CRATERS OF THE MOON

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by

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The full moon rippled behind a river of navy blue clouds flowing through the night sky. Henry, in his burnt out Chevy Caprice, pulled his sheepskin coat close around his neck as he waited for sleep to come. His eyes were heavy watching the way the light of the moon shadowed the surface of the black soil like pools of ink.

He had no dreams.

In the cool November morning the fogged windshield diffused the sunlight. Henry pulled the wooly lapel of his cracked brown sheepskin coat over one eye to block out the sun, but this movement exposed the skin of Henry’s lower back to the cool morning air. He shifted and covered his other eye. Now he was roused enough to notice how stiff his neck was, how sore his throat was, and how, unless he closed them very tightly, the sun made the insides of his eyelids orange. He sighed, adjusted his coat, and looked over to the passenger seat. There was a flimsy plastic container of corn chips stuck in dried liquid cheese from his dinner. In the cup holder was a half-empty can of light beer from last night’s six pack. He lit a crumpled cigarette from his overflowing ashtray and swigged the flat beer. The chips were stale, but they were always stale. He finished the beer and tossed the can into the backseat onto a pile of Polaroids of people he didn’t know. He cracked his neck, rolling his head, stretching his shoulder blades.

Up to this point in his day, things were very ordinary and they would continue to be throughout the afternoon. As always, Henry grabbed his Polaroid camera from where it sat in a
pile of beer cans in the backseat and checked to see that he had an extra film cartridge in his pocket. He unlocked the door and kicked it open. With some effort, he raised himself up out of the faded blue interior of the car and into the morning. He had no idea that today he would meet a girl named Matilda who would change his life forever. The morning went on.

Tourists came early to Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve. Henry wasn’t sure why though. What’s the great appeal of barren rocky landscapes resembling the surface of the moon? History, he guessed. Photo-ops. Family time. Henry himself liked it well enough to stay, and he supposed it was on some people’s maps of important geologic places to visit with their families—the least popular of a regional circle of such RV destinations including, but not limited to, Mount Rushmore, Yellowstone National Park, and the Grand Canyon. Tourists followed the sunrise across the lava fields surrounding the Great Rift and read maps covered in colorful dotted trails and information bubbles telling them the stories of the unique rock formations and just what exactly the Great Rift was—basically, a big crack in the Earth from which magma flowed for 15,000 years. From their foldable guides, they learned about cinder cones with names like “Inferno.” They observed massive rock columns called crags which looked like evil fingers sticking up out of the ground about to topple over like children’s blocks. These “crags,” they read, are made of sedimentary rock which had filled in and preserved the shapes of the shafts of eroded volcanoes. They learned about the scarce and scattered fauna appearing in italicized text with bold genus and species names, pockets of juniper bushes and stray gnarly branches of cedar with corresponding pictures in the brochures. Henry stood watching people awhile. If he was going to make enough money for his dinner and more film, he knew he had to start early and work late.
Of course, the tourists had their own cameras, fancy ones with digital displays, autofocus and face-recognition—much more impressive devices than Henry’s Polaroid. The tourists viewed most of the otherworldly scenery of Craters of the Moon through their cameras like little TVs held out in front of them, snapping hundreds of photos of the landscape. They posed in front of the towering cinder crags, huddled in dark caves, and scaled miniature canyons while a smiling stranger told them “Say cheese,” eliciting half-hearted laughter from mothers with mittens on. The kind stranger would depress the shutter, but not before a moment of hesitation to point and question whether the button, placed in the same position on all cameras, was indeed the button to push to capture the photograph. Having received confirmation of this obvious and yet somehow friendly inquiry, he would finally snap the picture, admire the display, say, “That’s a keeper,” and hand the camera back to its owner. Every person had a camera and every friendly stranger gladly followed this series of obligatory steps to generate pictures on assorted handheld devices for each other, so it was more out of pity than necessity that Henry made his meager living taking Polaroids.

It helped that Henry was a kind-looking person. His hazel eyes were warm and inviting. His short brown beard and lanky build made him seem unthreatening. He didn’t look like somebody who lived in his car. So when he said, “Wouldn’t you like a nice family portrait to remember this special occasion?” and smiled, the tourists always smiled back. And before they could answer, he’d have the camera up to his eye saying, “Boy, now that looks great. Just get in a little closer.” And they would get in a little closer, tacitly agreeing to be photographed. Henry would click the button and the camera would wind and churn and spit out the white-framed photo. Henry would flap it back and forth, get up next to the family, and hand the photo to a blond-haired child to hold for the rest to gather around and admire. “Oh, now that’s a beaut,”
Henry would say emphatically. And the father would scrunch his lips in a forced smile and hand him a folded dollar bill. When the paper hit his hand, Henry would tip an imaginary hat, smiling again, and set off in search of the next family.

Amazingly, this worked for Henry and had worked for three years. By the end of the day, with a short break for lunch, he would have thirty dollars for film and cigarettes and dinner which he bought at a convenience store not far from the visitor center on Highway 93.

The closest thing Henry had to a friend was Frank who worked behind the counter at the convenience store, and who, importantly, had a red beard. Frank was friendly to Henry and felt a sort of familial connection to him because of the frequency with which Henry patronized his business, so he sold Henry film at cost and never bothered to ask for ID for the beer, which was lucky because it was only a week prior Henry had celebrated his twenty-first birthday. Henry and Frank connected mainly because they both had beards and their conversation rarely strayed from their common facial hair. They went out of their way to compliment each other in increasingly strange ways. It had become something of a joke:

Henry set his six pack on the counter.

“Wonderful day for a beard. Going to be cold tonight.”

“Every day is a wonderful day for a beard, Frank. And might I add that yours is looking fantastic today.”

“As is yours, Henry. In fact, for a moment, I was insulted not to have been invited to the party on your face. Then I realized it was just your beard, a sheer celebration of itself!”

Henry laughed and contorted his face. Frank had outdone him that time.

“You’re weird,” he said.
Any other day, after leaving the store, Henry would have trudged back to where his car was parked in a remote area off a dirt road smiling to himself, trying to think of something freshly ridiculous to say to Frank about his beard in anticipation of the next night. And then, alone in his car, he would consume his junk-food dinner, and dream the dreams he dreamt as a child, namely of being president. It was a thing Henry had identified about himself as being out of the ordinary, but it was part of his routine, part of falling asleep, to fanaticize about the highest office in America. Henry imagined himself wearing a black suit and a red tie with his hair cut short and combed neat with pomade, face clean-shaven. He imagined a portrait painted of himself hanging in the White House and printed with dates and party affiliation in textbooks for middle-schoolers. He imagined owning Mount Vernon, having a wife and children, maids, servants, a cook. Boats, portraits, foreign policy. It was an odd combination of the things children learn in school about presidents and things you see in the news. He wanted to be a president in the late seventeen hundreds, braving the Delaware in a boat like the painting of George Washington, and he wanted to throw out the first pitch at a major league baseball game and host an Easter egg hunt on the lawn of the White House, posing for photos. All of this he would fantasize about before falling asleep on any normal night. But this evening was different, because, on his way back from the convenience store, he saw a girl with her parents and he thought he might make one more dollar before nightfall.

*

She stood chewing bubblegum like a younger girl might do, her strawberry blond hair catching the last rays of the sun as she waited impatiently for her parents to inspect the red and blue dotted lines of the park map. Her father had spread the open brochure atop the surface of an
information post for Devil’s Orchard Trail. Her mother slapped away his hands as she traced one of the curving lines with a long finger. Neither was sure of where the campground was from there.

It wasn’t that Matilda was ungrateful that her parents had insisted they take a family vacation, hitting all the beautiful tourist traps of the West, but she had a tendency, though she was now twenty and living on her own away at college, to act a bit like a teenager when forced to spend extended periods of time with them. She tapped her foot on the black soil and checked the time on her phone. She looked at her parents as they bickered and rolled her eyes, another mannerism she hadn’t completely outgrown, the effect of which was somewhat exaggerated by her blue, immediate, bulging eyes. It was these eyes that anyone who saw her first noticed, initially alarming the viewer because of the way they stuck out of her head, seemingly surprised by anything they came to rest on. To make it worse, she had a tendency to cough uncontrollably which emphasized the appearance that her eyes might actually pop out of their sockets and roll on the ground. The next thing people noticed about Matilda was her height. Almost six feet tall, she was awkward and boney. The baggy sweaters she wore didn’t diminish the angles of her body. Her collarbone jutted out and her shoulder blades were sharp. Her neck was long. But, after the initial shock of her bulging eyes, a spectator would be overcome by how appropriate and complementary their color was to her other features: Her hair was auburn and fine and her skin was like cream. Together, they had the effect of beauty.

She watched her long shadow, moving her arm up to cast it to the base of a rise in the land. Then, in the adolescent style she’d been perfecting that evening, she stretched her bubblegum from her teeth in a long band. It had long lost its flavor and was tight and rubbery
and bright green. She rolled it with her tongue back into her mouth. That’s when she saw a figure on the rise in front of her.

Her parents were busy with the map and didn’t notice the man. At first it wasn’t clear to Matilda whether he was coming or going, but as she watched, the silhouette grew larger.

“Dad…” she said, not turning around.

The man, she could see as he got close, was wearing a sheepskin coat over a red flannel, carried plastic bags, and had a camera looped around his neck.

“Dad, this guy might know where the campground is?” It wasn’t a question but she asked it, splitting the function of the phrase in half, one part question for Henry, one part statement to Dad.

Henry was close enough that he could hear her. He smiled.

“Campground? That’s back that way toward the North Crater Trail. You folks like to have a picture taken?”

Matilda’s father turned his attention from the map and looked at Henry skeptically. Henry smiled again and set down his bags. He leaned around Matilda to look at her father, lifting the camera to reiterate the question.

“No. No shortage of cameras,” the father said dismissively as though Henry was aiming to sell them his camera. “What we need is to find our RV,” he continued, incorrectly folding the map and coming closer to the man who stood in front of his daughter.

“Like I said, it’s back that way,” Henry said, pointing, but keeping his eyes on Matilda. Matilda smiled. Her father stepped closer.
“Thank you. Got a long drive ahead of us tomorrow.” He squeezed his lips together in the semblance of a smile, the way fathers did before they handed Henry a dollar, then he started walking in the direction Henry had pointed.

Matilda lingered. Her mother followed her father.

This being one of only a few fleeting opportunities he’d had to speak with a girl his age in the last three years, Henry attempted to talk to Matilda. She immediately struck him as spontaneous and outgoing. Something about her body language or the way her clothes fit or her mere willingness to defiantly make continued eye contact with him, or, maybe it was the bright colorful laces on her shoes, made her seem exciting.

“Where you from?”

Her father called to her. She didn’t move. Henry was thrilled that she was still standing in front him.

She whispered, “Meet me in the campground at midnight.”

Henry couldn’t believe his ears. He was sweating.

Matilda’s father called again.

“The bathrooms near lot 18.” She touched his arm.

“Wait. What’s your name?”

“Matilda.”

*

“Your father is going to be furious. Oh, Matilda, why would you do something like this? I’ve said your carelessness would get you in trouble.” Matilda’s mother sat on the edge of the bed still clenching the laundry basket, staring blankly into the zebra comforter which had
adorned Matilda’s bed since high school. “You have choices, you know. Your father wouldn’t have to know.”

Matilda sat uncomfortably on the other side of the bed, rigid against the wall, as far from her mother as she could get. She glanced in the mirror on the dresser and saw her mother’s reflection, a smoothed-out, filled-in, aged version of herself. She crossed her arms over her stomach.

She envisioned the protesters standing outside of the women’s clinic holding big black and yellow signs with pictures of aborted fetuses. Her face got red and tingly just imagining walking past them. Just thinking about the pictures made her feel faint. You don’t have to do this, they would say.

“I had a dream it was a girl,” she said. “I named her Kate.”

Matilda’s mother exhaled through her nose and turned her head slowly, apparently searching her daughter’s bedroom for another person with whom to make intense eye contact in an effort to express her displeasure.

“Just say you’ll go and get information.”

* *

The women’s clinic had a pass-through driveway to the parking lot in back of the building. The protesters were required by law to stand behind a yellow line painted on the ground on the other side of the street. In her rearview mirror, through the square cut out of the building for cars to drive through, Matilda could see the picketers’ signs, on sticks bouncing, and a beige shopping plaza and the blue sky behind it.

She pulled her car into a space at the very back of the lot.
She unfolded a blank check her mom had given her. It was baby blue with various watermarked words, “Live, Laugh, & Love,” in curly overlapping fonts decorating space that would otherwise be blank.

“The first visit, they do a check-up like any doctor would. They decide whether you get the pills or the procedure, depending on how far along you are, and schedule it. You can pay then or later. It’s really quite easy. None of the people there will judge you,” Matilda’s mother had said that morning as she handed her the check. “I wasn’t going to tell you this,” she said, grasping Matilda’s hands and crumpling the check, “but in the seventies, before we even thought of having you, your father and I—I had had an IUD, but somehow it didn’t work. It wasn’t like it is now.” Her voice quickly shifted from the light way she had described the clinicians to serious. “There wasn’t even a question.”

“Did Dad know?”

“Why do you think he’d be so terrified of this happening to you? We thought we’d have to change our whole lives around. I’d have had to quit my job and rely on your dad to support us. Our lives seemed over. We didn’t know what else to do. It’s the only time I’ve ever seen your father cry.”

Sitting in her car, Matilda tried to imagine her father crying. He’d always been a rock, emotionless and grounded. His eyes had always been steady blue and unwavering. Even a smile was only a temporary departure from his cool and collected, stoic visage.

Matilda hadn’t taken the keys from the ignition. Her hand froze in position as though she had just turned the car off. The muscles in her neck tightened.

She hated crying. It felt so self-pitying. She didn’t want to feel bad for herself.

She shook her head and thought of mass genocide.
She imagined Ethiopian children with bloated stomachs not even bothering to swat flies from their blotchy faces. Their curly hair and tears. The sad music of the commercials. Her problems were nothing compared to theirs. She tried to think of the whole world, all the suffering.

She cried.

She knew what she would do.

*

“—Colorado Springs. I don’t know why my parents insist on these family vacations. Like they don’t already live in the most beautiful place on earth. I’m just home from college for Thanksgiving and they wanted to come out here, I guess because we’ve been every place else.”

“Oh…”

“Where are you from?”

“Here.”

“You’re from Craters of the Moon,” she asked without a question mark.

“Well, not here. Arco. It’s twenty miles that way. It’s no place.”

“What do you do?”

Henry hesitated, then said, “I take pictures.”

“Yeah?” she said, over-enthused. “Some of my friends are photography majors. I’m a painter. Here, just over this hill.” Matilda reached her hand down to help Henry up onto a rock. “I explored out here yesterday and found this place.” Even though he could have stepped up just fine, Henry took her arm. He was immediately ashamed of how good it felt to touch her skin with his fingers.
“—You don’t strike me as organized enough to use a travel agent.” Henry quickly repeated this to himself, his lips moving imperceptibly, trying to decide if it was insulting, overly familiar, or funny.

“My parents…” She trailed off. “Here it is.”

Henry didn’t realize it until he was standing right in front of it, but Matilda had led him to the same pond he’d considered taking her to. The moon threw the tops of the trees, black, into the water.

“—Parent’s basement at sixteen with my older sister’s friend.”

Matilda didn’t seem to be paying attention as she dug in her pocket for something.

“You smoke pot?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said. “But not here, okay? Let’s go to my car.”

“Car?”

“I like making beautiful things. It’s more about stopping at the right time with painting. Taking pictures seems like it would be about finding the moment in the moment. Painting is more stopping and looking at what you made to see if it’s done.”

“Here it is.” Henry made a grand gesture at his Chevy Caprice.

“Seriously, you live here?” They opened the doors.
“I stay out here sometimes. I mean, when I’m taking pictures,” he said across the roof as he got in.

“That’s cool.” She closed her door. She lit the joint and handed it to Henry.

Henry inhaled the smoke into his lungs and held it as long as he could before he coughed uncontrollably. Matilda laughed. He had to drink half a beer to quiet his throat.

“Isn’t that like catching the right moment, though, right when it’s done? It’s all about finding the right time, whether you stop painting or click a shutter right then. Not that I’m a real photographer.”

Henry’s head spun and he felt like he didn’t remember where he was, but he knew where he was, then he wasn’t sure if he’d just wondered where he was or not.

He looked at her. She had her arms wrapped around her knees and was looking out the windshield into the dark. He coughed again. “I feel like I know you. Like we were friends when we were little.”

“Henry, I don’t know your last name. We didn’t know each other when we were little and you’re high.”

“Me and my brother used to stand up on swings at the park when we were kids. Like those swings made out of hard plastic. We rocked back and forth sideways and knocked the swings together while we sang Surfin’ USA.”

“That’s nice Henry.”

“You could have been there too.”

“Henry, I wasn’t there and you don’t know me.”

“No. I do.”

She laughed. “Maybe you want to know me, Henry.”
“Maybe, I do, Matilda. I want to know everything about you. It’s Finkle, by the way.”

“Finkle. That’s your last name? Henry Finkle, photographer.”

“That’s what it says on my business card. I got to tell you though. I’m not a photographer like you’re a painter.”

She looked at him.

He reached in the glove compartment for a flashlight and handed it to Matilda. He scooped a handful of photographs from the backseat and dropped them in her lap. She began to inspect them.

Sipping his beer, he said, “I only have the ones people don’t want. I’m not an artist. I sell these to tourists. You make beautiful things. I make dollars.”

“These are good, Henry.” She was inspecting each one.

“Not good enough.”

She said something, but he couldn’t tell if she was talking or if he had been talking or if it had been a very long time since anyone had spoken. She said it again.

“What?”

“I think they’re beautiful Henry. I think you’re talented.”

She kissed him. He was dizzy. “What was that for?”

“I like you Henry Finkle.”

He put his hand on her knee and then pulled it back. She kissed him again and put his hand back on her knee.

“I want to see your paintings,” he said interrupting the kiss. She kissed him again. She smelled amazing.

*
Six weeks later, Matilda was sitting in her shower. She didn’t want to sit in the shower, but she had to. The tiny tiles etched lines into her skin. She felt she was swimming in her head, the ocean roaring. Her eyes unfocused. She closed them, orange. Opened them and crossed them and watched pink tiles mix. Certain she felt rain on her shoulders, she held back an air bubble by putting her hands on her pale stomach. She stood quickly, hunching forward, and pushed open the foggy glass door. She stepped on the cool floor. She picked up the small plastic trashcan and emptied it on the countertop and escaped the chill back into the steam and sat down again. She wrapped her legs around the can. Still, with her head hovering over the opening, she held back. The last thing she wanted was to vomit. In the back of her mind, she saw a lima bean morph into a baby in her belly. She felt she might fall off the top of a building. She vomited air.

“Honey are you okay?”

“What?”

“You alright in there?”

“Huh?”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

*

In the morning, she was gone. Henry wasn’t sure whether he was happy or sad. He’d felt a closeness with Matilda he hadn’t felt for a long time. Her spontaneity consumed him. It made him feel like a more interesting person. She said she liked his pictures.
The sun glared in his eyes and he pulled down the visor to reveal his reflection in the tiny rounded square mirror.

More than remembering, he remembered trying to remember. In the moment, he had wanted to remember everything. He remembered fearing forgetting. Just a flash of hovering over Matilda, a glimpse of her body, a sliver of ecstasy. He remembered shivering. He remembered how her hips felt, how her skin felt elastic and warm under his thumbs.

He tried to hold on to it. He closed his eyes and opened them.

Somewhere he’d heard that scent was the most basic of all senses. He imagined noses evolving faces around them, creatures operating with only a sense of smell, nostrils connected to ancient reptilian brains. Once we were solely olfactory, then we got taste, then we got eyes and ears. He inhaled as deeply as he could. He put his face where her hair had been on the seat beside him. She’d smelled like peppermint and something else. Something round and vaguely fruity, sort of the color yellow. This was her shampoo or perfume or deodorant. Flowery, but not too flowery, familiar though exotic. Some combination of scents concocted to convince men to love women and women that men would love them. Then there was her real smell. Her skin smell. That pheromone genetic attracting agent. Something he felt he was predisposed to prefer, to pine for. It was faint and exciting.

He didn’t know how he felt.

The photographs he’d handed Matilda were on the floor by the passenger seat. A pile of moments. His eyes settled on a photo of a young couple he’d photographed candidly. They hadn’t wanted the photo when he offered it to them. They hardly looked at him. It was a nice picture: The sun in the right corner washed out half of it, casting in silhouette two subjects who held hands and leaned into each other’s faces, sharing a knowing breath. It should have been
easy to sell. Henry remembered the awkward approach he’d made after he snapped the picture. The couple hadn’t seen him take the picture and the Polaroid wasn’t fully developed when he presented it to them. They didn’t have any cash. They were friendly and thanked him and apologized. When he walked away holding the picture he had felt alone, like he had gotten to feel through them, by proximity and spontaneous transmission, a warmth he associated with confidence and secrets, and, leaving them, a chill passed over him.

Then he noticed another photo. It was one Matilda took of herself blowing a kiss in his direction in the early morning light.

He put this photo in his pocket and grabbed his camera.
In line, watching the sunrise through the bank’s plate-glass windows, Gary clutched an empty brown briefcase to his torso. He wore a suit. Gary believed people who went to banks wore suits. The queue curled around itself, back and forth over the metal-flecked white floor, guided by black seatbelts stretched across black poles. Every minute Gary looked out into the parking lot squinting at lumbering cars and eyeing new people coming through the door while a menacing bird chirped. Dried dirty water drop marks showed in the sun on the windows and created shadows on translucent advertisements.

Hopefuls swarmed like bees for microloans. The ads called it a new way to invigorate small business. Maybe there were supplies you couldn’t wait for. A company car needed repairing. The advertisements envisioning these situations were hung speckled in the windows, glued giant to billboards, and beamed blue out of TVs.

In the ads, actors pretended to have problems on well-lit sets. The answer appeared in white sans-serif font. Gary knew it was just a way of saying payday loans.

When the line moved, Gary studied faces behind him and in front of him. Most, he could tell, wouldn’t be able to pay back the bank-sanctioned shark-loans. The windows made the bank a greenhouse. He was sweating. Gary realized he was the only one wearing a suit.

A thin older man in front of him seemed to vibrate while he scratched his forearms through a light denim jacket as he babbled softly like a river. The man couldn’t stand still,
forcing Gary to observe the skeletal machinery of his body as it moved, clothes swinging from it like a windy scarecrow. Gary looked away.

Behind him, a baby cried now and then. The mother, he could see as he rounded one of the snaking barriers, was quite overweight. Her tight pink tank top and tight blue jean shorts cut into her skin. She had her child pinned to her side like a football with her giant arm. Gary imagined the child’s toys, red and yellow and nondescript, blocking hallways beside doors off hinges leaning on walls. He imagined her forever wearing her jean shorts and pink shirt, from childhood through her current being. The clothes hung loosely on the young girl in his mind and he watched her inflate, growing fat in her clothes. He looked to see if she was ashamed. The baby cried, shrinking Gary, but the woman was not embarrassed. The baby bawled out of a giant red mouth. The mother stuck one fat pinky at the spit-shiny opening on the baby’s face.

Gary formed his hand into the shape of a gun in his jacket pocket, for practice. There he found a button. He searched the other pockets while he waited. In the left pocket, he felt perhaps candy paper. He didn’t bring it out to see. Momentarily, his nervousness was relieved and he jammed his hand into an inside pocket. Here he found a stiff piece of paper which he brought out in front of his face.

It was the program from his wife’s funeral. He hadn’t worn the suit since then. A washed-out picture of her smiled at him from an oval hovering above a sunset which reddened the sea and a sailboat. He frowned at a poem about Jesus and footprints in the sand.

Gary watched a delicate, fawn-colored teller with big blue eyes like two Earths count money for a customer. He imagined talking to her in a low voice.

Gary imagined demanding money from her.
That morning, in front of the mirror in his bedroom, he had opened his briefcase. Fill it up. Now. He looked at himself, at his stubble and the kink in his red silk tie. He jutted his chin, frowning like a movie gangster. You think I’m kiddin?

He slapped his hands on the sides of his face. He scratched his neck stubble. He put both his hands in his jacket pockets, pretending to have two guns, and angled them at his reflection, cocking his head. He decided that the boldness of bringing two pistols to rob a bank contradicted the desire to conceal them in a suit jacket. He would pretend to have only one gun.

In the bathroom mirror, his shaky hand cleared paths of shaving cream on his face. He furrowed his brow and clenched his jaw, convincing himself he was robbing a bank. The running hot water steamed up a rippling hill in the middle of the mirror, flaring and vanishing. He wondered if he could just say specifically that he needed thirty thousand dollars to stay in the house his wife died in. He rinsed the razor under the hot water and flipped it over to flush out a few stuck hairs. With a towel, he wiped cream out of his ears.

He took down the ironing board from the closet to press the red tie. He was wasting time, he thought. He flattened the tie in a gust of steam.

The line got shorter. Then Gary was next. He watched the vibrating man in front of him beg for an advance on his paycheck. Adjusting the brown stocking cap on his balding brown head and scratching at it with gnarly knotted-wood fingers, the man pleaded with the fawn behind the counter. Finally, he lumbered away unwillingly, defeated, out into the sun. Gary stepped forward. Now he was vibrating.

Before Gary had a chance to make his demands, the old junkie returned suddenly and started to yell, flailing his scarecrow arms about, flapping his denim jacket with a shiny black
pistol gripped in one hand. The baby wailed. People in line shrieked and ducked under the black seatbelts.

“This is a robbery,” the scarecrow growled, angling the gun at the teller with the eyes like spinning blue globes. “Give me my money.”

A man in a white t-shirt knocked over one of the posts holding the advertisements. He tripped over the seatbelts, falling on his mouth on the floor. He spit out one bloody tooth. A woman nearly dropped her purse as she false-started for the door. She swung her hair as she glanced back at the robber and knelt beside the bleeding man.

Gary turned and ran, hurtled over the bleeding man and fallen seatbelt posts, then pushed through the door into the sun. He fell to his knees in the parking lot, dropping the briefcase. He heaved dryly over a painted white line on the blacktop. The ugly bird chirped and he sobbed, his lips bulging.

Gary clutched the empty brown briefcase to his chest. His smooth shaved face shined with sweat. He watched through the window as the scarecrow moved toward the teller behind the wooden counter who clicked and clicked a button no one could see.

Finally, Gary stood and turned and reentered the bank. He stepped into the spotted window light spread over the white floor, his gait wide like a cowboy. His scream echoed across the room. “Stop!” He smiled at the teller. “I’ll save you,” said a pirate with a thick voice in a movie he remembered watching with his father at his grandparents’ house as a boy. He wished there was a rope to swing from. He raised both his arms and the flaps of his jacket and pointed his hands shaped like guns at the windy scarecrow.
SUNFLOWER

I’ve met the girl I am going to marry. She is lovely in every way. Her lips especially are nice. She has small breasts and cute little hips and blonde hair. When we sleep, I hold one of her hips with my thumb. I smile every time either of us wake in the night. She says that I make her want to be a sunflower when she feels as though she’s been being a cactus. And I love the way she said that.

I’d like to think of something like that about the sunflower to say in our vows. I’ve been trying to think of the perfect words. I still need to think of a way to ask her to marry me.

But these nurses-in-training who come in to gain experience talking to patients, they are cute. I get two sitting at the table with me.

And when she gets excited, it is the most amazing thing just how much it amplifies my experience of each moment. How bright colorful things are when you feel you have a reason to recognize them. Like leaves in the sun. Oh, I wish I were outside.

They ask me questions. They’re surprised I have a degree. I’m a writer. This is exhausting. They were excited, they were trying to be chipper, not because they know me or because they are excited to see me. We’ve never met, but their faces keep looking familiar.

They don’t like when I ask if they have sisters I might have met. How could they have any connection to a crazy person, aside from sitting across the table now saying we could play checkers? But what’s the problem? I should be happy to have new people to talk to.
Sunflower. I say this word to myself as if it is a short prayer. It is. When announcements come over the speakers I think they are all for me.

After the girls leave, I pace the hallway. I’ve lost the folder they gave me and wander into a room with two beds where I saw the other night my dead grandmother was sleeping, bruised and bandaged from a fall. The room is empty and there are the glasses of her husband dead ten-years beside a folder just like mine with the name of the hospital on it. There are crossword puzzles inside with secret codes in them. I carefully move the glasses from the night stand to one of the beds and climb on top. I slide one of the ceiling tiles over and grab hold of a pipe. Somewhere there is a trap door. A secret way out. There is a ledge of wall by the bathroom where I am safe. I try to spread out my weight to cross the tiles in search of the door.

When I get out of here I am only going to do things that are beautiful. Create art. I’ll get married and dedicate myself to love. I’ll find God once and for all.

With how famous I am now, and all the cars driving around outside, and my brilliant ideas for what colors the future should be like, and with all the important people I know and have met in this hospital, I’m surprised no one is trying to find me in this ceiling.

The only phone calls I’ve gotten are from my brothers. I asked for books. I know if I read them all my mind will be okay. *Moby Dick, Infinite Jest, and Ulysses.* I haven’t heard from Anna, who I think might be one of the nurses, too. Someone brought this for you. She handed me *Moby Dick* with a sticker on it with my last name written in marker.

Twice, I tried to steal a wheelchair to get through the big door. It didn’t work.

Now, where is the way through the ceiling?
QUITTING

When my brother asked me to visit him in North Carolina, I felt tears in my eyes. I thought of how close we used to be. I started planning the whole thing for my week off. I’ll bring Martha, get to know her now that they’re engaged. Then when he wanted me to bring weed with me from Ohio, I was hurt.

I escape from cutting steaks and stocking packaged meats in a bright grocery store. They have LEDs now that reflect off the tight cellophane. It looks good, I think. The job is to make it look good. It will be nice not to go in a freezer for a week.

The parts of cows and pigs come in boxes. Heavy frozen boxes. Chuck. Round. Short loin. Filet. Shoulder. Butt. We cut them with a saw and big knives. Grind. Package. The weight of beef. The smell of pork. Just to see a day go by, slicing thicknesses and changing gloves. Watching people fill their shopping carts with soft drinks and half-gallons of 2% on sale, I smell stale cigarettes and imagine things about their lives. People mumble things behind me. How unhappy. How terribly cheerful. And what is the weather going to be like? And how about the heat?

I have my own cigarette on the way home. I want to quit eating meat. I want to quit buying a six pack at the convenience store on the corner. I want to quit.

He’s one of my best friends. Paul is family. I said no. I’m not driving with that. I’m not going to risk it. So he asked Martha to bring it. No more after this, I told myself.
I drive out of town and feel good about motion. Whipping past telephone poles and powerlines and trees and farms and bridges and lives that aren’t my own feels right. These are people I don’t know, people I don’t feel sad for, except their houses are so close to the road.

And am I thinking God planned it this way? Or am I thinking to hell with everything, let’s get high right now? And am I blessed when my heart races and I see those blue lights, getting some poor guy in a fast car? Am I lucky?

Of course. Look at the sky. I am lucky. I have eyes. Think of all the easy things. Full use of my hands and feet. Dexterity. Height. Standing up at all. Reaching things from high grocery shelves. That I can lift the boxes. Sore back, broken heart be damned. This beautiful day with the sky so many ways. Forget the pity for people in a small town. It’s just the stories I make up about them. It’s just the dark circles of their eyes. It’s just the way I impose my mood on the rest of the world. It’s going to rain.

Look, now is now, and here we go. Windows down. Hills. Motion. Four hours to Martha in Athens. Rain sprinkled lightly. Put on the radio. Forget the meat. Forget home. The contrasts of life are the art of the whole thing. The mystery of God is the beauty of it.

It was sunny the last hour. Dramatic clouds. Got into town and saw the university grounds picturesque.

The private gravel drive was three slow miles beside train tracks. A couple brick ranch houses and a doublewide along the way. The farm was at the very end with a white wood-sided two-story. There was a mess of tomatoes tangled on stakes. The farm had a dozen hens and four dairy cows and neat rows of romaine on a slope toward the railroad.

There were chairs set around a wooden table when I parked. Martha came out to meet me. A wooden structure was being built behind the farmhouse. It was to be a chapel, Martha
told me. Martha showed me where kale, carrots, bell peppers and beans were planted. She introduced me to Bill and Anne, who said I must be hungry.

We had chili. It was hearty. I was quiet. People started showing up. Twice a week, they made a dinner and invited the community. Someone on crutches. Someone who was homeless. Someone on a bicycle.

All the land was corn before, but it had been split up, I learned. Now Bill and Anne rented the old house. They wanted to buy it. I expected hippie types, new age and lovey, but they were very reserved and serious. They were younger than I expected, too. Mid-twenties. A baby cried inside.

The landowners lived in one of the smaller houses a half-mile up the long gravel drive I’d come down. They brought homemade wine. Here’s the old hippie couple I imagined. They take most of the eggs, I learned.

I sat in a lawn chair beside one of the men flaked with sawdust. “Fellow Carnivore,” he said. We both had the chili with venison. “Vegetarians,” he motioned to the others.

“There’s plenty vegetables here. The stew is very good.” I looked at Anne.

“It is.” She looked at her husband.

“Thank Bill,” the landowner’s wife said. She must have just finished saying it was him who made it.

“Delicious.” She offered the wine around and I watched everyone decline.

“I have water,” I said. “That makes us omnivores anyway.” I turned to the carpenter and smiled. It was forgotten.

“So your brother works at a summer camp then?”
After dinner, Martha and I walked by the railroad tracks on a newly paved bike path. I kicked stones and talked about this and that. It’s always so nice to talk to a girl my brother is with. Martha is cute. Beautiful sharp blue eyes. Quiet around groups, but I’ve been around her and Paul and seen them together. Now we’re comfortable. Have to ask about her religion because of the chapel and the folks who own the farm.

“How’d you get the internship?”

She’d found out about it through Farmer Shane, a local musician and agriculture student, and applied through email. Came for an interview and stayed.

She knew of a little abandoned overgrown stretch of the path where the tracks were rerouted. She asked if I wanted to try the weed she got for Paul.

“So are they pushy about religion? It seems serious.”

“No. They did make some suggestions when I first got here. When I told them I wasn’t religious, they accepted that.”

“Do they know you smoke?”

“They’ve mentioned not to smoke cigarettes inside and to make sure they are put out and not to litter.”

“Is it fun?”

“Yeah. Not like super exciting, but I’m learning a lot. It’s really getting used to being alone all the time. I’ve been playing ukulele.”

“You’ll show me?”

“Maybe.”

And I brought up the grocery store and how many cardboard boxes of cows we stack in the freezer and unstack and saw. And the milk and eggs. Feel like I’m already in hell or going
there for being a consumer and helping with the machine of food. And each single little life of those poor animals. I made her wince and wished I’d not mentioned it. She feels sorry for these ones. Look like they are happy. More happy.

When we got back it was getting dark. My room had a sage branch drying in the corner. A small window. There was a heavy quilt on the bed. This is something.

In the morning, I had a muffin and coffee and asked how they ended up here. Just Anne sat with us. Bill was out in the chapel frame. They didn’t want me to think they spoke to God or had visions. But they had a feeling that it was right to do things the way they were doing them. That faith was a force and connecting to the land and sustaining themselves through work felt good.

“True satisfaction doesn’t lie. Positive energy, reverence, and sustainability are the words we live by. You don’t have to pray to understand that.”

“True. Thank you for your hospitality. It was a real treat for me to come here.”

We hit the road. Got high.

Twisting roads of West Virginia. Coming through Beckley, or a place with signs for it, a lot of route numbers, confusing turning lanes, a glaring sun over squares of truck shadows and shale road cuts, I desperately wished to write a memorable pop-folk song, maybe with a pounding bass drum. A song about youth and love that would play on the radio somewhere for someone who didn’t mean to hear it, some playlist in a friend’s apartment, or a television commercial. And catch a twenty-something in an instant of self-reflection, revelry and self-forgetting, that edge of future and past and to-hell-with-it-all where even a corporate logo or an accented word can make you burn hungry for the warm whiskey of a lover’s mouth. Yellow
light lining of the sky and living ghosts, trees in bright fabrics, gold sliding to a winding creek bed. The magic of seeds floating in slow air.

We were hungry when we got to Virginia. Martha was a vegetarian only at the farm, I learned. She would eat meat if it meant a new experience. I thought we’d find something “authentic.” We stopped at a small place with a hand-painted sign, The Virgin Inn. Pulled pork with coleslaw and a Bud light for 4 dollars. A woman with a baby in a carrier on the counter was startled when we walked in. Video gambling behind a closed door in another room mixed sounds of winning and losing, the Morse code of rotating chance and imaginary coins with country music on a fuzzy radio behind the bar. She brought us an ashtray and was smoking. The phone rang. We waited.

There was a sign on the wall saying $5 Charge for Whining. I looked around. There were a lot of signs. Anyone found here at night will be found here in the morning. A picture of a rifle. Crosshairs. Gun control is having good aim.

The woman seemed surprised we were there or surprised we wanted food. When she walked away to get our sandwiches, I made a joke that the baby couldn’t read about the sign whining charge and would owe big.

“I can tell him to turn the sound off if that bothers you.”

“I was just looking around at all the signs. Is it really Winchester who governs?”

“My husband thinks they’re funny. Honestly, I think they’re dumb.”

“Guns or clever signs?”

She paused. “Signs saying you got guns. Jim says it’s fair warning. I say it’s too revealing.” She paused again inviting a response. This was an argument she’d had with Jim, I figured. She postured with pursed lips. I dumbly looked at her chest.
“That makes sense. I’m terrified of guns anyway so the signs are plenty for me.” She squinted her eyes at me then cocked her head at me after moment. She turned and walked out around the bar and pounded the door to the video casino. She shouted, “Sal, put on headphones.” Then to us, “My brother-in-law. I got a headache and the baby and he’s just in there. Christ. My husband was supposed to be back already.”

It was lit like a cafeteria and had linoleum everywhere. Not the type of inn I was expecting. The beer was in cans. I couldn’t stop reading signs and wondering what Sal looked like.

“That was really good.” I said this maybe three times. I put a twenty on the bar and asked about the restroom. When I got back, my change was there. I left the five. I’d meant to pay for Martha, but she used a card.

In the car, Martha told me the woman asked if we had any kids while I was in the john. She’d said we were on our way to visit her boyfriend. That I’m his brother.

“You think she thought I’d feel different about guns if I’d had kids?”

“I think she was just talking.”

“She seemed surprised when I said guns scared me.”

“I didn’t notice. Maybe men aren’t supposed to be afraid of guns.”

“Weird with the baby and smoking. Where are we?”

The clouds were ominous and grey as we dipped into curvy Virginia valleys. The food wasn’t as good as I kept saying. I felt sick. I tried to drive slowly till we got back on the highway. It rained on and off as we crossed into North Carolina and it got dark early. We listened to music for the last few hours. I wondered what the barwoman would think of Pleasant Farm. They have guns, too, Martha said.
Flat shelf of the coast as we got close. Tall long-leaf pines.

It was raining hard as we drove long one-lane stretches over small bridges in wetlands. We saw the magnificent Neuse River which went forever. Three miles at the widest. Ocean water came in and mixed with fresh water. The rain was so loud on the metal roofs.

We pulled up in a soggy gravel parking lot under some trees. I hugged Paul tight for a full minute and breathed deep. The camp was covered in pines and sand and beige southern looking cabins with screened-in porches and rocking chairs. The place was empty. We walked around in the rain. It slowed. We brought our stuff to bunk beds. We sat and smoked in rocking chairs in one of the cabins. There were dolphins in the river and we could hear them come up for air.

Kayaking in a cool lavender evening with black edges in the shapes of many trees. Long silences rocking between smooth waves reflecting and never breaking. We see dorsal fins by the dock. This is not a river or an ocean or a lake. Tide forces water up the river, brackish water under and over fresh. We adventure to calm water and search for the first stars. Reedy wetlands where we pass a joint. Paul had us turn back toward the river near dark and wait. I saw him check his watch. Fireworks erupted over the river in front of us. It was spectacular. Our faces flickered and flames of great big booms crackled smoky trails pushing every single possible world far from our minds.

How lucky, I thought.

There was another camp next door providing corporate team-building and they had a big celebration at the end of each week kicked off with a display from a barge. It made me happy. Paul said it was a nuisance.
We played guitar together and Martha had her ukulele. We turned off our cellphones. We got out the archery equipment and inflated a bunch of balloons to burst. We built a fire and drank a case of beer on the small steep beach and ate oysters.

I said, “Is this ocean sand?”

I caught a blue crab with a fishing pole. Almost caught a big fish which threw the line.

We smoked a lot and played basketball and cooked over fire. I felt I could have stayed forever, but the novelty wore off and I was happy to move again when we started the car at the end of the week.

Driving feels so inactive and forgettable then so quick and saturated with a view of a world where everything is kind big fat clouds with clear sharp green pastures of shadows. Where immediacy and distance meet at lazy hands on steering wheels and frequencies pulling sweet sound through stems of antennae, colorful fruit of vehicles. A world that feels like it’s falling apart or being built over beauty, swaths of grass for drainage by on and off-ramps. Teardrops of graded, engineered land. And then big mountains, humanity threads a vein of orderly asphalt and cell phone towers through. Dynamite coal seams. Something dusty and loud.

Once we were making good time, after taking the highway through North Carolina and Virginia, we decided to take the scenic route. We found ourselves on a small forgotten road weaving along next to a creek. We went a few miles past a coal mine entrance and into a valley until we came across a small concrete bridge. We got out to stretch and smoke underneath. I admired the ripples of water around rocks.

When we climbed back up the embankment, the car wouldn’t start. I cursed and said You gotta be kiddin’ me and tried it for the next ten minutes. I looked under the hood, as though
there was anything to do, hoping to find a loose cord to plug back in. It seemed to me that it was either the battery, the starter, or the alternator. I decided it was the alternator and shut the hood.

We weren’t sure what to do. No cars came past. We sat in the middle of a sunny afternoon in West Virginia trying to phone someone. Our cell phones had no reception, so we walked up out of the valley half a mile or so and kept trying. Got through for a few broken minutes and told my other brother, Sam, in Ohio we needed triple A. But we didn’t know where we were and lost the signal. I used the GPS to find our latitude and longitude and the name of the waterway, Paint Creek. I texted this information to Sam. This process climbing hills searching for service and piecing together our location took more than two hours and by the end both of our phones were dead.

We sat on the hood of the car and smoked and waited. We explored and found a cool cliff people had graffitied and a little area with a fire pit where it looked like people had parties. A porch swing hung from a tree with chains and big springs. Half a rusted fifty gallon barrel made a fire pit surrounded by spray paint cans and remnants of fireworks, empty beer bottles, a burnt phone book. There was a big boulder with lichen flowering on it. I climbed up. The top was skeletal dry white grey and robin’s egg blue cracked with dark thin moss.

We found an old train bridge and sat on it for a minute. I got on a kick talking about discovering the site like an archeological dig and wondering about the people who lived there or partied there. Nomadic peoples described by anthropologists, relics of an ancient civilization. Just a spot kids went to drink. I wondered how close a house might be and realized there could be another way there other than the way we came. Started getting paranoid and went back to the car.
We waited at the car for an hour and a half. Three hours. Then we decided if we didn’t want to sleep in my car that night we’d have to start walking and hope someone would pick us up. It didn’t look like the tow truck was coming. So we grabbed our packs and started walking. We didn’t get half a mile when the first car we’d seen in the last four hours came driving up behind us. We stuck out our thumbs.

The green hatchback pulled up and a woman stuck her head out the window and said, “Is that yall’s car back there?” It was, of course. Just as I was about to ask if she’d take us into town, she explained that she was the girlfriend of the triple A driver. She laughed and laughed when I said we were going to hitchhike. Good thing I’m me and not some lunatic, she said. Her boyfriend called her because she knew these back roads better than he did. He’d been sitting up at the mine entrance for the last half hour arguing with his dispatcher about whether he should come down the one-lane half gravel road where we found ourselves. Since our location wasn’t certain, they said no. She said this isn’t the first time she’d helped him out. She drove us back to our car.

She drove back up to the mine and brought her boyfriend down with his tow truck. Cool good-humored red-headed dude. We talked while he loaded the car on the flatbed. Think you’re free out and about seeing scenery and water in a blue metal complex of parts and design from all over the world, a collaboration, thousands, hundreds of thousands of parts, the pattern of the texture of a plastic handle. We don’t realize how dependent we are.

He took us back to Beckley. He unloaded the car at a mechanic’s. I dropped my keys in a box and used his cell and left a message. Then he drove us back down the road by the turnpike to a Days Inn.
The room was going to be seventy bucks. I talked to the lady behind the counter and told her our story and how we broke down and all. She gave me the trucker discount, saving me twenty dollars. We dropped our stuff in our room and decided to go find food.

We walked through a big parking lot lit in yellow. We were about to stop under an overpass to smoke, but we heard voices. I figured some high school kids had adopted this spot for drinking beer, and we walked on. On the way back we walked on the other side of the road.

We went out back of the hotel and smoked, went to the room and watched TV and drank beer. Extra day of vacation, I said and smiled.

In the morning, we had to walk up the road to the mechanic’s. As we went under the same overpass from the night before, we realized where the voices we’d heard the night before had come from. A white-bearded man in dirty denim. He looked to be in his sixties. He was sitting on scraps of cardboard on the other side of the ditch behind the barrier. He was drinking a tallboy of Milwaukee’s Best Ice. He called out to us. I wondered if he wanted money.

He asked where we were from and how we found ourselves there and we asked him the same. We asked where his friend was. Buying more beer at Sheetz. He asked if that was us walking the night before. He thought we were a nice couple. I didn’t explain. I told him about my car. He asked if we had pot. Smoked the last of it last night, I said. “Sure,” he said. He didn’t want money. We smoked a cigarette with him. He thanked us for being kind people. “Most people pretend I don’t exist,” he said. He said we were good people. He said let him know the status of the car either way. I said if I’d have known he was down here drinking beer, we’d have just partied with him last night and saved the money on the hotel. He asked how much it cost. He said he could have scraped together 50 if he’d not bought cigarettes. He
explained that about five percent of people will give you something if you sit on an exit ramp with a sign.

His sign said:

2 BROKE 2 BE 2 HAPPY 2DAY

GOD BLESS ALL.

When we got to the mechanic’s they said they were still waiting for the battery to arrive so they could drop it in and test the alternator. So, basically, they’d done nothing yet. Amazingly, within a half hour, they had the battery in and the car running. I had feared we’d be stuck two more days waiting for an alternator. It was just a bad battery. I gladly paid the bill and started the car. I turned to Martha and said, you know what we have to do, don’t you? We have to roll a joint and go smoke with that hobo. She smiled and agreed. We bought some sodas at the Sheetz and then sat in the parking lot of a shopping center to roll the joint. Then we drove over and parked at the hotel, checked out, and walked back down to the overpass and found that the hobo’s buddy had returned.

Huge morning grey slabs of smooth cement concrete with little bubbles, dark stars in an inverted night sky. The man with the beard was named Rick. He was thin and had a tattoo on his arm of a cross with the word drifter written overtop of it. The second man was heavier and named Edward, but he first said his name was Lou. His hat and shirt were patriotic and vaguely military without specific reference to a war or branch. They were both a little drunk. They gave us beers. I said, remember earlier when I said I had no pot? I was holding out on you. I’d like to make up for that lie by sharing this with you. And I showed them the joint I’d just rolled. He said fuckin’ A. He didn’t blame me for lying. He was very grateful. He knew we’d come back, but he honestly didn’t think we’d come back. We smoked and drank and talked there on the side
of the road. No one cared or no one noticed us. Just some bums. They told us stories about being beaten and robbed by local police on power trips. They said they never carry more than 50 dollars for that reason. Edward had been arrested recently for public drunkenness then released. He signed the release form, ‘IOU’. Then he was arrested not a mile out of town for the same thing. He showed me his copy of the second form where he’d tried the same thing and the lady said sign your real name.

Their biggest danger was not starvation or thirst. People gave them cold water from coolers all the time. They showed me a plastic bag full of bottled water and a gallon jug they’d gotten that day. Sometimes they have to leave it by the roadside because they get so much. They got money and bought cigarettes, beer, and food. They were eating giant pickles from the gas station. The only hard thing to come by was pot. They thanked us again as we passed it around. The most dangerous thing was cops who beat them and took their money.

They started talking again about how society perceives them and how grateful they were that we stopped to talk with them.

“People just ignore us,” Rick said. I could tell that it hurt him.

I said, “If somebody talks to me, I talk to them.”

They started talking spirituality and religion then. “The world is the bible. The bible is just a book,” Edward said. He quoted Corinthians.

Distractions of modern life, sitting on the outside.

What’s real?

“The last time I saw my family was my sister’s funeral,” Edward said. “On the program paper they give you, there was one of those poems about Jesus carrying you in the sand. Wasn’t sure what I thought of that. That’s when I started panhandling. Searching for good people and
love is the true path. I think. Not that I recommend it. But traveling does get you closer to yourself I think. Our church has a roof of a highway.”

Then Rick went:

“I wasn’t religious growing up. Went to bible study once, said I’d never go again. Didn’t like the old lady who taught it anyway. Got in a fist fight with my two brothers at church and I stopped going. My sisters went, but I didn’t have to. Spent Sunday digging up anthills in the field looking at leaves and the way they branch out with veins, and that was my God. Nature and love of nature. That’s more a kind of God I can understand. Reading in a book about love isn’t the same as loving and so I don’t see how reading about some old ideas of God gets you any closer to him, or it. Not that I’m some kind of expert, like I said. But take Hell. Do you believe in Hell? No. Heaven on Earth is now. I think that’s the real story. Like that about Jesus and footsteps on the beach. That’s not the bible, but it fits. Life is a beach. Now that’s a dumb joke for a bumper sticker. But there’s a truth in it. Like I’m not so smart, but I have truth in me, too. Do we need stained glass windows—what would Jesus’ thought of that? They’re beautiful craftsmanship and artistic and sure I couldn’t do one, but sitting inside not seeing the real colors of the world behind a kaleidoscope of, what’s it, idolatry. Even forget the commandments, whatever. Every day is God’s day. And working making money for other people and worshiping the dollar? Didn’t Jesus say a rich man couldn’t make it to heaven if he tried? That a camel had a better chance of flying through a needle? Maybe it’s our place in the universe to sit in spaces under roads and think like he did. Isn’t that something? God’s going to punish me if I don’t buy capitalism? No, if American means that, forget it. I love my country like the Indians, natives love country—the land itself. And I don’t own it. Something we share. That’s what I think. The more we remember how we’re part of nature, the closer we are to God. And
God isn’t some man floating in the clouds. He is the clouds. God is a flower. This flower. God
is this little roadside flower with a million petals you can’t count. Would it be so wrong for me
to say that? Grains of sand on that beach, where you walk along or with a loved one, and the
miracle is that the sand is there in the first place, carved away out of the mountains. The ocean
crashing around you in storms and the gentle push of wind and smell of salt and sea and these
trucks and cars, too. It’s all part of it. You’ve been to the ocean? I can’t believe some people
haven’t and then some people right beside it don’t understand it. Not really. That we’re all
connected through universal love. Maybe evolution says we come out of it and it’s all ‘the
human organism’ like those kids, remember, in Florida said? We’re all part of one big thing
even if we like to think about it differently, Catholics or Buddhists, or if we go along trying hard
not to look at bums under the road. And you gotta go along and look at the little flowers. Here
even the scraggly little ones. Sit down and see this beautiful afternoon. Live in the wind and the
world and turn over rocks because there’s something to find there even if you just find the
underside of a rock. See you are good people and I am very grateful you stopped to talk with us.
Here you could have been all pissed about the car and your battery, but you made the most of it
and it made our day and now we all have new friends. I remember what it was like to be young
and it’s not easy. I can see in your eyes you have pain. You think a lot. I was like that. But you
have each other and I think you’ll be together a long time and make each other happy. Very
happy. You don’t know when you’ll break down and meet someone under a highway. But there
are good people who will give you water. That’s God. Now, before you go, I want you to take
this jug. Now, it’s a special jug. I’m saying so. It’s blessed. I want you to keep it. Keep the
bottle. People give us plenty and we’ll get more. When you get home, empty it out. Keep it in
your closet or under the bed or wherever and when you’re ever sad or down, bring it out and put
a little water in from the tap. Have a drink and think of today and remember that there are good people in the world and you are one of them. It will make you feel better. And these flowers, put them in your car or press them in a book.”

On the way home, my boss called me to make sure I’d be to work the next day. I said “Yes,” but I wished very much to say “No.”

I kept the water bottle and even drank from it a couple times. It helped.
The boy had just finished eating the cup of ice cream a nurse had brought him and was now reading a comic book called “The Disappearing Man.” He’d had his tonsils removed that morning. Through the thin blue curtain, he heard a woman weeping. There was clinking of the metal rings which suspended the sliding curtains, and for an instant, the boy closed his eyes, afraid it was the curtain between himself and the unconscious man on the other side which had been suddenly opened.

He remained concealed, and letting the comic book fall open to his chest, he breathed softly, listening to the woman sniffle and wipe her nose.

“This is what he wanted. You have to remember that.”

The boy heard a long beeping noise where there was once a rhythm. The woman exploded with sobs. Three slow seconds passed, a doctor watching a clock.

“He’s gone.”

Gone? But the boy had seen the man there. He had never moved. How could he be gone? The boy lay stiff, holding his breath. What had happened?

When he was sure the woman had left, the boy removed his blanket and stepped his foot onto the linoleum. He slowly peered around the curtain. The man was gone.

The boy lay awake that night, fingers crossed, arms crossed over his chest, legs crossed at the ankle, praying that he would not disappear, too.
I was a doctor that day. The sun came in the windows and I felt free of the burden of being a patient. The building was new. I was transported there. The only person around was a girl drawing a picture she wanted to show me. It was of a head.

“Do you remember this?” she asked me. I felt I did. The yellow light we were in was very familiar.

“Tell me about it,” I said. I felt I could help her.

Yes, I knew her. Like a child, she smiled as she turned her paper toward me. The picture was the outline of a human head in profile. She’d drawn an apple in the center of it. There was writing all around the outline. The handwriting seemed foreign.

“I drew this.”

“Yes.”

“It’s how I feel.” It struck me as very simple. “This is what they’ve taken away.”

“Maybe I’ll draw something,” I said, and she seemed startled when I spoke. “Could I use the blue marker?” I pointed where the blue marker was on the table. She smiled and said, of course. I found a piece of paper of my own. I drew a cartoonish apple with a bite taken out of it, something out of a book from childhood I’d practiced drawing with.

She said, “That’s a good apple.”
“But apples aren’t blue,” I said. “That’s silly. Someone thought it looked good enough to eat, though.” I thought she’d laugh and looked at her expectantly.

That’s what she meant. “It looks good.” The joke was lost.

“I like the way you drew yours,” I said.

But that was a symbol of what used to be. She drew a big X through it and was mad I’d brought it up again. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you upset. Maybe I should have drawn something different. But now she wasn’t drawing anymore, she was just watching me draw. I felt the pressure of being on stage.

“What should we draw next?”

She didn’t know. I started to draw another apple thinking I would do one with two bites taken from it. When I did, she began racing to draw an apple core. I tried to think of something new. She was frustrated that her apple core wasn’t coming out right.

“I liked the first one you drew.”

The light changed and somewhere a door was opened. The air moved. I felt very sad now realizing I’d never spoken to this person before.

I drew a sun and clouds and distant birds.

“I like birds.”

“I like birds, too. Let’s draw birds.” I added more distant birds while she started a life-sized cardinal. I knew this would be a problem. But the drawing was better than I expected. I kept adding more birds to mine, waiting for her to look up and thinking maybe she would laugh at my idea of drawing many birds. But I found myself watching the intensity of her concentration. Does she think it will impress me? Yes, she does. Now, what if she is frustrated when she can’t do it and is mad again?
But, why should I expect that she can’t draw a cardinal from memory? Perhaps this is something she has practiced many times.

I realized there were two nurses observing us and whispering.

“Do you ever write poems?” I said.

Now she had no attention for me. The bird she was drawing was the only thing in the world. I didn’t know her name. I looked at the clock.

The nurses came over and said, “Alisha, it is time for group.”

Alisha became very upset. I was relieved not to be the one to break her concentration. I had got her started on the bird. I felt guilty. I was thirsty. I got up.

Later, an older man named Jeff introduced himself to me.

“One of the nurses said you write? She said you should work here.”

“That’s what I was good at in school, writing. I wonder what that means.”

“I’d like to learn to write.”

“Me too. I mean. I am. I do. I’d like to be a poet. I’d like to consider myself a poet.”

“Aren’t you? What’s the difference between a poet and a writer?”

“Yes. I guess I’d just like to write more. I am a poet.”

“I’d like to learn about poetry. How do you write poetry?”

“How do I? I’m not sure. What were you good at in school?”

“I’m an engineer.”

“That’s so cool. I wish I had a mind for measurements and precision.”

“I wish I had a mind for poetry. Do you memorize poems?”
“Not really. No.” This was disappointing to him. We sat silent a moment before I said, “I remember one. A short poem. It’s called ‘The Red Wheelbarrow.’ Ready? So much depends upon / a red wheelbarrow / glazed with rainwater / beside the white chickens.”

“Who wrote that? Say it again?”

“William Carlos Williams. So much depends—”


“I’m not a doctor. I’m a poet, remember? My dad was a doctor. So was William Carlos Williams. Actually that’s what he wrote most about. Short stories about being a doctor.”

“Was he your father?”

“No. Sorry they were both doctors. I didn’t mean to confuse you.”

“Did your father write?”

“Yes, he had dreams.”

“We all have dreams.”

“Yes. Poems are like dreams you share with words.”

“I like that. I’m going to write that down. Is that okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now what was the poem again? And who wrote it? And what does it mean? Oh no, I’m making you be a teacher now. Are you a teacher?”

“Maybe I’ll write the poem out. It’s hard for me to remember now. I’ve taught a couple classes—while I was on assistantship. I like to think all people are teachers. Poets, too.”

“You don’t want to talk anymore.”
“I’m a little tired now and dizzy. Here, let’s get paper. The lines of the poem are broken up the way you would think they would be. It’s called ‘The Red Wheelbarrow.’ The pauses are natural the way you would say them. So much depends upon—”

“What?”

“a red wheelbarrow.”

“I thought you said the red wheelbarrow.”

“Here, look.”

“What does it mean?”

I was overwhelmed with the feeling that I should have drawn chickens instead of distant birds earlier with Alisha. I missed her and our nonverbal morning. But I don’t know how to draw chickens and I wouldn’t draw a wheelbarrow because that’s not what this poem means to me. It means each piece is essential. The wheelbarrow does work. That moment was preserved. That sliver of life lasts forever. I see it in my mind. It means, how I see things is important. I had to figure out a way to show him what the poem meant to me. It is sacred to me. Not something to draw a picture of, something to picture in your mind. An exercise of thought, representative of the value of individual interpretation. Art. An in-between moment that lasts forever. Each word. Each bit of existence is exquisite. It is common and beautiful. The wheelbarrow does work.

“It’s common and beautiful. It’s useful. It sounds good. It looks good on the page. It looks good in my mind.” I thought this was a good start.

“Oh. I thought it was the answer to something.”

“Lunch is here,” someone outside the room shouted.
I fell asleep on the bathroom floor after lunch. It was cold. I dreamed of a girl who called me Chicken in a pasture. I loved it. And then, I was in a hospital psych ward. I was not a doctor.

I didn’t see Alisha the rest of the day. I wondered about the picture of the cardinal. When I asked about her, the nurse said Alisha refused to come out of her room and that it wasn’t about me. Alisha had her own issues and it was good that I sat with her.
I remember sitting on my dad’s bed as the medical examiner documented the time of death. He seemed the same to me as he did just minutes before, even maybe more calm and more comfortable. He hadn’t been able to talk for more than a week and he’d been sleeping a lot anyway. The only thing different was this strange woman saying he was dead.

“Yeah he’s gone,” the examiner said as sympathetically as she could, putting to rest any lingering hopes I might have and smiling as she watched me show my mom how his hands moved when I squeezed them.

Twenty-two years later, I think of this as little as possible, which is quite often. In the following days, “You have to take care of your mother now,” was a favorite phrase of men who shook my hand pretending to be injured by the grip of a seven year-old. “He’s in a better place,” they said and patted my head. They pulled coins out of my ear, but I wasn’t really paying attention. All the commotion was confusing. I didn’t understand, and I still don’t.

Now, I drive home from graduate school to my mother’s house in Unity, Ohio, to mow. I see cornfields and markets, American flags and horses grazing around fences and grasses. The yellow lines are bright and sharp and daisies crowd the edges. Today, I’m in love with Ohio and the way it looks from the road. I’m in love, until I see the baseball field where I used to play right field.
I would have been a baseball player if my dad had survived cancer. I had a good average that my dad figured out for me. Not so great with catches. That season I was in third grade I stopped a grounder with my foot and a fly ball went right past my glove and bounced off my forehead while my dad was talking to a patient on his cellphone. I was looking at his space on the bleachers, instead of watching the ball.

When I turn up the drive, I see my neighbor, the gym teacher, and wave. When her father died she sold me his car. I wonder now if it is strange for her to see the car reanimated.

The house is a brick two-story with big picture windows. I get the mail to give to my mother who is sitting at the kitchen table reading. She looks up at me through the window when I hop up to the porch beside the garage. She opens the door and gives me a hug and she asks me how school is going. Her hair seems whiter.

“Things are fine.” I ask about her book and fade in and out while staring down the hallway toward the room my dad died in, which now houses half of the poetry section of her swelling secondhand library. It was a biography.

“I better get out there and mow.”

“It’s too hot to mow. You can wait till later.”

“No. It’s long.”

“You can at least skip the hill, it’s not so bad.”

“It looks better if I do it all.”

“Don’t forget sunscreen.”

I step out to the garage and press the button to open the door. I put on my iPod and shuffle The Righteous Brothers before pulling the mower from the corner. The mower is red with little labels covered in dried grass. The green Lawn-Boy my dad used is long gone, hauled
away in a pick-up when we cleaned out our house to put it on the market. But here I am, squinting in the sun reflected in the window of the master bedroom as I bend to fill the mower with gas. I depress the squishy black button to prime the engine. I’m certain it will take several pulls to start, but it chokes and rumbles and comes to life.

First, I walk the front yard twice around the perimeter to give myself a buffer zone to make turns. The air is very humid. “You’ve Lost that Lovin’ Feeling” plays in my headphones, one of my dad’s favorites. When I listen to it, I hear him sing along in absent-minded baritone like he would sitting at the kitchen table after a morning jog.

I carve out the two holly bushes to make simpler shapes and fall into a rhythm, careful to keep the line straight. I remember following Dad with my older brother, Lee, the two of us pushing toy lawnmowers around the backyard. The only home video with our father was filmed by my mother on the small concrete patio. Lee and I bobbed along like baby ducks behind a tall man in shorts and knee-high tube socks.

I would have been a doctor if he had survived cancer. He would have pushed me to be more than I am. He was always working, reading about natural medicine and alternative therapies. He was a doctor of naturopathy, and dreamt of having a son who would study medicine. I watched him work in his office and drew pictures of him, always with stubble because his face was scratchy when he hugged me, though he was always clean-shaven. For my birthday one year, I asked for office supplies so that I could do work like he did, so he gave me a box filled with sticky notes and rubberstamps and paperclips from his desk. I set up in a corner and pretended, scribbling and handing out slips of paper to my brother.

I would have been an accomplished poet if my dad had survived cancer. I would have been a successful manipulator of beautiful words with a justified sense that the way I build
language is inherently valuable. No one cares that I remember him showing me how to make potato pancakes and how he showed me to press the patties between my small hands. I remember jogging with him. So what? I remember avoiding cracks in the sidewalk. I remember being lifted to the chin-up bar and him holding my body as I struggled. I’m a spoiled, entitled kid and the nicest thing I’ve ever done is drive home to do my laundry and mow the lawn so my mom doesn’t have to pay someone to do it.

“Unchained Melody” plays. Some vague notion of past girlfriends is replaced by a yearning for my father.

I would have been a landscaper if my dad had survived cancer.

There was a company that brought an enormous rattling trailer full of mowers of different shapes and sizes and parked it on our street before I was old enough to mow. They’d zoom all over the neighborhood, working on three or four lawns at the same time riding on machines that look like big motorized recliners with levers so they can turn on a dime. They’re three times wider and five times faster than my mower. What takes me two hours to do myself, takes them twenty minutes. And they’ve got giant canisters for collecting all the clippings. When they’re done the grass is short with no lines. If you didn’t see them do it, you might not know how it happened. No proof of life. No personality.

It feels so silly to take pride in this. At least I am moving around outside, getting some exercise. There is a quiet, like runner’s quiet or farmer’s quiet. It is a very loud meditation, it is work, and it feels very pointless. I know I’ll do it again next week, and I am walking around in circles trimming this plant that someone decided we ought to groom in front of our houses. It grows. I give myself over to the repetition. The heat and the sun. I become determined to do it well.
I would have been a musician. “All I Have to Do is Dream” comes on. I would have been a professional dreamer if my dad had lived. Dreams are the best part of many days. I try to unravel them, but nothing is revealed. There are no symbols like the ones in the poems and novels I read. Any motifs are imposed. Metaphors contrived. There is no authorial intent. Just images with no place to be, racing through my mind, defying interpretation, as I trace the trunk of a tree in a circle with a lawn mower.

In my dreams, my dad wears the old sweats that he jogged in and grates the potatoes which I try to peel. He lifts me up onto the cold white tile counter beside our sea-green refrigerator. The grease in the skillet spits and pops and I look out the screened door into our backyard. Now, I imagine that I looked outside for a very long time, though I probably didn’t. I remember what the light was like that day, the evening, the dull fog. I feel like I should have known right then that he would die. Now, somehow, I imagine that I did know.

I skip “Go Ahead and Cry.” “I’m So Lonely,” comes on.

Usually, he is young in the dreams. Maybe only five years older than me. He’s always wearing those same sweats. The blue ones he used to jog in. And there is this hole in the sleeve of the sweatshirt. I chewed it. I don’t know why. I used to wear it and bite off bits of it. I wore it every day, and I ate it. The strange thing is that I didn’t start wearing it until after he died, but he still always wears that sweatshirt in the dreams and it always has that hole in it.

In other dreams, he shows up on the porch of this house and I see him through the kitchen window. I go talk to him and hug him, happy he’s back and it feels like I knew he would come back. I let myself embrace the suppressed feeling that he was hiding all these years. He tells me about his long journey sailing a ship in a storm without a map to guide him and how afraid he was that he would be lost forever. Sometimes, we sail together, lost on a strange cartoon sea,
rolling on gigantic blue waves in a Peter Pan pirate ship, no map and no stars. In other dreams, I’m very young and he picks me up and spins us round and I laugh. For a moment when I wake, I think I’m happy again. I’m ready to jump out of bed and run up the stairs to tell my mom what I learned in my sleep. But I am alone in a tiny apartment. I remember what a dream is and I lose him all over again.

I would be saving for my retirement if my dad had lived. I would have painted this house several times. I would come home to mow and drink a beer with him afterward. I would have been better. I would have gone straight to graduate school instead of wasting two years working in a restaurant. I would have gone to church.

There’s some feeling of selflessness when I mow this lawn. Because it’s hard to do and I am sweating so much. The hill is the pain of the whole thing. This is dangerous. My mom’s cousin chopped off his heel with a lawnmower. I think of this when I mow the hill. I know I could hurt myself if I’m not careful, if I don’t do it right.

The house sits on the edge of the city. A small city. 5,000 people. Almost not a city at all. In the past, when trains were important, its future looked bright. There were five hotels. Bob Hope stayed in one of them once. Then as roads became more important, it was clear that Unity wasn’t on the way to anywhere anyone wanted to be. Youngstown and Pittsburgh, the two closest cities, collapsed when steel mills moved overseas. Unity never bounced back. There are now exactly zero hotels. This is the sort of place you wonder where the people in the cars going by are coming home from. It isn’t apparent what jobs they have.

The proper method is to walk along the top of the hill for a pass, careful not to let the mower tip over and tumble down the hill, then at the steepest part, you must turn and back down with one hand on the handle and the other on the support bar to keep distance between you and
the mower. Then you make a pass on the bottom, uphill, to the start, making a sort of triangle.
As this pattern is followed, it gets more difficult. The first pass on the top of the hill is easy. But
when you get to the middle, the cut grass is damp and the grade is steep. You must hold the
support bar and stand below the mower, feet angled and finding divots for holds, ready to release
the kill switch if you fall so the blades stop spinning.

The proper method may sound hazardous, but there’s no better way to do it. I’ve tried them all. Sometimes, passersby make suggestions. You could get a running start from the bottom. The idea here is to do the whole thing in vertical lines, running, shifting over, and running again. This works for the shallower end of the hill. Where it is steep, though, this would be downright stupid. This is a good way to bash your face on the handle. Another popular idea is to let the mower down from the top by a rope. People think this is the way to go and that they’re the first to think of it. They don’t seem to have any notion of how impractical this would be. The mower would tip up on its back wheels if you tied it by the handle and even if there were some secure place to attach at the base, it would be difficult to pull back up and not very precise. People make suggestions and I say, I’ve tried it all. This is the only way.

I imagine others, driving past in their cars, are intrigued and satisfied to know how the hill is mowed. Each of them had an aching curiosity and, seeing me scale the hill carefully, they admire my determination as I do it. As they pass, I stop moving forward. I don’t want anyone to see if I happen to fall. Sometimes, I do slip to a knee on the fresh cut grass. It’s inevitable. I imagine this would be frightening to see. They might stop their cars. They might think I need saving.

Old men, at some sort of social gathering, somebody’s grandpa you’re obliged to shake hands with. These men, they find out somehow where you live and say, I’m glad I don’t have to
mow that lawn. And they are. They smile, I think with sympathy, but also as though they’d
dodged a bullet, like they’d made a conscious decision in the past not to live in our house and
were suddenly congratulating themselves for their deft choice.

There’s a beauty in the diagonal lines. The wheel marks. The clumps of grass. You can
tell somebody did it with care. It has the mark of work. Somebody lives here.

I mow because my dad did. It makes me feel close to him. It gives me time to puzzle
over each memory melting in the summer heat.

“You’ll Never Walk Alone.”

I remember, I wrote a letter to my father asking how it was in heaven, hoping it was what
he wanted it to be, hoping it was what people on earth think it is. I used to think there were
houses made out of clouds and gold and in heaven people didn’t mind time passing and they
could see anyone they wanted whenever they wanted and God was like Santa Claus, chuckling
and jolly, pleased with everything. Now, looking up at the sky and wiping my forehead of
sweat, the idea of an afterlife seems absurd. I know my dad is just a skeleton in a cemetery, bugs
crawling through his eye sockets. I know he’s just dust and memories. But at the time, I worried
about his new life in heaven. I wondered if he was bored. I wondered how he spent his time and
who with. I envied whomever it was he was talking to. I supposed that if he were looking down
on me, watching over my life, as so many old men and women told me at his funeral he would,
surely he’d be able to read a note which I penned in my bedroom and sealed in an envelope. I
thought that if I created something, if I put something out in the universe, it would have an effect
on my life, as though even a simple expression of emotion, the secret act of writing something
down was a sacred rite, a prayer, a magical incantation that could call upon gods or God to alter
the course of events. I used to imagine that there were magical words no one had yet discovered
which might cause the physical universe to act differently. Perhaps the right combination of syllables, some concoction of gibberish would tear a hole in space-time and I could step through to an alternate universe where my dad was still living or even stumble upon a path to heaven.

The other question I asked in the letter was what he meant by his last words: “The bushes are full of birds.” I remember laughing at this. I’m embarrassed now, but I laughed. It struck me as ridiculous. I imagined red and yellow cartoon birds. A hundred silly birds bouncing in animated bushes. Lee laughed too. Later, we decided that he wanted to say, “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,” but I’ve always imagined it meant more.

“Dream On.” I would have been a mailman if my dad was alive.

I sent the letter. That windy, rainy day, I stuck my arm out a window on the second story of my house and the envelope floated away. Maybe, I thought, if the powers that be willed it, the letter would sail to heaven.

Later, I found a clump of wet paper in the holly bushes outside my window. I was disappointed it didn’t make it further out into the ethos to transmit my secret prayer for love.

I’ve since given up the idea that supernatural forces might know of my desires. I’ve given up the fantasy of the better place my father went to. I’ve given up God and the Devil as mythology. I really do wish there was a heaven though, so that there would be a place for my dad besides the cemetery.

At my father’s calling hours, I took a small brown wooden block from a carpentry set I had. On it, I wrote, I love you. I walked up to the casket and looked at him dead with makeup, unnatural, in a suit and tie. I put the wooden block in his jacket pocket and he was buried with it.

I would have been a funeral director or a stone worker.
It’s sometimes surprising to me when I see his gravestone at the cemetery. I don’t expect it to be there, because I know he’s gone forever. It always forces me to think about the reality of what a cemetery is. In October, when I usually visit my dad’s grave, the leaves are just starting to turn. It’s still warm. No one else is around. I will weave through the stones breathing deeply in the autumn air. It’s like a park with no people. Inevitably, I realize that I am surrounded by the bodies of hundreds of people that other people loved. I squat at my dad’s gravestone and try to will him back to life. I shake my head wishing there was something to do. I wish there was a spirit to talk to. What there is, though, is a rock in the ground with my dad’s name on it, lichen growing between the carved letters. Buried beneath it is something that used to be my dad, with a little block of wood stuck in his pocket.

I would have become a minister if my dad had lived. I would have believed in God. I would have been a carpenter or a builder or an architect.

As I mow, I sweat through my shirt. Dripping and panting. Swallowing dryly. It becomes pointless. I’m walking in circles alone in the yard. But I turn the corner and follow the line I’ve already made. I’ve got to mow the lawn to take care of my mom, to make things easier for her. She took care of us. She spoiled us.

“Hung on You.”

Maybe she’d have money now if she didn’t feel like she needed to give us everything we wanted. I think she felt sorry for us. She felt guilty Dad was gone. Christmas and birthdays got bigger than ever before. I remember insisting on videogames in exchange for attending school. These were sixty dollar Game Boy games. Batman. Spiderman. I was a brat. Demanding things. Sometimes, I wish my dad had been there just to keep me in line, so I didn’t have to look back and hate things about myself. I was an opportunist. I missed so much school. I was a liar.
When my dad died, I told my mom I needed to stay home from school for two weeks. I was building Legos. I think that’s probably the worst thing I’ve ever done. In the moments I think about this, mowing becomes my penance.

“I Believe,” makes me think that at least love is real.

I push the mower along behind the garage in the backyard and remember. When I was fifteen, I cleaned out the garage so there would be room for me to park the car I bought with money my father’s mother left me when she died. I had to dig through what seemed like a giant pile of bicycles and toys and other stuff that had accumulated over the years. I pulled off an initial layer of cardboard boxes and half a dozen garbage bags of old clothes. Then, there were broken plastic sleds that we ruined sliding down our hill in the snow onto the road. There were bicycle frames and other odd bike parts. I was really into bikes when I was eleven and twelve. My friends and I would order parts out of catalogues and talk about three-piece cranks and the best gear ratio for acceleration. We were a bunch of delinquents building trails and dirt jumps in the woods and riding our bikes around town all summer with cigarettes hanging out of the corners of our mouths. There was a blue plastic swimming pool and an orange and yellow car that you’d push with your feet like the Flintstones. There were baseball gloves and bats, too. I picked up the glove and forced it onto the tips of my fingers. I wondered if I’d have kept playing if my dad hadn’t died. Then, under all these layers, I found the light box. This is a strange flashing thing from his office downtown he used to treat patients. It was so far down underneath the stratified layers of forgotten childhood that it made me realize how much time had passed. I played with bikes, started smoking, and carried his mother’s casket. I always have this idea that my childhood ended when my dad died, but it continued. I played with my little brother’s toys and climbed trees and went swimming in little blue kiddy pools. I had fun. I learned to drive.
bought a car. And here was this relic of his life underneath so much of my childhood. So, I looked at this light box. It’s this rectangular thing that looks like a giant computer or some laboratory instrument. It must have weighed two-hundred pounds. It was cream-colored and had this glass circle at the front about the size of a silver dollar. I remember when he turned it on to show me, you were supposed to look into the glass circle at these intense flashing colors. I still don’t know what it was for or how it works. But when I uncovered it there that day in my garage I had a strange daydream. I sat down on the light box and thought about my dad’s cancer. I thought about the mole he had gotten removed too late. I thought about the stitches he showed me on his stomach and my sense of hope that he would recover from the melanoma. I have since lived a life of precaution. We have always worn plenty of sunscreen. I am apparently eight times more likely to get skin cancer just because he had it. I imagined UV radiation attacking DNA in one of my father’s cells. It’s silly. I’m sure this is nothing like what really happens, but I imagined double helixes being blasted apart by little photons. Ladders of little nucleotides, like in the videos I watched in high school biology, were smashed like glass. A green block of guanine got ripped away from a red cytosine. Blue adenine was torn from its yellow companion thymine. At some moment in the past, inaccessible to me, my dad was just sitting on a beach enjoying the sun and somehow the light hurt him. I imagined all of time as simultaneous.

In the garage that day, I prayed for clouds to come to my young father. I imagined I could save him if I could step through a hole in the universe. Grey clouds, I said, go back in time and blot out the sky.

“Ebb Tide” is one of my favorites. I skip back to the beginning to hear it again.

The only poem I’ve ever published was called, “I Once Was Big.” It’s about another piece of the home video we filmed that day we borrowed a camcorder from my uncle. It reads:
My pink younger brother, Steven, rolls his tiny head on video. I’m amazed I was a person floating in blue shorts, spinning, waving my naked arms, proclaiming helicopter moves exercise. Was I jealous? Aunts and uncles cooing at his small feet, his toothless mouth sucking their pinkies.

My dad’s voice rumbles behind the camera. My mom idly tells my grandma, “Jack thinks when Wade was a baby, he was big. He says, ‘Oh yeah, when you were little like me, then I was big like you.’” My dad says, “And he thinks that when he gets big, then I’ll be little again.”

It’s possible I knew something I’ve forgotten—that lumbering three-year-old in the video, climbing the treehouse ladder pulling a toy lawnmower just to climb back down, had already lived a thousand lives, had cared for his crying infant father, nursed him with a pinky.

That boy could not imagine a world where they were not together. His creation myth was that they’d just always been there, ballooning to fill voids, expanding and contracting like the universe collapsing just to give birth to itself, again and again.

I really dislike the poem now. It seems wordy and awkward and disorganized. I’ve memorized it and repeat it to myself because I like the memory. In the video I’ve watched many times, I kiss Steve on the head and my aunt says, “You love your little brother.”

Sometimes, I feel like I might fall over on the grass. Exhausted and dehydrated. The sun bearing down. But I’ve got to keep going. I think of my mother’s father who had a heart attack mowing our lawn.
My dad was too sick to do it. He was at his office downtown. My mother drove him there because he didn’t think he could drive. He felt like he had a responsibility to his patients.

Lee and I pushed our toy lawnmowers behind Pap.

Mine was a clear plastic dome with colorful balls like bubble gum popping on a yellow circular mechanism inside. Lee’s was a music-making red and yellow cylinder. Just like the videos with dad. Miniature versions of him. Training for work. Tiny men with responsibilities, backing up when he did, pushing forward when he did. Ducking under tree branches. Heads bobbing behind tall plants. Dad waved us behind him when he turned. He reached to move a baby pool aside to mow underneath it. In the videos, he’s pushing the green Lawn-Boy Pap fell from. Pap’s white hair grazed my knee on the way down. My mom saw from the kitchen where she sat with baby Steve.

Pap was pushing the mower on the small strip of grass between our driveway and our neighbor’s lawn. Mrs. Zrinscak next door called the ambulance. She watched from her kitchen window as my mom ran outside.

My mom went to nursing school before she found out literature was something you could study. She didn’t like being a nurse. She took out her father’s false teeth in the grass by the mailbox and put her mouth on his. Giving breath. She did what she was trained to do, what needed to be done.

“Soul & Inspiration.”

The ambulance was already there when my father walked up the hill in the bright sun. He walked the two miles he didn’t think he could drive. This was after my mom called him and Mrs. Zrinscak took us inside and distracted us with the Game of Life board game, herself dying of breast cancer. This was some time after my dad had the mole on his stomach removed. After
he’d shown me the stitches and said he’d be okay. This was after he’d vomited in the car on the way home from the clinic where they told him he had cancer. This was after his mole was bleeding. And this was after we’d gone away to a resort in the winter for him to relax and I sat with him in the sauna by a swimming pool where he pointed to a dollar bill at the bottom of the deep end. It was a sticker. A joke. I wanted to jump in to get it. We sat in the sauna instead. This was sometime after New Year’s Day when I was practicing printing my name in Dad’s room. I wrote some letters backward sometimes. We toasted orange juice in small glasses from a cocktail set with a glass shaker which we found in the attic when we moved into the house which I thought was a luxurious symbol of our new life. I thought resolutions were like wishes, that toasting was like blowing out candles. So we clinked our glasses and I wished for all the money in the world. I wish I could say I prayed for him to get well, but I don’t know if I knew how bad things would be.

Pap was dead before his head hit the ground.

When I mow, I think of this day. I think of my mom. Her father. Her mother. Her life. Her marriage to my father. Her loss. Nana tried to make it okay. In the shade of the garage she said Pap would have been on a ladder cleaning their gutters if he hadn’t been mowing our lawn. I think of her seeing her husband fall off a ladder through a window. I think of her freezing, holding her hands to her face. She was saying she didn’t blame us. She was saying it wasn’t our fault. It could have been worse.

So, when I feel like I’m going to fall over. When I’m pushing ahead thinking I can’t go anymore, I think about how hard it was for my mother. Her father, then her husband. A single mother with three boys. Three ungrateful boys without anyone to show them how to be men. She had it harder. Mowing is my apology. I’m sorry I couldn’t be more obedient. I’m sorry I
was difficult. I’m sorry Dad isn’t here to help her. I’m sorry he wasn’t here to make me a better child. So I mow. Even after eight hour days doing other jobs, on the hottest day of the year, when I think I might collapse, I won’t tell her I can’t.

I pause to take out my iPod and repeat “You’ve Lost that Lovin’ Feeling” for the last bit. Next week, I will come home again to mow the lawn and think about my father. I will drive through the small towns of Ohio, remembering my connection to each one of them, in love with the hidden roots of every tree along the way. Unity will appear out of lost memories. I’ll sit on my father’s deathbed. I’ll stand in right field waiting. I’ll clean out the garage. I’ll grate potatoes. I’ll recite poems and listen to The Righteous Brothers.

It will begin again. Memories will appear like distant scents, almost unidentifiable. Rain on its way, or a summer night as a teenager on a trampoline in the front yard, whispering loudly as dew forms and the night becomes colder. Something felt before, familiar. The glow around a streetlight spider-webbed with tree branches, giving the illusion of concentric circles. Memories will balloon out, filling me up, interfering with history, rewriting themselves into fiction, becoming new myths constructed to explain how I came to walk here on this lawn. I will step out of my car and walk up to the porch of the house I love as much as my mother does. She will see me suddenly through the kitchen window and her heart will jump the same way mine does when my father visits me in dreams. Then, for a moment, so short as to be imperceptible, we will both believe that I am him.
MOON

You were a shameless child. You were pure beauty. You were a dark white rock. A quartz pebble, the lucky stone under the jungle gym.

4.5, or so, billion years ago, some other world happened to the red-hot, young Earth, a soft beauty, a malleable baby. An alien mountain sailing for millions of years through our early solar system made an impact in an ocean of fire. It hit hard, threw off parts. Earth changed. Pieces of Theia and Terra were ejected into space, creating you, Luna.

You were beautiful then and you are beautiful now. And you were beautiful between, despite all your subsequent violent impact events. Your rivers of fire and valleys of heat.

These moments all have names. At least the big ones. The small ones could, too, if only someone named them. There are chains of craters and mountains, seas and lands: The Land of Snow, The Land of Hail, The Land of Fertility, The Peninsula of Thunder, The Island of Winds, and The Sea of Tranquility. Unique scars of your history and environment, each a different moment, forever remembered, happened, represented, symbolized, physical, real, and permanent. Your craters and deserts affect the light in the most brilliant ways.

Later, your gravity moved tides, mixed the primordial seas from which whales walked and where Jonah was eaten. Where Noah and Ishmael sailed, and Atlantis sunk. Peter Pan’s pirate ship flew. Giant sea creatures swallowed people whole. Your gravity pulls life up from the ocean whose waters lubricate the tectonic processes which move continents upon the Earth.
THE RING OF FIRE

The Sno-Kone machine had a window displaying peaks and valleys and rivers of shaved ice, a tundra glowing with the dancing lights of the East Palestine street fair, out of place in the sweaty Ohio summer night. Marybeth looked at the delicious snow, imagining it as a miniature wintry landscape, until the hand of the Boy Scout running the booth ruined the illusion with the metal scoop he used to shape the ice in blue wax-paper cones.

Marybeth and Lee Anne had been riding the teacups and the merry-go-round and the small Ferris wheel all day. They ate candy apples as the lights flickered on in the early evening and the sun dropped down below the nearby church and houses. They sat and watched families with children wade through the crowded street, the noisy game stalls filled with balloons and water guns, large blue teddy bears, green giraffes, a hundred floating duckies in a baby pool. Shouts rang in their ears—“You can’t win if you don’t play!” Young children with sticky mouths bounced with giant puffs of pink and blue cotton candy floating on paper tubes, fists full of Sno-Kones: blue raspberry, root beer, half grape and half orange. Their feet throbbed from pounding the pavement, clumsy and tripping and stepping to avoid green and black hoses stretched over the street. Their glazed eyes flicked from one set of moving lights to another. Balloons recently exploded with darts hung from pins behind carnies waiting for customers. Gusts of curling steam carrying food smells were lit yellow by more flashing lights.
As the lights of the fair finally began to overtake the warm glow of the sun radiating from behind the church on the corner, Marybeth and Lee Anne decided to ride The Ring of Fire.

The ride was tucked away behind the church. When they walked up to it, no one seemed to be waiting in line. A dark, thin ghost of a man collected their orange tickets, tore them in half, and deposited them in a box beside the stool on which he sat at the end of an empty, zigzagging metal barrier. The ghostly scarecrow rose from his perch and led the girls to their seats in the car painted with flames which would soon be upside-down. He puffed a cigarette and the ember glowed, doubled in his eyes under his baseball cap. He scratched his arms through his denim jacket. He pulled down the lap-bar. The girls were scared. Sensing this, the man croaked laughter from behind clouds of smoke and slammed the gate, enclosing the car.

The girls giggled at each other as the ride began rocking, forward and back, up the sides of the circle track. Lee Anne was chewing a licorice rope, sucking in red spit which tried to escape her mouth.

Marybeth was very scared, but she tried not to show it. She looked out toward the houses at the edge of the fair, the streets crowded with cars, the church parking lot overflowing. She felt her stomach leap as they reached the top of the circle.

Marybeth’s eyes rolled in her head as she tried to focus on the world outside. Upside-down again they went, stopping for a moment, stuck to the sky. They had no control now. They were fixed on a track. They had to wait for the ride to be over.

Later, as teenagers, they would look back on this moment and laugh and believe with certainty that they’d enjoyed it, saying even that The Ring of Fire was their all-time favorite street fair ride, but, at the time, Marybeth closed her eyes and held her breath.
Having heard it on a television commercial, Lee Anne said, “Oh Mylanta!” over and over as they circled.

At the end of the ride, the scarecrow appeared and released them from their misery. He opened the apparatus and laughed at their small, sick faces. One arm up in the air holding the metal grate, the ghost blocked their path so that they had to push by him while exiting the platform. Dizzy, Lee Anne tripped and fell into the ghost’s chest. He closed his tattooed arm around her, careful not to burn her with his cigarette, and laughed and said something that made him laugh even more. He grabbed her waist to steady her and get a good look at her face.

“You alright?” he said.

The girls climbed down from the platform and joined the crowd.

“That guy touched my butt when I fell,” Lee Anne told Marybeth.

Marybeth said, “You liked it.”

They walked dizzy through the rows of games and noises. Raffles were announced over a loudspeaker by a veteran. Somebody’s father’s rock and roll band played where a drum set had been positioned on squares of plywood in the grass outside of the American Legion.

As the girls were about to pass the Sno-Kone stand again, they saw Tina Sanders, the prettiest girl in their sixth-grade class, standing in line.

Tina Sanders was blonde. She had a blue headband holding back her hair. Her clothes seemed to Marybeth to be newer and cleaner than everyone else’s, like she’d stepped right out of a magazine advert for sweaters—some photograph of a family posed near a wooden fence in a leafy backyard, with floating squares of possible colors and ordering details.

Tina wore a white sleeveless top, with a frill of ruffled blue silky material across her chest, and a skirt to her knees, with blue branches extending and diverging on a white
background. She even had frills on her socks above her brown and white saddle shoes, old-fashioned and charming, something her mother thought completed the outfit. “Decidedly,” her mother had said as Tina stood in front of a multifaceted mirror, “adorable.”

Tina’s face was rosy, flushed from the excitement of the fair. Her teeth were very straight and, though no one could tell for sure, she did wear just the slightest hint of color on her lips, something her mother thought made her look grown up. She was a teenager now after all.

Marybeth, on the other hand, was brunette and bespectacled, cerebral and intelligent. She was, by comparison to Tina, somewhat plain. At least she felt that way. The adorableness of her wardrobe was not considered for a moment by her overweight mother whose cigarette had hung from her mouth as she held up dresses or sweaters taken from the closet in Marybeth’s older sister’s bedroom, saying, “You can wear these to school this year.” So Marybeth wore an oversized sweater atop a greenish dress, concealing ripped sleeves.

She had been described as bookish. She hated her glasses, but she adored books, and unfortunately her last name sounded enough like egghead that she’d been eternally cursed with the nickname.

Marybeth felt jealous of her neighbor and best friend, Lee Anne. She was taller than Marybeth with dirty-blond hair which was often tangled and somehow at once both grimy and endearing. Her nose was pointy and she had a dimple in her chin which made her face strong. Lee Anne always wore thin summer dresses with prints of log cabins or bowls of fruit or glasses of lemonade beside glass pitchers like on wallpaper or tablecloths.
Marybeth and Lee Anne got in line again for Sno-Kones behind Tina Sanders. Tina turned as though something in her periphery had caught her attention, and settled her wandering gaze on the two girls still flushed from their twisting, upending ride.

“Oh hey, Egghead. Hey, Lee, nice boobs. Hope you know what to do with them.”

Know what to do with them? Lee Anne tried not to seem puzzled, but her thin eyebrows defied her and jumped on her forehead.

“Sure I know what to do with them. At least I got them to do it with. That’s more than I can say for you.” Lee Anne was surprised by her own quick retort. That’ll shut her up.

Tina shrugged confidently.

“And Egghead, even if you had boobs, no one’s ever going to like you, so don’t worry. Probably no one will ever even kiss you. Has anyone ever even kissed you?”

Marybeth’s face burned. Tears began to form in her eyes behind her glasses. She felt removed from the world, separated like she was watching Tina laugh at her through a tunnel or the fog of a dream. She winced and very softly said, her lips hesitantly peeling away from each other, “Shut your big mouth, Tina.”

As though they were suddenly the best of girlfriends, Tina dropped the malice from her tone and stepped back so her perspective aligned with theirs. “Look,” she said, motioning toward the Boy Scout scooping ice and squirting colors from pump bottles at the Sno-Kone table.

“That’s Tim Terrill, he’s in eighth grade. Isn’t he the hottest?”

Marybeth and Lee Anne both nodded. Lee Anne bit her lip. Tim had a large mouth and very short blonde hair. He played basketball. His parents had some money and dressed him well, which went a long way in terms of securing his status in middle school.

“He is kinda dreamy,” Lee Anne said.
“I think I’m gonna ask him out,” Tina said, looking up and away from him, putting her finger in her hair. “Tina Terrill. Has a ring to it.”

“But he’s an eighth-grader,” Lee Anne gasped.

“So?” Tina said, coolly. She was now next in line.

Marybeth became distracted and looked at the Sno-Kone machine. She read the flavors and combinations of flavors someone had scrawled in marker on a piece of poster board taped to the table. She watched as the fair lights darted over the bottles of colored syrup until she felt she’d identified a pattern. She imagined the bottles were planks on a xylophone being hit by mallets, sounding with reverberating colored light.

Tina moved up in line.

At a shed painted to look like a red and white barn, behind the church by the stream, where the maintenance man kept a weed trimmer and a mower and the grease-stained tools his father gave him, the shadows of the Boy Scout and Tina Sanders holding hands could be seen slipping between unlatched doors.

They closed the doors behind them and positioned themselves to avoid knocking assorted nuts and bolts in glass jars from shelves to the floor. It was very dark inside the shed beyond the lights and noise of the fair. Tina stood stiff as Tim’s clumsy fingers fumbled at her sides.

We must be supposed to do something, if we’re standing this close.

Their lips touched. Tina squeezed hers tight and puckered like she was drinking through a straw. This was the idea she had about the way kissing happened. Tim tried to mold her lips with his, coercing them into something malleable like he was chewing a new hunk of gum without the help of his teeth. He pushed up close against her. They were both breathless.
Outside, Marybeth and Lee Anne, having followed Tim and Tina to the shed, were finishing the sweet melt at the bottom of their blue and white wax-paper cones, wondering what was happening in the tiny barn.

They held their ears to the side of the shed, listening. A muffled voice and clattering of things.

Marybeth, one day, listening to a violin concerto while doing dishes in her small apartment in Chicago, remembered the street fair, suddenly awash in the sounds and smells of her childhood, a hidden memory she’d forgotten long ago.

At once, she remembered the barn, she remembered Lee Anne at thirteen, crouched with her ear against the red wooden wall. She remembered the orange cigarette reflected in the two eyes of the man running The Ring of Fire and the truth of how sick they’d felt after riding it. She remembered the colors and the lights of the fair, the people. She remembered the shed and how it looked like a little barn.

Marybeth had thought something was wrong.

She ran away from the barn, leaving Lee Anne listening at the wall. Her little legs moved through the damp dark grass behind the church to the parking lot filled with all the cars of the people at the fair. She pushed up the sleeves of her oversized sweater and rounded the old brick building and the lighted church sign. Breathlessly, she threaded her way through the metal barriers which led to the Ring of Fire ride and the worker sitting on his stool beside the box of tickets. She stopped in front of him. He squinted and puffed his cigarette.

“Help.”
The man snatched his cigarette from his mouth, flicked it into the air in an arch, and watched the orange light fall like a shooting star to the street, sparking as it landed.

Marybeth pulled him along by the hand, leading him back through the parking lot of the church down to the shed where Lee Anne waited.

As they approached, Lee Anne started, stood, and straightened the folds of her wallpaper dress.

The ghost pounded his fist on the door. It shut a spare inch and slapped the door frame and jiggled the metal latches.

Inside, Tim had unbuttoned his shirt so that his stomach was exposed. He had pulled up Tina’s white shirt so that the skin of their bellies touched. They both liked how warm their bodies felt together. Their hairless stomachs slid over each other like baby whales.

The man opened the door, reached for a single light bulb which hung above, and turned it on. He grabbed Tim by his belt, and pulled him slowly out of the shed. Tina looked at the man, wide-eyed. After letting go of the boy, the ghost reached his dirty, calloused hand into the corner to Tina to help her step over a rake.

“It’s okay,” he said to her, his wrinkled face breaking into a slight smile. She took his hand. “There,” he said. “Everything’s fine.”

Tim backed away fixing his shirt.

“Okay, son,” the man said. “This shoulda been locked. Run along.”

The man turned to the girls, he smiled, and whispered, “Men are pigs.”

They laughed.

“Here, now, come with me.”

He bought each of the girls a cloud of cotton candy. Pink, blue, and green.
“There, now. None of you girls need to be going to no sheds with any Boy Scouts or anyone else for that matter.” He patted Tina on the head and winked at Marybeth. He glanced at Lee Anne.

“I gotta get back to the ride. Enjoy.”

The girls crunched the fluffy cotton candy down between their teeth, the sugar dissolving on their tongues.

Later, when Tina and Tim were married with a child and living in a house very similar to the one next to it, in a housing development beside a golf course on what used to be farmland, Tina took every opportunity she had to tell the story of their first kiss at the street fair. She will tell you she swooned and thought the whole thing was very romantic. She has no recollection of the man who opened the door and bought the girls cotton candy and sent them on their way.
I was riding my bicycle across the bridge in Mill Creek Park, by the old grain mill and the waterfall. As I watched the trees move sunlight in glittering patches on the creek, I was overwhelmed by the beauty of simple things like the trees and the sun and my bicycle and the wind. I could see all the leaves standing out individually. As I crossed the green bridge, I felt like God was in my ears. I felt I could easily learn Portuguese. I wanted to become a car mechanic. I wanted to become a writer. I wanted to become a paleontologist. A sailor. I felt like there was a direct connection between nature and humans in a simultaneous moment of past and present, and my self—my real self, the child I once was, the young, absorbent boy whose passing I have mourned for twenty years, was back, suddenly overwhelmingly happy. I felt like a child again.

I felt waves of calm. It was as if the weight of the world was lifted from my shoulders. My father’s death floated away. Our misunderstandings. You. I cried from the joy of relief. I’ve never cried from joy before, but there was something perfect about the leaves and light and the movement of my body and the falling water.

And suddenly so many moments of bliss seemed accessible within my memory. It is so easy to forget even the highest of highs when they sink into the past. But here among the swaying greenery are memories of traveling with a lover in Europe, kissing on the metro, fireworks booming mixing with climbing mountains in the Pacific Northwest, jumping from
boulder to boulder, running. Here are so many kisses and bottles of wine. That fantastic rain shower and vino verde with Irish cheese and crackers in April years ago. Jumping naked from the trunk of a fallen tree into a freezing river and splashing about throwing water in the sun.

Now, I’ve been here for a week, and there is no chance of release over the weekend. No one said anything to me about pulling down the ceiling in the other room. It was lucky I fell onto one of the beds.

The medications make me very tired and it seems like they’ve given me a lot. The day after the ceiling, I tried the emergency exits. These are locked. A policeman chased me the length of the hallway where I ran full speed into the door at the end bouncing off and hitting the floor where I involuntarily shook, unable to stop my arms and legs from moving. Two more police appeared and escorted me back to my room and held me down on the bed. I was given a shot in my behind. I thought for sure that I knew one of the police and one of the doctors. I heard a voice I recognized come over one of the radios, a woman’s voice. I knew she was going to help me and that I was safe. She was telling them who I am, how she loved me, how happy we’d been together. This was all a misunderstanding. As I drifted off to sleep, I knew when I was released I would have everything I ever wanted. A big old house by the park where I could ride my bike whenever I wanted. My blonde girl’s hips. Vino verde on a patio with speakers playing Motown.

I didn’t wake till after breakfast. Very groggy. I hear names over the loud speakers: Mike, David, Anna, Greg. I think these are people I know. A nurse takes my blood pressure. She’s the one I think is Anna. She’s not Anna, though. Beta blockers make me feel like I can’t breathe, like my veins are hollow. Ativan makes me drunk and Risperdal makes me tired and brain dead. I pick up the copy of *Moby Dick* my brother brought to me from the stand beside my
bed. I read two pages. I can’t focus for longer. It takes a long time. My mind and body are heavy and useless.

Lunch comes. I didn’t fill out a menu yesterday so I get Salisbury steak with brown gravy over it. I hate this so much.

On one wall in the dining area there is a mural of Mill Creek. The waterfall and the mill. It isn’t a very good piece of artwork, skewed perspectives and an ugly palate of mismatched fall colors. I look at this and break off pieces of the meat with the edge of my fork. After returning my tray, I watch TV for a bit.

Nurses-in-training visit again and socialize with us. She acts overly interested. Like, it’s a little too impressive to her that I play the piano. I’m in a band. I play the drums and bass and guitar, too. Working on the harmonica and banjo. I like to ride my bicycle in the park. I have a degree in literature. I’m reading Moby Dick and Infinite Jest. I got arrested for putting graffiti on a bridge. I like to paint. I also make ambient experimental music on my computer with a friend from college. I love the ocean and traveling. I’ve been to twenty-five states and a dozen foreign countries. I’ve worked in a kitchen, a dog kennel, a car dealership, a summer camp, a university, a library. I’m twenty-six and I don’t know what to do with my life and I am stuck here. I think Italy is my favorite place I’ve been. I think this place is my least favorite place.

I see that there is a wall in her eyes that says she wasn’t expecting to meet a person like me. Maybe she thought I would be like the bearded woman who sees demons and shouts at them with her gown backward and falling off. Maybe she thought I’d be like the man in the room next to mine who animatedly reads aloud from an invisible bible on his nightstand filled with gibberish to a congregation hidden in the wall. Visits are over. I didn’t tell her that I thought I could talk to my friends through the vent in my room on the first day. I didn’t tell her that I
thought some of the people here were actors at first, or that I thought my bathroom was detached and moved by truck to another location while I was asleep on the floor.

I play charades in the group room with three other patients. I pretend to yo-yo walk-the-dog. I pretend to walk an actual dog. I jump rope. I draw the string on a bow to shoot an invisible arrow. No one else wants to get up and act out the phrases on the slips of paper, so for half an hour I mime for them.

The bearded lady screams at demons while I walk back to my room. I try to talk to her, which seems to help. I walk beside her and try to comfort her. She thinks I am her brother. A nurse says he will take care of it and the woman starts screaming again at ghosts which she seems to see, which her eyes focus on. I go to my room and close my door and read two pages. I close my eyes and lay the book on my chest. The muffled sounds of the preacher next door bounce in the cinderblocks. I pray for sunflowers.
[female name] worked on a chicken / egg farm. What would you call that?

The chickenegg farm was run and owned by her lifelong neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. [last name], who often served as surrogate parents to [female name]. The absence of [female name]’s parents was largely due to their preoccupation with – or dedication to – or obsession with, ingesting Tennessee Whiskey. Even in mornings.

I imagine, had it not been for Mr. and Mrs. [last name], [female name] might have perished due to the colossal neglect on the part of her parents. This was not the case, though. She, Abbey? Abby. Sarah. Camille? She had a very nice childhood.

[female name] had a nice childhood on Mr. and Mrs. [last name]’s farm. She rose before the sun, donning an apron, or some sort of dress.

What would a nine or ten year old girl wear to collect eggs in a chicken coop?

Flower print dress which Mrs. [last name] sewed for her. White apron. Kind of dainty, like a little cloud in her lap. The kind of cloud a child would cut from white construction paper for a school project. Or, the dress is navy blue.

She would pull back her hair. Her hair was sandy, but bright. Not dull. She had maybe a piece of yarn she tied it with. And the yarn was yellow.

She had a necklace of her mother’s. Maybe it was her mother’s mother’s before her. And the dress was small flowers. Just simple print with yellow and green.
The floor—wooden, unfinished—creaked under her bare feet as she crossed through her kitchen as she left for work.

Her whole life, she never had shoes. She would have dirty feet. Bathed just once a week. Had to wait till after her parents had bathed. Hoped the water was still warm. Water heated on the stove.

She would walk through her backyard fiddling with her cloud apron like she always would. Then she ducks under the fence. A wooden fence. The simple ones that are just three wooden beams stuck in posts with three holes in them. This one has grey weathered wood and the bottom rung – or beam – has fallen from its proper hole in the post. This is, or was, where she would always duck under to continue through the grassy field as she walked toward Mr. and Mrs. [last name]’s house which is white and sat back from the road further than her parent’s house.

Each day, she would begin work as the morning light glowed on the edge of the world. There were those bubbly spit things that are sometimes on long grass in fields. Do beetles make those?

Without instruction or interaction from or with another soul, she would enter the chicken coop.

Would it be cartoonish if the chicken coop is red? Maybe it’s grey like her floor and fence. Her house is old grey wood, and Mr. and Mrs. [last name]’s house is painted white.

The hens lay eggs, or already have, and she reaches under them and collects the eggs in a basket or in her apron. In a basket.

I guess it’s not much of a job. I guess she could do chores and clean and sweep, too. She cleans and sweeps, too. With an old broom.
She would always take the eggs up to the house and leave the basket on the counter in the kitchen. Mr. [last name] would pay her on Tuesdays, and seemingly unbeknownst to him, Mrs. [last name] paid [female name] on Wednesdays. She always had just enough money to buy the things she wanted. She had enough for chocolate Necco’s from the drugstore.

Maybe they lived in Preston, Minnesota. It looks like a postcard from the early sixties there. Somehow, Preston is one of the only places on Earth which is, in reality, painted in Technicolor.

As she got older, she didn’t work more or harder, but it seemed that the [last name]s always managed to provide a sufficient wage. She always wore the cloud apron and crossed her grey wood kitchen out the backdoor with the chipped white paint. She’d always walk through her backyard in her bare feet. She’d climb the fence, as she was taller now. She’d walk through the grassy field with those spit-looking white bubbly secretions clinging to some of the long dewy blades of grass. She’d get the eggs in her basket. Some brown some white. She’d clean. She’d put the eggs on the [last name]’s counter.

She bought fabrics and made her own clothes. It began to become apparent that she had a beautiful petite figure. Of course, the clothes she made were modest, but as she grew, even older men noticed her at the grocery and the drugstore and the post office when she ran errands.

Her hair got lighter, bright. Shiny. Thin tight face. Green eyes. Unique beautiful girls have green eyes. Or, whatever makes your butterflies fly. Any honest person would bite the inside of their mouth and hurt a little in their chest and be sad because you could probably never deserve to touch even her hand. You’d want to kiss her on the forehead and sweet talk her under a tree on a farm. Under a lone maple tree in a field, between an old house and an abandoned old
barn and a fence. Or, just think of a single solitary willow tree in the middle of a field at the height of summer. Sun beating down. You ride your bikes on a country road, passing farm after farm. All that corn. All those stalks of corn beside that hot country road. Old barns and the glaring sun. Hot that makes you feel sleepy. And under the tree all you’d want to do is compliment her and offer her every little violet you pick in the grass. You’d be nervous, and if she ever told you she loved you, you might throw up a little. Or faint. And it’d take you years, and you’d still never believe her. She was beautiful in a way that made people around her hurt. She was completely approachable, sociable, modest and kind, but no one would ever convince themselves they could ever be good enough to be worthy of her. So no one courted her.

Couldn’t or wouldn’t approach her. She just went about her business, collecting eggs / running errands, unaware that she occupied the thoughts of the entire village. She might only come downtown once a week, but every man, young or old, fantasized about her day and night.

At first, it was not very strange. [female name] might have been seen buying flour at the grocery. Preston Grocery. Across the street from the post office and adjacent to the drugstore. The two older men sitting on a bench outside the hardware would see her leaving with her flour. And both wouldn’t stop thinking about her for the rest of the day. The image of her walking out of the grocery would be in their heads all day long. Not sexual fantasies, but more just an obsession. Like some sort of infection. Like having a song stuck in your head, just not annoying. A good song. A pretty song that keeps being pretty and it never gets annoying, just never leaves and makes breathing somewhat difficult.

[female name] just continued to collect eggs and run errands. Apparently oblivious, [female name] was loved by everyone. The cashier at the market, the pharmacist and his wife,
the men on the bench, even Mr. and Mrs. [last name] began to find their thoughts invaded by [female name].

Mr. [last name] occupied himself by building wooden ornaments in the basement of his white house. He made pinwheels and things for the yard or windowsill. He made Santas and reindeer at Christmas and signed the back of each ornament in black paint. Each year, he made and painted ornaments for close friends.

I guess if they live in Minnesota, it would be very cold in the winters and [female name] would need shoes sometimes.

So, maybe she lives in Preston, Georgia. There could be a Preston, Georgia. Subtropical. They have Southern accents. The guys by the hardware have hats that they fan themselves with. Maybe even bowties?

Yes. Cartoonish Southern Gentlemen.

I think you could guess the sorts of things they might say and do and how they might say and do them. Southern accents, handkerchiefs, white hair, bowties, sweaty foreheads and those straw hats that politicians used at one time to popularize themselves.

What are those hats called? Eisenhower had them, right?

Mrs. [last name] could often be found in the kitchen cooking. They had red and white checkered dishtowels. One day, even she found herself staring off daydreaming about [female name]. These fantasies were not really strange or exceedingly inappropriate, just surprisingly frequent. They were warm, loving. You see, [female name] was nearly holy—too sacred for anybody to have impure thoughts about.
Still, Mr. [last name] caught himself looking out the window from his woodshop in his basement, imagining [female name] walking across his grassy field. She would be pulling the petal off a flower. Skipping. Silly fantasies.

The whole town had it like a disease. No one talked about it, but everyone was stupefied by [female name]’s enchanting beauty.

I’ve decided to call [female name] Gracie Von. (This is actually one of my dogs’ names.) Hopefully, this will give the subtle impression and/or serve as a gentle reminder that [female name] is quite graceful and beautiful.

The practice of naming characters for their personal attributes or to indicate their role in a story has never much appealed to me. On the contrary, I find it unrealistic—a constant reminder of fiction and a barrier to the suspension of disbelief. However, this effect is, after thoughtful consideration, accentuated more so by characters who bear no names. For this reason, and because of the added benefit of hinting at a character’s strengths, weaknesses, demeanor, role, etc., I have decided to give my characters proper names, however misguided the route.

I was considering the possibility of making Mr. [last name] a villain or bad guy. So I thought, maybe he should have an evil name. I won’t give away what I thought he might do, just in case he might still do it. I don’t want to condemn him yet if it turns out that he’s not such a bad guy.

For now, we won’t give him a first name. He and Mrs. [last name] will henceforth be known as Mr. and Mrs. Farmer. Somewhat appropriate, I think.
As well as supplying these characters with names, it seems time to fill them out a bit – give some history, background … realism. They must be relatable and sympathetic. True to life, but only just a little generic.

Then we’ll start with Gracie Von. So far, we know, of course, she works for Mr. and Mrs. Farmer on their chickenegg farm. They have more than just eggs and chickens on this farm, of course. But Gracie’s job is to get the eggs every morning.

Her parents are alcoholics.

As she grew up, she learned to ignore their presence. She had almost no contact with her parents. When she was younger they would yell at her for trite things, so this was at least some form of interaction. “Why haven’t you set the table?” Mrs. Von would say. Rather, Mrs. Von would yell it, screaming, “Why in the world is this table not set?” And, of course, Grace was terrified. Not only was her mother heavily intoxicated and exceedingly mean, she was wholly unreasonable as well. The most frightening thing was that her mother had not been preparing nor was she planning to prepare dinner. Grace was being harshly scolded for not having performed a pointless task. Even as a young girl, it made sense to her that she needn’t set a table upon which food would not be served. But these were the sorts of things that would happen to her in her childhood.

Once, on a foggy Saturday morning, Gracie was late for work. Or, the sun was up particularly early. Her father had been awake all night drinking whiskey.

Should it be gin? It was whiskey.

Grace was just starting to mature. People were just starting to notice her extraordinary beauty. She was just thirteen or fourteen. She was on her way out of her house. She crossed through the kitchen as always, but she was stopped by her father who was sitting in a shadowy
yellow corner near the door smoking a cigarette. She froze where she was in her bare feet on the dusty wooden floor. Her father’s head swung from where he was leaning it against the kitchen cupboard into the early morning golden sunlight and said, “When’d you get so pretty?” Then, he stood up and stumbled toward her until he stood teetering in front of her. For a moment, it seemed he would collapse. He reached his shaky hand out toward her, still holding the butt of his cigarette between two dirty fingers, and lightly grazed her young thigh through her flower-print dress.

Grace looked straight into her father’s glassy blue sky eyes. She didn’t say a word, but stared at him with such innocence and intense beauty that her father snatched his hand back like it had been burned. With a frightened look on his face, he retreated back to his corner, shuddering. Gracie didn’t think another thing about it.

She didn’t think about it and she went to work as usual. She collected eggs from under the hens, putting the eggs in a basket which she left in the Farmers’ kitchen. She had lunch there. Mrs. Farmer always left a piece of pie or half a sandwich out for her. Grace usually didn’t eat at home since her parents’ diet consisted only of whiskey. So, Mrs. Farmer looked out for her and made sure she didn’t go hungry. They always provided for her.

When she got home that afternoon, her father had hung himself in the basement.

Their basement had a low ceiling. You could see that he had to bend his own knees in order to suffocate himself with his belt which he’d hung from a pipe.

With her father gone, Gracie’s life was hardly different. It wasn’t as though he had had much of a presence while he was living anyway. And if her mother was depressed, there would have been no way to tell as she always drank enough whiskey to kill an elephant.
In fact, according to the townspeople, there was some amount of truth to this phrase. They claimed that a circus elephant was snuck out of its pen one night after a performance. He was brought outside the local tavern and tied up with a length of rope. The two men who had taken him from his circus pen went inside the bar and took bets on who would win in a drinking contest—Gracie’s mother or the pachyderm. Whatdoyouknow? Gracie’s mother agreed to it. She was red and nearly unconscious from all the whiskey she’d already ingested, but they set up a wooden bucket in front of the elephant and filled it with a mixture of whiskey and soda anyway. The elephant drank half of it and keeled over. Gracie’s mother drank twice that and kept on drinking, so they say.

Who knows if it’s true? Elephants might just happen to be extra sensitive to alcohol. Who’s to say? Might have tiny little livers. Maybe anybody’d be able to out-drink an elephant. Great big elephants got pea-sized livers. I don’t know. Or, the whole thing was made up and no elephant was ever drinking any whiskey outside that tavern. Either way, that’s just to say that she drank a lot. She drank more than any other person ever has, before or since.

After Grace’s father killed himself, her mother faded into the background.

Grace got older and hardly even noticed her mother rocking in a chair in the living room, drinking whiskey. They didn’t speak for years. Eventually, her mother was gone, absorbed by the walls of the house like a child’s lost toy or a misplaced slipper.

Grace kept living her life, just the same as before. She was not affected by the absence of her parents any more than she was affected by their presence. The Farmers continued to provide for her, like they always had.

Now, the Farmers were just nice. Almost to the point of being two-dimensional. Gracie was, of course, more than grateful for their kindness and hospitality, but Mr. and Mrs. Farmer
seemed to be altruistic beings, existing just as some sort of device by which Gracie could continue to exist while having such absent parents. They provided for Grace, and Grace did what they asked. It was a symbiotic synergetic harmonious relationship.

Yes, there was not an evil bone in either Mr. or Mrs. Farmer’s bodies. Spotless souls. Devoted Christians. Very humble, very religious. Heaven material, no doubt. In fact, Mr. Farmer, Brutus, attended seminary and was very knowledgeable and astute when it came to matters of faith. As a young man, Brutus, before he met Mrs. Farmer—then Angelica Dogood—was a Baptist minister. But when his father passed, leaving him the family farm, Brutus came to live there.

Mr. Farmer was a devout Christian through and through, almost to an unhealthy extent. He was obsessive about prayer and insisted on putting a crucifix on every wall in every room in his house. Angelica didn’t mind it much. She was very quiet and reserved, though she couldn’t help raising her eyebrow when Brutus would pray in silence for upwards of twenty minutes before a meal. And that was just toast and juice in the morning. He could sit for hours with his hands clutching each other, white-knuckled, whispering to God before dinner. It got to be so bad that Mrs. Farmer wouldn’t bother even starting dinner until Mr. Farmer had already been sitting in his chair at the table for two hours in devout prayer.

Even while he worked, Mr. Farmer would be thinking about Jesus. It was all he did. Religion occupied his mind all day, every day. On his tractor, plowing, or in the barn bailing hay or feeding the cattle, Mr. Farmer never shook the image of Jesus on the Cross, with a crown of thorns, bleeding, dying for his sins. It was a vivid image. Gruesome. The thorns dug into Jesus’ head while blood ran down his temples. His hands were run through with stakes. Blood had run
down Jesus’ arms, some of it drying in his open armpits. Jesus writhed with pain, and Mr. Farmer knew this was to save him. Jesus’ suffering was his salvation.

The image comforted Mr. Farmer.

This was all Mr. Farmer thought of until Grace turned 13 and became the sole focus of all of Preston, Georgia. Slowly, Mr. Farmer’s thoughts were infiltrated by images of Grace and her ceaseless beauty.

It wasn’t so bad at first. He’d be chewing on a wheat stalk, riding his tractor, just daydreaming about bloody Jesus, and then all of a sudden, Jesus wasn’t Jesus anymore. There was Grace stepping down off the cross with her hair made of seafloing yellow wheat just waving to him. Behind her the vision was washed out by a golden sun in a purple sky, the perfect purple color compliment to the perfect gold of her wheat hair.

He’d shake his head side to side and wipe the sweat off his forehead. Jesus would start bleeding red again, and he’d sigh in relief.

Then he got to thinking of her more than Jesus, and he couldn’t shake it. He’d spend time thinking about every little bit of her. He could spend hours daydreaming about her collarbone. Weeks went by during which Mr. Farmer thought of nothing but Gracie’s eyelashes. Then her elbow or a pinky. One whole month, Mr. Farmer daydreamed about her left foot. The foot was perfect. A little dirty (if you remember she had noshoes and weeklybathed), but slender, feminine. When Grace was 15, Mr. Farmer spent half that year thinking about her left knee. He imagined tiny stubble and little wrinkles on her kneecap. The year she turned 16, he thought about her lips, dry thin beautiful lips. He nearly went crazy that year. It got so he spent no time at all thinking about Jesus. He adored her. Everybody adored her.
Then, finally, on her 17th birthday, he couldn’t take it anymore. That morning, as she brought eggsandbasket to the kitchen as usual, fixing to eat the piece of blueberrypie Mrs. Farmer had lovingly laid out for her, he approached her. He saw her with goldenwheatair floating before him. He closed his eyes tight and opened them again, but his vision persisted. In his delirious and obsessive state of mind, he decided that his love would be returned. If anyone deserved her, he did. He was overcome with desire.

So he asked her for a kiss.

And this was not out of the bounds of ordinarily normal acceptable behavior. She had kissed him many times before, the way a child will. Why it used to be, when Jesus was all Mr. Farmer thought of, she’d very often give him a peck on the cheek as a thank you for the Tuesday paymoney. To her, today was no different and of course obliged, as she had many times before. This, however, was the first time Brutus Farmer enjoyed it in anything other than a platonic way. His heart melted as the lips he had dreamt of for an entire year touched his cheek lightly.

He felt a rush of ecstasy. He felt dizzy and happier than any time in his life. Happier than his wedding day. He was overcome with pleasure and began to shake.

Then he felt very sick and disgusted with himself. Only moments had passed. Grace had left the kitchen. The shame overwhelmed him. He sank down in the corner of the kitchen grabbing hold of the cabinet doors, scraping his fingernails on the white painted wood. He was overcome by an intense hatred for himself. He vomited and sweat beaded on his forehead as his back arched in convulsions and he thought about his bloody crucified Jesus.

No one ever saw Brutus Farmer again.

Stranger things happened.
A man had himself tattooed all over with Grace’s name. A hundred different typesettings
and a hundred different languages. Another man refused to eat if she wouldn’t love him. He
starved to death tied to a lamppost at the center of town. Statues were erected to her beauty.
Volumes of love poems were written and dedicated to her.

People began disappearing all over the place.

Grace didn’t notice.

As these things happened, a few religious people began circulating rumors about the
destructive force of Grace’s beauty. Look what we’ve become, they said. All we do is for her,
and does she care? Our love is not returned. We spend every minute of every day working to
honor her, and she just goes around without a care in the world. The townspeople began to fear
her instead of worship her. She killed her father, you know, they said. Mr. Farmer, too. They
saw her as a manifestation of the Devil, an ungodly, unnatural beauty.

Now, instead of craning their necks to catch a glimpse of Grace, people made a point of
avoiding looking at her all together. It was said that one would be turned to stone if her gaze was
met.

Come to think of it, they said at the local tavern, what ever happened to Grace’s mother?

Years passed and people only became more fearful. Even Mrs. Farmer, in her old age,
became superstitious and avoided eye contact with Grace.

Grace was still all that the people of Preston, Georgia thought about, but not like before.
Now, she was an evil temptress, not a beautiful innocent. People would do anything to distract
themselves from thinking of her. The tavern stayed open twenty-four hours as people took to
drinking and gambling as an escape. Fortunes were squandered. An entire town was paralyzed
by myths about little, beautiful Gracie Von.
No one recalled her birth. No one remembered her as a child. Where did Grace even come from, they asked themselves. She had no origin.

Organizations were begun in response to her supposed wickedness. The myths became more extensive:

She was born of two wicked swamp women. Two witches who had prayed to the Devil for her birth. Traded their souls! They had raised her in secrecy in the woods. She lived on goat’s blood until the age of five. She slept on a bed of thorns and poison ivy. Eventually, they said, when Grace was still very young, the two wicked women found her even too wicked for them to handle. They began to fear for their lives. Even to them, her beauty seemed unnatural and frightening.

So one dark night, the two witches concocted a potion. They mixed it with Grace’s dinner and she fell fast asleep. The witches poked her with sharp sticks to convince themselves she was indeed effectively sedated by the potion. Then they threw her in a burlap sack and dragged her into the night. As fate would have it, they brought her to Preston, Georgia and left her on the side of a road near an old rundown house and prayed she would never find her way back to them, even casting their best enchantments to guard against it. Then they scurried off like mice into the night.

It was said that Grace killed the inhabitants of the old grey house, cutting their flesh into hundreds of small pieces and burying these bits around the backyard. It was said that she practiced a strange religion involving witchcraft and potions and dark things and spells and magic and human sacrifice. Everything strange and evil came to be connected to Grace.
Years passed and Grace became old. She stopped collecting eggs and stayed in her house most days. She did not eat, but her beauty endured. Mrs. Farmer continued to provide for her. And when Mrs. Farmer died of old age (though the townspeople chalked it up to her proximity to Grace), her savings and property were left to Grace.

The townspeople blamed Grace for droughts and deaths. One particularly dry year, they burned effigies of Gracie and the rains returned. Any and all misfortune was attributed to her. Bad weather was caused by her. Poverty. Hunger. Hangovers even.

Eventually, the myths were written down. Prayers to protect the townspeople from Grace were popularized at the tavern and those, too, were transcribed. Organizations sprung up in opposition to her. The transcribed prayers and myths which surrounded her served as the scripture for several churches.

One hundred years later, subsequent generations were still elaborating the horrible story and attending the churches. They insisted on telling their stories which had no grounding in reality. Nearly everything they said was a fictional distortion.

It now seems apparent, for the townspeople and all their myths, it wasn’t necessary that Grace had ever even existed.
How charming the graffiti is from an Italian train. Under bridges, people have built homes from broken parts of things, tires and milk crates and colorful cloths. There is the excitement of our own movement, the flashes of shadows and the bright fields we’ve never seen. I contain myself from swiveling my head round and round.

It is just a train ride. Why should we be so interested in the ways people live? This isn’t our personal tour. We play bored. The continual clacking makes it easier to pretend this isn’t fascinating.

And then we do fall asleep through long straight stretches and wake up in dark tunnels.

“Tell me something.”

“I was thinking of how it’s the same sun all over.”

“I was thinking how it was different fields.”

We are on our holiday train even if some people are coming home from work or going to see someone they don’t miss. We kiss and laugh to bring ourselves back to us.

The stops get closer together and the sun is in a place that hurts our eyes, but the ocean water entices us not to miss a view. The architecture, and hills. The cranes. The flowers are out for us. Can we pick one and make it back to the train?

We are tourists. And people guess where we are from when we switch trains. I am tall and either Dutch or Irish or American. She is so beautiful, she finally gets mad at me for looking
at her. I notice how many people look at us. It’s our backpacks. It’s her smile. It’s how happy we are to be here together. It’s how she dances from foot to foot with her dark hair on her shoulders planning what we’ll do next.

Later on the roof, I can’t stop watching a soccer game. I don’t know the score. Is it just that I’m enthralled with what’s in front of me? Is it just the movement and the lights?

“Then, just watch it and stop pretending you love me.”

“How could you say that?”

“Why can’t you choose what to pay attention to?”

Food and drink don’t make us happy and we consider going to bed, but then we can’t touch. Our beds are separate. I look far away to excuse my wondering brain. I think of how much I will miss just being near her. I lament the feeling I am failing to be present. Do I want to remember a soccer game? A soccer game I watched instead of making her smile one more time?

My bed is too small for me. I don’t sleep well. The next morning, I say I need cigarettes and buy some from a box after a man sitting outside helps me. We walk through a street sale and don’t buy anything. I’m irritable and mad when other men look at her. I think they are hoping she is mad at me. We walk three miles from Sant’ Agnello to Sorrento.

I am an ass until we sulk for an hour on a cold public beach where the sun is blocked by the cliff. A man shows us a menu to a restaurant where we can rent an umbrella and chair and have expensive drinks.

“I just want to be in the ocean. I don’t mind the beach.”

“I feel weird. Maybe we should wait till the sun is further.”
We climb back up the stairs to Sorrento to find wine which we bring back to the beach in plastic bags. We swim with it out to the restaurant’s breakwater rocks where a few sunbathers sit in lounge chairs on concrete patios.

“We win,” I say.

We kiss and drink and take pictures of ourselves in the sun. We wave to boats and laugh at ourselves. Mt. Vesuvius is a spectacular distant cloud. We swim and kiss underwater. We say how bad we feel for the people on the cliff in their fancy hotel rooms and for our poor selves from earlier who almost didn’t swim. We say when we come back for our honeymoon we’ll stay in that yellow one and sit on the roof and look down on the whole thing and say how silly we were. We hope we won’t be yelled at by the waiters or the patrons. We wave to the people taking photos from the cliff and imagine being the stars of their vacations.

“I want to do this again tomorrow.”

“It wouldn’t be the same. It will be a different day.”

“We could come tomorrow for the sunset?”

We dry off. We are tired from the sun and wine and laughing and swimming. We stop on the stairs to kiss more.

The next day, we make a half-hearted attempt at swimming. There is more activity. We see big ferries heading to Capri.

There are three men with a wooden treasure chest in an inner tube on a string like they are flying a kite in the water. They tell us to open it.

“Why?”

“To see what’s inside.”

“I’m betting there’s nothing in it.”
“Americans always want to wager.”

“Italians always want me to open a floating box.”

“I’m from Spain.”

“Ahh. It’s an experiment for a class.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a way of meeting people.”

“Yeah.”

“I like it. I won’t tell anyone it’s empty.”

“I never said it was empty.”

I laugh.

They interest other people and I watch. One man runs and jumps off of an unused boardwalk to come close to it. It almost flips. This gets the attention of the restaurant guests.

When I go to swim to the rocks, I am scolded by a waiter who is nice. A policeman tells the men with the inner tube they can’t be on the closed boardwalk. It is quite a different day.

The sunset is magnificent. We sit on the closed pier and have a picnic listing things we are happy for.

“This pistachio.”

“Prosecco.”

“Your butt.”

“Your face.”

“Your guts.”

“This sunset on this day.”

“You are getting better at being present.”
“Did you arrange that treasure chest ordeal?”

“Ha. That was before.”

“Here’s to now.”

The sunset goes from fire to orange and purple. As a cool breeze comes in, an older couple comes along pulling a suitcase. They couldn’t have been so lost as to get all the way down here with their luggage from the hotel. They have nice clothes. They roll cigarettes.

“That’s us when we’re old.”

“That’s a homeless couple.”

“That’s you and your wife when you’re old.”

“That’s bad.”

“They seem happy.”

The man methodically removes several heavy blankets from the case. They wave to us politely. They open some wine and have a toast.

“What do you think they clinked on?”

“Health.”

“Love.”

“Sunsets.”

“Love.”

“Us.”

“Them toasting to us?”

“Yes. Themselves.”

“They are cute. I want to know their story.”
A HORSE ON A MAP

The night Matilda’s father, Marty, dropped a sun-orange pottery bowl filled with avocados on the kitchen floor was the last time he would see his daughter. This was after Matilda found herself staring into a small white garbage can in her shower—after she peed on a wand at a Dairy Queen beside a drugstore and dropped it on the floor, scrambling to see what two lines meant—after a dream of giving birth to a girl and naming her Kate—not long after her mom dropped the laundry basket down the stairs and hushed her, pushed her into her room, sat on the corner of her zebra comforter, crying—after she’d found herself sitting in her car at the women’s clinic, unfolding a check penned by her mother, saw the words printed thereon and thought they might be a message from the universe, that, Live and Laugh and Love, floating in italics, on a micro-printed watermark, meant don’t walk past those protestors—after she didn’t walk past those protestors with fetuses on posters—after she started her car and drove home, still pregnant with a check—after she cried for two actual hours on her zebra blankets, took a shower, vomited, and then cried even more.

That night, after she splashed her blotchy face repeatedly with cold water, she sat with her parents through dinner and listened to her father explain to a couple from work —Matilda had heard the rant perhaps a hundred times—why he’d bought that particular orange bowl on the counter, what kind of clay it was made from, why the glaze was special, how he wanted everything in his life to be unique, and why he hated mass-produced consumer items.
Shortly after the couple from work left, Matilda was sitting on a kitchen barstool eating chocolate-strawberry cheesecake. Her father was unsetting the table, putting back a vase of flowers. Matilda’s mother said, “Marty, Matilda has something to tell you.”

Matilda’s eyes got wide and a forkful of cheesecake froze in midair. Then she lifted her fork in a circular motion of nonchalance and said,

— I’m pregnant.

Marty said, “What?” and picked up the bowl of avocados to move it from the counter back to the table. She didn’t repeat herself. It took another two seconds for him to hear it.

Matilda slid a small pile of chocolate crust and raspberry syrup off the edge of her fork with her finger and placed it on her tongue. Then, her father dropped the bowl and it broke into six large sun-orange pieces. Avocados rolled everywhere. And for two weeks he would not shut up about that bowl.

Matilda couldn’t sleep that night. She kept thinking of Henry and experiencing a renewable flush of excitement like she felt when she saw the hesitation in her father’s face. She should feel guilty, she told herself, but she felt alive. She pursued the feeling into the early hours of morning, watching the sky from her bedroom window. Finally, she kicked off her covers and started putting things into a bag. She’d need shoes. That old yellow waterproof. Socks. She had a sleeping bag. She pulled a charcoal set and other art supplies from her closet. She imagined having a picnic and sketching dreams of her baby’s face at roadside rest stops. She never fully decided she was leaving, but everything seemed to happen naturally and the idea spurred her warm feeling of excitement.
When she closed the door to the backseat of the car and watched the yellow garage light flicker off in the morning glow appearing over the beige split-level, she was already hoping Henry could help her, maybe give her a place to live for a while. She’d dreamed of a spring afternoon with their child in the backyard bathing in a blue and white kiddie pool. She looked at the perfectly manicured grass in front of her parents’ house and imagined a beautiful young girl sitting cross-legged, painting on an easel, grinning while Henry snapped her photo out front of their own house. She tried not to imagine their lives as artists, a painter and a photographer, as perfectly lovely.

No, she wasn’t thinking about that as she got in the car. She wasn’t that type of person. She’d seen girls who couldn’t survive without their men—not that Henry was her man, or going to be—and she hated that type. She couldn’t stand girls who couldn’t make up their own minds. Always following men, depending on them, like her mother does. Oh, god how she pitied the woman having to hear about the orange bowl of avocados, and hated her for pushing the idea of abortion to keep the whole thing from her dad. It was Matilda’s decision. Her mom was tied down, but she wasn’t. She wouldn’t be disappointed if Henry didn’t want anything to do with her either. It was perfectly possible she’d decide she’d like to settle down in Wyoming and never even go to Idaho. She just had to go away from here.

She knew she wasn’t supposed to have caffeine, or at least not too much, but she stopped at a two-pump full-service station—what she believed might be the last gas station in America where aging men wore overalls, ancient grease-stained baseball caps sitting on the back of their thinning hair as they pulled handles on pumps which rang bells for gallons and spun black wheel counters with white numbers, where they washed her windshield whether it needed it or not and it seemed every customer was given a steaming cup of weak coffee. And the man who called her
darling and brought her a warm Styrofoam cup said, “That usually costs a quarter,” and, smiling like they’d shared some secret, said, “but what’s a quarter between friends.” And it wasn’t a question. Then the man, as though he’d forgotten, turned away still holding the white plastic lid, and was back in a moment delicately placing it on the rim of her cup.

When her tank was full, they waved again. She drove over black rubber hoses, sending pneumatic dings to the small red and white cinder-block building. She flattened a map in the passenger seat, left the window cracked just a little, bounced one wheel over the curb, and turned into the street.

She tried not to think of the night before.

Her father had said, “I can’t look at you,” as he knelt to pick up avocados. She heard it repeating in her head.

She felt like she’d been scared her whole life to hear the exact way he’d said those words. Like she’d had a nightmare once many years ago about him turning away from her, avoiding her eyes. This was the man who had kissed her forehead and told her bad dreams were just dreams. This was the man who’d said—when she was in high school and she’d thought she liked girls, after kissing Stephanie in the bathroom—“Your mother and I will love you no matter what,” bringing tears to his eyes, perhaps because he himself didn’t know he was capable of such acceptance of his daughter’s unique lifestyle, and had said it again when she changed her mind. This time though, there was no pride in his eyes as he cried. There was shame and self-loathing. She thought maybe he hated himself for having her.

Across the kitchen he’d seemed miles away.

Her mother stood between them. “How can you say that, Mark? How can you say that to your daughter?”
The dramatic halogen track-lighting in the cathedral kitchen ceiling cast shadows in his eyes, over his cheekbones. This is how she would remember him.

It was seven hundred and fifty miles to Arco—that name Matilda remembered. Nowhere, Idaho, where Henry took pictures. And did he take any pictures of her? Did he keep the Polaroid she took of herself that morning before she left? And did he look at it sometimes? Vanity overtook her then, just for a moment, and she looked at her blotchy face in the rearview mirror, like she was now posing for Henry. How silly she was near Woodmoor and Black Forest, wanting Henry to think of her, to think of the night they’d spent together.

He was just not like any guy she’d known. He was gentle. She imagined it was because he was such a visual person. Not oriented only toward the physical. Not forceful. More visual. Obsessed with looking. Of course, that’s why he was a photographer. That’s something they had in common, she thought, aesthetics, both appreciating color, and the way the sun was breaking through trees, off to her right, made her think of it. Some intangible idea about the mood of colors and a brightness of hope for the future which can go as fast as it comes, like clouds casting shadows, flowing quickly in front of the sun. It made her wish she’d had a camera, wish Henry was there with his. Then she wished she’d taken a photograph of her parents’ home that morning, the faint radiating shine behind the chimney. Her parents’ bedroom window. And that made her remember her father’s face in the kitchen, like a watery ghost floating in the black rectangle of the sliding glass door which led to the patio. The way he put his hands on his face. The way he actually couldn’t look at her. But how she did look at him, not looking at her. And she didn’t want to cry anymore, and she didn’t want to feel bad, so she tried to fantasize about Henry.
Once, Matilda went to France to visit Stephanie, the girl she kissed in a bathroom as a teenager. They were good friends even after Steph’s exchange had ended and they tried to talk on the phone with phone cards they bought at convenience stores. Steph was from a small town an hour and a half north of Paris, with a name which Matilda also believed to be the word for books, to which they took a bus and a train and where they ate dinner with Stephanie’s parents. There’s a picture of the four of them on the stairs of their screened-in porch, taken from their backyard. Matilda stands on the ground in the photo. Steph stands on the first step beside Tilda and their heads are level. Stephanie’s parents stand on the second step, smiling beside overgrown ivy, laughing at either how short they are, how tall Matilda is, or just because it’s a beautiful day and they know they’re lucky to live in such a beautiful house with such a beautiful garden.

And it was this garden, hidden in the back of her mind, to where she decided to transplant Henry in her memory. This was where she transposed the bearded young man with brown eyes. Instead of lying in the grass on her elbows drinking Belgian beer from cold glasses with Stefanie, she imagined herself wearing a white summer dress and, now somehow miniature, she and Henry kissing underneath a tomato plant. Now, how nice it seemed to her that they were there together. Of course they weren’t there together, but she liked it and she smiled. And then, in the next instant, the place where Stephanie had taken her to surprise her—a tiny secluded beach with carved-out rock arches and cliffs from which they jumped to the waves—became the backdrop of her fantasy with Henry. France. She wasn’t the type of girl who needed a picturesque romance in France, but it wasn’t as though she really cared at the moment, because she was driving her car away from her old life and she needed to invent a new one. She had ten hours to drive.
So she thought about when Stephanie and some of her friends dug a hole in the sand and she climbed in and they buried her up to her neck and they drank beer out of small green bottles. Now she imagined sitting in the water in the shade of eroded rock arches with Henry. She imagined tasting ocean salt on his lips and the feel of sand on their skin touching, abrading. The lapping water echoing on the ceiling of their private cave. Nearly, she convinced herself they had been there together. And because Henry was there, because she inserted him into her memories, it was her favorite memory and it made her feel momentarily happy. She kept it next to the picture of their unborn daughter painting in their overgrown grass. And she knew it wasn’t real, of course. Henry didn’t have this memory. They were never in a garden or a cave and they never jumped off cliffs with boats in the distance and it was Stephanie, not Henry, who pulled seaweed off of her red Converse high-tops. But it was wonderful and it made the drive go faster. And she knew what it was like to be there and what it was like to kiss Henry and they seemed to go together well. She thought about her night with Henry. She stopped herself from wondering if he’d like the name Kate.

“Where you from?”
“Here.”
“You’re from Craters of the Moon?”
“Well, not ‘here’, —Arco. It’s twenty miles that way. It’s no place.”
“What do you do?”
“I take pictures.”
“Cool. Some of my friends are photography majors. I’m a painter. Here.”
Matilda reached her hand down to help Henry up onto a rock. He’d very slowly taken her hand with both of his. Matilda could swear they paused for a moment. Locked eyes for a thousandth of a second. She knew she liked Henry then.

They had kissed as they sat on a large curving branch of cedar beside a small lake with the black tops of trees and the moon in the water. And the moon was big, she remembered. They should have been taking pictures then, too.

Driving her car, Matilda tried to will herself back to Henry’s car, to a moment where she felt utterly loved. Not that she needed a man to make her feel loved, just that she needed to feel accepted by someone right now. And it wasn’t the worst thing in the world to think about Henry. He was kind and gentle. And maybe she exaggerated it a bit for effect when replaying it in her mind.

She put her hands under his arms and held his ribs, then moved her fingers over his flannel to his shoulders and into the sleeves of this sheepskin coat and slid the coat off of him. And he was shaking. It was cold. She put her hands on his waist.

“Your lips are special,” he said. She continued kissing him. “I mean, like, I feel like they were made special for me to kiss.”

“You’re drunk.”

“You are.”

She remembered trying to slide under him in the backseat. He almost fell with his pants at his knees. They laughed. She got on top of him and he hugged her with his elbows in the space between her hips and her ribs. And somehow that was the loveliest thing he could do in that moment. She felt grounded. She felt outside of herself, a part of something bigger,
immortal. That’s what she was looking for. That was why she was going to find Henry, because he could make her feel like that.

    And really it wasn’t just that she was pregnant, she told herself.

    She wasn’t just going because she had no place else to go. Well maybe she would have never seen him again if this hadn’t happened. If her father didn’t say he couldn’t look at her. But she wanted to see him again, anyway. She wanted to feel the way she did before:

    They were sweating and they were breathless and the only thing they could do was what they did, and they didn’t feel self-conscious, not even a little bit. It was natural. He was strong and she was strong and they moved together and there was a good tension feeling and they were beautiful the way a horse is beautiful and every movement they made was the right movement to make and they became better versions of themselves for those moments, enjoying being alive, happy for everything they weren’t thinking of which brought them there, together, powerful, beautiful and endless.

    The sun on the dew in the grass kept catching Matilda’s eyes as she drove. She tried again to suppress the daydream of her daughter painting and Henry laughing. She sat upright, grasping the wheel, her back straight. She imagined a creek with Kate playing in it. A backyard and a lot of minnows and Kate laughing gorgeous little girl laughter as she watched them dart around her feet.

    It was as though she didn’t see the road. The glistening of the grass surprised her again and again out of dreams. And then there was a horse in front of her.

    She stopped hard, still yards away. There seemed to be a path. This was where Matilda pulled her car in the dirt. She got out and approached the horse who was black like coal and powerful and calm. She looked in his eyes. He was harnessed but not saddled. She put out her
hand to touch him. She imagined her fingers being eaten. The horse looked at Matilda with one eye and put his head to the ground and moved his lips around small yellow flowers. No cars came.

Matilda just stood and looked for a while.

She went back to her car. From the backseat, she grabbed the charcoal and chalk set she’d taken from her closet. She took the map from the passenger seat. She brought the materials to the hood of her car and flattened the folded map and began to draw the horse.
The August before fifth grade, I was riding my bicycle around the half-mile loop in the city park. I passed the soccer fields, pedaling. I avoided the yellow speed bumps, riding in empty parking spaces. Geese landed in the pond all at once down the hill, under the apple trees where my father and I had once stooped to let tadpoles swim over our palms and where we watched baby ducks grow from yellow and black puffs into real birds.

There was a birthday in one of the numbered pavilions and I glanced at the family singing. A boy lost hold of his string. He cried and he screamed. A light blue balloon went floating in the overcast sky.

I passed more empty pavilions. I pumped my legs, standing, feeling the air move over me. I sat down and listened to my bicycle. The basketball hoops and the playground came into view and then were eclipsed by the horseshoe and handball courts as I neared the bottom of the loop.

I squeezed my handbrakes to slow. There were two other boys on bikes.

They were sitting near an incline up to the horseshoe pits which had been worn by bike tires into a dirt ramp. The boys took turns riding a path around two pine trees on the other side of the road. Crossing the asphalt as fast as possible, gaining speed, they would shoot up the ramp, into the air.

I stopped to watch.
The boy on the bright yellow bike was wearing baggy jeans with one of the pant legs rolled up. He stood riding and circled the trees. As he cranked, dirt came up from his back tire. When he hit the ramp he kicked the tail end of his bike out slightly before landing. A pretty cool trick. I was captivated.

The other boy on a blue bike took his turn. At the peak of his jump, he moved his handlebars quickly left and right, shifting his front tire back and forth in the air. When he landed the first boy said, “Awesome,” and pulled from his pocket a bent and crumpled cigarette. They both glanced around. The park was mostly empty. Just tall trees. No cars were around.

Then they saw me watching them. I looked down at the road.

They coasted over to where I stood.

Their eyes investigated my bike and inspected my clothing. I was wearing a red and white striped polo.

They wore t-shirts of punk bands and baseball caps with the logos of dirt bike companies. I noticed then that the boy with the blue bike also had his right pant leg rolled up. I’d seen muscular and tattooed men in cities wearing their pants like this. My mother told me then this was some sort of gang-related symbolism, but she didn’t say—and it was a mystery to me then—what it could possibly mean. This association made these boys seem attractively dangerous.

“You should really roll that up or wear shorts when you ride,” Blue bike said, indicating something near my legs.

I didn’t know what he meant and stood silent.

“You pant leg, man. So it doesn’t get caught like that in the sprocket.” He pointed at the greasy cuff of my pants.
“Oh, right. That makes sense. I should have thought of that.” I bent and fumbled with the material and quickly gave up again.

“You’re friends with the smart kids, right? Justin and Andrew?”

I was, or had been. I hadn’t thought of them as the smart kids though. But we were A-students in elementary school. We didn’t get in trouble. We smiled. We were in the gifted program together.

Justin and Andrew went on to be valedictorians, but I didn’t, partly because I met Ron and Steven. In spite of my existential confusion and general apathy, I managed to coast through the rest of school on my wits, continuing to be motivated by a fear of being disliked by my teachers.

“Not really anymore,” I said. Though it had been only days since I had last seen Andrew, I knew we were done being friends. I’d had a falling out with Justin over my bike. He and Andrew both had nice new big ones. Mountain bikes. They said they didn’t want to ride with me. They didn’t like my BMX. They were embarrassed that I would ride what they called a kids’ bike. I said I didn’t want to be friends with people who pick their friends that way, and I left.

“Those are great dirt tires,” the boy with the yellow bike said.

“Thanks.”

“You wanna try this?” The other boy pointed at the ramp.

“I’m Steven. This is Ron.” I nodded. I lifted my chin and looked at them.

“I’m Wade.”
We got the name Steven Wade at school that year on account of us always being together. “It’s Steve and Wade,” they’d say. “Steven Wade.” Like one person.

“Steven Wade, you coming to the party tonight?” Steven’s older brother was on the football team. They gave us our first beers. “Steven Wade, let’s go out to Dorothy’s and ride the four-wheeler.” More Budweiser with football players. “Steven Wade, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you were brothers, or lovers, but you’re too cool to be queer.”

We became the center of a group of friends. We revolved around bicycles.

Chandler smoked cigarettes and laughed, spewing vulgarities while we rode our bikes to the store to steal cigarettes. He relentlessly teased Lenny who was short and always had boogers. On a dare, Lenny stole a whole pack of Marlboros from his father’s refrigerator carton. His dad beat him with his belt for it and we could hear it all the way in the woods. Chandler treated him nice the next couple days after that.

Jared kissed much taller and prettier and blonder girls than any of us could imagine in the woods where we built bicycle ramps. We—I—would watch him, and wonder, how does he do that?

We all dug with shovels taken from our father’s garages and erected ramps to run our bicycles over, to fall from out of the air, to bleed on and get up.

Ron found a mostly full bottle of Jack Daniel’s in those woods once when we first started building ramps there. Must have been stashed and forgotten. Steven got alcohol poisoning from it and puked for two days straight. He survived. We rode our bikes. Because of that bottle, because of the Jack Daniel’s, we named the trails Old Number 7. A grown-up reference we treated with deference. Old-Number-7-Trails.

“You guys, wanna go to Old Number 7?”
We spent our days there. Summer days. Long days. Fall days. Smoked stolen cigarettes. Jumped our bikes over each other’s bodies. Dug. Got dirty.

We rode over to Akeinhead’s Dairy.

We stole candy bars—five-finger discount. We stole cigarettes. We bought sodas to distract the attendant. We won free sodas under the bottle caps and stole more cigarettes.

Once I walked in and grabbed a soda from the back cooler. While the attendant looked at my winning cap and turned to place it in a Ziploc bag with others, I put a whole carton down the back of my pants. The attendant was pretty. I remember her.

We made ourselves sick smoking pack after pack of Maverick Menthol Light 100s.

We blew smoke rings. We smoked two at a time.

We walked on the railroad tracks. Laid down coins, collected flattened ones.

Someone put a 2x4 on the tracks once. Nothing happened.

We caused mischief. Threw corn kernels scattering on Halloween at houses. Toilet papered people’s yards. Put eggs on the paint of the English teacher’s car. Then, that winter, bad things happened.

It started when we met Beau. A real bad kid.

Sure we stole cigarettes. Sure we were bad. I think Chandler even tortured a frog once, the weirdo. But these things happen. I remember shooting a bird with a BB gun once and crying later at home. But Beau was older, badder, had piercings, got in trouble at school, yelled at teachers, was violent, and raised hell. He had lines shaved into his eyebrows. I was afraid of him. Still, he was friends with Jared’s older brothers who we thought were cool, because they taught us to smoke pot in their parents’ doublewide trailer on the hill and we shot paintballs at cans in the yard and imagined we saw UFOs in the cornfield.
So when Beau and those guys wanted to hang out with us, check out our trails, we thought that was pretty great. They brought a joint up there and we passed it around in a circle—six or seven of us between the dirt ramps. We were in sixth grade. They were in eighth grade.

Beau pulled out what I remember as being a blue revolver. Like light blue. I don’t know how it would have been that color, but it was. Powder blue. It was small, but it had a kick. He showed us how to shoot it into a pile of dirt.

Steve and Ron took turns. We laughed a lot. Our hands shook.

It was terrifying and exhilarating.

Lenny didn’t want to shoot. Chandler didn’t want to either. He sat on a log and smiled and told Jared to suck his dick cause Jared called him a pussy for not shooting. But Jared didn’t shoot it either because his hands were busy with a girl.

I watched Jared kiss Amanda.

I took the gun.

I turned away and pulled the trigger.

The bullet I never saw shifted dirt in one of the jumps and made it fall out the other side in crumbles. It broke one of the ramps.

I handed it over. I was shaking. I was high, but I was alive like I didn’t know I could be.

I breathed deep. This freedom scared me.

Steven’s house was just a block away. We went over there in the evening to play videogames after riding our bikes and stole cigarettes from Steven’s step-father’s packs of Camels he left sitting out on the kitchen table.
Steven’s step-father was called Big Will, and I hated him. When he died on a motorcycle, later, Steve and I honestly said “Good riddance.” We hoped he’d rot in hell. The world was better off.

Big Will beat Steven’s mother and Steven and their dog, Penny. And Penny was the sweetest dog on Earth.

I remember he’d scratch his crotch with the cordless phone antenna, calmly laying on the couch, drinking beer in his boxers. The dog would do something he didn’t like, like vomit for instance, and that phone was through the wall in the kitchen. His fists were in the air. I saw him once strangle Steven. He was something.

Big Will drove truck.

Big Will had a dirty mouth.

Big Will didn’t go to high school.

Big Will could be fun when he was fun and was not fun when he wasn’t.

Big Will gave us beer.

Big Will taught us to drink black coffee in truck stops.

Big Will taught us to be men in the way he thought men should be.

Big Will’s family was like him. They made him.

His mother, Dorothy, worked in a factory making lawnmowers most of her life. She was then retired. The poor old lady paid for everybody to watch pay-per-view wrestling at her house.

His brother, also named Ron, had killed three people drunk driving, and drank and drove all the time. He did heroin and anything he could get his hands on. His disability, drunkenness and drug addiction, gave him government money to drink with. Big Will himself was a former crackhead. He told us stories like we would understand them, like twelve-year-olds should
understand, or even ever hear, the story of how he once stole a handful of 8-balls from a crack dealer:

“What you do is—see—the guy sticks his hand in your car window for you to pick one. Fuckin’ big-lipped nigger, this guy was. He sticks his hand in. Twenty bucks. I give him the money, then I slap the bottom of that black motherfucker’s hand and those rocks go rolling all over the car. I floor it and get the hell out of there!”

He laughed.

We laughed because he laughed.

This is just an example.

He told us about sex:

“I seen my share of prostitutes on the road. Hoot Al got a refund on a five-dollar blowjob in Aliquippa, PA, because the girl couldn’t finish him off.”

I can’t believe the things he told us.

Once, at his mother’s house, where his brother lived upstairs with bent cook-spoons, he told us about how, in high school, he and his friends all had sex with the same girl in a shed. He told us that story and laughed. He thought he was teaching us about the world.

He told us about black prostitutes:

“You ever had black pussy?”

I’m twelve, why are you saying this to me?

“Those bitches are crazy. Take anything you give ‘em though. You can’t date one though. But you can fuck one. Plus, on the inside,” he said, “all pussy’s pink.” And he laughed and laughed and laughed and taught us that that kind of thing was funny.
I already hated him with all my heart for what he did to Steven’s beautiful mother. She was kind of sweet and I had a soft spot for her. I was a kid. I think I kind of wanted to kiss her. Not that she was an angel or anything, really, but no one deserves to be around a man like that. He broke her collarbone once. I wanted to kill him.

Anyway, Big Will must have heard the gunshots that day in the woods and asked Steve about it while we were playing videogames in their living room that evening.

“Did you hear shooting today?”

“Shooting?” Steve pretended to think about it.

“Yeah. But it ain’t hunting season. Don’t know what that could have been.” He said this like he was merely kicking around a bit of conversation.

Steve kept his eyes on the screen and said, probably too casually, “Gunshots. Hmm. No. I heard some birds today, but I ain’t heard no guns.”

Quickly, as though this next sentence was fully formed in his head, Big Will said, “That’s funny because it sounded like it came from those woods where you ride your bikes. Did I see Beau Marlow’s boy up there today?”

“Beau. No. Beau who?”

I was in a cold sweat. What we didn’t know, couldn’t know, was that Big Will watched us shoot that gun that day. He must have. Had to. Or, Steven played it too cool and he just knew he was lying. Or Big Will was just guessing, and he guessed right. One way or another, he got pissed. He was setting Steven up in a lie, and he trapped him. And he hated being lied to and I think he was just looking for a reason.

He said, “Wade go home.” And I continued sitting.

“You wanna watch your friend cry? See what a pussy he is?”
I clenched my jaw. The world buzzed in my ears.

He took off his belt. Steve was still looking at the TV.

“Wade, you better leave.”

He stood, grabbed Steve’s arm, and dragged him through the kitchen and into the backyard.

I ran after them, and when I reached the backdoor I heard Steven scream.

It was dark.

I was then standing in front of them. I tried to get between them. Big Will took one fat finger and pushed me backward into the grass.

Even though he was crying, Steve was talking back, trying to find strength in words.

“You fat dumbass.”

“Shut up. Stop crying. I’ll give you something to cry about.” His belt cracked. Steve yelped like a dog.

I started crying.

“Don’t make me give you a reason.” Then just like that he stopped. He saw me looking at him. He picked Steve up and straightened his grass-stained shirt.

I slammed the gate on the back fence and left. I nearly fell off my bike. I swear I felt all of it myself. I hurt for Steven. I couldn’t see through my tears as I floated my bike along the yellow lines of the dark road.
I have again begun reading passages from the Old Testament. I search there for truths of the past as though my parents’ bible holds some secrets that might motivate me.

I love the descriptions of the Garden in Genesis. I imagine lush greenery and flowers and sweet ripe fruit. The formality and rhythm of the language are nice and make me sleepy. I imagine what it would be like to eat the apple selected by the serpent. It seems so strange that God would punish his creation so harshly and I feel that I have lost heaven on Earth myself. God’s cruelty seems to me to suggest I am correct in believing he is false.

I flip around and read Job. I find myself wishing for the New Testament and stories of Jesus’ words of love and forgiveness. This book needs a hero.

My son comes in to interrupt me, saying he needs to pee. I tell him to go to the bathroom then and he does. I use this as an excuse to get some tea and pick up a modern version of the New Testament.

It is a quiet Sunday morning. How I love the absence of the noises of trucks and trains outside. It feels sacred to be quiet and I like it.

I eat cold cereal and drink tea and sit in early light. I fall asleep reading.

My dream is of myself as a child my son’s age. I walk along a creek in a secluded wood. Everything is wet and the leaves above me shift slowly back and forth as rain falls in big drops. The water breaking around rocks in the creek is entrancing and I stop to watch the ripples and
reflections with the feeling that a dinosaur might cross in front of me. I walk further and find the trunk of a large tree fallen across the creek. I want to sit there. The branches sticking out from it scrape me as I struggle to find a place in the middle of it. I find a place to sit and look into the water. Just the grey sky is reflected back at me. I look up, and my Jon is back from the dead looking at me from the splintered trunk of the tree. I wake with a start, and regret losing the cool simplicity of the creek and the intensity of that moment with Jon. I put the bible away.

I always feel like he’ll walk in some day right off the street. He’ll open the door and hang up his coat, kissing me and giving me violets. A hundred violets to choose from, he’d bend down at the edge of the yard, like always, and grab up two or three. They were special, the ones he chose, because he picked them for me. If he came back, I know he’d give me violets.

I can’t shake the idea that a curtain will come up and Jon will be there. Together we’ll step to the edge of the stage and take a bow, the audience throwing flowers.

My friends Tim and Sara bring over whiskey to drink and we sit at the kitchen table. Tim is sprawled out in his chair, his flannel shirt hanging open to reveal a dirty grey t-shirt underneath. He goes on about the news, saying how things ought to be and what is the country coming to.

I drink my whiskey and look at things around the kitchen. There’s a row of Peanuts figurines I took from Mom’s when she died lined up on the window sill. The little yellow Woodstock has fallen over.

Sara’s good at seeming interested when Tim talks. She nods up and down emphatically at the things he lazily postulates. She seems to admire this spouting off. We pour more drinks as Tim slouches ever lower in his seat. I hear the clock tick and the wind rattle in the frames.
We have another drink and move from the kitchen to the living room as it gets dark. Tim and Sara sit on my grey couch and I plop down in a big olive green recliner. Chris is on the floor playing with his pink doll again, shaking it back and forth and making her talk. Her eyes flutter open and closed.

When Jon died, he was at home. Hospice had been coming and some friends bought groceries for us. They were always bringing treats for Chris, trying to keep him happy. We had a special bed put in Chris’ old bedroom for Jon so at least he could be home. He’d lost so much weight, he was just bones. I learned that most cancer patients starve to death because the cancer takes all their nutrients. It was finally a relief when he died. He couldn’t eat or speak by the end. The morning he died, I brought Chris into the room to say goodbye.

He climbed up on the bed. I told him his dad was with God now.

He didn’t seem bothered. He peeled back Jon’s eyelids and looked at his blue eyes, closed them, and opened them again.

Are you going to get remarried?

We could fix you up. We know some great people from work, don’t we, honey?

It’s about time that you start looking out for yourself and get a good man.

It’s not too late for you to find someone good like my Tim.

I go get more drinks. In the kitchen, I spill whiskey all over the table. I grab a dishtowel and start trying to clean it up, but drop the towel there on the table and look out the dirty kitchen window with the Peanuts figurines. In the distance, there is a line of trees. They all seem to
blend together. My eyes unfocus. I walk back to the living room, balancing one drink on top of the other two.

I was lucky enough to find my Tim.

It’s not too late. Oh, I know the perfect guy.

I look down at the carpet. Chris is still there with his doll. He drags it around the floor and brings it to me. Holding it in my hands, I remember that he’d gotten it from this little girl who lived next door to us a few years ago. Her family has since moved, but Chris still has this doll. He really seemed to like going over to her house and playing with her toys. She had so many that no one noticed if one or two were missing when he’d sneak his favorites home.

That girl had pigtails tied with ribbon and in the summer she’d bring me flowers from her family’s garden. Sometimes, they’d ask me over for dinner. I always thought it was just because they felt bad for me alone here with Chris, but I’d go anyway. I’d go over to their house and we’d drink fancy liquor from special glass bottles they kept at their bar. We’d drink and talk at the table before dinner and the kids would play on the floor.

They’d drink like fish, but they always prayed before they ate. I’d close my eyes with them when they did and pretend to pray, too. They’d start saying a little prayer aloud and then they’d each have their own little silent one together. I’d always open my eyes at some point to watch them hold hands with their arms raised up above the edge of the table. The little girl would be blinking and blinking, trying to keep her eyes shut. She’d be smiling showing her braces, tilting her frizzy pig-tailed head back and side to side like she was feeling the warmth of the sun on her face, talking to God.
After we’d eat a ham or a turkey or a steak, we’d have another drink out in their backyard. We grown-ups would sit in some white plastic lawn chairs with our drinks at a circular table of frosted glass.

I remember once their girl and Chris went to play in the creek that ran behind their house like they often would. Chris came running over, wanting to show me something. So I got up and set down my drink and took his hand.

He ran faster than I wanted to walk, tugging at my arm. When we got there, he pointed into the creek to show me something, a hundred baby frogs, all there in one place. They were all babies, hopping. They were a big mess of bouncing little things. He wanted me to stand there while he investigated them. He picked one out and held it up to his face and looked like he was about to taste it. He gently squeezed another. And then, when he thought I wasn’t looking, he picked one out and stepped on it, pushing its little body down into the sand with his thumb.
On the first day of soccer practice, a girl noticed me plucking a blade of grass to chew on. She was so excited she blurted out, “You eat grass, too?”

“I don’t really eat it, I just sort of chew on it.”

“Oh, I eat it.” She seemed sad, so I turned back to my blade of grass. “But, it’s okay, because we can be friends because we’re like cows.”

“Okay, we’re cows.”

When the coach asked what the team name should be, Abby and I both raised our hands and excitedly said, “The Cows!” as though it were an obvious choice. He frowned and looked at the white and black soccer ball as though it were to blame for the idea we had.

“Cows? But, cows are slow and...” Mr. Smith looked down at his belly.

“How about the newspapers!” another kid said.

“Alright, look it’s more like we want a name like the Bulldogs to intimidate—scare—the other team.”

“How about Freddy Kruger?”

“You want to name the team Freddy Kruger?”

“Cows is better than that!”

“Bulldogs!”

“But the football team is already called the Bulldogs.” We were silent for a bit.
“The Intimidators.”

Finally someone raised his hand and said, “The Giants.” I raised my hand to say there already was a football team called The Giants which I think the coach sensed.

“We’re The Giants” he said between his teeth.

I didn’t even like “The Giants.” Not their name, colors, or really anything. I was a child and selected my sports mostly based on imagery. Cows were beautiful animals in fields. Giants conjured monstrous fairy tales. I didn’t want to intimidate anyway. Like cows and Mr. Smith, giants were often slow and fat. This is the way I saw it then. Certainly an argument could be made for or against “The Newspapers” as well.

The team ended up being called The Blue Giants. At least that’s what we all thought it would be called at the end of practice. At the next meeting, we found out that our t-shirts were pink. Abby was really happy about this as it was her favorite color. We floated the idea that the team should be called The Giant Pink Cows. This didn’t go over well.

None of the other boys wanted to have pink shirts, so the third practice was just me and Abby chewing grass and another girl who was kicking a soccer ball around.
The red light through the thin curtains fading, Dad was drifting off to sleep in the early evening. He lay in bed, listening to trains outside his closed window. In their whistles he heard voices. The voices told him not to stay. Don’t stay here, Dad. Don’t stay there, Dad. Don’t lay there, Dad. Did they say the same thing, or change slightly? He couldn’t decide and supposed it didn’t matter. Surely the trains would stop soon and he would have some rest no matter what they said.

But the trains kept coming and they seemed to be getting louder. Shouting so he felt very uneasy and sick. Did they have to? Were deer on the tracks? How many animals are there? How many trains are running right now and why is the volume so high? And if they are saying secret messages to hypnotize him, why not just send one through his bedroom wall? If they are real voices of people wanting to tell him to leave, say it with a train to his head.

But there were voices still. Smaller ones in the corners of the room. He tilted his head and listened. Part of his mind felt as though it were falling asleep and part strained to hear a weak signal he felt was bouncing off the ceiling. If only there were some way to amplify the sound so that he could figure out what the train people seemed to want him to know. He turned on his side to ignore the whispers in his ear. He turned on his other side to see if he could hear them there. Who would want to say things to him in his bedroom? Who would shout over everything just to make him want to kill himself?
We don’t want you to kill yourself. We want you to help yourself. His ears rang. If this is real, then the voices were hearing his thoughts. No, they laughed, we just know how stupid you are. Shit. He heard us. It’s not working.

Was he being watched? Did they know he could hear them? He wanted to listen more to see what they would say about him. Maybe they had answers to help cure the feeling he had that he would never be happy again.

Another train roared, startling Dad so he forgot about the small voices. Dad, don’t. Don’t smoke, Dad. Done. Dad done.

He lay on his back and doubled the pillow over trying to make himself comfortable. He listened to his breath in and out of his nose. There are always trains. They could sound like anything. Why would this bother him? Go broke, Dad. Go broke. Any dad could hear this and think it was them. Dad, Dad, look.

But what of the small voices? Train whistles could be made to sound like anything. But the voices in the corners—were they interfering with his sleep, twisting around his dreams so that he found no peace? And what were they trying to tell him? To be better? To be happy?

He took a deep wheezing breath. Was that a voice? That was himself. Maybe the voices from the ceiling were in his ear. Dad lay for hours trying to determine the source, not sleeping. When a car passed, he wondered if they knew he was there in his bed.

Finally, he needed to pee badly enough that he got up. As he stood, another train whistle blew. Was this a coincidence? It was dark now and Dad banged his head on his bedroom door. He stumbled into the hallway on wobbly legs. He made it to the toilet with his hands in front of him.

He’s in the bathroom. He’s peeing in the dark, again.
He swore he heard that. Was he being watched? Was he hearing transmissions on radios of police or neighbors who were watching his every move? He peed, relishing in the relief of the noise of the water to drown out the voices. He felt better and didn’t flush the toilet. He crossed the room. The voice said, he didn’t wash his hands. He rubbed his eye. He rubbed his eye and didn’t wash his hands.

The trains said, Dad, why are you so stupid? Give up on your dreams.

Finally, he slept.

His dreams were of speaking to beautiful women and walking in autumnal woods with his son and wife.

In the early morning, he felt sure of silence. There were noises of the house, and the cicadas still hummed, but there were no voices. He got up and had coffee. The silence of his stupor was pleasant until his son woke.

“Dad, I’m tired.”

“Then, why don’t you go back to sleep, it’s Saturday.”

“I heard a loud noise and was scared.”

“Oh? When?”

“In the middle of the night.”

“That was me. I ran into the door. Do I have a mark?”

“Maybe a little one. Did it hurt?”

“Yes. I have a headache now, too.”

His son ate cereal loudly while Dad tried to read the newspaper. Dad tried to focus on the words, but heard only the loud crunch of his son’s corn flakes. He gave up on articles and searched for the comics.
His son slurped down the milk remaining in his bowl by lifting it to his face. With milk on his lip and nose he asked, “Can I have the funnies, Dad?” Dad set the paper on the counter beside his son and walked out to the garage.

A train whistle blew as his foot stepped down from the wooden steps to the concrete floor. We’re not watching you, the train said. He shook his head. Small voices said, what does that mean?

It wasn’t clear to Dad how any of this went together. He went back and forth between convincing himself the voices weren’t real and being upset that the trains wouldn’t leave him alone. He went and stood in front of the refrigerator where he kept beer and soda. He looked at his watch. It was 8:45 a.m. He opened the door and grabbed a can. He tried to open it quietly, imagining the small voices listened to him or watched him when they weren’t commenting on his thoughts.

He drank half of the beer in the first gulp and opened the fridge again to grab another. He took both to a table against the far wall where he kept all manner of markers, rollers, brushes, inks, acrylic and watercolor paints. He had several sheets of heavy paper and one large canvas.

Dad didn’t go to art school or know much about art in general, but he loved to put colors on a canvas and spend hours blending and applying more paints until he considered a painting finished or ruined. It felt to him a peaceful and beautiful activity. While he painted, for the most part, nothing disturbed his mind.

He turned on an old radio. He pulled a string for the light above him. He stood looking at the messy table and grabbed the canvas.

He selected yellow for the bottom right corner and painted in long strokes. Another train roared, but this time it seemed only to be a train in the distance. He heard his neighbor’s screen
door squeak open and smack shut. Had he been in his kitchen looking out in the yard between them it would have bothered him. His neighbor was an old man with white hair and Dad didn’t like to see him and he didn’t like Dad. But as he finished his first beer and reached for emerald green ink and a spray bottle filled with water, he felt very pleased with himself and continued painting, sometimes entertaining the idea that his art would be appreciated by people who would ask him questions and praise his childlike use of bold colors and abstract forms. The water made the ink run and bleed across the canvas so there were branching formations of green across the field of yellow he’d created. He opened his second beer. He painted a large patch of orange in the upper left corner, then a splotch of deep red ink in the middle. He stepped back, already liking what he’d made. He considered stopping. But then what would he do? He didn’t want to do anything else. He added a magenta stripe next to the yellow along the bottom edge. This seemed to throw off the balance. He needed blue and more yellow. He mixed some of the colors together on the canvas with another brush and tried splattering yellow and a little black across the whole thing. It looked good and he wanted to do another one, but it was his only canvas. He went for another beer. He walked backward a few steps considering the painting from a distance. He thought of things people might say about it. He imagined having his own art show.

The voices started in the corner. He couldn’t make out a message. Was his neighbor talking to someone? Had his son put on cartoons? There was a train again and it seemed it was in the same key as the classical music coming from the radio. Maybe there was just a fuzz of interference coming through the speaker. Do you like it now? Was he being teased about his painting? He added more yellow around the orange and blended the green and blue and sprayed more water. Are you happy? Nice painting. He squinted at the corner as though he might
intimidate the source of the voices or reveal to whoever was watching him that he heard them talking about him and he wasn’t happy about it. Would they just leave him alone to paint? This was his only happiness and he wasn’t going to listen.

What if they tell secrets of happiness? No, they just say mean things. Oh okay. You’re on your own. Wait what do you have to say? He turned off the radio for a moment. He could faintly hear birds outside.

Dad was sweating and wiped paint across his forehead. He finished his beer. The cool liquid in his empty stomach was fantastic. He belched loudly. He was very pleased with the painting. He got another beer.

He turned the canvas on its side. He considered the brush strokes and the effect of the different mediums on top of each other. The inks were very vibrant but more transparent so that paints showed through them. In some places where he’d used the spray bottle, the ink and paint mixed in interesting patterns like sediment-rich river deltas photographed from space. He smiled at his painting and turned it again. He added more yellow, then more red. He turned the painting again. He wanted to consider it from all directions.

It’s not even art. My kid could do it. Violins played Mozart on the radio. It made him happy. Colors. Who doesn’t like colors? What a nice mess. It’s so arbitrary. What’s the meaning? What did you set out to do? It’s just a mess and you’re stupid.

He turned the painting again. He didn’t have a way of defending his art. It was abstract and childish. It wasn’t well planned, but the process was enjoyable and the final product always was pleasant and visually appealing. It doesn’t matter if nobody gets it.
Now Dad needed to eat, but he didn’t want to leave his painting table. It had gone too fast. He wanted to paint more. But the painting looked good how it was and he didn’t want to change it or ruin it.

He went inside for cornflakes.

Oh, what important work you do. What brilliant art! Why don’t you go color with crayons? Dad shook his head.

His son was watching cartoons. He heard a theme song playing. Maybe those were the voices he’d heard. Yes. He grabbed a handful of the cereal and crunched it loudly and could hear nothing. He got the milk and poured it over the cornflakes slowly. He felt momentarily proud for not spilling anything.

Dad went back out toward the music on the radio in the garage.

The painting already looked a little duller. Maybe the light had changed a little or the paints drying made the difference. He wasn’t sure what it needed. It doesn’t matter. It’s stupid anyway. When’s the art show? You’re not a famous artist.

Dad turned off the radio. He rotated the painting again. It seemed new. He smiled. He decided to go for a walk, but then he heard a car accelerating in the distance and immediately felt unsure of going outside.

He went inside to use the restroom.

He was glad he’d gone inside because he was able to wipe the paint off of his face. He changed his shirt and told his son he’d be back soon.

Dad opened the front door and stepped out. Then he went back inside for his jacket and scarf. He thought he’d just go around the block a couple times. He walked briskly at first and then slowed.
What are you doing with your life? Painting and drinking in the morning? Uh huh! He heard crows. You’re an idiot! It hurt his ears. Somewhere a loud lawn mower hummed and screeched metal on metal as it turned. He looked around to see birds and leaves in trees above him. He took an awkward step on the curb and stumbled before catching his balance. As he neared a crossroad, he heard a leaf blower off to his right which seemed to him to be a sign not to go that way, so he continued straight. Idiot. Mmm. We love you, Dad. We hate you, Dad. We don’t want you to die. We don’t want you to stay. We don’t want you to leave. He shook his head and pulled his coat closer and walked faster. He tried to concentrate on the sound of his footsteps.

As he neared the laundromat by the railroad tracks, he heard a loud dog barking. He stopped, listening. It was as though he’d never noticed the complexity of noise made in such a voice. There was the impact of the initial sound like clapping which made his ears pulse, and then beneath that, it sounded as though there were a chorus yelling in slightly imperfect synchronicity. He couldn’t see the dog anywhere. He listened to the undertones.

He felt the sudden urge to visit his wife’s grave and had a vision that if he went there, she would be alive again and everyone he’d ever known and loved would be there, too. Ex-girlfriends. His brother. His parents. Sweetie.

The barking dog continued. Don’t go. No. No. Dad. Think of your son? Why? Why shouldn’t he go see her? Would he die if he went to the graveyard? Would there be danger on the way? Why would the dog want to keep him from seeing his wife again?

There were no cars in the parking lot of the laundromat. He went in to use the restroom. In the mirror he looked at his eyes. He could see tears in the corners. Thinking of his wife was
messing with him. He didn’t need to go to the cemetery. He’d just cry a minute and there wouldn’t be anyone there. No friends. No wife. No talking dog.

He splashed water in his face and dried it with a paper towel.

He saw a pickup truck coming up the road as he exited the laundromat. Dad didn’t recognize the driver who made eye contact with him.

He was startled by a loud train whistle from behind him. Love. Love. Dad. Go.

Dad continued, intent again on walking to the cemetery on the other side of town.

As he passed a side street, he saw the same truck again. He could hear the truck turn behind him and he became rigid trying to walk naturally, aware now of his own breathing. The truck accelerated past him and a parked car. The man seemed to glare at Dad in the rearview. Dad turned down the next street.

He made two more rights to go home. He remembered his son watching television. He decided to pray.

Dear God, give me the strength to carry on. Give me my wife back. No. I know I can’t ask for that. Dear God, make me not hear things. Give me a clear voice of my own to listen to. Dear God, make me better at sleeping or give me the nerve to end my life. Dear God, let me have one more beer. Give me the strength to find peace in this life. Stop thinking. Stop making bad decisions. Let me not feel the glaring eyes of neighbors. Let me be respectable. Let my head feel better. Let the art world suddenly take notice of me so that I might be famous and sell paintings and move away from here. Give me patience. Give me confidence. Give me money. Send me a friend. Give me another canvas and a time machine.

A train whistle blew. Dad held his breath wondering what it would say this time.

Don’t you get it now?
It was loud. So much louder than at his house.

Go home, Dad. Don’t roam, Dad. Don’t moan, Dad. You’re alone.

He heard the last syllable drag out as the engines pushed past him.

What about my Son!

This sounded too Godlike for Dad to bear. Poor God, all powerful and stuck in his miserable heaven. It’s like life. It’s what you make it. What could he say to his son to make him not be the same as him? To not be a crazy guy walking around listening to trains?

Nothing. He’s a kid, home watching cartoons.

How long have I been gone?

Dad looked at his watch.

An hour. Was that good or bad?

Dad came home and was surprised to see that he liked his painting still.

His son was asleep in front of the TV. A loud commercial came on and startled Dad and he wished he could be asleep and unroused by noise.

Watching a large wasp crawl on the window pane, working over its wings with legs, Dad thought of smashing it with a magazine. It walked in circles until the sun appeared bright outside. Dad watched the leaves flip violently in the wind. Dad felt the profound sense that something would happen. The wasp stationed itself in the upper corner of the window.
A MAN AND WOMAN MEET ON THE STREET IN YOUNGSTOWN, OH

—Is that who I think it is?
—What? Hey, Elisha, watch where you’re going. You better look out for light posts, little boy.
—Hello?
—I see you.
—You know, I always loved you, baby.
—Elisha, let’s cross.
—Hello!? You hear what I said?
—I got a man.
—Yeah? I got a woman, too.
—I love my man.
—I love my woman, too. But, I always loved you. Always will. Hear me?
She curled next to him with her head on his chest. He smelled her hair. The cool mountain air brought the scent of figs and brown sugar to him anew. She played her fingers on his stomach. He looked at her lips. She smiled and kissed him. He smelled her hair again, breathing deeply. She laughed and it made him happy.

He tried to take a photograph in his mind to save so he could remember what it was like to be close to her. She whispered something to him softly, lips grazing his ear.

“I love you so much right now.”

Daniel stopped typing. Romance was difficult to imagine even if it had been real. He heard what he knew to be the grumble of the mail truck pulling away from his building. The balcony door was open and it was cold outside. He pulled on his old green army surplus jacket and sipped his coffee, preparing to venture downstairs.

In front of the grid of steel mailboxes, he fished a ring of keys out of his pocket and fumbled to find the key. Inside, he found a coupon advertisement and his gas bill. He wedged this mail into his armpit and struggled to find another small key on the ring. He opened the box next to his. Inside, he found another envelope with the same blue logo of the gas company. This envelope was addressed to Anna Macy. He looked at the name a moment and pushed his thumb into the short brown beard on his chin. He folded Anna’s envelope in with his mail and jammed
it all into his cluttered army bag. He pulled a stocking cap from the jacket’s breast pocket and put it on before opening the heavy wooden door into the street.

Outside, he unlocked his bike, mounted it, and started riding. The damp morning air made foggy coronas around the streetlights. He should have worn gloves, but he was excited to have an excuse to see Anna and rode on through the shiny black streets, knuckles white like bone around his handle grips.

A month ago, Anna had moved out of his building to a nicer apartment complex outside of town. Her mother, Deb—“Oh, call me Deb,” was what she would say when Daniel called her Ms. Macy—had been the first to know of a vacancy in her building and as a friend of the landlady had gotten the apartment at a discount. It was a two-bedroom on the second floor of a faux adobe building with arched doorways and red roof tiles which made it look to Daniel like a picture from a label of a jar of salsa rather than “a nice place to start a family.” Daniel knew Deb imagined her daughter getting married and having kids, playing with grandchildren on the playground, and hosting family reunions in the pavilion behind the complex.

“You could even have a wedding here,” Deb suggested when Daniel had come over to check out the new place. He couldn’t help a small smile from forming as he imagined she meant Anna and himself could be married there. He glanced at Anna.

“Yeah, that’d be really classy, Mom. I’ve always dreamed of being married at Pine Wood Villas. What a nightmare. Though it could be a themed wedding,” she said as she pointed at a particularly large mass of cobwebs in the rafters. “It’s already decorated for Halloween.”

The new guy Anna was dating, Paul, fit right into the fantasy Deb had created for her daughter. Paul was a lawyer with just the right amount of gel in his hair to hold his comb strokes and side part without looking wet. He shaved every day and wore a musky cologne which
Daniel couldn’t identify, but which he insisted, when speaking to Anna on the phone after having met the two of them for coffee, smelled exactly like the yellow hand soap from push dispensers in movie theatre restrooms. Paul was a few years older than Daniel and infuriatingly handsome and Daniel could see what girls saw in him. He was downright attractive and Daniel hated him.

Daniel, on the other hand, was a writer with very messy hair and a bicycle and a job at a café. He was a hopeless romantic and a hipster. His old-fashioned typewriter was proof of both. He would sit in front of the humming machine with his eyes closed, trying to will into being the most vivid memories of his relationship with Anna. There was always lots of light and color in his descriptions. He imagined if he could paint a picture using bright oranges and yellows against dark blues and purples, he’d be getting at the sharpness of the contrast between pain and pleasure he experienced when looked at with love.

_The moon was almost full as the two lovers sat in the field above the mountain lake. It was midnight, but the light of the moon was so red and bright they could see individual blades of grass reflected in the silver water. They were hypnotized by it, until a single cloud passed and they heard a bobcat yowl not too far off. They looked at each other. The man smiled and squeezed the woman’s hand gently. Her eyes were wide pools, but she smiled too so they forgot the moon and the woods and the noises of night. When they kissed, it was like the world stood still. Their skin trembled in the cool air. They would never forget this camping trip._

When he tried to write about Anna, he imagined, and now looking back he was convinced, that he’d loved her even before he’d met her two years ago in the morning, _with the sun golden-horizontal_, in their hallway, when they’d both happened to open their doors at the same moment.
He’d started an awful short story about seeing her for the first time, trying to capture the romance of the camping trip before it’d even happened. Crumpled pages littered the floor around his desk. When he sat in front of his typewriter in his apartment and stared out the window, he felt like he remembered her unique blue eyes in that first moment better than anything in his life, how bright they cut into his, her pupils encircled by soft copper flames exploding into turquoise. Perhaps he embellished a little. Her eyes may have accumulated this power over time. But when he scanned his mind for the right images to put down on paper, that moment, when they’d opened their doors, stretched on for days. He was now certain that he had noticed every single feature she was composed of in those first few seconds, though in reality he had discovered each individual detail of her beauty over the course of months as they got to know each other.

_When he first saw her, his mouth dropped open and he couldn’t speak. His dreams had held prophesies of her arrival, those blue eyes burning in the night. And then, to see them there, in the light of day, rays of sun dancing on her soft pale skin, left him awestruck as though he was gazing at some wonder of nature_—

A mountain peak? Or perhaps a green river flowing through a great canyon, layers of orange sandstone, copper fire set against jade-water-eyes, the sun, the moon, the ocean, a hidden stream, slow, quiet, forgotten and obvious.

No, that’s stupid.

He was always searching for some hidden metaphor, a sentence more compelling than _she is beautiful to me_ to describe the breathlessness he felt the first time they’d climbed to the top of a mountain and held each other in the cool night.
He’d tried to write the story a hundred times. Always, he thought of the way she smelled. Figs and brown sugar. He had the idea that the strength of that feeling, the straining and tightening of the tendons in his neck which he felt when he closed his eyes and sat at his typewriter thinking of her trying to manifest her beauty in words—he thought that feeling ought to make the story just happen. Her beauty, it seemed, should have the ability to make the story beautiful.

That morning, before getting on his bike, before opening his mailbox and fumbling with the keys, before drinking his cup of tea and standing at his counter with a fork and a single fried egg, he’d sat in his striped bathrobe at his typewriter, chewing his lip, trying to write the story again. He had squeezed the bridge of his nose, pushing his finger and thumb into his tear ducts.

*Her beauty was like art. Art which you, Daniel, would rather sit trying to recreate than to foster in the first place. She loves Paul now because you sit around thinking about pink grapefruit lip balm and figs and brown sugar body wash. She moved on and you didn’t and there’s no use painting pictures or writing about her eyes or her lips or her hips or her hair. She is not some tiny detail in one of your stories and she is not coming back to you. In fact, if you were to believe you’d captured love in a few physical descriptions of a woman who once ran her fingers over your neck, who had eyes you knew you could look into all day, you’d be proving that there was no such thing. The longing you feel for the love you’ve lost, doesn’t mean she wants the past. It’s impossible to go back and you are a terrible writer and an idiot.*

The sky was darkening and a light rain fell. The heavy grey clouds were most forgiving behind Anna’s building where the sun managed to line the edges in silver. Daniel cut through the grass on his bike, leaving a sunken trail with the pattern of his tire tread in the muddy lawn.
It was a nice enough building, he admitted. It was just two stories, horseshoeing around the parking area, with arched adobe openings which gave the impression of individual porches in front of each separate apartment entrance. Behind the building was an open field, two cracked-cement basketball courts, and closest to Daniel and the yard he’d traversed, behind the left wing of the building, the large covered pavilion with tables and a fireplace—perfect for a costume wedding—he noticed someone had erected an orange tent. After leaning his bike against a handicapped only sign, Daniel walked up the stairs to the second story. He passed the first door and ducked under a wilting hanging plant. Then he tapped on the door to apartment 202.

It began to rain harder. Daniel turned around and watched the water drip from the roof of the apartments across the way. A few of the other arches also had sad hanging plants drooping over their baskets. One apartment had a round, red charcoal grill and a tangled American flag. In his mind, he started writing a story including these details which he planned to work on when he returned to his apartment.

*I was a rainy day and real life had just caught up with our protagonist, let’s call him Nathaniel. He was soaked through with rain and standing in front of his ex-girlfriend’s apartment so that he might give her old mail. Dripping with sadness, he willed himself to another moment far away on the mountain where they hiked together.*

He heard the door latch click open and he swiveled around on his heel. Anna was standing, one hand on the doorknob and the other holding her golden retriever’s collar which was covered by a bandana tied around his neck which Daniel noticed was the exact color of the sky on a perfect sunny day. Anna was wearing pink sweatpants and a plain white tank top over another thinner white tank top. Her long blonde hair was pulled back in a loose, lopsided
ponytail so that Daniel could see, over her left shoulder, the blue band that held it as she stooped to hold her dog.

For a moment Daniel stood looking at her. It couldn’t have been more than a few seconds, but he felt as though time had stopped, like he was admiring a candid photograph of her at the door of her apartment from long ago in a dream in the future when she’d forgotten his name and face, but he couldn’t stop being in love with the way she looked in that memory, if it was a memory, on a day that might never have happened, buried somewhere in the rainy evening sky of his brain. In his dream, she smiled and stepped closer and her hair smelled warm, like figs and brown sugar. In his dream, they kissed lightly and held each other and he kissed her delicate neck where it met her collar bone. In his dream, they cried out of relief because they were finally holding one another again, familiar, awakened.

Daniel swallowed and did his best to push the fantasy from his mind. He felt a sense of loss as he shook free from his dream. She was there, holding her dog, looking up at him in the door of her apartment.

“Hey, how’re you do-ing?” he asked with irregular emphasis. “You wouldn’t believe it, but I miss you. If for no other reason than just so I don’t have to ride two miles in the rain every time you get some mail.” Daniel smiled and tried to laugh. He knew this wasn’t funny and he let the army bag swing to his side from his shoulder and then started rummaging through it.

“Daniel, you don’t have to ride over here for every little thing that comes. I mean, thank you, but I don’t expect—”

“Oh it’s no problem. I like getting to see you. Just like old times.” He forced another laugh. “Here it is.” He pulled out the envelope with the blue gas company logo on it and offered it to her.
Still holding back her dog, she let go of the doorknob and reached out and took the envelope. She half smiled and looked at Daniel with what he thought was pity. “Really, you shouldn’t have gone to the trouble.”

“No problem at all, ma’am,” he said, doing his best impression of a helpful young boy scout who’d brought home some missing puppy, playfully mocking nothing because there was no basis for the joke. He looked at her eyes and in the evening light he squinted, but he couldn’t make out any copper halo on her iris. He then, hating that he did it even before he did, put a flattened hand to his brow and drew his heels together in the formal salute of a country and military that never existed. Losing his nerve, he looked away from her eyes, finished the salute with his hand, turned on his heel, and walked away quickly, his face burning.

He made it to the bottom of the stairs and to his bike. The rain was coming down steadily. He caught his hands in his hair. No problem at all ma’am. What the hell was that? He knelt to tie his shoe, his knee in a puddle. Idiot.

For a moment he turned back, hoping she was looking over the veranda after him.

Don’t go, she would have said.

There was only rain. He watched the water run off the red clay tiles. What a dumb looking building, he thought.

Daniel rode home slowly, rain soaking into his army jacket and running in his eyes. He imagined Deb knocking at Anna’s door asking who that was that came by today and Anna saying, “Oh it was just Daniel. He rode all the way over here to give me the notice that my gas service at the old apartment building was turned off.”

“In the rain, for that?” Deb would have said. “Why doesn’t he just call? It’s so sad the way that boy loves you, like some little boy, like some little puppy.”
When he got back to his apartment, he sat on his balcony in his bathrobe. The rain had all but stopped. He drank tea. At moments, his eyes welled up and he felt sorry for himself. He took pride in being sensitive enough to sit alone on the verge of tears and strong enough to hold the tears back. This was what made him a writer, he thought. He wrote lines for his story in his mind which he promptly forgot and he mourned their passing. *She’s like the wind and the rain.*

*Love comes and it goes.*

Before they were officially an item, Daniel and Anna had always spent time sitting on her balcony together. He’d always wanted to tell her how he felt every moment he was with her, but she’d always had a boyfriend, each of them muscular and well-employed and, of course, presentable to a mother like Deb. And they were fine people, mostly; Daniel even liked some of them just as characters.

One man was kind and handsome, but without his shirt he looked like some kind of Sasquatch. “I swear he shaves like three times a day and when he takes off his t-shirt it looks—no lie—like he’s wearing a sweater.” Another was passive-aggressive and Anna thought he was encouraging her to develop an eating disorder. “We’re at dinner and he seriously says— and I’ve got a forkful of steak and mashed potatoes right in front of my mouth when he says it—Wow, now that girl is beautiful. I bet she only eats side salads.” Daniel really blushed and got quiet when she told him about another boyfriend who suggested a certain sexual position she found unlikely. “I’m not comfortable us both doing that to each other at the same time. It just seems weird and I think he’s too short for it to work anyway.” And another guy was a speculator about alien life and their activity on our planet. Daniel had taken account of all of her lovers’
flaws, building a case for himself, determined to avoid their mistakes when he finally found the courage to tell her how he felt.

_It was when she invited him on a hike for the first time and they drove out of the city that Daniel found the words. Anna was single for once and asking for advice. He didn’t know he was going to say it._

The next day, he checked his mail and hers. Nothing.

The day after that, he got a postcard from a friend overseas and wished he was there. Anna got a credit card offer and grocery store newsprint ads.

On the third day, he opened his box, wishing or wanting something he couldn’t guess, looking in the metal space for something to improve his life. It was empty. He didn’t know what he wanted or what he expected to be there. After a moment considering her mailbox like a gift to be opened, he looked in and found a small yellow envelope. The first thing he saw was a heart sticker on the back across the seal. It must be some cute note from an ex trying to win her back, he thought. Before he picked it up, he imagined slanted male handwriting detailing some special moment which could not be forgotten. Some night. A kiss that cute slanted man couldn’t shake from his dreams. _Remember that night with the wine in Paris, how we danced under the moon on the hotel terrace. Your lips were like candy, and your hair was on fire._

Slanted handwriting man confessed his love for her in bad verse, and Daniel was jealous of a character he’d created in his own imagination.

He snapped himself out of it and picked up the envelope. He flipped it over expecting to see a return address he could shape into a lost romance.
It was from Anna.

He opened it and it smelled like her. He imagined her wrist on the page as she wrote.

He was tempted to read it there in the hallway, but he took it like so much hidden treasure upstairs to his apartment.

Automatically, he threw his keys on his desk with the typewriter. He sat down in the chair and read:

_Daniel,_

_It was nice to see you at my place the other day. It made me miss living next to you. I’m sorry you rode all that way in the rain. It was sweet. It reminded me of when you used to bring wildflowers to my door._

Here, he stopped. This much threw him into a daydream. Effortlessly, he found himself on her street, riding again to her apartment, running to the stairs as his bike collapsed in the grass, and standing breathless in front of her door. She would rush to him and throw her arms wide to embrace him. This time it was sunny. She would lose hold of her dog who would go running into the grass, sky blue bandana flapping. Her hands on his face, she would kiss him.

Excitedly, he almost abandoned the fantasy. He had the urge to start typing, to try again to write a story with the ending he wished for. This was the part he could never write, because he could never imagine how it could come to happen. He kept dreaming:

Running with the golden retriever following jumping, hopping up on his hind legs, they held hands and moved across the sunny grass. The sky, he noticed, was exactly the same blue of
the dog’s bandana. The sun danced on her hair. Closing his eyes while he forgot the letter he held in his hand, forgetting the apartment he sat in, he remembered the bright orange tent inside the pavilion behind the building. This is where they went.

The tent walls glowed with the dampened light of the bright sun. He took hold of Anna and laid her down on one of the navy blue sleeping bags they’d had on the mountain and kissed her.

For another moment he stopped imagining. He quickly tried to recount the steps that would bring the characters to this point in the action. Perhaps, if he could remember precisely how his imagination had developed this scenario, he would be able to finally write the story. Maybe he would know, if he traced the events accurately, exactly what would be needed to manifest the story in life.

He kept dreaming:

Her lips were perfect. He couldn’t stop kissing her. Her neck was long. He tried to kiss the divot by her collar bone. He could feel the tendons and veins in her neck on his lips and tongue. He kissed the crater at her throat. He kissed her throat. He put his hand on the soft skin of her side, on her hip, sliding his hand up to her ribs. He stopped kissing her to catch his breath. He thought he might die. The faint orange light coming through the fabric of the tent walls accentuated his flushed face.

At his typewriter, he wrote:

*She curled next to him with her head on his chest. He smelled her figs and brown sugar skin. She played her fingers on his stomach. He breathed deeply. He looked at her lips. She laughed and it made him happy.*
He tried to take a photograph in his mind to save so he could remember what it was like to be close to her. She whispered something to him softly, lips grazing his ear. He couldn’t make out what she was saying. She did it again, but he still couldn’t hear.

“This isn’t real.”

His mind clenched.

He remembered the letter. What did it say?

Daniel,

It was nice to see you at my place the other day. It made me miss living next to you. I’m sorry you rode all that way in the rain. It was sweet. It reminded me of when you used to bring wildflowers to my door. I really kind of miss my old apartment, but maybe I’m just nostalgic. The new place is bigger and the yard is great for Pongo. My mom thinks I’m silly for even remembering the one-bedroom with the balcony. Sorry I seemed dumb when you came over. I didn’t get the chance to ask you in. Paul and I were playing a board game and making mulled wine. There was more than enough and we got really tipsy. I wish you guys could be better friends. I know it’s been kind of weird with him. He’s not the most sociable, but I really love him. Don’t tell my mom, but we’ve even been talking about marriage. I’d love for you to be in the wedding if and when, fingers-crossed it does happen. I’d want you to help pick out my dress and flowers. You have a real artistic eye. I don’t think Paul really sees things like that. I went clothes shopping with him thinking it was going to be fun, but he just
asked the clerk what was new and bought the same shirt in several colors and a
couple of ties and was done. Not very exciting. He’s a little bland, but I can see
everything my mom wants for me when I look at him. She says I just need to think
of ways to liven things up. It’s not all fun all the time.

I wanted to write because I know you like mail. Also, I was thinking of
you because I was airing out that orange tent we used to take on camping trips. I
was thinking it would be enlivening to go on hikes again and Paul has some time
off next week. I can’t find the stakes so I had to tie it to one of the picnic tables in
the pavilion to air it out. I was wondering if they might be in the basement
storage with your gear. Would you mind looking?

Now don’t be a stranger and let’s make plans for the three of us to hang
out so that you can be a groomsman.

With Love, Anna
Two magnificent fat yellow sunflowers stretch up toward the Mediterranean turquoise sky on thick twisting stems emerging from tangles of squash vines in the garden behind the horse pasture. I pick handfuls of orange and purple cherry tomatoes, popping every fifth or sixth one in my mouth, relishing in their sweet flavor. I cut some kale and lettuce and toss them in a milk crate. The chickens have plenty grain in a feeder. There is water, too. The four hens have left me three eggs, two brown and one speckled blue. Before I shut the garden gate, I grab up a cucumber for the last horse remaining in the pasture, Niko. He comes slowly over to me affectionately nudging my shoulder with his big nose. I cut the cucumber into sections and hold them out for him. His lips dance around the pieces in my palm and his nostrils flare. When he is finished, I trace a straight line down his forehead a few times with my index finger. I’m already to the gate when I remember the bucket I brought out with Niko’s alfalfa laying over by the garden. As I go out to get it, Porsche comes chasing Niko and barking. I always think she’ll get trampled by the back hooves, but she never does. I close the gate and Porsche ducks under the fence and we walk together past the wooden stables and the fenced horse riding ring.

Summer camp ended two weeks ago, all the kids leaving in big buses waving out the windows at the counselors. I arranged to stay on camp till my flight leaves from Seattle for a month long tour of Europe. I’ve been taking care of Niko and cleaning the camp kitchen during the day and reading Moby Dick in the evenings on a recliner I moved to the porch of the health
house. The weather has been mostly clear. It is so beautiful here. It’s been one of the most peaceful times of my life. I feel great. I’m in the best shape I’ve been for years. Climbing mountains and camping by mountain streams and swimming in the lake is what I’ve needed. No TVs, no phones. Fresh food and air, towering evergreens and acres upon acres of land without another person on it. I’ve hardly thought anything about the hospital. The world feels tangible and immediate again. I only hear beautiful voices in the trees and wind.

Tonight, I will go into Seattle to have dinner and then to a hotel on Lake Washington where boats will float in the sunset. The camp cook, Steve and I will sit on a balcony and clink beer bottles together. In the morning, I will go to the airport and fly far away.