ABSTRACT

ALL OUR FATHERS

By Nicholas D. Hoffman

All Our Fathers is a collection of eight pieces of creative nonfiction and seven fictional stories. Though separated by genre, the collection has larger themes running throughout: nature as a catalyst for discovery, spiritual and moral upheaval, matters of the body, and the relationship between sons and fathers. Each piece features characters or narrators who struggle with doubt as they attempt to navigate a world filled with moral and spiritual uncertainty, reconcile some peace with death, and plot a course through the disorder of losing, and sometimes regaining, their families.
ALL OUR FATHERS

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Faculty of Miami University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

by

Nicholas D. Hoffman

Miami University

Oxford, Ohio

2005

Director: __________________________

Eric Goodman

Reader: __________________________

Morris Young

Reader: __________________________

Brian Roley
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Absence  

2. *Shape*  

3. Boys in Nature  

4. *My Funeral Wish List*  

5. Two Days on Saginaw Lake  

6. *Piano Moving*  

7. *Books & Blood*  

8. First Days  

9. *Ice*  

10. Hunting Red Jones  

11. *Dear Fat Magician*  

12. *Creatures*  

13. Hitler Hunting  

14. *While Driving*  

15. All Our Fathers
Acknowledgements

As before, thanks to the usual players, who always have and continue to constitute the messy and wonderful core from which the more obvious elements of this work are culled: Kim, Paul, and Kyle. Thanks also to the faculty and staff at Miami for their tireless enthusiasm for the teaching of writing. This includes, but is not limited to: Eric, Brian, Margaret, and Constance. Much gratitude is also due Kim Rayburn for her keen insight and indelible humor.

This work would not have been possible with the support, encouragement, and incessant prodding of my future-wife, Krystal Miller.
Absence

In the spring when I am eleven and my brother Marcus is sixteen, the spring when our mother is gone and Marcus earns the eternal wrath of one visiting Slovakian priest, our father is building things. The spare bedroom is getting new paint and a closet; the kitchen a new countertop; the basement linoleum flooring, a drop-ceiling, and wood-patterned particle board walls to create a room separate from the washer and dryer. The effort of my father’s toil is felt throughout the entire house: we are living in a raw fog of sweat and sawdust and body odor; we are irritable and brushing up against each other as different rooms are proclaimed temporarily off-limits to run electricity, or to let paint dry, or to store materials, or for some other reason. The house is not so much a home as it is an expression of the progress of my father’s mind, a constant flux of wood and steel and pipes and wires. My brother and I have to find a way to live in the spaces in between what he envisions.

He spends his weekend in the basement, my father, and his nights above in the spare bedroom, which he and my mother elected to paint yellow before she left, because my old room in their first apartment was yellow. This is how they like to remember things.

I help my father carry cans of paint upstairs in the evenings, and Marcus takes the station wagon out to Widewater’s for greasy potato skins with his friends, or at least this is where he says he’s going. A year later New York State will up the minimum driving age to eighteen, and Marcus, delighted at my misfortune, will be grandfathered in.

The only neglected project is the deck behind the kitchen in the back yard, started two summers earlier and put on hold for lack of funds and motivation. My father sealed the deck before leaving it, so it stands ready for completion, a jagged and grainy invasion into the square patch of green behind our house. “The wood keeps disappearing,” my father says of the deck, but I know better.
In late June, the heat ascends into the hundreds, and children are jumping into the Erie Canal, despite the warnings of their mothers. At night, cats fight in the hedge below my window, and the air is hot and still. I stay awake, watching for heat lightning. Marcus is gone at night. When I hear the gravel churning in the driveway at two o’clock, I lean back in my bed. Our father is waiting for Marcus when the latch turns, and their voices lift through the airy grates that carry heat through the house in the winter and let heat pass between rooms in the summer.

“Where’ve you been?”

“Out.”

“Out where?”

Marcus’s keys strike bare counter in the kitchen, a heavy rattle that I hear all the way on the second floor. “Down by the canal. Someone was shooting off fireworks.”

“You’re home at midnight from now on.” For some reason I imagine my father holding a hammer when he says this.

Neither of them say anything then, and their silence is interrupted by a cat-scream that rattles up through my window. I wait for Marcus’ answer, because I know that whatever it is, it will mean something for me. This is how things work between us: what happens or doesn’t happen to Marcus, eventually means that something will or will not happen for me. Years later he will call me the beneficiary of decent parenting due to the years of trial-parenting that he endured. I will say that he cut a rut so deep with our parents that I couldn’t find a way out of the path he made. We are both right.

But that night in June, Marcus says nothing, nothing that I can hear through the iron grate.

“Go to bed,” my father says. “Church in the morning.”
The Erie Canal, begun in 1817 and undergoing construction to this day, runs behind everything in Lockport, New York. It flows behind the Donner Family Funeral Home, St. John’s Catholic Church, McVeigh’s Hardware store (now Ace), and our house on West Vine Street. Middle to late spring, the banks of the canal swell with brown-black sediment and runoff from the hills that cradle it. Children wedge their feet between the rocks and cast their lines for sunfish; houseboats slipping south pass with the gentle current, which in turn is mediated by the seven locks within the city limits. The water rises and falls by both the temperament of nature and the machinations of man. Driftwood, bloated animal corpses, boats, and people float by each spring, passing through, riding the lockswell as they push west.

I watch them drift. The canal is the spine that gives my city its name and purpose, and it follows me everywhere I go.

In the spring our mother has been gone for almost a month. She is not really gone, my father likes to say—she’s always just a phone call away. It’s true, we’ve spoken with her many times during the absence. At our dinner table two chairs now sit empty where just one did before, and now when the three of us sit down on a Saturday evening for Marcus’ grilled hot dogs, the greasy meat and the construction make the kitchen feel like an infirmary—our family is taking casualties, our numbers are dwindling. My father and I—and Marcus too—exchange the same questions and answers each week. Where has Mom gone? She needs some time to rest and think. How much time? As much as she needs.

We don’t speak of it, but it is our fault. Mine and Marcus’s. We are big, too big, both born through cesarean section, ripping and rending the womb that made us, leaving it
inhospitable and deadly. Because of us, my father’s blueprint for the ideal family, rounded up to three children from the national average of two point six, is no longer possible.

Our mother is discovering and thinking about this in Vermont with her parents, away from her sons and her husband, for as long as she needs.

That summer when we are three, even the canal flows differently.

In the morning, we are showered and clean. “You boys look good,” my father says to us at the bottom of the stair. “But you need to shave, Marcus.”

“Too late, now,” my brother says. He doesn’t look tired at all. The time is eleven thirty-eight. We are ushered into the car by the unyielding precision of my father’s watch. I am never quite sure, but it seems to me when my mother was around she was open to the possibility of arriving to Mass a few minutes late; her eyes would perform a half-roll when my father gave a staccato clap of his hands, indicating that we should be in the car.

This is the summer when my father speaks about Mom whenever he is driving, like he could summon her presence by invoking her name.

“Those Japanese bugs are back.” He flicks a tiny orange creature at his collar.

“No.”

“No.”

This is a detail that surprises and delights me, even though there is no trace of Asia in her, or none that I could remember.

“Yep. At the Yokota base in Okinawa.”

I wonder why we never knew this before.
He tells us on the way to Mass about Michiko, the young Japanese nurse who visited our mother after she was born and how they still exchange letters, or they used to. As we drive to church, I imagine following the canal up into the mountains, down through the hills, and emerging in Okinawa. I imagine Japan like a watercolor painting of the images I’ve seen from my father’s National Geographic.

Michiko is waiting there; she recognizes me from the correspondence with my mother. “Welcome home, Joshua-kun,” she says. The land behind her is dotted with pink peach orchards and the sun hangs in the sky like an overripe tomato, and the water of the canal runs not chocolate brown, but toxic blue.

St. John’s is our church, the way that certain buildings become yours because your parents were married there, or your grandparents given a funeral Mass there. Marcus and I both received the waxy water of baptism in St. John’s marble fountain—our father and mother were married behind the same fountain. It’s close enough for us to walk, barely a mile away as the canal flows, but we drive to ensure that we get a seat.

The church building resembles the shell of a giant hermit crab. I like to think that such a crab emerged one day from the muddy brown waters of the Erie and waddled up onto the bank and hunkered down. When the crab sank back into the canal he forgot his shell, only to be swept west by the current. It is shame that the massive abandoned shell was only used for Mass and marriages and baptisms. The flaring dome is high enough to accommodate a game of baseball.

When we enter we are greeted by a tall, cadaverous priest from Czechoslovakia. The usual Pastor, Father Joe, had taken his leave of us for the Holy Land, as he said all priests must do from time to time. His replacement, Father Turtillo, incites controversy with his
syrup-colored hair, which he wears in a pony-tail. Father Turtillo is a big man, and when he leans over the altar the folds of his robe seem to swallow the marble slate. The altar boys, just a year or so younger than me, give him a wide berth at the front of the church.

“He must come from Europe,” I whisper to Marcus during the homily. “Up high, somewhere in the mountains.” The priest’s skin is rough and gray.

Marcus does not look at me when he speaks. “I hear they still have ogres over there.”

Turtillo delivers his homily—a basic lesson of transubstantiation, and how lucky we are for that daily miracle—in a low growl, like he is speaking to a crowd of torch-bearing heathens. The Body, Father Turtillo says, is a precious gift that we must hold as sacred. His voice skips at the word *hold*, and he repeats it again before adding, “… in your hearts. Hold… the body of our Lord.” His face lowers like a drawbridge, and he leans back into the wooden seat. I scratch my head impatiently and sneak a glance at my father’s watch: the homily was nineteen minutes long, four full rambling minutes longer than Father Joe’s usual offering.

We sit, we stand, along with three hundred other parishioners in a choreographed ceremony that we all know by rote. Sit, stand. Stand, sit, stand, sing. Sit, stand, kneel. The air is pushed around us by white fans on the reticulated ceiling. Father Turtillo, drained after his homily, pushes towards the conclusion of the Mass in a Carpathian drone.

During communion I fall into line behind Marcus and my father to receive the Body and Blood. As he passes me I notice Marcus is smirking, like he just thought of a joke and can’t keep it to himself. The opposite communion line is moving faster, and Marcus leaves ours and joins it to take communion from Father Turtillo.
Marcus is big at sixteen, as large as our father and well on his way towards being larger. His pudgy face is an eruption of scraggly black hairs and vibrant acne, his mouth a gentle upward curve. He wears a gut, though it has stretched and thinned with his rapid increase in height. I wonder, staring across at him in line, if I will look like him as I grow older. You can always look at your father or mother and hold out hope for yourself, because they are only one-half of the equation. You can rationalize their physicality away using the other parent: “I won’t be bald because it doesn’t run in my mother’s family.” But with a sibling, here are all the parts assembled in a working order—you will not come out the same, but similar. Looking at Marcus is looking into the future. I know this.

Marcus meets Father Turtillo at the front of the church with a solemn nod, and the giant priest dips his hand into the glass communion bowl, retrieving a thin disc, not much larger than a quarter. From behind my cupped hands in the opposite line, I see Turtillo’s lips move, and Marcus holds out his hands.

The wafer descends, and at the last moment Marcus breaks his hands apart and raises them to his mouth, as if he thinks he’s already taken possession of the host. The thin piece of bread falls through my brother’s extended hand to red carpet below—it falls faster than I would have thought possible for so small a thing.

Father Turtillo’s heavy eyebrows converge in the center of his forehead. Marcus is standing motionless with his hands spread. He is looking down at the carpet, and I cannot read his expression.

The other servers are staring at the two of them. Father Turtillo sways like a felled tree and drops to his knees. He passes a bony hand over the wafer and when he is standing
again it is gone. His throat bobs once. He shoves Marcus aside and reaches down into his bowl for another piece of the Body to hand to the next believer.

In my own line, I am suddenly confronted by a nun. Unsure of myself, feeling the inexplicable urge to one-up my brother, I take the wafer she gives me and raise it to my lips, but turn away from her view. I hold the disc in my palm and put my hand in my pocket when no one can see and pretend to chew.

When Marcus returns to the pew I elbow him in the ribs. “What did you do?”

He is shaking his head. “It’s just bread.”

“Dad’s gonna whoop you if he saw.”

Marcus looks down at me. “For letting a piece of bread hit the ground? I don’t think so.”

It is raining when we exit the Mass, and I can hear the gears of the nearby lock churning to release the pressure of the swollen canal. My father must have missed the incident with the communion wafer, because his face is empty. I replay the motion again and again, trying to remember if there was a flash or a wisp of smoke or something when the bread hit the carpet, or when Father Turtillo passed his hand over it and snuck it into his own mouth like some sort of magic trick. I think on it over and over, until at last I remember a small spark, or think I remember, which I took to be the refraction of a candle at the time. Something was upset by Marcus’ infraction, but I can’t figure out what. The wafer in my pocket feels like it must be burning.

We pass over the bridge to the parking lot just as the water is emptying out of the lock. The locks of Lockport came from the mind of one David Bates, born 1777. I know this because it says so on a bronze plaque overlooking the canal as it crosses under the
streets near St. John’s. I pass the words on the way back to the car, and when I read them I
cannot help but think of my father, “…a man of fine stature, with a commanding figure.
His countenance was agreeable, rather than handsome. His eyes were black, but lively with
gentle expression. He was endowed with a retentive memory…”

“Look there.” Marcus is beside me, pointing. He pulls me up short, letting our
father pass us, already digging in his pockets for keys.

On one of the muddy banks, a flat rowboat is nestled in the gnarled crotch of a
maple. The sides are flecked with green paint, and a pair of moss-colored oars are resting
against the tree.

Marcus leans on the railing. “It’s mine.”

“You stole a boat?”

“No, stupid. I found it sunk and patched it up. Put in some benches and latched on
a pair of oarlocks. That’s where I was last night.”

“You were rowing around in the dark?”

My brother’s hand finds the back of my head, but he has turned me around to face
the lock before I can respond in kind. “I rowed into the lock in the dark, and the gates
closed behind me.” He laughs. “I sat in that boat for an hour before they opened the other
side.”

My brother’s hands are large and knobby, like my father’s, and I wonder how his
clumsy hands, the same hands that let fall the Body of Our Lord, managed enough dexterity
to fix the rowboat to the point of seaworthiness. They are builders’ hands, the same kind of
hands that are spending nights and weekends fashioning our house into a home. I imagine
Marcus and my father building at the same time, mere blocks away from each other, house
and rowboat.
The boat catches an errant beam of sunlight and glimmers, the bow pointing down the canal to the west. Behind me, the last lock before Niagara begins to churn, the water rushing under the gates with a gentle roar.

I wait until Marcus walks past me to the car before reaching into my pocket and retrieving the paper-thin communion wafer. It is rigid and tan, like a sheet of cardboard. I release it into the swirling water and wait there on the bridge, watching long after it has disappeared into the brown of the Erie. I stand on the bridge, watching and waiting, until my father calls.
The first time I thought I might be fat, it went like this:

In the cavernous elementary school gymnasium, I stumble just in time to take a dodgeball to the head. I'm wearing some ragged t-shirt (probably with Macho Man Savage or Hulk Hogan emblazoned on it—or both) and black lycra biker shorts with a solid neon stripe on either side. (Quick. Can you guess the year? I'll say only that it was before the child obesity rate exploded to more than forty percent.)

In the slowpokes' den on the lacquered stage (the gymnasium doubled as an auditorium) I sat and saw the flesh around my legs balloon out to the sides, neon stripes expanding, black shorts stretching like sausage casing, forming a unified mass of girth that did not break into two separate legs until the knees. Both of my hands combined could not close over that thick leggy circumference. I was amazed. A girl next to me, Nicole, who was also fat, might have whistled. She might also have been relieved.

A short while later my parents bought a scale. The last time I had been to the doctor's office I registered a modest eighty pounds, but in the blue-white tiled bathroom I weighed myself for the first time, the first of many, and struggled to understand the number returned to me. One thirty. “You’re a growing boy,” my mother said. She was right.

What does one thirty mean, seeing it for the first time? Such an unprecedented increase was shocking, unbelievable. I wanted to, and probably did, cry. The benchmark of one hundred was irrevocably breached and destroyed, the evidence of fleshy excess hanging over the sides of my shorts and from sagging gut and chest. “Growth spurt,” my mother said again.
But when she and my father hid the Parents Book of Rationalizations away, we all knew the truth. I was earning the distinction. I was big, I was flabby, I was fat.

The second time I thought I was fat, it was like this:

“You’re fat!” barked Richard Utter (who was no rail himself), with his jagged yellow teeth. I resented this. I was tall, already taller than the teacher, perhaps even the school principal, and certainly taller than the rodent-faced Utter. I’d have given him plump, but fat was a little much. Even for me. I was just looking for a fair shake.

I was big. Large. If you wanted fat, I’d show you fat. Cleo was fat, wide and squat like a catcher rolled into an eternal crouch. His cheeks were full and round as juicy plums, his gut a blossoming mound mimicking the curvature of the earth. Moreover, Cleo knew he was fat, but he evaded all the baggage of obesity by being both jovial and black, which amounted to enough for even the cruelest of kids (Utter) to forgive his corpulence, and even celebrate it. Cleo worked them like circus ringleader.

“I’m so fat—fat fat fatteo!” Cleo sang. His theme song had more choruses and a few verses even, listing his favorite foods: “Apple pie, cherry pie, pumpkin pie, blueberry pie, popcooorn!” I thought popcorn must have been extra special to make it into the running with all those decadent pies. When enduring the countdown to lunch time, he crooned, “Stop me, stop me, before I eat’cha, because I’m hungry! I’m hungry!”

Yes, Cleo was forgivably fat. I was something else, a separate fat, strange and different, absolutely mockable. If I had been a bit wittier, or a better singer, or not so protective of my massive brown-bag lunches, I might have been another Cleo. I stayed away from him to discourage comparisons. Cleo wore torn jeans and Hawaiian shirts, so I wore sweatpants and tie-dye. He wore a box hair-cut. I wore a bowl.
But my contemporaries did not fail to take notice. Richard Utter in sixth grade was
replaced by Joe Driscoll in seventh, Adam Baker in eighth, the twin brothers Mark and Jeff
Augustinelli in ninth and tenth—at which point my father relocated his family from New
York to the more forgiving state of Ohio, where gym classes were not required beyond the
ten-th grade. The Augustinellis were the worst of the bunch. Both were wide-headed
athletes, thick of torso and engaged in the daily toil of adding mass for their freshman
football practices. They were legacies—their father and uncles had gone to the same school,
played football there. Pictures of the Augustinelli patriarchs were ensconced in the library,
and along the hallways scattered in large class photographs, staring down at me and all who
passed with undisguised loathing and imperial contempt. They were now city councilmen
and community leaders. At football games they were greeted with smiles and back-slaps.
Their football girth had melted, but they were hardly fat. They preyed on the fat. And so
did their progeny.

The Augustinelli twins never failed to notice when my pushups were half-hearted
lifts, and to proclaim this loudly to the entire gym class. Thankfully there were no
showers—there was never enough time between classes for this. New York State, such a
taskmaster on the mandated gym classes, had no such scruples about basic hygiene (for
which I am grateful). They chortled at my twelve minute mile during the state fitness tests,
took feverish delight in my inability to do a pull-up. When I had the fortune of avoiding one
brother, the other would appear, miraculously, as if I was giving off a fat scent that attracted
only those with a penchant for dispensing scorn.

The Augustinellis proved to me that high school is truly good for only the chosen
few. The rest of us are the sorry chaff on which they stand so that they might enjoy the
glow of adored adolescence. The fat are easily distinguishable here—there is no question of
their station. They are the bottom of the pyramid, and not for their stout bearing and ability to hold others aloft. They help form the faceless mass from which the exalted youth, young and athletic and charismatic, can emerge.

II.

They weren’t the first to attach to me the name “Tits,” but the Augustinelli twins cherished the nickname like no others I had ever known. They never passed an opportunity to sling it in my direction like a precise and perfectly honed missile—when flung carelessly into a crowd it unerringly found me. They favored “ogre” also, but this was a passing thing. There were plenty kids both larger and taller than I. For a title to stick it had to be both memorable and specific, and mine was the real thing: utterly descriptive. “Tits” held until I moved away and passed far beyond their sphere of influence.

Unlike its thin counterpart, being fat comes in an oppressive array of shapes and forms, which may account for why there are so many words in its arsenal. Bulbous. Corpulent. Obese. Rotund. Plump. Engorged. Chubby. Porcine. Fat came for me in a form not entirely obscure, but deliberate and precise in its attack: the chest.

My body followed a genetic blueprint that was an evolutionary footnote—all men have vestigial breasts, but of course these are never meant to accumulate the fat and mass of a woman’s. And yet as I grew over the course of many heavy meat-and-potato dinners, cream-filled doughnuts, salt and buttered popcorns, chocolate milkshakes, Oreos both single and double stuffed, wafers vanilla and chocolate and every flavor in between, eggs and muffins and bacons and sausages, and sugar-laden cereals, the pale flesh of my nipples expanded like dilating pupils. Fat bunched behind them, protruding, rounding, and expanding. The form was unmistakable, and it was hardly masculine.
In the growing years parts are changing so fast you hardly notice all of the individual developments. I quite literally woke up and noticed my chest protrusions for the first time, pressed them gently, cupped one in my hand. It was startling. I wanted to hide.

But there are intuitive paths to comfort that children quickly learn. You track your own path away from pain. If a child hides in the closet when Mom and Dad are fighting, we know exactly why, and we call it tragic. I shuffled from safe pockets of solitude to larger crowds where anonymity would spare me the harshest inspections. Other kids developed their own habits to escape from or dull the pain of daily high school torment—bribery, drugs, loud music, awkward first sex.

For me it was a simple slouch, among other things, that brought some relief, the remnants of which remain deeply lodged in my awkward posture to this day. It was a matter of angles and gravity—lean forward, let the overlarge shirt hang down. The hypotenuse hides the dangling curves underneath. Standing perfectly straight reveals the rounded breasts in their most exaggerated form. I once stole tape from my father’s workbench in the hopes of taping myself into a better body. My propensity to sweat killed this brief hope. The slouch was my consistent savior. But it did not go unnoticed. At eighth grade graduation I was told, rather pointedly, in front of every kid in the school, not to slouch during the graduation ceremony.

“It’s your time to be proud,” the principal said. “You should look like it.”

And I did. I was wearing a new gray suit jacket—the perfect cover. I wonder if the person who had invented the suit jacket—a man?—had the same problem.

There’s a medical word that describes the condition: *gynecomastia*. The word originates in Greek as “woman-like breasts.” *Gynecomastia* is defined as the development of
visible breast tissue in boys or men. It is most prevalent in pubescent boys, and it most cases the tissue disappears by the end of puberty. Doctors tend to disagree on the exact number, but most allow that *gynecomastia* in some form affects anywhere between forty to sixty percent of all men. There is no known cause, even though the development of fatty tissue around the breast has been linked to certain drugs and treatments for illnesses. I know from my grandfather’s picture and my father’s shape that the condition is undeniably buried in the genetic code, as much as eye color or baldness.

Like any cosmetic deformity, *gynecomastia* is fair game for comedy. Adam Sandler, especially, has sunk to the level of scoring a few laughs at the expense of a pudgy boy in his animated movie “Eight Crazy Nights.” The movie was so unsuccessful I don’t begrudge him the cheap shot, but it provides a window to how thin men view fat ones, and the empathetic chasm between the two. Any reference to “man-boobs” rarely fails to garner a laugh.

*Gynecomastia* is passed down genetically, which would seem to indicate that it is nothing more than a cosmetic issue with little real relevance. After one of my pubescent fits of frustration over my shape my parents showed me a picture of my grandfather on my father’s side as a way of cheering me up. He was a stout man with a barrel for a chest, complete with two floppy breasts, held aloft by a pair of his grinning friends on either side. I’m not sure how the picture was supposed to make me feel better—it convinced me that there was no escape. I had thought, mistakenly, that my fat, even my breast-fat, was the side-effect of my overeating, but once I learned that it was deeply rooted in my genetic structure, I began to lose hope. Was I to be forever reading confusion in the eyes of strangers as they tried to reconcile my masculine face with the top-heavy torso?
Nature had determined, it seemed, that I would never achieve a man’s shape, and there was nothing I could do to change it. Shape separated man from woman, and I was lodged somewhere in the middle: definitely not woman, but not quite fully man. Man with an asterisk and a question mark.

Shortly after I learned of the word *gynecomastia*, I watched a half-hour special on a health channel where a teenaged boy, suffering from the condition, underwent male-breast reduction surgery. The process looked, to me, extraordinarily easy; the patient was not even put under, merely numbed at certain points on his chest. A masked doctor used a metal rod to separate the fatty tissue from the muscles on the chest. He then made an incision around the nipple and folded it back, allowing enough room for the lump of greasy white fat to be pulled through. The doctor held the breast tissue in his hand a moment for the cameras—it twitched and undulated like a thing alive. Close the incision, stitch up the nipple, and the teenager was recovered and flat chest-ed in a matter of weeks. Quick and easy. The whole procedure appeared so simple I developed the notion that I could accomplish it myself. Kitchen knives appeared to me as jagged portals to normalcy.

The images of the surgery still come to me sometimes, especially when I am exercising. It looked so easy. A few quick incisions, and a masked doctor could cut out of me anything that had ever made me doubt that I was a man, or that I could be normal. The masked doctor could fix what nature had screwed up—could shape me, remodel me into the proper form of a man.

### III.

Sift all the muddle of the details in all the self-help lose-weight books and you will find two constants (in the honest ones, at least): eat less and exercise more. The formula is simple and there is profit to be found in expressing it in endless permutations, but success
comes usually only to those who engage both sides, and then only with some frankness and
tenacity.

In the health-centric world and beyond, fat is synonymous with failure. Being fat is
universally interpreted as a failure of body, a failure of mind, and a failure of will. Not
content to remain on the sidelines in this small arena of larger culture wars, fat people have
taken actions against this notion. In a nation that preaches fear of fat, they loudly proclaim
that fat is normal, that exercise is a trendy fad propped up by the millions of dollars it culls
annually from the insecure and the overweight.

The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance has been championing this
cause since 1969. Among NAAFA’s goals are to “dispel the common myths that are used to
justify treating fat people as second-class citizens: ‘If they really wanted to, they could lose weight;’
‘It’s not healthy to be fat.’” I can’t help but feel a little implicated by NAAFA and those who
espouse their ideas. “It’s not healthy to be fat” is the mantra I’ve been using to encourage
more exercise and better eating in myself for five years, with some success. The idea that
I’ve been a tool for the fat-exploiting subculture of health experts is disturbing, though one
that I can live with when it comes attached to a smaller, leaner me. According to NAAFA,
I’ve bought into the myth and have been thoroughly seduced by it.

Internationally, fat has become an easy shorthand for over-consumptive Americans.
The American tourist seeking a McDonald’s in Madrid steps unwittingly into an easy
stereotype—uncultured, consumptive, creatures of slothful habit. And the consumption is
not limited to food alone. It extends to all things: oil, cars, electronics, alcohol,
pornography. The argument for the live-in-the-moment American extends a step further.
The harm we inflict our bodies with trans-fat and grease and constant junk can be alleviated
in later life through medical and cosmetic surgery. Liposuction to remove the fat,
transplants to replace the tortured veins. If we can live large and evade the consequences, why not? In an easy-fix society, we struggle to find solutions to problems that have no easy-fix.

We judge fat on sight alone, but we also require a numeric measure to complete the judgment. Any story about a morbidly obese man never fails to mention 500 pounds in the first paragraph. The number helps paint the picture. But a lone number by itself is a poor way to measure the body. A number is singular and pretends to tell a larger story than what it actually measures. Weight is a singular measurement of mass, but the human body exists at all times in three dimensions, not just one. It bulges and protrudes, fleshy and greasy meat on bone. It shrinks and grows. Expands and contracts. Weight itself fluctuates, sometimes dramatically, from day to day. In whole the human body contains a myriad of working parts and miniature structures within, all in various stages of growth and decay and health and sickness. How can one number purport to capture all of this with any success? It can’t. But because we lack better alternatives (body mass indexes can be even more misleading), we continue to use and misuse it.

The only number I recall after one thirty was two seventy, and that was in high school. It was almost beyond belief, and to this day I wonder if I imagined it, if it was never real. But no, I have the pants to prove it (size 44), so it must be true. My wardrobe bears the fossil evidence of the larger me—shirts that now fit like overcoats, swimming trunks that won’t stay up. I was so large then, I am afraid to look back and remember, because I don’t want anyone to remember me that way, much less myself.
The first doctor I asked about my excessively fatty chest told me, quite simply, to eat less and exercise more. The second left open the possibility of surgery, but insisted that I achieve a certain base weight first and then decide. He also quoted me the cost for such a surgery, and I kept the number, which was in the thousands and seemed an unattainable amount of money for either myself or my parents at the time, at the forefront of my conscious thought. But it wasn’t until college that I found the free time and initiative to take the first steps into the world of fitness.

Let’s face it: for the newbie gyms and fitness centers are intimidating—the spidery machines and bulked and toned denizens scream to the newcomer that he does not belong. Struggling with the most miniscule free weights in front of a wall-length mirror drives the point home. *This place is not for you.* This is how I felt for years. Lifting weights was, at first, both humbling and humiliating. What a mockery of time and nature it is to raise heavy objects (and not-so-heavy objects) and then put them back down again—that this motion, endlessly repeated in a variety of different forms, is the key to physical beauty. My arms, undersized and weak, were sticks, so I focused on the chest. I learned by watching others, often imperfectly. A security officer who was rumored unstable from his time in Vietnam came in the early morning and went through a rigorous routine of squats and pull-ups, dips and thrusts, screaming and grunting all the while. He was bony and packed with awkward muscle, and his intensity scared me. I watched him from behind walls of glass. When he left I went through his motions, attempting to fall into the fading residue of those forms.

Two years later I took another step and added a small amount of cardiovascular work. “Hoffman’s aren’t built for running,” my father told me once, and he was right. Nonetheless, I eked out a few miles on the treadmill every week, and attempted to cut superfluous food out of my diet. Eggs and cheese and bacon became grapefruit and cereal.
Lunch became salad. Desert was omitted entirely. The failures were many, but over time I trained myself to feel guilt at the thought of desert, to hate myself if I skipped even a day of exercise. I had bought into the fitness culture, and for all its evils and money grubbing, I did lose weight.

Three years after I entered my first weight room with the intention to get fit, my mother bought me a suit. It was my birthday. “It fits so much better now—now that you’ve developed,” she said. Even in paying me a compliment, there was the language normally reserved for the maturation of young girls. Still.

In the best defense against I’ve heard over-indulgent victimhood, Scott Russell Sanders writes, “I do not wish to compete for a trophy in suffering.” I repeat the same here. And really, how terrible is it to be fat? Obesity has, quite literally, exploded over the country. If anything, being fat is quickly becoming the norm rather than the exception. Nightly news runs a fairly standard “Are our children too fat?” feature meant to shake parents of their complacency and complicity. One might imagine an approaching age when an elementary school class bursting with rotund children picks on the class rails for being too thin, for their lightweight abnormality. My college roommate, Bert, once complained of a heightened self-consciousness on account of his acute thinness.

“It can’t be as bad as being fat,” I said, a little too quickly, defensive.

“Not, I guess it’s not,” he replied. But they do exist on the same continuum. Bert endlessly attempts to “bulk up,” and greets the addition of a few pounds over his normal one forty-five with great delight. I don’t feel the same way about the diminution of my own weight. Each pound lost for me points to the next pound. There is still more to lose. I have a goal weight that, short of lengthy famine or debilitating illness, I will never achieve.
II.

If this was a manual of self-help there would be no need for anything more. But this is not self-help, and because I am not burdened with a need to populate bookstore shelves with empty promises, I can attempt some plain honesty.

I have trouble imagining the inverted classroom scene where the fat mock the thin—obesity is not a target for scorn merely because it is abnormal (to the extent it even is abnormal anymore). Rather, it indicates a certain way of life, a certain type of person, and lets the viewer fill in all the marginal details with an easy shorthand—fat can mean slow, of both body and mind, slovenly, dull, boring, gluttonous, consumptive, greedy, mean, buffoonish, and anything in between. A thin person may easily become fat, but it is much harder for a fat person to become thin. The negative connotations far outweigh the few positive ones: jolly, friendly, and the few other misleading traits that Santa Claus and Chris Farley have won for the large and obese.

Nonetheless, being fat is fairly low on the grand and elaborate scale of human sufferings. It is, after all, often a symptom of excess, hardly a condition that garners much sympathy. But perhaps obesity and the problems of shape are too easily dismissed, the consequences too easily trivialized. “You want to become invisible, gain one hundred pounds” says Steve Vaught, the “Fat Man Walking” who, so fed up with his obesity, decided to embark on a coast to coast hike to lose it. He’s right. It’s more than simply not fitting into seats at a movie theater or waiting in line for a roller coaster with too small a safety bar only to be escorted, in full view of all the acceptably slender patrons, to the lonely side along with their cameras and eyeglasses. It’s the snap judgment that renders you lazy, slovenly—the quick devaluation of a basic humanity. Do I overstate? Perhaps. But when you are fat, you are fat all the time, and the physical space your body occupies becomes an outward
reflection of the person you are—form dictates function in the quick judgment of human intellect, not the other way around.

And this particular condition is writ across ages and generations in genetic letters; I am compelled to wonder if any son of mine will be dealt the same hand. Will he be afraid to remove his shirt at the beach? Never play basketball for fear of having to play ‘skins’? Will he fake an injury to avoid the humiliation, as I did? I’m afraid that he will. I’ve seen it in the pictures of my paternal grandfather, and I’ve seen it in my father. And yet at the same time I fear crossing over too deeply to the other side, that I’ve gone too far already—will I force any child of mine into exhaustive sports and athletics? Will I drive him like a merciless coach? Will I regulate his eating with the same fevered intensity that I apply to my own?

And will he hate me for it?

Shape occupies a sacred and unassailable place in the national conscience. We worship it in its most pleasing and perfect forms. Athletes and models and those people who appear on television and in movies are paid enormous sums of money for their shapes, elevated to the highest levels of national adulation. This is not a new development. The Greeks were perfecting their own methods of training and physical conditioning millennia ago. But it is difficult to know if they placed such high stock in the forms of the body as we do now. The American cult of the body stands above most other things as a national obsession. Our president’s fitness makes headlines, and our tabloids relentlessly track Kirstie Alley and Anna Nicole Smith’s indulgent pilgrimages from thin to fat to thin again. The appearance of cellulite on a female celebrity’s thighs at the beach can spark scandal and speculation that she is losing it, that essential shape that anchors her near-universal appeal.
We judge people by their shapes, infer things, correctly and incorrectly, about their lifestyle, their work, even their personalities, by the space their bodies occupy. Does a bulging gut indicate hours spent on a couch? Lavish lunches? Does a woman’s shape reveal the children she has borne? Can a man’s shape indicate the children he has sired? What does shape tell me about you? What does it tell you about me? Does shape always tell the truth?

Bulk can hide muscle, and toned is not synonymous with strong. In college I associated the brickish and angular shape of many football players with a subpar intelligence, and I was refuted in this assumption more than affirmed. Nonetheless, I still equate the sharp shoulder angles and square torso that accompany a lifetime spent in the company of dumbbells with a career athlete’s savage indifference to learning. Is this fair? Hardly. Is it wrong? Sometimes.

The NAAFA people and those of similar mind encourage the obese to make peace with their corpulence. This movement is unsettling to me—it loudly proclaims that “I am who I am, and that’s fine,” and “I’m a fat person, and I’m not changing for you.” Their stalwart push for acceptance denies the possibility of improvement. And yet the affirmation of their worth as humans, obese but still human, is unquestionably what I spent my childhood seeking. The choice is to cave and join a gym and diet, or affirm who you are and all your habits, even those that are unquestionably unhealthy. Who is right? And who is denying some essential truth?

I still want to change, even after years of exercise and miles of running, I don’t want this to be me. Six months ago I wore through my first pair of running shoes. It’s a milestone I never thought I would have the pleasure of reaching.
Is it wrong to be unhappy with the body you inhabit? Is the danger of obsession so great to forestall the adoption of healthy habits? Right now, I don’t think so. But that doesn’t stop me from worry. The upcoming pages of the book of my life are now stenciled in with an unyielding routine: I will lift heavy objects and put them back down. There are no more blank pages to look forward to. In the summertime I will run the jagged track with the high school students and frosh football hopefuls. In the winter I will descend into a musty YMCA basement and hop the treadmill.

I suspect that one of the consequences of devoting myself to the fitness culture is having to look back through time’s mirror at my thirteen year-old self and say, “Yes, you are worthless. Why don’t you fix yourself? You’re not good enough.” And those words are an echo to what I was feeling at the time. Have I, in some devil’s bargain, exchanged some fragment of basic humanity for a smaller shape? For the luxury of not being fat in America in 2005, for never feeling compelled to look up at the catcall of “Tits!”, it’s a price that, for good or ill, I will continue to pay.

As I write this, I’ve almost worn through a second pair of running shoes. I have resisted the lure of surgery, but the surgical knife is still behind me when I run, and still my chest jiggles like a thing alive. When this pair of shoes falls smooth at the tread, I will buy another.

And after that, another.
By the end of the first day at Camp Horseshoe, the boys in Scout Troop 12 figure we are going to waste the pansies in Troop 339. Troop 339 stays at the lodge across the lake, a knobby scab of windswept ice, and under better conditions might have made passing friends with the boys in Troop 12. But as a group Troop 339 has nothing on us—they come from Syracuse and wear matching red ski jackets and black snowpants, thick goggles the color of neon and citrine. We watch as they step down from their high-risen diesel trucks and boxy caravans and unload from hitched trailers mated pairs of snowmobiles and sloshing red vats of gasoline mixed with oil. Mr. Lombardi, our scoutmaster, shakes hands and makes friends with a few of their leaders. I’m glad at that moment that my father begged off coming on this trip, that it’s Mr. Lombardi and not him shaking hands with those rich boy’s daddies.

In the Camp Horseshoe parking lot, Troop 339 blares their music from car door speakers—Ace of Base and Fantastic Voyage and “I’ll make love to you”—so loud we can barely hear ourselves mutter “faggots” under our breaths.

We all scuttle out of Mr. Lombardi’s van. The troop—seven boys, one scoutmaster—trudges past them on a gritty snow ridge near the camp director’s lodge leading down towards the three-room Onadaga Cabin at the edge of the lake.

“Did you see those mommas boys?” Brian says as we pass them, loud enough to make it seem dangerous. Brian is sixteen, lean but short with an angular jaw that comes to a point at his chin. He has an erratic power that we respect and fear. In the summer he always takes quarterback at football. In the fall, during a pine cone war, he threw a cone so hard at someone’s head that the kid had to go to the doctor to get the pieces removed. More than that, he is right. Troop 339 fits the description—under those heavy jackets each is wearing the tan scout uniform. Some have neck kerchiefs. One is even wearing the
uniform hat. Brian looks back around the pillar of his backpack at the rest of us and whispers, “We can take’em.”

The boys of Troop 12, not one scout uniform between us, agree, and we are thrilled for doing so. Every boy knows—with the exception of Timothy Lews, maybe—that Brian is crazy, certified nuts. He screams and jumps at the sight of moths, steals liquor from his stepfather, and once used his knife to cut his way out of a tent during a nightmare. He claimed it was a nightmare.

“Watch where you’re going, Brian,” says Mr. Lombardi. Under the padding of wool and flannel layers the collar of Mr. Lombardi’s scoutmaster’s uniform curls up around his doughy neck. Brian changes course on the path, veering down towards the frozen lake.

When we reach Onadaga cabin, Mr. Lombardi packs the food we hauled in on sleds into the cupboards. He tests the sink for hot water and, finding none, sends us to get firewood.

Outside Brian is teaching Timothy Lews how to chop firewood. Brian is posed like a conqueror over a fallen tree, the axe resting lightly in his gloved hands. Tim stands a safe distance away, to the side, in case the axe head loses its grip on the handle or Brian loses his. Brain’s triangle jaw fades into a grimace with every stroke. Woodchips erupt like fireworks. Tim watches mutely and shudders. The tree splinters under Brian’s force. He is several years younger than Brian, perhaps half his age even. He barely speaks and has blond hair and wide pale ears. It is his first time at camp.

“Stand back, Rocks,” Brian says tells me, and I do, even though I had been expecting a turn with the axe. He takes off his gloves and tests the edge of the axe with his bare thumb. Tim shifts his feet, looking the same as he did when we left the parking lot of
Dewey Presbyterian four hours earlier. His mother had smoothed back his pigeon-fur hair and was pushing him towards Mr. Lombardi like she was making a deposit at the bank. She transferred Tim’s Ninja Turtles sleeping bag from her trunk to Mr. Lombardi’s and drove away.

I follow Tim’s gaze to his boots, which are held together by a thick layer of packing tape. Snow is already invading. Brian hoots and splits the remainder of the fallen tree, momentum swinging him down into the thick snow knees-first, where he rests for a long while with the axe in front of him. Finally he stands and hands the tool to Tim, who struggles with its weight. “Your turn,” Brian says, and lights a cigarette.

At the lake Troy and Jeremy and Dustin drop their arms and let fall the various devices of our weekend amusement: repaired snowshoes, half-crumpled plastic sleds and saucers, cross-country skis rescued from garage sales, and the auger—a five foot pole with a bent handle at the top and flecked red drill at the base. Troy is the oldest—a baseball player with a box haircut who rarely attends meetings or campouts anymore. He is what my father calls “A young lion,” which is enough to compel me to hate him. Troy’s parents have made him come.

Jeremy and Dustin are the same age—fourteen. Both of them are doughy and nearsighted—like me—from long hours of video games and seclusion. They appear to be good friends in scouts and attend the same high school that I do, where each of us ignores the others in unspoken agreement. Dustin stares down at the sleds and skis. In the midst of so many choices I wonder that they are eager to try all at once and so they do nothing save stand there at the lake’s edge, as if peering into the planet’s grim future or past and feeling the same silent thrill of absolute solitude.
Outside, Pat and his younger cousin Cory finish with the last items from the car—a kerosene lamp with accompanying fuel in frigid green cylinders—and claim the top bunks in the cabin as their own. They sit up and grin at each other, run their hands over the ceiling inches above their faces. The bunks creak with every movement. Pat—the larger one, orange-haired and pale—retrieves a bag a smuggled candy from his pack and tosses pieces across the divide to his cousin. They both attend the Catholic school two blocks north of Dewey Presbyterian.

Mr. Lombardi toils in the kitchen and then assembles his cot in the small room behind, rolling his mummy bag on top. He takes his gloves off and rubs his hands together, feels the firm bumps of calloused skin. Rubbing them together, he shoves both hands down inside the front of his jeans like he always does when he thinks nobody is looking.

Outside, an axe bites down on stiff wood in erratic rhythm.

“We can take those pansies,” Brian says again, this time from the center of the frozen lake. Mr. Lombardi swipes the cigarette from his stepson’s mouth with the twitching hands of a man who is trying to quit smoking and extinguishes it before putting it in his pocket

“I won’t hear that kind of talk, Brian,” Mr. Lombardi says.

“Ok, Saul.” Brian grins as he drags out the syllables of his stepfather’s name and adds a few extra of his own.

The lodge across the lake is a hive of movement. Troop 339 sets each magnificent snowmobile out in a long line, leaving them room to scurry about and service their vehicles. Their cabin is twice the size of ours, complete with a heavy green and orange troop flag that hangs like a popped balloon from the pole outside.
“We could ask them for a ride,” Jeremy offers and pulls up the sled he’d been towing that carries the auger.

“Not before we catch ourselves dinner, we won’t,” Mr. Lombardi says, and he leads us on. Near a stray island of pine and rock he kicks bare a patch of lake and takes up the auger, leaning into the heavy drill as the ice churns. Black water bubbles up from the wound. Mr. Lombardi clears away the slush with bare hands and points to the tackle and lines on the sled I’m dragging behind. “Get to it.”

The hole is big enough for two. Troy baits two lines and hands one to Tim. When the wind kicks up the top of Tim’s bare ears blaze with ruby numbness. Tim does not speak at all—at meetings the word “retard” was whispered, but without the range of insult. It was pity and truth, we thought.

Troy asks, “Did you bring a hat, Tim?”

He shakes his head no.

“No hat, Timmy?” Brian removes his knit hat and pushes it down over the blond hair and wayward ears. Tim adjusts the hat above his eyes so he can see.

We gather some small wood and Brian starts a fire on the shore of the island with his lighter. Mr. Lombardi says nothing but moves closer as the afternoon drags, puts his hands up near the small flames. Together they form a circle that becomes wet with slush and black soil. The fishing lines are slack in the dark hole on the ice. I scuff the ice with the tip of my boot, thinking of the fish that could be swimming under the sheet of ice beneath my feet, fat and glistening and sluggish. My stomach rumbles.

“Should have brought some chairs,” Mr. Lombardi says.

The grumbling clatter of snowmobile engines flying across the lake is his only answer.
Around the wood burning stove four pairs of wet feet dangle. The cabin smells of tomato soup and burning socks.

Mr. Lombardi ladles soup into plastic bowls. “Not a single bite.” He does not sound surprised. The cupboards are stocked with canned tuna to snack on at night, and long rectangles of aluminum that house anchovies in their own greasy brine.

Tim burns the roof of his mouth on his first spoonful of soup, nearly spills the entire bowl down the front of his lap in surprise. Jeremy laughs.

“Blow on it, Tim.”

But the younger boy does not. He hangs his tongue outside of his mouth like a dog would, half-smiling, looking around from face to face and taking big gulps of air as fast as he can and letting them go

“It’s hot, Tim!” Brian pushes his angular face right up into my round one. “Hot—h-o-t! Can you understand that? It burns!” With his foot—wearing only a tattered sock—Brian releases the door to the wood burning stove and withdraws a smoldering length of wood. He waves it like a torch. “Hot, Tim. Like fire!”

Mr. Lombardi leans in from the kitchen. “Brian! Put that away!”

Nobody moves. I stay still even as the bowl of soup burns in my lap.

Brian grunts and tosses the log back into the stove’s iron mouth. His hand is sooty black and red, blistered. He puts his boots on without tying the laces and steps out of the cabin, leaving the door open.

Mr. Lombardi closes the door. “Is that soup ok, Tim?”

“Yeah.”
Dustin sits back down. Pat and Cory exchange something with their eyes. Troy shakes his head and says so Mr. Lombardi can't hear, “Kid’s messed up.”

The window behind the stove flickers with our first snowy dusk.

Outside, Brian is on his knees, digging. When one pair of gloves is soaked through he goes back to his stepfather’s van in the parking lot and retrieves a spare. It’s a tightly packed pile, adjacent to the cabin, the kind that might be left by the snowplow’s blade, six feet high and with a diameter nearly twice that. Brian digs from the bottom, with single-minded ferocity, pulling the snow towards him in a doggie paddle motion, pushing it aside with the flat of his arm. I watch him from the cabin window.

Rattles from snowmobile engines drift across the frozen lake, and every now and then Brian looks up, alert, eyes searching. The light is fading.

When he’s created enough space, he ducks his head inside, twisting his body to look up at the ceiling. He smoothes it over with his glove. Turning to lie on his belly, he starts enlarging the small interior he has created. Snow migrates from his cupped gloves around his sides, past the slick ruffles of his winter leggings on out the mouth of the mound. In the dark of his mound, Brian cannot see his own breath. He pushes wide, like he was swimming, pulling at the compacted cold and then stroking it behind him. After a half hour of this, he withdraws. He clears away the excess and surveys his progress. He is slightly damp, not cold at all. He pushes the brown hair out of his eyes and goes back in.

Behind him, the cabin door opens.

“What’cha doing?”

Pulling out from the base of the hole, Brian can see that Tim has applied another layer of tape to his cracked boots.
“Get me a flashlight,” he commands.

When Tim returns Brian says, “Go on. Take a look.” Knit-capped head and shoulders and waist and wavering flashlight disappear into the portal and Brian turns to the side, fumbles at his pants. Tim exits the snowmound and steadies the flashlight in both hands, the lucent beam falling on Brian’s front, the retreating shrub of a penis and a steaming pale stream.

Tim flicks the flashlight off and looks down at his boots.

“Let’s get to work,” Brian says, indicating the dark mouth of the mound.

Tim stares at him for a long while.

“Get moving, retard.”

The flashlight comes on, the beam a circle expanding in the dark. They begin to dig.

A dying fire.

In the cabin, Mr. Lombardi fumbles with the front of his pack, takes out a clear orange bottle that rattles with pills and puts it in his pocket.

“Let’s go for a hike,” Jeremy suggests. He trades a look with Troy. I pretend not to notice.

No one moves.

The door opens.

Tim stands there, Brian’s knit hat frozen to his forehead. His gloves are soggy and lank, the cracked boots splitting again at their seams. Brian’s head pops in the crevice above Tim’s.

“I’m spending the night outside.”

“Brian. No.” Mr. Lombardi leans forward, knees bent.
“I made an igloo. I want to test it out.”

“I’d rather you slept inside.”

“Chill, Saul. Just let me get my sleeping bag.”

Tim wanders around the couch and took a seat near the wood burning stove. He pulls his boots off in pieces.

Brian stomps snow past Mr. Lombardi and into the kitchen, to the little room where Mr. Lombardi’s cot stands perpendicular to the cold back wall. He retreats the way he came, the ties of Saul’s sleeping bag dragging behind him like dead snakes.

Mr. Lombardi extends his hand. “Take these.”

Brian takes the pills from his stepfather’s hand and throws them back as if they were a glass of scotch. I’d seen my father make the same motion every night of my life, ice clinking hard against the bottom of the glass. The round part of Brian’s throat bobs. Troy and Jeremy and Pat and Cory and I—we sit around the fire, pretending not to see the exchange, pretending it didn’t happen even though it’s the only thing any of us is thinking about.

To my side I see Troy mouth the words, “Messed up.”

I nod my head with a quick, “Uh huh.”

Mr. Lombardi looks at me. “Did you say something Rocks?”

“Nope.”

He grunts and throws his goose-down coat over his shoulders after Brian leaves.

“I’m meeting with the other leaders.”

“I think we’ll take that hike,” Troy says.

“Ask Brian if he wants to go,” Mr. Lombardi says.

“We will.”
But I know we won’t.

The only sounds are our breath and the steady schlump... schlump of snow-shoed feet landing in fresh snow, packing it down slightly. Troy pauses a short way out and passes out the cigars he’s stolen from his father’s den. I take mine and clumsily undo the wrapper. Lighters flash and each boy, now trailing a whispy tendril of pungent smoke, presses on toward the center of the lake.

Schlump. Schlump.

Before we reach the center Brian appears behind us, pushing himself through the snow on cross-country skis like it was peanut butter.

“That need wax,” I say.

“Rocks—eat me.”

Tim is behind Brian, holding a wavering flashlight, which he is instructed to turn off.

Brian looks at us. “Where’s mine?”

After a moment Troy reaches into his pocket and produces a cigar for Brian. He lights it and inhales, coughing and smiling at the same time. “Seen any lights?” Brian says.

“Rich people have cabins all over the lake up here.”

Seven pairs of eyes, scanning each tree-shadowed horizon.

Jeremy takes off his hat. I can see the steam off his head even in the darkness.

“There’s no one up here.”

Brian says, “Naah—yes there is. There’s those fags across the lake. Being fancy and snowmobiling—folks have to come up here sometime. Use their rich-people stuff. There.” He points.
And we do see a light. It could be from a cabin, back on a ridge, above the lake, a big two-story with wide front windows, a crackling fireplace, and half-filled wine glasses. The light is steady and orange.

Round dots of fire glow in the silence.

Brian crouches down. “Nice young rich couples from Albany, needing a place to get away. Winter get away, they see. Skiing. Brandy by the fire. The Adirondacks. They build their cabins on the lake, make a weekend paradise.” The scene unfurls like a brochure in my mind. But Brian does not stop there: “I want to see boobs.” He wraps his arms around his knees, lifts his chin at the light in the distance and chuckles. “Boobs as big as my head, with nipples that won’t fit in my mouth. They’re up here.”

We laugh, and each boy sees those very things, just as described, and each feels lighter from the substance of their deepest desire rising from Brian’s lips, spoken in steaming breath to hover above them like the smoke from their cigars.

We look at each other. There’s no way anything like Brian described could be out there.

Jeremy starts off toward the light, and we have no choice but to follow, snowshoes rising.

The orange light does not waver. At the edge of the lake Brian throws the heavy skis into the forest and rushes up the dark, legs sinking knee-deep. We follow, snowshoes keeping us from sinking, except for Tim, who struggles behind. I stay close to someone’s shoulder there in the darkness, afraid that if I get separated they will press on without me. At the lip of the hill Brian pauses, and we can see him clearly in the light, the narrow chin hanging over us in shadow.
The orange is a streetlight. We are on the road.

The same road we drove in on.

Brian flicks the nub of his cigar away. Everyone else has finished with theirs.

No one speaks a word until Cory looks up the road, says “I hear something.”

I see Tim quiver as he watches the inky black of the forest on either side. The light from the pole above makes the darkness that much darker—I can tell that Tim is afraid, afraid of the dark, because I am, too.

The noise builds slowly, a soft buzzing like the distant lawnmower you hear when waking up on a summer’s weekend. Twin lamps appear beneath the shelf of darkness, and then another pair. The lawnmower grinds away. Three more. We step to the side.

Troop 339 passes us, keeping a stately pace on their mounts as if on parade. A few of them smile under their goggles and helmets. One waves. The noise does not follow them but seems to linger with us, there on the road long after they pass, the residual slowburn of inferiority, echoing in the deepest well of our heads. They disappear down the road, but the noise of them does not. Nor does the thought of them.

Someone says, “I’ve got an idea.”

We smoke the last of Troy’s cigars and Brian sends Tim away.

“Go on,” he orders. “You’re too young for this.”

Tim stands there, wordless. He doesn’t offer any defense, only stands, as if Brian will soon change his mind and welcome the younger boy to the heist. Finally, he trudges off. The flashlight he holds in a small gloved hand is dimming, and I imagine it will die before he makes it back to the cabin.
The moon is impossibly large in the sky, and I follow Brian and the others as they run along the road. Snowshoes are flung into the woods, and I imagine what happens if I fall off the road, into the darkness. Running in the snow, I see shadows; they could be great beasts following our passage, ready to snatch us back into oblivion if we stray from the path. I think of Tim, making his way back towards Onadaga cabin with only the fading flashlight—with the moon he will be fine. But Tim is also the quiet kind, the one that when he disappears no one will notice, and I will have to be the one to say, as we make ready to leave on Sunday afternoon, “Hey, where’s Tim?” even though I’ve been wondering all along.

But the prospect of mischief soon blots out any worry for Tim. Summer camp the year before we stole the camp director’s podium during the night. It was kept in the dining hall, behind latched screen doors and the padlocked door leading to the kitchen. I didn’t actually break into the dining hall—I crouched in the brush a ways up the road, a lookout. What I was supposed to do if someone came, I wasn’t sure, but when Brian and Troy and Jeremy ran by me with the hunk of wood on their shoulders I took the quickly muttered, “Nice work, Rocks,” and followed after. We meant to return it, but Brian splintered it into square logs and burned it.

When we reach Troop 339’s lodge Brian crouches beyond the light of their cabin and I plant one knee in the wet snow. The snowmobiles are there, lined up side by side. We don’t say a thing.

We can hear them inside, talking, laughing. Perhaps they are playing cards like Troop 12 sometimes does. Or eating that salty pickled fish in its yellow juice. Finally Brian stands, when he is through waiting, walks calmly over to the folded tarp between the cabin and the snow machines, lifts one boxy gas can in each hand, and walks away. Jeremy goes next, and then Troy, each taking two. Pat and Cory and Dustin and I split the remaining
three. At the lake’s edge I run, as fast as I can, sinking into the snow covering the ice, smelling the fumes from the sloshing can as it bangs against my knee. Everyone is running, tripping, falling. Someone is laughing.

In the center of the lake I fall over a small, dark shape. It’s Tim.

“Sorry, man.”

He looks up at me and I think I can see him smile but he’s standing in my shadow and all I can tell is that he’s brought a sled with him.

“I thought this would help,” he says.

“Nice going,” someone says. Tim beams.

The gasoline is loaded and we cross the distance to the opposite shore, faster now. Jeremy is giggling. He keeps repeating: “Pansies. Those stupid, stupid pansies.”

“Life is demanding, without understanding!” Brian is singing.

Cracking voices follow his innocent tune.

Mr. Lombardi comes back sometime after midnight, sneezing. I imagine walking past the darkened edge of the cabin where we buried the red vats under tarp and snow. I think before I close my eyes we are brave, righteous—daring. I think that I am these things too.

A bright night passes into a gray dawn.

In the morning we eat salty eggs and toast from the kerosene stove. Tim cannot stop smiling, looks like a happy confession is about to spill out of his mouth but each time he leans forward Jeremy puts a restraining hand on his shoulder.

Mr. Lombardi takes the troop out for some wilderness survival. We clear a patch of snow away outside the cabin. “Pretend Dustin’s leg is broken,” he says. I search for a log
that can double as a splint. Brian’s appears from the entrance to his igloo, his face split into a wide smile.

“Hey Rocks. Nice night.”

I say, “It was good.” I can’t stop my eyes from searching out that corner. The snow is carefully packed there, ringed by a scatter of footprints. Not so subtle, but not obvious, either.

Seeing him bent over on his elbows I remember my first days at camp, the first time I met Brian and Mr. Lombardi and the others, in a grassy field not far from here, near Crystal Lake. Crystal Lake was about a four hours drive from Dewey Presbyterian’s parking lot, too, where my father dropped me off and watched the scouts load the gear with his hands rooted on his hips. There were more fathers then, two years ago, not just Mr. Lombardi. They talked about my father at night when they played cards, called him “On the rocks,” for his love of brown liquor, which got shortened and picked up by their sons. I didn’t know what it meant then. I was happy for the attention.

Beyond the igloo Mr. Lombardi stands, arms crossed. This is how I will always see him from this moment forward. He fumbles with his pockets as we apply the splint and bandage to Dustin’s perfectly broken leg. Deep blue lighter and cigarette emerge, the first we’ve seen of them all weekend. Mr. Lombardi must have lost control, I thought.

He steps away from the scouts, three steps, as if worried the distance would infect them with his second-hand lack of willpower, to the tussled snow and mound. I see that an errant patch of red peaks out from under the small mound, and Mr. Lombardi puts the cigarette to his lips. Brian is in his igloo—but then suddenly he is not. My mind creates the image of him moving between igloo and his stepfather even though I do not see it. The memory is there, even when the truth is not. Brian slaps him, a wide lunging roundhouse of
a swing, knocking both cigarette and lighter into the snow, where they both instantly
disappear.

It is the scene that I will be thinking of years later, that same life-giving strike, when
glass and ice hit the wall and shatter from the force of my hand and scotch washes the white
carpet tan before fading and my father stares at me with the same look that Mr. Lombardi
gives Brian. It’s a look that asks, “Who the hell do you think you are?”

The guilty vats of gasoline to his back, buried like scotch in a locked cabinet, Brian
can only give one answer, the only defense, the same answer that I give.

Your son.
My Funeral Wish List

*Have no fear—you’ll know what to do.*
—Thomas Lynch, “Tract”

In the dull gray heat of a July morning I raised the driver’s seat to the sitting position, rubbed my eyes open, and watched the cars cut across St. Luke’s parking lot to the near end, where they were hailed and corralled near my own by an orange-vested police officer. I was twenty-three. I’d driven the last leg, one hour from a small Buffalo satellite to Rochester, New York, that morning, having arrived at a relative’s house near Buffalo the midnight before. My father was in the seat beside me. Rain had ceased with the sunrise though the sky was still overcast and sullen, and one by one I watched the cars expel their breathing cargo, taking some satisfaction in recognizing some faces from the time when I had lived in this city: old high school classmates in their fresh suits; parents I had known by the size of their voices from my time in basketball and little league. I had not been in Rochester, wet and windy and crawling like spilled liquid up around Lake Erie’s southern coast, in seven years.

The deceased for whom we had come to pay tribute was a former friend discarded by the co-conspirators, time and neglect, during the long course one of my family’s frequent dislocations. K___ was a high school and college football star. We had been in boy scouts together. He was my age.

The funeral program indicated that his high school football team—my high school football team, for a time—had gone on to win state, a fact I learned that morning for the first time. K___ had set all sorts of monumental records for tackles and interceptions and deflections during his Division II years. I had not known this, but I was not surprised.

In the front pew of the church I recognized his brother and sister and father and mother from my time in the boy scouts, when his entire family came with the troop to the
frigid January woods of Camp Cutler, and the young played football in the snow the entire
day and then dried our clothes on the wood-burning stove so we could play capture the flag
at night by moonlight in the same snow we’d carved up during the day.

They looked the same. I felt different.

The funeral Mass began with a chime.

When Thomas Mann said that “A man’s dying is more the survivors’ affair than his
own,” I wonder if he thought he was making a new point, never before considered, or
simply restating an old maxim of community life and death. Of course Mann is correct, but
there’s enough ambiguity left in the words and enough ego residing in me to submit a few
modest requests in anticipation of my own funeral day.

At the end of things, I would like an open casket.

At the point of time in question, I’m fairly sure that I won’t care, but since some
direction might be helpful, and since it’s important to me now, I provide: when I’m dead, I
want my body waked in an open casket. A nice suit, a clean shave, one last grooming—
forgo the makeup, please, as much as you probably hear that and roll your eyes, I’ve always
had an aversion to anything of the sort and though I’m fairly certain my dead body won’t
react the way my live one did when I dabbed zit-remover at the end of my nose, I’d like to
leave a final face cold and ungreased. The amniotic bath of birthing was surely a wet enough
affair to warrant a dry exit. Perhaps you can also skip the tie—that would be quite a fashion
trend among the recently deceased, eh? But do what you will, I won’t care—do whatever
you think is best so long as the casket door remains open. Though, should you close it by
accident, I’m sure you won’t hear any protest from the spent substance within.
There are, of course, exceptions. Brutally disfiguring accidents, for example, may present a barrier to my wishes. If there is not enough of my body to legally claim a bounty or a reward to put on display then it may be best to leave the casket closed. I have supreme confidence, however, in the ability of the morticians to rearrange and reconstruct my lifeless form to the satisfaction of the living in the event of any of the more mundane accidents that tend to do us all in. A car crash, for example, shouldn’t present too much of an obstacle. Likewise a bad fall, or a wasting disease, or any one of those unforeseen traumas that wait in our shadows. Though unlikely in this day and age, it is possible that there will be no body to display at all—incinerated in the flames of catastrophic wreckage, or demolished by a chemical accident, or lost as the result of some complicated bit of foul play. There is not enough vanity in me to fake my own death—or rather, the fear at reading disappointment mingled with surprise in the faces of those who would care at the occasion of my miraculous ‘resurrection’ is too great.

Let there be drinks if the mood suits or let it be sober; post pictures if you must but be forewarned that I have always been, and no doubt will continue to be, among the least photogenic of human beings. But, I repeat, leave the casket open—all the way, if possible, but at the very least from the waist up. I imagine it will have to be a large casket, perhaps larger than the standard size that fits ninety percent of all humans. Choose whichever caliber of casket you prefer. Cost may be no object. But it could be. I don’t suppose I will have had the foresight to secrete away some money for the purposes of my own funeral—why should I not be a burden to those who cared for me? Where they never a burden to me?

The thought of leaving my body in the ground for the remainder of eternity has always frightened me, irrationally, perhaps, so I would like to be cremated once the wake is
over—but not before. Don’t you dare send me to the flame until my body has been displayed for the requisite viewing hours. The ashes you can do with as you will, sprinkle them over some solid ground or into a shallow lake or leave them in your closet, but the open casket is a must. Put me up there and let everyone see, let them know. The body will not deceive. It will be a testament to how I lived—fast and hard, maybe, or slow and deliberate. Thick and a bit slovenly, or angular and strong. Given the choice I’d like to leave a good corpse, but that may be oxymoronic. In either case, the body will not lie. My body won’t suffer the mistruths of the (hopefully) loving eulogist. It will not corroborate the tall tales that may or may not be swapped. It will stand as tangible contradiction to the garbled history that will be shared by my contemporaries, if (God willing) there remain any left to share it. It will rest there, among the tens or the hundreds or the one or simply by itself in an empty room, open and willing, viewable, verifiable.

I missed K___’s wake. It had been held the night before, scheduled from eight to ten and then extended until midnight to accommodate the crowds, a mass of mourners that the local news numbered in the hundreds, perhaps well over a thousand. Old friends chatted with each other in the lines that extended outside of the funeral home, and neatly folded football jerseys rested on a table near the foot of the coffin, one gray, one blue. This was recounted to me by an old friend the morning of his funeral Mass.

Months later his football numbers, in the quick ceremonies that come at halftime or before kickoff, would be retired by both high school and college. But the wake itself was an event, in the truest sense of the word. It was on the news and in the papers—had it occurred during a different month surely classes at his former high school would have been
cancelled. The funeral home could barely contain the breadth of the happening. I can only imagine that the mourners took some solace from their great numbers.

I’m not sure what I would have said to him if I had been there. I’m not sure what his body would have told me. He had been killed by an errant car and driver—some reconstruction had been involved. All present would later remark how natural he looked, how normal, how they couldn’t even tell.

Maybe, the body would have told me nothing at all.

The last time I saw death I was fifteen. My mother’s sister had succumbed to years of prolonged alcohol, her abused organs failing, and my father drove me through Canada during the night to Michigan while my mother flew ahead. It was unexpected, dictionary-definition tragic, almost a cliché. At the wake her father (my grandfather) stood off to the side of the casket, hands clenched behind his back, steadily repeating, “Fathers don’t bury their kids,” over and over again as if those were the only lines he was given during the morbid theater.

I remember there was a young woman wearing a dress with printed flowers who sang a song, some lilting Irish verse that was no doubt picked by the mother of the deceased. It was purely a lament for the living and their ears—it could not reach the ears of dead so there was no point in guessing for an appropriate tune. The family enjoyed Irish songs, took pride in their Emerald heritage, probably more than was healthy—the song was for them.

A weeping child whom I did not know read an unintelligible poem, and my grandfather thanked everyone with a few words and directed them towards food and refreshment. Those two provided more solace than the priest who spoke between them, words rehearsed, blanks filled in with the usual scripture and invocation of Jesus and the
“Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death…” that fades away from all
meaning if you repeat it often enough.

The woman in the coffin, my aunt, looked compressed, chin faded into neck. She
was wearing purple. I stood in front of her body a long time, my hands rooted to my sides.

While I’m in a wishing mood I’ll wish for it to be cold, a dread and wintry month.
I’d like for my body to garner some attention, at least for a moment, and that can’t very well
happen in the midst of a temperate and lusty summer day. March, the month of my birth,
would be appropriate in a circular sort of way, and certainly cold enough in most familiar
climes to suit my tastes, but I have no grudge against any other cold-weather month.
November or December can have me, if they can squeeze me in around the edges of their
travel hours and pageantry and primal consumer instinct.

Let those who come be fed. Some may have traveled far. Some may have wandered
in by mistake; regardless of motive, let the hungry be fed. I have been comforted and
consoled by warm food during a good wake in ways that I cannot begin to explain.

Set some mood music if you must, perhaps some light piano from a stereo in the
corner, but keep the volume low. I enjoy music, but let me be frank: I’m brazenly selfish,
and I want my wake to be about me or, barring that, at least something a measure beyond
the mere circumstances of my death and those who cared enough to show up over it. There
is no song or jingle I love so much that I’d want to be played in full totemic remembrance of
my life. There are no lyrics that so appropriately fit the occasion so as to dissuade the mass
rolling of eyes, which must be kept to a minimum so as to increase the enjoyment during the
moments when the rolling of eyes is the only appropriate response.
Before he was a football star, K___ was an anomaly. He remained an anomaly after he was a football star, too, which is part of the reason, perhaps, that his wake was so well attended. K___ was small, for an athlete of his caliber at least, standing well under five and a half feet and weighing no more than one hundred and fifty pounds.

I found the priest at K___’s funeral Mass to be strangely comforting. My expectations had been low, but the small, dark man in white robes was fearlessly blunt about the entire matter. “It’s alright to be upset with God,” I remember him saying. The words seemed right. The priest was a small man himself; at some point during the service K___’s father remarked, sad grin in place, how hugging the priest felt like hugging his son because they were roughly the same size.

During the funeral Mass, the Rudy comparisons were inevitable. I had prepared myself for them. Likewise the football anecdotes, which were numerous, but not as obnoxious as I’d feared. Mistakenly (and quite stupidly) I did not think that much meaning could be drawn from a life that had been dedicated to high school and college athletics. Having always been distrustful (and envious at times) of that world, I was taken aback by the weight of those memories and stories, the simple elegance of a triumphant word uttered to a coach after an intercepted pass, a pass thrown in his direction because he was deemed the weakest, the smallest, the most exploitable. For me, football cannot be boiled down into a microcosmic soup, the chilled-over essence of life, but that doesn’t mean I cannot appreciate the essential grist that the game collects.

My own memories of K___ are scattered, too, with visions of football. We played on weekends before he joined the high school team, on grass, dirt, snow, and on a peat bog. His talent was unmistakable even then—all other were clumsy by comparison. For as easily
as he was lifted up onto someone’s shoulders, K___ evaded tackles and stole the ball away with jovial tenacity. But there was a time I remember clearly not associated with football—an extended weekend in Canada, some massive conglomeration of Boy Scouts running around in a dense thicket of woods. I remember the thrill of being placed in the same group with K___, because that was back when popularity could spread by simple proximity.

During a team obstacle course, I lifted him by the waist and set him over a wall as if he barely weighed anything at all. When I hoisted myself to the top of the wall, from the other side he cupped his hands so I could step down, and in the single moment of that step he bore a weight nearly twice his own, until we were both on the ground on the other side, racing towards the next challenge.

Thomas Mann was more correct than perhaps even he knew. I could shed no tears for the deceased, but as I watched K___’s father and mother touch the tiny silver coffin for the last time before it was put into the ground, I wept.

My father didn’t want me to come to K___’s funeral Mass. He was friends with K___’s father in perhaps a deeper way than K___ and I had been friends—they had played hockey together. My father was worried, he later told me, that if we came together it would look like some manner of morbid gloating, that he still had a son. I told him this was foolish.

K___’s father is among those few who where adults when I was a child that I would fearlessly call my friend in the same way I call contemporaries friend. In boy scouts he was a father to everyone, careful, nagging, supportive. During one of my last camping trips K___’s father took me and my best friend Adam and a few others to the top of Mt. Cathead, a stubbornly steep mound of moss and rock in the heart of the Adirondacks. We raced up
that hill, rushing against sweat and warm summer mist to gain the summit before the sun went down, and at the top we climbed the groaning fire tower and watched the golden orb melt into a shimmering lake. We came down in the dark, slowly, carefully, hands on each others shoulders, searching for safe purchase.

I came for him, for the smallest hint of possibility that he might not have to shoulder his grief alone. Is that presumptuous? I suppose that it is.

I came for my father also.

The physical distance between me and the greater part of my extended family meant that I was never able to see their bodies taken away. I was always in a car, cutting through Canada’s lower appendages to Michigan while the corpses were taken, boxed, and burned. When I arrived at two in the afternoon at my grandmother’s house, my grandfather’s body was already gone, already cleaned and laid out and slated for the furnace. Maybe he was ashes already. The transition seemed too quick to me, too sudden, as if we had simply misplaced him. My mind didn’t easily make the leap—I thought he still might be wandering around the yard, raking leaves, out on a morning errand to appease the whims of his voracious grandchildren. At the wake there was nothing but a posterboard of pictures.

Again, no evidence of his departure. There was no receipt of his journey, no spent flesh laid out at back of the parlor, unmistakably and verifiably absent.

This troubled me.

The mind can play tricks. Sometimes I catch myself, while buying groceries or passing the bus stop, and I think I see my grandfather. I want to check closer, compel the suspect to turn and present himself, even though I know it cannot be him. Would I stop to
notice the resemblance had I seen his body at the end? Even when I don’t see him, I smell his cigars everywhere.

There is, perhaps, something within us that willingly yields to physical proof, a gate that bends open at the sight or touch of something solid even though it may stubbornly stand closed against ethereal reason and sense and logic. What is that Bible passage, often repeated, but rarely at funerals?

“Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.”

To be human is to doubt.

My life goes on, as yours does, and I do not obsess over lost moments with the bodies of the dead. They are gone whether I have seen them or not, deceased, irrefutably dead and buried or burned and scattered but dead, dead, nonetheless. I would have liked to spend those moments at the side of those open caskets, to stand side-by-side with death and learn to appreciate, if not tolerate, its company and handiwork for those few quiet moments. To stand there and bid them goodbye, a gesture that only holds meaning for me and not for them, and to say to myself “I am not afraid” or more likely “I am afraid” and let it be that.

In the end I wish it to be quiet, orderly, and solemn. Is it a sign of neediness to ask for a few tears? Perhaps it is—I myself am quite stingy with tears during such occasions. I have no football tales and few, if any, triumphs over adversity to carry the day’s narration, but by then you will have your own stories to tell about your own lives, living and breathing and enduring, lifting the weight of grief until it becomes bearable and welcome, a gentle burden.
Two Days on Saginaw Lake

When I try to understand why it was so stark, so monumental, so compulsory a memory for me to cherish—three men in a rowboat—I resort, like any good agnostic, to cold analysis. It was spring, the time of new life, but really it was the frozen tail of March carrying over into April. A mild weekend excursion, not gone terribly awry, but awry from the start. It was one of those things you were supposed to impress your meek-souled friends with, spending a night in a cabin with your girlfriend’s mash-breathed father. A confidence builder. Therapeutic, like when you tell yourself that life sucks and every little thing you do is a drug to let you out of your cage for a short while. Three men in a rowboat.

I can tell this story now because the reason I don’t fish anymore—the mash-breathed father—is dead, turned to dust in a furnace and spread over his favorite fishing cove on Saginaw Lake where the crappy used to rise to the surface to nip at the ash from his cigar. Now it’s just me—his family is moved away or dead. Frank’s graceless little life-caption left me empty, angry, and disturbed. It wasn’t a proper send-off, and as much I’d want to rent a rowboat (or find the old rust heap) and row out to his favorite spot by the dam, I didn’t. Partly because he’d be pissed at me for going out without a rod. Mostly because he doesn’t deserve anyone (except me, it seems) thinking on him any longer.

Like I said it was March—no, April, but we snuck hand warmers into our boots because the air still smelled as crisp and as vacant as March. We drove the two hours from Lansing to Saginaw in Frank Kinnel’s iron-colored Ford truck, with the man himself driving, my legs mashed into the dash, and Russell Hay sitting between us. Russell Hay looked about my age, but he was five years younger, barely-schooled and practicing for a future with the Oat Factory in Flint—twelve dollars an hour he whispered to me on the drive up, shaking
his head as if it couldn’t hold the thought of so much money. Frank Kinnel drove the car in
the silence, his window cracked, sweet-smelling cigar in his right hand.

I had to admit that I was happy Russell was there, though the reason does me no
credit. Russell Hay was a loser, you see—not the lovable kind. He was the brand of loser
everyone wants to keep around. The kind you use to make yourself feel better. I knew it
then and believe it still—time has vindicated my prejudice. But I found the fantasy of
Russell-as-loser useful as well, like the idea that loving husbands don’t beat their wives, or
that ten-pound smallmouth bass live near the dam on Lake Saginaw, or that Jesus lives and
will come down with his chariots and sweep you up and away from all things unbearable.

“Pay attention, you two,” Frank said as we rounded the corner of Tyson’s Creek,
more for Russell’s benefit than for mine. “In case you ever drive up here alone. Or in case
you need to cart my ass to the hospital.”

I would have filled the silence with a joke about carting Frank’s rather significant ass
to the hospital in Tyson’s Creek—our relationship had reached the point of playful banter,
as long as I didn’t step over the line—but Russell looked uncomfortable enough. I had
agreed to come this weekend for two reasons: to fish and to ease Russell Hay into the sphere
of Frank’s power and influence as smoothly as I could. No one had been there for me when
I started dating his oldest daughter, and, like I said before, I wanted to keep Russell around
for a while.

Tough to swallow that Russell was the only one that did stay around.

I was twenty, and I didn’t know much, but I knew having Russell there would
instantly make London Sawyer responsible, level-headed, and not a goddamned-fool-of-a-
boy. I knew Russell would give Frank and me something to shares laughs over. Frank
would invite me to sit on his porch just because I was not Russell, and there we’d scheme like bullies until the streetlamps died at midnight.

So I let the silence rest.

By the time we arrived I decided Russell Hay should have been a farm boy. He sported faded denims, a shirt of thick plaid and heavy work boots. His father was foreman at the Oat Factory, having once upon a time been a farmer himself. It seemed unnatural that Russell did not and never would spend his days working the land. The dull, cow eyes he wore when Frank told him to go fill the motor with gas made me picture him driving a tractor, or lugging around animal feed in a sloshing bucket. The last name is what forced the association—that his corn-colored hair, so pale in certain lights it could have been white. Russell stumbled down the hill towards the dock, and I stood there, stretching my legs in front of the lake.

Fifteen minutes later we unearthed the rowboat, slapped away the spiders and the leaves and put her in the water. Frank trolled the weedy bottom while he was rowing, but he had the sleek black Evanrude 15 (haggled away from his commie neighbor) for puttering himself out to the dam where the big fish lived. I stowed the rods and reels and tackle boxes under the benches, and Frank pushed us away from the dock. He sat in the rear, priming the motor, Russell in the middle, and me in the front.

“It’s nice here, I like it,” Russell said to me.

“It is pretty,” I replied, as if speaking to a child.

“You gas it up?” Frank asked after pulling the cord with no success.

Russell nodded. “Which pole do I use?”
Frank looked at me wryly. “The fuck did he just say? Pole?” It was one of Frank’s favorite games, but somewhere in the depths of him I suspected his anger at ignorance was genuine.

“It’s a rod,” I told Russell gently.

We drifted across the channel to the opposite shore, where I knew snapping turtles enjoyed poking their heads out among the reeds.

I decided Russell could do with some fair warning. “Watch out for the snappers.” To show my own bravery, I leaned over and fondled the water for the moment, as if testing the temperature.

When the motor didn’t start, Frank called Russell a fuckup for forgetting to mix oil in with the gas, three parts to one, gas to oil, and rowed us back to shore.

Russell sat in the middle of the boat, dumbstruck, before saying, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” It was dark.

“He’s always angry about something,” I said cheerfully. We hiked back to the cottage, listened to the Tigers preseason on the radio, and imagined the warmth of Tallahassee and the mighty stride of Kirk Gibson, humbling the Florida sun.

Eager to make up time lost to Russell’s fuckup, Frank had us awake and at the dam by six thirty. Sleep still crusted my eyes, and my fingers were too numb to dislodge it as we trolled back and forth in front of the cottage, “prepping” Russell for our run at the dam. In the morning, the mist rose just above the sun’s golden reflection in the far off waters.

The lake: it won’t do any good to think of the lake as it is now. You have to reach back nearly a decade: before the spray boats puttered each rosy dawn, dumping chemicals into the brown waters to keep the weeds from choking the beaches; before the law schoolers
built their vacation castles on the wooded hills; before the geriatrics got pissed and formed the Neighborhood Lake Association to bleed money out of folks like Frank Kinnel, who pooled the money he took home from the GM plant in Lancaster with his in-laws in order to lease a plot of land on the water and build a modest single-story cottage. This was long before the new upperclass lakefronters, armed with their fish radars and bass pheromones, fished the smallmouth to extinction. The bass in the lake are stocked now, I’m told.

The only thing Frank Kinnel hated worse than Arabs and liberals were pike. Long, snaky, jagged-tooth pike. He fought them on the end of his line, riding the fury in his rod like the thrashing of a hanged man, engaging his imagination long enough to consider that the fish might be a smallmouth, flabby-sided, beautiful and delicious. But he knew. He knew before the white belly rose to the surface of the water. He could feel a pike on the end of his line sure as he could tell when he was being lied to. And he reacted the same way to both.

“You tie a blood knot in that line?” he demanded of Russell when the boy lost a split-tail to a “fish” that Frank and I knew was a tree-stump.

“Yeah,” Russell said, digging into a tackle box for another lure. I knew he hadn’t, and said nothing as he tied another overhand knot to his lure. Russell said, “Must’ve been a big one. What’s in here, trout?”


“Well,” Frank said, “That’s dead wrong. There’s crappy and sunfish by the shore, and the guy that fishes at night told me he landed a catfish once.” His cast sailed beyond the dam’s drainage pipe, breaking the surface of the water with concentric ripples.

Frank, I knew, was an easy man to read. He occupied one of two stages at all times: pissed at you, or about to be pissed at you. His slight rebuke at my overgeneralization took
me by surprise. He knew already I was better than Russell Hay, how could he not? But then I second-guessed Frank Kinnel—what if he was really watching me? What if he wanted to know how I dealt with loser fuckups like Russell Hay? I mulled the thought for a few casts. Worse… what if I was no better to him than Russell?

“I’ve been getting a few nibbles,” I told Russell after a moment. “Try this one and see if you can land something fat.” Before he could protest I swapped rods with him, and retied the knot on the split-tail when he wasn’t paying attention.

I was sure that I knew more than Russell, the fresh-faced interloper to the Kinnel family. After all, I had been dating Frank Kinnel’s oily-haired older daughter for eight months, clawing my way into Mr. Kinnel’s good graces, when the youngest, whose name I won’t mention, landed Russell, a neighborhood boy who played varsity baseball for his high school. I had been going to the lake with the Kinnels since the fall, further impressing Mr. Kinnel with my talents with the rod and reel—a parting gift from my own grandfather. So I sat thinking, as humans often do, how best can I use this person?

The only sounds were the hum of lures through the air, the delicate splashes, and the crank of reels.

I had Frank Kinnel off-guard from the moment I met him, when his freckle-faced daughter—whose name doesn’t matter and I don’t know anymore—practically joined us at the fist in an awkward handshake.

“London? The fuck kind of name is that?”

I had my response ready, honed from years of such reactions to my parents’ harmless little eccentricity. “It’s a city in England, you may have heard of it?”

Frank resumed his reclining chair. “Wiseass. There’s a London in Ontario, too, did you know that? Shitty little town where the poor-bastard Canucks get laid off and think
about crossing the border into Michigan but in the end they don’t ‘cause they know they can’t handle being Americans.” It was something my father never would have said.

“I’m American,” I declared. The words sound silly even to me now, but I report them faithfully because I think they impressed Frank Kinnel, revealed to him that there was something to this young man named London. Or maybe he just thought I was stupid.

After a long while, he said, “Good.”

And it was good, because I sank into his yellow and orange couch when I visited like I lived there, like I was family, familiar. Heck, I was Frank Kinnel, fifty-five pounds, thirty years, and two daughters removed. Sure, I had a weird name and hippie parents who didn’t fish and hated the very idea of it, but I wasn’t tattooed, I sported only a single modest earring, and I was STD-free. Looking through Frank’s eyes, I was interviewing myself for the position of Frank’s-eldest-daughter’s-boyfriend. Even Frank’s wife liked me, invited me over for large dinners, where I sat and held hands with her daughter, sawed at his plate, drank his beer, and roared about current events into my ready ear.

The motor sputtered like a carnival, and the water parted at the rusted bow of the rowboat. In the trancelike din of the early morning, the only creature that dared challenge the Evanrude 15 were the loons nesting on the shore of Dr. Master’s island. The Evanrude exhaled a wall of sound in each direction, and we—Frank, Russell Hay, and I—rode the pinnacles of the parting water all the way to the dam. When Frank cut the motor with a savage rip of his arm, the walls of sound struck us, pushing through along with the wake we had cut.

“Get’em wet,” Frank said.
Russell rubbed his sleep-glazed eyes, leering at the nearby empty beach. I thought Russell looked a bit panicked, as panicked as I had been my first trip out with Mr. Kinnel, so I pointed out a milky white split-tail for him to use and smiled. I was resolved to smooth over Frank Kinnel to Russell as best I could, because by that time I had decided I liked them both.

“Cast off the right side,” I instructed him as I saw Frank throw his line to the left. Russell did; his line sailed twenty feet before plunking into rocky shoals at the front of the dam.

“Get your lure down as far as you can; we want to just skim the top of the weeds.” Frank lodged his rod between the rear and middle benches of the rowboat, and I switched places with him so he could row. The oarlocks moaned with Frank’s effort.

He fished like a hunter. He saw the canyons of weed and rock and tree-stump in his mind, followed each darting fish into each crevice, planting his lure in an ambush at the only exit.

“Imagination,” he once told me later, “Is the only thing a good fisherman needs.” He had been drunk at the time, but I nodded at the sage words all the same. This was years before his liver would fail him and his eyes would turn yellow. Even in intoxication, I granted Mr. Kinnel my respect, because he would expect no less. I didn’t have the heart to be a wiseass while he slowly killed himself with Silver Bullets. And I was dating his oldest daughter. This was before his oldest daughter—whose name I choose not to remember—decided against a wedding, because she decided she didn’t feel comfortable with weddings. Before she decided against me, after seven years of deciding she did not feel comfortable with me, after seven years of accusing her own mean, abusive, and alcoholic father of spending more time with her boyfriend than she was.
Frank’s chest expanded and contracted with the flat, even strokes, guiding the boat up and along the dam and back again. Every so often he dropped the oars in their locks and jerked his rod high in the air, trying to set the barbed hook on the other end of his line.

“Crafty bastard, try that again.”

Russell looked to Frank and then to me.

“All fish are crafty bastards to him,” I explained.

“Not the pike,” Frank corrected. “Those’em are slimy bastards.”

“I’ve never seen a pike,” Russell murmured, the end of his rod drooping.

“Fucking snakefish can’t resist keeping me from my bass. You’ll see one before the day is out.”

“Probably,” I agreed.

And we were right. Russell hooked a monster pike, a thrashing snake-like fish with long, serrated teeth, on our fifth pass past the dam.

“The net!” Frank said, retrieving his line. Had there been only two of us in the boat, our motions would have been automatic: securing the exposed line, netting the fish, removing the hook. Russell yelled and whooped, the tip of his rod dancing as he fought the fish with his entire body, like he was a bronco. In his excitement his line crossed mine, so I dropped my rod and got the net ready.

The fish rose. Russell pulled it up rather than reeled.

Frank was speaking in a smooth tone, issuing instructions, “Get him on London’s side of the boat—he’ll dive under, try to spit the hook. Don’t worry about jumping; pike never jump; they’d rather take you down into the weeds and get your line wrapped around a tree stump—that’s it, slowly. Not too fast! That’s only eight-pound test you’ve got there!”
The pike surfaced on my side again, and I netted him. I dropped the net in the center of the boat between us. Frank tried to lean over, but he couldn’t without nearly tipping the boat, so he sat back. I dislodged the fish and held it up to Russell.

“Here,” I said.

“What do I do?”

“Grab him and take the hook out.”

“Every man that lands one has to get his own fish off the line.”

I sympathized with Russell, but agreed with Frank—one of those rare instances. That was before Russell would take Frank out to an expensive steak dinner to tell him he was asking for his pregnant daughter’s hand in marriage. Before Frank sat there in his steaming rage with a cold steak in front of him, wishing goddamned Russell Hay was just a little more like London Sawyer.

Gingerly, Russell wrapped his fingers around the mid-section of the pike, still holding it at arm’s length.

The fish groaned.

“You’re holding too tight.”

“How long can he survive up here?”

“For a good while, don’t worry about it. Grab your lure there—it went through the top of his jaw but you should be able to wiggle it out.”

“It—it’s not coming out.” He shifted the lure back and forth, digging each time a little deeper into the roof of the fish’s mouth. “God, I don’t want him to die! How much longer can he last?”

Now the fish gurgled again, a plaintive, wet sound echoing around its blood-red gills.
“You’re still holding it too tight. Hold on.” I began searching my tackle box for a pair of pliers.

Frank said, “Let him get it out his own self.”

Russell was whispering to the fish, “I’m sorry, buddy, don’t die, buddy.”

“It’s just a pike, boy,” Frank said.

Russell held his just-a-pike at eye level, nodding and murmuring, seeking the creature’s agreement. In the distance, we heard the soft song of a loon, and Frank looked away from Russell Hay. With a grunt, Russell ripped the lure from the top of the fish’s mouth, cutting the top of the jaw nearly in half.

The fish might have wiggled, or maybe Russell just twisted it in his hand, but somehow it was looking at me, flapping its vivisected upper lip, as if to say, how could you let this imposter cut me like this? I thought we had a deal? The pike knew the routine—his bottom membrane was torn, he had been caught before. And Russell violated the order.

“Well, that’s one way to do it,” Frank said, chuckling.

Russell threw the pike back in. “He’s not moving. I think I killed him.”

Frank had already picked up his oars. “He’s just in shock. I’d be too, if someone ripped a big fucking hole in my jaw. Rub him.”

Russell leaned over the side of the boat, whispering to his catch, rubbing its muscled sides and hoping.

I still think about that lake, even now. It was man-made, and I was surprised how it crept into my life, opening the lockbox of my nostalgia and permanently selecting a place for itself there, even at a time when I thought I hated everything artificial. I hated man for his war machines, and the grinding gears of capitalism that existed only to take sharp edges off
of every person’s soul. Like I said, I was twenty, and I didn’t know much. It was a place
where Frank woke two boys in their cots before the sun came up, standing in the doorway in
a tanktop with an unlit cigar dangling from his lips; where he marched those two boys down
to his rowboat and told them to get their lines in the water and keep’em wet. It was the
preface to things gone wrong, with Frank, with Russell, with all of us.

But at the center of it was Frank. The last time we went out that weekend, at dusk,
Frank stashed an Igloo full of beer under his bench, instructing us to “Make’em count boys,
I’m hungry,” which was strange because he never kept anything he caught, even the bass.

He rowed us to the middle of the lake, where we’d have an easy time getting back
when it got too dark, where he claimed a long, deep trench divided the lake into equal
halves. He did not fish then; he simply let himself grow confused. His belly full of beer, his
head buzzing, he let himself believe, just for a moment, that Russell and I were his sons,
sharing a quiet night with the old man and what he loved to do. Had he shaken his
intoxication, he could have seen the details. Russell’s dark complexion and blond dopeyness
didn’t match Frank’s deep Irish rouge. And I… I was everything Frank Kinnel had learned
to despise in his daughters’ generation, but I was tolerated because we shared the same love.
And I tolerated Frank right back.

It wasn’t Russell and me; it was just the feel of two male bodies in his boat, the
illusion of sons, which his first religion, that being the church of angry-old-sons-of-bitches,
wouldn’t let him ever speak. We dated his daughters, ate his food, and fished his lake. The
beer, the cigar, the added weight in his boat, it was all he wanted. He said it by letting us be
there, even though we were fucking his daughters and we were fuckups ourselves. And he
knew it wasn’t real, that it wouldn’t last, that neither London Sawyer nor Russell Hay would
ever call him Pop.
Frank lit his cigar, and Russell and I caught nothing, and night fell.

Two sons and a father sat in a rowboat in the center of that dark pane of glass, the sons throwing in their lines, time and time again, using everything the old man had taught them.
Piano Moving

The wooden bench my father ponders is colored American walnut, imitating the Baldwin upright piano, its much larger cousin. My father stands over me, bringing all the math and physics he has amassed during his thirty years as a civil engineer to bear on the problem of moving the Baldwin through the door, down a narrow hallway, on onto the bed of his Chevy S10 pickup truck outside.

I imagine he is mentally listing our assets as he dissects the problem: one heavy-duty dolly, equipped with solid rubber wheels; an assortment of ropes and bungee cords, colored green and blue and red; and two male bodies, one twenty-one years old and the other fifty-two, in varying states of growth and decay.

With an index finger I strike middle C, holding the note while the tape measure jumps from the back pocket of my father’s blue jeans to his left hand and he begins muttering measurements: “Fifty seven and three quarters inches long… Forty five and a half inches high… I'll be right back.” He leaves to give the S10 the same treatment as the Baldwin, and I pick my way through the C major scale, first with the right hand, then with the left. Then, both hands together, though considerably much slower than either hand individually, rounding the corner from the center of the keys up one octave. Feeling adventurous I switch to G major, my favorite musical scale because it isn’t the condescending simplicity of C’s eight white keys, and it so easily transmutes into E minor, allowing for an easy (if unsubtle) shift in mood.

The Baldwin itself is in decent condition, wearing a only few splintered eruptions in its smooth finish (no doubt obtained from some previous move). It certainly bears itself with a dignity my clumsy hands can’t match, and the G scale dies on an errant F as my father reenters the den, his eyebrows twitching.
“What’s the verdict?” I ask, acutely aware of my dependence on his expertise, his precise knowledge of angles and grades and shapes. To my eye, the portal opening from the den to the hallway appears too small to handle the Baldwin, which is now my Baldwin. My aunt is getting a new home, a more expensive home far away from the muddy banks of the Schuylkill, the urethra of Philadelphia, a home to match her new high-paying job. The piano is detritus that she has no more use for; it passes to me, providing I have a means to move the thing back to upstate New York. And I do: my father the civil engineer, careful and meticulous, and his brand new Chevy S10, purchased once both of his sons were safely away at college.

I appreciate my father’s thorough examination, but I want to just move the thing; heft it by the handles on the side and lift it out over the concrete porch to the S10. Five hours through dense Pennsylvania traffic and the prospect of five hours back spells an urgency for me that my father cannot acknowledge or even understand. But I know this: he gathered up his family to arrive at Sunday mass exactly five minutes early for twenty years, and each morning he takes his coffee from a cup that reads “Measure twice, cut once.” There is nothing I know that can compel him to impatience.

Neither of us has moved a piano before, and I think we minimally understand the possible danger, both to the thing itself and to ourselves. It’s a job that should be handled be professionals with the correct equipment and necessary experience. I would not consider attempting this task with anyone but my father. The piano seems smaller, manageable, in his presence.

The Baldwin is, essentially, mine. For me, this is an errand of selfishness: I want the piano, though I don’t particularly want to wait for my father to puzzle through the problem. I want it solved and done. Two years of casual weightlifting have given me, if not the same
shape, the same basic mass as my father. I am twenty-one, and I feel like I can lift anything. There is strength in brashness, a unspeakable haste in youth. I don't ascribe that same strength to my father, but I think that I can bear the heavier portion of the load, take up the slack from whatever he can't handle.

“'It'll fit in the back,'” he says, measuring tape in hand. “Just barely.”

So it will. Just barely. I stand, set the bench to the side and fall to a crouch, gripping the sides. My father watches, pensive and unwilling to act, waiting to see how the shapes play out before him.

***

I learned to play piano, at a children’s level, four years earlier at the age of seventeen. There’s something humbling about learning to play an instrument as an “adult.” Music instructors deem anyone over the age of twelve an adult when it comes to learning music, indicating that the lumpy clay of childhood, optimal for impressing the good habits of musicianship, has passed. All that it left for the adults is a steep road to passable skill.

But for the adult, or seventeen-year-old, who is just learning music for the first time, the spark of childhood returns, if briefly, and erupts from the fingers with innocent wonder.

My high school offered a narrow room and six electric pianos for not-so-private lessons as part of an experimental class, and for the six of us, moody high-end teenagers, it was a small chance to relive a childhood that had never been, though some brought their own expectations to the lessons. Melanie wanted to impress her parents by making use of their lonely baby grand. Bridgit needed another class to fill her schedule. Greg desired just enough skill to impress his friends with “November Rain.” I was curious; I wanted to see if I could still learn something new.
Ode to Joy, rendered in large, obstinate notes in Alfred’s Guide to Beginning Piano, was our first task. It took the best among us, Greg, two weeks to master the one-handed tune. But the first hint that we were really making music came with the first halting notes of Fur Elise.

Learning to play as an adult is a difficult thing to describe, because I lack the necessary childhood experience for comparison—but I can try. For a child, music is learning a new language, a mathematical language of spacing and tempo, of dissonance and harmony. Unburdened with a refuse of excess years, I imagine that a child’s mind is a willing sponge for the regimented language of music. For the adult, one who hasn’t the time or the patience or the malleability of mind to learn the language of music, learning a song is a difficult process retreating to a younger self, building snippets of memorized melody in slow, deliberate stages. The foolish delight taken from the experience is the joy of hearing timeless tunes destroyed by inept hands.

At first, we were satisfied to play the opening measures of Fur Elise, content with the brief and most well-recollected notes of the song rather than the song itself. Then curiosity expanded, like the desire to explore every room in a new house, or discover some forgotten treasure in a musty attic. We, the nearly-ready-to-be-adults, were as shy as kindergartners, never going more than a few random notes beyond our comfortable ignorance and musical self-deprecation, until one day Bridgit plucked her way through the entirety of Fur Elise with her short, thin fingers. She repeated the feat, and again, each time her confidence truer, and seeing her risk the devolution back into a younger self, hearing her take the music and wear it around—clumsily, to be sure, but wear it nonetheless—made children of us all.
“I’m playing the same songs as my little cousin!” Melanie exclaimed happily one day in November. We all play at least as well as our little cousins by now. On good days we could even show the toddlers up at their own game.

Christmas gave us an excuse to learn *We Three Kings* and *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, *Silent Night* and *Away in a Manger*. We held a holiday concert for the music department, to display how far we had come. I played *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, smacking the keys with cinderblock hands, half-hoping Jimmy Stewart would wander into the hall, suicidal and exasperated, saying “Haven’t you learned that silly tune yet? You’ve played it over and over!”

The tortured tunes that issued over and over from that small room can be called by their rightful names—*Fur Elise*, *Ode to Joy*, *Brahm’s Lullaby*, *Scarborough Fair*, and, of course, *The Entertainer*—but the disharmonious whole of what piano lessons produced among six teens was nothing less than child’s play.

Having no access to a piano of my own for practice, and being seventeen, I tucked away my small skill at the instrument upon completing the lessons. I went to college and grew apart from my family, and childhood, that smirking and fickle marauder, dissipated like a single note, held too long, but never quite released.

***

The Baldwin is every bit as heavy as its four hundred and thirty eight pounds—not counting the bench, which is designated to sit between us on the drive home. We have to enlist a woman jogging with her black and tan German shepherd to brace the piano while we lift one end up to the S10’s tailgate. I don’t think she realizes the extent of the possible danger my father and I are exposing her to. I step up into the bed of the pickup as my father tries twice to lift the other end of the Baldwin so I can pull it safely onto the bed. I
am reminded that we are have no idea what we are doing, and now clearly the jogger and the German shepherd know it too. They both lope away after a third unsuccessful attempt.

“Come give me a hand with this,” my father says.

“I was just about to,” I reply, hopping down from the pickup. The Baldwin forms a hypotenuse with the road and the edge of the tailgate. Together we lift, surely putting our tendons and muscles under undue stress that could cut any honest piano mover’s career short. Once parallel, the Baldwin slides along the bed right up to the glass. We tie it down with bungees and nylon rope. My back is a compressed sponge of cartilage and bone. I ache.

Concerned for my father’s physical well-being after bearing the Baldwin, I swallow my pain and volunteer to drive once the piano is tied down and secure. The S10 sags under the weight, the rear end running low to the ground. I wonder if perhaps we should have rented a moving van as I press the gas pedal down harder, forcing the complaining four cylinders to achieve fifty miles per hour.

Behind us the Baldwin shifts and rattles merrily, obscuring my view of the road. There’s a tarp under the passenger seat in case of rain, but the weather reports showed partly cloudy skies all the way north.

Fifty miles per hour suits the piano and my father, a ponderous driver himself, just fine. In an unloaded car I would ignore his protestations and set the cruise at ten miles above the limit. “Roads are designed for certain speeds,” he likes to say. “Bad things happen when you drive above them.”

Bad things, perhaps, but there is no surer way to incite an honest conversation with my father than to push my speed up past the limit. Now that the Baldwin has stolen that option from me, we have little to say to each other. The height of the piano (forty five
inches) gives the S10 a bulky sail, and when the winds pick up I am struggling to maintain my lane, and forgetting to maintain a constant speed.

“Keep it steady—fifty—you’re all over the place and I’m getting swung around over here.”

I flick the radio dial to NPR to divert my father’s attention.

During a commercial break he starts to ruminate on politics. I am speeding, half paying attention. Like most people, he is upset with corruption, with life’s increasingly higher prices, and with lies. NPR inevitably invites this sort of discussion, though it usually is a less honest discussion than my speeding incites. I stay focused on the road—I can’t handle the S10 and a discussion at the same time.

When I do not immediately respond my father is silent for long while. I worry that he is about to launch into his defense of school levies. The piano bench, the seat face-down between us, keeps us from making eye contact, and its edges dig into our sides. In that moment, as he considers what he will say next, we are both separated and connected by American walnut, speeding along in a mobile confessional, and that’s when I am overcome by a sudden urge to divulge a secret I have been nursing for nearly a year, a secret that blocks the path between childhood and what comes after: that I no longer share the his faith and the faith of his family. That I am no longer Catholic.

I want to tell him because the bench between us keeps me from looking at him, and because the Baldwin keeps me from seeing what I am leaving behind as the S10 speeds along. I want to tell him because of these things, and because it’s time the words passed my own lips, to make sure that I believe myself when I say them.

***
The first thing I did when I moved to college, besides adapting my newfound desire for music from piano to the more forgiving guitar, was to stop attending Catholic mass. I am by no means unusual in this respect. A high school teacher—a priest—cynically predicted such a change for many of my classmates upon graduation. Religious colleges advertise statistics indicating that anywhere from 25% to 40% of freshmen became “less religious.” I know this because I go to one.

For me, the problem was the assumption of faith—a faith that is both assumed to be on firm ground by everyone except the practitioner, coupled with the clothing of religion the practitioner has assumed. So comfortable are the vestments of faith, so worn and well-fit by years of mindless ritual, that the result is unsubstantiated (and later, unsustainable) habit.

I can’t pinpoint the moment I decided that I was not Catholic anymore, but it occurred somewhere close to the time that I realized I held none of that faith’s core beliefs. This was no serious revelation: college is the surest hammer to smash past habits and inclinations, while at the same time forging more enduring ones (an experience which is not always a positive exchange).

C.S. Lewis, whose ghost I argued with continually, says that, in the end, Christianity is not concerned with either individuals or communities, neither the natural self nor the collected mass, but “a new creature,” something wholly vague and perhaps indefinable. When I tried to understand what he could have meant, I did so by attempting to classify and categorize myself: Catholic by experience, by childhood and by family, but not belief. This is a tenuous middle ground that leaves little of either world, but only a strange and indefinable new creature, unsure as an infant. I knew only that I was not a Catholic; I defined myself by what I was not. Sitting there in the cabin of my father’s white Chevy pickup, I had a chance to decide who I would be, by telling it to someone who already knew who I had been.
This new creature was beset with doubts and fears and precious few certainties. This new creature did not believe in “Measure Twice, Cut Once,” nor could it speak the languages of either math or music, and it could only understand itself by revealing what it was not.

This new creature was what I unfolded to my father during our tenure as piano movers.

***

The subject is not brought up so much as it arises, like a steaming creature from a dark pool, as we trade offhand remarks to keep me from dozing off.

“Classes going well?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re eating well?”

“Of course.”

“Where are you going to mass at school?”

I say, “I’m not.”

“I bet there’s a Catholic church within walking distance of your school. I’ll find you one on MapQuest when we get back.” He is slightly reproachful, but he now considers the problem solved. I cannot let the moment pass.

“Church can get along without me.”

“I’d feel better if I knew you were going.”

Not paying attention, I hit a pothole in the road, disturbing the Baldwin and shaking the heavy strings in its wooden ribcage. The noise is a chromatic scream for me to pay attention to the road.
“I don’t know…” I start, my hands tight on the wheel, and once the next words are uttered I find that I cannot stop. “More and more I just don’t want anything to do with this institution. I want to leave it behind, set it aside.” I pause, letting the blue-gray interior absorb my heresy. My father has turned off the radio.

“I might pick it up later, I might come back to it.” This is my sugary lie to make the medicine go down smoothly. Once left behind, I can’t see myself ever returning to this church as an adult. But if I leave the option open with my father, at least it exists somewhere. At least it’s not gone forever. “I haven’t been a part of it for two years. I want to keep moving.”

They are helpless, clumsy words. Heavy words, dropped like lead pellets from my tongue. They are insufficient to relay the message of how I feel about the rusty iron framework of Catholicism that has been foundational to my being.

As hard as saying that and driving the Baldwin-toting S10 at the same time was, the silence that follows is harder to endure. Finally, my father says, “Ok.”

Just, “Ok.” I mull the possibilities—Ok, I understand and appreciate you telling me this? Ok, you’re an idiot? Entire realms of hidden meaning locked within two letters fly away like ashes from a hurled cigarette butt as I swerve to barely avoid an imperfection in the road.

The piano bench wedged between us has become a third passenger, a silent witness to our words. My father grips one of the naked legs as it juts up into the air of the cabin. His fingers, long spider-legs like my own, steady the American walnut wedged between us, which in turn steadies me as I pilot the S10, pushing the speed up into the upper fifties so that we can be home before dark.

***
We arrive after the sun has set, and both of us are eager to unload the Baldwin. Already the bench is in the living room of my parents’ home, waiting for its partner to join it there, so I can play it when I come home from school. When I have a place of my own, I suppose I will again enlist my father and his S10 to help me move it along to its next home.

Two neighbors help us ease the Baldwin out of the truck bed and down to the still-warm concrete. We thank them generously, offer beer and a seat on the porch for their efforts. The S10, relieved of its burden, gives a metal groan and eases off the swollen axle, rising.
Books & Blood

At the age of twenty-two I become intimately fascinated with my own feces. Floating, coiling, sinking, spreading—I examine them, wadding up a length of TP to poke and prod and turn the length over, like a long slow brown lazy alligator in a porcelain enclosure. I look for clues, for treasure, for hints of what I’ve eaten, mentally cataloguing the time since it was eaten, figuring out how long it took to venture from mouth to anus to bowl, where I will fiddle with it like a bored toddler who hasn’t yet been told “No!” but should be soon, lest the habit mature into something weird and freaky. Sometimes there are veins of black running through the length of the hardened turd—what could that mean? I’m a prophet, a seer, trying to divine my future from the chunky blocks of waste, looking for signs, searching for meaning. I’m leaning over the mouth of the bowl, inhaling the full stench of my own excrement (as a person can only do for extended periods with the odors and wastes of his own body), searching for truth, in a position that the kid walking in the door to the communal bathroom behind me mistakes for vomiting.

“Rough night?” he asks.

I nod. Yes.

Four Months Until Graduation

I’ve been trying to eat healthier, so I eat a lot of lettuce. Big, green, chunky leafs, with just enough dressing to make the stuff palatable. I toss in eight croutons exactly and maybe some diced cubes of grilled chicken breast. I mix it all up in a big purple bowl and sit the bowl in my lap and sit my ass on the couch. I graze. I chomp. The leaves are so big that they paint low-fat ranch smears across my cheeks. I take stock. My twenty two years
has been spent taking in slices of pizza dripping with grease, chicken wings by the bucket. I endured an on-again off-again love affair with cheese and its derivatives. The result: I weighed one thirty by the close of sixth grade, two seventy through most of high school, numbers that I know are not acceptable, then or now.

But those days are behind me. Now I am fitter, stronger, better. I am a salad-eater, coming home to green after a lifetime of sweaty beef and pork laced with shimmering fat. Small bowls of applesauce are my sides, wads of seedless grapes my dessert. Sometimes, an apple. Lunch can be oranges, breakfast a single bowl of cereal or a grapefruit or skipped entirely. I have forsaken my longtime friend and comfort, eggs. This is how He-Man would eat, I tell myself, were he living my life instead of the decadent lie of Prince Adam.

The lettuce races through me. It’s out in ten hours, without fail, leaving me wondering what happened to all the things that must have been in the way. Did it skip by the granola with a wave and a hand signal? Did the corn muffin shuffle politely out of the way, offering a gentlemanly tip of the hat, as the salad sped on, pressed hard up against the wall of the intestine like an Olympic luger? It must have, because here it is—and it looks like a disaster. The lettuce is still leafy, still green (though a darker green), in somewhat smaller chunks but still recognizable, still resembling the ideal. How did it manage to keep its form? I am amazed. Whatever the composition of the lettuce, something about it causes the turd to lose all structural integrity, break apart like crumbling blocks of clay. Grapefruit does the same thing. The little pink sacs that comprise the flesh of the fruit bob in my toilet bowl, daring me to ask how they survived the perilous voyage, how they managed to keep their precious juices inside, intact and pure despite the harsh environment within. Somehow, the pink grapefruit slugs look even plumper now than they did as part of the fruit itself, as if the fantastic journey through my newly healthy body has enriched them, granted them new life.
and power, new texture. They are spiced with the essential flavor of me, the new me. They must be delicious.

Why, I could almost reach down and—

*Three Months Until Graduation*

I stride with purpose down the hall to the communal bathroom. I take a book. Something big and heavy, meaty with importance, or small and slim, the perfect little jewel of wisdom. The walk is slow, deliberate. The tiles twinkle at me as I enter, freshly cleaned that morning. The actual BM takes seconds—never more than a minute, usually. There’s a comfort about these ceramic tiles and four false walls that speaks to a privacy, a solitude—a privatude. I finish great works in here, feet sticking out from under the locked door, because it is the perfect place to deal with the ideas of the dead and the undying wisps of history those ideas churn in their wake. I curse Plato’s meandering argument, throw the heavy Republic down with a loud thud and echo upon reaching the sticky heart of Book VIII, the attack on poetry. I hate Plato because he’s convincing and sitting there with my jeans scrunched at my ankles I don’t want to be convinced—I crave affirmation. Sometimes I take John Dewey’s *Reconstruction in Philosophy* with me, ink from the thin onion paper staining my hands with every turn of the page. “How to live healthily or justly is a matter which differs with every person,” Dewey says. “Healthy living is not something to be attained by itself apart from other ways of living.” Huh? Are you sure?

I put the book down, utterly disappointed. Somehow, Dewey must be wrong, and for that to be true I must find an answer that is right.
In March I digest *The Brothers Karamazov*. I have to finish the anvil-heavy book in a week or so for an oral exam, so I take caffeine and read all night and kill hundreds of pages at a time in the bathroom (and gain about ten pounds that week, incidentally). In the quiet cage of those four false walls I wait patiently for Alyosha to wise up and listen to his brother Ivan. Ivan has it figured out—Ivan isn’t going to trust the God that would let that little child be torn apart by the hunting dogs. That spoke to me. *I was* Ivan, and at the end I curse injustice in all its malevolent forms because surely Ivan deserved better for being so right.

Sometimes, every now and then, there is a long red smear on the paper as it bobs in the bowl. The water swells the red on the paper, blurring it. This is a curious development, I think, returning myself temporarily to this world of solids and flesh. The bright red stalker comes and goes, but I don’t pay much attention—can’t, actually. I am reading ‘great works’ and being tested on them orally (which compels me to feel superior to those who still take tastes by means of a pen). I cannot take the time to worry over the red in my shit-stain because I am busy at the same time shitting a thesis about Woodrow Wilson that only three people will ever read. Precariously, I am juggling in my mind the essential truth of Wilson: FDR was Wilson, Reagan was Wilson, Bush was Wilson, Clinton was Wilson, they were all Wilson. Don’t you understand? There is no room for worry about the red I find left behind upon rising. I am rooted in the chaotic center of understanding, of knowing: Wilson changed everything—I realize this on the last page of my thesis, so I rewrite the abstract and the introduction, fit it all together between the sturdy iron jaws of one of those giant paperclips and send it off to its muted life in the world.
During the defense a professor tries to get me to equate how the words “regime change” uttered by a Senator John Kerry, at the time just speculating about a run for president, are in effect the same thing Wilson had been calling for during his campaign in 1912, and how both are equally disastrous in their applications.

No, I say. Definitely not. Wilson is mine. His disaster is mine. How dare you suggest that John Kerry could possibly be as influential and important as Woodrow Wilson, who belongs to me?

Two Months

Despite Woodrow Wilson and our mutual disasters, the bloody wipes are coming all the time, and they are bringing pain with them. I’ve moved onto Jane Austen and Stendhal, both of whom are eager to tell me what love is. Even in the throaty midst of love the nuisance of the pain will not be deferred—it is demanding my attention, siphoning the power and direction of my brain away from its intended plateau.

It’s a new sort of thing—I can remember straining as a child, trying to force the stuff out a few days prior to its intended delivery date, but not this. This is like sacs of jagged marbles, rolling and bumping and lodging and not moving—good Christ, just move!—but descending to the asshole’s launch pad and sitting there, stretching the flesh, waiting for the tower’s signal that never quite comes and when it does it’s too late because the damage is already done. It’s a dripping red crash with no survivors. Afterwards, I survey the wreckage from above the same way God must look down every curious disaster: things are getting out of control.
In an embarrassing display of neediness, I call my father and ask for advice. This is a mistake: he pesters me with endless questions about my diet (which is fine; near perfect, as far as I know) and stories from his youth (he’d had the blood-in-shit problem, too, but his had been dark and brown, indicating a stomach problem, where mine is cherry red) and a worried mother, because he goes against my explicit instructions and tells her about my problems. Traitor.

Beginning to worry, I take my problems to the university health center. The receptionist asks why I am there and I say, “Blood in the stool,” all slow and confident, to show her I’m not the least bit embarrassed, that I am twenty two and this little blip isn’t a real problem so much as a curiosity. She tells me to wait over there.

“No, over there,” she says.

“Sorry.”

“It’s ok.”

The waiting room resembles an airport concourse. A handful of people sit in the double rows, waiting to take off into whatever body or mental issues had brought them there. I glance through a magazine. There’s a girl behind me, sitting with a guy I assume is her boyfriend. They speak in hushed tones—or do I just want their tones to be hushed? Every couple sitting in the health center speaking in quiet voices must be there for any number of reasons more interesting than mine. There is drama in their problem because they are together. Suddenly I am longing for a companion.

The receptionist calls my name, and seconds later I am behind a closed door with a nurse, of sorts. She looks about thirty. Curly red hair, maybe more orange than red. She’s wearing some sort of tan vest that meets the requisite demands of utility and style. I’ve forgotten her name, so let’s just call her Amy.
“Is it raining outside?” she asks as I take a seat across from her desk.

A clear view of her window indicates it is doing no such thing. My shirt, however, is damp with sweat: I’ve been running. I run more than I study now—this new healthy body demands no less.

“I just walked over from the Fitness Nook.” It sounds like an apology.

“You’ve got blood in your stool, huh?”

“I do.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“On and off for a year. Maybe more.” I lean back, trying not to appear nervous. Then I lean forward, returning to my starting position, and add, “I’ve been noticing it a lot more lately. Once a week. Twice, sometimes.”

“Do you strain when you have a BM?”

“Strain?”

“Yeah, strain.”

“I’m not sure. I mean, it all works out alright, most of the time. Doesn’t feel any tougher. Maybe. I don’t know. Sometimes it gets hard—you know how it is—hard. So yeah, sometimes. Yes, I guess, yes I do strain when I have a BM.”

“And the blood—”

“Bright red.”

Amy places her hands on the desk. I notice that she is married, and has a scar on the top of her right hand. Looks like a knife wound. “You most likely have what is called a hemorrhoid. It’s a fairly common thing.”

Well, no shit. (I do not say this to her). I can Google “bloody shits” as easily as the next guy and see that all the hits lead to pages about hemorrhoids, along with some
fascinating pictures of anal fissures and colon cancer and diverticulosis. I wanted a bit more
for putting myself out like this, for admitting this fault so freely, so carelessly. I’m afraid—
ok? Plain and simple afraid. And I admit it. Shouldn’t I be rewarded? I want my
hemorrhoid, if that’s what it is, to be the best hemorrhoid there is—when I die they can cut
it out of me and donate it to science and it will win awards in my name.

Amy is studying me, waiting for me to say something.

I stare right back, hoping she will get the point.

The point? The point is I’m twenty two and this shouldn’t be happening to me, I
mean, not yet, not quite yet. Don’t I have a few years of perfect health left, you know, the
kind accumulated for good behavior? Haven’t I been eating well? Eating better? Ok, not
eating as much fat and heavy red meat as before? Don’t I deserve a clean shit, quick and
whole and not at all messy or speckled with blood, just like everyone else gets?

“What do I do about it?” I ask Amy. Now that the hemorrhoid is no big thing, I
hope that there is a pill that can just take care of it, quick and simple. I am longing to be
done with this.

“There is a procedure that can be done which involves placing a small rubber band
at the base of the hemorrhoid. We’ll have to check the area—”

My back goes rigid. I can’t help it, can’t stop myself from giving such a tell-tale
reaction.

Amy wears a small weary grin. “We can find a man to do it if that bothers you.”

“No, it’s not that.” I try to be reassuring. It really isn’t that. Really.

Amy doesn’t believe me. She must think that I’m awful, a terrible person for being
squeamish about having a woman run a dainty finger from her knife-scarred hand around
the ring of my asshole, searching for the offending vein, engorged and pulsing with blood,
searching in the very beating heart of my ass which I’m sure is hairy like the rest of me and sweaty like the rest of me because I had just walked over from the Fitness Nook where I spent twenty minutes running on a conveyor belt because I’m so fit and healthy now. Absolutely awful.

“I was hoping I could do something—eat a little better, make a lifestyle change, before we… go to that step.” She should just tell me what to do. I am twenty two and infinitely malleable—I can change. My lifestyle is free, it is open, it is promiscuous in its forms and ideas, it can change, has changed before, will change again. I give it freely to her, Amy.

She smiles down at me. Has she raised her chair while I was imagining myself bent over her desk? I think that she has. Her face looks soft and doughy. “The easiest thing you can do is to get off the pot right after a BM—wait right until you have to go before getting on. Do you spend a lot of time on the toilet?”

“I read.”

“Don’t do that anymore.”

I nod and look down slowly. My eyes find the floor. I can’t do that, I want to tell her—cannot abandon the toilet, that place where I have my great thoughts, where I do my scholarly work, where I become Ivan and Thrasymanus and the ghostly interlocutor with John Dewey and his new philosophy and Wilson and his new freedom. New, new, it’s all new, all reconstructed, all changed—I can’t do it.

“Get off the toilet fast. Right. Like, how fast?”

“As soon as you’re done.”

“Mmm. What else can I do?”

She gives me that look. It says, ‘I know you’re not going to follow my instructions. I know you think you’re some hot shit, reading your great works there on the pot,
occasionally exclaiming and sometimes throwing them and underlining and laughing and pretending that you’re some sort of serious scholar and not an infant hack who’s just discovered all of this and suddenly thinks he’s a master, thinks he’s superior for it, thinks he gains some new nugget of insight into life every time his ass—which is hairy and disgusting like everyone else’s ass—touches the seat.’ Her look says all this and more. She speaks, “Increasing the amount of fiber in your diet will help the process. There is a fiber supplement called Metamu—”

“I know it. My dad takes it.”

“It comes in cookies now.”

“Cookies, huh? So that will stop the problem?”

“It will make your BM’s easier. Give your feces a softer consistency.”

I think of a Wendy’s Frosty, those things I used to eat and dip my fries in before I was so Healthy and Fit. The Frosty was firm and yet so soft and melty, yielding. I am feeling better already.

“If there is inflammation you can use Tucks pads. They carry them at drug stores.”

T-U-C-K-S pads—yes, yes, good. I pretend to write that down.

“Yeah, thanks. I mean, that’s really helpful. Because I’ve had this with me for so long and its been sorta intermittent, maybe once every three, or four times, and I just wanted to know what it was. I wanted needed to know it wasn’t serious, like, I didn’t need a surgery or to get my stomach pumped or anything. That’s a relief. I feel so much better.”

Suddenly we are level again. I am sitting up straighter—no, Amy has lowered her seat. Amy says, “From what you’ve told me it doesn’t sound very serious right now; I think I can let you go without the examination. But if the pain gets worse or the area is inflamed, you will need to come back and get the area checked.”
“That’s great,” I say, and I mean it. It is great, this, this thing that healthy people do—they take their problems to the expert, the professional. They talk them over. They gave. They take. They come up with a rational solution. Cookies. Pads. Don’t spend an hour reading *The Prince* on the crapper. This is my New Plan. My Reconstruction. My New Freedom.

Perfect.

“Thanks a lot,” I tell Amy, and I leave.

*One Month*

Amy’s simple solutions turn out harder to follow than I first thought. I never buy the cookies (though I do swipe some of my dad’s fiber powder when I go home). I see the pads in a drug store but since everything is feeling fine at the time I don’t buy them, don’t even give them a second glance. Instead I run farther, I work my body harder, somehow convinced that this will solve the problem. The one rule I do follow, however—I follow it religiously: no more reading.

After meeting with Amy I am jerky and tentative with my evacuations. I cannot achieve the calm required to read, much less to perform the required function. Imagine a quarterback who’s just been sacked. Let’s say he got a concussion, broke both his legs too. The next time he gets in there, after months of rehabilitation and physical exams and searching for the trauma, he is skittish in the pocket. He throws the ball too fast, too hard. He tries to force the play. He’s not comfortable. Nothing flows. The offense stalls. This is me now: utterly focused on what was before so easily subjugated while I read.
My thesis gets a grudging pass and days are long and slow and lazy with routine and worry about the future. Woodrow Wilson and I are done with each other, finished, but I still think about him all the time, think about his obsessive need to make old things new, to unearth them and dance them around in fresh clothes. I am in the bathroom multiple times a day now. I’m in there, bent over, knees at lazy obtuse angles. My Googling has given me a new word to fear: malabsorption. Instead of letting it all out I’m squeeze to keep it all in, lest my life’s energy fall out of me from the rear. But even when I fail at this, I can’t help but look.

Sometimes the view binds me so that I’m actually on my knees. I’m searching for blood, and other things too, but my cover is that I’m looking for blood. Sometimes it’s a tough gig. Did I eat Mexican lately? Last night? Is that floaty thing a dried hard ass-scab or the mutilated skin of a red pepper? Poke, poke. I can’t tell.

Grapefruit obfuscates the entire process—I wouldn’t even bother to look for blood in a grapefruit shit except that now I’m hooked. Here is the mystery of all my inner body, spread out like a blueprint on the wet screen of my toilet bowl. I can see where things went wrong, what needs to be changed. Problems I didn’t even know existed can now be analyzed and fixed. Reconstructed.

Not allowed to read anything in bathroom, not allowed to spar with the ghosts of dead authors and thinkers and their living ideas, I read only myself. I try to understand what I’m saying to myself, what I have to say to everyone else.

One month to go and I’m still searching, my face in the toilet bowl, convinced that the answer is in there.
First Days

At the close of my thirteenth summer I begin classes at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic High School and my mother is searching for a job. My brother Marcus is gone to parts unknown, taking with him very little of his stuff: a duffel of clothes, a boom box, and his collection of cassettes. Before Marcus left my father tried to teach him how to change the oil in his Chevy wagon, and they came away from the experience black-smudged with my father more eager to see him gone and Marcus more eager to leave. I await a similar offer from my father with a rehearsed rejection.

Marcus’ room looks habitable, but empty because it is so clean now that he is gone. The bed covers are folded neatly over the slender mattress and the clothes on the floor have been laundered and returned to their drawers by my mother, insisting that even if Marcus is gone at least she doesn’t have to look at his mess all day. In between her phone calls and interviews, my mother is cleaning with renewed fervor. Bit by bit, she erases traces of Marcus from the house. His magazines disappear from the cardboard bins in the living room, and his records are boxed and stashed in the closet. In between bouts of job-hunting, she swallows whole memories of the house on Vine Street that held her husband and two sons while she was absent, replacing my brother’s stray hairs and left-out food with clean countertop and Lysol-smelling bathrooms. She’s taken over his space so fully that by October it seems like he has always been gone, that it has always been just the three of us and an empty room. I can’t decide if this is for the better or the worse.

That fall, Marcus sends a single postcard with an orange and blue background and large yellow block letters that say “Hollywood.” It has no return address, and Marcus’ sloppy script is only two lines long: “Doing fine. Come visit me sometime.” The postcard finds the trash before my father gets home to see it.
Marcus has a shelf of books that is still intact, left mostly untouched by my mother’s busy hands except to periodically remove the dust they accumulate. They are things he read when he was my age, kid’s stuff. The shelf is at the top of the stairs, where the landing veers to his room at the right. It looks ancient. They are mostly worn fantasy books, Conan the Barbarian novelizations and other paperbacks with pictures of knights and swords and dragons. My mother was suspicious of such books, but said nothing because she was happy Marcus was reading anything. “Books will always be your friends,” my mother likes to say. Now Marcus has moved on, and his friends are alone.

I take one on a chilly afternoon and fall into the space between the radiator and the staircase, the closest thing to privacy in the house on West Vine except that it is the first thing my father sees when he walks in the door each night.

“What’ve you got there?” he asks that night.

“A book,” I say quickly, flashing the cover before his eyes.

He grunts. “There’s better things for you to be reading.” He’s right but we say nothing further.

That night *Moby Dick* and *The Old Man and the Sea* appear at my bedside, my father fishing for a replacement for his oldest son. During those first days when I begin high school, the books on Marcus’ shelf become my friends.

The mind acclimates itself in methods strange and profound. All during the time I attended public school, I knew that Sunday was the day when the normal laws of physics and life and death were suspended, Sundays when I had to wake early and get dropped off for Sunday school then attend Mass. Monday through Saturday, the dead stay dead, but on
Sunday the dead could rise. On Wednesday, the greasy battered and fried fish disappeared from our dinner table with no hope of replication, but on Sunday the fish is so bountiful it can feed a crowd. On Saturday, a boy my age jumping from a bridge into the Erie Canal breaks his neck, but on Sunday the son of God can walk on water and raise his best friend from the dead. That the world found between the pages of the Bible could differ so greatly from the one I lived in, that it could behave so strangely one day and so tragically the next bothers me, but I keep this to myself.

As I stand for the Pledge of Allegiance and opening prayer my first day in the high school named for Thomas Aquinas, I feel the world around me changing its ways yet again. Here is God on weekdays, and I come to learn that while I know plenty about Sunday God, I know next to nothing about Weekday God, who is a like a stalker in His persistent attention to your every action and thought. This is very different from Sunday God, who seems content to let you be as you are six days a week and then take a few hours of your Sunday to tell you that you could be better, but you are probably going to Hell even so. Resist temptation, but prepare yourself for the fire.

Compared to this new weekly deity, I imagine Sunday God as a rather affable fellow, easy-going and almost comic when it comes to handing out judgment. Of course, Sunday God’s incarnation may benefit from the fact that I only had to deal with him once a week, whereas the Weekday God I meet in my Freshman Theology class at Aquinas is omnipresent and everywhere, always eager for fear or praise or just simple attention. In that regard He (the Weekday version) reminds me of my missing brother.

I am first introduced to Weekday God by a coke-bottle-thin silver-haired nun who derives substantial theological glee from exposing the ignorance of her students. Sr. Karol begins class on my first day with the instructions that she most likely began every one of her
previous one-hundred and fifty or so freshmen classes with: “Open your Bibles and turn to Matthew Five, Verse One.”

With a confusion that will soon be held under a bushel basket and a curiosity that will die when the aged sister next opened her mouth, I raise my hand and venture, “What page is that on?”

Sister Karol stares at me, at the same time balancing a measuring stick three meters long on the tip of her extended index finger. “Matthew. Chapter Five. Verse One.”

I turn to my blue-sweatered classmates, but everyone has found something of burning interest in the pages of their New Americans and forgotten that anyone was speaking. I repeat my question, and the boy in front of me turns around, his head ducked low, and flips my onionskin pages to the appropriate passage.

“Perhaps we should start with a lesson in how to read our Bible.”

First days can set the tone for an interminable amount of time, a fact of which I am acutely aware as we get a stern, measuring stick-enforced lesson in how to identify and find Bible passages, a lesson that I seem to be the only poor soul in the classroom to need.

An idea blossoms in my mind, one that had never quite been entertained before, and it is cultivated gradually, almost lovingly, by Sr. Karol and her yard stick each and every weekday: I am a bad Catholic.

The books from Marcus’ shelf were are similar to the stories found between the torn yellow paper covers of the New American Bible, Student’s Edition. The similarities are so striking I wouldn’t have been surprised to see a faded copy of the New American translation on Marcus’ shelf next to Wizards and Goblins. Both have prophets and prophecies that are fulfilled hundreds of years in the future. Wars ravage the texts of both, the death tolls
impossibly high and passed over with the callous disregard of a detached historian. Deities walk the land in both, or at least agents of those deities do, inviting perfect faith.

There is a fictive quality to Marcus’ collection of fantasy books that is comforting, something about how the main characters know their god or gods by name (and in some cases had met them in person) and how they know what they have to do, and know perfectly the will and intentions of their god. Between the covers of book where a muscled barbarian in a goatskin thong is battling a draconian iguana-man, that sort of thing works. There’s a kind of twisted logic that the New American Bible lacks.

I am not completely unfamiliar with tale of the healing of the blind man, or the parable of the talents, but they are stories told on Sunday and left there before I come to attend Catholic High School. Which was real? Why did a parable told on Sunday need become a historical fact each weekday? Was all that a tale needed to become truth the weight of an adult telling it?

Stories become history, history becomes fact.

My mother scours the newspaper, makes phone calls. She’s looking for a job. She doesn’t mind something part time. She would prefer to work hours similar to the ones I spend in school, so as not absent herself any second of my growing up the way she feels Marcus cheated her by going away, or perhaps to expunge some guilt over that loss. I suspect it is both.

When she finds a job in early October, she feels compelled to ask my permission. I want to say no, but the word is stolen away from my lips by her excitement and enthusiasm. She has not been this happy since I was born, my father tells me in confidence, throwing up a final and unnecessary bulwark against my thwarted dissatisfaction.
She is the new librarian at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic High School.

She leans over me while I do my math homework in the early evening one night, her pressed business suit transforming her stout frame into a striped jumble of obtuse and acute angles. “You'll never believe what happened today,” my mother begins, and she’s right, I don’t.

In between interviews with different firms she stopped at the high school to settle my tuition payments, and casually mentioned to the secretary that she was job hunting.

“This must be a sign from God, it works so well. I can take you to school and drop you off, and still be around in the afternoons. Your father thinks it’s a great opportunity.” Then she puts the question to me, the question that really is no question. “But I told them all during the interview—that Father Million is a nice man, made me feel right at home, was actually glad to see me there, said I was the answer to his prayers—I said that I had to ask you first.”

The next morning, she is up a full hour before am I, and the car is already warming in the driveway when I come down to take some cereal. Chewing my grainy Cheerios, I wonder what Marcus would have done, if he would have left home earlier. I glance at the calendar on the wall, thinking that he surely will return for Thanksgiving, or if not then, Christmas. Only weeks away.

Outside, the passenger door is cracked open, and my mother is already ready for her first day, and so we go, leaving behind the house on West Vine and the gravel driveway and specter of our lost family member, our first inclinations calcifying into steady habits, the bone of routine that will keep us moving and never break us, because we will lie to keep it whole.
At school there are many priests, coming and going like black shadows, but Father Branault stands above all of them. Father Branault is impossibly tall, and fat enough for you to notice, the way his stomach leaps from his torso. Not a vigorous, bulbous fat, but a stretched and lazy fat. The flesh of neglect. He is a massive man, and the force of his body matches the force of his words. He draws a line on the board with a nub of chalk and writes on either side “Sacred Scripture” and “Sacred Tradition.”

“Everything we believe as Catholics come to us from God in one of these two ways,” he explains. Father Branault is sweating, his black-button shirt sticking to the slope of his chest. Plaid skirts on the girls next to me and what they hide occasionally divert my attention away from Father Branault. The furnace rumbles on, spewing heat, and all the students instinctively, reluctantly, move towards him. Father attacks the board with his chalk.

The faith of my fathers enjoys a simple compartmentalization for the remainder of the afternoon. The Ten Commandments comes from Sacred Scripture. The law that priests must be men, from Sacred Tradition. The laws regarding abstinence comes from both, really, if we must know. And yet the font of both is the same inexplicable source, defying definition.

The word “God.”

And whatever lurks behind it.

In November a student dies in a car accident, and the entire school empties into the auditorium for a memorial Mass. Father Branault strides beneath a basketball hoop, the top of his head brushing the bottom of the net. Metal chairs scrape on the scuffed floor, and
sunlight pours into the auditorium from the tall rectangular windows on either side. I cover
my eyes. Father Branault is carrying the ornate mace that he holds for the most ceremonial
of Masses, and he is preceded by an incense bearer. The smoke fills the shafts of sunlight,
renders them solid. The auditorium shrinks. At the front of the auditorium, Father Branault
turns and faces the mass of agitated students. Many are crying, but many more are not. Not
every face has a name in a school of two thousand.

“Today we are called to honor, to remember, to cherish Chelsea Grayhill, who has
gone ahead of us to her home in Christ Jesus. It is not uncommon for us to ask why at the
time, to be shaken, to be upset, to be angry with God.” The giant of a priest looks over
everyone gathered in the sweltering space. “I give you permission to be upset with God.
Take to Him you anger, your fears, and your prayers, that when you return to Him your faith
will be all the stronger.”

It seems impossible to me, then, the idea that a broken faith could be reassembled
into something strong and lasting. But I did not know the girl, so I take Father Branualt’s
invitation to be upset with God, to blame Him for the senseless death of the girl I did not
know without the burden of ever having to return to Him.

You can not, after all, reassemble that which did not ever exist.

“We continue on,” Father Branault says during his Homily, “Always cherishing
Chelsea’s memory, always treasuring her love of God, her devotion to her family, her love.”

The students in the front row—along with Chelsea’s family—have spent all of their
tears. They look like they can not remember her face at all. I pick my mother out of the
bleachers and catch her watching me. Her hair, studiously propped every morning with a
haze of spray, has fallen, and her eyes are dark. She could be a twin to the mother at the
front of the auditorium.
When the time comes, I take communion with the other students. I eat and swallow the tiny wafer that looks like a penny in Father Branault’s hand. I remember all the times I went through a communion line staring at Marcus’ back, matching my measured steps with his. As I pass the forefront of the rows, I see Chelsea’s family there and the communion wafer seems to expand and fill my stomach, swelling from the weight of grief in the face of my disbelief. I feel sick. I look up to the person next to me, searching for Marcus’ smirk, but it is not there. The smell of incense is smothering.

For the first time in that auditorium I experience the force of my religion, not in an extraordinary way but in all the ordinary ones—the crutch in times of trouble and need, the perfume to mask despair, the salve to cure incurable wounds. The mace, the incense, massive Father Branault himself and his raven vestments—these are all meant to stalk and trap the harshest conditions of existence and channel them away from their source, away from God, so that at the end of the day you can still look heavenward and say, Yes, God, I love you and all your creation, for it is good. My brother is gone and my home is broken, but yes, it is truly good. You can tell yourself this even though everything you are feeling tells you no, no, this must be wrong.

When the faculty comes forward after the students, my mother takes communion, tears in her eyes, and I know that she is thinking that very same thing.
My most vivid childhood memory is ice. Not the solid, pure manufactured ice of the hockey rink where my father took me to watch him play in his old men’s league as a child, but the thin, powdery shavings that came off of the player’s skateblades as they stepped onto the thick black rubber layered over the arena floor. The ice was like fresh snow, and it didn’t melt, because the interior of the arena was barely heated. I hid under the bleachers and collected the precious white as the teams came and went, until I had formed a single perfect ball. I bounced it in my gloved hands as I watched the old man tend net, saw him peppered with shots from the younger players.

At some point the old man was awarded a trophy for being the best goalie in his old man’s league, but the only games I remember are the ones where he let eight or nine go by him. By the sixth goal I usually couldn’t stand to watch anymore, guessing at what his teammates must think of the old man as they skated by and tapped his pads with the edge of their sticks. I took my iceball to a secluded corner and threw it against the sheet metal wall as hard as I could. The ball left a satisfying print that would stay there for a long time.

When the old man was losing bad I’d waste five dollars on the Pit Fighter video game in near the entrance between the two rinks. Twenty quarters could cover my lack of skill easily, and after I beat the game I used whatever other money he gave me to buy a red and white striped box of salty popcorn, which I had to take my gloves off to eat. If I had any money left I’d get a Coke to wash down the salt and butter, otherwise I went down to the drinking fountain between locker rooms.

I was down there sucking water greedily one night when I heard the clatter of sticks hitting the ice and the shouts of angry men. A fight erupted on the opposite rink. Fights were rare in the old men’s league, where the men paid to play and usually didn’t have enough
reserve energy for anything other than skating up and down the rink. I watched as the ref put himself between the two men, one in a white jersey, the other in blue. The blue jerseyed man fell back and swore. His gloves sat on the ice, along with his helmet. I looked around to make sure no one saw that I had heard him. Without opening the door that led out of the rink, he stepped up over the plexiglass and hopped down to the black rubber floor. He swung his stick at the wall, where it shattered, one of the shards spiraling past my head. I didn’t move—my hands were frozen to the drinking fountain.

Blue jersey pushed past me, cursing at those behind him and disappearing down the corridor into the locker room. I gathered up the shards of ice from his loud retreat and formed them into a ball, which I kept with me until the end of the night when my father’s game ended and I threw it out into a milky gray New York snowfield. I didn’t tell him about the fight.

Towards the end of the old man’s hockey career, when I was seven or eight, a younger guy, Arnie, joined the team and my dad picked him up for most of the games, leaving me to ride in the back seat with him. Arnie was young—he looked about sixteen, though he could have been as old as twenty, but the true tell was in his voice: he concluded every tentative statement with a nervous laugh, like he wanted to take back whatever he just said. Arnie was a poor skater and an even worse defenseman. I resented him for the role he played in rolling up the score when my dad was in net: playing defense, Arnie tripped over his own skates as the attackers rushed past them, leaving my father to face all three by himself. If the old man managed to stop the first shot and lose the rebound, the three would stand there taking turns at him until the puck went in.

A natural dislike quickly flourished into hatred. I hated Arnie because my father would redirect his natural fathering instincts away from me and towards him during those
car rides. One night we had to wait a long time for Arnie to emerge from the house he shared with four other guys. He finally came out after my father knocked at the door and, slinging his bag and skates apologetically into the car, said, “My friends wouldn’t let me leave.”

I couldn’t say how, but I hear my father’s response in my head before he said it—I anticipated his words like I was saying them to a child of my own.

“If they act like that, then maybe they aren’t your friends.”

When Arnie missed a playoff game to attend a monster truck rally, the old man and I jointly mocked his choice, though I was more than pleased Arnie wouldn’t be falling all over the ice that night.

A few years later, after my father retired from the old men’s league, Arnie sent my father a card from prison. He had written something strange and docile at the bottom, something like, “Thanks for being a good friend.”

The old man threw the card in the trash without responding, and we didn’t hear from Arnie again.
Hunting Red Jones

Wagner built a pond for his daughter Miriam in the backyard when she was twelve years old. They were father and daughter, connected by blood and common habitat, but Wagner was not in the habit of presenting his daughter with gifts, and Miriam was not in the habit of accepting them. Wagner remembered keenly their exchange when he showed her the ornate landscaped pool with a splashing waterfall (kept churning by a hidden pump), carefully arranged limestone rocks, and the wide-headed catfish that lounged like glistening slugs in the clear water below.

“The fish are big and ugly.”

“They’re catfish. If you spend a little time with them, they’ll get used to you, and you will get used to them.”

Miriam said, “Little fish are nicer.”

“Then you want an aquarium. Everyone has an aquarium. How many girls have their very own pond?”

“Just me,” she said.

“That’s right.”

There was a small model of a red house on the pond’s far bank with a flaring roof in the style of exaggerated Chinese architecture. Miriam took the structure in her pale hands, holding it aloft by the edges of its roof, and left the pond. Every night Wagner dropped the catfish large stinking pellets, and they rose to the surface to wrap their wide ugly mouths around this offering. Wagner waited patiently for them to die, all through Miriam’s childhood.
At age fifty-eight, Wagner fell asleep each night in front of a blazing blue television screen, which provided the only light in his entire one-story Manitoban home from sundown to sun-up. Never a deeply religious man, Wagner indulged an intense fear of nightly noises—the clack and creak of bending tree branches, the thud of dense acorns, raining like Lilliputian cannon-fire, the nightly trysts of the wilderness creatures from the dense woods of Hartshire and beyond. In the wintertime, he heard footsteps in the soft snow: wolves, drunken boys, and other nighttime predators. The television’s incessant chatter and solicitations kept these intrusions at bay. When Wagner slept the dull blue reflected off his eyelids. When he dreamt it was of years past, and of people long dead who when he awoke Wagner was convinced were living again. He dreamt of his departed wife and her hair, which was always too short for his liking. He dreamt of his daughter. And then, one day, upon waking, she was there. It was a strange sort of miracle. Her face was lined but still pretty, her eyes still that strange greenish-brown that unsettled him. She looked thinner than he remembered, even though she wore an overlarge sweatshirt that hid her figure.

“Hi, dad,” Miriam said, standing on the uneven porch steps.

“You’re out,” Wagner said. There was no question.

“Good behavior. I need a place to stay.” She stopped and smiled. This was when they both expected her to recount all the minute events of her recent life, but she defied herself and her father by unfolding nothing. “I don’t have a whole lot going on right now.”

“How long are you in town?”

She bit her lower lip. “Couple weeks?”

“I’ll set up the cot in the guest room.”

“Thanks, Daddy.”
It was her grouping of words—reserved for when she was particularly cross with him, pronounced as pointedly as *You failed*. He remembered the night that he found Miriam at home, drunk off her teenage ass, on the precipice of emptying her stomach into the scarred backyard where he had wasted four good weekends of hunting season molding the land for her pond. “I’m glad you’re finally enjoying your birthday gift,” he had said.

“Thanks, *Daddy.*”

The first thing Miriam wanted to do in Hartshire was hunt men, or so it seemed to Wagner. On Friday nights Wagner often joined the younger men who gleefully tolerated him at Smoot’s Tavern and consumed exactly one beer. On Friday nights he also lost money at pool and found himself staggering home, and the younger men and even smiling Freddie Smoot mocked him endlessly but without malice, the way one speaks of a beloved but addled uncle. Perhaps they realized that they were young and not lonely and this thought made them happy, or perhaps they simply wished that, like him, they could induce their own stumbling steps with a single beer. It was a talent particular to him, one that he had not discovered until well into his middle age.

“Let’s get a drink,” Miriam said. “I haven’t had one in three years.”

Three years had passed like nothing for Wagner—living alone along the cold neckline of the world had dulled time’s razor, and left him in an endless bachelorhood. His wife would have called it wasteful, but Wagner disagreed. Mountain living had bloomed into serenity for him after years of city life clumped in traffic, paying bills, overseeing his daughter’s schooling and childhood. In the mountains there was none of this, just the bare and busy night, and for that Wagner had his television.
It was Thursday night, and Smoot’s bar was empty except for the second shift lumber yard workers and the mothers whose children were all grown up and gone and liked to sneak cigarettes in the afternoon when they were away from their husbands.

“My daughter,” Wagner said by way of introduction to his acquaintances, which at that point consisted of Freddie Smoot behind the bar and Deirdre Wilson, whose husband monitored the water tower and drank himself silly every night. “Miriam.”

Miriam sat. There were no lights except white Christmas lights dangling from the walls and the glowing beer signs and neon in the windows. The darkness inside was thicker than that without—Wagner would have enjoyed it if he weren’t in the company of his daughter.

“What brings you to town, Miriam?” Freddie Smoot asked, pouring her a drink.

“I’m visiting my father,” she said, and raised the glass to her mouth. She drank deeply, like a parched animal, and then licked from her glistening lips the few stray golden drops. “I haven’t seen him in absolutely forever.”

“We take good care of Wagner,” Deirdre offered, and Smoot quickly agreed.

Seated next to his daughter, Wagner was half-listening to their conversation, as he was always listening to everything that went on around him at a strange half-capacity. He heard their words and resented the implication—that he was an old fool, helpless and useless, needing their care and simply counting down the days until his funeral. But he was used to this sort of treatment. The other half, the half that was engaged, fell into a deep manner of contemplation where Wagner could see the dangling white lights on their strings move as stars, carving the dark interior of the bar with their crystalline arcs. They moved as celestial bodies. The glass before him was empty.

At the edge of his universe Wagner heard his daughter talking.
“I thought about it so much,” Miriam was saying, “Until I felt nothing at all, really. The shame had all worn away. It seemed inevitable. I was preparing myself to drive to the police station as we woke up together. I saw myself in jail. There was two of me—the one who knew this was wrong and felt that I should be horrified by these thoughts, and the one that would commit the act. I thought about it all the time. I dreamt it. And finally, it happened. I did it.”

Freddie Smoot was laughing. Wagner, emerging from his cosmic reverie, thought that Miriam had just said something funny, or inappropriate, or both, and the members of her audience seemed to take great delight in her frankness. Deirdre Wilson leaned in and placed her spectacles around her neck, as she always did when suspected she was going to say something serious. “Good for you, honey. We need more of your kind around here.”

Wagner disagreed. Miriam was one daughter too many. The problem with the order of things was that he could have never known this until after she was born. Before, he had wanted three children, in any sizes or variations, and his wife, being both congenial and good with children, agreed. But Miriam had worn her father down to his most tender core, and by association, her mother as well.

“There’s quite a few widowers up here in Hartshire,” Smoot was saying to Miriam. “Wagner’s in good company. They can all relate. Like a family.”

Wagner went again for his glass and, finding nothing, retracted himself from their talk. He took deep breaths of second-hand smoke and dove deeper, away from all things. The whole world was fine in this barstool, and only moving would break that condition of perfect stability.

The only words he heard afterwards were, “Red Jones.”

The words did not rouse him.
The next morning Wagner was surprised to find himself leading his daughter along a rocky path, weaving steadily up into the thinner air. Wagner could not remember how these events had transpired.

“We’re going hunting,” Miriam said, reminding him. “You said you’d take me to see Red Jones.” She wore a hunting rifle over one shoulder. It looked long and sleek as a jungle cat. The cylindrical scope formed a single eye that was as precise as it was uncaring.

Wagner himself carried a short compound bow, and a quiver of the arrows he had constructed himself. The wind was trailing east, and he felt rather than knew that this would be a good day for hunting. He wondered where Miriam had gotten the gun.

“Red Jones?” he said. “Did I tell you about him?” While hiking, Wagner felt the full force of his weight as they ascended a slush-glazed stone path to the airy reaches. He was a heavy man, though he did not often eat. Sometimes he did not eat for days.

“Yes—you said we’d be lucky to catch a glimpse.”

Wagner nodded, remembering. “You don’t hunt Jones. Sometimes you find him, or he finds you. But it’s all a matter of chance and luck.”

“Well, I want to see him.”

Red Jones was a black bear, massive and legendary all about the surrounding antique malls and hunting shops but of little actual consequence in Hartshire itself. Red Jones was in retirement, the hunters liked to say, and the act of “hunting” the decades-old beast involved only catching a fleeting glimpse of him as he ambled by on some secret mission. Every now and then someone fired a shot at Jones’ passing, carefully, into the air, as a sign of respect.
Red Jones would nod, it was reported, perhaps give a rare growl, acknowledging the mutual friendship that the hunting men of Hartshire had shared with him since he was a cub.

“Jones isn’t a polar bear,” Wagner said, his voice quiet and intense as they climbed higher. “Some people think he is, but they’re wrong. Red Jones is perfectly white from head to toe, a pure albino with raw pinkish eyes the same color of his lips and tongue.”

The bear was deaf and nearly blind, too, Wagner knew. Jones had gone deaf the year before in an icestorm, when ice-glazed branches cracked all around his tree-stump lair and fell into the crusted snow like terrible bombs. Jones’ eyesight was fading, and he rarely moved from his lair on the far side of the hill. Wagner had discovered stray bits of his teeth over the years—these he kept in a glass jar on his mantle, though no one believed him when he said that the chips of bone were from the mouth of the great white bear.

He knew all this because in his more lucid moments, just after waking from a dream of his wife or daughter or Miriam’s poor manslaughtered Jim, whom Wagner had taken aside on their wedding day and hugged and shook hands with, he drove the twelve miles along icy roads, hiked another two, and dumped scraps of fish from his freezer at the base of Jones’ lair.

Wagner had been doing this for three years.

“Hold on,” Wagner said. He searched the round trees for his markings, a single blue sphere of dotted spray-paint, that would lead them to the stands. The wind was with them, and he seemed in a hurry to reach the spot.

“We lost?” Miriam asked.

“No, I just need to get my bearings.”
But the land had changed around them—Wagner saw it and he sensed that Miriam, though she had never been there before in her life, felt it as well. The ground had grown hard at their approach, as if steeling itself against their frenzied steps, and the small northward wind was rattling branches and painting the sky was hazy clouds.

“I was just up here,” Wagner said, though he did say how long ago that was. He moved them on and searched more trees. Miriam took her rifle down and held the barrel low, pointed into the earth. Wagner wondered if that was how she did Jim—asked him to bend over, pick something off the floor. Or maybe he was changing the oil in her car. In either scenario Miriam stood above him, the slender black finger of the rifle pointing to the end of his life, to the ground where he would be buried.

Wagner’s bow felt heavy on his back as he seemed to find his way again, but they advanced slowly, and only Wagner seemed to know where they were, and then only in passing.

They found the stands at noon and Miriam took the higher one at the mouth of the wide valley, and Wagner lower at the nape. Wagner could see everything from his perch but not his daughter: a wide swatch of pine blocked his view. He did not know if his daughter had ever hunted before—he did not much care, except that once she was out of his range of vision he felt that he could see clearly again, and the land unfolded before him as if he was seeing it from a very great height, and he knew his bow could reach any beast, offer a firm strike of precise and savage thunder from above.

In the cold heart of the valley they waited, Wager watching the quivering pine branches that obfuscated his daughter from his vision. His bow was in his hand, arrows in a quiver near his feet. The pine branches flittered despite the absence of wind and he thought
it must be Miriam trying to talk to him, to say the things that she could not verbalize so that he would know, so that he would be forgiven.

*I miss Mom*, the branches blocking Miriam seemed to say. Wagner thought they must be language. Could it be they could communicate with only branches? With mere shakings, slow vibrations? Yes, yes, it was unmistakable. She had never talked to him as a child—it was only from her unconscious motions that he knew his daughter at all. He put his hand on a skeletal limb at the edge of his stand.

*Your mother, you know, loved both of us, and was worse because of it.* It was difficult at first, and Wagner was sure he had malformed some of the words, but he proceeded with greater confidence. *But she wouldn’t change, your mother. She refused to.*

*So did Jim.*

*I really liked Jim.* Even the branches conveyed this brittle response.

*So did I, right up to the moment I killed him.*

*I think you made a mistake.*

*You didn’t know him like I did. You didn’t know.*

*Did you need to kill him?*

*Yes, I really did.*

*Did he hurt you?*

But the branches did not move again, and Wagner interpreted this absence as a yes, and could not move himself to any other conclusion. He *had* liked Jim. But Jim had hurt her. They both had hurt her. And Jim was dead.

Wagner could almost smile. The cold crusted at the edge of his lips.

They were just branches.
A sow and two cubs crossed their paths, and Wagner signaled with the call of a fowl for Miriam to hold her fire. Miriam was unused at hunting but familiar with a gun. For a long moment Wagner thought his daughter would ignore this warning, taking aim on the sow and dispatching her as she must have dispatched Jim, and then taking it all the way and putting the cubs down as well. All this was illegal, of course, but what crime could one commit that three years would not erase? Wagner wondered this.

But she did not fire. When the sow and her cubs safely disappeared into the trees beyond Wagner took some food he had stored away and watched the branches. At one point he was sure they signed, *I am alone*, but he did not sign any response.

Hours passed.

The steps leading down from the stand lay firmly embedded, nailed into the tree’s rugged face, and Wager thought suddenly of leaping down, rushing back to the car, leaving his daughter alone again. But things were different now: she was wearing a coat the same color of the earth this time, and carried a gun. Before, she had been in orange, and in irons. He had left her before he got snagged into the trial, before he was asked to be part of any defense, because he knew she was guilty.

He just knew it, and had known it for a long time.

When Red Jones appeared under the dusking sky, the old beast ambled into the valley as if were his own. Wagner released a long breath. Thick flaps of hoary skin hung from the bear. Jones was dotted with sparse white fur, and the angry skin beneath it was raw as a fresh wound. The wind twisted out of their favor and Jones caught the scent of humans in their tree stands. Wagner stood at the ready, surprising himself with an arrow already knocked. His body was taut but quivering, like a guitar string freshly plucked.
There was movement in the branches near Miriam’s stand, and in their own private language Wagner knew that she was speaking to him.

*He’s mine,* she said.

Wagner was fluttering in his perch, the arrow tip bobbing, tracing frantic circles in the air. Jones struck out over the length of the vale, having forgotten the scent of man or already disinterested. He thinks we’ve come to feed him, Wagner thought, and the idea seemed to fit into his mind like a singular puzzle piece. He knew then what he had to do, even knew that he should regret doing it. Wagner had the only shot, and Jones would not soon come again to this place, if ever.

Wagner drew, and the feel of his line was wrong. Too heavy. The shot was poorly lined and his vision split as he slowed his breathing. It was wrong, all wrong and ill-advised, and Wagner regretted these things too as he knew he should, but he did not lower his arms. Straining to hold the shot, he waited until his arms trembled enough to upset the balance, and then Wagner closed his eyes and loosed the arrow. A fierce yelp from Jones told him that he had hit.

But the hit was not clean. Miriam was already rumbling from her perch to valley floor.

“What the hell were you thinking?” she called to her father.

“I had the only shot.”

“You didn’t have anything!”

“You wanted him,” Wagner said.

She stared acid at him. “Thanks, Daddy.”

Wagner knew that this meant he would not be invited on any further hunts. This was the hunters’ mascot he had tagged, a singularly unique and haggard old bear. And it had
been his friend. It was the price he had to pay, and Wagner had known it before he took aim on the ragged white bear. It was another regret.

Wagner knew that Miriam would come to understand.

Jones heaved as if he carried a gale in his sagging belly. Wagner’s arrow stood from its right shoulder. Clotted blood trailed from the wound like scraps of dried tomatoes. Wagner and Miriam reached the bear in a dense clump of thicket and trees, and Jones was not dead.

“He’s so ugly.”

“Just old,” Wagner said. “Born so different from his kind, I’m amazed he’s lived this long at all.”

Miriam asked, “Are you sad you’ve killed him?”

“He’s not dead yet.”

The bear’s inky eyes were upon them, but Wagner could not say if it registered anything. Even their voices might have been like gentle tremors to the dying beast. Wagner would have liked that—safely wrapped in a cocoon of senselessness. Was there any better way to spend one’s last moments?

Wagner heard the bear’s rattle and decided not to refrain from the one thing he swore he never needed to know, the one thing he always knew that didn’t matter, because his savage little daughter was a monster, always had been and always would be. He could only save her by being more savage, by leaping in front and taking her kill, by keeping her clean of the dried scraps of blood, by dipping his hands into the wound and running as far as he could, running in the opposite direction, like he was carrying that fatal bleeding grenade that could harm her, that only his fat and old body could shield.
“I want to know about Jim.”

Miriam had her rifle in her hand. “What do you want to know?”

Wagner knelt and pressed a hand to Red Jones’ flap of an ear. “How did it happen?”

Miriam told him, and the great white bear died between them, so that for the first time Wagner could say to himself yes, yes, I killed Jim. I am to blame—it was me, it was me, it was me all along.
Dear Fat Magician

I met you once, for about twenty minutes, during the summer my father lost his job as a civil engineer and I flew to California for a few weeks to stay with my father’s oldest brother Joe. Joe’s son Matt and I had been friends since both our parents switched from Prodigy to America OnLine, and we were going to tag team write the Great Commercially Successful Novel while I was there. But more than that I was going because I didn’t want to see my father hunched over a bowl of cereal at ten o’clock on a weekday. I was going because I had decisions that I wanted to put on hold—graduate school, a job, a girlfriend. And, there was a chance that Matt and I would really write something.

My uncle Joe moved to Los Angeles in the sixties and he never left that place or time. He rode the Disney wave for a while, designed sets, painted, made friends. On a Wednesday afternoon that summer he took me and Matt to the Magic Castle, a fifties-era, modestly rehabilitated ‘magician’s club’ on a bluff overlooking a field of Hollywood backlots. Joe had done some pro bono work for the club and was friends with the owner. ‘Magician’s Club’ gives the place more mystery and intrigue and coolness than it really has—you enter from the vestibule via a sliding bookcase that opens upon your spoken command, revealing: a dingy bar. Abracadabra! Behold the marvels of overpriced bottom shelf liquor!

We ate lunch on the top floor. You were there, too, fat magician. You sat at a small table by yourself, sweating a bit, eating your salad heaped with bacon and cheese. I saw you from my table near the window. Turning away from you, I shook hands and nodded at a few people that I am sure Joe meant to impress me with their celebrity. A skeletal man with shaking hands who wrote jingles for Disney in the fifties. Two producers from MTV’s The Osbournes. A slouching man who introduced himself as an Imagineer.

“A what?” I asked.
“Imagineer,” he replied.

“That was Walt’s word,” the songwriter said, shaking an impossibly long vein-laced finger at me. He was a piano player.

I mouthed silently to Matt, “Walt?”

“Disney.”

“Oh.”

After lunch Joe forced me to stay for a show in the room he designed while he went away to chat with the owner. The room was a dark little enclave, assembled with bits of black-and-white Hollywood memorabilia, pictures of forgotten stars and starlets. It sat fifteen, and was promptly filled with the group of cologne slathered octogenarians.

I admit that I didn’t like you from the start. You were young and fat and bald and had fleshy hairless arms that looked impossibly pale in the dim light. You did card tricks. You did that eye thing, too, but that was barely a trick at all. I mean, really, you called yourself a “magician”? You entered from around the heavy curtains, wiped the globes of sweat from your bald head and broke open fresh packs of cards like they were loaves of bread.

And you made fun of me. You mimicked my protective slouch. You furrowed your eyebrows and scrunched your face. The oldies laughed. I was an easy mark. You flicked decks of cards into my chest, once, twice, three times. The comedy was in the repetition, I understand. And still I smiled and played along. You could have your show, so long as we both understood that I knew what you were doing.

Great rings of sweat formed under the arms of your blue cotton shirt. You did have fast hands, I’ll give you that. But you botched a few tricks. You showed me an ace of hearts. I showed it to the oldies, who seemed to derive great pleasure from my complicity in
my own embarrassment moments before. After a flurry of hand jives and gestures, you
triumphantly flipped a seven of clubs, made a quick crack about how I must have messed up
the trick and moved on, real quick. You must have learned that in magician’s school. The
audience was too busy laughing to notice how lousy a magician you really were.

At the green felt table at the base of the showroom, you did the eye trick.

“I can tell when someone is lying just by watching their eyes,” you said. And you
turned to face me and I sat up straight and opened my eyes wide.

“Did you have onions for lunch?” you asked me.

A laugh from the crowd.

“No.”

“You’re telling the truth. Are you twenty-one years old?”

“Yes.”

“Telling the truth. Are you having a good time?”

“Yes.”

“You’re lying.”

The eighty-somethings roared with amusement. Knees were slapped.

“Do you believe in magic?”

“Yes,” I said, keeping my body firm.

“The truth,” you said. I slipped that one by you. “Have you ever lied before?”

I said, “Yes.”

“The truth. Ever stolen money?”

“No.”

You waited a long time, watching the whites of my eyes, maybe, before proclaiming,

“Truth.” Then you asked, “Have you ever intentionally lied to your parents?”
I took a small breath before saying, “Yes,” and as you searched for the answer you got more from my eyes than a simple true or false. You might have seen me at age seventeen, lying to my parents about a movie I did not see with alcohol on my breath. Or maybe you saw me at nine, telling my mother I did not know what had happened to the two dollars on the table I filched to buy candy.

I know you saw me a week earlier, in the living room with my hands tight in my lap, sitting across from my father, fear welling in my throat, saying, “Really, this is a good thing. This is for the best.”

You did not say anything. You saw my secret.

It was a kind of a magic.
Creatures

I direct cars in the parking lot at the local zoo all summer. I am so reliable and punctual and white that they put me in charge of directing cars. I sweat all day, walking miles of asphalt radiating with withering sun. I carry a radio at my belt in case I am needed. I feel superior. I am seventeen.

There are regular workers, kids, who are supposed to come in each day and take orders from me, but they are reliably unreliable. They rarely show up on time, steal outrageously from the registers when do they show up, and throw filched office supplies at each other like chittering monkeys. This won’t do, so I am given temps, bussed in from the downtown agency, five or six each day. One of them is Eduardo—that’s not his real name, but it is the name that lives in my memory for the six and a half foot black man in cheap sandals.

Eduardo, jovial, wears a wide-brimmed hat, yells things I cannot understand across the lot to the other temps, and pees in the bushes behind a jeep. Across the street a lone giraffe’s head bears witness to the urination. I tell Eduardo, no, I need you to walk the mile to the Visitor’s Center and pee there. But inside I agree with him—I want to pee in the bushes behind a jeep, too. I want to wear the massive hat and toothy grin and laugh Eduardo’s deep laugh. But there are rules. They are mine to use against people like Eduardo, so I do. Eduardo smiles and apologizes. He calls me “boss.” He is more than twice my age.

I place Eduardo and the temps in the proper locations. I smile, tell them to call if they need anything, I will bring them water if they need it. I tell them, in the nicest way that I can, that they will be standing in this spot all day, with the exception of a fifteen-minute break and a half hour lunch. On the whole, they do what I say. Being temps, they get paid a
whole dollar more an hour than I do, and I fantasize that makes them feel better about taking orders from me. It feels like a fair trade that we have already shook hands on.

I hide in an air-conditioned tollbooth, sipping on a cup of ice mixed with powdered Gatorade. Inside is Al. Al is older than Eduardo, heavy-set, white, and a permanent employee. At times, he is frightening. For reasons he never explains and that will later get him fired, he keeps a pair of handcuffs dangling from his belt. In many ways he is just as unreliable as the teenagers that were supposed to waste their summers directing cars all day. Last week Al wanted to fight a man who refused to pay the parking fee—I spoke to Al with slow, calming words and told him to go home. I keep Al out of trouble, but he finds it anyway.

Unlike me, Al relies on his minimum wage salary. He has a daughter who picks him up and drops him off at the tollbooths each morning and evening, and he often complains about his debt. I nod at him. When the booths close down at three Al and Eduardo stand at the main intersection, laughing and conversing unintelligibly. They are men working at a kid’s job, and I join them there. Al tells me he respects me, over and over again. He tells me I am not like the other supervisors. Eduardo reiterates his affection for the “boss.” Al wonders when he will get promoted. Eduardo asks how he can apply for a permanent job here. I inform him that he will start at minimum wage, but he doesn’t care. He wants to bring the other temps water. He wants to wear a radio at his hip.

At three, the folks who have been inside since nine begin filtering out, slowly, dodging each other, tired, confused, lighter in the wallet, herding their sunburnt children across the bridge to the parking lot. A large group of Amish march in a line to their tour bus at the back of the lot. Eduardo laughs as they pass: can’t understand them, he says. Al agrees. Eduardo tips his wide-brimmed hat, remarking at their uniform appearance. I laugh.
Al remarks that they’ve come to see the new baby gorilla—Bantu. Al is missing teeth and has a raspy laugh. There is a second gorilla baby the Amish won’t see, hidden behind walls of brick and plexiglass: A creature that has no name and an extra chromosome, a creature that is the result of a mated brother and sister. Bantu looks a lot like a human baby, Al likes to say.

The Amish watch the three of us in the intersection, three at a single location, where only a single man would do. Al is the only one directing. I should put Eduardo to work at something else, but I crave the affection due a lenient boss. Al works hard; he thinks he will get that promotion soon. He tells me I am a good boss. Sometimes when he is bold he will criticize me for not working as hard as he does. The handcuffs at his belt rattle when he walks. Eduardo checks his watch; the van from the temp agency will arrive soon. He will fill out an application before he leaves. He wants me to put a good word in for him. I tell Eduardo I have nothing but good words for him.

When Eduardo and Al are clocked out and gone, I retrieve the cones and stack them behind the booth. I sit in the air-conditioned visitor’s center across from my boss’s desk. We say how wonderful that Al managed to control his temper another day longer, and how much better Eduardo has gotten at following orders. We banter about the utility of keeping the employees happy.

Outside, the bald eagle with clipped wings shrieks at the approach of his keeper. The keeper tosses two sides of fish into the stream below the eagle’s perch. The eagle waits until the keeper leaves, leaps down, and buries his beak into the pearly flesh.
Hitler Hunting

The end.*

*It ended, of course, with Reagan. When struck with an astrological shard of absolute lucidity, the fortieth President of the United States launched a pre-emptive strike on Soviet Russia, compelling communism and all its cohorts in an early, atom-split retirement. When the last vestiges of fallout cracked away, there was only agreement, and Reagan won a third term, and history came to an end. In the end history sent back among the living those who had served as its prime agents, willingly or not. There was only those returned, those lucky enough to be alive at the end of history, immortal Reagan. The only occupation, if one bothered to hold an occupation, was hunting Hitler.

Willis Van Devanter did not hunt Hitler. In the center of a whirling thrust of warm air and human bodies, eager conversation and glistening glasses spilling with mixed and colored alcohols, a whistle rang from the silvery little instrument shackled to the hostess’ neck in a shaded den of New York City. Willis took one long look at Hugo Black beside him, considered the woman he was passing to his friend, one fresh-smelling twenty-five-year-old black law student from Connecticut, and wiped his brow with the edge of his sleeve. Hugo caught the gesture and smiled back, round face tightening. Hugo was a fetching lad, Willis had to admit, perhaps in the way of one who hasn’t quite grown up yet and retains some fragrance of his calamitous youth, pungent and thick with innocent malice. Willis marked the scorecard before him, giving the female law student a hearty affirmative in a check mark just as a fresh prospect took the seat opposite his and displayed her teeth with a fresh, if slightly pained, anticipation.

The whistle called again, and Willis began his thirteenth speed-date of the evening. They exchanged names and a soft handshake.
“—from Rhode Island, but my family's originally from—”

“—come from Indiana but I've been all over—”

“—is so interesting!”

“___”

“___”

“—never on the first date unless—”

“—understand completely—”

This carried on for two minutes before Willis took her soft Rhode Island hands, originally from Massachusetts, in his own, a gesture that never failed to gain the most prominent attention of the fairer sex, and said, “You should know, because I conduct myself honestly, that I am enjoying my second life.”

She blinked. Willis stole a look over at Hugo. His friend said something that made the law student laugh. He doubted that Hugo had been making this confession to each prospective lady and badly desired to hate his friend for that. Men—true men—did not shroud themselves in anonymity.

The woman across from his seat, however, was studying him with telescopic eyes, searching his face for the missing recognition. She took a breath and said, corners of lips rising, voice ascending in tenor, “A king—am I right? King George? No—James? Am I right? Am I right?”

Willis released his hands and shook his head, still alarmed at the firm tuft of brown hair upon his brow after a first life of near total baldness, and prayed for the quick release of the whistle’s siren.
Contrary to the newly revised rules of nature at the end of history, Hugo and Willis were not masters of the slaughterbench. Neither had killed a man, not even Hugo during his most controversial and disputed days of innocence. They had been mere arbiters, referees as men sought to map the infinite subtleties of causal existence, and then to apply a universal label to the map of human experience. They were not kings or conquerors. Now, Hugo treasured his eyesight as Willis appreciated his hair. They were among the reborn, enjoying vanity for perhaps the first time. Such things had seemed small before. If the end of history was an age of blond hair and copper tans instead of golden rules, they could abide that. Did that diminish them? They didn’t care.

Were they even important enough to be here again?

History apparently thought so.

“Twelve matches!” Hugo shouted. His fist was clenched triumphantly around his final scorecard, complete with phone numbers and email addresses and additional contact information that Willis barely understood the need for.

“I marked seven of my own,” Willis offered, remembering in the final moments how Hugo had made the rounds among the prospects and engendered the fast friendship of even those with whom he did not match, utilizing to great effect the quick charm of an Irish boy reared in Alabama, that golden trait which had endured through his first life and death and now into his second.

“Let’s go get a drink,” Hugo said, and steered Willis by the sleeve of his leather jacket around the bend of a glistening street corner towards a midtown bar.

“I’d rather go home, take a rest.” Willis tried to exude some weary enthusiasm. The young face Willis wore smiled much too easily for his liking, it gave too much away for what
Willis knew he would not get in return. “I’ve seven matches to prepare for in the coming
days.”

“Days? I told Henrietta and Jillian we’d meet them after the session!” Hugo was
shorter than Willis but wider and sturdier—his small tugs grew less syncopated and more as
the gradual easing a farmer exerts on an unwilling animal, calm hands pulling the rough skin,
calling the creature forward. Willis followed without further complaint.

Inside, Willis waited alone, arm along the ridge of a standing table, sweat coming
together along the canyons of his back and across the weak creases of his forehead, until
Hugo appeared through the throng with two frosted mugs of watery beer. Willis thanked his
friend and drank deeply, ignoring the swell of thick carbonation in his throat, until his mug
was half empty. Hugo struck up a conversation with the fellow at his shoulder and Willis
peered unevenly at a far television screen, keenly paid interest to some sporting contest he
never cared to consider before. In the distance, the colors blurred together and Willis
blinked them into focus, broke them down into their composite pieces. Eyes narrowed, he
leaned forward, until Hugo caught him with an extended arm and said, “The girls are here.”

The girls were there. Willis recognized more than a few from the speed dating
service—a Danielle and a Rhonda and a Kate, in addition to the aforementioned Henrietta
and Jillian. The latter’s appearance compelled Willis to stand all the straighter and affect an
air of casual confidence that he did not feel. That she was attractive was not in question—
fine black hair pulled back over tastefully exposed shoulders and a pale blue dress that on
any other woman warranted a mark of scandal, but on her rendered the shine and class of a
Hellenistic heroine. Her skin was the color of threshed wheat, though in the crowded dim
bar everyone’s skin was monochromatically rendered a similar hue.

She caught Willis’ eye and approached. “I remember you—the tall one.”
Willis laughed and took a step back to allow her safe purchase at his table. “And I, I couldn’t soon forget one so elegant.”

Hugo’s head appeared from between the shoulders of the other women, his round face flushed. “Drinks? Who wants more drinks? Who needs a drink?”

Willis nodded at his glass. “I’m fine.”

“I could use a post-speed-date martini.” Jillian reached for her purse.

“No donation necessary,” Hugo quipped and his head retreated into the cleft of shoulders.

“I liked your friend,” Jillian said, her purse falling back to her side. “I didn’t put him down as a match, though. I’ve been around men like him before.” She paused, noting Willis’ face, before saying, “The needy type.”

Willis found himself nodding, but said, “Hugo’s not a bad character. I’ve lived with him almost a year now. I don’t know what I would’ve done without him.”

Hugo returned, ducking under arms and tables, supplying drinks, his voice becoming louder and higher pitched. Jillian accepted her martini with a smile as Hugo disappeared again. “Is he returned, too?”

“Hugo? Yes. I knew him before; I suppose that’s how we found each other.” Willis drained his beer and then chuckled, hesitantly. “I was a bit worried when I saw you, you know, down the line. I wasn’t sure how Hugo was going to react.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, don’t say anything—I don’t say this to everyone, but back in his first youth Hugo was a member of the Klan.”

“The what?”

“The Klan.”
Jillian’s mouth opened slightly. She stepped up on her toes to get a look at Hugo over the hump of Willis’ shoulder. “You’re joking.”

He shook his head. “Forget I said it. Yes, a joke.” Willis attempted a recovery: “He hunts Hitler now.”

Jillian nodded slowly, and her martini sat on the table, untouched after the first taste. “That must be so rewarding for him! Do you hunt as well?”

“No,” Willis said, “I’m too busy.”

“Busy? Doing what?”

He did nothing the next day, shuffling interminably from room to room in their brickyard loft as Hugo slept in the flagrantly indulgent way of the young. The temperature fell and Willis took his coat and a scarf that still smelled of its cottony fellows and walked two blocks for groceries. The doors opened at the sight of him and Willis met the blast of heated air thankfully. Inside, the monitors that hung from the ceiling like vampire bats chattered on about the great fruitless hunts for killers both ancient and modern, the assembled speaking tour of a cadre of Roman Emperors, and the deluge of returned figures too obscure to fit the bill of public consumption and yet somehow judged worthy but history’s unfathomable invisible standard, as were both Willis and Hugo.

At times, Willis thought that the end of history was a sorry place. The grocery store was only the beginning. Ex-presidents ran daily forums in state funded museums. Mozart and Beethoven played concerts to empty halls. Caesar was knighted and put on display. Charlemagne, given a daytime talk show broadcast in seven languages. The most recent ranks of history’s prime criminals were condemned to crowded prisons, where time-gorged tourists swollen with the weight of leisure gathered to watch them behind electrified
plexiglass and shorn bars. History’s long carpet had unfurled for every Disneyfied family to tread upon. There were no more secrets now, except one: Hitler.

Willis took some eggs and a mashed rectangle of pork, sealed in airtight plastic, along with a bag of oranges. One life ago, he had been a boy in Indiana stealing oranges from the grocer, who spoke little English and whipped the boy when he caught him. Willis had returned as a teenager and worked for that grocer for two years, and by the end the grocer had learned enough English to curse him properly. Willis counted it among his greatest achievements. The doors opened again, and from nowhere a bell sounded indicating the monetary deduction from his standing account. Willis had no idea how much the account held or how to gauge its accumulation.

That night, while a fledgling nor’easter meandered up the Atlantic Coast, dodged the city and dumped twelve inches on the surrounding inlands and bays, Hugo sat before the widescreen television in the front room, ripping the oranges apart with his short, tanned fingers and eating the fleshy insides while the juices coated his chin. Willis watched the clouds in the distance and stared until the orange lamplight into his eyes burned.

The next day Willis decided they would go skiing, his first honest attempt at fulfilling a lengthy list of activities neglected or scorned during his earlier living years. The list consisted of the usual amusements: skiing, skydiving, treasure hunting in the blue Caribbean Sea. But there were also odd longings, particular to Willis himself: he wanted to visit a gas station in Maryland where, in the previous life, he had been stranded by an overheated car, and a hitchhiker had sat and commiserated with him for several hours. He wanted to fly in a low-hanging plane over Indiana and point at everything he remembered. He wanted to see the ruins of South American civilizations, and then step foot in the Library of Congress again.
“Skiing. Sounds great,” Hugo said, tearing into breakfast orange. They departed at noon.

“I need to apologize,” Willis said as they drove out of the city, settling onto the easy transit of a plowed interstate. “For two nights ago.”

“What happened?”

“I spoke ill of you.”

“Yeah?”

Willis described the woman Jillian—

“I remember her. She wasn’t one of my matches.”

“I told who you were.”

Hugo looked back towards the road, shielding his eyes from the refracted intensity of the snowglare. “That’s not so grave a sin.”

“I mentioned your time with the Klan.”

Hugo’s eyes widened, his forehead wrinkling despite his revitalized youth, morphing him suddenly into that solemn man Willis remembered from the confirmation hearings decades and lifetimes earlier. “That was wrong. That was really wrong of you.”

“I know it was.”

“I mean, why did you do that? Why would you do that to me? These mistakes, they just keep following, like a bad smell, and they never let go—some mistakes never let go. But that’s with them, out there. I don’t need this with you, Willis.” He leaned back, thick hands on his knees, rocking back and forward in the seat. “Why did you have to do that?”

“I don’t know why I did it. But it was wrong. And I’m sorry.”

“You’re damned right it was wrong.”

“And that’s why I’m apologizing.”
“I don’t go around telling people about you.”

“That’s because I tell them myself.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t hide who I am.”

“Say what you mean, Willis, say what you mean! You think I’m hiding? You think I’m not being myself?”

“That’s not it at all—”

“But that’s what you’re thinking!” Hugo laughed, his index finger pointed straight at Willis’ head. “You hold on and you hold on and you think that you’re the person you were before history singled you out and said, ‘you’re an important one.’ It doesn’t work that way, Willis. It doesn’t—it can’t. You and I are here, right now, two men, not blurbs and a sentence in a child’s textbook. This is the reward we earned. This is life at the end of history.”

Willis drove on, silent.

Minutes later, Hugo was still shaking his head. “Can’t believe you did that. Can’t believe it.”

At night the lights blazed and the snow makers coughed to life, dusting the side of the hill in a light powdery glaze that, if artificial, was still quite beautiful, Willis thought. They had both taken well to the sport, adequately, if not skillfully. By the time night took the mountainside in its chill grip they were proficient, and at the top of the lift Hugo paused a moment to wonder where in the shrinking compartments of his past life he could have sequestered this activity, or so many others. Where in the middle of the hearings and research and politics and the mechanics of history did he have time to glide down the side of
a snowy hill? Perhaps that is why history afforded him, and so many others, this second chance, he thought. It was no reward or gift of cosmic justice, but a consequence. A life of obscurity—the inverse of power and reason. Was it a punishment? Willis caught sight of Hugo, arching down the decline like an F4 sliding across doughy clouds. For some, definitely, it was no punishment. Was it possible to punish the wicked and reward the righteous by giving the lot of them the exact same thing? Willis didn’t trust history to be that clever. But he didn’t dismiss the notion..

In the low haze of the mountaintop Hugo appeared off the lip of the chairlift, goggles plastered against his forehead, heat steaming from inside his jacket.

“Having a good time?” Willis asked as his friend stepped to the ridge beside him.

“We need to do this more often.”

“We have plenty of time,” Willis replied, unable to keep his voice from dipping in range, as it so often did when he was pronouncing a criminal’s sentence.

“Uh oh.”

“What is it?”

“Hitler Hunters.” Hugo pointed with the end of his pole, down the hillside, where the parking lot of the ski lodge was rapidly filling with flickering green and yellow lights.

“What do you think they’re after?”

Hugo snorted, expelling a length of coiling snot to the ground below.

The only problem anyone had at the end of history was Hitler’s continued existence. Along with all the other masters of blood and death who had spotted the centuries since the beginning of time. Those who were judged interesting and congenial enough were forgiven their crimes, and displayed prominently for those lucky enough to be caught in history’s
joke. Others—Chairman Mao, for example—were promptly incarcerated. It was a different kind of display. But Hitler had evaded all of this.

This reason and no other within the fibrous realms of human sanity is what compelled the vigilante instinct in otherwise passive people to coalesce into an armed militia dedicated to the eradication of one man. They were not about justice, but something else entirely. It was as if the end of Hitler reborn would instantly release all the anguish and despair and death the man had wrought, shoot it up into the sky where it would evaporate into sweet-smelling mists and fireworks, the light of which would compel the world into spontaneous celebration.

This is what the Hitler Hunters believed. Either that, or they were simply bored with life at the end of history. Willis guessed it was a mixture of both.

Willis leaned back, letting the poles and his arms bear his weight, and thought idly for a moment that they were after Hugo. There was a passing resemblance between the Hugo and the Fuhrer of old, certainly enough to spark the zealous interest of the last semblance of end-times law.

They were the new judges, Willis thought suddenly. The Hitler Hunters. History no longer suffered any gatekeepers or movers, but here, at the stagnant end of time’s flow, the Hunters dealt in their own form of universal justice that was, without doubt, absolute. The law of the land was rendered in their pursuit. Could they be after Hugo? It didn’t matter if Hugo was not Hitler—the reborn had inexplicably been returned the gift of life, and without a passing knowledge of the source, that gift was theirs to take away.

“Up here!” Willis wanted to say. He saw himself gesturing, at the top of the mountain, in his mind. “Here’s right here! The man you’re looking for! Hugo Black! Not
me, I didn’t do anything. I’m just here enjoying the view. Not sure why I was sent back, really—isn’t history a strange thing?” The Hunters, in their blended oranges and greens and yellows, would swarm around him, agree, take Hugo away and leave Willis in his frozen obscurity.

“At least they have something to answer for,” Willis said out loud.

“What’s that?” Hugo was watching the men and women unload from their vans, silver rifles slung across their backs. They were scarcely better organized than the mob that grows out of an angry crowd.

“They’re sure of what they are doing.” Willis chewed his lip.

Hugo wasn’t convinced. “If a quick and solid faith is all that’s required, then history is a bigger fool than I thought. Let’s get down the hill one more time before they shut the place down.”

Before Willis could object Hugo slammed the goggles down onto the bridge of his red nose and pushed off. At the bottom, the Hitler Hunters leveled rifles in their faces as they explained who they were. The Hunters asked, without any hint of irony, if they knew where Hitler was.

“Have you checked Hell?” Hugo suggested amiably as they studied his wind-blown features.

Willis did not say anything, though he thought that if they could have checked Hell, the Hunters would have, and done it gladly. Ultimate justice required an ultimate villain, and even Satan himself, if he existed, would have bended knee to Hitler’s reputation on the scale of evil.

“They’re alright,” a burly black-bearded man pronounced to his companions. “You two should think about joining us—lend us your expertise about being returned.”
Hugo took off his skis and stomped away. Willis said, “I’m afraid you’d find our expertise lacking,” and he meant it. He considered the Hitler Hunters and their prey. At least they knew their roles, had the certainty of them to hold onto, Willis thought. Expertise? Who among them knew anything about living a second life, much less one at the final step of history’s bloodied spire.

Hugo slept in the car on the way back to the city, and the radio was awash with the prattle of the Hunters and their advocates. They had taken over nearly every station, compelled to draw the rest of the world into their mission. Willis listened as they listed Hitler’s transgressions, and began reciting the names of those who perished in Nazi death camps. The oration would take months to complete. The point was obvious.

Willis thought of the bar as he drove, he thought of Hugo’s Klan and the camps on American soil, all that dust and grit and silt and crust of the riverbed breaking free and flowing and flowing and accumulating here, collecting into black piles here, here, in the swelling tidepool of their second lives.

“What a terrible place this is,” he said, and his hands went loose about the steering wheel. At the exit, the vehicle left the freeway and arched down into the city, passing signs pointing into New Jersey and Baltimore and beyond, those cruel reminders of the certainty of the first life, and the eerie similarity of that life to the current one.

The thrill of horror was gone.

Hugo Black woke up alone. A thin sheen of drool had dried to the side of his face and the seatbelt where it lay. He smacked his lips a few times to get the taste of heavy slumber out of his mouth and looked around for Willis. He was in the parking garage—the high-rise building across from their shared apartment. The radio was on, rattling off names
that meant nothing to Hugo: “…Najman Fryat…Abraham Godman…Elly Weist…Lia Sadun…”

Hugo saw himself in the side mirror as he exited the car and called Willis’ name, marveled again at the blessed prospect of second youth, at the mistakes that needn’t be repeated, at the simple sight of hair growing at the crown of his head.

“Willis?” Hugo bent his head down and swore. He still could not believe his friend had given him up so quickly, spoken the words so freely to a near-stranger when Hugo had worked so hard to lock that troublesome viper of the past away. Hugo walked to the ledge, looked at the two-story drop below, the glistening streets and fluorescent orange lights.

It couldn’t have been jealousy, Hugo thought. Certainly not. They were both young, both blessed. Hugo left the ledge and called Willis’ name again, one last time, and listened to the sound of his voice echo in the solitary caverns of the garage. Some deep deficiency, Hugo thought, a buried flaw or thwarted desire had compelled Willis to speak ill that night. Likewise it had been some deep and buried virtue that compelled Willis to speak of it and apologize. Despite it all, Willis was a good man, Hugo knew. They both were. They must be.

Hugo stepped quicker with this sudden affirmation—forgiveness was not freely given to those in their second lives, but Hugo vowed that, to the extent it was his to give, he would extend it to his friend when next he saw him.

In the empty parking garage, the abandoned radio continued to speak the names, churning out the sound into the concrete void, where the echoes rang for minutes before they died, unheard.
While Driving

Recent studies conducted by the Institute of Legitimate Inquiry found that I exceed the posted speed limits while driving ninety-five percent of the time. Of those transgressions, nearly half are at speeds ten miles or more above the posted limits. Time is highly valuable and as adult life progresses I am found to be less and less tolerant of increasingly long commutes. The study indicated there may be a correlation between age and the decline of passive acceptance of driving times in excess of thirty minutes. Time is always in short supply, the researchers found.

The study predicts that as much of twenty percent of my lifespan will be spent within a motor vehicle. Coupled with the thirty-four percent in bed and the eighteen percent in front of a computer screen, this means that over half of my life will be passed in utterly sedentary inactivity.

Heart attack, along with traffic accident, cancer, and merry-go-round malfunction, rank highest on the list of probable causes of my death.

The study also concluded that I have a relative chance of receiving a traffic citation for speeding less than one percent of the time. This rate was nearly tripled when I was found to excessively rocking out to songs sung by Freddie Mercury, Steve Perry, or, surprisingly enough, Jon Anderson. Loud back-beated music raises the heart-rate, researchers postulate, causing me to discharge this mercurial energy by accelerating to fantastically reckless speeds. The rate of this strangely focused exuberance is increased by long periods of passive-lethargic activity both at work and at home. Researchers recommend that I get out more.

I was found to be nearly twice as likely as all other drivers to pick my nose at stoplights, but half as likely to pass a vehicle traveling at well below the posted speed.
Researchers also found that in cases of extreme anger and frustration, I was thirty-percent more likely than other drivers to use an uncommon combination of two more common expletives, such as “Fucktard” and “Bitchwad” in reference to nearby drivers exhibiting overly aggressive behavior. Though on initial surveys I checked “No” on the box marked “Do you use your middle to signify displeasure?”, the Institute found this was untrue, as I engage the appendage in displays of frustration nearly eight percent of the time, though occasionally keep it below window-level, where the offender is not likely to see it. Researchers term this pattern of behavior “pansyshit road rage.”

The Institute study found that I am terrible at following directions when driving to new places, easily confused by road signs, and that I lose my way when traveling to a new location a staggering seventy-three percent of the time. These instances were accompanied by habits of excessive nervousness, including nail-biting and beard-plucking. I am bearded (or relatively goat-teed) ten percent of the time. My sweat threshold was calculated at a record one hundred and seven (high).

While driving, the study concludes I conducted verbal conversations with myself or with surrounding drivers (in both cases, one-sided conversations) a startling twenty-five percent of the time. These conversations are play-acted by me, researchers say, using a higher pitched sing-songy voice to represent the object of my scorn.

“Hey, bitchwad, why is your turn signal still on?”

“Well, I’m an idiot and I’m talking on my cell phone, that’s why!”

In cases when following excessively slow drivers, researchers found that I suspect they are either a) old; b) foreign; or c) women. I am right exactly half of the time. When an overly aggressive driver is flashing me from behind to go faster, I assume they are a man. I am right nearly all of the time, except when I am not.
The data reveals I wear a seatbelt one hundred percent of the time, have driven over legal limits of intoxication twice, and that I openly suggest that cops should be out hunting terrorists or hurricanes instead of setting speed traps on the stretch of interstate that sinks from mountainous 70 mph Virginia to flat 55 mph Ohio. The police declined to comment on the results of the study.

The study concludes that I run parking lot stop signs a staggering ninety-eight percent of the time, because “they aren’t real stop signs,” recklessly endangering the lives of men, women, and seedless watermelon. Earlier surveys indicated that I considered myself a “pretty safe driver,” but this study has thrown that assertion into doubt.

Presented with the results of this study, I placed a call to my office to get a reaction. I was not available to respond.
All Our Fathers

When my older brother Marcus comes home my father loses his job to stay with him. Marcus is broken in seventeen places and needs someone to feed him and wipe his ass and carry his shit away in a silver tray all day long, but my father decides even before his eldest son is dropped at his doorstep by an ambulance that he is going to quit.

“Damn union’s ruining everything,” he says. “Honest man can’t get a job unless he’s willing to sit around all day long. I tell you—I won’t do it.” His dispute with the union is play-acted on our dinner table, where the lazy steak, laced with glistening fat, is replaced by the lean and honest chicken.

Up until this I have always assumed that my father is an honest man, that his bouncing from job to job is a symptom of each employer’s particular flaws and unreasonable expectations. I watched my father manage long assembly lines, maintain physical plants, and build things, like the fresh one-story homes on the banks of the Erie Canal. But he never holds these jobs long. And when Marcus comes home he stops working altogether. We rely on my mother’s Catholic School librarian’s salary.

In the afternoons I see them together, after school, Marcus and my father. They watch the black and white television in Marcus’ shadowed room, my father asleep with his head against the dresser, Marcus leaning back, eyes dully focused on the screen. Sometimes Marcus sees me and gives a small smile. When my father wakes, the lines from the dresser are imprinted on his face like a savage pink tattoo, and they do not fade until morning.

“Motorcycle,” Marcus told me the day the ambulance dropped him at our doorstep. He had been gone for two years, and in that time had called twice. “I was coming through this forest in Wyoming—this was after the cliffs on the west coast, you should have seen them—and it was early morning and the sun was out. There were deer and critters
everywhere. The road didn’t even belong. It was just sun and trees, sun and trees everywhere, not a hint of wind or traffic. And here I come motoring through on my loud-ass bike. Thought I could go fast enough to lose myself in the sun and trees—I wanted to leave the sound of my engine behind. You can go fast enough to do that, you know. Leave the sound behind.”

“Was it a tree?” I ask.

“No,” Marcus says. “A car.”

He will say no more.

The bill for the ambulance ride arrives in October and my father goes out again during the days, taking odd jobs at lumber yards and whatever his friends will give him to cover the difference. My mother and I ignore each other on a daily basis, as we have for the majority of my high school education. Father Branault is her good friend at St. Thomas Aquinas High School. In the mornings I bring him his newspaper from the steps in front of school. He expects this from me, and I obey.

“Thank you, Joshua,” he says, and then adds, “Are you good with God today?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Have you confessed?”

“Last week I took confession with Father Rudduger.”

“Very good.”

Taking my cue for dismissal, I wonder if Branault will cross-check my lie, if he will draw Rudduger into his confidence. The priests at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic High School keep little company except themselves, but Branault towers over all of them, by virtue of his size, perhaps, or his massive voice, or the way his hands clench and unclench,
Despite everything, I feel safe at school, even in Father Branault’s shaded office, which is small and dark and smells like sweet wax and sweat. I feel safe everywhere, except when I am with Marcus. In the two years he has been gone we have changed and yet we haven’t. He cannot move and asks me questions that he shouldn’t have to ask, questions that have easy answers, really, if he’d just bother to look. But he seems to have lost his ability to gauge Mom and Dad along with his basic mobility and excretory functions. The latter two he will regain in time, the hospital notes say, but the others are not as certain.

“Has Dad been like this the whole time?” Marcus asks me one day.

“Pretty much.”

Marcus laughs. “My hospital bill came in the mail today.”

“Big?”

“Enormous. I threw it in the trash.”

“That was smart.”

“They’ll send another. And another after that.” His left arm is in a rigid opal cast and the purple in his face has faded into a dull bruise. “How you been, kiddo? You do it with a girl yet?”

“No,” I say, and I leave, because it is not safe to stay.

My mother, over the course of my high school career, has insinuated herself into the fabric of the school so much that she seems a permanent fixture. No one, neither students nor teachers, can remember a time when she was not there, when she was not managing the
library, or overseeing the implementation of the boxy computers with their black and green screens, instructing all on the matter of their navigation.

Besides her, there are three priests who reside within and are also inseparable from the school: Rudduger, Branault, and Million. Father Million runs the school as lead pastor and president. He is also the shortest man I have ever seen, completely bald on top with a flailing attempt at a comb-over. He walks the halls each morning before class, oblivious to the fact that all of his carefully rehearsed comments are not particular to any student.

“Great game on Sunday,” he says to me.

“I don’t play football.”

“Are you sure? You had two interceptions! You’re mighty fast out there, son.”

“I wasn’t there.”

“What are your plans for the future?”

“College, I guess.”

He pats my shoulder. “Good for you. You belong at a good school. Keep it up. Those recruiters had their eyes on you.”

He shuffles away, supremely satisfied with my prescribed future.

Rudduger is the associate pastor who teaches, among other things, sex-ed and the sanctity of marriage in an apologetic sort of manner.

“I know you don’t think I’m qualified for this sort of thing, but I’ve been trained to counsel couples and deal with all of these issues as they relate to the church and God.”

Offering that, Father Rudduger opens the floor for questions. He is bald, like Father Million, but taller and lean, with a slight paunch. He wears a densely thick salt-and-pepper beard that frames his face into an upside down triangle, and his glasses obscure his beady eyes from me and the class.
There are many technical and anatomical questions put to him, and Rudduger answers with the familiar platitudes of the calendar as birth control, and, of course, wait until marriage. One boy near me, who rarely ever speaks, wants to know if twins can be born to two different fathers, and Father Rudduger ponders this question with a Socratic journey through the uterus to the feminine subconscious without arriving at a solid answer.

Father Branault is the largest of the three ordained men in the school. His face is pasty and his hair is the color of pumpkinseed. It is his job to elucidate all the mysteries of the faith that do not pertain to sex and marriage, or the administration of a high school.

“God knows what is going to happen, hopes for you to do the right thing, but does not step in to force your hand. This is free will.”

Someone is agitated by this. “If God knows what is going to happen, how is it not predestination? If He knows, it must have happened somewhere, if only in the mind of God, and so it must happen.”

Father Branault is unfazed. “Of course He knows all of the sins we will commit, but He has granted us the free will to commit them.” Branault speaks of free will like it is his personal treasure, like God has granted him a supreme gift and the distinction of illuminating its power to the faithful youth. This is far removed from the discussions two years ago, where “Why does God let bad things happen?” dominated the classroom. Though we did not find the answer to this question, things moved on as if we had.

There are times I want to bring the class back to that question, but the deeper we go, the more intricate the mysteries probed, the more the nature of God becomes a matter of fact rather than a matter of mystery.

We memorize these facts, and then we take a test.
Father Branault says Mass after school in the chapel on the third floor, and every Wednesday and Friday I assist him. He is quick and methodical with the motions. Together we have the service down to a lean thirty-two minutes, which makes it exceptionally popular amongst the student athletes who are often required to attend.

“The Lord be with you,” he says.

The response: “And also with you.”

“Let us bow our heads and pray.”

I hold the heavy catechist’s tome before him, open to the designated prayer.

“Lord Almighty, grant us the…”

When Mass is concluded, I help Father Branault with his vestments, and in the sacristy of the chapel, he finishes the remainder of the wine used for the sacrament. I put the remaining hosts into the golden tabernacle at the head of the altar, close the heavy doors, forming the whole sun carved on their surface. In the carving, the sun is rising. I extinguish the candles and go to Father Branault.

“I’m leaving now, Father.”

“Good, Joshua, good.” I leave him there in the sacristy, and he stays there—for how long, I do not know. I would not bother to assist him at Mass except that he asked me to. Alone in the sacristy, his plump face is surrounded with the glow of sweat and bristle, his light orange hair matted against his large skull. He is surrounded by the elements of the holy, he wears the band of God about his neck. Within the walls of this high school, sometimes Father Branault is God.

When God speaks, you obey.

I obey.
“I’m almost ready to work again,” Marcus says, but nothing could be farther from the truth. I carry him to the yard so he can get some air, and he’s heavier than I thought he would be. On the way down the stairs, I bump his head three times on the railing.

“Watch it there, clumsy.”

“Sorry.”

Marcus has always been big, but once we’re outside among the leaves I can tell he’s lost weight—there’s a lightness to him, and his arms are like the neck of the guitar he keeps in the corner of his room, straining against some unseen pressure. His stomach is sunken.

I place Marcus on the edge of the deck our father has not yet finished, and never will. My brother takes a rake and holds it tightly before his chest, like a weapon, but otherwise does nothing. He fishes his pockets for a cigarette but finding none shrugs and leans back. I retrieve the other rake from the garage and start in on the leaves.

“What are things like at school?” Marcus asks. “You know, with Mom there.”

“We see each other every day. It’s a long car ride.”

He laughs, scratches his bare foot with the edge of his rake. “She left us when you were little. I’m surprised Dad took her back.”

“Why wouldn’t he?” I am a little offended by the notion that our family should not be whole. Having Marcus home, even in his broken state, has rendered our home complete in a way it never was before. I would never tell him, but I am glad that he is back, even if he is injured. Maybe I am even glad he is injured, because it means he will have to stay, at least for a time.

“Because she’s crazy.”
I hold my rake in one hand, like a weapon. I remember when we were smaller Marcus and I used to have vicious rake fights in the backyard all the time. Once, I caught him unguarded and opened a cut above his eye that needed five stitches.

“She’s fine now.”

“No,” Marcus disagrees, “She’s not. She started going to church with Dad all the time. They’ve both lost it.”

“At least they didn’t bust themselves up on a motorcycle.” This is my default response: lacking anything better to say, revert to an insult on his condition.

But Marcus knows me, knows me at least as well as he knows himself, if not better. He smiles, and without warning clocks me with the handle of the rake he’s holding. “I’m not that busted.”

He dodges my counterattack, laughing the entire time. When he finally stops for a breath he is tired, and I carry him inside again, place him down on his bed, turn on the television for him, and leave the door open in case he needs anything.

Everything changes on All Saint’s Day. The Halloween the night before had been muted. There were no costumes, just Marcus in his wheelchair, handing out candy with his good arm. My father was working a nightshift somewhere.

“Nice costume!” the parents told Marcus as he issued sweets to their children. “That cast looks so real!”

“Yeah,” Marcus said, grinning, “Made it myself.”

For the rest of my days I will remember the threshold between Halloween and All Saint’s Day as a void, a pendulous chasm that can only be breached by something powerful enough to move the fall season to the edge and force it to take the plunge into winter.
Father Branault is such a man, has such a power, but it is Eddie Franklin George that pushes him, and everyone else, to that fine edge. The boy with three first names in ascending alphabetical order flashes onto the local newspaper like lightning, his charges leaping from radio to television to print and then pinballing endlessly between all media.

After the Mass on All Saint’s Day, my mother calls me to the library, and I am surprised at how much the place has changed since we both arrived at St. Thomas Aquinas’s school. The emaciated shelves are now bursting with volumes, and heavy racks of paperbacks stacked like bricks form impressive columns in the center. There are printed invitations to “Read!” and “Settle down with a good book!” Their exuberance is not my mother’s.

“Josh, you’re going to hear a lot of things in the next few days, and I just want you to give Father Branault a chance. Just give him a chance, and an open mind.”

“What’s going on?” I ask, still not understanding.

“Just give him a chance.”

“What has he done?”

“Keep an open mind.”

At home, my father sulks over his food. Marcus and I watch him from the porch. My father is dirty, caked with the crust of the earth, and tired. He microwaves himself food, groused over the newspaper, and drinks beer. His work schedule has become a jumble of heavy hours and late nights that none of us bother to track anymore. Marcus heals and recovers, but his bills do not, so my father works. On All Saint’s Day, my father greets my mother at the door, takes her bags, and says, “It’s time to move Josh somewhere else.”

“What? Why?”
“That priest. Josh can’t keep going there.”

My mother stomps into the kitchen, her heels grinding on the stained linoleum floor.

“I work there, Mason.” A tremor runs through her body, and I know this means she is calming herself. “It’s fine. That boy is just making up stories.”

“I won’t have my son attending school—helping Mass, even—with any man accused of that. I don’t care if he is a priest.”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

My father shakes his head, digging in. “I’m pulling him tomorrow.”

“If you pull him, I could get fired!”

“You let that principal know that we’re not keen on trusting priests right now.”

“The principal is a priest!” My mother’s hair is flying, torn free from its spray and gel shackles by her quivering head, by her disbelief in her husband’s vehemence.

“Then tell him we don’t trust him, either.”

Marcus raises his eyebrows, and from the porch we hear our mother take the stairs, pound each one in anger, and slam the door to the master bedroom.

My father calmly finishes his meal, settles himself on the couch in the living room, and goes to sleep.

“Are we going to Mass today?” I ask.

“Of course we are,” my mother answers.

“No,” my father answers.

It is Saturday evening. I ask the same Sunday morning and get nothing from my father. My mother leaves and goes by herself. She returns and does not speak a word to anyone.
Eddie Franklin George disappears and does not speak for himself—he has a bold young lawyer with perfect hair to do it for him. My father does not follow through on his promise to remove me from school, but sometimes he appears as the final bell is ringing in overalls and hard hat, ready to take me home.

“I’m watching this place,” he says. “That priest better pray I don’t find him.”

“What would you do?”

But my father does not say.

In his race to catch up with Marcus’ bills, he is a man with little patience. He is quick to rise and to bed—when he is home he attends to Marcus and then to me like he never has before, as if he has suddenly realized his sons are in great danger, and only his protection can see them through.

“That’s messed up,” my brother says of Father Branault when we get home. “Did you know that kid?”

“Yeah.”

“What was he like?”

“Kind of quiet. Not really a good student. But he was a fast runner. And he got in a fight at the beginning of the year and almost got expelled.”

“Is he telling the truth?” Marcus always asks me questions in this manner, as if I hold the correct answer in the most secure places of my heart, and he can unlock these by simply asking for it. He is not asking for what I think; he is asking for what is true. He cannot bring himself to consider that I would not know the truth of the matter.
The investigator from the newspaper comes to ask me questions, because I assisted Mass with Father Branault. He is an older man with a bristled moustache who seems tired of his job. He asks me if there was ever anything improper going on.

“No, not really,” I answer.

He asks did I ever notice anything strange.

Strange? A man who devotes his life to Christ and exerts such force at Mass that he is left empty at the end, barely able to stand? How is this not strange? The mysteries of the sacraments that he presided over, they were strange every day. Yes, I noticed. I could not help but notice, until the strange became so commonplace that it was not strange at all. Mystery became familiar.

I answer, truthfully, “No.”

There is no avoiding my mother. We are chained by our common destination each day, and she looks at me with questions she dares not speak. The weeks pass slowly, and when I see her in the hall at the fresh start of December she appears near tears.

“We must pray for a brave and misguided man,” Father Million instructs us over the loudspeaker. We are taught to practice forgiveness. The good deeds of Father Branault are unfurled like sacred scrolls, and within those schools walls there is nothing but good will and second chances.

But the fresh-faced attorney beats his fist on television, and shouts about how that man should never be near children again. I want to shout back at him, through the television screen, yes, yes.

Forgiveness should not be so easy. Sometimes, it cannot be.

I think my mother knows this.
I do not see Father Branault again. When my father finally agrees to go to Mass again it is Christmas Eve, and he makes sure that Marcus and I attend, that we go as a family for the first time in many years. Marcus is on crutches as we ascend the steps of the church, and my father takes care to anoint his brow and all of ours with holy water as we enter. At the offering he and my mother both give crisp twenty dollar bills.

The priest at our parish has spoken of the “terrible situation” for months, and he is clearly tired of it and will have nothing more of it on this night, the celebration of the eve of Christ's birth. The church is packed, filled with people that my father once scornfully termed “Christmas and Easter Catholics.” He himself has not been since October.

My mother is made up, hair in place, wearing a muted blue dress. She has made a fine dinner that awaits us at home. She holds my hand during the prayer of the faithful.

“Bow your heads and pray for God’s blessing,” the priest intones, and as one the congregation’s eyes lower. But my father’s eyes do not, and he stares directly at the priest, as if invoking the judgment of God on the man before the altar. He is resolute, arrogant even, in his defiance.

Marcus and I both see this. I suspect that the priest sees it too, for he levels an icy stare in our direction, meeting my father’s challenge. My mother’s face is buried in her chest. Instinctively, when the time comes, my entire family begins the affirmation of faith.

“We believe in God the almighty, creator of Heaven and earth, maker of all that is seen and unseen.” Marcus shifts on his crutches, and my mother takes his free hand.

“We believe in Jesus Christ, his son, begotten and not made, one in being with the father. He was crucified, died and was buried. On the third day he rose again.” I take
shelter in my silence. Only my mother has repeated this affirmation, and I can tell from the ripple that runs along her spine that she knows it.

“We believe in one holy and apostolic Church…”

Around my family, the voices swell and form a crust to our silent void. I do not say the words to the last affirmation, nor does Marcus. My father and mother have remained silent as well, simply looking at one another. My mother looks relieved. The Christmas candles glitter at the front of the altar.

Leading, she takes my father’s hand, and together they walk down the aisle together, and Marcus and I follow. She passes by flickering candles and holly leaves, and when she arrives at the heavy doors she throws both of them open with her hands. We leave as the priest is preparing communion, the sleeves of his robes rising and dipping. Behind us, the congregation speaks in one voice, as if acknowledging our departure, sending us on our way. My father puts his hand on my head.

“Amen.”