The Hog, She Dreams of Better Worlds: Stories

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This thesis titled
The Hog, She Dreams of Better Worlds: Stories

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ABSTRACT

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Several stories in which several characters herein run about willy-nilly, staking their claims in the world and—if all goes devilishly well—acting as proverbial fodder for the several critics who will one day revisit this bit of academe in an effort to better understand the brilliant literary career of the author.

Approved: ________________________________________________________

Darrell Spencer

Professor of English
DEDICATION

For M, whose stubborn love has outmatched all my bluster.
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THE HOG, SHE DREAMS OF BETTER WORLDS:

STORIES
Epigraph

The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening . . .

—Genesis 19:1
New Year

The ground has turned to infinitesimal spikes of glass, the frozen dandelion blades hard and artificial-looking in the cold morning air. I haven’t moved since the last shot. The one that whistled off the steel rim of that junked car, buzzed back, across the open yard and plugged itself, dead—ended in a muted pillow-strike sound that I’ve heard before.

I haven’t moved. My finger is still on the trigger, and I’m dimly aware of that arthritic ache in the joints of my forefinger. Of my thumb looped flatly behind the rear sight, fingers braced behind the guard. My left bloodless hand under the forestock has gone to sleep or frozen. For the first time since it happened I’m aware of my breathing, the dense mist of my breath rising in a vapor before my nose.

My mind is a blank. I’ve been staring into those weeds for hours. I walked out at nine last night and tried out the new sight line. Andy had helped me clear a few saplings blocking the view of the muddy trailer park at the bottom of the hill. Jerry, the guy who runs the place, told me he’d pay me fifty for slugging rats, said my trailer, uphill about forty yards, was a good spot for shooting vermin—rats, coons, squirrels, maybe coyote—digging through the trash at the back of the lot. About a dozen trailers squatted there in the mud, and after Christmas the dumpster got full with wrappings and boxes, turkey leftovers and casserole carcasses, and Jerry told me to wait till Sunday night when everyone went up to First Baptist for the evening service and a potluck. Take care of some rodents, any wild dogs, feral cats. That sort of thing. He said he didn’t want sued
for some kid getting bit just ‘cause the fucking tenants were too lazy to hoist their trash bags into the god damn container.

So I waited there and waited to see anybody moving, and I took off my gloves and I set down a styrofoam cup of coffee I got at Speedway, and grabbed half a sack of dog food by the door and set it up on the stump like a sandbag, rested the gun across it, got comfortable. WATCHED the shadows brewing up out of the soft darkness, the angle of the dumpster cut by a pasty orange streetlamp that coated those black plastic bags in a wet-like sheen. I drummed my fingers to keep them warm till the first raccoon came up and started tearing at the edge of a trash bag. The way their hands move is almost human. I shot him through the skull. His furry body rolled over in the dead brown leaves and didn’t fuss. After that I put two rats down. A mangy dog. A smaller raccoon, more delicate than the first, maybe a female, that had sniffed along the outside edges, maybe at the dog. I put her down too. Each time, the rifle cracked like a stroke of lightning, bowled the life out of each animal. Till it was around ten-thirty and I thought I best pack up, as the church van would be back any time.

If it weren’t for that god damn cat.

A cat.

Stringy as spaghetti, spindly legs like a spider’s, hunching, clawing, probably pawing for mice that had gotten at the garbage. It was a pitiful thing. Rangy, sooty gray with a tail kinked left and down, crooking like a rusty drill, left-up-left, jerky. Pitiable.

If only I hadn’t waited. Thought about it too long before putting a bullet into it. I watched the cat doing its own cockeyed version of a pounce, a halt, then a spastic rush

The cat suddenly slipped backward in one of those herky-jerky tailspins, rolled to its side, into the shadow, just as I pulled the trigger. I adjusted instinctively. The pop of my twenty-two, the bullet searing a line down through the patch of scraggly woods.

Struck the rim of a blocked car, sailed wide.

Then the sound.

A short—very short; too short—figure at the edge of the trailer near the dumpster. That sound like a rock thrown into a sheet on the line. Stopped mid-air and lodged into something soft. The same way a bullet goes into a dog.

That little figure fell forward into the leaves, and I heard the crunch of them louder, world-jarring loud. The cat scurrying away, making a wooden racket through the invisible trees.

God.

My finger is still on the trigger, my eyes still trained on that spot, where whatever it is fell. Maybe a Christmas box, a doll’s box. One of those big ones the size of a child. Maybe a thrown-out wad of insulation. A soiled cot mattress rolled and bound. Infinite.

The Baptists drove in about ten forty-five I think, but by then the night had stopped. Chatters and muffled goodbyes as passengers dove out into the cold, called over their shoulders, slammed the sliding door. The motor made a hurting sound as it trolled up the road and away down the bend.
In this morning-white haze I’m looking for the signs of artificial colors. The sunshine yellows bright as Big Bird, or candy reds of fire engines—the kind of things children wear. Get suited up in by parents. Not a peep from the park since someone started a car, turned it off, closed their door, sometime after the van came by. Very late.

There’s a rigid silence to dawn. The fluid winding of a noiseless clock. Somewhere across Jisco Road a tractor starts up like a man clearing his throat.

I wait until a woman, eyes broken U’s, tumbles out drunk-sick, hungover with a flimsy nightgown loose and wagging across her breasts, swaying as she retches in the weeds before dropping to one knee and wiping away the strung spittle from her lips. I take her for mid-twenties. A mother, maybe.

I wait for her to look beyond her feet at whatever it is. I wait for the way her face will distort as she discovers some horrible secret in the silver grass. But her marred, bleary expression holds steady as she hitches herself up against the backside of her trailer, tugs up at the neck of her gown while mincing—she’s barefoot—to keep her toes from freezing to the ground.

She turns and highsteps back around to the front, out of sight, and doesn’t appear again.

The cold sun draws up on its hind legs until I’m staring down on a gray miniature of the trailer park in full detail. I don’t move. Not for anything. This is the way stone feels.

Late morning, a tall man with black wisps of fine hair fluttering across his scalp crosses the central space that serves as a sort of courtyard. He carries a white trash bag
and wears a pointed party hat in metallic purple with white, loopy letters on it that say *Happy New Year!!* And for the first time I realize last night was new year’s eve, and midnight came and went without any ball or resolutions, without the hollow cheers of confetti-blanketed millions calling out to me from my television. I can’t remember the last time, if ever, I didn’t watch that ball, the one with all the lights, touch down like a goodcheer bomb at the center of Times Square, the ripples of laughter and singing spreading out till it seemed like they’d reach all the way out here, in the icy moon-dim silence of my little place on the hill.

And for the first time, I feel the quiet—as I watch that man crossing the yard in silence like a movie with the sound turned down. As he removes the hat, jams it in with the trash, tosses that bag and twirls on his heel. As he stops and circles that indentation in the grass. As that grown man tries to catch his breath, and bows down in haste, in absolute panic, to the tiny body at his feet, I feel the quiet.

And realize those cheers never ever reached this far.
They Wash Their Feet in Soda Water

As a soldier, Bertram Hahn was no good. Green-tomato-Bertram, plucked prematurely from his parents’ Ohio farm where the wheat wiggled and cooled itself in the superficial heat of early spring, yanked from his roots where he’d always considered himself a scholar in the making. Whisked in Uncle Sam’s efficient fashion to the South Pacific and those fresh emerald dollops known as the Kiribati atolls to build dirt-and-thatch airstrips for P-38 fighters. A scholar, not a soldier—who always carried Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and a copy of Frazer’s *Golden Bough* in his rucksack.

Two blue nights into the sweltering spring of 1943, Japanese *Zeros* bombed the bivouacs where his unit had made camp, setting the jungle alight and burning all but two of the unit into crisp, black studies of the withered human form. Bertram being one of the two, recovered from a head injury in a straw hut infirmary, fading in and out of fevered dreams as he struggled for consciousness and life.

That first night they brought Bertram in to the dank recovery room with its pungent vapors and fecund warmth, he looked bad indeed. His nurse, an I-Kiribati girl with liquid brown eyes who’d been taught English by sallow Jesuits, found in Bertram’s bag his copy of *The Waste Land*. It was her impression that this book, as strange as the priests’ Bibles had been to her, must be Bertram’s religious text. And so, in her stilted English, night after night, beneath a smoky wandering moon, she read it aloud, over and over, for his comfort.

And when Bertram awoke, seventeen days later, he found that the echoes of his past—the smoky voice of a Baptist minister in the open air of tent revivals; the barked
commands of CO’s at Fort Dix; even the chidings of an overly attentive mother—had been knocked clean out of his head, displaced by Eliot’s panoramic anarchy. He found peace in the “oil and tar” of downed planes on the shore, the “red sails” of men’s undergarments hanging to dry while “beating oars” of I-Kiribati lapped the sea foam of inlets. And so on. The whole mad rhythm of it recalled in perfect clarity, its lilting lines opening before him like a path—a new religion!—until one day Bertram left. Just up and went away, singing under his breath, “Weialala leia, Wallala leialala...”

In the jungle, salt winds came up the coastline and pressed warmly at Bertram’s back, the broken palms from Japanese strafing runs flapping behind him in a cool murmur. “‘Your shadow at morning striding behind you,’” Bertram said. And when it grew late: “‘Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you.’” Bertram felt wonderful, ate fruits that hurt his stomach, defecated near a palm, ate again, a green melon this time, and this time felt warmth in his fingers that felt like enlightenment. He trudged on, vaguely aware that some pressure in his brain had given him great insight into the poem, which was more than a poem. Had given him clarity, “Like ‘Madame Sosostris,’” he said to no one. “‘Famous clairvoyante, / Had a bad cold, nevertheless / Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe.’” In the evening, when he grew weary, he chanted, over and over in a sad, whispering monotony, “‘And each man fixed his eyes before his feet,’” which gave him the strength to carry on.

For one sultry month he hobbled through the jungle, eating fruit and sleeping when his strength ran out, no greater purpose in mind than his contemplation of the work: “‘ego ipse oculis meis vidi;’ Amen!” The poem. The rains, animals, tropical-disease-carrying
mosquitoes gave him their blessing—his swollen brain still swollen, a slight pressure behind the eyes, and grubby fingers spilling again and again across Eliot’s open pages, a copy his uncle had given him for his birthday which he kept dry by wrapping in the torn-off sleeve of his shirt and tucking it into his waistband.

Then one day Bertram came across a man in a tree, naked but for a pair of saggy shorts, hung upside down by his feet from a branch, his hands desperately close to the ground. “I do not find / The Hanged Man,” said Bertram. Weeks before he had left his own words behind. The man in the tree beseeched Bertram with words Bertram didn’t know, his mouth making syllables that went zzzzshh-zsh and bong-ong-ong. Below the man were new graves, the scattered mounds of dark soil churned up by a multitude of insects. If Bertram had spoken Korean, the man might have explained he was a forced laborer for the Japanese army. Would have said, for stealing a single banana, he’d been made to dig the graves of his friends before they were shot, that he’d been hung upside down to be devoured by whatever jungle animals stalked the bug-riddled darkness.

Staring at the graves, Bertram said, “O keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men, / Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!”

The man in the tree pleaded—“zzzzshhh” and “ong-ong-ong”—in ways that made Bertram’s swollen brain shiver in its soupy skull.

Negotiations had broken down.

So, like any good Waste Land-ian, which was a term Bertram had settled on over Eliotite, uncertain as to what he should do about the man in the tree, who looked very Japanese and therefore very much like the enemy, Bertram sat before the graves and
searched the poem for guidance. The first great moral test of his newfound religion. The life of a man hung before him.

“‘Breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land,’” Bertram said. But there were not lilacs over the graves. There was no ‘spring rain,’ nor a ‘colonnade,’ nor an ‘antique mantel,’ no ‘chair’ or ‘red rock’ or ‘London Bridge’ or ‘King William Street’ or ‘Queen Victoria Street’; no landmark to give him purchase. Nothing but the unlike jungle of a South Pacific island. Bertram thought and thought. The corpses were not sprouting. He sniffed the air: no ‘strange synthetic perfumes.’

“‘What are you thinking of?’” mumbled Bertram to himself, holding his eyes shut tight, sitting in the dirt, his hands pounding his forehead. “‘What thinking? What?...Think.’” All the while the Korean in the tree, whose name was Jung Hee, pleaded with crazy, dirty Bertram on the ground. “I am man,” said Jung Hee. “A fellow human being! My name is Jung Hee! Jung Hee! Jung Hee!”

“‘I never know what you are thinking,’” quoted Bertram. “‘What shall I do now?’” He consulted his *Golden Bough*—his only other text—on the hanged man and found a passage on the rites of the Bagobos of Mindanao, who each year lashed a man to a tree, lanced him with spears, cut him in two and threw him in a ditch. It seemed a tenuous interpretation, but Bertram made preparations all the same. Eliot was Eliot. And Frazer was, after all, Frazer.

“Jung Hee! Jung Hee!” said Jung Hee while Bertram sharpened a stick against a rock.

“Jung Hee! Jung Hee!”
This went on for an hour. Two. Then three.


Which gave Bertram, finally, the pause he required, thinking of that beautifully simple line: “‘My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart / Under my feet.’” For, because he was upside down, Jung Hee’s heart was, in fact, under his feet. And for once Bertram knew what it was to experience complete and perfect spiritual clarity.

With his newly sharpened spear, Bertram severed the rope about Jung Hee’s ankles, and Jung Hee spilled to the ground, his voice gone. His trembling hands clutching the dirt.

“‘After the event / He wept,’” declared Bertram. He had had no real desire to run Jung Hee through with a spear.

After that, the two of them walked the jungle together. Jung Hee, who had no home or country that could pluck him out of this hellish hot world of weeds, who saw the light of true understanding in his savior’s eyes, was more than content to follow Bertram Hahn.

And for weeks the poem provided their answers, Bertram consulting its pages to find water sources, fruits, dry vines for the thatching of a lean-to. They played chess, as was recommended, their pieces carved from coconut husks. Jung Hee, who could read English, but not speak it, sometimes studied the words in the steady, silk moonlight as Bertram slept, so that his understanding filled his soul in other ways.

They passed many months in the jungle this way, until they heard again the
Japanese guns along the shore mounting their cannonade, pungent gunsmoke streaking the sky.

The final throes of the greater than great war had reached their last stages of magnitude and madness.

“Burning burning burning burning,” said Bertram sadly. “And upside down in air were towers.”

“All things are on fire,” said Jung Hee in Korean. The Buddha had said this. The Buddha, Jung Hee thought, may have been a *Waste Land*-ian.

*During their months in the jungle, Bertram and Jung Hee came across a third man, Aaron Stool, who, like Bertram, was a deserter, though for non-religious reasons. Aaron Stool did not believe in God and therefore could not believe in any higher power, poetic or otherwise. His lack of God exacerbated his fear of death—a valid medical condition that in Aaron Stool’s book exempted him from war and other dangerous activities. Aaron Stool did not know what to make of Eliot or *The Waste Land*. Aaron Stool said that all real religions were ancient. He had been through two years of college, and said that, as far as he knew, Modernists didn’t believe in God, either.*

*Bertram, refusing to speak words other than the poem, called Aaron Stool, “the third who walks always beside you,” which he shortened to “the third.”

*Jung Hee called him “Turd.”

*I should mention that Aaron Stool was not a bright boy and often picked his nose with a twig. For two years, Aaron Stool’s parents had paid for him to continue university*
even after he failed all of his classes. Until he was drafted. After that, they could not pay to have him continue, and that year his physical was one of the few things he did not fail.

The night after the smoke, Bertram made a wrong choice. His instincts had for so long been reliant on the poem that he failed to understand the dangers of real war. Or maybe he understood them better than anyone. Still, he did not choose well.

That night, as Bertram, Jung Hee, and Aaron Stool slept, the three of them triparted by the thinnest space, the glottal, backthroated snarling of an animal awoke them as it noshed its prey. As they looked about, the dank, perplexing darkness multiplied its blackest shades so that every leaf, every errant twig and night-moving insect took the hostile forms of monsters and evil spirits.

“I wish I had my gun,” whispered Aaron Stool, who actually wished Jung Hee had his gun.

Bertram stood. “Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit / There is not even silence in the mountains / But dry sterile thunder without rain.” They had never traveled at night, but they traveled now, moved away from the noshing sound, which came from the coast line.

The noshing sound was the engines of American gunships preparing a morning assault on the island.

But Bertram and Jung Hee and Aaron Stool could not have known, and the three of them retreated inland, traveling by night, until Aaron Stool stepped on a Japanese land mine. The explosion made a bright orange flare that blinded temporarily the other two.
His body popped up and flopped down in two uneven pieces.

Bertram knelt beside Aaron Stool, whose blood ran from a seared opening in his flesh where his right leg once was. Jung Hee pressed his hands into the wet meat of Aaron Stool’s mangled pelvis, but his blood and bone followed gravity and slid away from him onto the jungle floor.

“After the torchlight red on sweaty faces,” said Bertram.

Aaron Stool wailed.

“After the agony in stony places / The shouting and the crying,” Bertram said. He had no prayers left other than Eliot’s.

Aaron Stool cried like a small child.

Aaron stool died.

Bertram embraced the man, the blackened char of his face embedding itself in the night. “He who was living is now dead,” said Bertram. He and Jung Hee cried openly over Aaron Stool’s body. “We who were living are now dying.”

In the morning, Jung Hee and Bertram buried Aaron Stool. American planes buzzed overhead. The invasion of Tarawa was underway. “What is that sound in the air,” said Bertram. “Murmur of maternal lamentation.” And for the first time he despised the full meaning of the poem. Because Eliot had been right.

“Who are those hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth.” Bertram sought comfort in the words, couldn’t find comfort. The American planes bombarded the Japanese guns along the coast. Naval fusillades shook
the air. Metal ripped in banshee shrieks, sliced through men as ethereal as ghosts.

Bertram shouted to Jung Hee over the guns: “My friend, blood shaking my heart / The awful daring of a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract / By this, and this only, we have existed.” Surrender, he thought. Eliot had not yet failed him. He led Jung Hee toward the beach where American landing craft scurried up the sand like hulking beetles, soldiers pouring forth in blistering arrays of gunfire.

Bertram emerged from the nearby jungle calling to them in peace, “Shantih shantih shantih!”

To one soldier, whose name I shall not reveal, Bertram—wild-eyed, disheveled madman-in-loincloth—looked a prisoner of war, and Jung Hee, behind him, covered in blood, looked his Japanese captor. This soldier, who in the heat of battle, cinched his nerves into a hardened thing, steely, dropped to one knee and shot Jung Hee. A hero’s shot. A one in a million.

Bertram babbled wildly, talking in phrases the soldier didn’t understand, yet somehow he made it known that the ‘Japanese’ was in fact a friend, a companion. The soldier helped to stanch the bleeding. Medics were called.

And in the pressing heat, as the squads mounted the jungle and took the island, that soldier who had taken the shot watched as Bertram removed his own dog tags and put them over the head of Jung Hee, whose shoulder the bullet had pierced, and who, as far as the US Army was now concerned, became Bertram Hahn.²

*By the time the error was corrected, Jung Hee Park had been treated. He was eventually*
offered asylum, spent five very difficult years in Edwardsville, Illinois before moving to Palm Beach and acquiring a small business loan to start up Third Man Pizza, which currently has seven locations. He never told anyone, not even his wife of forty years, who died last fall, or his three children, who he loves each in delightfully different ways, to what the “Third Man” refers.

As for Bertram Hahn, he was also ‘rescued’. For two days he slept in a tent while the chatter of machine guns raped the last of the burning jungle. And after his sleep, he arose to his Waste Land. A smoldering, dead ‘decayed hole’ of jungle and men, warped black branches encrusted in shallow washes of sea salt. The moans of the wounded lugged back to camp and shipped off to ships in the hell-damp heat, their cries like the ‘drip drop drip drop drop drop drop’ of blood where ‘there is no water.’

Bertram stumbled out into this black. This dark ruin.

And that soldier who’d shot Jung Hee, the soldier who himself had lived through the invasion only out of some miracle, stopped the dazed Bertram, placed a hand on his shoulder. Bertram turned to this soldier, and he spoke. He said, “I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me / Shall I at least set my lands in order?” And the soldier allowed him to go. Understood in some way that the man was either mad or a Christ, a Buddha or a prophet. And that whatever he was, he required his solitude—his mad brain the space and silence of the jungle to comprehend the import of his new enlightenment.

That soldier—who fired the shot; who let Bertram pass into the jungle; who
returned home and went to school on the GI Bill; who came across those same words in an introductory English course years later; who was nearly jolted out of his desk by the sight of it; and who today, living in his Shaker-style home in Ridgely, Maryland—that soldier half-thinks that some day soon he’ll hear on the nightly news about a weathered, toothless loon, who sixty-seven years later, re-emerged with the light of the world in his hands, the peace and the poem to correct us all.

And that old soldier in his burgundy recliner, sitting before the news in his sweatpants and a ratty sweatshirt, which was a gift from his grandchildren—that soldier thinks that message is something he’d like to hear.
Tennessee, 1971

Driving in the early-winter dark, Gabe and Jessie, both in their forties, figured as two leathered smudges with eyes. Jessie had been thinking about the foundry. Same scene over and over. The way he had for months. He tried concentrating on the rain. Slipstream droplets veered quietly over the windshield of Gabe’s Impala, the irritable drivebelt shrieking round the crankshaft while the mildew smell of cracked leather rose through the seats.

“Gotta work the job,” said Gabe. “It’s what we’re here for. Got to get the plan straight.”

Gabe had been attending First Baptist since Christmas. Some solid prospects for wifing, which is how he put it. But this woman they were going to see—she was older. Elderly. Wanted two men to help her move a few things. Her husband had passed away the year previous, and she was selling the farm, moving in with her daughter, had started going to church in town, which is how she met Gabe, who said he’d help, no charge, out of Christian duty, in hopes of impressing the daughter, whose husband—“not in the picture for a while,” said Gabe.

It was also Gabe’s idea to filch a few things in the process. If there were any worth taking. “A little senile,” Gabe said. “Never notice. Just nothing big. Not the television, not a whole jewelry box. Bad eyesight, too. Did I mention that?”

But Jessie couldn’t concentrate. He kept replaying that moment in the foundry in his head. He’d been casting clutch covers, pouring molten steel from a handheld crucible about the size of lunch pail into sand molds when this kid—some kid in pajamas—shot in
front of him. Jessie’s arm had flailed as he stumbled backward, trying not to scald the child. The fall. The spill of magmatic metal slithering across Dale Everett’s boot, enough to take a toe before he got out of it.

“I just want quiet,” Jessie said. He’d been out of work ever since, facing a lawsuit unless Dale wised up and saw Jessie had nothing but a weather-sheared trailer in repayment. Jessie turned toward the door, hoping the gesture would be enough to quiet the drive for a bit. He’d started dreading this day the second Gabe mentioned it, and it didn’t help matters he’d been spotting angels since the thing with the kid.

That’s what he’d decided the kid was. An angel. He certainly hadn’t found any other way to explain it. And angels had been popping up ever since. In the bright spaces between people, atop fence posts, beside refrigerators, one near the A&P market checkout where a six year-old girl fell and cut her knee on some weather stripping, the angel had been there, too, and in the endzone of the Redmen football game Friday night. Right there in the goddamn endzone under the arc sodium lights, feet planted in the red grass where the Chief Tecumseh logo had been painted by the field crew.

Jessie shut his eyes tight, felt the vibration of rain tickling the roof, crawling across the car, leaving echoes of echoes in the disturbance.

The trees and fields, desaturated of greens, rolled across the window like the two-dimensional movie backgrounds of old films, black and whites where the driver wiggles the wheel, and the world outside looks all too close.

Gabe shook Jessie when they pulled into the gravel drive.
An old farm house, blank as forgetting, its stolid panes black and warped, the slivered skin of paint trembling under the drizzle.

“Got cold,” Jessie said. He hustled up the steps with Gabe, looked for angels and saw none. How many more before he went to the doctor? He was forty-three. Could his mind be going? Did you mention a thing like that to a doctor?

Gabe smacked his hands together and knocked on the door.

The old woman answered. Stood five foot tall, jaw of a bailiff, hands lost in a tangle of apron. “Name’s Irene,” she said to Jessie. “Just doing my dishes.” She waved them in.

Their feet made the old floorboards moan. Jessie felt Gabe mapping the place, ticking off the steps from room to room, measuring the time it would take the woman to get from one to the next. In the sitting room a small, spotty-looking television with milky glass like a bubble. No eight track console or cartridges.

She led them on to the kitchen, gnawing her bottom lip with a slick row of dentures. Hobbling on a stiff left leg, she looked like a pinch-nosed donkey with button eyes, a piteous animal whose pathetic stoop shot a hole of guilt through Jessie’s guts.

He scanned the splintered cupboards. Spotted an iron corn sheller on the counter like a medieval surgical tool. A few loose horseshoe nails in a red, McDonald’s fry box. Cracked ceramic crockery stained with age. The lot of shabby things detailed in the cold fringe of morning light.

Gabe nodded his head at some boxes stacked brown against the back wall.

“You do all this packing yourself?”
“Suppose I did,” she said. “I still get around. Heavy lifting’s where they got me.”

“You won’t need to lift a finger.” He bowed like a footman.

This softened her a bit. She rested her hands on the towel slung across the two sinks. “Got new milk, you want it.”

“From the cow?” said Gabe.

“Sure enough.”

“Eggs?”

“I’ll fry ‘em up,” she said. “You boys take the upstairs. There’s a bureau in the room to the right needs hauled out to the truck.”

The two climbed the stairs. Jessie heard Irene put the iron skillet on its burner.

“A meal in the bargain,” said Gabe. He pointed out the bureau against the left wall in the open room at the top of the steps, but passed it up for the next doorway and slid inside. He motioned for Jessie to explore the room on the left.

Jessie stopped in the hallway in front of the closed door on the lefthand side of the hallway and listened, heard the grate of the skillet on the metal range as the Irene began cooking. He smelled bacon. He opened the door and stepped into the room, which was lowlit with whatever was draining out of the sky, its faintness shining in through some thick, green curtains drawn loosely closed.

Not angels like you see in cartoons. But it was Jessie’s best guess. People no one else saw. He’d pointed one out to Carla at the fair six months ago. A towheaded man,
curly-locked, like a Swede, broad shoulders, in all white, something simple, Indian
maybe, a homespun shirt and pants with no buttons, almost like pajamas.

“Looky there,” he’d said. “What do you expect that fella’s up to?”

The man stared up at the ferris wheel from directly beneath it.

“Who?” said Carla.

The man was gone.

Jessie described him, and Carla said, “I think I would have seen someone like
that.”

It wasn’t until a few weeks later, a full month after the foundry incident, Jessie
got the idea about the angels. He’d seen two of them on the side of the road, holding
hands, a man and a woman, both blonde in similar outfits. Then a boy standing atop the
Buckeye Mart. Jessie had halted in the parking lot and gawked up at the kid, his hands
trembling as the child, a different one than before, touched his own temple with a chubby,
pale finger. Jessie mirrored the motion, trying to read the meaning in it, and a few folks in
the parking lot looked up in the same direction, but none of them stopped, not the way
they should have. Not the way you stop when you see a child at the edge of a building.

In the shadowed room, Jessie’s eyes adjusted to the light. A bedroom. The dank
wallpaper was crammed with paisley and textured flowers. Dark shag carpet well worn.
He honed in on a box sitting on a chair, something to hold in case the old woman made it
up the stairs and questioned him.

Then his breath hitched in his throat.
In the center of the floor was a brass bed, a heaven’s-gate head with pipes like a church organ rising over the pillows. And on the bed a man.

Dark and mummified, his leathered lips pulled back over bullet teeth with a beef-jerky tongue caught like a worm between the top and lower incisors.

Not ghosts, but angels. Nothing phantasmagorical to suggest an apparition—the ectoplasmic resonance of light trailing the body like smoke, the way Jessie always imagined the dead. The people in white—there was no other explanation—simply watched. As if intrigued by the movements of humans living, observing the mechanics of happiness and mundane sorrows fluctuating across fleshy pink faces.

It was in the past months, out of work, smoking before a dead television and thinking, that Jessie had had time to piece it all together. How he’d known years before, really, when it came right down to it. Just didn’t know, not with the certainty he now felt since the kid. Same way he was certain of their presence in the violent moments—those spots where life seemed to speed up and rush headlong into death. Or at least the potential for it.

Certain. Certain was the word.

The first time he’d seen them was a day of gunfire. Blackbirds had taken to roosting in the sandstone cornices of the county courthouse, squawking like pirates from behind a gunwale, shit raining down like rain. Sheriff Henderson had ordered folks to clear out for two blocks so deputies and a few local boys could sharpshoot the fowl with .22s. Gabe and Jessie had figured it’d be a hoot, so they packed their rifles down to Oak
Street where Bill and a few of the other deputies were standing on the sidewalk and spitting into the street.

The sheriff gave them the speech. “Uptown’s blocked off and we’ve moved all the cars. Remember, boys: clear line of sight. Everyone stays on Main till we give the word, then we all move together. All shots upward. No ricochets. You hear me?”

They nodded.

Fourteen of them marched into the middle of town. It might have been a horror movie, something about the apocalypse. The buildings were silent except for the birds. The men stood in an uneven line and pointed their sights upward at the courthouse. They looked nothing like a unit. The deputies were the only ones in uniform. They didn’t stand in a straight row. Each took up his own stance a few yards away from the next.

Aimed.

Fired.

The fusillade of steel blistered the courthouse, shaving flecks of sandstone from its sheer face amid a cloud of black feathers. Like tinder under flint, the feathers caught fire and floated down, wafting match-heads, over the flailing black bodies of birds tumbling over and into the shrubs below.

Jessie watched these feathers, followed them, the curling swerve of unpredictable flame dancing across the street toward the old feed mill. The utter slowness of it imprinted the image in his mind. One single feather. One pentecostal swirl of Jehovah’s light dancing over these men, its loveliness tilting to the benevolent wind and alighting over the open hatch of the mill’s grain silo.
The rattling spray of gunfire was suddenly punctuated by exploding grain dust, set alight by one small torch on a blackbird’s wing. The silo howled and buckled in a convulsion that shook the ground. Glenn Flowchet spun with his rifle, scared shitless, squeezed off a round and shot Terry Markham in the face. The bullet shattered Terry’s jaw and punched a hole in his cheek, passing out the other side and whizzing down the street where it bounced with the sound of a dropped nickel.

“Holy shlllit,” said Terry. A slurry of blood dribbled out the black hole next to his chin.

“God damn it,” Sheriff Henderson said. “God fucking damn it.”

Glenn Flowchet flipped the safety on his gun and set it at his feet, staring at it as if it were a dead dog.

Gabe was chuckling into his palm—“Holy fuck holy fuck, man. God damn.”

Which is when Jessie saw the angel, a honey-eyed young woman with the sweet, untamed juiciness of an orange, slipping past the others and leading Terry away, the Sheriff trailing after. They were at a dead run, headed for the cruiser by the time Jessie realized he hadn’t seen this woman. Her appearance was improbable enough—along with her disappearance as Terry and Sheriff Henderson hit the cruiser, blood blurring its way down the white panel of the passenger door—that Jessie didn’t say anything about it.

But that night at Carla’s, after he’d told her what happened, he threw out what had really been on his mind.

“You ever see an angel?” he asked her.
“Like a real angel?” Her black hair fell to either side of her sharp chin as she searched for an answer in her peas.

“Real angel, I guess.”

She grinned. “You telling me something?”

“I might be.”

“I guess if you’re calling me your angel, you’ll want me around for good.”

“I’m not saying that.”

“But kind of,” she went on. “Like a guardian?”

“I don’t know.”

“That means you’d be stuck with me. For life.”

His lips tightened. He couldn’t follow.

“Marriage,” she said. “Is that what you’re talking about?”

“It’s not.”

“Well we’re going to have it sometime—this conversation.”

“I was talking about something else.”

“Angels,” she said. “Like real ones?”

“Forget it.”

He’d thought a lot about guardian angels since then. Figured that’s what they were. Kind of watching over folks.

In the dark bedroom there were no angels.
Only the dead man rotting into dust with his desiccated face slumping into the hollows of his skull, into the pillow, and instinctively Jessie moved away from it. He bumped the box on the chair, which made a heavy thump on the floor.

This was a time for reality, he thought. And the man in the bed could have been anything. A hallucination, like the angels. Or real, but existent on some other plane. Like the angels. He wanted to throw something at it. He picked up a lamp with its cord wrapped round the base, no bulb, packed and ready to go. He felt the wooden weight of it in his hand. He wanted to throw it, for it to land on the dead man’s stomach, to make a sound, hollow or rotten, something to confirm his existence. Jessie’s mind felt stripped, like the threads of a bad pipe, slipping, rolling over and over.

“You ain’t in the right room,” said Irene.

She stood in the doorway, an unlit match in her hand, scraping at its head with the edge of her thumbnail, those dentures going nervous across her bottom lip. She obstinately avoided the bed, didn’t look, just kept on staring at Jessie.

“Sorry, ma’am.”

He approached her, afraid now to peek at the bed himself. The body—there or not. Either way felt like a steel lock on madness. His mind rolled over again, spinning in a rusty paralysis, a hardened loop of logic. She’d done this to him. If she’d looked, he’d have confirmation. But she didn’t.

Resisting a last glance, he passed her, carrying the lamp into the hall. She shut the door behind him and smiled.
“Bureau is in that room.” She pointed to the piece. Gabe, for his part, suddenly emerged from the other room lugging an end table.

“No no no,” she said. “That’s my bedroom. Still got a few nights in this old house. That room’s the last to go.”

“Sorry about that,” Gabe said. He carried the end table back into the room with a smile that told Jessie he’d found something.

After that, she watched them tote the big bureau down the steps and out the door to her dead-blue Chevy half-ton. The rain had hardened to an icy brocade through which the house and trees looked like silver monuments to themselves. The sting of it pricked Jessie’s skin. They tied the dresser in place with twine while Irene finished breakfast.

Walking back across the yard in the biting mist, Gabe grabbed Jessie’s arm.

“She’s fucking rich,” he said.

Jessie tried to make out Gabe’s face in the rain, but the ice droplets sliding down his eyebrows made him liquid, made his features shift. Gabe felt to Jessie as unreal as the angels. The dead man.

“Did you hear me? Fucking oldest cliché in the book. Wads of it under her mattress.” Gabe plucked a sheaf of bills from the pocket of his jeans, running his fingers across the edges. “Don’t worry. I took some from a couple different wads. They were way back, middle of the mattress. I’ll cover for you, if you want to grab some.”

“There’s a dead man,” said Jessie. The wad of bills had scarcely registered. He still held the roll of twine in his left hand and had cinched the end of it round his fingers so tight he’d started to bleed.
“Dead man?”
“A dead man. In the room.”

They entered the foyer and headed up the stairs.
Irene raised her voice from the kitchen as they passed through. “Breakfast is on.”
Gabe called back to her. “Jessie cut himself on the twine. Lost a glove. We’re going to look for it a second.” They reached the top and turned toward the left door.

“Here?”

Jessie nodded. He felt something ending. Felt the dawning of some new moment curling itself up over the lip of his life like a beast, something massive and wet and warm, rolling and breathing its dank breath in an animal sigh. The miasma of churned earth collecting in his nostrils. And before Gabe could open the door, he knew it was the smell of the dead man. The real dead man in the bed lying in his tattered gray coat with a hat by his hand. And knew it was the woman’s husband moldering in the saturated shadows.

Gabe pushed through.

“Fuck,” he said.

Jessie could see the dead man’s feet from the doorway, two leather silhouettes against the light of the window. He wore wingtips.

Gabe looked at the man in silence and his thoughts became tangible in the darkness.

“No,” said Jessie in a whisper.

“She’s old,” said Gabe. “One foot in the grave.”
“It’s murder.”

Gabe opened his palms as if to display the corpse. “This—this is crazy. It’s an alibi. She tried to kill us. She freaked out. Whatever we want to say.”

“The money,” said Jessie. The movement of his tongue felt attached to the base of his spine. The sound of his own voice moved through him like a tensed muscle.

“Hell, yes, the money. No shit, the money. Thousands. Nobody knows about it. Brandy would have told me. She said her mom had nothing. Complained about it. She was pissed she was going to have to foot another set of bills. See?”

“I won’t.”

“Then don’t,” said Gabe. “Just don’t fuck it up.”

She appeared behind them on the stairs, winded from the climb.

“Don’t say nothing,” she said. “That’s Robert in there. It’s all he wanted. To stay in the house.”

Her hand on her chest, she looked more pitiful than before. Her dentures made her top lip stick out over the bottom. She drew in shallow breaths with a permanent wince. Brittle wrinkles Jessie hadn’t noticed before had suddenly collected down her cheeks into the side of her mouth and worked their way down her neck. She wheezed. Her small hands gripped the balustrade, her swollen arthritic knuckles doubling her fingers into knotted shapes that looked unrealistic.

“He’s my husband,” she said.

Gabe slid past Jessie and without stopping shoved her.

Jessie didn’t move.
A simple terrified expression flashed over her face, and for a moment she looked young again, the way only the young can look—the young who want to live, to breathe and consume sunshine in single wondrous strokes of brilliant, ceaseless energy. She tumbled. Her small body made broken stick noises. Rubbing sounds of her dress sliding over the stairs—the sound a child’s slippered feet make when slid across the carpet to build static electricity. Then stopped. And there was nothing finite. No final thud at the bottom. Just the cessation of noise.

Gabe said, “She went crazy, okay. She went nuts when we found the old man. She threw herself down the stairs. We call the ambulance after we take all the money.” He turned toward the bedroom and spoke over his shoulder. “You get to keep the trailer, bud.”

Jessie looked down at the rope burn where the twine had peeled the skin back from the meat of his fingers. It was red and raw, bleeding in patches. He looked down at his feet, which wore no shoes. His legs, which were clothed in white pants. His shirt, a muslin twill of light cotton. He felt the lustrousness of his own resolve. A divine swell working like a light through the darkness of his heart.

“Glory glory,” he murmured. His lips tasted sweet with a honeysuckle moisture.

At his feet sat the lamp he’d picked up earlier. It seemed an inconsequential piece of the universe then. A placement made in haste, though now it was clear. A divine forethought of an omniscient presence glaring balefully upon the wages of a darkened world.
He picked it up. Felt the heft of it in his hand, the slight sway of it as it moved, pendulum-wise, from the vertex of his wrist. It was a weapon.

A God weapon.

He followed Gabe into the bedroom where Gabe had upturned the mattress. Atop the box spring lay wads of cash like green islands in a murky sea.

He looked down on Gabe. The stooped frame of one of God’s children clutching at riches. He breathed the smell of the house into his lungs, the death of everything. He raised the lamp over his head—its perfect perfect balance; its finely tuned weight—and paused in silence. A moment of infinite fluidity. He saw the others through the windows of the room. They were coming. Across the fields. From the woods.
“There’s a new layer of ice, today,” said Devon. He looked across the yard to the car parked off the back alley. It hadn’t moved in a week.

“It just keeps coming,” Denise said quietly. She pressed her thumb against the cold window. Her nerves felt tattered. Brian wouldn’t have understood, would have told her to get over it, but he wasn’t here, and being cooped up, for any amount of time, made her edgy, on the verge of collapse.

“It was like a freezing rain or something,” Devon went on. “It made like a shell. I stepped on it. It wouldn’t even break” Denise had let him trek to the mailbox to check for letters, even though no one, not even the postal service, had been down their street in three days.

“It’s bad,” she agreed.

Outside, the wind blew a crystalline snow like silver glitter off the roof and scattered it across the yard. For six days it had snowed, always at night, quiet deposits on a world being buried. Each time she trudged to the porch to shovel off the small patch in front of her door, she saw the strata of snowfalls like an illustration in Brooke’s dinosaur book.

She removed her thumb from the window, leaving a halo of condensation on the glass.

“You want me to get breakfast ready for Brooke and Ellen?” he asked.

She smiled at him appreciatively, pulling her robe tight to her neck. Devon was a good boy, a good big brother. Brooke, who was six, looked up to him, and Ellen, two,
couldn’t have found him more hilarious. She’d had the kids five days in the house, and Devon was the only reason she’d made it this long without tearing out her hair. Much longer though, and—

“Let them sleep,” she said. “Let’s not take any chances banging pots and pans around.”

“When’s dad coming home?”

Devon, despite his good intentions, took his own subtle toll on her nerves. While Brooke operated at a volume just below a jet engine, and Ellen possessed the universal arsenal of all two year-olds (the crying, the running, the scattered toys), Devon had his questions.

“Did he get snowed in, too?” he asked.

“Not in Arizona, no,” she said. “But he got caught in a layover in Washington, D.C. He said they probably wouldn’t fly out till tomorrow or the next day.” Another two days—she felt like crying.

“I hope he’s all right. What’s a layover?”

A part of her suddenly unraveled. Her composure broke, as if he’d stacked one too many dominoes on an already teetering pile. A sudden urge to slap him, to shut his mouth. She breathed deeply. A torrent of guilt welled up in her gut.

“Honey. Honey,” she said gently. “Mommy needs to go out.” If it were ever going to happen, if she were going to get even the slightest break, now was the time, while the girls were asleep.

“But the car—”
“I know. The car. But we need bread,” she lied. “And milk. I’m just going to walk to the gas station at the end of the street, see if they’re open. You think you can keep an eye on things?”

Devon’s face lit up. “Can I go?”

She held him by the shoulders. “I need you to be the man of the house. I can’t have you walk to the store, and I can’t leave the girl’s alone.”

“But they’re asleep.”

“If they wake up, they’ll be scared. They’d be scared if you weren’t here, right? You have to watch out. I need you to do this, okay?”

He nodded, warming to the idea. “You don’t need to worry, mom. I’ll take care of the girls.”

“Good,” she said. “I’ll just be gone for a little bit.”

She wore the same old coat she always wore. A year ago at a yard sale she’d bought a ratty pink ski jacket with purple shoulder-stripes and fuchsia piping. Brian had made fun of her the first time she wore it, and every time since, but she’d refused to spend good money on a winter coat. It would have felt like giving in to the winter, like admitting it was a force that held sway in her life.

The cold clarity of the air heightened the smell of the steel mill a half mile away. She felt that same cold fill her lungs, took in the brilliance of what colors there were. A rust-red awning; across the street, the green dark of a shingle oak; blue oil defiantly pooled in the wedge of a blocked sewer drain.
For the first time that morning she felt a sincere smile on her face.

Miraculously, the gas station was open. A solitary, gray Ford truck with a rust-eaten tailgate was parked near the door, and someone had shoveled out one gas bay, though there were no cars on the road.

She went in and said hello to the old man behind the counter, and he pulled on the bill of his cap. “Hope you’re walkin’,” he said.

She found a loaf of bread whose expiration date was yesterday, and grabbed a half-gallon of milk. After serious deliberation, she bought the kids some candy from the front counter, but decided not to tell them about it until she had to bribe them to be quiet.

The old man bagged her groceries and smiled.

The street on her return trip looked different from this angle—a new set of details glistening under the ice. She kicked a chunk of hardpack, probably freed from the bottom of a car days before, and declared herself free of her cabin fever. The walk had been enough. She beamed through cold-induced tears, ready to take on the day—and her jittery, stir-crazy children. Maybe they’d even chip a snow man out of the ice.

She screamed as she walked through the door of her house, dropping the bag of groceries. The M&Ms, of which she’d snuck a handful, spilled across the white tiles of the foyer and plinked their way to the carpet.

Sitting on her couch was a young man in a dark suit. He was thin, and handsome in an intelligent-looking sort of way, and he held a handkerchief to his nose as if he were about to blow it. He looked up at her and froze.
“My kids,” she rasped.

That thrill of breathing she’d experienced on her frigid walk home turned sour in the back of her throat.

“What have you done with my kids?”

He didn’t move.

She looked for anything to use as a weapon. She snatched an umbrella from beside the door, then remembered Devon’s baseball bat in the hall. She sprinted for it, but it wasn’t there. She ran through to the kitchen for a knife but stopped when she saw a woman standing near the sink. The woman, like the man, was dressed nicely. She wore a simple black dress and a string of pearls. Her curly brown hair was swept back. She was holding a plate under running water.

“What are you doing?” said Denise. She pulled at a drawer and found a steak knife, waved it at the woman, who dropped the plate in the sink, threw up her hands and fell back against the refrigerator. Magnets and papers slid off the door and clinked to the linoleum.

“Where?” said Denise. Her mind spun uselessly. She swung toward the doorway of the kitchen, catching sight of the man. He held up his arms, too.

“You stay back,” she said. She fumbled for the phone and found it replaced with a cordless. “What is this? Did you bring this?”

She dialed 911.

“Where are my kids? You tell me. I’m calling the police. Are my kids okay?”

That rage and horror she’d felt upon first seeing the man was beginning to melt into
despair. “Where are my kids? Where are my kids?!” She swung the knife toward the woman, who backed away further.

The man stepped forward, his hands still raised. His eyes were wild and afraid.

“Mom?” he said.

Then he said it again.

“Mom?”

Devon held Ellen against his chest. He’d removed his suit jacket, and her tears had wetted the fabric above his pocket. She was seventeen, a senior in high school, blonde and beautiful, her hair cut in a bob that hung straight just below her chin.

“I don’t get it,” she said. “I don’t understand. How can you do this?”

They stood at the foot of Denise’s hospital bed, all three of them.

Brooke, whose curly brown hair hid a partial scar down her chin, kept sitting in a visitor’s chair, then standing and pacing, her dark eyes racing across the room with all the intelligence and intensity Denise had seen in her as a child.

What sedative they’d given her had begun to wear off, though a cottony harshness, like fiberglass needles, still garroled her throat and looped down into her stomach. “Could I have some water?”

Brooke poured half cup and handed it to her. Her hand shook as badly as Denise’s.
Denise had watched through a slowly lifting mist of tranquilizers as her grown children gave their statements to a police officer. He’d said something to them, and she got the sense there’d be further inquiry, though for now they were alone.

Devon walked Ellen to Brooke’s chair and deposited her before pacing the room, himself.

“I have to ask, Mom,” he said. He threw up his hands. “I have to ask. Where have you been?”

“Stop it, Dev,” said Brooke.

“Was it because of dad? Did dad do something?”

“Devon,” said Brooke, walking toward him and holding his hands. “She’s not well. She’s obviously not well.”

Anger flashed across his face. “It’s a reasonable question. She disappears. Fifteen years, she’s gone, and as soon as Dad dies, she shows up? It has to be Dad.”

“Stop it,” said Brooke. She pushed him into the hall.

Denise clutched her chest.

*Her Brian. Brian. Dead.*

Ellen alone remained in the room, crying against the back of the chair.

“Brian?” Denise moaned. “Brian?”

She thought of her husband, how they’d talked on the phone only this morning, about him digging out the car. About his mother’s house and whether or not she’d still have heat if it snowed again. They’d talked briefly about Ellen’s birthday, which was in
March, and she’d told him they’d worry about shopping for presents as soon as she saw some green on the ground.

“Brian,” she said.

All of it so clear. Except it hadn’t happened this morning. According to these people, to her children, her grown children, that conversation was fifteen years ago, and Denise had never returned from her trip to the gas station.

She dreamt vividly. A coarse, cold reality rose up beneath her like a rapidly ascending elevator, and she was thrust forward into a home she at once recognized. To the bedroom of a boy—small, even for his age, which was six. His dark hair and dark eyes in a wan face with a triangular chin, and she knew once she’d told him he reminded her of a ghost, which made him happy.

A blue room with sailing ships in the wallpaper where Nicholas blinked awake, arose, traipsed over the floor, the quilt she’d made him trailing after, its frayed corners clipped into the crooks of his arms. He pulled the knob on the television and flipped the dial till he found Bugs Bunny giving Yosemite Sam the slip, watched, scratched at his taut, thin belly, then moved into the bathroom. From there he walked to the kitchen, where cool corners of sunlight bloomed in geometric shapes across the tile. He smelled the air.

Denise reached out to him, but her hands lost substance as she spread her fingers. Her skin disintegrated into a pale ash, blending with the dust motes swirling in the air of the kitchen.
Little Nicholas searched for her in the bedroom, where the warmth of her sheets confirmed she’d only been absent a short time. He looked out onto the back yard at the growing mounds of snow, packed into hard angles by the railing of the deck and fences.

“Mommy?” he said.

No answer.

He tried again—“Mommy?”—but the sound of his own, wiry voice made him wince. He passed through the den. A faint odor of chlorine burned at the edges of his nostrils. Then he sat down before the television to wait.

Daffy Duck. Elmer Fudd. Porky . . .

She awoke in a dark hospital room, disoriented, her tongue thick and dry.

“Mom?” It was Brooke.

“Water,” said Denise, but Brooke’s hand was already offering it.

“They said the meds would make you thirsty.”

“I don’t want any more drugs,” said Denise. Her voice came out dusty, like wind escaping through a sheet of ripped plastic.

“They’ve been for your own good,” said a man. This wasn’t Devon. For a moment, Denise imagined it might be Brian’s voice, a familiar voice cracked and worn like old leather over the years, and her heart thumped in her chest. But the man was tall and bald. Not at all Brian. A half week’s worth of beard shadowed his pitted, thin cheeks. He had dark eyes that glimmered in his head. “But you haven’t had any medication for twelve hours now. You should feel a little clearer.”
“Mom,” said Brooke gently, “this is Officer Haverty. He wants to ask you a few questions.”

Denise sucked down another long draught of water. “What time is it?”

“Nine,” said Brooke, then anticipating her mother—the way she’d always anticipated, even at six years-old—added, “Nine a.m., Mom.” She rested a hand on Denise’s, and Denise looked out the window where the blinds were partially drawn. A storm-swathed sky in dead winter gave the impression of night.

“I just feel so—”

“You don’t have to talk right now, if you don’t want to,” Brooke went on. “Officer Haverty said it was okay.”

“No. I want—I should talk to somebody.” Denise pushed herself up on the bed and felt the pull of a tube in her arm.

“To keep you hydrated,” said Brooke. “You were out so long.” She seemed to realize this sentence had a double meaning and pulled a hand to her mouth. “I mean, just a day, but still.”

Denise tapped the saline tube. “Must have been how Rip Van Winkle did it,” she said. She tried laughing at her lame joke, but neither Officer Haverty nor Brooke seemed to get it.

“Is that how this feels to you, ma’am?” said Haverty. “Like you’ve been asleep for fifteen years?” All business.

Denise took another long drink. “It doesn’t—it doesn’t feel like anything.”

Haverty narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”
“I mean,” said Denise, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. She tugged at the hospital gown drooping over her shoulders. Her skin felt papery. A strange map of wrinkles crisscrossed the knuckles of her hand, and she was instantly aware of this lost time on her own body. She’d be fifty. Fifty or fifty-one, depending on the month.

“What day is it, what year?” she asked.

Haverty answered abruptly. “February 9, 2011.”

So it was fifty. She was a fifty year-old woman. A strange sensation lifted off her shoulders, as if the not knowing had been the real weight. A year. A date. Those were anchors. Despite missing whatever changes in her body, whatever crow’s feet or aches or graying hairs, she knew now, and that seemed important enough to give her a sense of place, of certainty.

“Thank you, officer.”

“Ma’am, I’m not a psychologist, so I can’t speak to the factuality of your memory loss, so I’m just going to ask. I’m going to ask you flat out. Can you account for any—any, at all—of your whereabouts in the past fifteen years.”

But there was nothing there. She remembered yesterday morning, going to the store, asking Devon to—

“Oh, my god,” she said.

“What?” asked Brooke, hovering over Denise like a protective mother, their roles reversed.
“Oh, my god,” she said again, “but Devon. He must have been so scared. You girls. You girls must have—did anything happen? What happened?” A wave of panic overcame her. “You were there all alone. I just—I just left you. That scar?”

“Are you saying you intended to leave?” asked Haverty.

But Denise was no longer listening. She touched Brooke’s cheek where that long, dull scar sliced along the edge of her jawbone. She pushed back Brooke’s hair, and Brooke shuddered the way a skittish horse would shudder, but allowed her mother to inspect it.

“Did this happen when you were alone? Did this happen—because of me?”

A flash of shock broke over Brooke’s face, and she clapped her mother’s hand to her cheek. “No, Mom. No. This. It was a boat. Kayaking. Phil and I. I mean. An accident. Somebody clipped me with an oar.”

“Phil? Is that?”

“I wish I could tell you it didn’t—he was just a guy in college—I wish I could say that—for you, mom. He was, I mean—a guy in college. That’s true. A great guy. An incredible man. But not just that. Mom”—she looked about the room as if searching for strength—“Phil is my husband.”

Immediately Denise knew, she knew the way in which Brooke had been thoughtful, the way Brooke cared. “He’s out in the hall, isn’t he?”

A long moment before she could speak. “It’s good to have you back, Mom.” She rushed to the door, stuck her head out and beckoned to someone out of sight.
Phil entered and held his wife by the shoulders the way Brian had done to Denise when she was cold, and Denise could see that Phil had been here the entire time, for his wife, for Brooke. Denise imagined Brooke when she was still six, of dreaming about her finding this good man, who would support her through all the worst times, even if that meant waiting in a hospital hallway while his wife dealt with her prodigal mother.

He had thick, sandy blonde hair cut boyishly, and what remained of an outdoorsman’s tan in the dead of winter. She was happy for her daughter. Denise could imagine him, could imagine Brooke, hiking into the woods long into autumn, drawing out what they could of the season before the weather turned cold and drove them inside.

She tensed at the thought of being holed up, waiting for the snow to break, for winter to be over. What felt like a steel razor shot through her spine. Her dream came rushing back.

“What is it, mom?”

Officer Haverty took a step forward. Phil ran for a nurse.

“Mom, talk to me. You’re scaring me. What is it?”

Denise gripped her daughter’s hand on one side and found herself clinching the officer’s on the other.

“Ma’am,” he said.

“What?”

“No, mom. Devon’s fine. He just went home, for a shower and a little sleep. He’s fine.”

“No.” Denise’s face contorted, tears rolled from her eyes. “My other son. Nicholas.”

The dream washed over her.

Nicholas sat at the table in front of a plate of charred toast covered in rippling waves of butter.

He was all alone. A six year-old boy in a house by himself.

He wrapped soggy napkin around his right index finger, and Denise could see that he had burnt his knuckle. A box of cereal lay sideways, open toward him. He hadn’t possessed the height to pull a bowl from the cupboard nor the strength to fetch milk from the refrigerator.

His jaws made crunchy sounds, the dry bread and dry Cheerios disappearing into his mouth in handfuls. When he finished, he cleaned up as best he could—a good boy—then re-wet the napkin.

For another half hour he sat in front of the television as Scooby Doo yelped and skittered across the screen in the den. Nicholas’s belly bulged outward from beneath the blanket. Then the news came on, and he killed the television, turning toward the sliding doors that opened from the den onto—
She scrambled, screamed, beat her fists against the veil of fog between her and him, but her hands slogged into horrible slowness, a clear weight like hardening glass holding her wrists and forcing her to watch.

Her Nicholas, peering through the door at the pool beyond.

She woke up screaming.

“Mom, what is it?” Brooke stood beside her. Phil, remarkably, remained asleep in an uncomfortable-looking chair.

Denise stared. “I . . . I lost it. I don’t know. I’m so—”

“Don’t try too hard, Mom. The doctor gave you that drug again. You were really”—she looked ashamed—“kind of freaking out.”

“Nicholas,” said Denise, but this time the image was gone. Only that panic in the bottom of her stomach, weighted there by medication.

“Try to go back to sleep, Mom.”

Denise raised a hand as if to resist, but it floated before her like a disembodied spirit. The walls sunk in on themselves, shadows flexing inward, and before she could say more, she was lost again in unconsciousness.

“I don’t care.” It was Devon’s voice. “Think about it. We’re her family, we’re her original family. She belongs with us. Forget finding someone else.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying this,” said Brooke. “There could be a little kid out there, scared. Hurt.”
“Think about it,” he said. “Use your head. Even if there is a kid—and nobody can prove there is—what’s the likelihood it’s a little kid. Assuming this is a real memory—and I’ll remind you even Dr. Yun says it’s likely it isn’t—the younger you make the kid the less likely he’s real. She’s fifty. And the more likely you make it that he is real, the more likely he’s at least an age he can dial for police.”

“You have it all figured out, don’t you? You don’t think it’s possible she made another life in the past fifteen years?”

“They haven’t found anybody, not named Nicholas or any other thing. And no missing persons reports. She was wearing the same coat as when she left, for christ sake. She could have been living on the street. I’m just saying, it might not be anything. It might be she’s back where she belongs. With us. With her real family. If there is another family, she was ours first. We’re where she started, and we’re where she belongs.”

Then came a younger voice, a girl—it reminded Denise of something, and a blue spark went off in her brain. It was Ellen. Ellen, who she’d never heard speak in whole sentences.

“She’s not okay,” said Ellen. “We have to think of her. We have to do something.”

Something about Ellen’s voice, though, awakened in Denise a hidden door, something she couldn’t place or distinguish, as if she’d found some key to returning the past fifteen years of her life. She listened from her bed where she lay with her eyes closed.
“I’m just saying we need to get her home,” continued Devon. “She just needs to be in familiar surroundings.”

“Familiar?” Brooke said. “Devon. It’s not like the house looks the same. It’s not like all her old things are there.”

“Some are,” he said. “A lot of them. In the attic.”

They went on arguing, their voices swinging in and out like pendulums.

And each time Ellen spoke—Ellen who’d only been two when she left and whose words had squeaked out in high-pitched, mispronounced phrases about dogs and monkeys and oatmeal and dancing ducks—Denise heard something familiar, something soothing and at the same time sad, like a love note or a scarf she’d treasured but misplaced.

She could see him through her dream.

Nicholas. Frail. He stood before the door that opened up onto the indoor pool. That pool. Had probably been the reason for her divorce. Harold wanted it. She didn’t. He got his precious pool, but she got the house and Nicholas—which, in the end, meant she got the pool. The pool she hadn’t wanted.

But Nicholas loved it, and for him she kept it going, even though the extra expense meant picking up shifts . . . where?

Her thoughts floated into space, and she struggled to stay with him, by the pool, where he now stood, and for the first time she saw he was on the wrong side of the glass, looking in, his frailty outlined by scant ribs visible below his thin chest. He drew a heart
in the steamed glass, watched it disappear to a shell of finger streaks. It obscured his view into the den, from which they’d put the entrance to the pool. He looked for her, waited in his half-wet swim trunks for her to return. He had expected her to scour the house and ultimately flap out through the glass door, to rail at him, to scold him for having even considered the thought of swimming with no supervision.

But she didn’t come.

Nicholas turned toward the water and rested his head against his bony shoulder like a bird resigning itself to sleep.

Then he took a step away from the door.

She awoke in Devon’s old room, in her old house, her heart pounding through her chest. The deep smell of old wood surrounded her in a stifling warmth, and she heard voices caroming from a far corner of the home. Around her were the vestiges of a life already becoming distant and hazy. Tattered, friable boxes covered in a residue of dust that felt sticky to the touch were stacked like castle walls around her bed, each marked in Devon’s careful hand: Mom’s Pajamas; Mom’s Jewelry; Cooking Things; Frames/Albums; Blankets (Baby and Quilts); Mom’s Clothes; Mom’s – Miscellany. Other labels reached into the shadows of the room or hid under other boxes.

Devon had done this. His devotion to her and (what at some point must have seemed like zealotry) to her memory had withheld years of loss. He alone had kept that dark flame of memory burning with his inevitable precision, his details, his conscientious
eye, catching those mementos destined for obscurity, for yard sales or trash bins, tagging
and preserving them like a careful collector.

And in his haste to have her back—she’d passed all the physical tests at the
hospital, with the promise of more—he’d insisted she get back home with them, had piled
these things around her as if she were just going to pick up where she left off, fix the girls
breakfast and get down the Monopoly game from over the book shelf.

She’d tried at first, but upon arriving, upon seeing those boxes, her chest had felt
ready to cave, and she lay down to sleep. Now, in the dark room, her panic had worked
its way up to her shoulders. The nerves in the back of her neck vibrated like taut wire up
to her ears.

“Nicholas,” she whispered.

She opened the door carefully, could hear her children and Phil talking in their
foreign, grown-up voices. She slunk down the hall, tensing with every step, listening for
the slightest lull. She could hear them now.

“What she needs is rest,” said Brooke. “Then see if she remembers anything.”

Devon paced between the kitchen and his empty chair. “This isn’t a time to be
pushing,” he said. “She just needs to get back in the house. She needs to remember us.”

“She does remember us. That’s the problem. She remembers us exactly—like it
was yesterday. She remembers us better than we remember us. But this isn’t about her, is
it?”

“Don’t be an idiot. We’re her family. We want what’s best.”

“Then why not leave her in the hospital?”
“So they could poke into her brain?”

“She was mumbling something about Nicholas,” said Brooke. “In her sleep. I’m worried.”

“We’re doing everything we can,” Devon insisted. “We’ve brought her home.”

A silence folded over them.

Brooke went on. “Tell me this isn’t about Dad. Tell me, Devon. I won’t argue if you just admit it.”

“Dad’s dead,” he finally said.

“Yes,” Brooke went on gently, “Dad died. He’s not going to come back. It’s a broken thing, and putting Mom here isn’t going to—”

Denise froze, heard the quiet sob of her daughter as she choked on her own words.

Denise couldn’t take any more. She crossed the hall and into the living room, out of sight of her children, carefully sprung the latch on the front door and slipped out.

The melting snow seeped up through the old slippers she’d found in one of Devon’s boxes, and she cursed herself for not having taken time to try and find a decent pair of shoes. She hesitated there, in the snow, her moon-dim shadow pressing across splotches of white like a scared animal poised, on the edge of bolting. A moment’s hesitation. That was all, and she heard from the kitchen window her youngest daughter, Ellen saying something in an excited voice.
That voice again, pulling her into the present. Ellen’s voice that made Denise no longer feel like an anachronism existing in some unknown future. And at once she understood that Ellen was the key.

“Mom?” Devon followed her out of the house and grabbed her wrist. “Where are you going?”

“Nicholas,” she muttered. “He’s—my baby—he’s in trouble. There’s no one home.”

His grip loosened. She saw in his face the boy she’d left behind so many years ago, his features melting. Tears rimmed his eyes.

“Your leaving again?”

The cold in her feet was becoming painful. “I—I don’t know, Devon. But he’s my son—”

“I was—I’m your son.”

All her broken thoughts collapsed, a weight pressing against her breast. “Oh, honey. Honey.” She touched his face with her hand. “You had to keep it all together. It was you.”

“You said to be a man. You said I had to keep them safe.”

She felt hot tears spill down her cheeks. “I never meant—baby boy—my poor baby—you must have been so scared—”

She stepped toward him to hold him, but he backed away. “Forget it, Mom. We need to get you better. It’s you I’m worried about.” He clasped his hand in hers. “Come inside. It’s cold.”
“Okay,” she said. The images of the boy and the swimming pool were gone.

“Okay.”

That night she lay down to sleep and overheard her children in the hallway.

“We’ll have to take her somewhere,” whispered Brooke.

“She’s not going anywhere.”

“We can’t stand guard 24/7 and hope she doesn’t crawl out a window. I don’t like it anymore than you do, but don’t let this thing you have about Dad keep you from getting her good treatment.”

“You don’t talk about that. You weren’t there when Dad—”

“You’re right,” she said. “I wasn’t. And I know. You took care of us. I know I wasn’t old enough to really understand. But I went through the same shit. And we’re going through the same things now. Mom needs help. She needs—professional help.”

Denise could hear Devon rake the toe of his shoe across the running board. She knew it because he’d done it as a child while thinking. And it dawned on her: she had heard so much of her children’s conversations lately, not because they thought she was asleep, but because they thought, in part, it didn’t matter. She was non compos mentis, ill, and this was about how they were going to help her get better, not about what she wanted right now. That didn’t count. They weren’t being indiscreet, they were being conscientious; discussing her within earshot was their way of including her in a decision she had no control over.

Devon finally spoke. “You’re right. I know. I’ll call the hospital in the morning.

I’ll set it up.”
She knew he wasn’t talking about the hospital where they’d just been. She knew into what kinds of hospitals they put people like her.

“Nicholas,” she whispered into the dark. “I’m coming, baby.”

Despite trying to stay awake, she drifted off and found Nicholas again. He stood near the water’s edge dabbling a toe across the surface, humming a song. Janis Joplin’s *Piece of My Heart*. And in her mind she smiled, remembering she’d taught that one to him because she liked it, and why not teach children the good stuff, the stuff you enjoy?

He held the orange, water-wing, arm floaties and slipped them on his wrists as he walked the length of the pool, occasionally kicking the water. The floaties came up only to his elbows before he could push them up no further. She was the one who usually put them around his biceps and blew them up just a little bit more so they wouldn’t slip.

She wasn’t there.

He eyed the floats on his arms like two enormous bracelets, blew out a breath that tussled his dark bangs, shivered, looked to the door once more, and jumped.

Denise sat up sweating. The house was silent, and it took her until the kitchen to discover an appliance—the stove—which told her the time. After three. Her toes coiled at every creak in the wood beneath her feet as she loped along the hallway.
She found Ellen’s room. Only after she’d opened the bedroom door did she realize that the house was no longer as she’d left it. It might not have been Ellen’s room at all.

But it was.

All the furnishings were different, the bed a large, green rectangle near a desk with a hinged lamp, some books, and a hamper close by. Ellen’s golden hair practically glowed in the moonlight, and Denise found herself admiring it, proud of her child’s beauty.

However long she stood there, it was too long. A muffled rattling worked its way up the wall as someone from a nearby room shifted in their bed. Denise moved quickly, placed a light hand on Ellen’s shoulder. Denise whispered, barely audible. “Can you come with me?”

Ellen arose and followed her to the front door where Denise grabbed the keys. The two of them moved like ghosts out the door and into the night. Denise found Brooke’s car, and the two of them got in.

“Thank you, honey,” said Denise. “Oh, God, thank you.”

“I’m not going to help you escape,” said Ellen. She crossed her arms. “I just wasn’t going to let you go alone. We can drive around, but we’re going back.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Where are we going?”

“I . . .” Denise felt exhausted.
“You know, I just don’t know how to feel,” said Ellen. “I don’t, I can’t, understand it, no matter how hard I try.”

Unlike Brooke and Devon, Ellen shed no tears. Her lower lip remained firmly in place.

“But if—like you said—if there’s a little boy—if he’s in trouble.” She looked at her mother sternly. “I don’t know if you’re all in there. But if you’re not crazy—I mean, if this part of you, if it’s real—I’m not going to let them take you away without trying. So what do you want?”

It pained Denise to think her baby, her Ellen, was now only here as a chaperone. Denise had missed everything, every formative event of her young life, and here they were, in a car, together.

“It’s you, Ellen. Your voice. It’s—doing something—to my memory, like I can hear. I can remember things—or I think I can.”

“So you want me to talk?”

Denise knew now what she wanted Ellen to do. It was ridiculous. “I want you to sing.”

“Sing?”

“That Janis Joplin song. You know?” She began humming the tune. “‘Take it! Take another little piece of my heart now, baby!’”

Ellen snorted out a laugh, perhaps realizing for the first time that her mother really was a fruitcake.

“Please,” whispered Denise.
A horrible look of pity crossed Ellen’s face, and Denise knew her daughter could never, ever take her completely seriously again, no matter if she found Nicholas, no matter what mental health tests she passed, something had been irretrievably lost, and again the despair washed over her.

A sudden image of Nicholas flailing against his water-wings to keep his head above water broke across her mind. She felt like vomiting, gripped the passenger side door.

Then Ellen began to sing.

Nicholas found the bottom of the shallow end with his toes, bouncing up so his nose and mouth rose above the clear, blue water. But each time, he came down again, and the burning tang of chlorine washed into his nostrils and down his mouth. He gurgled, jumping, the water-wings impeding his strokes and sometimes pushing him in the opposite way he wanted to go. The ladder on the shallow end moved away from him.

Something in Ellen’s voice rekindled images Denise didn’t know existed. A winding map through city streets, a curvature of country lane, a stretch of highway, all of them rising to meet her as her daughter sang what words she knew, Denise prodding her, telling her where to turn. Then they switched. Denise convinced Ellen to let her take the wheel, and it was automatic.

Outside the city, along a run of burgs and other little towns Denise veered down an off-ramp and turned left into a tree-lined neighborhood. The house was there waiting
for them. In her fervor, she curbed the front wheel and rolled to a stop across the grass strip near the sidewalk. Denise flung open the door and ran toward the porch.

“Nicholas!” she screamed. “Nicholas! I’m coming, baby!”

She pounded a fist against the locked door, slammed her shoulder into it, but it wouldn’t budge. “Nicholas!” She backpedalled onto the lawn searching the windows for somewhere to climb up. She found a rock in the flower bed and threw it, shattering the picture window. She ran toward it. Someone suddenly caught her by the waist and pulled her backward. “Nicholas!” she screamed again.

She felt her body propelled backward into the grass.

“Stop it, mom.” It was Devon. He kneeled over her, pinning her arms to the ground.

“Let me go! Nicholas will drown! God damn it! Let me go!” She kicked and thrashed.

“Mom! Mom!” He pulled her up to a seated position so she could see the window. “You would have cut yourself!” He sounded almost as hysterical as she was, but he was pointing now to a jagged razor of glass that would have sliced open her stomach.

Devon began to cry. He let go of her hands and slumped into the grass beside her. None of it felt real. She looked at the house again. It didn’t look right. Too small for an indoor pool.

“You weren’t there, mom,” he cried. She looked back. Brooke and Phil and Ellen all stood at the edge of the sidewalk watching them. Ellen had a cell phone in her hand, and suddenly Denise realized that Ellen had never had any intention of going anywhere
without the others following. She had called at some point, or maybe it had it all been planned. Maybe they’d agreed to let her go. To possibly find a house and a little boy.

“You let me go? You said I should stay with you.”

“I just didn’t—I didn’t want,” said Devon, sobbing now, “didn’t want anyone else to have to go through that. To have to take care of everybody. To keep . . . to keep your father from killing himself. I was ten, for God’s sake, Mom, when he held that gun to his throat. I didn’t want—”

He went limp.

Denise moved to him, and this time he didn’t resist her. “Oh, my baby. You were strong. You shouldn’t have had to be, but you were strong, stronger than anyone.”

She held him as he cried into her chest. “But I didn’t want you to find this—this house.”

She held his face between her hands. “You knew about this house?”

“We’re you’re real family,” he cried. “We were first.”

“Karen?” said a man’s voice. A slightly balding man stood in the doorway to the house, and behind him two young girls around twelve and thirteen. Both had curly blonde hair.

The man took a step onto his lawn. He addressed Denise. “Karen, we’ve been worried sick.” He stopped when he saw Devon in her arms. “Is this why you left? This guy?”

“Mommy!” The two girls ran toward her, and with them, a flood of memories from the past fifteen years. Her life with these people.
“Mom, we were worried,” said one blond girl, and Denise knew all of it. The way she remembered this house, this other family. Both girls. Their voices so much like Ellen’s.

“Why did you bring him here?” the man demanded. And she knew his name was Tom. Her husband of the past twelve mostly wonderful, happy years. He stood on his own lawn where she, his wife, who’d been missing for two days, had returned with another man to smash out his window.

Tom cracked his knuckles, made fists, rocked back and forth. He looked at the car and Ellen and Brooke and Phil. “Karen, what the hell is going on?”

“He’s my son,” Denise said, gesturing to Devon.

One of the blonde girls—Katie—tentatively wrapped her arms about Denise’s neck. “Mommy, are you coming home?”

In the Burton’s living room, a small powwow had taken place between Tom and Katie and Emma on a love seat, and Brooke, Phil, Ellen and Devon on the opposite couch. Denise, who was also Karen, took turns between holding her younger daughters close to her while they sat on her lap and rubbing the hands of her mostly understanding first children on the other.

Tom did most of the speaking.

“I came to that house, I guess your old house. He answered.” He pointed at Devon. “He said he didn’t know you.”
“I didn’t know what was going on,” said Devon, rubbing the heel of his hand into his eye. “You were in the hospital. This strange man comes to my door the night after you show up, and asks if I know you.” He shook his head and stared at the floor. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Tom had found a strangely folded newspaper near the door that morning with Brian’s obituary circled like a want ad. “You were mumbling at breakfast,” he said to Denise, and you looked worried, but when I asked you what was wrong, you just walked away and went into the attic.”

Where she’d found her old clothes and returned to her old life.

Devon spoke softly. “I guess I could have figured out he was probably—when he came, talking about dad’s funeral—I just couldn’t let them take you.” He slouched further into his own knees. “But tonight, when you found the house—Tom had given me the address—” He looked directly at Tom. “You looked so worried. I’m sorry. I should have known what you were going through. I should have told you, right there.”

Tom nodded. Silent tears. “Just glad to have her back. I’m—I guess I’m sorry you had to go through what you did.”

Devon looked up at Denise and by way of explanation, said, “He said he had two daughters. He said you’d been married twelve years and this had never happened before. I’m sorry. I just, I knew there wasn’t a ‘Nicholas.’”

Brooke leaned forward and touched her mother’s knee. “Don’t worry, mom. We’re going to get you help.”

Now Tom put a hand on her shoulder.
Katie, the younger of her two girls, slipped quietly between the two families and sat on the floor at Denise’s feet. The young girl—she was eleven; of course she was—reached out and held one of Devon’s long fingers. “You kind of have eyes like mine.”

In spite of himself, Devon smiled.

Two families became one.

It happened six years later, at her birthday party, her children, all of them, gathered round her singing while Tom danced a jig in a silly party hat. Brooke held a video camera while Katie swaddled Brooke’s newborn daughter in her arms, Phil looking on.

Sure there’d been hard times while the families adjusted to one another, but she had been drawn to them similarly, it seemed, and they’d meshed well, accepting their lives, her grown children giving her two young daughters all the richness of experience that comes from older siblings. And while Tom had taken the longest to get used to the new situation, he’d even become close with Devon—neither one approved of Ellen’s current boyfriend.

It happened there. In that moment. They were singing happy birthday, and Emma approached her with a heaping, ice-cream-heavy rootbeer float. She’d placed a candle in the ice cream and outlined a heart with her finger in the frosted glass of the mug. She held the mug up to Denise as they sang, and it was then Denise remembered.

Nicholas was long dead.
Denise knew there’d been a time when she was a young woman, alone with her child after a messy divorce, left alone in a house too large for her to afford. Just as she also knew there’d been a time she smoked and had been snowed in and left early in the morning to walk into town after four days without cigarettes. In the same way she knew she’d taken almost two hours on foot finding an open store, buying a pack and trekking back home. Just like she knew she’d returned, searched the house, screaming at the top of her lungs. And through the glass, through a smudged heart she saw the figure of Nicholas, his small hands shackled in orange water-wings, floating silently just beneath the surface. The same way she knew that, in her despair, she’d left, and somehow forgot all of it ever happened.

She remembered it all.

Her Nicholas. Her first family.

The happy birthday song ended. She said nothing. She closed her eyes. And blew out her candles.
His lips parted in an angular smile. Colin Bethwaite had seen a lot of rubes in a lot of gas stations, and they always gave him a giddy, helium balloon feeling in his throat, like he couldn’t wait to let them in on the joke.

The old fella on the other side of the counter shambled along the back wall. “You sure that’s the name of the medicine? AcheAway?”

“It’s the only thing’ll do when she’s got migraines,” Colin said. “Hope you have it.”

The man ran his arthritic finger over the pain medicines hanging in single-serving packets from their hooks.

Colin thought how easy it all was. Once you knew.

People couldn’t stand to see people in pain, and they’d do just about anything to make other people’s anguish stop. Sure, there were sociopaths out there, but in general, even sadists didn’t like to see folks in pain if they weren’t the ones inflicting it.

“She’s out there in the car,” Colin said, “and she’s in terrible, terrible shape. You sure you don’t have it?”

The old man rubbed his chin, cursing his poor eyesight. Colin let his smile slip again. He covered it with his hand when the man turned to face him.

“I’m sorry, son. I just don’t see it. We got Aspirin, that Ibuprofen, Advil, Aleve, and some Cold and Flu remedies, but that’s about it. You think any of them might help?”

Colin put on his best worried face, something on the verge of tears, and pressed both hands against the counter. “We’ve tried all those,” he said, affecting a similar
backwoods drawl. “You sure you don’t have any AcheAway in back? I just don’t know what I’m going to do if she don’t get that medicine.”

The old man looked torn. He put up his hands. “Hold on, son. I ain’t saying there is, but I’ll check.” He shuffled to the back, disappearing into the stock room.

The cash register was computerized and could only be opened during a transaction. A bit of anti-theft nonsense that, like most anti-theft nonsense, only made it harder for honest people to do their job. Colin had watched the old man fumble with it while he waited for the last customer to check out. Now, Colin snagged a pack of gum out of the display and ran it in front of the scanner. Tiny red lasers caught the barcode. The register beeped. Colin glanced at the stockroom, saw nothing, reached across the counter and punched in five dollars, then hit the change button. The register drawer slid open and the blue, digital display above it said CHANGE: $4.27. Colin thought 73¢ seemed like a lot for a pack of gum.

“What a rip off,” he said, then deftly cleaned out the drawer of bills and pulled it closed. A receipt shot silently out of the dispenser as the old man hustled out of the back. Colin ripped the receipt free and shoved it into his pocket.

“Sorry, son. Don’t have none.”

Colin looked distraught, but then stood up straight as if ready to soldier on.

“Thanks for trying.”

“My Clara used to get migraines something awful,” he said. “Wish I’d known about that AcheAway. Something that always helped, though, was this.” He held out an old red handkerchief and put into Colin’s hands. It was soaked and cold.
Colin stopped short of dropping it on the counter, remembering to play the part of a husband willing to try anything. He stared down at the red piece of cloth. Just a regular old bandana that looked like it had seen too many years.

“Call me superstitious,” said the old man, “but that hanky—and that hanky only—always helped a bit. Pour some cold water over it, place it on Clara’s head, you could almost see the relief wash over her.” He smiled kindly.

“I couldn’t,” said Colin, feeling a little repulsed by the clammy, used thing which had touched other people, probably covered in snot. He just wanted it out of his hands. “What would your Clara do?”

The man looked down, and this time his face took on a look that Colin couldn’t read, something between a friendly look of concern and a smirk. “Clara ain’t around no more. Maybe if you take it, it’ll give a little relief to someone else. Call it my way of saying sorry for not having that proper medicine.”

Colin nodded. He’d throw it away the second he was out of sight. What counted most was to play everything straight. It was late, they were off the main highway, and if his luck held there wouldn’t be another customer for hours. By the time the old fella noticed the money was gone, Colin would be out of the state.

“Thanks,” he said. “That’s real nice. I’ll give it to my wife.”

He turned to walk out the door, and the old man held up a hand, almost ashamed. “Oh, son...”

Colin’s heart skipped a tick. “Yep?”

“You going to pay for that gum?”
Colin looked down. He still had the pack in his hand. He laid it on the counter—“Nah. Too expensive.”—and walked out.

In the car, Stacia peered at Colin without moving. She’d leaned the front passenger seat back and adopted a stereotypical fainter’s pose, the back of her hand raised dramatically to her forehead. As they pulled out Colin slapped the red handkerchief over her face. She sat up like a jack-in-the-box.

“What the hell, man?”

“Home remedy,” said Colin.

“Gross.” She plucked the handkerchief from where it had fallen into her lap and flung it onto the dash. “What’d you use?”

“AcheAway,” said Colin.


“Sounds like an energy drink. Completely unbelievable. And I don’t see the use in changing it when AcheAway got us this.” He produced the wad of bills he’d jammed into his jacket pocket.

Stacia squealed. “Good haul.” She counted the cash. “Sweet Jesus. Nine hundred dollars. God, don’t these people ever hear of depositing in a safe?”

“I had a feeling,” said Colin. Most places stipulated that their employees make regular drops into a backroom safe when the till took in over two hundred dollars. But Colin had discovered two things about gas stations that stood about a half mile from the
highway. Those stations still did a fair business, but they were less uptight than the massive pitstops whose signs glowed like heaven’s neon over the offramps. And what was more, the locals who more often frequented those stations tended to use more cash, fewer credit card transactions. Colin was always on the lookout for stations with the old-style pumps that didn’t even take cards—stations which, coincidentally, were also less likely to have cameras.

The station they’d just hit was the perfect storm. Lots of money. Low risk. Scott free.

“Feel like a bite?” Stacia said. “I’m starving.”

As a rule, Colin didn’t stop for at least three hours afterward, especially in Alabama, but he was feeling saucy, like if they took the risk the adrenaline rush might spice things up when they got to the hotel. It was ill-advised, but Colin wasn’t an accountant. And what was the use of being Bonnie and Clyde if you didn’t get a little thrill?

“That old coot won’t find out till morning, anyway,” he said. “Let’s risk it.”

Stacia bit her bottom lip and scratched playfully along his thigh with her fingernails.

They pulled off the highway and immediately the thick, southern woods enveloped what glow had been rising off the headlights of traffic along US-82.

“Ooo, poor choice, bucko,” said Stacia.

Colin hated this about Stacia. The second things looked unpromising she was ready to bail. She’d be stuck shoplifting at dollar stores if he hadn’t taken her out of
Piedmont, Ohio, which happened to be about the saddest, dirtiest little town he’d ever come across, and with Colin’s experience, that was saying a lot.

“See,” he said. “Ye of little faith.” He pointed to a one-story bar with wood paneling on the outside with a “MALT BEER” sign buzzing in a tiny window. Surrounding it was a trash-strewn lot where a couple old pick-ups and a few other rusted-out shitboxes were parked.

“Ah, yes, the promised land,” said Stacia.

“Historically, dive bars have the best burgers.” He pulled in.

Stacia looked dubious, then grabbed the handkerchief, re-folded it and tied it like a Willie Nelson headband.

“What the hell are you doing?” asked Colin.

“Blending in with the locals,” said Stacia. “Plus, it actually does feel kind of good, like when my mom used to put wet wash cloths on me to keep a fever down. I like it.”

They stepped out into the muggy night, and Colin couldn’t remember it being this humid earlier. Maybe it was the forest. The dark woods leaned in like a filthy uncle in a back bedroom. The sickly sweet scent of pine resin thickened the air.

“You want to try a different place?” he said.

“What? Now dives don’t have the best burgers? Come on, I could eat—whatever they serve here.” Stacia pulled on the dingled-up metal door of the bar and walked in.
Inside had all the requisite dive bar flavor: half-lit jukebox playing a female country singer (not Patsy Cline, but close enough); a few Miller High Life mirrors behind the bar; wood flooring scuffed to the condition of a cattle barn; that stench of stale smoke and dead beer soaking into the walls; and the locals clad in varying shades of denim, complimentary beards, melanoma tans and small, bleary eyes.

“Cheery,” said Stacia.

Colin pointed to a booth at the back.

As they passed, a fat, bristle-haired man in thick, black glasses wearing a jeans vest advertising a karate dojo swiveled on his bar stool and stared straight at Stacia. It was one of those times if they’d been back in Chicago that Colin would have snapped his fingers in front of the guy’s face, asked him what the hell he was looking at. But already he felt off-balance, hedged in, and decided, short of the guy saying something, he wouldn’t press it. They slid into the booth.

Now a couple other guys at the bar were looking their way, along with an equally hard-looking woman whose dirty black hair she’d teased into bangs and a massive perm.

The bartender, a tall man in his forties, came out from behind the bar with a small pad and pen in his hand.

“What can I get you?”

“You can get me an explanation,” said Stacia. Colin had heard that tone before. Stacia could pass as white, but her father was black, and Colin wondered briefly if they were being greeted by some of that famous southern-racist hospitality. He dug into his
pocket for the Swiss Army knife he kept on him at all times. He felt the groove in the
thumb-nail catch for the long blade.

“You can tell me,” Stacia continued, “why the hell everybody is staring.”

The bartender looked uncomfortable, but not overly so. “It ain’t that, if that’s
what you think,” he said. He nodded down the bar at a broken-down African American
man in an army coat who was staring just as hard as everybody else.

“That what is it?” asked Stacia.

“Can I get you folks something to eat or not?”

“Fine,” said Colin and snapped up a menu. Maybe they didn’t get newcomers in
here very often. He hoped if they just ordered, the whole snag in the night would smooth
itself out. “I’ll have the cheeseburger with pickles and onions. Onion rings on the side.”

“Hope you weren’t planning on a goodnight kiss,” said Stacia. She seemed to
have picked up on Colin’s strategy—or remembered that they’d just ripped off nearly a
thousand dollars from two exits down the road and didn’t want to draw more attention to
themselves than necessary. She ordered a double with cheese, fried mushrooms, cheese
sticks and a beer. The bartender went away with the order.

“You are hungry,” said Colin.

“Do you believe that? About it not being a black thing?”

Colin looked around. The stares weren’t so blatant anymore, but he and Stacia
were still catching sidewise glances from most of the patrons.

“I don’t know. Let’s just not push it.”

“Fucking United States,” said Stacia under her breath. “Land of the free, my ass.”
“The bartender was looking at your headband.”

“What?” she said. “Am I in gang colors or something?”

“I don’t know, but—” Colin stopped. The word “color” suddenly gave him pause, and for the first time he noticed that there was nothing red in the entire bar. He scanned the whole place as best he could without leaving his seat. Not even the jukebox. What jukebox didn’t have a fiery red splash of color?

Shoes. No.

Jackets. No.

Chairs. Nada.

Jewelry. Hats. Signs. Glasses. Tablecloths. Nothing. No red hair, not even those red baskets that hold every order of fries in every bar in America. Green. Here those baskets were green. Colin had never seen green fry baskets, and it made him nervous. He’d be the first to admit the feeling was unfounded, illogical. But that one little detail made everything else feel completely wrong.

“I think you should take off the handkerchief,” he said.

“What?”

“Keep your voice down. Do it now. Just take it off.”

“But my hair—”

“Do it.” He said it more harshly than he meant to, and again a few more people looked their way, but Stacia removed the headband.

“What the hell was that?”

Colin told her as calmly as he could.
“Don’t be stupid,” she said.

“Prove me wrong.”

She looked. Stood up, then walked to the back where she disappeared into the women’s restroom. Colin tapped a nervous finger on the table.

A few minutes later Stacia walked out of the bathroom looking pale and clammy. She’d tied the bandana around her wrist and now covered it with the other hand. She didn’t sit down. Instead she stopped in front of Colin, her teeth clenched as she whispered. “Come with me.”

“Sit down. The food’ll be here in a bit.”

“Come with me now.”

He rose, trying not to look suspicious as he followed Stacia back to the restrooms in a small, unlit hallway at the back of the bar. She pushed on the women’s door and motioned for him to follow. He stopped.

“Get in here,” she growled. “Now.”

He took a reluctant step in, and she shut the door behind him.

They were in the women’s restroom, and at first Colin thought Stacia’s theatrics were a trick to get him to throw caution to the wind. Had he ever had sex in a public restroom? He was a little sad to realize he’d never been that bold. Stacia grabbed him by the wrist.

“Ow. What?”
“I said, look.” The restroom was tiny—a sink and two stalls. Stacia pulled him toward the larger one, the handicapped stall against the back wall. She pushed him forward, into it.

At first he didn’t see it. What she was pointing at. Then it struck him like a slap across the face.

“I was looking for something red to prove you wrong,” said Stacia. “I found it.”

On the cinderblock wall, which had been painted a dingy yellow the color of hardened cheese, someone had scrawled out several scenes in black sharpie, pictures of women with limbs cut off. Arms. Legs. Breasts. Chunks of flesh from their sides. All of them depicted in a cruel child’s hand, howling with cartoonish mouths. For the wounds, a red marker had been used. Liberally. The sprays of blood were frantic scribbles, claw-like lines shooting away from the figures in two foot arcs, as if someone had furiously tried to color in the entire wall. Above the crude portraits of death someone in a calmer hand—though still clumsy and childlike—had scratched out these words:

And when thou art spoiled, what wilt thou do? Though thou clothest thyself with crimson, in vain shalt thou make thyself fair; thy lovers will despise thee, they will seek thy life.

Colin spun on Stacia, a smile cutting into his lips. He pressed a finger against the red scribbles and came away with a cherry-colored fingertip.

“You got me,” he said.
“What?”

“At that Wal-Mart in Birmingham,” he said. “You stole a pack of markers. Remember?” He took a step toward her. “This is good. I’ll give you that. Really quick. Is that a genuine Bible verse? Childhood tent revivals?” He looked at the wall again and touched the word ‘crimson’ with his thumb. “Creepy. And I’m flattered.”

The look of bewilderment and shock on Stacia’s face was too scared. Too ‘horror-movie.’ He had her.

“Damn it,” she said. Her white teeth flashed in the dimness of the bathroom. “I was going to keep you on the hook until burgers came.”

“Let me sweat it out?”

She nodded.

“Practical joker.” He thought of the time they’d stolen that car in Thibodaux. How before they abandoned it at a Quizno’s outside Birmingham, she’d bought half a dozen deviled eggs and shoved them under the seat for whoever finally found the vehicle baking in the southern, summer sun.

She flipped a flimsy deadbolt latch on the door. “I could make it up to you.” She unbuttoned the top button of her jeans.

But it felt wrong. Colin’s nerves still vibrated with the sight of those green fry baskets. And despite the joke, Stacia’s impromptu artwork had left him feeling tense. His stomach had turned to cold granite. He wiped a film of sweat from the back of his neck.

“I don’t feel like it, babe.”

“Scared? What if I want you to stay?”
“Frankly, Scarlet, I don’t give a damn.”

“Oh, so you want Scarlet?” She adopted a deep southern accent. “Harlan, what so ever will I do with this?” She flipped the red handkerchief like a tail before his eyes. “Or is this the ‘scarlet’ you was wanting?” She slung it around the back of his neck and pulled as if to kiss him, but the clammy handkerchief against his skin threw him into a tizzy. He was an animal in a trap. No logic. Just red panic.

“Stop it stop stop.” He threw his head down, lunged away from her and shoved. Her shoulders struck the door loudly, and breath puffed from her lips. His foot caught the grimed, plastic trashcan as he stumbled backward, and he came down in a fetid pool of water on the concrete floor. “Shit.”

“That hurt,” she said angrily. Then, seeing him on the floor in the puddle, she began to giggle. She placed a hand over her mouth like a school girl.

“It’s not funny,” he said. “None of this is funny.” He stood, swiping at whatever God-awful water had soaked his entire left leg and rear. “We’re leaving. We’re leaving now.”

He tromped past her, unfastened the latch and walked out. He put a twenty on the bar and headed for the door. If Stacia knew what was good for her, she’d follow. If not, he’d teach her a lesson and leave her here.

No one looked up except the fat man in the thick glasses, who Colin could see now was partially blind. His lenses looked like telescopes. And it was no wonder he’d stared when they walked in. He wouldn’t have been able to tell the difference between a human or a moose if it sat down beside him and ordered a Lime Rickey.
Colin stepped out into the parking lot. That sticky, thick texture of black tar still hung in the air. The garbage bins exhaled an acrid dose of rank alcohol and rotten food. His stomach churned with every whiff. He hustled to the car and slammed the door. His head tilting back against the cool vinyl, he closed his eyes and waited for Stacia to trail out, probably cursing and spitting.

Cicadas in the trees rattled in a white-noise staccato for a minute at time before giving way to bullfrogs letting loose in the wetlands. Colin let the sounds wash over him, breathing in through his nose.

Any minute now, he thought. He pictured Stacia sitting down and eating the burgers out of spite, just to make him wait. On the other hand, he couldn’t imagine her staying in there another second. The place had felt wrong. Spooky. It had been all he could do to keep from screaming. He opened his eyes and scanned the parking lot. Same trash. Same stillness.

Then the lights went out.

First the feeble streetlamp on the telephone pole at the other end of the lot. Then a floodlamp on the corner of the building. And finally the “MALT BEER” sign. Darkness filled the window behind it.

“What the . . .” Colin sat up in his seat, every vertebra in his spine rigid as a wooden rod. He stepped out of the car. The cicadas and frogs didn’t stop, but they seemed further away now, as if he were at the epicenter of some disturbing silence. For no logical reason, he scrutinized the tree line, squinting into the interstices of shadow that blackened and swayed under what little moonlight crept down through the branches.
Colin’s dome light was on, the only source of illumination now, and he suddenly felt like he was in a spotlight, the only actor on a stage for countless eyes in the dark. He shut the door. His eyes adjusted slowly. Shapes became shadows of their former selves. He took a step, and as he did he unwittingly kicked a plastic cup. It went skittering across the asphalt, laughing hollowly as it struck a concrete pylon.

His nerves on edge, Colin approached the dented, metal door of the bar. Put his hand on it.

Then a funny thought struck him. Someone was going to come barreling out of the bar and break his thumb where he held the handle. He let go and took a step back, staring. The door seemed to change shape and color the longer he looked. But no one came. He counted to thirty. No one. He counted again. This time a full minute. Still no one. Not even a sound. Maybe the people inside were just sensible. Folks who’d sit there in the dark till the power came back on.

But this isn’t a power outage, he thought. The lights went out one by one, like someone was ticking off the switches on a breaker box.

He pulled on the handle.

Locked.

He pulled again.


“Hey! Heeeeeeeyyyyyy!”

He threw a fist and felt his knuckles crack painfully. He rubbed them and absently wondered if he’d broken his hand.
“Stacia?” he said softly.

Again he had that sense of being watched. Someone could have been standing five feet away, Colin wouldn’t have detected him. He spun once, scrutinizing what he could make of the dark. Then hustled around to the back. Here the woods were closer and blocked off more of the moonlight, and he had to feel his way along the back wall to find the door. It felt like the other one. Unadorned. Metal. A single, looped handle with a latch, like the kind on a school gymnasium. He felt the latch under his thumb and depressed it. It let out a miniscule click, and the door gave way. He pulled it open and stepped in.

From the smell he was in the kitchen. He remembered his cell phone and pulled it from his pocket. Calling the police had been out of the question—they had just robbed a gas station; numerous gas stations if you counted the last month, which the law usually did—but a cell phone was still a good flashlight. He was still trying not to panic. Maybe, for whatever reason, the patrons hadn’t heard him around front. Maybe they thought he was a crazy man, and it was like his father always said about spiders, *They’re more afraid of you than you are of them.* He turned on the phone, and it’s subdued blue light washed over a stainless steel sink to his left. He turned it to the right and made out a bank of fryers. No one there.

Then a thought struck him. Standing here in a darkened kitchen, every sense pulsating, the notion rushed in like an unbidden, ice-cold flood. He looked at his finger and thumb. The finger was still red. His thumb was not black.
It should be black, he thought. He’d touched the word crimson, like he’d touched the picture of the bleeding women. The black marker should have come off on his thumb, same as the red marker.

And on the heels of that, a second thought: Stacia never answered. She admitted to having been caught, but she hadn’t said she wrote the Bible verse.

Had the verse been there all along? Just given her the idea for the pictures?

It seemed too coincidental.

He moved further along the kitchen, approaching a door with a glass panel at head level in the shape of diamond. Again that sensation of being the only one visible. He turned off the phone and put his face to the glass. All was black.

He strained his eyes searching for any delineation, any faint reflection off surfaces where he knew the bar should be, of wine glasses hanging overhead. He heard a shuffling, then a clunk, as if someone had bumped into a table.

He squinted, staring hard into the room.

The door swung against him and he staggered back, reeling against a fryer. He threw his arms up instinctively, could feel his wet ass digging into the temperature knobs, smell the grease directly behind him. He fumbled with the phone. It flickered on, a twilight blue, and he caught the face of Stacia ducking low, a mask of fright, her mouth wide, lips the color of a drowning victim’s. She was holding her left wrist which was still wrapped in the bandana. But her hand seemed to be gone. Dark liquid dripped from its end.

“Oh, God, Colin, get us out of here. Please, dear god get us out.”
She held up what looked to be a stump, cut off where she’d tied the kerchief earlier, now wrapped in it.

“Cut off the offending limb,” she murmured. “They kept saying . . .”

Colin felt electric run through his veins. Glanced up at the door, where he heard a scratching noise. He gripped Stacia by the arm and hauled her out the back, practically lifting her as the two of them raced for the car. Behind him he heard the metal door slam open against the outer wall. Blood raced through his ears. He threw Stacia into the passenger seat, fell in behind the wheel and turned the key.

The ignition clicked once.

“Fuck fuck fuck,” Colin hissed.

He turned it again.

Nothing.

Then as if at the beginning of some stage play, all the lights flickered back on and Stacia began to laugh excitedly. She pulled the bandana away from her balled-up little fist.

“You’re face was priceless,” she said, drawing out the word. “Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.”

Colin looked up and saw the bartender and a few other patrons standing in the front doorway, staring at the car.

Stacia opened the car door, stood and gave them the thumbs up. “He fell for it hook, line and sinker,” she shouted. And as Colin stumbled out of the car, his knees rubbery, they all began to laugh.
Stacia turned to Colin. “God, you worry too much, Colin. You need to live a little. As soon as you walked out the door, I told them you were being a jerk, I told them we should play a prank, and they went for it.”

Colin knew he should be furious, but his racing heart had pumped all his energy somewhere else, and instead he tried to focus on breathing in the heavy air. He wanted to yell at her, but it felt wrong in front of all these people. They were still watching. The bartender idly flipped a hand towel over his shoulder and shifted his weight from one leg to the other. Colin was still the show, and they were waiting to see what he’d do next.

“Frankly,” said Stacia, “I was surprised. I didn’t think they’d do it. But they’re good sports. Bill—he’s the one in the glasses—he said we should lock the door. God that was fun.”

She came around the car and took Colin’s hand, leading him back inside. A few of the regulars patted him on the back. The man with the thick glasses chuckled.

Stacia led Colin back to their booth where their burgers were waiting.

“I was worried you’d catch the fake. They didn’t have ketchup, so I had to douse the handkerchief in worcester sauce, which has a pretty potent smell. I guess it’s hard to smell over the shit in your pants.”

Colin wobbled into the seat. “I didn’t—”

“You looked like you did.” She let out a self-satisfied laugh. “That’s what you get for being so damn suspicious all the time.”

They settled in and Stacia took a massive bite of her burger. Colin felt the anger building at the base of his neck, like he could rip into Stacia at any moment, but public
drama had never been his thing. What was more, if he reacted badly, ranted and raged, he’d prove her right. He’d be the jerk, and they’d all have been justified in their practical joke. He’d have got what he deserved. He forced up a good-natured laugh, but it came out as hollow as that plastic cup in the parking lot.

He took a bite of burger. The bartender brought them two beers.

“These two are on the house,” he said, smiling in a no-hard-feelings way that also let Colin know that he, Colin, had been the butt of a very pleasant bit of entertainment, which was something they didn’t get very often.

Halfway through the burger, Colin felt the weight of the whole day crashing down on him, and between the beer and the meat he felt unnaturally sleepy. He looked at Stacia. They hadn’t really talked since digging in, and she had a dopey smile on her face. Her eyes were as glassy and tired-looking as Colin felt.

He slouched in the booth. Then he turned to Stacia.

“Did you say they don’t have ketchup?”

She nodded drowsily.

“What kind of restaurant doesn’t have ketchup?”

And in that sleepy moment, as the bartender walked toward them with another round, one silly thought tripped over and over through Colin’s mind: Ketchup is red.

But he was too tired to care, and sleepily he took another bite of burger.
The Matter of Living

I am glad God saw Death
And gave Death a job taking care of all who are tired of living

— “The Junk Man,” Carl Sandburg

Five minutes after Janine left him for good, Carl vomited blood. To soothe the nagging feeling it might be stomach cancer, he lit a bergamot-chamomile aromatherapy candle, fell asleep, and awoke to the mantel in flames. Two hours later the house was a charred husk being hosed down in white jets of water that rose into orange blossoms of steam which curlicued across roofs of smug neighbors he’d never cared for or talked to. Thirty-two hours, and the routine checkup by emergency room doctors turned into a full-on probing of vital organs by three specialists, cancer confirmed, and Carl was left with nothing.

“You have six weeks, I’d say,” Dr. Rajiv said. “Realistically.”

Until now Carl always respected Rajiv as one of those ‘straight-shooter’ types. He bragged about it to guys at the racket club: ‘He won’t feed you b.s. You’re too fat, you’re a smoker, he’ll tell you to knock it off with the cheeseburgers or Winstons.’

Now, though, he wanted to sock Rajiv in the jaw.

Carl tried calling Janine. No answer. Left her a message, something about the house, and a month and a half to live. But Janine was the type to let it ride. Cancer was justice as far as she’d be concerned.
Rajiv had bit his bottom lip. “You’re fifty-seven, Carl. It’s late stage, and it’s spread. Chemo and radiation are out. There’s endoscopic dissection, but . . . it’s about a four or five percent chance.” More straight-shooter talk.

The night after the diagnosis Carl returned to his house for the first time to survey the damages. They were total. From the sidewalk he could see the microwave he bought a week ago fused to a hunk of jagged black wall. Something had melted over it, hardening to a gelatinous coating the color of new molasses. Carl remained there, staring, until a light came on in his neighbor’s window. A shadowed presence bobbed between the gauzy white curtains.

The curtains separated, and a woman’s face appeared, searching the night for signs of home invaders. Carl jammed his sweaty palms into his pockets and fled.

Staring at the hotel ceiling, lying on the kingsize bed, Carl felt childish, as if his parents had once again packed him away to his aunt’s B&B, a converted lighthouse between Blue Hill and Jericho off the coast of Maine. He still thought sometimes of the clamorous waves rippling up Eggemoggin Reach during winter storms, incessant as static on the dead television. Maybe it was the bed. Kingsize seemed excessive no matter how much you stretched out.

He awoke later to find blood on his pillow. He rolled to the other side of the bed and fell back to sleep.

Edy was twenty-eight and glowed like a lustrous reminder of something lost.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.
In truth, he’d already decided what to do. He was going to make things right with Janine. Then he was going to throw himself off a bridge. If he survived the fall, he’d simply go limp and sink to the bottom.

“I’m going to apologize to Janine,” he said.

They were sitting outside a locally owned coffee shop—Edy’s pick—whose windows were filled with Warhol-esque prints of slaughtered cows and chickens painted like Marilyn Monroe in primary colors. Carl briefly wondered how this helped business or what it had to do with coffee.

“You’re going to have to do a lot more than apologize,” she said.

Edy didn’t get it. He didn’t want Janine to take him back.

“I want to be forgiven. I’m not looking for someone to clean up after me as I melt into a hospital bed.”

“God, don’t say that. That’s awful.”

“To you. You have a good fifty years.”

“If I’m going by your timetable, I only have thirty.”

He liked talking to Edy, not just because she resembled a Hellenic statue, or that she constantly squinched her eyebrows to ruin that effect, but because she kept him connected. To everything. Politics, bands, movies, blogs, even bouts of muddled philosophy—whatever she picked up in a Barnes and Noble that week, accompanied by much squinching, then very often abandoned. They’d met in an elevator at Charlton Cosmetics, where he was a consultant on environmental impact studies and she was a temp. She’d asked him to lunch right then, two years ago, and was bolder, more
opinionated and well-informed than most people Carl’s age. Also, for whatever reason, she liked Carl’s company.

“Need a place to crash?” she asked.

God, that was all he needed. Bedding down on Edy’s creaky couch in her shabby loft, catching glimpses of her tight bottom as she pranced to the bathroom in her underwear. He’d asked her once if she’d ever considered him as a lover, trying to keep it light. She’d laughed, touched his forearm and told him he’d never keep up. Which was probably true, though he’d gone home to bandage a few mental wounds upon hearing it.

“I think I’ll be all right ‘crashing’ at the hotel. You know you’re taking this really well.” Once again, he felt a little hurt.

Edy shrugged. “I guess I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“You don’t believe I’m dying, then.”

“Oh, I believe it. Same as anybody. I just don’t put much faith in timetables.”

He left Edy feeling sappy and sad and nostalgic for a thousand different reasons. Seeing Edy had been a mistake. Clearly. Timetables of his past blipped into his mind like figures being tallied on a giant screen in some Pentagon control-room: running totals of his time watching television; masturbating; angry tirades over types of lettuce; that stint with the rotary, mindless conversations with insurance agents and diabetic car salesmen; arguments with Janine about missing socks. The longer he walked the more unsettled he became about his wasted life. The whole mess with Janine—had Edy been the problem all along? Janine and he had been dating for six years. She was coming off a divorce that made her too gun-shy to give up her own house, and Carl was a confirmed bachelor,
which made him incapable of giving up his. There was that, too. A lack of commitment, maybe. But it had also been about timetables. Janine hadn’t left over Edy or the house. Edy she could deal with. The houses she could deal with. It was Carl’s timetables that made her leave.

He reached Janine’s just before six o’clock. It had seemed a good idea, the two and half hour walk to Janine’s subdivision outside Bexley, something in the mode of Thoreau to think about the delivery of his mea culpa. But now, with the prospect of being turned away outright, and the thought of a dark, possibly cold, trek back, Carl was rethinking his decision to leave his car in town. Failing to patch things up meant more timetables, more cold. He’d left his phone in the car, and if Janine slammed the door in his face, he wasn’t about to knock again and ask her to call a taxi. A new timetable appeared on the big Pentagon screen in his head: Unnecessary Hikes to the Suburbs.

He knocked.

Janine answered within seconds as if she’d been waiting for him in the foyer.

“Oh, it’s you.”

“Did you get my message?”

“I got it.” She crossed her arms. She looked at the street behind him. “Where’s your car?”

“I left it in town.”

“That’s a little presumptuous, don’t you think?”
He felt flustered. She wasn’t Edy, but Janine was still considerably younger than Carl. Ten years. And her straight, black hair gave her high cheeks an extreme angularity he’d recognized in fashion models, a severity used to great effect in expressing disdain.

“God, Janine, it’s good to see you.”

“I can’t say the same, Carl. Was there something you wanted to say to me, or is this just a voyeuristic thing, come to stare at me in the doorway?” She spread her hands and stuck out a thin leg from her pencil skirt. She looked like she’d just come home from the office. She looked stunning. Carl couldn’t remember why he’d ever thought of ending the relationship.

“I don’t want you to hate me,” he said rather limply.

“Bit late for that.”

“Okay, I want you to stop hating me.”

“Sweet Jesus, Carl, you are the most self-centered human being I’ve ever encountered. You find out you’re going to die—if that’s even true—and now you want to kick the bucket feeling good about the people you hurt. Well if it eases your conscience, if that’s what it takes, Carl, fine, blah blah blah, I forgive you.”

This did not seem sincere.

Carl regrouped. “Let me make it up to you.”

She crossed her arms. “I’m listening.”

“I’ll . . .” His mind froze. What could he do? If he really wasn’t asking Janine to come back—and he’d considered that he actually might be asking just that—then what was he going to do? Something nice for her so she’d think of him kindly when he was
gone? Sugar-coat the sour taste in her mouth? And what was he doing wasting an evening walking to the suburbs if he only had six weeks to live? Shouldn’t he be base jumping? Or trying cocaine? Volunteering with the homeless? Taking the homeless base jumping?

“I’ll buy you a car,” he stuttered.

“What did you just say?” Her expression changed, and he could tell he’d said the wrong thing. “What am I, your mistress? Are you sure it isn’t brain cancer?” She seemed to recoil at that last word, not for having said it, but from him, as if she suddenly believed it, and in believing it were reacting the way all herd animals react to their own who are sickly and dying—with disgust.

He soldiered on. “A car.” he repeated. No, this wasn’t going well. In his defense, he’d listened to Janine complain about the lease on her Hyundai for a year now. “I’d buy it, outright. Tax and all.” That didn’t sound right either. Was he a gameshow host?

“Get the fuck off my porch,” she growled, and slammed the door.

Walking back toward the city, Carl swore several times under his breath. The ovoid moon wobbled in the cold night sky, and every time a car passed, a gush of air swooshed up his pants and seized him with a chill so abrupt he shivered uncontrollably.

Without realizing he’d done it he walked straight back to his house.

He didn’t register his mistake until he spotted the scorched remnant of a porch beam, jagged and splintered, from a half-block away. His momentum carried him the last hundred feet, and once again he stood before the remains of his life. He wiped his brow with the palm of his hand. He was literally walking in circles. Great big circles.
He saw the neighbor woman in her window again, but by the time he did, it was too late to take cover, and she was out on her lawn in her nightdress before he could pretend to be headed somewhere else. He couldn’t remember her name.

“Are you okay?” she said.

For a moment he filed through his brain for all the ways to avoid cancer talk but then realized she was referring to the housefire.

“Fine,” he said. He smiled and gave a little wave to dismiss her, but she kept coming. She crossed the wet grass in her corduroy slippers. Dowdy and a little overweight, maybe about Janine’s age with none of the sex appeal. Carl didn’t remember anything about her, if she worked or had a husband, if she owned cats. She seemed like she might own cats.

He looked at the scorched house so as not to have to meet her face. She did the same so they looked like two people watching a sunset or an atom bomb going off in the distance.

“Sorry about your house,” she said.

“It’s all right.”

She was quiet.

Carl felt more uneasy with every second, positioned as they were like two people in an elevator. Then something caught his attention.

“Is my microwave gone?”
She leaned toward him to get a better look into the bombed-out shell that used to be his breakfast nook. “I saw kids here yesterday. Playing. They were shooting some jars with BB guns. I think the jars came out of the refrigerator.”

Carl hadn’t thought of the refrigerator. He suddenly wanted to see how well the stuff inside had survived. He thought of that old joke about the black boxes on airplanes, how if those boxes always survived crashes why didn’t they just make the planes out of black boxes? He imagined a plane made out of refrigerators.

“I called the police,” said the woman. “They showed up eventually. The kids were gone.”

Carl pointed. “Two days ago my microwave was right there. Just right there. My God, does looting become acceptable when it’s on top of another tragedy?” He didn’t know why he was upset, but he was.

“I’m sorry,” said the woman.

“You didn’t do it,” he snapped. A bit too abruptly.

“I guess the dogwood doesn’t matter now, either,” she said.

Then he remembered. Her name was Rosaly Arbuthnot. How could he forget a name like that? And there’d been some episode with the tree, though he couldn’t quite remember.

He peered through, or rather over, what was left of his living room into the backyard where the poor little tree with its tenderly knotted branches and once diaphanous flowers now leaned away from the house as if it had attempted to save itself
by ducking clear of the flames. But it had not saved itself. And what was left of its trunk
had curled defensively against the far fence and died.

“I wouldn’t have done anything to damage it,” she said. “No humming bird
feeders or hanging baskets, anything like that.” She sounded a tad hurt.

It came back to him now.

Seven years ago, thinking it would beautify one corner of the backyard and fill in
the dead space between his kitchen window and fence, Carl planted the tree at the
northwest corner of the foundation. But the soffit threw too much shade, and in a bid for
sunlight the tree had grown away from the house, arching across the fence into Rosaly
Arbuthnot’s yard. Sensing a potential squabble, Carl preemptively hired trimmers to
sever any limbs extending beyond his own property.

Rosaly had showed up on his doorstep just as the chainsaws roared to life.

She begged him to allow the tree to grow unabated and promised not to complain.
She’d held up her right hand as if swearing in court. But Carl had just nursed his brother
through a litigious and tortuous divorce, didn’t want to think about lawyers or monetary
damages, and had already paid the landscaping company. He had everything to lose. He
politely declined and, as she shuffled back to her house, he chalked up the crying to eco-
friendly nuttiness.

How had he forgotten this?

“It was such a beautiful tree,” she said.

“I have a bit more to worry about than the tree,” he mumbled.
“Oh, I didn’t—I’m sorry,” she repeated. “I just loved watching it bloom in the spring. I’m not good with the yard, so it was the only spot of color. That pink. I was just saying I know how you feel.” And something in her voice told him she meant it, even if it could have been perceived as a lecturette on karma.

Despite feeling still a bit defensive, he was suddenly overcome with the same need he’d felt with Janine—to make things right.

He turned toward her. She wasn’t so homely now he could see her up close, almost like she just gave off the impression of homeliness from afar. Her face looked sad but not tired or world-worn. She had brown eyes, and they were large on either side of her petite nose.

“I’m dying,” he said. He didn’t know why he said it.

She didn’t try to correct him. She seemed to know he wasn’t talking about the fire.

“Is that why you set your house on fire?”

“That was an accident.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

They stood in silence.

“Rosaly,” he said, maybe to show her he remembered her name.

She took his hand and shook it. “It was nice to meet you.”

“It was nice to meet you, too,” he heard himself say.
“If you need to talk,” she said, but didn’t finish. Then crossed her yard and left him to look at the dark.

Back at the car, he dug the cell phone out from under the restaurant receipts in his cupholder. Edy had left him a message.

“Carl. I got to thinking about it. And if you want to sleep with me. Yeah. I’m okay with that. We’re friends. I think, you know, you should get what you want. Before it all goes south.” Her voice shifted into a lighter tone. “You’ll definitely remember it as long as you live.” Then hung up.

Despite feeling chilled and exhausted, a rush of adrenaline filled him with an electric energy as he listened again. He got back to his hotel and couldn’t sleep. This time the room felt different. The bloody pillowcase had been removed by the maid, and no matter how hard he tried he couldn’t think of anything beyond tomorrow, which was, Carl found, a good thing.

He’d told Janine he thought they should break it off within the year. That was the long and short of it anyway. They’d been discussing summer plans.

“I’m driving to see Dan in Newark,” he’d said. He’d felt irritable thinking about what he could be doing with Edy at that moment, even if it were nonsexual.

“You have to plan further if you’re going to get out of the country,” Janine said. “What about next year? I’ve always wanted to try fabada. And I’ve never been to Spain.” She cocked her head. “Isn’t there a song about that?”
But he wasn’t listening. It irked him she was so confident about their future. She was taking him for granted.

“Look, we don’t know where we’ll be in a year.”

“You planning on moving?” she asked.

“No. I’m just saying—” But what was he saying? He suddenly felt like a kid out on frozen lake too late in the season. He felt like jumping. Just to see if something would crack.

Janine had gone silent and was staring across his kitchen table at him. Her hands were still on the keyboard of her laptop where she’d pulled up Spanish travel sites. “What are you saying?”

That ice beneath his feet groaned, the black water below it lapping.

“I’m saying maybe we shouldn’t necessarily plan on being together then.”

He realized that until that moment he’d never seen Janine look shocked. What he wanted to say was that he hated this old couple stuff, this planning. Tours and little outings. Food they had to ‘experience.’ Fountains. It all smacked of campers and grandparents and pants pulled up to your chin. He wanted to tell her he was still a man. He had his adventures yet. Sexual conquests even. But whatever he might have said had already written itself across her face.

“You’re saying it’s over.” She said this very slowly.

“I’m saying let’s make plans for this summer. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“So. Next summer. That’s getting ahead of ourselves?”
He thought if she stormed out quickly enough he’d still have time to call Edy and ask her if he could buy her dinner.

He shrugged.

Janine stood, closed her laptop and slid it into her bag, all very professionally. Very quietly. Carl felt if he spoke at that moment, the air would shatter. He sat still in his chair. It’d be another month before all her stuff was out of the house, when all the words were used up and she was gone for good, but this was the moment that mattered. Carl became aware of his hand resting like a dead thing on the table. He pulled it into his lap, and it felt like a dead thing on his thigh.

She slung her bag over her shoulder and walked out.

He waited until he heard her car pull away from the curb before he rose and called Edy. Her phone went straight to voicemail. Carl didn’t leave a message, opting to slap together a sandwich for dinner and fall asleep on the couch in front of the television.

He awoke in the hotel breathing the cold, scrubbed air jetting out of the cooling unit near the window. Air like astronauts must breathe.

Despite the ache in his legs from the previous evening’s walk he’d never felt so invigorated. He phoned Edy, caught her on the third ring, and she agreed to come up to his room about seven. They would order room service for dinner. She sounded thrilled, not sad or compromising at all. And this made Carl happy, and despite the circumstances, the thought of just seeing Edy naked kept blocking out the fact he’d be dead soon. It was
the best feeling, and he wondered why he hadn’t left Janine earlier. There was too much living to do.

But when he brushed his teeth he couldn’t help but think of that woman and the dogwood tree. What would it have hurt to tell the landscapers to knock it off? To leave the branches how they were, how she liked them? Hell, he could have had her sign a contract stating she wouldn’t sue. Something like that. A disclaimer. Notarized.

His gums began to bleed, and this time the blood was from brushing too hard, because he was angry, but the blood in the sink made him remember that he was going to die, and he got angry all over again, and now he was angry with that woman, for saying that about the tree, because if he hadn’t known about the tree he wouldn’t be thinking about it with only a month to live, and instead he’d be thinking about the shape of Edy’s breasts or something like that and about how to spruce himself up, but instead, instead he was staring into a generic, beige sink that would be cleaned and used again by countless anonymous people, and he was examining a stringy curliee of blood slithering around the drain that reminded him he very soon wouldn’t have any blood in his body because he’d be pumped full of embalming fluid, which got him thinking about burial arrangements and whether or not he would like to be cremated . . .

“Stop it,” he said to himself. He recognized only his eyes in the mirror. The rest of him seemed like someone else.

The thought occurred to him he might not be able to get an erection if he were thinking of that woman and the goddamn dogwood tree. He thought about going over
there and apologizing, then looked her up in the phone book instead. He got her voicemail, and it seemed like too much of his life lately was being stored on phones, awaiting a date with a listener without the benefit of an answer, so he decided not to leave a message. He found a hot dog vendor on the street outside and ordered a bratwurst with mustard and jalapeno relish—what the hell, you only live once—then stopped halfway through, not wanting to be bloated the first time Edy saw him naked. Was the first time the right way to think of it? Outside of prostitutes, which he’d never before considered, he tried to think of any other time he might have looked at sex as terminal, a one-time thing. Maybe other people went in for one-night stands, but for Carl—was he old-fashioned?—there had always been the potential that sex might turn into something more. Already the tryst with Edy felt like it was all too short, and he hoped she’d stay the night so he’d have a chance to do it more than once. He thought about finding some Viagra, but couldn’t remember if you had to have a prescription.

He left the hotel and shopped for some new clothes and other toiletries, which took an hour up town. Then unable to think of anything else to do, he returned to his hotel room and lay down, where he took a very long nap.

At 5:30, Edy woke him out of a sound sleep and asked abruptly where he was. He reminded her he was at the Marriott and hung up. He stared at the ceiling, thought of Maine and his aunt and the bed and breakfast again, but it lacked the same nostalgia. After a few minutes of blinking, wondering if tears might come, he arose, took another shower and got ready. Halfway through combing his hair he realized it hadn’t been Edy on the phone.
She knocked at 6:45, and Carl answered the door smelling of the David Beckham cologne he’d bought at Walgreen’s. He’d always been a handsome man, fifty-seven and still took care of his body, maybe more than he ever had, his athletic shoulders and trim waist belying his age, but now the half circles under his eyes and the crease lines in his brow gave him a haggard appearance, despite the new baby-blue sweater, khakis and checked dress shirt.

“Expecting someone?” said Janine.

He looked down the hall to her left and right.

“So you are expecting someone. A call girl?”

“What do you want?” he said.

These were again the wrong words. His heart punched at his ribs. He wanted Janine back, didn’t he? Just not right now. Not when Edy was so close.

“Edy,’” she said. And at first he thought she’d guessed, but then he understood: Edy was standing in the hallway. She’d turned the corner and the two women were staring at one another.

Before he knew what was happening Janine was running at Edy and screaming. A guttural sound that sounded more primate than anything else, and Edy was in a defensive crouch like a basketball player. In the same moment Carl was a little pained to see Edy wearing jeans and a t-shirt. He was hurt she hadn’t dressed up a bit more for the occasion. He had another moment to think that the occasion was about to be a fistfight, and that she was dressed about as well as she could be for that.
Edy threw the first punch. Janine had kicked off her heels and dove with her arms outstretched as if performing an openfield tackle. Edy ducked and shot a fist into Janine’s stomach, which ended the screaming abruptly. Janine bounced sideways across the wall, sunk to one knee, then came up and swung in a kind of cat’s claw. This time, Edy wasn’t so lucky. Janine’s fingers caught her right eye and snagged her curled, blonde locks, yanking her head back and to one side. Janine pulled and Carl heard the wad of hair as it came out of Edy’s head. Their arms flew now like birds trying to free themselves from a net, and Carl ran to them, but stopped a few feet away, his hands outstretched, his mouth open and silent.

“You bitch,” said Janine, and popped Edy in the lip.

“Bitch,” said Edy. She swung her arm, locked at the elbow, and made contact with Janine’s temple, which caused her to lose her grip on Edy’s hair.

For a split second they appeared as if they might stop, but then Edy screamed and shoved Janine into the wall, and they were at it again. And none of it was sexy.

Carl was going to say something, then felt a twinge in his stomach and remembered he was going to die, and after that all he could say was “Sorry. Sorry.”

Two hotel security guards came because someone had called, and within minutes the police had arrived and Carl was trying to explain to someone what had happened, but it all seemed too terribly complex, and in the police station where they had to fill out forms, all Carl could think of was the fact that he should have never cut back the dogwood tree.
When the officer with the big teeth asked if Carl needed a ride back to his hotel, he gave his home address instead and didn’t wait for Janine or Edy to finish giving their statements. He couldn’t have sex now if he tried, and he supposed Edy wouldn’t want to because her left eye had swollen shut.

The officer dropped Carl off at his house, viewing the remains with a raised eyebrow, but thankfully didn’t ask any questions when they stopped. Carl looked for Rosaly, but she didn’t appear in the window. He remembered again he had no idea where she worked or what her hours were. He didn’t think she had a husband.

Twilight had turned everything a dusty, light color like poorly exposed film, and Carl watched his own feet carefully for ruts or shrew holes in the grass as he crossed Rosaly’s unfamiliar yard. He knocked.

No answer.

After a few minutes, he made a decision, which was to wait and apologize for the dogwood tree. Maybe beginning there would be what set the world in order. He looked around at the quiet neighborhood, then walked around the side of Rosaly’s house to her backyard where he intended to make himself comfortable in a swing or hammock or whatever he found until she got back.

As he turned the corner he saw her sitting in a lawn chair staring into her little yard, whose grass hadn’t grown very full and whose surface looked a bit too wet and muddy to walk through without losing a shoe. She was crying, and Carl wished not to scare her, so he made a wide circle and entered her field of vision by walking out into the
yard, and sure enough he lost a shoe, his right one, but Rosaly was already looking up at him, and he didn’t want to stop, so he kept walking and said, “Hello.”

She sniffled. “Hello.”

He wished to tell her sorry. For the dogwood. But this didn’t seem appropriate, not now, with her crying, because he doubted she was crying about that, and so he stammered a bit, then said, “What’s wrong?”

And when she told him, he listened. Water soaked up into his sock, and he listened, because it seemed to make her feel better. And when she was done, he held out his arms, and at first she hesitated, but then she got up and walked to him and let him hug her, and for the first time in a very long while Carl felt useful and used up and tired and glad and better all at once. He felt better. And when Rosaly squeezed back, the time left in Carl’s life felt like almost enough.
The Hog, She Dreams of Better Worlds

April 24

Shep King sat in his rust-spotted Corolla pulling his fingers with his thumb until he heard the satisfying pop of each knuckle. He lifted a Speedway coffee from the cupholder and put it down without drinking. Tim Reppert’s farm lay a quarter mile down the road, and from where Shep sat he could see the mouth of the gravel drive.

Tim’s red F-150 with the dinged-up tailgate pulled out.

Shep followed.

April 14

_The hog breathes in the warm air rolling up from the mud, her feet squelching slightly in the broken stalks of churned straw. Her black eyes gaze upward at the pink people in their awkward embrace._

_The man’s blue jeans are draped about his ankles. His wallet has worked its way out of his back pocket. The woman’s pale legs are wrapped about his waist, her feet aglow in the shadows of the dusty barn._

_“Hurry,” she whispers._

_Their bodies make a bumping sound against the ladder to the hay mow._

_“Hurry.”_

_He finishes and presses his bared teeth against her chin._

_“I love you,” he says. He has black hair and tired eyes. Forty-one, he is thin with sinewed shoulders._
“Timothy,” she says. “God, Timothy, please don’t start.”

“I love you, Cara.”

“Please.” She is thirty-six and too far past youthful flirtations. “I have to pick up the kids.”

She dreams sometimes of a moment in seventh grade, on the school bus, her mouth open as Walter Smalley put his strong, freshman-boy’s hand on her upper thigh. That was love.

She finds her jeans where she hung them on an old tack nail and slides them on, slips into her flat black shoes. Her left breast hurts. This is the first time they’ve made love in the barn. In the sunlight, she leaves the stink of hogs and the belch-like lowing of the cattle to breathe the modest, open air. The switchgrass dances near the pond. Dragonflies cut past in crystalline purples. Her silver minivan seems out of place.

“It’s only 2:20,” he shouts after her. He has lost his wallet in the drive bay where the cattle cross in and out all day, raking their itching sides against the planks of the pig sties. The cows will enjoy stepping on the wallet, driving it into the earth and burying the plastic identifications in the mud.

“I have to go,” she says. “They’re letting out early today. There’s an assembly or something.”

He stops and swings his arms in circles to push the blood to his hands. His muscles feel sore from the exertion; he needs to limber up.
“You could live here,” he shouts as she hops in the van, but she doesn’t seriously consider this. It doesn’t enter her mind in the same way she imagines food at the grocery store or faces of aunts and uncles.

_Cara King leaves the farm and picks up her two children at Limerick Elementary. She and the kids sing a song about Easter on the way home._

After Cara left him stretching before the barn, Tim Reppert walked down to the old house where he was in the process of packing everything up. His grandparents, Irene and Bob Sr., had built the old house when they first married and bought the land, and it was about to fall in. Tim had spent most of last autumn framing up the new place fifty yards up the hill. Then cold weather hit, and from Thanksgiving to February the new house stood like a shivering skeleton through the limp snows of winter. Come March, Tim was back at it something fierce. He managed to roof up the new homestead between rains and hired a fella to help him tack up drywall.

By now, he’d moved most the big items up to the new place, and what greeted him in the old house was a dour maze of dustless rooms moldering in their emptiness. He spent an hour loading dishes, which he separated by single paper towels, into sturdy boxes, then walked both floors, checked closets, and took down a few sets of blinds he intended to tote out. In the upstairs bathroom he held open the broken medicine cabinet and swiped at Tylenol bottles, a tin of Resinol, dust-laden dental floss, a stiff toothbrush and a beige sports wrap with two elastic bands. They dropped into a flimsy cell-phone box into which he was just about to add a safety razor when he looked out the doorway
and noticed the .22 shotgun he’d leaned against the stair railing. He’d promised to
slaughter one of his hogs for Zeb Cockerham by Saturday. He was even going to keep
some of the porkbelly for himself for bacon. But Cara had called this morning, and every
thought of slaughter had slipped his mind.

He cursed under his breath, tossed the box into the sink and picked up the gun.

Through the window two white ash trees were visible on the hill, their autumn leaves still
clinging in blood-red defiance to their muscled branches. The sun had ducked behind
them, but there was still time enough. He loaded the chamber and crossed the patch of
earth separating the drive from the smaller gate in the cow fence. He made a mental note
to change the salt block in back of the barn, and quickly glanced over the tomato plants,
which resembled weeds this early in the season.

He thought nothing of which pig he’d choose as he approached the cooling
darkness of the barn’s inner nave, preferring instead to remember Cara, her sweet-
smelling paleness and the freckled line of pigment that coated both shoulders and crossed
her nose like someone had dusted her in cinnamon.

He smiled and cocked the gun.

_The hog sleeps, her head resting in the crux between the bottom plank of her sty
and the rotting warmth of earth which she hollowed to a shallow ditch with her snout._

_Her side rises and falls in gentle undulations, the white hairs standing out on her skin,
appearing in the dying sunlight like the hair of an angel._
She dreams. She’s been witness to the human’s coupling and found it fascinating, an image rare and unlike that of the other images she has known. She dreams of them. This man and this woman. What they’re like on subways far from here, when and how they’ve danced, and with whom. Proms with ceilings speckled by tin foil stars and even once—once—a boozy honky-tonk where the woman faked a Texas accent the entire night and danced with five men, all who offered to take her home. And it was the best night—the happiest—of her life, maybe, she thinks.

She dreams of honeysuckle clinging in a quilted thickness to the barbed wire of childhood homes and the man pinching the small white flowers from their cups, draining the sweetened dew that funneled out into his mouth.

Dreams of their happiness together, the two. Man and woman, and the part of their thrill which is so much like the first stirrings of strange love. The way she smiles and touches his collarbone as a way of sizing him, of gauging his bigness in the world. His care for her and the memory he has of loving her—telling himself this from the time he was a senior in high school and she in eighth grade—because he could never imagine anything so frail and lovely. And thinking only of his absolute joy when, twenty years later, they ran into one another at a craft fair, she oddly absent of children, he there to help his cousin tote homemade coat racks to her booth where half the town had gathered in the school gymnasium.

Of his halfhearted joke about finally getting to see her where they might have gone to prom together, of wishing he might have escorted her there had they not been just the slightest bit too far apart in age. And her laugh, genuine, the giddy elements of a
downy, dark, earthy tenderness welling in her breast, feeling the compliment and holding it tight to her chest. Knowing then.

Even then.

That they’d been meant to be.

The night Doug Partin told him, Shep King was a little stiff with two shots of Bulleit. It hadn’t been explicit, what Doug said, but a man knows these things, the granules of truth that paint as clear a picture as photographic evidence.

Shep was tall with big arms and coarse red hair like lightbulb filament. In the time since he and Cara were married he’d packed on a few pounds, but took semi-yearly stints at the gym to cut into his growing girth. The resolution never held, but he also hadn’t let himself go completely. He still found himself not entirely disagreeable in the mirror. He’d just trucked back into town from his aunt’s funeral, ordered pizzas for the kids, stepped out to pick them up and ducked in to Curbside for two shots of bourbon. He was looking down at his gut, wondering if he’d overdone the booze when Doug led him outside.

The temperature had dropped, and Doug hustled through a cigarette, his other hand shaking around a pint of beer.

“Cara buying chickens?”

Shep stomped his boots on the paving bricks. “Chickens?”
“Saw her up at Tim Reppert’s place—family used to own the grocery store. You remember Tim. Couple years ahead of us in school. His dad used to paint the booster house at the ball fields.”

“Yeah yeah. Carl. Thin guy.”

“Carl’s the one used to butcher his own livestock, sell em in his deli back of the grocery. Tim’s his son.”

“He play football?”

“Nah. Kind of a backward kid. Don’t know if he finished. Pretty sure I saw Cara’s van up there. Maybe she was just turning around.”

Shep could see Doug didn’t believe this.

“What day was that?”

“Say Wednesday or Tuesday.”

“Yeah yeah. She got it in her head to grill out. Wanted some fresh steaks.”

Doug pulled on the last of his cigarette, and the orange line of ember raced from the tip toward his mouth. “Let’s get inside.”

Shep nodded.

His wife was having an affair.

Since then, for the past week, Shep had begun to see Cara as a woman in a movie, a celluloid version of the mother of his children whose neatly lit skin revealed none of the perturbing laugh lines she stressed over in the mirror on Sunday mornings or the reddened dryness of her knuckles in winter. This alternate Cara moved with greater
purpose—film-time working more quickly than real time. She shook her hair loose and it fell straight down her back. She wore corsets tied with pink, satin ribbon. She slipped from lacy, black underwear, standing before a doorway in nothing but the constrictive bodice which pushed her breasts, white as goose down, up into small heaving hillocks of flesh. Shep had never seen his wife in a corset. He imagined her laughing, straddling, leaping, bracing herself against the wood of a large headboard, biting her bottom lip. And a part of him detached itself. In fact, he found it disturbing how little emotion he could muster. This cinematic doppelganger of his wife—this woman fucking another man—she was so unlike the woman he knew that he had to remind himself they were one in the same.

April 24

“One—in—the same,” he said, trailing Tim Reppert’s F-150 down Charles Street where he turned into the Carolton Rest Home. In the parking lot, Shep parked where he wouldn’t be seen and slipped the .38 Classic from his glove box.

The gun, a Model 10, had always looked too thin to Shep, its handle and the contour of its chamber anemic-looking, the proportions lacking something in the way of masculine heft. The gun did not make him feel powerful staring at it. Instead he felt hungry and hollow. He conjured again the vision of his wife, this time in a long black nightgown cut so low her cleavage made wispy, curved shadows in the candle light.

“I don’t want to,” he said almost petulantly.
But the gun refused to fly from his seat, refused to disappear into ash the way Doug Partin’s cigarette had done.

April 14

The hog awakes from her dream to see the man tilting the gun barrel to her forehead.

*She sees the man and imagines his feeble, shaking thighs, the blue veins in the back of his knees. She has dreamed of his love. In the quiet interstices between mumbled prayers she foresaw the two of them sliding up the shadowed aisle of a large church, their hands entwined. They aren’t being married. They are here in the middle of a solemn, estranged afternoon from their work and families. Aged members of the congregation long since sapped of ambition bow heads and channel visions of loved ones through the gray walls of stone. The terra cotta saints wait, softened by years of human breath rolling across their surfaces, their hands and faces silent as the God who watches the people in their pews.*

*The man and woman approach the altar and the row of candles glittering at odd intervals. She and he are smiling. Smiles of hushed tranquility breaking like waves over their eyes. They can see one another now as no one has ever seen another human being. They have come this far, and despite their initial doubts, they have arrived, to a tiny town in west Texas where a sheet of sand layers the flat rooftop of the hotel where they have been staying for the last week.*
The man lights a candle for his mother, who ran away nearly three decades ago from his father and sent the boy a letter telling him that one day he would marry the Robbins girl. The one with the big feet and freckles. She warned him never to make fun of this girl.

He looks about the church. His mother, he thinks, must have known some of these people, back when he was too angry to contact her. Back when she was alive.

In the afternoons, they have taken to sipping Coke from two straws plugged into the same can, eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in order to hold off a bit longer the time that will inevitably come when they are both forced to look for jobs. When they have to be away from each other.

Because they’ve wasted too much time already.

He fires.

April 24

Shep King watched Tim Reppert roll his father out in a wheelchair to a small patio beneath the porte cochère where other elderly men and women sat watching service vans and visitors rolling up and departing.

Tim spoke with his father a moment, resting his hand on the elder man’s sharp-angled shoulder.

Shep had heard since grade school that Carl Reppert was an angry son of a bitch ever since his wife ran off. Rumor was she was a beautiful woman that couldn’t sit still in
church because the pastor’s voice made her horny. That’s what kids said, anyway. Shep stared at the wimpy-looking gun in his seat and briefly wondered whether Tim had taken after his father or cried after his mother, then lost his nerve and tucked the gun into his jacket.

When Tim drove back to the farm, Shep stayed on his tail. The two vehicles rattled up the gravel drive, lurching slowly in the ruts on the steep incline. At the top of the hill, Tim pulled alongside the cinder block garage and stepped down from the truck. Shep parked, slid out, and the two men stared at one another. Without a word, Shep pulled the gun from his pocket and held it, half extended, pointed at the ground. He made sure Tim saw it.

Tim didn’t run. His thin shoulders heaved in what might have been a shrug or a deep sigh of resignation. A crackling wind cut down off the hill, shaking the power lines, and Tim looked back at the new house, its metallic sheets of insulation uncovered as yet by the stacks of vinyl siding in the yard. The western face of the house glowed the dense pink of sandstone, like an otherworldly palace.

Shep felt momentarily distracted, instantly wanted to see inside the new house—a natural instinct working through him—to calculate it’s progress. Something about seeing the guts of a building had always given Shep a brisk, infinitesimal thrill, as if he’d been privy to creation itself, the capacity to look through rooms, through walls, at the bare, plywood floor and its wide-headed nails glinting in hard rows. The copper and plastic pipes extending like crooked trees between two-by-fours while lengths of green and black wire wriggled under massive staples toward the upper floors.
Without a word Tim turned toward the old house at an easy pace, and Shep followed.

The two of them went inside. Tim held open the door behind him like he might have for someone at a restaurant. Shep smelled him this close, the talcy, medicinal aroma of the rest home clinging to his clothes. Shep was a head taller, a good hundred pounds heavier. This close, it struck him he could probably kill Tim Reppert with his bare hands. He didn’t think of Cara.

“Supper?” said Tim as the two of them passed into the kitchen.

“Don’t think you’re going to get out of this,” Shep said.

Beyond the nicked oak table was a wall of wood paneling and a framed picture of Jesus praying at night in the garden of Gethsemane. Shep pulled up a chair and left the gun resting on the table, looked at the phone on the wall—an old-style thing the color of chocolate soft-serve. Tim made no grab for the receiver.

“You mean to kill me?”

“I do.”

Tim nodded and pulled a half-loaf of yellow cake and a bowl of mashed potatoes out of the refrigerator, then a pitcher of sweet tea. He lifted out a green tupperware container and opened it. Shep could smell the homemade bacon strips inside, aromatic in their own fat, pungent as tar or lilacs. He found a pan in the cupboard and turned the knob on the stove. A ring of blue flame puffed into existence, and Tim set the pan over it.

“I don’t want you to get any ideas,” said Shep. “No hot grease in my eyes or nothing like that.”
Tim sliced the cake with a butter knife without looking up, doled pieces onto two small, white plates, and carried them to the table. He set one in front of Shep.

“You’re taking this pretty well,” said Shep. Tim’s silence had unnerved him a bit, and he felt his resolve sinking into his stomach. But a last meal was something he could allow, surely. Something he understood needed to be done, maybe to quell some flame of conscience. The task had turned into something like work. He thought of bailing hay at the Flakers’ old farm down the road when he was seventeen, the long day stretching out before him as he stood beneath a morning sky layered like the dense pages of a Bible. The work to be done. For some reason, he couldn’t summon Cara’s face, not even in the cinematic simplicity he’d conjured so deftly for most of the week. It was as if duty had filled in the gaps. Duty, like always. And no amount of anger could replace the stolid, unbroken feeling of responsibility weighing across his shoulders and back.

He placed his hand full on the gun, the way he’d placed his hands against the back of Dutch Flaker’s wagon, to ground himself before moving forward.

Tim slopped two helpings of mashed potatoes onto plates with a wooden spoon. “Shep,” he said. “I’m scared shitless, but something’s been telling me this is overdue. I ain’t got nobody but dad, and he’s about gone. Part of me hoped you’d come along before I begun that house up there on the hill.”

This is what Shep had meant to ask. How long it had been going on. He felt foolish for not being the one to bring it up, even now with the gun beneath his palm. “That long, huh?”

“She run the building permit up here from the courthouse.”
“That when it started?”

“Bit before that, I guess.”

“You couldn’t get that permit yourself, huh.” But Shep knew his wife had been the one to take the initiative. She would have had to convince Dean Adams she could drive the paperwork out on her lunch break. A physical pain cut into Shep’s sternum.

Tim threw the bacon into the skillet. The strips hissed. “I figure you won’t understand this, but then I figure you will. I love her.”

“That right. Pardon my saying so, but you got no idea.”

“I don’t, probably. I guess that’s right. But I do.”

Tim placed the mashed potatoes in the microwave, and Shep curled three fingers around the handle of the gun. The room felt smaller as the heat from the stove and the smell of cooking food filled up the breathing space. He tried pushing away from the table to give himself room, but the back of his chair was already touching the wall.

Then it was ready. Bacon. Mashed potatoes. Cake. Milk to drink.

Something about the meal was traditional, a holdover from earlier farming days, the pigs to slaughter, food from scratch; but in other ways it held something of Tim’s loneliness, his bachelorhood, in its makeup. Shep couldn’t help but think there should have been eggs or slabs of ham, toast or rolls, green beans even. Instead, here were the remnants of what a meal used to look like. The rest of it had disappeared but never been replaced.

Tim set the plate before Shep, then sat before his own meal with nothing but a spoon. Shep switched the gun to the left side of his plate, and Tim flinched. He seemed to
quiver for a few seconds, his hands held frozen over the table, then he lowered his eyes and began eating.

For nine minutes their utensils scraped and cut, filling the kitchen with ceramic echoes. Shep’s jaw worked slowly over the bacon. The potatoes. He washed it down with milk, felt the calming effect of heavy, simple foods sliding down his throat and pacifying a hunger he hadn’t known existed. Not these past few hours. Maybe years. He felt the food’s goodness working through him. The lingering savor of bacon on the back of his tongue. A warmth spread through his chest and almost covered up the ache at the center of his rib cage.

He stood and pointed the gun at Tim, whose eyes had gone watery. His face remained impassive, and he sat up in his chair, set the spoon down, which he’d been turning over with the tips of his fingers.

“I’m ready,” he said.

“We’re headed up the new place,” Shep said.

Tim’s breath hitched, and he raised a hand in momentary protest. Then he lowered it and rose.

They hiked up the hill in the dark. Shep couldn’t remember when the sun dropped, but he knew if he was going to make a go of this, he needed to hurry. Until a minute ago he’d thought only of killing Tim Reppert, of shooting him until his body stopped and the life fell out of him in puddles. But thinking of the new house had given him an idea.
“You’re going to burn it up, aren’t you?” Tim said.

“What makes you think that?”

“What I’d do.”

Shep stepped through the gate in the cow fence, where again Tim held it open for him. The two of them, silhouettes against the navy velvet of sky, crossed the cow path and climbed the plywood steps leading up to the door. Inside they’d tacked drywall along the ceilings and around the outside walls. Even in the dark Shep could see the inner rooms, unplastered, separated by two-by-fours, just like he’d imagined. A row of rustic prison cells. In the near corner sat a heap of furniture covered in shear plastic and splotched with plaster.

“Over there,” said Shep. He motioned toward a pair of work lamps set up near a stack of sheetrock. “Turn them lights on.”

Tim did and the room glowed.

Shep fired.

April 14

He fires.

The hog dreams of better worlds before the top of her skull is split in a momentary shiver, electric, which ripples through her body. The hog dreams, before her own death wipes us all clean, of the man and the woman and their tender mouths searching in the dark for whispered promises, for the gentle, crashing, upturned caress of a warm
moment. Of earlier days together, lifted minutes, talking, pretending, even to themselves, that their lunch hour meetings were happenstance.

That his plans of building the house had always been there. But really. Really. Of his unvoiced thoughts and the future he saw in her eyes. The children, all of them, running in and out of rooms, yelping like animals as they planted pillows across the living room rug so they could jump from raft to raft in a sea of lava. Of days he’d feel so tired he couldn’t stand a second longer. Of the second job he’d take to protect them all. Of saving. Of pretending it never phased him while secretly feeling his heart aching at his incapacity to understand and express it, every time he peered into a crib, or turned the television low while his wife slept in his arms. Of his happiness.

Of the new house. Of the new life and the shuttling sweetness of days passing almost without end because they were so good. So good you couldn’t express a single word of it. But feel it. In the new house he’d begun for this very purpose.

And the hog, she slumps across the mud in a shallow exhalation of breath.

April 24

Shep fired the gun past Tim Reppert’s shoulder, and Tim winced, recoiling into a stoop, his knees buckling, his back against the studwall, clutching the air.

Shep felt the food working heavily through his veins. The warmth of it swallowing what anger he’d been able to muster. It had been a mistake, this trip. He should have shot him down in the old house, right there in the kitchen, whip-cracked Tim
Reppert back to kingdom come. But there’d been too much time. And he knew it, plain as anything. He saw the house now for what it was.

“You going to take care of em? You promise?”

Tim refused to look up. He spit on the floor. A slurry of blood from where he’d bitten the inside of his mouth rolled into a crevice between the floor panels filled with sawdust.

Shep pointed the gun, still looking around him. The living room where they stood. The bathroom in the far, south corner. A kitchen with an island topped in tiles white as dentist’s teeth. The stairway, unfinished, wide, with a soft pitch perfect for young ones.

He saw them all, the rooms, the lives of the people who would live here, and he could do nothing to stop it. The next days were as inevitable as the earth, as undeniable as tinfoil stars congregated on a shapeless sky.

“Promise,” he said.

Tim raised his hand, his face still averted, and Shep left. He drove west until he ran low on gas, filled up and went on again, the struggle of staying awake against the crushing threat of dawn staring him blank in the face. Until somewhere near Nebraska he held his hand against his brow, feeling his eyelids slipping. Framing a darkness which withered the edges of his vision.

Slipping.

Dreaming and dreaming. None of us are innocent.
CRITICAL AFTERWORD

Appalachia, Violence and Religion

in which is discussed

1. the purpose of this afterword—2. the influence of my upbringing—3. violence—4. my father—5. depicting religious faith in fiction—6. “Appalachian fiction”—7. dissonance as aesthetic

1. Writing itself is an introspective act, one that requires mining for elements of memory while reasserting such details in a mechanism of artifice. So something like a critical analysis of one’s own work in many ways amounts to an uncloaking of the machinery one stashed neatly inside the automaton in the first place. Then again, as writers, we are always rending and cataloguing the minutiae of other works and writers—those we respect and those we don’t—for aesthetic signs. These signs are signifiers embedded in the craft that evoke, suspend and relate narrative information based on a principle of manipulation. And we desperately want to know how to manipulate the form to our advantage.

The dissection of our influences proves useful in that it tells us where we are headed and where we have been. This afterword, then, posits a simultaneity of purpose: that of exploring memories (where I can pin them down in relation to this collection) and investigating the textual influence of fiction and theory in my own bid to transmogrify those memories into art.
2. When I was young, about eight or nine, a woman named Tammy who lived with her parents across the street from us was taken from her parents’ home by her ex-husband, driven down the road, and shot in the head, her body left in the ditch. Looking back, what strikes me most about these events was that, while horrendous, none of it shocked us. The family, the violence, their desperate poverty. It was everything we’d always known, and there was a hardness, even though our parents shielded us from it as best they could, that grew from being there, in that place. We lived on a dirt road off a dilapidated highway seven miles from a rural, Appalachian town in southeastern Ohio. Most kids with whom I went to school, the neighbors, even family, led hardscrabble lives in trailers or unibuilt homes, worked low-paying jobs in dying industries, and in general inherited little but the farmers’ disregard for education with the inversely proportionate work ethic as compensation.

That Tammy’s father, Buck, was a gun nut, that he stapled targets to trees in his backyard and fired his handguns every night was a matter of course. That his wife made cakes for our birthdays, that we prayed for Tammy in a small country church with our parents. That often as not we heard the stilted grunt-like speech of leathered men in our town. That often as not we heard prayer and old idioms, softly spoken—“Everything happens for a reason,” they said; “When God closes a door, he opens a window,” they said. That the farmers grew pot a few yards away from the cornfields. That classmates at our country school, some of them slept on dirt floors, without heat, showered once a week. That I hated them for their wretchedness. That we fought. That we waded in
creeks. That all this hardness and poverty was somehow tempered by a belief that the Almighty cared enough to play a hand. That we knew what the outside world was doing, how it was getting on and moving away from us. Was every bit the story of my upbringing. Every bit of it a slow progression through intermittent glimpses, of what made it so difficult to capture.

3. Encapsulating my experience as a child and as an observer is a recurring violence. The oppression of poverty and the frustration of extremely limited opportunity manifests itself quite often in a brutal reaction that changes nothing for those over whom that poverty and those limitations rule. Hardness often breeds cruelty. And cruelty breeds cruelty. I once worked with a social services organization which provided jobs for underprivileged youth. We hired a troubled young man as a janitor in our building as opposed to another business, hoping to supervise him more closely that way. As my boss once said, “I get the feeling that boy would stab me as soon as look at me.” And I knew what he meant. Something dead in the young man’s eyes, like he’d been beaten one too many times, abused, or just hardened in ways most of us couldn’t imagine. It was the look, I thought, of long-term inmates. When the young man attempted to steal a watch and was fired, he broke back into the building and trashed only one office: that of my boss, the man who’d hired him. The young man took a laptop from the office, carried it into the back alley and smashed it on the pavement. He stole little else, and none of it benefited him in any way. But this event settled for me a question that had been troubling me for some time, What is the power of violence? And the answer is, in the case of the
young man, and maybe in all violence, nothing, because it rarely has anything to do with the problem. Tammy’s ex-husband murdered her because she left with their unborn son. The violence didn’t correct that.

Violence, as a fictional element, should be an enigma, and I find myself returning to violence in my stories because the subject haunts me. I’ve seen it. I’m affected by it in the same ways we all are, sometimes shutting it out and sometimes so deeply disgusted and dismayed by it that I feel powerless to do anything. But in the violence—potential, accidental, intentional or otherwise—throughout my stories I have attempted to capture in the narrative and in the characters the confusion bred by violence or from which violence is born.

In “They Wash Their Feet in Soda Water,” set during World War II, the characters literally wander in confusion through a South Pacific jungle until violence finds them: “...the three of them retreated inland, traveling by night, until Aaron Stool stepped on a Japanese land mine. The explosion made a bright orange flare that blinded temporarily the other two. His body popped up and flopped down in two uneven pieces” (20). The violence in “New Year” is remote, accidental, and the narrator spends the story waiting to find out if that violence has found a victim: “My finger is still on the trigger, my eyes still trained on that spot, where whatever it is fell” (10). In “The Red Handkerchief,” it is mimicked, false: “Then as if at the beginning of some stage play, all the lights flickered back on and Stacia began to laugh excitedly” (89). In “The Matter of Living,” it is ridiculous: “He couldn’t have sex now if he tried, and he supposed Edy wouldn’t want to because her left eye was swollen shut” (110). And in “The Hog, She
Dreams of Better Worlds,” when that violence is exposed to forethought, it becomes sickly: “The gun did not make him feel powerful staring at it. . . . But [it] refused to . . . disappear into ash” (120).

Regardless of its form, violence is always jarring, an undercurrent of force that disrupts. In Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, Capote uses the voice of Larry Hendricks, an English teacher, to introduce the murders of the Clutter family:

Kenyon was in my sophomore English class. [He] was over in a corner, lying on a couch. He was gagged with adhesive tape and bound hand and foot, like the mother. . . . Somehow he haunts me the most, Kenyon does. I think it’s because he was the most recognizable, the one that looked the most like himself—even though he’d been shot in the face, directly, head-on. He was wearing a T-shirt and blue jeans, and he was barefoot. . . . His head was propped by a couple of pillows, like they’d been stuffed under him to make an easier target. (62-4)

In Capote’s debatably non-fiction “novel,” the discovery of the family cuts short the narrative of the Clutters as living beings and replaces them with gruesome images of unspeakable cruelty. In this way, Capote achieves an element that’s always in the back of my mind when I write violence: confusion. Norman Mailer, in *The Executioner’s Song*, articulates violence in similar terms when he exposes Gilmore’s second murder through the eyes of the murder victim’s wife, Debbie: “She got there in time to watch the strange man walk out the door. . . . Ben was on the floor. He just lay there face down, and his
legs were shaking. . . A wave of blood kept rising out of his hair. She put her hand on it.
. . . She sat there with the phone in her free hand ringing the operator” (250).

Even in pre-meditation, the immediacy of violence occludes reason, making the logic for violence retroactive. The fiction I most admire addresses the retroactive assertions of order we place on violence, but also exposes this troubled logic without exculpating its adherents or constructing an apologetic for its effects. In Russell Banks’ short story “The Gully” a bus driver known only as Freckle Face is robbed twice and faced with termination should it happen again: “‘It’s company policy, Freckle Face,’ [the dispatcher] said. ‘Three times in a month, and you’re gone, man’” (14). In answer to Freckle Face’s protest, the dispatcher explains, “Sometimes the drivers are in cahoots with the thieves” (14). Faced with the loss of his salary and most importantly the women, whom Freckle face is able to date “possibly because he had lots of money to spend” (13), Freckle Face purchases a gun. When two thieves step onto his bus and take a seat, waiting for the right moment to rob him, Freckle Face “reached down to his lunch bag on the floor, drew out a .45, spun around and shot the man behind him in the eye” (14). He chases the second thief to “a dead-end alley behind a Pakistani restaurant, and he shot him twice, first in the chest and then up close, in the head” (14-5).

In Banks’ story, Freckle Face builds his life upon this one moment. He and two other vigilantes from “the Gully” become local heroes, parlaying their status into positions of power in which they charge the citizens to take care of criminals in ways the police cannot. But Banks illustrates the tenuousness of suppositions predicated on violence by ending with Freckle Face years later. Having climbed the social and
economic ladder, Freckle Face’s mind still lingers on his humble beginnings:

“Sometimes, though, late at night, Freckle Face would rise up from the bed he shared with the daughter of the prime minister . . . and look down and across the sleeping city all the way to the Gully” (22). This preoccupation with his past haunts him precisely because his success is based on a moment void of logic. Far from being triumphant, Banks makes it clear that justifications based on momentary violence render instability, requiring reassurance long afterward that one’s existence makes sense: “[Freckle Face] would say over and over to himself, as if it were a magical charm, an incantation: I don’t live there anymore, and no one I know lives there. The people who go on living there must want to live there, or they’d leave that place” (23).

The disruption caused by violence in fiction—and non-fiction—should always account for the disintegration of reason, for the ways in which violence doesn’t make sense. Otherwise, that depiction of violence is something else. It is sadism.

4.

My father believes intimately that God will answer his prayers. So do most people I know in my hometown.

5.

Religion played a heavy hand in my upbringing, and while I was blessed with only moderately devout parents whose Methodism allowed them an inclusive attitude toward most, I was also privy to much deeper wells of zealotry through friends and
family. A pervasive Christianity lined every aspect of my childhood. I’ve found the power of this belief most difficult to capture in fiction without that fiction becoming a sort of diatribe against it.

In my most recent work, I’ve more adequately captured this faith by experimenting with a fictional technique where I utilize questionable events with a third person narrator. Charles Baxter, in *The Art of Subtext*, describes John Cheever’s “The Swimmer” as “decisively beyond plot with [the images of decay, loss and fatigue that greet William Maxwell at the end of his swim], deep in a world configured by impulse and dream” (48). In a similar way I have hoped to meld the controlling belief system of otherwise real people with their own beliefs as a way of providing a door to understanding how deep those beliefs run. This is a technique achieved through fiction because fiction begs a suspension of disbelief untethered from the rigors of personal experience and credulity. The moment nonfiction becomes unbelievable to us, it becomes untenable. However, the line of believability in fiction is stretched by our willingness to accept the principles upon which the fictional world is based. In “Tennessee, 1971,” the main character, Jessie, sees angels, and the events leading throughout his life to the end of the story may or may not be the product of their existence. I don’t enact this kind of ambiguity as a way of being clever or to make the story obtuse or abstract for the reader.

The most difficult aspect of creating characters culled from my time in Appalachia is finding a way to depict the extent to which men and women are motivated by and believe in the supernatural. If I can prompt the reader, however momentarily, to “believe” in the possibility of angels in the context of the story, even if that reader does not personally
believe, then I have produced an insight for that reader into the mindset of those who do believe.

In “The Hog, She Dreams of Better Worlds,” I’ve attempted to explore this idea further by giving a pig a dreamlife which may or may not be a reflection of the people it has seen and by insinuating that after having eaten this pig, the people may or may not have been infected by those dreams. This story came about as a way of exploring the supernatural in an otherwise realistic story, using the Buddhist idea of emotional transference as related by Thich Nhat Hanh in his book Anger: “There is a lot of anger, a lot of frustration, and much suffering in the chickens [kept in small cages under artificial days and nights] So when you eat the flesh or egg of such a chicken, you are eating anger and frustration” (16).

In “The Red Handkerchief,” I attempt to play on how fiction might depict belief in the supernatural (and by extension superstition) by telling a more suspense-driven tale predicated on the belief that the supernatural—or at least the uncanny and conspiratorially suspicious—is quite possible. In it is the idea of a morality tale: the punishment for past sins finally catching up to the sinner in unsettling ways. But here again, the story derives its power not from the supernatural, but in the main character Colin’s belief that such comeuppance is possible. This is the same kind of morality tale spun by Stephen King in a story like “The Cat from Hell,” in which a paid assassin, “an unimaginative man with no superstitions” (240), receives his just deserts from a cat who eventually kills him. In such stories, regardless of the character’s denial, if the reader believes a cosmic reaping of what’s been sown is possible, then little else matters.
What is important to remember is that such a willing suspension of disbelief is the closest a reader can sometimes come to the way in which people retain faith in the principles of their religion. That hell is around the corner for the thief or murderer is just an extension of our own readerly capacity for imagination. I believe fiction gives an inroad to understanding which is limited by other forms such as non-fiction. In non-fiction such beliefs can *usually* only be stated in terms of an idealized objectivity, or at the very least, a subjectivity aware of its own incapacity for omniscience. Fiction, however, bears no such imprimatur of realistic adherence and is therefore capable of recreating a more “accurate” experience for the reader—sometimes via non-realistic events—of the “reality” of people whose beliefs are embodied in any given character or story. This is what I’ve sought to do by bringing in the question of the supernatural into my stories: to better capture the reality of the people among whom I’ve grown up and lived for most of my life.

6.

The short stories here represent my attempts to come to terms with religion, violence, enlightenment, fate, history and melodrama primarily via the terms of my Appalachian heritage. This is a project—nebulous as it may have begun—from which I’ve shied for most of my life with the fear of being labeled an “Appalachian writer,” a classification which often, for me and I think many others, encompasses the tired tropes of quaintness, nostalgia, ignorance, mediocrity, rurality and a history of “earthiness.” In her article “Seeing Inside the Mountains,” Karen Roggenkamp reiterates this fact: “For well over a century, Appalachia has served as the butt of countless jokes and pejorative
stereotypes. While most culturally sensitive people would today studiously avoid
denigrating other American cultural groups and ethnicities, Appalachians are subject still
to open prejudice from outsiders” (193). Citing Gabriele Kupitz, Roggencamp defines
these stereotypes as “notion[s] of a cultural backwater, an area of dark, deep, smoky
woods, . . . ‘hillbillies,’ clans, unkempt children, domestic animals running amuck, and
‘moonshine’ liquor” (193).

More importantly, I have avoided writing about Appalachia because Appalachian
literature is a kind of literature often judged not for its literary merit in the larger
schemata of fiction, but on how well it performs within a preconceived set of principles
burdened with a stigmatic underbelly. A case in point is James Still’s River of Earth. Its
“rich archaic poetry of [Appalachian people’s] talk and customs” (so the back of the book
lets us know) make it a “classic of Appalachian literature,” not a “Classic.” It also relies
quaintly written prose: “‘This is my pigeon roost,’ Uncle Jolly said. ‘I nest right natural
in jail, and it’s a fact. I get lonesome sometimes, though, nigh enough to start figuring a
way out” (158). It also relies on stereotypically “backwoodsy” scenarios: “‘Hit’s a sight
to have such a passel of victuals after living tight as a tow-wad,’ Mother said. ‘If Saul
Hignight hadn’t laid claim to the heifer, we’d had milk and butter too. The baby might o’
lived.’ Mother cried while telling about the heifer. ‘He heard the calf was alive and sent a
man to forch it. He was ashamed to come a-claiming himself’” (170). Published within a
year of Grapes of Wrath by the same publisher, Steinbeck’s novel became a staple of
academics, while Still’s, in most circles, did not, and I can hardly dub this a tragedy. If
people in Kentucky ever talked this way, they don’t now, and one can see how difficult it
is, in the face of such overt dialectical simplicity, to achieve a literary voice separate from those stereotypes: in essence to write an “Appalachian narrative” which is not dubbed first and foremost “Appalachian” and which does not stunt the author with its classification. Two such authors who avoid it are Cormac McCarthy (*Child of God* is one example) and Breece D’J Pancake, the first because he moved beyond it, and the second, perhaps because he died young. But both were also amazing (disparately individualistic) stylists who refused to cater to the kind of prose in which Still steeps his narrative.

7.

Last year, a writer friend of mine read the first story in this collection (“New Year”). She remarked that the first-person voice wasn’t always “consistent” with the character, a middle-aged, Appalachian man living on a hill above a trailer park. Thinking about her comment, I was forced to defend what I’d attempted to do, which was to capture a character whose thoughts preclude his capacity to express them. In the first person I intentionally used an overly “sophisticated” prose (“The ground has turned to infinitesimal spikes of glass, the frozen dandelions hard and artificial-looking in the cold morning air” (8)) alongside a more characteristic voice (“Thought about it too long before putting a bullet into it” (10)) in order to articulate a dissonance that I see embodied in many of the people, especially men, of Appalachia.

These are men whose mouths say one thing while their actions and intelligence transcend their verbal limitations. Stanley Greer is a case in point. Stanley lived in a shack off the gravel alley behind the apartment where my wife and I lived. He owned a cat, a rust-eaten van and a padlock he used to lock up his front (and only) door. Stanley
grew up poor white trash and would tell you so, went into the Navy as a young man, got out, did a stint in prison, got out. But by the time Mindy and I met Stanley, he was making a meager living off the profits from his stone carvings. He’d apprenticed in his teens with the folk artist “Popeye” Reed, and worked mostly in sandstone to create sculptures of just about anything he thought up or read about: bears, Celtic symbols, haunting faces and torsos, Native American chieftains, nudes. He gave Mindy a slim, simplistic bird which we still have on our mantel and over which I sometimes still marvel at its uncomplicated elegance.

Stanley cursed like the sailor he once was, took a somewhat racist attitude, knew little about the internet and always looked in need of a bath, but he was a pure artist, with talent, an abiding love for his cat, and a transcendent mind for sculpting stone. This is the kind of man I sought to capture in “New Year,” a man whose capacity for understanding and art existed on a pre-verbal plane. The rub here is that in order to capture a man like Stanley in a short story, his pre- or super-verbal capacities must be couched in the articulations of the verbal/textual, in words. Charles D’Ambrosio performs a similar feat in his short story “The Point.” The thirteen-year-old narrator has become an expert at walking his widowed mother’s drunken friends home from parties to make sure they arrive safely to their beds. In the story, the primary narration consists of a voice beyond that of most teenagers: “The wind was full and immaculately white in the blue-black sky. The wind funneled down Saratoga Passage, blowing hard, blowing south, and Mrs. Gurney and I were struggling against it, tacking back and forth across the playfield” (37). In dialogue however, the narrator uses a realistically teenage voice: “Your not fine, Mrs.
Gurney” (38); “Let’s go, Mrs. Gurney” (39); “You’re going home Mrs. Gurney. Hang tough” (41). In addition to voice, the cadence and length of non-verbalized narration and the verbalized dialogue differ greatly.

In “New Year,” despite the narrator never speaking aloud, I attempted to take this technique a step further by insinuating—via similar differences in cadence and sentence length—the gap between what the narrator observes and how he would express that observation: “I wait until a woman, eyes broken U’s, tumbles out drunk-sick, hungover with a flimsy nightgown loose and wagging across her breasts, swaying as she retches in the weeds before dropping to one knee and wiping away the strung spittle from her lips. I take her for mid-twenties. A mother, maybe” (11).

To the above authors, McCarthy and Pancake, who’ve resisted the stamp of “Appalachian literature” while writing about Appalachia, I might include a more recent addition: Alan Heathcock. Heathcock’s story collection Volt captured the language of rural Americans—perhaps Appalachian, perhaps not, but whose traits embodied every bit of my own Appalachian “experience.”

In response to how well he must have treated a parakeet for it not to fly away when he set it free, one character in a Heathcock story replies: “It don’t say one way or the other” (90). In narration, Heathcock upholds this language: “Half a mile from there sat the McGahee place, a squat little house, its siding pissed with rust” (127). The phrase “pissed with rust” conveys a kind of short-hand for how the people in Heathcock’s fictional town of Krafton might talk (the way they also speak in Appalachia). “Looks like somebody pissed on it,” we might hear a character say, but Heathcock abbreviates this
language into his prose, boiling it down. He also tempers it with deft, short strokes that transcend that language: “When she found the center, wispy clouds veiled the night, the rotunda hazed in sepia moonlight” (126).

Here again there exists a dissonance of voices that isn’t “consistent” as an identifiable marker of “rural” or “Appalachian literature.” In the same way, I have attempted to use this technique of disparity throughout much of this collection to transcend a label and strive toward a literature not condemned by its own attributes or expectations. Particularly in “New Year,” “Tennessee, 1971,” and “The Hog, She Dreams of Better Worlds,” I have intentionally strived for this discord as a way of uplifting the narrative.
Works Cited


