIATE THEIR POTENTIALLY DAMAGING AFTER-EFFECTS

Instructions for reading:

As with the “flooding” technique in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or a simple phobia, read through the sections below as able. If you heard these proverbs or expressions repeated, as a child or in school, and they still make you nervous today, you might benefit from this desensitization exercise.

Begin by reading the randomly scrambled text out loud at a steady pace. Repeat as many times as necessary and then at greater speed, until the saying or proverb has lost its power to evoke shame, guilt or anxiety. Remember being a child and repeating a tongue-twister until it just turned into gibberish or you were laughing so hard you couldn’t talk? That is what we want to accomplish with this technique. Use with any other sayings or words from the past that continue to have a negative effect on you.
She was Bad, She was Horrid

Was when she good horrid,
but bad when when she,
very was when good bad, indeed!

She was she was very
very was but when she
good horrid bad was very when.

Good was she horrid,
indeed when was
was bad she very but she she.

When when was good,
bad but good, very
horrid very indeed, very
horrid, was she, bad
was she, when but
indeed very good was she,
good was she when
indeed very was.

And, But!!

No ifs ands or buts —
and ifs, no buts!
Ands, buts: no: Or....
Or no. If and but.
But, and, and! Or, if no — No.
SUGAR 'N SPICE 'N EVERYTHING NICE

That's nice what girls are little made and sugar little what and nice spice are of 'n little nice that's what everything girls made sugar nice little of spice 'n what sugar that girls nice that's little made and what spice 'n everything sugar are of of made are girls little what that's nice everything and spice 'n sugar that's nice what everything little and girls spice are 'n made sugar of what and everything spice that's made.

"A ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE." (GERTRUDE STEIN)

A is a rose is rose is is a rose a is a a a rose is is rose is rose rose a is rose is a is rose is a is rose rose a a is is a a rose a is rose a a is rose a is rose is a is rose a is a rose a a is is a is rose is rose rose is a rose a rose is a rose a a a rose rose rose is a is rose is a is rose is a rose rose is rose is a is rose a a a is a rose a is is rose is rose is a.

Owen
THOMAS MIRA Y LOPEZ

ETIOLOGY

Whenever my mother and I drive to her house in Pennsylvania, she asks me to take a look at the Ohio buckeye. It is a ritual I am familiar with by now. I carry the bags inside and leave them on the kitchen counter, then move the food from cooler to refrigerator. She takes the black poodle out of his travel crate, praises him for being so patient, eyes him closely as he romps around the field, and when I have slid the ice packs into the freezer and the poodle has discovered for the hundredth time the hundredth smell at the base of the pine, she will call to me through the screen door. “Come, Tom, come see dad’s tree.”

She does not know how much I begrudge this ceremony. She does not know that, after two hours in the car next to her, all I want to do is open a bag of tortillas chips, pop the seal of a jar of salsa con queso, and stand over the counter dipping a dozen or so chips into cheese. Or, rather, she does know this: she is my mother. If I eat too much, she knows the next thing I will do is take a nap. The poodle’s walk is timed so that she can call out to me before I become too involved in the process of dipping and chewing, before I feel full enough to grunt a refusal and shut the door to my room. She might even know that I do not care about the buckeye, that I attach no importance to it, that I do not even particularly like it. She is my mother. Maybe she knows that she has only to expose it enough in order for me to care—like the way when I sit down to eat take-out with her on Monday nights, she knows she only has to refuse to change channels and I will watch Dancing With The Stars.

In Pennsylvania, I trudge outside and around the house and walk up to the tree. I circle it and give the trunk a hesitant pat, squeeze its diameter, unsure how to touch it as I am unsure how to pet the dog. “It’s beautiful,” she will beam, standing there, watching me. “It’s grown so much.”

There are five rivers in the Greek underworld. They are the Styx, river of hate; Acheron, river of pain; Cocytus, river of lamentation; Phlegethon, river of rage; and Lethe, river of oblivion. I like to think that, taken together, these rivers form a rough Kubler-Ross model for ghosts.
In their enumeration, Lethe comes last, the final stage of grief. Its waters serve as a general anesthetic. All those who drink from them forget their former state, their joy and grief, pleasure and pain. This potential, this river of morphine and drowsiness and opiates, sounds quite tempting when poetized, when it becomes, as Ovid writes in the *Metamorphoses*, the place “where dream-haunted poppies grow, hanging their heads above wet ferns and grasses...and weighted eyelids close each day to darkness.”

Yet my uncertainty about Lethe stems from its source. Arriving in English from Greek via Latin, the word is rendered as either oblivion or forgetfulness. To me, these two words, speaking the English that I speak, are different: oblivion is a permanent state, forgetfulness temporary. I would like Lethe to mean the latter—a soporific that acts nightly not just to erase all memories of pain and suffering, but to restore those memories upon arising and transform them into something acceptable, into a new and peaceful state. But I suspect Lethe is really the former: that once you drink these waters there is no going back, no middle ground or middle island upon which to stand.

My father planted the Ohio buckeye in 2004, the year my parents bought this second house in northern Pennsylvania, fifteen minutes south of the Delaware River. What makes the buckeye impressive is that my father planted a seed, not a sapling or nursery tree. This seed, bay horse brown with a café au lait spot in its center, resembles the eye of a male deer and so gives the buckeye its name. My father planted the seed in 2004 and, in 2006, it had grown to a four foot sapling. In 2012, my mother estimates the tree at twenty feet tall. Buckeyes grow to a height of forty-five feet. Their diameter measures fifty centimeters. They live for eighty years, a human lifespan. That is, the lifespan of a lucky human.

It is crucial for my mother that this buckeye not just live and flourish, but survive. She will scoff at the afterlife, yet all the same, animism and reincarnation exist for her within this tree. She has assigned a spirit to it, wished it a narrative to fulfill these beliefs.
That spirit, of course, belongs to my father. The body is his as well: the hands that scooped out the pocket of earth and laid the seed to rest are now the buckeye’s leaves, his limbs the branches, the mind that decided to plant the tree exactly there are its roots, stretching ten feet downhill from the squat evergreen, thirty feet from the house so that my mother can gaze out at it from the window above the kitchen sink.

One does not need to pay for passage across Lethe. Charon the toll collector ferries the dead only across the Styx or Acheron. As payment, the dead must each give Charon an obol, or he will not allow them to cross. An obol holds little value; the coin is equivalent, roughly speaking, to the daily wage of a skilled worker in ancient Greece. It is no fortune in itself, but it adds up. If Charon does not receive his payment, the soul can not cross and is fated to spend eternity in limbo between the world of the living and the dead. To prevent this, a family would place an obol in the deceased’s mouth, under the tongue or on the lips. This became known as Charon’s obol: a viaticum, bus fare and a bag lunch, provision for a journey. The otherworldly narrative one can conjure from a small circular object, seed or coin, grasped in a hand.

My father’s seizures began in 2003, the year before he planted the buckeye. They were minor, except when they were not. Those were the one or two nights he spent in a hospital bed at Mount Sinai. Medication could treat them, except when it could not. The seizures still recurred, however minor, and by the summer of 2006, my father no longer worked in the garden or the field. He complained of his right hand cramping, of losing the dexterity in his fingers. He no longer drank black coffee in Duralex glasses, the way he had growing up in Brazil, nor did he have a glass of Sandeman port after dinner, the way his mother did. He did not drive and this frustrated him. When I came to visit, I drove him from New York to Pennsylvania and he remained silent, watching the speedometer.

I was not around that summer—I worked on a farm near my
college, weeding by hand, complaining of the straw that would scratch up my arms—and so I did not witness these regressions. I could hear them, however, if I chose to. His voice had started to slur by then, the lip a little twisted, and so he sounded over the phone as if he had just woken up from a nap, disoriented, not entirely in his present state. I was not around that fall either: it was junior year and I went to Rome to study abroad.

In September of 2006, my father suffered a massive seizure while visiting his mother in Brazil. Two surgeries later, the right side of his body was paralyzed and he could no longer speak. By October, he was back in New York, flown twenty-four hours in a Medevac plane alongside my mother. She told him, when she was planning the evacuation, that he would be able to recover in the country, that they could watch the mother-of-pearl sunsets together and count sheep on the opposite hill. I nodded along. My father did not say anything. In November, after a little over two months of silence, he died.

Once one crosses the Styx and Acheron, there is still a ways to go before reaching Lethe. The dead, Plato writes in Phaedo, are sentenced to different parts of the underworld according to their earthly acts. Murderers, for example, are sent to Cocytus; those who have outraged their parents to Phlegethon. Once they have served their time there, the current brings them to the Akherousian Lake, where they must call out to those they have wronged and ask to be set free. If their plea is accepted, they may leave; if not, they are borne back into the rivers. These rules are meant for the dead. Yet if the living may travel to the underworld, if the living sometimes search for loved ones or drink from Lethe, why can’t they be judged as well? Why don’t they float in the waters of Cocytus and Phlegethon?

The buckeye has become, for my mother, something tangible my father left behind. Unlike other memories, it does not decay or fade, but gains in strength over time. It is there, so solidly there, impressing itself on the landscape. My mother can mark its progress and measure its height as if it were a growing boy. She can perceive its existence as remarkable, just as
she perceives mine as such—her only child, born to her at the age of forty-two, after already one miscarriage. She can nurture it, this memory of my father before his illness—the scientist who loved trees, who loved experiments like burying seeds in the ground or sifting through bear shit he found on the road, oblivious to the implication that the bear, the danger, might lurk nearby. She sees this and envisions a new, sturdier body, a body that grows skyward without shaking or collapsing.

Yet still, despite the buckeye's heartiness, she worries. She frets over it and fusses. She thinks of razing the trees around it, the squat evergreen and the weeping willow, holdovers from the previous owners, even though they do not steal the buckeye's sunlight. The buckeye, in fact, robs theirs. She fears she will not be able to sustain it, to keep it healthy. She believes it owes its vitality to itself, to whatever magic was within my father's hands that could create a living thing.

She worries, in particular, because she believes herself a hopeless gardener. "Not just hopeless, I'm cursed," she will half-joke. I do not want to believe her (how could my mother, the woman who swaddles the poodle in a towel after his bath and holds him in her arms like a newborn, fail at nurturing?), but the evidence is there. The plot I weeded the year before is as overgrown as ever, the sole mark of her success the petunia bush she transplanted. She speaks of her garden to strangers and, when they politely inquire what she grows, she snaps back, "I grow weeds." It will not immediately be clear that she is serious. Out back by the cellar entrance, she will point with pride to a handful of white flowers that have grown amidst the tangle of tall grass. They are weeds, not wild flowers, but they are to some degree the result of her hand. Rumors of her inadequacy have apparently spread. The gardener who lives down the road does not return her calls. She does not know why. "I'm cursed, I'm doomed." She has left several messages, asking for his services, offering him to name his price, but he has not called back.

Given the chance to keep something, someone, healthy all over again, she has enlisted my help. I weed around the base of the tree, I lay down mulch and wood chips. I build a wire fence around the buckeye's
perimeter to keep out rabbits. We both have no idea what we are doing, but these acts are of utmost importance—if I refuse or complain, the tree's life hangs in the balance, we could lose him all over again—and so we walk out and admire the buckeye each visit, as if we were visiting a living tomb, as if we were trying to grow the thing on good karma alone.

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In 2008, my mother bought a tree in Central Park also in memory of my father. A horse chestnut, specifically. My father now divides his time between two trees. It stands in the North Meadow, along the path my father walked each morning to and from work. Standing beside this tree, you can see Mount Sinai to the east. The hospital's medical center, a large black building, fills the skyline. My father worked in this building as a cell biologist and was transferred there as a patient after my mother flew him out of Brazil. It was where he died. Adjacent to the horse chestnut lie the fields where he watched me play soccer growing up, I the goalkeeper, he the assistant coach by virtue of being Brazilian. Nearby, a five minute walk away, are the trees where he buried the pet hamster and cockatiel on his way to work, after we found them at the bottom of their cages.

I read about Central Park and a man named Elmaz Qyra one morning at my mother's kitchen table. The New York Times is profiling the dangers of the city's trees. Like my father, Qyra liked to walk in the park after work. When he had finished his shift as a busboy, he walked a few blocks north to the 59th street entrance and headed to Poet's Walk. One time in late February, 2010, he went for a walk after a heavy snow had fallen. At 3:00 p.m., the Times wrote, if there was any sunlight, Poet's Walk must have been wondrous. The park, his wife said, reminded him of his childhood home, of his parents' farm in Albania. What Qyra did not know, as he walked alone along the promenade, was that one of the trees above him was due to be removed. The year before, a limb had fallen from it and
damaged another tree. A five-foot cavity swelled within its trunk and fungus infested it. Elmaz Qyra passed beneath it and a fifteen-foot limb as heavy as a refrigerator fell, split his head open, and killed him.

After my father was hospitalized in Rio, I visited him there. I flew from Rome and stayed for two weeks. Over those two weeks, my father in then out of the ICU, I gained between five and ten pounds. I liked the food in the hospital cafeteria and it killed time. There was not much to do: hold my father’s hand, read Graham Greene, watch soccer or CNN, masturbate, nap, wipe my father’s brow, play solitaire on my iPod. Staying overnight in the hospital room, I would sleep from eight in the evening till ten the next morning. My mother did not sleep. She lost fifteen pounds. She started smoking again and exhaled a lot, either smoke or sighs. She sighed so audibly that I thought she did so on purpose, wanting my attention or awaiting my comment, but she claimed she was unaware of it.

My father lost even more weight, thirty pounds if I had to guess. Around a half pound came from his skull. A human skull weighs a little over two pounds and doctors removed a quarter of my father’s to perform the second operation. They did not install a plate and so the left side of my father’s head looked deflated, as if collapsed in on itself. There seemed nothing separating brain from skin. The skin, the hair shaved to a stubble, flapped and breathed of its own accord. If I pressed hard enough with my finger, I thought it would sink all the way into the skin until it touched his brain, the damaged organ I could not see.

Needless to say, my father did not have much of an appetite. I began to eat the soft, warm foods off his tray: macaroni and cheese, apple sauce, mashed potatoes, flan. The nurses who brought in the meals would do a song and dance each time as to how delicious the food looked, how hungry my father must be, how he needed sustenance to get his strength back up. I looked on while they did this, picking out which food I would eat first, the nurses little knowing that they were performing for me.

To eat and sleep, of course, is its own form of forgetting. If you
were not awake for it, it is hard to say it really happened.

I cannot see the buckeye the way my mother sees it. My father does not stand tall within it, this ugly, puny thing choking the water and stealing sunlight away from the evergreen. Its growth is not representative of his spirit or his hand. There are few memories for me of my father in the country, none of his working the land. When my parents first bought this house, during the visit when my father planted this seed, I stayed in New York. I was still in high school then and their overnight trips meant that I could hotbox our bathroom with my friends.

Still, I yearn to see it and him with her eyes. Now he rises balanced, where before there was asymmetry and paralysis. Now he grows and feeds on water where before he shrank, withered from the inability to retain fluid. Now bark armors the pith within his trunk, where before nothing encased his cerebral tissue or separated it from his skin. Now the wind rustles through his leaves and sometimes it even howls, where before there was only silence.

This is all, I suspect, just another way of forgetting. Or of remembering only what we want to remember. The river of Lethe runs underground and feeds the buckeye. By placing my father in this tree, my mother has chosen to remember him as he not always was: as strong and healthy, flourishing instead of decaying.

Form, however, collapses. My father’s body, my mother’s superstitions. And what happens when that balance breaks down, when the surface level can no longer hide the structural frailty underneath? Trees rot, desiccate, become infested, drink too deeply from poisonous waters. Oblivion lasts until it does not, until a branch snaps and falls in anger at its being forgotten.

Forms indeed collapse. Within her own memory, my mother has begun to mix-up names. She calls me Rafael. She calls the dog Tom. She calls my father Tom or Celso, the poodle’s name. Sometimes she says your grandfather, when she means your dad. She no longer catches the slip, it
passes unnoticed. I used to correct her every time, to jump on the chance of being right. But now I no longer do so. I let it slide.

Her memory is sharp in other ways. “Do you visit dad’s tree?” she will ask me. She means the horse chestnut she has purchased in Central Park. I tell her not so much. If I walk by it, I will make note of it. But I do not often happen to pass it—I no longer play soccer or baseball on those fields, I have no reason to cross the park and visit Mount Sinai. I read a book underneath it once, J.D. Salinger’s *Nine Stories*. If I tell my mother I am going anywhere in Central Park, she will want to know if I plan to stop by my father’s tree. “No, mom,” I say, “I’ll be a mile away.” I ask her if she ever visits the tree and she says no, she doesn’t often end up around there, it’s out of her way and a bit hard to go to. She means she can see that big black building looming to the east. But she’s glad the tree’s there all the same.

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My cousins and I would play a game called Monster under the horse chestnut tree at my grandparents’ house in East Hampton. My father would chase us around the yard, his face twisted in a rictus, lip upturned into snarl. “Now I’m coming to get you,” he would shout, once he had given us enough time to reach safety. If my father found and caught us, he would wrap us up in his arms and the game would be over. To avoid him, we hid under the canopy of the horse chestnut tree. When we heard him coming, his stomp and growl, we began to climb the tree. We climbed a limb near the tree’s edge, one that ran along the ground until it rose upwards again. My father would palm open the curtain of leaves and scowl, feigning disorientation, giving us time, pretending he did not know we had run to where we always ran to. For reasons unexplained, he could not climb the tree. Elevation was our safe haven, we had made it our rule. If we climbed beyond his grasp and kicked free of the hands that grabbed at our ankles, he could do nothing but look up at us—our chests breathing against bark, arms hugging the tree limb, feet dangling—and glower. Then the
Eventually a branch necessary to climb this limb snapped off. It was our first foothold and, without it, we were helpless. My father nailed a two-by-four to the trunk where the branch had been. Our feet could not wrap around it the same way, but it remained fixed and we could climb the limb again. I know that even if this limb were to continue growing, this two by four would stay in the same place and persist, at the perfect height for a four-year-old's step. This, to me, is stable memory, oblivion's antithesis. That is, until a new owner decides to prune the branches, or lightning strikes the thing, or hurricane Sandy or Amelia or Rachel or Alexandra or Hannah moves in off the Atlantic, or the branch just rots and poisons the tree and I die.

The last time I heard my father's voice was on my birthday. I was in the shower, in Rome, and my cell phone rang. It was an international number. I turned off the water and answered. It was October and my mother was at Mount Sinai, my father having been transferred back to New York. She wished me happy birthday and put my father on the phone. He was doing better and could form a few sounds. Mostly sighs. The word hey. He made it half-way through happy birthday. I waited on the other end, head leaning against the tiles, naked, dripping wet.

The last time I heard him speak a sentence was at the airport. I had an evening flight to Fiumicino, he was to fly to Rio de Janeiro the following day. I do not remember what he said, but it must have been along the lines of: "Be safe, Tom. Remember x, remember y. Love you. Be safe."

I asked my mother why didn't they call me from the hospital more often, if my father could manage a few words. She said she didn't really know. "Dad was tired," she said, "It was very hard for him." He preferred silence. It was hard to know how he felt about us, if he was mad I was not there, if I were acting the right way or hurting him further. We could have just remained speechless over the line but I do not say that, just as my mother does not ask me why I did not call the hospital myself or why I stayed in Rome.
The above is not exactly true. The last time I heard my father’s voice was not on my birthday or at the airport, but a few years after his death. He had recorded the message on the answering machine at the house in Pennsylvania. I would call from time to time, when I knew my mother was not there. His voice sounded distracted, caught off-guard, because either my mother or I had just walked into the room. You could hear the kitchen chair creak as he leaned in when the recording began. I did not tell my mother I did this, but I am almost certain she did the same because sometime later, when I was away or abroad, she changed the recording to an automated message and erased his last remaining words. Though I would not have done so, I can only hope the agony of deleting his voice, the willful choice to forget, weighed less for her than the agony of hearing it. While there is no account of what Elmaz Qyra heard before he died, others describe the sound of a falling branch in various ways. It can sound like a thunderclap. It is the creak of a floorboard in a horror movie. A booming. A loud crack or snap. It is something. It is a warning or a taunt or a condemnation.

Trees rot because of fungus and internal decay. A tree suffers a significant wound, anything larger than three to four inches in diameter, and rotting fungi will establish their presence in the time it takes it to form a callous over its injury. It is a common phenomenon for a tree to suffer significant injury: lightning can strike or a thunderstorm can break a limb; roots can be damaged underground or insects can infest it; there is human harm, say someone who prunes one large limb instead of several smaller ones. As a defense mechanism, trees will compartmentalize their decay to maintain structural integrity. That is, fungi will only rot away the dead wood in the center of the tree. A tree can sustain the hollowing of its core as long as new rings are forming and widening around its circumference; its structure can bear a central emptiness if there is something to compensate. Just as humans—my suffering mother, my sick father—will do. Some trees do a better job of compartmentalizing decay than others. Oaks, for exam-

Technically, my mother did not buy the horse chestnut tree in Central Park, but an endowment for it. The Tree Trust of the Central Park Conservancy offers New Yorkers the opportunity to “create a living memory that will last for generations to come.” In exchange for a donation, the Conservancy will engrave a paving stone in honor of the endower along the southern end of Poet’s Walk. The endower also receives the more or less false sense that he or she owns a tree.

Donations range depending on the tree endowed. For $1,000, you can purchase a new sapling. For $5,000, a remarkable tree. With this and all subsequent prices comes the engraved granite paving stone. For $12,000, a tree cluster family. For $25,000, a historic tree, planted 150 years ago at Central Park’s inception. For $250,000, you can purchase groves or allées. Groves are a cluster composed of four or more trees of the same species. Allées are “a unique arrangement of two or more rows of the same species.” The example the Conservancy gives is of the majestic American elms along Poet’s Walk itself. With these come an engraved bronze plaque.

My mother purchased a remarkable tree. Her engraved granite paving stone, must read somewhere on Poet’s Walk: “Endowed by JUDY THOMAS in honor of RAFAEL MIRA Y LOPEZ.” But I am not sure. I have never visited it.

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I flew from Rome to New York in early November. I landed on a Thursday and was to fly back Sunday, but my father died that Sunday night and I stayed. That day, around noon or one in the afternoon, a doctor told my mother and me that my father would not last very long. I told my mother I would be right back. I took the elevator down the eight or nine floors from the ICU my father had been moved into the night before, and stepped out onto the street. Across Fifth Avenue was Central Park and I be-
gan to run. I ran into the park, past the dust field, past the North Meadow, past the horse chestnut where my father's spirit would later reside, out onto the Upper West Side and north ten blocks until I reached the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. I entered and told the man behind the donation booth that I would like to buy the $3.95 candle. I handed him a twenty and he told me he could not make change and pointed to a sign. I left, bought an Apricot Linzer cookie at a pastry shop next door, came back, put a five dollar bill on the counter, took my candle, and threw the cookie at the man. I walked down the nave until I reached the bed of candles by the altar. I lay the wick in a neighboring candle's flame and placed mine among the others. Written on the glass of the other candles were messages and well-wishes for loved and lost ones. I did not write anything, but I did make a wish. A wish that, if I were to say what it was, I'd be afraid wouldn't come true.

I took a cab back to the hospital. I watched the New York Giants lose to the Chicago Bears and that night, figuring things would hold, I told my mother I was going back to the apartment. I would have a bite to eat and get some rest. My aunt had just driven down and we ordered take-out, General Tso's Chicken and scallion pancakes. The food arrived and a call came from my mother. "You should come back," she said. I did. When I arrived, my father seemed the same and I fell asleep in an armchair at the foot of the bed. The overnight nurse came and left and, after she did so, when the Cheyne-Stokes breathing began, my mother told me, "You should come to the bed, Tom."

A remarkable tree is an interesting name for a common horse chestnut, especially when one considers that the Conservancy is naming things that do not know they have names. But a remarkable tree is exactly what my mother believes this chestnut to be.

Endowments help ensure the maintenance of Central Park's trees, but the Conservancy does not inform you what happens if your particular tree is damaged or destroyed. This is a valid concern. On Halloween in 2011, an unexpected and unprecedented snowstorm damaged 1,000 trees.
in Central Park. Earlier that year, Hurricane Irene destroyed 100 trees. Before these, a thunderstorm downed more than 100 trees in the park on a single day, August 19, 2009. Hundreds more were damaged, many fatally. This was the most severe destruction the park’s trees had sustained in decades and it was concentrated in the northern third of the park where my father’s horse chestnut stood. The city temporarily closed the fields at North Meadow in case of falling branches. The storm was a microburst: straight-line winds reached speeds of 70 mph. “Central Park has been devastated,” said Adrian Benepe, then Parks commissioner. “You have personal relationships with certain trees and now they are gone.” “We’re not going to be around in 80 years when they grow back,” said Donna Castellano, director of operations in the cardiology department at Mount Sinai.

The storm destroyed another horse chestnut close to my father’s, yet my father’s tree went unscathed. “It was terrible,” my mother reported to me, “but what a miracle. Nothing happened to dad’s tree. How lucky.” It survived with only a few broken branches. It had earned its remarkableness.

After you watch someone die, an odd minute passes when you are unsure what to do next. It is a minute removed from time’s flow, even though you are very sure of what time it is. After my father died, this happened. The nurses were not yet informed, the hall was silent, it was 11:11 p.m. There was not much for us to do. I did not know whether I was allowed or supposed to touch him. What I did—with the knowledge that one day I would look back, hovering over myself and scrutinizing these actions—was take a penny from my pocket and place it in my father’s hand. This was not easy, place is not the precise verb. I had to uncurl my father’s hand (his right hand, the one that had been paralyzed, though now it made no difference), stick the penny against the palm’s flesh, and then close the hand again. But the penny would not stay put, his hand did not want to clasp it, and so I wedged it in between his index and middle fingers, near the lowest knuckle.

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Why I did this puzzles me. I knew it would at the time and I believe that was part of the reason. It was not Charon’s obol exactly—I did not open my father’s mouth and lay the coin on his tongue—but it was an act of superstition. I am not a pagan or a polytheist, I do not believe in Hades or the underworld. I am the son of a scientist. But, all the same, I told my mother as I struggled with his hand, “He might need this.”

I believe now that this was not just superstition, but forgetting. Passage paid for not on Acheron or Styx, but on Lethe. I was, in a way, trying to obscure or distort memory, to make surreal or unreal what I would otherwise have to account for as the truth. I was not being me, but watching myself be me. That bad old habit of pretending you’re a character in a movie: this is one way of dealing with a situation you are unprepared for, to watch what motions you will go through as if from a distance. I watched myself put a penny in my father’s hand because I knew I would later replay that moment and not what happened the minute before. I ran a mile and a half to the Cathedral when I could have taken a cab because it was more cinematic.

I did, in fact, take a cab back. During that ride, I called my girlfriend and told her I would not make my flight to Rome. I asked her, sitting at her desk in Massachusetts, to go online and sign in to my email. I gave her my password. I asked her to write an email to the director of my study abroad program informing him of the situation. I asked her to write it pretending to be me. I told her to sign my name at the bottom.

Milton calls Lethe “the wat’ry labyrinth, whereof who drinks, forthwith his former state and being forgets.” I say Lethe because, when I look back upon that day, I see someone other than myself going through those motions. I see someone who, when not eating or sleeping, was wrapped up in the business of being another; who already then was planting a seed to obscure the past; who was busy constructing a labyrinth of oblivion. I see a boy who was prepared to wave happily goodbye to memory and father if it meant circumnavigating the rivers of hate, pain, lamenta-
tion, and rage. I see someone content to lose sight, to let the boat slip into slick, still fog, if all it left him was a penny poorer.

The trees Elmaz Qyra walked underneath were the allées, the American elms of Poet’s Walk that can be purchased for $250,000. “These elms,” the Conservancy writes, “are one of the largest and last remaining stands in North America, and one of the Parks most photographed areas.” It goes on: “They form a cathedral-like canopy above the Park’s widest pedestrian pathway.” The American elm that killed Qyra, the one scheduled to be removed, the one within which a five-foot cavity swelled, was given a special name for the way it always appeared bathed in light. It was called the Ghost Elm.

I called my mother to find out what she inscribed along Poet’s Walk and discovered I had it wrong. She said she did not buy an endowment for a horse chestnut. She wanted to but they had none available. She bought an endowment for an American elm.

Midway through The Aeneid, Aeneas descends to the underworld and reunites with his father Anchises. When the Greeks sacked Troy, Aeneas fled the city carrying his elderly father upon his back. Before he reaches what will become Rome, before even Dido and Carthage, Aeneas lands at the city of Drepanum in Sicily. There, Anchises dies. A year or so later, Aeneas breaks off a golden bough, gives it as a gift to Proserpina, and wins entrance into the underworld. When eventually he finds his father there, he sees a multitude of people drinking from a river and asks Anchises what they are doing. Anchises tells him the following: “They are the souls who are destined for Reincarnation; and now at Lethe’s stream they are drinking the waters that quench man’s troubles, the deep draught of oblivion...They come in crowds to the river Lethe, so that you see, with memory washed out they may revisit the earth above.”

So, you see, I had it backwards. The living do not drink from Lethe; the dead do. It is not my mother and I who drink for oblivion, but my
father. Its waters wash his subterranean roots, wipe out all memories of pain and agony and paralysis and monstrosity, and perhaps, I hope, restore him to balance and peace. A tree that readies itself to grow and survive, to stand in symmetry, to speak in whispers and wind but to speak nonetheless. He would, of course, in his preparation for earthly life, forget all else. He would forget us, his wife and child, he would have to. It would be a fair trade, I think. The most my mother and I could hope for is something animate, something spirited and numinous to pass between us, some flash of sun to glance off the buckeye and catch my mother’s eye at the kitchen window, or some pattern of light and shade to fall across the pages of my book as I sit on a rock underneath my father the remarkable horse chestnut.

But maybe that is not so. Let us pause on that rock, that tree, that American elm that survived one thunderstorm and more to come. Let us stage another cinematic scene. Imagine an incision of more than three to four inches in diameter, imagine a fungus creeping in, imagine decay and rot and the loss of integrity. Imagine the penny was needed, but it fell loose from his hand. Imagine that Lethe was the wrong river all along, that really we the living are still stuck on the Styx or Acheron or Cocytus or Phlegethon, that the waters still bubble with hate and pain and lamentation and rage. Imagine that there is no end to that, no true forgetting, that whatever already happened will continue to gnaw and plague and eat away at me and my father and mother. Imagine that that’s how eternity works. And now, imagine that I have actually come to visit my father’s tree, that I have come to sit on the rock underneath its branches and read a book and occasionally look out at the children playing soccer and, farther away, the large black building where he died. And what if I have it all wrong, what if, just what if, the sound I heard before the branch fell and split open a quarter of my skull was not the boom or crack or thunder or creak others described hearing, but a voice, his voice, his deprived voice, and it was mad as all hell and it said to me, “You motherfucker, you monster, you tried to sleep and eat your way past me, you tried to pretend I wasn’t there, you piece of shit, you stayed away while I was dying, you ingrate, you fuck, you
ordered Chinese food two hours before my death, you asshole, you masturbator, you were content to let me go if it made your life easier, you selfish son of a bitch, you, you, you, you, you, it’s always about you. But now I’m coming to get you.”
PROVINCETOWN

In my mind, I beg our blood to work. To keep us loving long after we’ve breached. I lean into your shoulder, not light like a shearwater, but heavy and insistent as the horn of a goat. The dunes that separate our maritime kingdom from fields of corn are an elaborate set. The puppets may be tragic, may be lonesome, full of gravity, but we are deliberate and afraid of nothing. We kiss at the bar, tequila heavy on our knees, like whales identifiable only by certain scars.

_He slaps the water with his fin because he can_, the naturalist had said. Back at the campground, sunburnt, in the dark, we find each other’s heads below the blueberry shrubs (because we can) and we do so in the shape of love, which is a peninsula.

We are setting up the rain fly. We are stoned and can’t get it right. We are inside our minds thinking, _I was almost an island._

It never does rain. I never do get bored. Leaving the Cape on Route 6, we chew taffy and listen to oldies. Here is the bridge. We do not hit traffic. We do not break down.
I practiced on a dead possum
my father and I found on a walk
through the woodlot. After dinner
I snuck back down to the woods
where the skull hung at eye-level
in the knot of a tree and I said
"Marry me." The possum’s other bones
lay to the side of the trail,
buried under the first fallen leaves.
Other days, I thought
I might ask it with glow-in-the-dark
stars on the bedroom ceiling,
or on the chalkboard if she got a
teaching job. We were, as they
say, not getting any younger. In
the little woodlot in Iowa
under the quiet gaze of bones,
queer theory nagged at me
like yesterday’s nettle in the finger.
There were too many reasons
why I was not supposed to want
to marry her, but we wouldn’t
have to tell. We could just do it.
The woman sits and watches a forest grow
until she's a girl on a patio leafing out,
her sandy skin burnt by a snow late
in the night. Her husband stands in the middle
of winter without beginning on edge and pours
pitchers of cool water from the top of a cliff
down onto his sex, like a young leather flower
captured in a simple snare on a game trail.

It's September and back in Eastern Oregon
a cold-front has dropped the highs into the 40's.
In his woodshop, my father planes a strip of elm
for a new door, while my mother and the dog
move from room to room in the small house
where the wood stove warms everything, even
a summer that dies again and again without us.
CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES


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