This thesis is a collection of very normal things called stories. Stories concerning the usual trials, tribulations, triumphs, and daily goings-on of your basic, run-of-the-mill characters. It’s about what you’d expect. Plots, settings, conflicts, narratives made up of sentences and paragraphs and what have you. There are a lot of words in here. Meant to communicate some such thing or other. Nothing out of the ordinary. Standard stuff really. There’s nothing to see here.
VERY NORMAL THINGS

A Thesis

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Matthew J. Weinkam
Miami University
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Advisor: ______________________________
Margaret Luongo

Reader: ______________________________
Joseph Bates

Reader: ______________________________
Tim Melley
# Table of Contents

Concerning J___  

2

The Two Kinds of Decay  

6

A Few More Questions  

14

All Right  

17

By Way of Explanation  

24

Triptych  

25

Never, Nothing, No One  

30

In Visible Cities  

34

Adams  

35

Estate Sale  

42
"She had felt restless, of course, in specific and vague ways, all her life, as have, she figured, all people paying sufficient attention to their lives to admit that their lives are utter mysteries."

~ Padgett Powell, *Mrs. Hollingsworth’s Men*
Concerning J___

After she says she is leaving him, J___ is glad, relieved actually, and makes himself a hairspray-Zippo flamethrower first thing. It’s a bitch to hold and lights only one in every five tries but damn if it can’t make a body jump when it does. I know what I’m doing, he tells her while lighter fluid drips onto his hand, though he isn’t sure he believes it himself. Chasing Dog across the living room shag as she yips at the flames, he feels full of some new mystery he decides to call freedom and later that night, amid empties of high-content, low-quality alcoholic drink, decides her never needed him in the first place.

Or was it the other way around?

Next morning the air is cold and fresh and unforgiving. A robin chirps outside J___’s window and he does his best to ignore it. She’s left for work but hasn’t left for good, as a note on the counter makes clear. Breaking up, it says, is not the same as breaking a lease. Stretching, J___ feels strangely elated, unburdened, and would like to do the adult equivalent of skipping, whatever that is, but cuts his hair instead, lopping off fistfuls unceremoniously with scissors he found in the kitchen. The new J___ looks jagged, homeless-like, and in need of a matching beard. I’m in need of a matching beard, he says to the mirror. She used to make him shave every day. Three bagels, a beer, and J___ is outside standing in the middle of a new day while Dog shits on the stoop.

J___ does not clean up after.

The headache arrives late without an invitation as J___ is in search of somewhere to go besides work. Turns out the adult equivalent of skipping is skipping your job, only at ten in the morning there’s little else to do in a small town but slave. Pubs are not yet pouring, the hour won’t be happy for quite a bit, and daytime television was always her thing. J___ browses a local hardware store for two solid hours before admitting defeat and heading to work. The fistful of washers he pockets on the way out, though, makes him feel better even if he has no use for them. Stealing is a thrill no matter what the fuck you take, he thinks, washers a-jangle in his slacks.

Boss says: I’m afraid I just don’t know you anymore, J___.

J___ says: I’m sort of between identities at the moment, Boss.
Lunch time and J___ is trying to drive away the headache with a fast food concoction where meat is sandwiched between two larger meats only it doesn’t feel like enough. When he’s kicked out for trying to flambé the food with leftover whiskey from a flask and the homemade flamethrower he vows revenge. I vow revenge, he says though no one listens. It’s not the first time he’s been told not to return to this particular restaurant, not the first time the authorities were summoned, but last time he was here with her they were caught together in the bathroom so the manager may not have recognized him fully clothed. He wonders why he came back here and hopes it was just for the sandwich.

After he peels out in the parking lot the throb behind his eyes and the stiffness in his neck return, and not even running red lights can make it go away.

Boss says: And what’s that jangle coming from your slacks, J___?
J___ says: It’s just my swinging dick, Boss. Wanna taste?

With the rest of the afternoon suddenly free, the rest of the year now actually, J___ makes it a goal to get tossed out of every bar in town, but the first one he goes to, called Bar, won’t ask him to leave. He slurs racial epithets, breaks glasses with increasing violence, drops his pants even, but the regulars are little more than amused. They buy him shots and eat their peanuts like they’ve been relieved of some major burden and when he vomits on the one with the thickest neck he’s given a black eye but still isn’t shown the door. It’s like I can’t ever want what I get, J___ says to the floor, and repeats it as though trying to elicit a response or correct a mistake. J___ doesn’t remember much of the drive home, only acceleration, the clock on the dash glowing at him, and the vague sense of nausea and honking horns.

Back at the apartment her things are all over and there is nowhere he can pass out that isn’t on top of an oversized sweatshirt or used towels or plate of day old mac and cheese that is hers. Everything is scattered, in pieces, disconnected and fogged with memory. A hairbrush and a crumpled up yogurt coupon lying next to each other on the sofa seem episodic, chronological even. J___ is not sure who is supposed to move out now, not sure of who they are anymore, can’t even recall their goddamn names. The whole thing’s too complicated. He wants to break her things, rip them to shreds, swallow them whole to show he’s fine and happy and full of freedom.

*
But it’s not the end. J___ wakes an hour or two later knowing it’s not a new day, it’s the same one as before and it’s unavoidable. Events from earlier return to him in pieces that he struggles to put in order and it baffles him to think how swiftly one can dissemble one’s entire life. Or is the word disassemble? Waiting for the feeling of sickness to come, J___ is glad no one is watching. Glad his life is his own. Glad he managed not to choke on his own throw-up or get too much of it in his hair. Most things can be cleaned, his clothes can be washed, and the stains removed, the whole job thing could be a problem though, he thinks as Dog licks his purple eye. By the time she gets home from work he’s more or less in order. She greets Dog and acknowledges him but not his frayed hair and not his bruises either. Her silence concerns J___. It’s like there’s two of each of them in the room, the them from before and the them now, and the four are just getting to know each other.

As J___ and she drive Dog to the vet appointment they’d nearly forgotten about, J___ begins to think that the new mystery, upon reflection, feels nothing like freedom should feel at all. Dog looks miserable in one of those mid-size cages used for animal transportation and J___ and she look tense in one of those mid-size vehicles used for conversation at environmentalist luncheons and, occasionally, for people transportation. When he says, Are you sure you know what you’re doing? she says, I know how to take care of Dog. When he says, I meant with us, she just sighs. No one says anything about the new dents on the fender. J___ finds an unfamiliar seduction in obeying traffic laws while he struggles to remember why they agreed to go to the vet together in the first place.

Dog performs well for the most part and it’s the first time J___ can remember a trip to the vet that hasn’t caused J___ crippling anxiety. The two of them take turns holding her, whispering comfort, making reassuring looks with their faces, as a stony red-haired woman probes without mercy. Dog has dog eyes and J___ hesitates before attributing complex human emotions to them but it looks for all the world like she is content or feeling something like contentment which doesn’t seem right at all. It’s kind of disturbing, actually, and J___ can’t wait for when the whole process is finally over. Dog yips and jumps the whole way back to the car but neither of them say shush or down.

J___ says: I have something I want to say.

She says: I’ll fix your hair when we get home.

They stop for food on the way back. Behind the counter a worker, an old man, shuffles to refill the ice machine, the weight of the bucket threatening to tip him. He must be in his
seventies, eighties perhaps, the skin on his arms is pocked and scarred with age, and J’s heart positively breaks from watching him move. He wants to do the adult equivalent of crying, whatever that is. Later, seated in a booth, they see him make his rounds. He wipes tables, scoots chairs, stoops for stray napkins; the place would fall apart without this man, J can just feel it. And now he is moving around the dining room, offering teenagers and businessmen refills on their drinks, but no one needs him to get one. The old man is moving closer, his slacks are belted high on the waist, his posture hunched as if burdened, and in only three more tables he will be standing in front of them, asking J and her if they need anything. Watching the man approach, J is aware of the knot in his stomach. Across the table, she looks up and J begins to speak.
The Two Kinds Of Decay

“No worthy problem is ever solved within the plane of its original conception.”
~ Albert Einstein

Stares at Television.
Eats lemon drops.
Contemplates: *Television amusing.*

Alone.
For now.

After lemon drops: Salad and breadsticks and pasta and sauce and wine and wine and wine.
Napkins.
Television: *There there.*

The regret returns.
Television: *Concern.*
Makes phone call.
Rings.
Gets voice mail.
Contemplates: *Always with the voice mail...* 
Television: *Consolation.*
Contemplates: *What is this feeling?*
Stares at Internet.
Wireless connection.
Broadest of bands.
Internet: There is so much you don’t know.
Eats twizzlers.

Checks inbox.
Email from office: Two clients. Three orders each. Usual way. By Tuesday. Or else...
Contemplates: Sweat is the cologne of accomplishment.
Internet: Search me.
Contemplates: Sweat is the cologne of accomplishment.
Internet: Just browse.
Contemplates: Sweat is...

Surfs web.

Internet: Yes.

Stares at mirror.
Mirror: Not this cliché...
Contemplates: Fat.
Contemplates: Low self-esteem.
Contemplates: Going to be fired fuck up failure.
Mirror: God, you’re depressing.
Contemplates: Nostalgia.
Contemplates: Should’ves and could’ves &c.
Mirror: It’s about regret, isn’t it?
Contemplates: And self-hatred.
Mirror: Obviously.
Contemplates: And other stuff.
Mirror: Of course.
Contemplates: Suggestions?
Mirror: Wash your hands.
Mirror: Maybe set some reasonable goals.
The Thing About Goals: There are only two possible outcomes.

Elsewhere
The daughter. Pink and plump. Skin drum-tight. Blinding youth in a heap of the old.

Slow motion is the only motion in Elsewhere.

The daughter cares. Talks soft. Aids in baggy clothes. Floats between crafts and cards and endless Bingo. Seven people named Ruth. Used to be nine. The door is a revolving one. The home is away from home. Fragile wisdom. Kiss gently. Bathe with tender soapy strokes.

Her phone rings.
She lets it go to voice mail.

Reasonable Goal 1: Lose some weight.
Lemon drops in trash.
Twizzlers in trash.
Salad, breadsticks, pasta too.

Three and one-half sit-ups.

Total and complete fucking exhaustion.

Television: Expert advice.
Internet: New updates.
Mirror: Don’t mope out on me again.

Alone.
For a while now…
Mirror: *Sigh.*

The regret returns.
Television: *Concern.*
Makes phone call.
Rings.
Gets voice mail.
Contemplates: *Always with the voice mail...*
Television: *Consolation.*
Contemplates: *What is this feeling?*
Mirror: *Repetition.*

Q: Regret?
A: Unfortunately.
Q: Regret of what?
Q: Regret of who?
A: Not who. Whom.
Q: Regret of whom?
Q: Regret about whom?
A: Himself.
Q: …
Q: Is that all?
A: Yes.
A: No.
A: Mostly about his daughter.
Q: His daughter?
A: And himself.
Q: You said that.
A: And other stuff.
Q: Of course.
Reasonable Goal 1: Lose some weight – failed.
Reasonable Goal 2: Finish work by Tuesday.
Stares at work.
Work:
Contemplates: *Work unamusing.*
Contemplates: *Perhaps a break—*
Email from office: *No breaks. Two more days. Finish on time. Or else...*

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**Daughter’s Conception**
Post-marriage. Pre-divorce.
Immaculate.

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Lemon drops and twizzlers and everything else.
Recovered from trash.
Also: *Wine.*

Stares at work.
Contemplates: *Perhaps an extension—*
Email from office: *No extensions. By tomorrow. Or else...*
Contemplates: *Cologne is the sweat of the accomplished.*
Reasonable Goal 1: Lose some weight – failed.
Reasonable Goal 2: Finish work by Tuesday – failed.
Reasonable Goal 3: Fix everything.
Contemplates: *Suicide.*
Mirror: *This has gone to a dark place.*
Mirror: *Suggestions?*
Television: *Jokes?*
Internet: *The information superhighway?*
Lemon drops: *Lemon drops?*

The regret returns.
Television: *Concern.*
Contemplates: *Need to contemplate.*
Television: *There there.*
Contemplates: *Shut up.*
Television: *Expert advice.*
Contemplates: *I’m going to lose it.*
Television: …
Television: *Jokes?*
Foot through Television.
Television stuck on foot.
Hop-and-kick dance.
Red face.
Collapse.
Television:
Internet: *So much to learn.*
Throw at wall.
Internet: *So many links.*
Stomp.
Foot pain.
Internet: *You’re alone without us.*
Hammer.
Hammer.
Hammer.
Internet:
Mirror: *A bit melodramatic, no?*
Hammer.
Mirror:
Elsewhere

She sees him and stops.


She wraps it tight. With gauze. Without questions. And after, he holds her arm. Tests his legs. Walks the grounds. Meets and greets and loses a game of bridge. Learns her life. If only a bit. Before it is time to leave.

He says thanks but means sorry.
She says you’re welcome but means you’re not.
Though once, and perhaps by accident, she may call him Dad.

What, he wonders, is this feeling?
Where, he thinks, is the regret?

For now.
Not alone.
Home.
Stares at mess.
Broken electronics and shattered glass.

Cleans house.
Takes out trash.
Finishes (finally) work.

Salad and breadsticks and pasta and sauce.
No wine.

Makes phone call.
Rings.

Q: What about the daughter?
A: What about her?
Q: Why the regret?
A: Her regret?
Q: No. His.
A: His regret?
Q: About her.
A: His regret about her?
Q: Yes. What about his regret about her?
A: It is loud. And corrosive. Like waves.
Q: No. What is it about?
A: What is what about?
Q: The regret.
A: What is the regret about?
Q: Yes.
A: Not about. Over.
Q: What is the regret over?
A: Not what. When.
Q: When is the regret over?
A: Never.
A Few More Questions for You About Your “Extended Business Trip”
and Those Pictures I Saw of You and Tom Buford Online

When are you going to start answering the phone? I used to think I’d just missed you out at a meeting or grabbing a blueberry bagel or five with the other women—but at two or four in the morning? And you who can’t sleep through a little deep breathing? The number you gave me for the hotel was wrong and now that I’ve managed to find the correct one by searching through the desk in your study the hotel has blocked our home phone, my cell phone, and now payphones too—I even tried those phones by the daycare—just because, what, I’m trying to get a hold of you? And was that a Hispanic family that answered the phone in your room last time I got through?

Your colleagues at America! Insurance! haven’t talked to me either since you left on the business trip and it’s been what, going on three months now? Which, speaking of, did you change your email address and forget to tell me? All my messages—to your work, personal, private, and company private-personal email addresses—have been sent back and I’m starting to wonder: is it some kind of internet problem? This letter (with an attached request to forward this on to you unopened and without reading it) is going to the hotel, your work (and all co-workers whose addresses you have), all our friends, all my family, and all of your family—all of whom have stopped answering my calls and emails by the way—in hopes of hearing anything back because, did you even get my first letter? Someone has to know something about what’s going on, wouldn’t you think? I mean, do you have any idea how difficult this has been?

I used to wonder: what would it be like raising a kid alone? Could I do it? Was I, as they say, strong enough? Now I wonder: what would it be like if you were back and I didn’t have to raise little Jamesie alone—change his poopy diapers, feed him baby mush, burp him and clean that baby mush off my shirt because I forgot to have a towel or something there (again)—while trying to hold down my Nails Etc. Hair Etc. assistant regional middle acting supervising manager position? (You think it gets any easier being the only male working there?) I mean, do you even know how hard it is to answer little Jamesie when he asks if you’ll be back to play that tossing game again, the one where you throw him into the air? (No, he hasn’t learned to talk yet—he asks with his eyes—but don’t you think he would have learned by now if you were still here?)
Why won’t you call or write or even pass the message along through someone else? Are you mad at me? Was it the first letter I sent? Was it that thing I said about never wanting to see you again? You don’t believe that do you? You don’t think I actually meant it, that I don’t want you here with me always and everyday, good, bad, sickness, health etc. etc. like we promised that April day three years ago in the Montgomery courthouse, you with that flower dress looking so pretty my hand shook while signing, remember? I was just angry and I hoped writing that in the letter would bring you back but I guess it wasn’t good enough, was it? What is it? Is it me? Am I too embarrassing? Too much Nails Etc. Hair Etc. and not enough America! Insurance!? Am I too clingy, too needy, too pestering, too intrusive, too paranoid, too self-conscious? Am I too much?

Or, wait, has your sister said something to you? You don’t believe her, do you? I have, I swear, no feelings whatsoever even in the slightest most minimal way for her, honest to God, that I would even begin to consider thinking about possibly acting upon (not that she’d say yes to even my most persistent advances…were I to make them), acting upon in any way even remotely similar to the way I saw you acting with Tom Buford in those pictures online that, what, you didn’t think I would see? Tom Buford? Really? Even if I liked your sister (which I don’t) and we got together (which we totally didn’t) don’t you think we’d have the decency to refrain from doing anything like that, that…dancing (if it can even be called that) much less taking pictures of it (and putting them online where anyone could find them)? Haven’t I always said, “That Tom Buford is one weird creep-o who would probably be into some wacky stuff that he’d take pictures of!” or something like that? You even said yourself you wished he wasn’t over so much installing that cabinet in the master bath when you were home alone with him—when was that, a year before Jamesie was born?—because he was such a big guy, a forceful and exhausting guy you said, plus: how long does it take to install one goddamn cabinet anyway? And now you’re down there …dancing with him? In nightclubs? Those pictures made me sick partly because of that creep-o Tom Buford, yes, but even more than that is: when was the last time you and I danced? Our honeymoon in Paris, Illinois?

I know I’m a screw up, and that I can be a bit thick, and that I can sometimes be annoying in my eager persistence, and that working at Nails Etc. Hair Etc. isn’t a very manly job, and that I sometimes say inappropriate things to your sister that I don’t really mean, and that little Jamesie can be a handful and that you always had a hard time with him, and that you sometimes felt your job was the only thing keeping you here, but you do know that that day, Friday January 21st, the day little Jamesie was born, I didn’t leave your side for a single minute of the thirty-one hours and fifty-six minutes you were in labor squeezing your hand white the whole time as though I were the one giving birth? That when he finally came out in that red-wet mess and I saw how big and beautiful he was, and when his tiny fingers wrapped soft around my pinkie and he
coughed, squeezing his little eyes shut, I knew a part of each of us was in this real live human person, that we had brought him into the world together? You don’t know this, I’m sure, but as you slept in the hospital, little Jamesie wrapped quiet in your arms, I climbed in the bed and lay next to you as best I could, near falling off, unable to slow my eager heart, wanting to hold you and little Jamesie so close and tight that no space was between us and we would melt together into one body; and as we lay there I knew I’d be a good father, I knew we’d be a real family, I knew we’d be happy, and together, for always, and ever, no question.

What I mean to say is I know little Jamesie isn’t mine, that you and Tom Buford left together, that you probably don’t plan on ever coming back—I’ve known all along, why pretend otherwise?—but I can accept all that and forgive you because anything is better than this, than being without you, which is why little Jamesie and I are coming down to find you, wherever you are, whoever you’re with (is it that Hispanic family?), even if you never get this letter, to ask one last, one final question: how will you end this?
All Right

We’re driving to find some cough syrup in Pipe’s brown, wood-paneled Oldsmobile and he keeps stopping to piss on the side of the road. Only he won’t just stop on the side of the road, he’s got to find some place where no one will see him so we spend hours on the side streets off of side streets looking for a fence or some bushes or a place without street lights where he can empty his pea-sized bladder.

Three Face lets him know that if we stop one more time so Pipe can jerk off he’s going to shit in the air vent for real. Pipe tries to laugh this off but he sounds worried. He knows Three Face is the type of guy to do that sort of thing, not just joke about it. But Pipe takes another pull from his forty and wanders off towards a tree anyway.

It’s the first week of the new year and warm enough for Three Face to wear a white v-neck with jeans and cowboy boots. I tell him he looks like one of the village people and he punches my arm and says he’s not a fucking fag which I take as proof positive. I’m wearing a blue flannel shirt one size too big, the one you got me from a thrift store, and there are so many holes in my shoes they’re practically sandals. It is a Tuesday. I can only see two stars in the sky when I tilt my head up and look out the back window. The moon is nowhere in sight.

When Pipe gets back he spits and throws his empty bottle in the road in front of the headlights and it shatters brilliantly. He stands by the door to survey the night. Why don’t you slow down, I tell him, you’re always in such a goddamned hurry it’s driving me crazy. Pipe finally gets in the car and reminds us, again, that when one of us gets our own goddamned car we can go as fast as we fucking want but until then it’s shut up or walk. Three Face points out it’s actually Sam’s car, like he always does, but this time the words sound different coming out of his mouth. Three Face fucked Pipe’s girl Sam two weeks ago and I can’t tell if Pipe knows about it yet or not. The two of them have been chilly all night but that’s not much different from the norm. Pipe seems less chatty than usual and from the backseat the space between the two of them looks like a dark chasm. Pipe puts the car in second and makes a point of running over the biggest shards of his forty before we head out.

Pittsburgh is never this warm in January and the strangeness of it makes the air thick with possibilities so we drive fast with the windows down and pretend it’s May. If the radio worked we would turn it up real loud but it doesn’t so the air we’re rushing through is the only thing that drowns out the silence. There are piles of snow melting, rotting in the warm air all along the
roadside, and the asphalt is the dark black of wet and recent rain. It’s decided that Sid is bound to have some Tussin so we’re off to his place in a hurry before this buzz wears off.

The road yawns out before us, long and slow, and I can feel myself floating somewhere behind my body. An old couple is holding hands waiting to cross on the corner and as we pass I yell that it’s getting late and shouldn’t they be dead or something? Pipe honks the horn and we laugh like we’re in high school, letting off steam and hormones. I think of the last time I saw you when we held hands over pancakes and fruit in the shape of a face. That diner was going out of business; it was set to close in a week. We didn’t even last to the end of the meal; you said you were leaving me, told me before your second cup of coffee even got there. That was four months ago now but I can still taste that pulpy OJ, probably expired, that never quite digested. Pipe keeps on the horn even though no one’s around until Three Face socks him in the ribs to make him stop. Just having some fun, Pipe says.

Sid lives with the shit and the scum in that dump they call Northview Heights but his place is nicer than any of ours. The door’s locked and no one’s answering so Three Face climbs through the broken window in the back to let us in. We pick around the empty house like bums in a dumpster. We do our best with the resin from the bowl in the kitchen, do a line of what looks like coke we find on the bathroom counter, check and recheck the empty, stained fridge that hangs with the door open, find nothing in all the usual places and nothing anywhere else either.

Fuck, says Three Face to no one. He’s got a pistol he found in the medicine cabinet. He’s pointed it at the empty Whitman’s Sampler box Sid uses to stash his weed. Three Face pulls the trigger and the sound is awful. Jesus Christ calm down just chill and take it easy would you, says Pipe. My head is pounding and even some honest over-the-counter cough syrup would really do the trick right now. Remind me to butt-fuck Sid’s sister, says Three Face, in front of the rest of her sixth grade special ed. class. You can tell he wanted to think of something meaner to say.

We leave the coffee table in pieces as a kind of sorry we missed you note to Sid and let the door hang open so he knows it was us. Since when does he lock the door, asks Pipe and we climb back in the car. The fuck do we do now? Three Face is playing with the gun he took but Pipe makes him put it in the glove box. We could head down to Colwell. Get stuff from someone down there, Three Face says. We’ve only been down Colwell for pick up once and even though Three Face says he’s there all the time we all know he’s full of it. Wal-Mart, I say, it’s twenty-four hours. I’m not in the mood for something heavy I just want some syrup. Three Face, real original, asks when my balls are going to drop but Pipe agrees with me so we’re off.

Ten blocks out Three Face wants us to turn around so he can shit on Sid’s porch or in his bed or something but Pipe says too late to go back now. Great fucking idea though, we say. Just the thought of it gets spirits back up.
Pipe stops to piss on the way and Three Face wants to know where the fuck it’s all coming from anyway and why he didn’t just go at the house before we left. Yeah, why didn’t you tinkle at the house before we left, I say in a lady voice. Mommy always tells you to tinkle before we leave. Pipe goes into a giggle fit and gets wiz on his jeans. Damn it, fuck, he says wiping himself. Does widdle Jonny need some toilet training, I say. I always do this with the high voice but they don’t laugh as much as you laughed. No one snorts or cries or shoots beer out their nose from it.

I’m fucking serious, says Three Face. Did you drink a goddamn lake earlier? That why we keep stopping? Pipe tells him he’s going to put him in the goddamned hospital with his near-dead mom if he doesn’t shut up and the night gets real quiet all the sudden. Three Face looks like he’s going to pull the gun out of the glove box and the two go into a stare down. I try and think of something funny to say but can’t. A robin chirps just inside headlight range and I can’t remember ever seeing one this late at night. We drive away in silence.

In the pharmacy section the entire supply of cough syrup is empty. There are labels and price tags for every medicine imaginable but the shelves are dusty and barren. The three of us stand in front of them in disbelief. Wal-Mart is fucking out of something?

When we ask what the fuck, exactly, is going on, an old dinosaur of a woman admits she has no idea. Could be an inventory shift, they do that sometimes overnight. Or maybe they’ve been recalled, traces of lead or something like that. Pipe looks at me like laced cough syrup was exactly what he was hoping for. I just don’t know, she says. Three Face doesn’t think she can be fucking serious but she assures him that she is quite serious. Don’t you have some made in China knock off store brand shit, he asks. If you don’t see it out here we don’t have it. No, sir. You know what works just as well though? Some green tea. Or some of these multivitamins, she says grabbing him by the arm and leading him over to them. We follow.

Oooh. Even better, take this, she says and shoves a box in his hand. It’s real thick and forms a protective coat on the inside of your throat. Tastes real good too. I’d drink it even if I weren’t sick but Irv says the smell gives him headaches can you believe that? Three Face looks like he’d strangle her if he could get a word or motion in edgewise. And here, take these vitamins. You can crush them up and mix them in with the tea and you’ll be right as rain by sundown tomorrow or my name’s Lucille Ball. Alrighty? And would you look down there, lane three is open and waiting for you. Now isn’t it just your lucky day? You lads are just darling helping out a sick friend. Thank you kindly. You boys have a good night now. Goodbye!
That was one of your phrases: thank you kindly. Sounded like a record player when you said it. I used to say if we got a dog we could name it Kindly and teach it to fetch us things. Thank you, Kindly, we’d say. Thank you.

We’re standing in the line as the cashier mindlessly scans the tea and vitamins still just plain baffled by that old dino’s spell when Three Face finally comes out of it. The fuck? He looks around like coming down off a high. I don’t want any of this shit, he says and curses at the cashier. We leave the twenty-three dollars and fourteen cents of stuff on the belt and walk out. The greeter wishes us goodnight.

We stop again on a dark street out near the suburbs. Pipe is off taking a piss somewhere and Three Face hasn’t said a word about it. In the beams of the headlights I can see a dark shape in the middle of the road on the double yellow. I ask Three Face what he thinks it is and he tells me to take a look if I’m so goddamned curious. So I do. I walk out to the edge of the light and crouch down. It’s a deer, a doe, large and graceful even in death. The tongue hangs half-dry from its mouth, a pool of blood forms a halo around its head, and the neck is arched back like it’s trying to howl. I wait for her to get up and run off but she’s still and a fly rests on her open eye.

I yell for Pipe and Three Face to come over which they do reluctantly. Fucking huge, says Three Face. It looks like it just happened in the last couple hours or so, like she was just alive, I say. Smells like she’s been dead for weeks, says Three Face. You can feel the heat coming from her and some breeze I can’t feel makes the hair under her chin dance. We are quiet, even Three Face is quiet. I whisper that we should maybe move her, get her out of the road. My voice seems to come from far away. No way I’m touching that thing, says Three Face and heads back to the car. I look at Pipe who looks back at me. You owe me, he says.

We grab the legs and make toward the right shoulder of the road. I’m trying to help move the deer but now that I’ve touched her, felt her fur, I can’t seem to make my legs go. Her body is heavy and I can feel the muscles shift under the skin as I pull. It’s hard to think. Pipe got her weight on his own and slows to a stop. He yells at me and slaps my face to wake me up. We pull it to the side of the road in sideways awkward steps leaving a dark streak of blood leading back to the double yellow and I sit down in the grass off the shoulder and sob. I can’t help it. The flies have followed her and resettled on the lips and in her ears. The smell is in my clothes now, rank in an earthy way. When they can’t get me to move or stand Pipe and Three Face decide to just drive off and leave me. I’m glad for this and pet her coat wondering if I’m the only single living thing in the world that cares that she’s died. I sit for a long time, unable to get up or move on. I bend and kiss her on her head.

I’ve got some very normal things wrong with me. It’s easy to see why you left.
I walk to the nearest gas station, buy a pack, and light up outside. The girl at the counter inside gave me American Spirits when I asked for Camels. This is what you want, she told me. She’s wide but so is her smile. She was right: the pull takes work and the taste feels good on my lips.

I’ve gone through three and started on my fourth sitting on the curb when Pipe and Three Face pull up. I climb in. Got your balls back, Three Face asks. I don’t respond. Pipe tells me they tried to shake down Armond but he had nothing so they came back to find me. Thought we were going to find you dead in the road too, he says. I look back at the girl behind the counter and Pipe notices. I think our boy was gaming while we were gone. Three Face looks at her through the glass. God she’s ugly. How shit faced are you? Pipe tells me it’s about time I climbed on someone new. Two months without fucking will fuck you up, he says. I toss butt number four out the window, put my feet up on the seat, and lounge against the door. You all right, he asks. I don’t know how to answer. Can we just get some fucking shit already, I say. So we drive.

Cold is seeping back into the night air and it looks like it’s starting to drive Three Face crazy. He’s making fists and cussing Pipe and throwing change at passing cars. Pipe doesn’t stop until we find a big, new twenty-four hour drug store somewhere in Carrick where the wood-paneled Oldsmobile is like jeans at a wedding. The lady at the counter smiles sweetly as we enter and we duck down an aisle quick to avoid her gaze. I take my time going past the cheap-o toys, picking up the silly stuff. Make a good bong, says Pipe about the giant tub of bubbles I’m trying to open. Three Face is already at the cough medicine and I grab a pinwheel and join him.

What’s it going to be, says Pipe. Three Face is lighting up looking at all the bottles. I say we should just get one or two to avoid suspicion but Three Face insists we should get the whole lot and fuck going anywhere else. He takes as much as he can carry and tells us it’s our fucking loss when we don’t do the same.

At the counter the Lady looks suspicious. Who buys this much cough syrup at three in the morning? She doesn’t want to sell it to us, we can tell. There’s a pause. Pipe puts on his best coughing show though and it seems like she’s starting to buy it. Like her suspicion is starting to fade. The quiet buzz of florescent lights is awful and the moment is opening up before us. But I can see it in her hands. They relax and lengthen over the counter and look like they going towards the first bottle to scan it.

That’s when I notice the swell of her belly poorly hidden under her loose top. She so big she must be due next week. How did I not notice it when we came in? I’m about to ask her about
it, ask her if it’s a boy or a girl or when it’s due. She looks at me and one of the hands goes back to her stomach resting on its curve.

Then Three Face snaps and puts a gun to her temple. He’s shouting at her to give up the fucking drops and whatever cash is in the drawer. He couldn’t take it any more, I guess. The pause, the florescent lights, the cold night air. Something. Pipe and I have no idea what the fuck’s happening or what to do if we did. Three Face is still shouting and the lady finally manages to open the drawer but she is moving too slow, shaking too badly from fear to do much else, so he reaches over, grabs what money he can, and starts shoving it down his pants. If there’s anyone else in the store they’re not moving. Fuck, Pipe says. Let’s fucking go, I say. The two of us start to move.

Not yet, yells Three Face. He’s got the gun to the lady’s head again. The tapes, he says. Where do you keep the security tapes. What the fuck are you doing, says Pipe. Three Face says we don’t destroy those tapes we’re fucked. Screw the tapes, says Pipe but Three Face isn’t paying attention. He’s got the gun at her forehead and is pressing down hard. Tell me where the tapes are, he says, slower this time, and cocks the gun. The lady’s hands jump to her belly at the sound. Don’t do this man, says Pipe. I’m not fucking going to jail over some cunt, says Three Face back. Then: tell me where the fucking tapes are, he shouts at her and moves the gun from the lady’s head to her stomach. The sound she makes is like an animal, fearful and helpless. Her face is all wet. The sound comes from somewhere far away.

Then Pipe speaks again. This time his voice sounds different. I know you fucked Sam, he says to Three Face. I knew you fucked her and I didn’t say a goddamned fucking word about it. His voice is calm, too quiet for the situation. It cuts the air in half. He’s looking Three Face in the eye and he’s not blinking. But if you hurt that woman, if you do anything to her, I will murder you. Do you understand me? The words are coming from somewhere far away.

Don’t fuck with me, Pipe, says Three Face. He’s not sure if he should laugh.

Do you understand me? Pipe hasn’t moved. I will murder you.

The way he says that word—murder—it lights up the room.

Three Face stares back at him.

Are you really going to do this over some fucking—

And your mother… Pipe says cutting him off. Three Face turns to stone.

I’m begging Pipe to shut the fuck up but my mouth won’t move.

Pipe speaks again. I will go to the hospital and I will tell your mother what I did, tell her how I killed you. I’d murder her too but her chemo’s probably worse than that anyway.

Before he finishes the sentence I know he’s dead. Pipe knows it too. It’s spontaneous but calculated, what he says, but the words are true.
Three Face points the gun at Pipe and fires. Pipe goes down hard, his legs buckling under him. It happens faster than I can wrap my mind around. The lady is screaming and sobbing and Pipe is on the floor and he isn’t moving. He’s hit in the neck and it looks like it almost took his fucking head off. I’m shaking and shaking and shaking. Three Face is gone, long gone and Pipe’s way past dead.

I think I see you. You’re somewhere far away, in another city, another country maybe. You’ve been drinking. You seem content.

I remember that you told me once about the pond by the house where you grew up and how you’d spend the night on a boat in the middle of it surrounded by stars. You said that in the morning when you woke up it felt like you were dough rising in the oven, filling slowly with the warmth of the world.

The pregnant lady has stopped screaming and she’s on the floor with Pipe, holding him in her arms. She found some kind of deep calm and when she tells me to call an ambulance she looks at me straight. It’s okay, she says. I’ll tell them you weren’t with him.

She’s covered in blood and is petting Pipe’s hair.

Is it a boy or a girl, I ask.

A girl, she says, due the end of the month.

Thanks, I say, and go for the phone.

There’s one in the back, it’s large and beige and has oversized grey buttons. A red sticker on the front says dial nine for outgoing. I call, listen to it ring, and hope that wherever you are, whatever you’re doing, you’ll answer.
By Way of Explanation

Before he even asked for my order I wanted to fuck him but it was really the way he repeated venti back to me that made me leave the note on the napkin with my number detailing exactly where and how it should happen.
It was the man in the street slapping a tennis ball back and forth with his daughter of eight or nine years, no net or anything, just some elementary volleys, that made me sad. The daughter had tiny-tike light-up sneakers, a rather loopy backhand, and actually seemed to be enjoying herself, all of which pointed towards her never amounting to much, tennisly speaking. And I could tell by the way the father, a relatively new neighbor I’d never formally met, grunted after rogue hits that within a year this girl would be enrolled in one of those elite academies where national ranking and corporate sponsorship were fed into the water supply, but it was already too late for her. At seven or eight she was behind by at least four or five years. I couldn’t bear to watch.

After all, I had my own jr. inside—all slobber and burps, not so much as an email address to his name—waiting to be reared. There were flashcards to flash, Mozart to memorize, and the unfortunate fact that at six months my boy was a fatty baby who couldn’t so much as toddle. His mother’s fault, I presumed. She pampered him day and night, fulfilled his every wish, gave up her breast whenever he begged. At this rate, I told her, he’ll never stop acting like a child.

But here was this father slapping the old fuzzy ball with his daughter in the street, too cheap to take her to some honest to goodness clay, and she was laughing, and he was smiling and I was thinking maybe he’s got something up that sweaty tee shirt sleeve of his. I was thinking I had some questions for him.

Sir? Excuse me, neighbor sir. Do you, as a fellow parent, believe you should let your child decide for herself what she wishes to make of her life, or do you think it better that you choose for her and start the training as soon as possible? At what age is a child capable of making an informed decision on the matter, and by that age isn’t it already too late for her to really truly master what she has chosen, having lost those formative years when the mind and body are still electric with potential? Does the ethical dimension of letting your child choose her own life trump the more pragmatic professionalization of the child from the proverbial get-go? Do you, like me, curse your parents from time to time for having not schooled you more
thoroughly in one area or another as a kid, and do you think professional athletes or
astrophysicists, that is, geniuses who spent their youth mechanically foul-shooting or times-
tableing, ever feel the opposite and yearn instead for childhood freedom and choice? Do you
believe in free will?

In other words: what, in your opinion is the best way to raise a child? I’m asking as a
newly minted father myself, son still cribbed, talking nonsense and making poops. Should I hand
the little tyke a book? Schedule cricket lessons? Buy him a soldering iron? I mean, what
mistakes do you think you’ve made? What do you regret? What would you do differently?
Should you have gone with the organic diapers? Was the blue-gray airplane mobile too gender
specific? Are you pro-spankings, anti-spankings, or spankings neutral? Are you racked with the
same kind of preemptive guilt for mistakes you have yet to make or may have already made or
may be making right now without even knowing? Do you wonder these things too? Have you
ever approached a near stranger on the street, literally the street, and asked him or her to explain,
apropos nothing, his or her theoretical framework for childrearing?

I suppose what I came over here to say is don’t you think it’s too late for this one,
tennisly speaking? I mean, what is she, eight? With a sloppy backhand like that? Come on.

Perhaps it was best I said nothing. The street is not exactly a forum for this sort of
inquiry, at least not in my neighborhood, and this man, odds are, was not a dispenser of
spontaneous wisdom for some stranger shoveling pseudo-philosophic inquiries his way in the
midst of some light father-daughter recreation. Besides, I was taking in groceries and a tub of
chocolate ice cream was leaking onto my freshly pressed slacks.

Inside now, I look down to my son. I hope it will never be too late for him, tennisly
speaking or anythingly speaking. His face is a blank canvass, pure and terrible and I fear
anything I do and anything I don’t do will ruin it, ruin him. I have questions, so many questions,
and wonder often if the cavalcade of queries isn’t bad for my health, all things considered. I
wonder: what happens to them, these questions, as they play unresolved, unsupervised, in the
recess of my mind while my son watches me, wide-eyed and patient, growing and silent from his
crib.
Mothers

If he shows up late she will leave him and if he does not show up late she will leave him. She’s made up her mind on this point. But when she imagines it happening she’s in his point of view, arguing against her, and winning. She’s out of practice with getting her way, with making her own decisions even, which does not bode well, she thinks, for the whole leaving thing.

The weather is not a guide. It’s neither raining nor sunning. It’s not dark, not day, and not moving from one to the other. If it were summer or winter or spring or fall or warm or cold or breezy or still she might, she thinks, be able to point and say this is why, this is what made me leave. But there is no weather today. No season. No time but late or not late and she is left alone with her own free will.

That, and the baby.

He is looking up to her. She can’t imagine what he sees. Is it shapes? Colors? Sounds or tastes maybe? Perhaps nothing at all. Nobody. She read an article on this somewhere. She remembers it being long.

She remembers there was a time when she believed that if she followed her parents’ advice, followed it exactly to the letter, nothing would ever go wrong. Nothing could ever go wrong. They had access to all the knowledge in the world—all the science and the math and the books and the art, they knew it all—how could they ever be mistaken? Their job must be easy, she remembers thinking as a girl.

She had hoped for a girl.

She lifts the baby to her, bringing them together. His weight is familiar. How much of her is in him? Or, another way: how much of him is her? Half? Or is he fully Mommy and Daddy both at the same time? It’s not so much an issue of ownership as it is makeup. How much of his physical person will have come from her? How much of his personality or individuality? Will she see parts of herself manifest in him? Parts she doesn’t like?

She can’t turn off these questions, his questions, in her head. They seem selfish.

She will leave him. She is sure of it.

She had been sure about her parents too, though, and it took nineteen years before she realized that she had never had sex, gotten drunk, smoked cigarettes, or even missed curfew; that she missed those opportunities to learn how to be wrong. She had made the mistake of not
making mistakes and was paying for it now, unprepared for the disorientation of failure and the weight of guilty admission. She fears a change in the status quo as much as the continuation of it.

There has been no disaster, not yet, only the unshakable sense of one approaching on the horizon. If only there had been some transgression, she thinks. If he had cheated or she had loved someone else, this would all be easier. They could scream and shout and slam doors and break glass and really enjoy themselves and their victimhood. But he has done nothing and she has done nothing. They simply had a child, is all.

She bounces the baby on her hip in a way that soothes her more than him. He has his fingers in his mouth. He may be trying to eat them, she thinks, though he has no real teeth. His contented gnawing is adorable.

How much does he know?
How long since she changed his diaper?
What color will his eyes be? His or hers?

Unease and indefinable dissatisfaction is not probable cause, she knows, for separation. It doesn’t make for a good argument. She will not be able to make him understand. She has seemed happy, he will say. She hasn’t said anything about her problems to him. How could he be expected to make things better if he hadn’t even known they were bad?

Fair points, she thinks. Fair points all.
Her empathy, she fears, will be her undoing.

She sets the baby down in the crib and he wiggles his arms and legs and smiles. He is absolutely goddamn oblivious to everything. He has no idea how awful it can feel sometimes to be in the world.

There is no cold, no wind, no weather or season at all. She shudders.

There is, however, a sound on the stairs. She does not know if he is on time or not on time. She’s not sure. And now here he is. He is standing in the doorway.
Babies

It is not your fault. No, how could it be? You are amoral, extramoral, a cherub of neutrality. Plump in your crib you cannot see them and so they do not even exist. You are alone and the center of everything, drowning in sensations, yet you remain still, motionless save for the occasional pawing of air or kicking of legs. How is it that you stay so calm? Tell us your secret. We wish to know.

Mommy and Daddy are talking now; a dangerous pastime, we agree. Particularly in this fragile moment. What they say could do harm and what they do not say could do harm. He does not know the things she thinks and feels; he’s not aware of the weight his words carry, tossing them off so casual like. It’s reckless. It makes us anxious. If only he could know. If someone could just tell him now what she was planning that would make us feel better. But there is no one who can tell him and so we are full of fear. But not you, you just have questions. How is it that the sounds they make and the space between them could cause so much pain? Good one. You must be your father’s son, we think, full of questions like that.

When they stand over the crib deciding your future with raised voices you begin to smile toothless and squinting. Their expressions amaze you: the way his skin stretches and folds, the way her eyes dance and glisten, the way their mouths oh. How do they make those shouts and sighs? You’re baffled and delighted and so you laugh.

It silences them. They seem embarrassed, childish even, having seen for a brief moment something besides themselves. They speak to one another now only in hushed, sheepish coo’s that lull you nearer toward sleep. In another time or perhaps in another place your drooping eyes and miniature yawns might have brought peace but it is too late for that, for them. It is not your fault, of course. The fear they feel in your silence is their own.

Child, you are blameless. You simply reflect what has always been there. You hold a mirror up to their differences, their disagreements, their incompatibilities and force recognition. It makes her feel naked; it gives him goose bumps. For them, you are inescapable. Quiet. Your blue eyes are watching them, every second of the day, seeing them exactly as they are. Yours is the cold stare of the objective view and it is unbearable. They are almost thankful for it when you scream.
I have regrets. Killing my dog, for instance. I’ve never taken to the phrase, Put her out of her misery. The phrase has never put me out of mine.

I’m not what you’d call a happy man. I work in a warehouse. Before that I drove trucks and before that I did landscaping. At one point I flipped burgers, just to see. I never try to “make a living” if I can help it.

My mother calls to check in but I rarely answer. We live thirty minutes and twenty years apart. We got on while Dad was still alive but these days it’s hard to see the point. She’s in a home and I’m in a house and even though she’s nearly restricted to a bed I get the feeling she does more living than me. Sometimes I wish I had “assisted living.” Those places have more activities than a kindergarten class.

The regulars at Pete’s Pub are anything but. One, for instance, is a Vietnam Vet—the Vet part, I found out recently, being short for Veterinarian. I’ve been going for years and still no one knows my name, not even Pete. Every time I order a shot and a beer he asks what kind, like it’s my first goddamn visit. Maybe because I never tip. Or maybe I just have one of those faces.

We get these young things in there from time to time. Girls. I think I disgust myself more than them though. They hang in packs, three or nine together, and mostly try to pretend we’re not there. They take over the jukebox and remind us of the worst of the eighties but Pete doesn’t seem to mind. He busies about making fruity concoctions and slicing citrus just so.

The dog was a German Shepherd with sad eyes and some kind of canine leukemia. It was a slow process. She didn’t eat much. You had to remember to be careful petting her she bruised so easy. Finally, when her chest infection got so bad she was choking on her own blood I drove her in and had them do it then and there. Wasn’t sure if I was supposed to hold her or not and by the time I moved to her she was already gone.
Another regret was getting married but that’s nothing new, is it. Hard to be upset about it anymore, really. It’s only a story when two people get together and don’t want to blow each other’s brains out. I doubt we’d still be together if it weren’t for the kid.

One particular young thing has been coming to Pete’s a lot lately. She sits at the bar, not a booth. Twice she’s come alone. She laughs loud but doesn’t drink too much and she shows so much skin you can see the tattoo of a robin on her shoulder blade. Once a boy came in after her, some dough-faced son of a bitch, and we drove him out quick when she started to cry. No one said anything about it after but he never came back again. She reminds me of a neighbor from my childhood who lost a son at birth and was never the same after. Put on a good face at dinners and things but...

My mother left a message the other day, said she had a brief scare and they kept her at the hospital all afternoon. Nothing to worry about, she said to the machine, besides the usual things, of course. No need to call back, there’s nothing you can do.

When I was in college I got in a bar fight with a local. He was twice my size and twice as drunk. He went down easy. I never wanted to win, felt I deserved a beating, and when I found out later I had broken his jaw it made me sick. I dropped out of school after only two months. Never had a taste for it. Only shit you learn is shit you don’t want to know anyway, Dad would say.

I can’t pretend there aren’t good days or moments of peace and calm that could almost be called happiness. But I don’t want to tell that story. I don’t want to lie about the way my life feels when I can stand to think about it. I gave up hope long ago but that isn’t the end of anything, it’s just another sort of beginning. Just because a story is too sorry to hear doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be told. It doesn’t mean it isn’t true. You still have to face it.

That girl, the young thing, has been coming every night this week, flirting with Pete and trying less and less to stay upright. Acting like a regular. When I order a shot and a beer she beats Pete to it and asks what kind. I look sour so she drags me to the jukebox to show her “old people’s music” and tells me I could probably beat up her dad. She wants me to dance but I don’t want to dance so she does it by herself. She seems vulnerable. You have to wonder what happened to her to make her come here every night like us. I want to tell her it only gets worse.
I had a friend who used to cut herself every couple weeks or so. We were twelve. After a while it was hard to care. We lived in the suburbs and I could never decide if that justified the mutilation or made it self-indulgent. We slept together only once, just to see. She’s a nanny in New York now, for all I know.

There was a time I never had a dog, a time my mother wasn’t sick, a time when Dad and her would take a Sunday drive and leave me in the house alone and tell me with a wink not to have too much fun. I never knew how to make the most of that time with nothing holding me back and no one around. It seemed to pass before I even knew it.

When the girl doesn’t show at Pete’s two nights in a row I decide something must be wrong and go looking. Don’t know where to go or even why I think she’s in trouble but I walk down to the university and around campus for a while until I start to feel dirty and angry and mean. On the way back I see that dough-faced little shit from before smoking with a friend and ask him where the hell she is, what the hell he did to her. He says he has no idea who I’m talking about and his friend gives me a little shove, tells me to back off. Exactly what I was looking for.

I lay one on the friend and then turn to the shit, asking my questions again. He still says he doesn’t know, says please, I don’t know who you’re talking about, please. The friend is on the ground, holding his eye and a few people have stopped what they’re doing to watch. When the shit doesn’t answer me a third time I just can’t help myself. No one watching does anything, not sure they’d be able to stop me anyhow.

When I get back to the bar she’s there and she’s laughing and she’s leaning on Vet and Pete gives me a look. Must have come in late. Her life might even be happy. I get a shot and a beer and this time Pete doesn’t ask a thing. After the lights come up she follows me out, asks where I was, says she missed me though I know she doesn’t mean it. I shrug and head for the car, take my time getting in. The engine spits to a start and I hear a knock on the window. Something wrong, grump? She asks leaning in the car after I crank the glass down. Everything, I tell her and she laughs. I can smell all there is to know about her and it fills my head with things I haven’t thought in years. You’re as sour as they come, she says and plants a drunken kiss on my temple, I like that. I tell her to be safe and then I drive the dark road home.

When I get back to the house the kid’s asleep in bed and the wife is crying, saying I don’t care anymore, never have probably. I hold her and calm her and try and feel if there is any change inside me. There is hair in her face and I do my best to tuck it behind her ears. Every day
feels like the first day, like I’ve got to start over again from scratch and try and make the best of it all. Nothing comes easy. We lie in bed unable to sleep and watch the next day begin.

Sometimes I worry I’ll have to decide about my mother, about the plug and whether or not to pull it. When I ask she tells me it’s not an issue. When I go, I’ll go, she says, none of this halfway business. Still, I can’t help but think about it. It leaks into my dreams. Her there, dead-eyed and drooling, some doc handing me papers and speaking words soft in my ear. In the dream I sign on the line but hug her to me tight as she takes her last mechanical sigh.
In Visible Cities

There is a mistake in believing a city is one thing, thinks the author upon arrival in an exotic, foreign capital. There is the city imagined beforehand, the city experienced that particular day by that particular person with the sun and the light just so, and the city to those who live there, invisible to even themselves. These and many more, thinks the author, are the cities contained by just this single place, in this single country, in this single world. Cities escape definition, slide wet noodle-like between your fingers, and trying to capture any one of them would be an exercise in futility. Or, thinks the author, perhaps an exercise in beauty. The author too, however, is more than one single thing. And even in this moment, another part of him is cursing the rain, and the loneliness of his life, and the inability to experience anything pure and unblemished by so much thought and goddamn rumination. His inability, he realizes, to just simply feel. The author, alive with the birth of a novel idea, at that very moment mourns the loss of a particular death within himself.
Adams

Adams is a runner, a sketch artist, an upper-level calculus student, an amateur filmmaker, a democrat, an occasional reader, a bed-wetter, a strong-silent type more silent than strong, an inept valet, a lapsed Catholic, a father, a sucker for music that features the piano, a waiter, a whiskey man, a middle child, a (late) morning person, a homeroom representative, a lousy bowler, a quick wit, an accountant, a momma’s boy, an alcoholic (briefly), more of a baseball fan than anything else, a dirty-blond, a teacher’s pet, a stubborn sumbitch, a Midwesterner, a vegetarian (briefly), a republican, a dog person, a cancer-victim, an average lover, a good friend, a really bad dancer, a citizen and a senior citizen, a hard person to get a handle on, a college grad, a ketchup lover, a real asshole, a sorry intern, a jogger, an outsider, a joke and a liar and a cheater (but only once). Does that help?

There is no first memory that Adams has to point to. Instead his life begins en medias res. He remembers crawling between the pews in church, playing under the bushes outside his house, climbing on to a chair in the kitchen and yelling because he wants to go to school. But which of these came first? When did his life, for him, begin?

On a family trip to the city pool, two years old, Adams walks right off the edge into the water and begins to sink. Father fishes him out, sets him dry, and he walks right back in. Gives everybody quite a scare. Keep an eye on this one, they say.

At or near the appropriate ages Adams learns to speak, go to the bathroom, tie his shoes, read, write, sleep without a light on, share, pour milk, recognize sarcasm, cartwheel, cut with a knife, whistle, lie.

Here’s something. Adams doesn’t get brain freezes. Instead, if he shovels ice cream too fast or downs a slushy in a single gulp, his left shoulder cramps. He’s not sure if that is better or worse than the more typical headache. While all the other boys squint their eyes, hold their heads and moan he massages the crick in his neck, trying to work out the cold.

Adams tends not to fit in, which is normal.

There was a time when Adams wouldn’t eat foods or sauces that are white. He doesn’t like to be reminded of this. Ranch, mayo, cream cheese, sour cream, vanilla ice cream. Things of that sort. He couldn’t explain when or why it began. It may have lasted as long as three years before he gave it up or forgot about it or was shamed into quitting. Looking back on it, and on
many things, he found nothing to point to—no day, event, or embarrassing incident—to mark either a beginning or an end. There is no reasonable explanation.

Adams is one of three little Adams’. He has an older sister, Samantha, and a younger brother, Ben. Adams’ family has a ranch house with four bedrooms, two bathrooms and an overstuffed four-car garage. There is a modest back yard with a creek in the back and two tall tulip poplars in the front. They own two used cars and a large eight-passenger van that they use for vacations and transporting large objects. The neighborhood is within city limits. The street runs east west with a slight incline. Pop is full-time at a household cleaning-product company doing corporate computer work and Mom takes occasional part time work at a family owned greenhouse. Both have college degrees. Total family income somewhere around 80,000 a year. Does this help? Adams and his siblings walk to grade school with several other kids in the neighborhood where they achieve adequate academic success. Their clothes are largely hand-me-downs and their food is bought with clipped coupons and other diligently monitored discounts. They own one television and one computer and they do not have central air. In the winter there is a large hill at a nearby school for sledding.

His only real fight is in junior high. Tired of being teased, embarrassed by a harmless juvenile prank, Adams turns on the boy who pushed him and starts swinging his arms inexpertly. A whole head shorter than him but significantly more practiced in these sorts of scrapes, the boy begins laying fists into Adams’s stomach with abandon. He grabs at the boy’s hair, yanking it down in desperation, tears welling, regretting his anger and overreaction and inadequate boxing skills. The fight ends in a stalemate with red faces and ill-formed curses. For months after Adams avoids the boy and the boy avoids him. Friends try not to choose sides.

Family, siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, neighbors, teachers. Of course.

There are the things Adams does every day. Does that make them more or less important? Running full out, bent low at top speed. Wide, jaw-cracking yawns. Thoughts of own death and death of loved ones. Nose picking. Brief holding of breath due to excitement when opening the front door to the broad outside world. Hasty teeth brushing before bed. Wishful thinking. Many of Adams’ daily rituals are tied to the body. Eating and drinking foods and drinks. Visits to and from various restrooms. Breathing. Many cannot be helped. Flexing of muscles. Generation of tissue. The desire to be loved. Memory formations. The beatings of the heart. Wonder. Hope. Etc.

He has his share of tragedy. In high school his parents die. One after the other, only months apart. Each day Adams forgets and then remembers. He laughs at a joke, enjoys a movie, flirts with a girl in class and the image of a casket leaps unbidden to his mind. The feeling is a kind of emotional vertigo. He has no one to talk with about it. He’s not sure what he’d say if he
did. Once, in a moment of weakness, he uses his orphan-status to his advantage, plays the victim card, and for the next three nights is unable to sleep. Adams and his brother stay with an aunt and uncle and Adams keeps his head down. For the first time in his life homework is easy, he can’t stop studying. The last two years of high school he receives top marks, aces every test—even the upper-level calculus exam that everyone else fails—and at graduation, when his friends are embarrassed by their parents and their pictures, Adams hugs his siblings, kisses his aunt, and shakes his uncles outstretched hand.

He had this dream once.

There are friends that come and go. Some are closer than others. Each relationship is different, based on different things, pushes or pulls him in one direction or another, influencing his personality, interests, sense of humor, self-esteem, dress, success in school. It all seems terribly important somehow.

Religion, race, sexuality.

Adams becomes culturally and socio-politically aware at 20. For the next seven or eight years he struggles—sometimes quietly, sometimes at rallies, once in letter to the editor—with certain irresolvable truths about the world and his place in it. He was born white, male, straight, and Christian in the United States and isn’t sure who to apologize to for it. Occasionally he sees his own life through the eyes of someone in Yemen or Mongolia or Haiti—someone named Hassid or Sarantuya or Garaudy, Adams thinks—and the structures of thought he is accustomed to collapse. It’s impossible to reconcile his day-to-day life and concerns and desires with those of someone down the street much less half way around the globe. Sometimes he wonders why he or anyone else doesn’t just drop this stupid sham of a life and try and fix the world’s problems. Most times, though, his thoughts are interrupted by a phone call or a television program or an overdue electric bill.

Here’s one thing that did happen to him.

They meet in the fall and again in the spring but it’s winter when they sleep together for the first time. At sunrise they wake and walk through the morning snow. It’s bitter cold with an even colder wind and that morning Adams decides he’s a coffee drinker, though he hates the taste. It becomes a routine. The coffee. The sleeping together. He never knows how or why these things happen, especially years later, in the car, on the way home from a former friend’s fiftieth birthday party and the argument that hastened their exit, when he realizes he has no idea what road he’s on, where he is, how he got there. That the road behind him is even darker than the way ahead. That’s the best I can explain it.

There are stories to tell about the women before her.

He knows, in an intellectual sense, that these years at a medium-sized state university will be some of the best of his life. He has limitless freedom and doesn’t yet fear responsibility. He
has time on his hands. He pursues interests, he makes friends and memories with them. He knows that soon his life will begin, soon his desires will defer to others’, and that in five or ten years he will look back with fondness and think about how good things were. But it’s hard to feel that now. It just feels like life and the passage from one day to the next. When you’re down in it, it all sort of looks the same. He wonders what carpe diem really means in a practical sense and struggles to think what more seizing he can do in his days. Because even when he is in the park reading, swimming at the beach, drinking and laughing on a porch at night with his friends, it doesn’t seem like much. Like maybe it’s not good until you think about it later, until you compare it to whatever comes next.

There’s a time after college and before adulthood when life opens up and the freedom is terrible. Adams fills the time making mistakes. Jobs, apartments, women, alcohol, finances and investments, a thing with coke once or twice. He drifts through cities and states, collects debt like it’s a hobby, experiments with unconventional facial hair. His capacity for failure develops new depths and intricacies. His instincts are dependably bad. When he spends a night in lockup he decides he’s through with it, this way of life. When he’s charged with a DUI several months later the law seems to agree. Mistakes were made, he thinks looking back somewhat fondly on this period of his life at the conclusion of a mandatory five-week program. A month later he marries.

For some time in the nineties his wife cannot stop getting pregnant. Four in five years. By the time it is over Adams cannot remember what she looks like without a child inside her. He still helps her in the car and she still lets him. The first night she drinks again she’s out after only a glass. Some mornings he wakes early and waits in vain for her to be sick.

Later that same day…

Likes and dislikes and no feelings either way.

His relation to history, the world, major political and cultural events.

Is this making sense?

And oh yes. There is a moment, walking through the park on a late summer evening with his son on his shoulders, wife pushing the double-wide stroller, mutt running ahead on the new extension leash, when Adams feels a satisfaction so thorough as to be near sacramental. It’s a confirmation. His life is a poster, an advertisement, with white puffy clouds and everything. On a more cynical day it might have seemed a hilarious cliché. This day it is existential contentment.

And his body—as thought it had been waiting for this day, this realization—settles into itself. His hair is suddenly peppered with grey, his posture natural and austere, his face harder and softer all at once. It is as though he had always been this way and always would.

Their names are Lucy, Geoffrey, Maxwell, and Sarah and their lives are his life.
Things Adams never does. He never makes that trip across the country in a beat up VW with some friends. Never learns that backpacking across Europe is not remotely as romantic as it seems. Adams never makes the kind of serious, life-ending mistakes you read about in the paper and he never learns from them. He’s never spent more than that one night in lockup or gone to a bad part of town for long enough to get mugged. Adams never makes it to that Brazilian restaurant he’s heard so much about. He never calls Alice from grade school to see what her life has become now. Though he’s not opposed to it in principle, Adams never experiments with taboo sexual positions. He never gets to Montana to visit that old family friend who has been offering for years. Adams never learns, really learns, another language. Never does he live downtown. Never is he a regular at a bar where he knows the names of the bartender’s kids or can order off menu or has his own drink. Adams never has a group of really diverse friends, never feels anything but white and middle class. He never picks up carpentry, never learns how to fix his car or even what the names of the different parts are—an oil change baffles him. Adams doesn’t get a summer job painting houses, doesn’t bartend in the pacific northwest, never makes it back to Ivanhoe, Virginia to see the fireflies or lightening bugs (he can’t remember which they called them) at dusk. Adams never works out every morning like he is supposed to. Cooking, really cooking, is something he never learns. Though he’s always wanted, Adams never jumps on a moving train or sleeps in his car overnight at a gas station. He never settles things with his dead parents, never makes it to therapy, never takes mental health—as a profession or as a suggestion—seriously. Adams doesn’t think of his life as a list of things he hasn’t done. Or, when he does, it is at one of those low moments on what seems like a high vista looking back over his life unable to feel anything but regret and self-pity about his mangled life and how little he has truly lived. Does he see himself most accurately and objectively in these moments? Is this really how he should be judged?

What else.

At fifty-four Adams rolls a golf cart over his leg. It’s difficult for him to explain afterwards. He’s not even a real golfer. Doctors and their assistants insert rods and pins and in a few months he’s walking, sort of; getting to know the pain of a leg that doesn’t feel like his. Adams keeps a sense of humor about it. Opt for a cane because it’s versatile. He can shake it, poke at things, pretend to be a withered old man just for laughs. Mostly he likes it for its gravitas. People listen more, take him at his word. On special occasions, Christmas with the grandkids, he covers it with tinsel, holly, or pine and delights all.

Temperament, personality.

Things that change and things that stay the same.
Patterns, schedules, routines, rituals. The speedy business of time. Almost every major decision in his life is out of his hands and Adams is thankful. He wears his regrets now with pride.

Often, at nights, he roams the house. Sits with a glass of milk in the kitchen, street lamps and moonlight casting unfamiliar shadows, feeling like a stranger in his own home. It isn’t insomnia. There is muted curiosity and excitement, a sense of timelessness. It’s another world.

Secrets. Things he never tells even those he is closest to.

An affair, brief and regrettable, more emotional than physical, predictable even to him.

Three years later, with the help of doctors, Adams finds cancer. It’s pancreatic and it comes with a timeline. After the first batch of chemo he mows the lawn. It is a hot, cloudless summer day. The task takes all afternoon. The limping. The exhaustion. His wife is hysterical but can’t stop him. When the kids hear the story they wince and shake their heads. I could have done it, they retroactively offer, I could have cut the grass, though they know the lawn didn’t need mowing, that that had never been the point.

He gets used to funerals. Their routine becomes a strange comfort. With each passing friend and family member Adams feels more at home with the process. His condolences more practiced, sincere, and worded with confident comfort. His dark grey suit fits better than ever. He’s familiar now with the rituals of death.

He gets good at nostalgia too. Remembering was always better than doing for him. Some of the best moments in his life he never recognized until later when he thought back on it or told the story of it to some stranger and found, in the telling, that it actually did sound pretty good, yes.

Some things rarely happened to him, surely. Things that other people have not seen or known.

Does any of this help?

The world has such rich texture to Adams now. Common objects, every day routines and customs, times, temperatures, individual words and letters—each have an elaborate history of their own. Putting on a shoe is sacred and life affirming. Washing his face with water is like a deep, long sigh. A light breeze through the treetops can bring him to his knees. Every bite of food is slowed and savored, mulled over, given proper thought. There is nothing that does not carry the weight of memories. Each thing is connected to every other thing and the whole tangled mess of it stretches back and forth across time. Adams doesn’t want to do things anymore, just look. There are so many things.

It seems silly to wait to hear the inevitable. They all hold their breath hoping for news that cannot come, Adams knows. When the doctors put an end to hope he silently thanks them.
There is more apprehension in uncertainty than in practical preparation and Adams is anxious to get on with the business of dying.

Every morning for a week Adams wakes up thinking it will be his last day alive. He’s not afraid exactly. He is unsure. The kids take turns changing him, washing him in his bed. They keep the blinds shut and the fan on. Their words are stiff and awkward in their mouths. His wife rarely leaves him.

But then, on a Sunday, he can feel it, he knows it’s there and it comes as a relief. He will not improve, he has done what he could about living, he is able to say goodbye. He is tired and it is all he can do to stay awake. He does not want his wife to keep crying and just looking at her gives him this feeling in his chest. Like sleep, he can’t will it to come any faster, can’t hold it off when it’s time. He looks around the room and it’s like walking through the house at night. Familiar yet strange. He thinks of everything and everyone he can remember one at a time in turn.

Adams dies. It is early afternoon. It is summer and hot and when you walk outside it is so bright you are temporarily blinded. It is so bright you can’t even see.

I’m not sure what else to say.
Estate Sale

The estate sale began at eight in the morning instead of nine because Cathy said Mom would have wanted it that way and besides, she had her son’s soccer game that afternoon and needed to be out of there by one, one-thirty at the latest.

This meant, Tom found out, that the estate sale really began at six-thirty because when he arrived at that time a crowd of twenty or so were waiting there already on the porch in the predawn dark to be the first to get their hands on the “bargain-priced antique furniture” and “period-costume clothes” Cathy advertized in the local paper. “Everything must go” it said.

“Is everyone here for the estate sale?” Tom asked.
“We’re here for the savings,” they said.
“Well you’ll have to wait, I need to rearrange some things, get it all organized.”
“No need, we’ll just go ahead and come in now as it is, thank you.”
And before Tom could protest the crowd swept him up and carried him inside and began to dismantle the house in a swift, orderly fashion.

The crowd had doubled and Tom had sold almost half of Mom’s things by the time Cathy came in with her son Sam—in shin guards and cleats, absorbed by one of those hand-held game systems—following closely behind. A man in pajamas was asking Tom how much for the paint off the walls, saying over and over, “It would go great with my new wife, it would go great with my new wife.” Tom brushed him aside.

“Cathy?”
“So many people,” she said.
“Nine people have tried to buy the urn holding Mom’s ashes.”
“This turnout. More than I ever imagined.”
“Nine people.”
“The house is practically bursting. It’s beautiful.”
“And that was after I made a sign indicating the urn contained her ashes.”
Tom noticed Sam staring at him.
“There was nowhere to park just abouts,” she said.
“One of them,” said Tom trying to avoid Sam’s gaze, “one of them was willing to pay nine hundred dollars for it.”
“The front lawn. We could have charged for parking.”

“Nine hundred dollars for it with the ashes inside. I think that’s what he wanted, the ashes.” Sam’s expression was one of complete and unblinking blankness.

“Front lawn valet parking for five dollars.” She said. “Too late now.”

Tom made a face at Sam. A soccer cleat shuffled.

Cathy spoke. “Here. I’ll take over at the money box.”

Cathy took his seat and as Tom walked away he turned back to see Sam playing his game again. The man in pajamas had gone.

Tom passed through a small crowd and into the kitchen. The walls were bare, the ceiling fan disassembled, and the oven removed, leaving an abrupt end to the counter and either an extra-clean or extra-dirty oven-shaped space on the wall, depending on how you looked at it. The cabinets, save a fine layer of dust, were completely empty and the two men beside him seemed to be debating whether or not the cabinets were “family friendly” enough for them. Tom remembered as a kid being too short to reach the cabinet. Mom would stretch over him, back foot tipping off the linoleum, to grab his favorite glass cup from one of the higher shelves. It was black with blue stars, the cup, and probably long gone now.

The whole room felt different, suspect, and it gave Tom a kind of vertigo to be in there with people he didn’t know. These strangers were loud, browsing vigorously, fondling utensils, even taking food from the cupboard. One was testing out the Apple Jacks to see if they had gone stale.

“They’ve gone stale,” the man said with apparent delight.

“You can’t eat that,” said Tom, snatching the box from him.

In another life, one without child support or college loans, Tom would have kept everything and moved into the house himself. Instead, a man near the sink was picking through the garbage and sniffing each item in turn.

Tom looked to the fridge as though it had answers but saw someone shoveling magnets, family Polaroids, and yellowed Garfield cartoons off the refrigerator door and into a burlap sack.

“Those,” Tom told the woman, “are not yours.”

“I got to them first. You want them you got to make a move.”

“I don’t think you understand. This is my Mom’s house.”

“Was,” the woman corrected. “And these,” she said, holding the pictures aloft, “will be mine.”

“But that’s me in that picture,” said Tom pointing to one of the photos the woman was holding. In the picture, Tom and Cathy hung upside down from the monkey bars on the rusted
swing set in the back yard, thumbs in ears to make moose antlers. “I’m sorry but these photos are not for sale.”

The woman huffed. “I don’t care about the photos. I’m buying the memories.”

What was going on here? Who were these people? And where was that smoke coming from? Perhaps the dining room.

“Excuse me. Excuse me,” Tom said entering the room, “you can’t smoke in here.”

It was an old woman, grey hair escaping her bonnet, puffing on a cigarette in a wheelchair. A dark, wool blanket covered her legs.

“What?”

“Please. You can’t smoke inside. This was my Mom’s house. She’d kill me if I let anyone smoke in here.”

The woman squinted at him with wrinkled eyes and blew a perfect ring of smoke. “What does this boy want, Charles?” she said, gesturing with her leathery, claw-like hand.

“You’re going to have to speak up, she’s a little hard of hearing,” said the tall, thin man behind her.

Tom tried raising his voice, “No smoking, you can’t smoke in here.”

“If he wants to buy the credenza,” the old woman said flicking her spent cigarette in a long arc across the room and lighting another, “tell him it’s an ugly piece of garbage and he can have it. I wouldn’t dream of buying something so hideously rotten.”

“No, this is my Mom’s— Would you kindly put that out. There’s no smoking in here.”

Tom was making wild, dramatic gestures as the woman lit yet another Marlboro. Tom looked to the young man behind her but found no support. He was fingering a chip in the ceiling paint.

“I simply do not understand what this boy wants, Charles,” she mumbled as the two cigarettes danced on her lips. “But if he is the proprietor, tell him I’m willing to tender twenty-five for the ambiance and not a cent more.”

Tom closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose as though closing his eyes and rubbing the bridge of his nose might help.

“And offer him a smoke while you’re at it, Charles. He seems to need it.”

Tom ventured up the stairs to see what havoc had been wreaked in the bedrooms and heard laughter from Mom’s. Entering her room always felt like trespassing; he had never been allowed as a child because it was her only sanctuary, she had said. Once, when Tom sobbed in during her nap, fresh scrape bleeding down his leg, she became so enraged she tossed him out and locked the door, refusing to come out for the remainder of the day, forcing Tom and Cathy to improvise their own dinner. Even now he felt he had to be reverent as though her room were a museum or a church or a mausoleum.
Two teenagers were laughing by the closet.
“Look at this,” said the girl, holding up a brown and orange flowered gown.
The boy laughed. “Sexy,” he said, drawing the word out.
“How about this?” It was his Mom’s wedding dress: full sleeves, elaborate lace trim, faded by the years. She held it up against her body and swayed side to side.
“It looks,” said the boy carefully considering the most accurate description, “like baby vomit. I think my eyes are going to explode from just looking at it.” He mimicked his eyes exploding. “Ka-pow.”
Tom didn’t punch the boy in the face and found himself surprised by it.
“Would you please please please get out of this house.”
“Please please please,” the boy mocked as the girl giggled herself into a snort.
Tom found this juvenile insult surprisingly effective. “Listen,” he said, anger awakening, “You have no right. This is my mother’s house. That is her wedding dress you’re holding. Show some respect.”
The boy laughed. “Too late for that. Somebody already bought it.”
“The dress? It’s not for sale,” said Tom, briefly thrown.
“Not the dress,” the boy said, “the respect. Some guy in pajamas bought any and all respect for the old hag. Paid next to nothing for it too.”
“That’s not possible.”
“Wanna bet?”
Tom did not wanna bet. He wanted to do some very violent things to this precocious punk. “I want you to get out of this house before I throw you out,” he said through his teeth, wondering if he looked as threatening as he felt.
The two looked at him skeptically for a moment until Tom lunged suddenly forward causing the girl to scream, the boy to start, and both of them to make a quick escape.
Looking at his fist Tom almost wished they hadn’t scampered out.
He sighed roughly and thought about counting to ten or some number much much higher.
The bed was still there, unsold, untouched by time. A breeze came through the open window and played lazily with a length of curtain. A robin watched from the tree outside. Tom lay down and closed his eyes, the smells of childhood overwhelming.

Tom heard grunting from the direction of the bathroom and forced himself up off the bed to investigate. A large hairy man was crouching at the toilet resting his forehead against his arm which was draped across the bowl. He was moaning.
“Are you going to throw up?”
“I bought the toilet,” said the man, climbing to his feet, his voice echoing off the tiled floor and walls, “but it’s hard as hell to get out of here. Want to give me a hand?”

Tom frowned.

“Don’t worry, I turned the water off first,” he said, misreading the expression.

“You bought the toilet? What? Why? How much did you pay for it?”

“That’s the best part—here, help me out.” Crouching to grab the toilet from the side he indicated Tom do the same on the opposite side. Tom unwillingly joined him.

They pulled until the bowl separated from the floor with a sorrowful ceramic crack and dropped awkwardly back down again in a scraping clonk of porcelain.

“There we go!” He slapped Tom on the back and then pulled him in close for a sideways hug, the way a father might his son. “The best part? I only paid thirty dollars for it! Thirty!” he said with an expectant smile as though waiting for Tom’s amazed approval.

“But it’s a fifty year old used toilet. Why would you even buy it?”

“For the same reason I bought the house’s modest curb appeal. The same reason I paid out the ass for the musty smell of the basement.” He said. With a quick tussle of Tom’s hair, the man released him and lifted the toilet into his big, hairy arms. “I appreciate the help.” He lumbered down the stairs and made his way out the door.

It had been ages since Tom last set foot in his old bedroom. The few people in the room were thankfully quiet, politely browsing among the remaining shelving unit, twin dressers and corkboard. Mom had turned the room into a guest bedroom after he moved out at twenty-two—back when he knew nothing about anything—and while much of the furniture was the same there was no sign he had ever lived there. The posters that covered the walls during high school were long gone, taken to storage or thrown out, and even his memorabilia—plastic trophies from grade school baseball and tumbling, academic achievements in math and science from high school—even these had been moved from the top shelf in the closet to the storage space for his apartment across town. He couldn’t bear to throw any of it out.

Though he had left long ago Tom felt no time had passed at all. Looking around, he was twelve again; his old things reappeared exactly where they had been years before, preserved by memory, layers of dust and all. He sat on the bed, his feet near the sold sticker on the mattress, and when the last middle-aged couple smiled politely at him and left the room, Tom decided to lie down.

At one time he had shared the room with Cathy; their beds had sat side by side. At night, before it was time to sleep, they would race in from the hallway and dive onto the mattresses to see who could get there first. In seventh grade, the beginning of junior high school, Cathy had moved into ‘the office’ and Tom finally had a room of his own. He was an adult; he had pre-calc
homework and a job cutting grass twice a week for the bed-ridden neighbor. This room had become his space, a place where he could keep his things. In high school his girlfriend would sneak over in the middle of the night and quietly giggle in protest of his wandering hands. He could almost hear the laugh now, with his eyes closed, lying on the bed. Her laugh had been infectious. Her laugh had haunted him years later when he believed no one would be able to love him again. Her laugh, he realized, was coming from the closet.

Tom flung open the door. It was the two teens from the other room. The boy had his pants around his ankles and the girl was topless and laughing. Their faces were a bright, breathless red.

Tom kept a relative cool.

“Get the fuck out of my house this fucking second.”

They ran past him, out the room and towards the stairs, laughing like crows, the boy pulling his pants up in a hopping half-run. “It’s not your home anymore,” he shouted behind him, “It’s been sold!”

“It’s been sold,” the girl echoed, covering her mouth in a snort.

Tom followed them down the stairs and shook his fist, actually shook it, at their disappearing backs. “If I ever even see you two again I will so help me God don’t you ever come back or else…” he said, unsure how to finish the phrase.

The house, Tom noticed from the stairs, had gone mysteriously empty and quiet. Where only minutes ago there had been so many people it was difficult to move from one room to another, now an eerie calm had settled over the barren hardwood floor. Carpets had gone. Bulbs had been removed from light fixtures. There was a strange sense that all joy had been completely stripped from the place.

Sam stood alone in the landing, shiny red jersey tucked neatly into his shorts, holding a black glass cup with blue stars.

Tom froze. There it was. His cup.

“Where is everyone, Sam?”

Sam did not respond. In a different context, his dedication to total incommunicability might have been impressive.

“Where’s your mom?”

Sam’s hair was blond and bowl-cut and for some reason it made Tom want to punt him.

“Sam. Give me the glass.”

He wasn’t even any good at soccer, Sam. He stayed in his position while the other kids naturally swarmed the ball in glee. It was kind of creepy actually, his standing calm and apart. Waiting. Tom only felt the slightest glimmer of guilt for suspecting a mental disability.
“Sam.”
He hadn’t even realized how much this cup meant to him.
There was a distinct pause, just long enough, in which Tom realized what would happen.
He was powerless to stop it.
The glass did not fall to the floor in slow motion. It went down at the usual speed and
shattered as though shattering was what it was designed for. It was inevitable.
By the time Tom was finally successful in putting a stop to his tears and pulling himself
up from the stairs, Sam had gone.

Meanwhile, Cathy’s auction for what was left of Mom’s things had begun in the
basement without Tom’s knowledge. Rows of seats and been set up and filled in the space once
reserved for family game night and in the semi-dark, between the old wood paneling, Cathy
methodically auctioned off the rest of Mom’s things. Old birthday cards, her journals, her dirty
laundry, the dirt and chewed off fingernails from her old vacuum cleaner, the body of the dog
she’d lost as a young girl dug up from the back yard garden, dry-cleaning receipts and old movie
stubs, the teeth she’d lost as a child and kept all this time in little plastic chests, bubblegum
wrappers, bark from the tree in the back yard in which she had carved her name, rags made out
of old tee shirts, the time capsule she planted when she moved in summer 1972, used q-tips,
rusted rat traps, her old shoes and socks and stockings and underwear, and love letters sealed
with red candle wax. With a certain undeniable panache, Cathy auctioned off her mother’s
boisterous staccato laugh, her sharp blue-green eyes, her toothy smile, green thumb, false
humility, bad jokes, appreciation for modern dance, infamous homemade triple-berry muffins,
stubborn close-mindedness, peanut allergy, addiction to two-part apocalyptic TV-movies, neat
all-caps handwriting, and her infuriating punctuality. She sold it, all of it, one by one in front of
Mom’s resting ashes in the urn centered neatly behind Cathy on the fireplace mantelpiece where
it waited its turn.

By the time Tom arrived the bidding was over one thousand.
“Tell me,” said Tom, “this isn’t happening.”
Heads turned.
“Tommy,” said Cathy. “I think you should go back upstairs. Take a nap maybe. You look
awful.”
“You’re going to auction off Mom?”
“Just her ashes.”
Tom wasn’t sure how to respond. It was a feeling he was starting to grow tired of. “Why?” he tried. Then: “Why would you do that? What right do you have? What will we remember her by?”

“About that. We won’t remember. I’ve just sold our last memory of her.”

Tom doubted this. He couldn’t not remember Mom if he tried. Not just the good things but the bad things too. These memories, they came at him like flies. He’d wave them off and they’d circle back. Landing on an arm. Demanding his attention. Gathering in clouds that hummed ominously. He couldn’t forget her even if he wanted to.

But thinking about it now Tom drew a blank. He tried to summon an image, a gesture, a moment together, anything about her. But nothing came. Tom couldn’t recall a single thing. What did she look like? Had he even had a mother? Who was she? What even was her name?

“This,” she said holding up the urn, “is the only thing left.”

Tom looked at it and felt nothing. No sorrow. No respect. He had no emotional connection to this white jar with blue flowers on it. It looked nice enough. Tom tried to remember why he had cared.

“What does it matter, Tom? Even if we kept the house, her things, this stuff, our memories of her, what would it matter? What happens to all of it when we die? Who will remember her then? Who will remember us? Why is it important at all?”

Tom looked about the room, crowded with patient faces, each one as strange as the next.

“But,” he said and the faces waited for an answer. He had nothing. Nothing but the shadow of a feeling, something he couldn’t explain or understand.

“Well if there is nothing else,” said Cathy, turning away from him and back to the crowded basement, “I believe we were at eleven hundred fifty. Do I hear twelve?”

“Twelve,” said a man in the back.

“Wait just one second,” said Tom.

“Twelve. Do I hear twelve fifty?”

“Twelve fifty.”

“Hold on,” said Tom, thinking, thinking about needing to think.

“Thirteen?”

“Thirteen.”

“Please,” said Tom. “Can we talk about this?” The musty smell of the basement, he noticed, was somehow gone.

“Thirteen fifty?”

“Please,” said Tom again, searching helplessly for an argument. “Please don’t.”

“Thirteen fifty?”
It was too late. Tom tried desperately to remember something, anything about Mom. He knew he had had a mom. Knew she had been real. But what was her hair color? How did she smell? What had she said to him before bed each night? Had it warmed him? Like a hug? Had it cast him off to sleep? Was it significant? Would he ever even know?

“Going once,” said Cathy, “Twice. Sold.”

*

Tom stood in the living room, looking at himself in the mirrors that covered the east wall. He didn’t recognize the house or the room behind him in the tiled mirrors, he didn’t recognize himself, and the harder he looked the further away he seemed. Tom was being dismantled piece by piece; someone had bought the mirrors off the wall and was removing them one at a time. First his head, then his shoulders and chest, then his stomach and waist. Tom didn’t want to watch the rest so he closed his eyes and stood silent and unmoving for a very long time. When he opened them everything was gone, everyone had left, and the house was silent and still.

The sky had filled with dark clouds and the afternoon sun was nowhere in sight which made the air in the room a particular kind of thick. A bird sailed through the place where the window had been, before it had been sold and removed, and it landed gracefully in front of the fireplace. It was a robin; perhaps the same one that he suspected had been following him for the last couple weeks. It stood perfectly still for some time, peaceful but unnerving, and then turned its head quickly to the side and looked at him from this new angle. Birds always moved like this, a kind of jerking motion that a robot or someone dancing like a robot would make, Tom thought. Perhaps it had a message for him. Maybe it wanted to be friends but was unsure of how to start a conversation. Maybe it was homeschooled and that’s why it was so awkward. Aren’t all birds homeschooled?

Tom began to approach it in as nonthreatening of a manner as he could contrive. He even put his palms out to show he had nothing in them and stepped gingerly so as not to make any clunking noises on the hardwood with his shoes. The bird looked suspicious. Tom could understand why. After all, if someone walked toward him slowly, palms out, wide eyed and stepping gingerly he’d be suspicious too. Mid-step, Tom noticed a low murmuring or mumbling sound was coming from somewhere unknown. The sound, he realized, had been there all along but he hadn’t become aware of it consciously until now. Was it coming from the bird? He looked at the bird looking at him looking at the bird and thought he saw its mouth moving ever so slightly. The bird was trying to speak with him. Its voice sounded familiar.

Tom stepped closer, unsure of his own intentions, and was within arm’s reach of the robin when all of the sudden there was a crack or snap, a breaking that made him and the bird
jump, startled. The two of them looked around, then back at each other, stunned and confused, and then the bird, remembering what it was, flew away, out the hole in the living room wall leaving Tom alone and in a crouch, struggling to understand.