IN THE LAP OF LINCOLN

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Thesis

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DEDICATION

To

Aden James Boyd

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INTRODUCTION

"It is my belief that the immature artist seldom thrives in idyllic surroundings. What he seems to need, though I am the last to advocate it, is more first-hand experience of life, more bitter experience, in other words. In short, more struggle, more privation, more anguish, more disillusionment."

-Henry Miller *Big Sur and The Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*

What do I know about writing? Not much. That is, not much aside from what I've learned in school. I know that everyone is supposed to have a writing process, a routine. I also know that grammar and punctuation are crucial to getting your content read. In fact, I've tried committing the first eight rules of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* to memory because John Gardner maintains that one wishing to write must first know the rules of mechanics, of sentence structure and grammar: "No one can hope to write well if he has not mastered—absolutely mastered—the rudiments: grammar and syntax, punctuation, diction, sentence variety, paragraph structure, and so forth." I have also learned that there is something of the arbitrary when discussing this from one writer to the next. This is good for me. I can use this as an excuse for my own shortcomings, though I desperately want to be perfect in mechanics and content. Then I think, that's what my wife—my first reader and grammar police—is for. Thankfully for

me, Gardner also writes that “Mastery is not something that strikes in an instant, like athunderbolt, but a gathering power that moves steadily through time, like weather.” The weather moves very slowly around my parts.

In an attempt to learn more, I have taken to reading myriad books on writing and the writing life, hoping to find some secret revealed. But no one—not Gardner, Richard Hugo, E.M. Forster, Anne Beattie; not W.H. Auden, Nelson Algren, John Berger; not any of the collected essays from the *New York Times*—has served up the secret recipe, the Ten Commandments of writing that, being followed with diligence and purpose, will yield exquisite, thought provoking line after line, the sentence so profound that readers run out to get the words tattooed on their thighs.

But maybe it’s just me, my own inability to comprehend what all of the big hitters have written. So many other people I’ve talked to—professors, fellow students, family members and friends—seem to feel that writing is such an easy thing to do, especially fiction writing. I’m nearly convinced that it is my own ineptitude, that I should find some other interests. As a matter of fact, according to people like Shirley Brice Heath, someone like me shouldn’t even be interested in reading literature, never mind interested in trying to write it.

Heath—a MacArthur Fellow, a linguistic anthropologist, and a professor of English and linguistics at Stanford—throughout the eighties haunted places where people were held captive without recourse to television or other comforting pursuits. As part of her research, she rode public transportation in several different cities, lurked (prior to 9/11) down the concourses of airports, taking her notebook into bookstores and seaside resorts. Whenever she saw people buying trade-paperbacks she asked to interview them.

She also visited creative writing programs and summer writers' conferences to grill young writers and accomplished novelists. From this research, Heath posits that, "For a person to sustain an interest in literature two things have to be in place. First, the habit of reading works of substance must have been heavily modeled when he or she was very young." In other words, one or both of the parents must have been reading serious books and must have encouraged the child to do the same. Neither of my parents, biological nor adopted, have ever been readers, of any sort; no magazines, no pulp, and certainly no high literature. So encouragement to do the same didn't exist. That's not to say that my parents were morons. They built a million dollar company together from the ground up. I only bring this up because Heath finds, on the East Coast, a strong element of class in her findings.

According to Heath, parents in the privileged classes encourage reading out of a sense of entitlement. Just as a civilized person ought to be able to appreciate escargot or caviar, a good pinot or a double malt scotch, he ought to be able to appreciate Joseph Conrad, Thomas Mann, and Henry James. Fortunately, I wasn't raised on the East Coast. But, though class apparently matters less in the rest of the country, especially in the Protestant Midwest where I was born, literature is still seen as a way to exercise the mind. As Heath puts it, "Part of the exercise of being a good person is not using your free time frivolously. You have to be able to account for yourself through the work ethic *and* through the wise use of your leisure time." Finally, something Heath and I can agree on. I keep a quote from W.M. Taylor on a chalkboard in my work space that reads: "Temptation rarely comes in working hours. It is in their leisure time that men are made

or marred." John Gardner goes on for roughly 200 pages on this issue in *On Moral Fiction* and Lionel Trilling doubles that in *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent*.

But, Heath feels that simply having a parent who reads is not enough. Young readers also need to find a person with whom they can share their interest:

> A child who's got the habit will start reading under the covers with a flashlight. If the parents are smart, they'll forbid the child to do this, and thereby encourage her. Otherwise she'll find a peer who also has the habit, and the two of them will keep it a secret between them. Finding a peer can take place as late as college. In high school, especially, there's a social penalty to be paid for being a reader. Lots of kids who have been lone readers get to college and suddenly discover, 'Oh my God, there are other people here who read.'

I had none of this going for me. When my family lived in Texas I was in second grade, and this is the first memory I have of reading. I was placed in the advanced reading class, but I never read unless I was in class and I never read by flashlight under the bed sheets. Having to go to summer school between fifth and sixth grade, I read like a fiend for that entire summer, no doubt due to the encouragement of Mr. Sadlon, the reading teacher. When school started up again, I stopped. My point is that while considering Heath's notions, I realized I hadn't met any of her preconditions. Never mind that, reading on, Heath described a second kind of reader, the social isolate, "the child who from an early age felt very different from everyone around him." She goes on to explain that people don't like to admit that they are social isolates as children, and that sense of being different is taken to an imaginary world. The problem is that this imaginary world is one that can't be shared with someone else, because it's imaginary. And so, Heath continues, "the important dialogue in your life is with the *authors* of the books you read. Though they aren't present, they become your community." I was a

social butterfly, a chameleon among various social cliques. My dialogue was with anyone who would listen.

The point of all this is that these readers of the social-isolate type, according to Heath, are much more likely to become writers than those of the modeled-habit type. I don't fit into either of these types. So why do I bother writing?

I know that I never knew I was interested in fiction or fiction writing until the first time I moved in with a girlfriend at nineteen years old. She was from a very affluent family, an honor student at Baldwin-Wallace College, and, though she said she wanted to get married, she hated that I didn't have any desire to go to college. We had lived together for about two years when she left for a summer in France. She wasn't exactly trusting, so she asked a close friend and classmate in her Russian Lit class to stay with me until classes started up again, ostensibly saving her friend from having to go back to New Philadelphia, Ohio. Her name was Michelle, and she embodied all of the dark, cynical stereotypes of the young anarchist literati portrayed in the 50's Hollywood Beat films: a collection of black turtle necks, peasant skirts and black Capri pants, horn-rimmed glasses, a severe black bob, and a cigarette always dangling a precarious ash from the corner of her perpetually down-turned mouth.

It was during that summer that I started a slow metamorphosis into Heath's social-isolate. I had given Michelle the bedroom and made my bed on the couch. Whenever I came home from work, or the bar, or a party, she was always in the bedroom reading or writing in a big black sketchbook, smoking a cigarette and drinking coffee. I tried, on several occasions, to get her to come out with me, but she always refused. So, one Friday night I came home from work with a jug of cheap red wine and Michelle and I

spun records, drank, laughed, and talked for hours about college, work, books, heavy machinery, and writing. I stopped going out with friends after work and instead went home to make dinner for Michelle. I had no television, so we sat around smoking grass, listening to music, and talking about what we thought we knew about the world, life, and—cheesy but true—love. We agreed that it didn't exist.

Sunday mornings were ritual. We would make a pile of pancakes, sit at the kitchen table listening to Michael Jackson's *Off the Wall* stuffing our faces and, between syrupy mouthfuls of buttermilk cakes and stocking-footed moonwalks across the linoleum, I was given my first lessons on Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Bunin, and other Russian masters.

It wasn't long before she was reciting to me her poetry, her raspy voice in my ear as she rubbed aloe in my sunburned shoulders before we fell asleep pressed together like spoons. Little did I know that I was learning about fiction writing through all of this, most importantly the notion that, as Faulkner said, "the heart in conflict with itself," or as Gardner put it, "the anguish of moral choice," is the root of all meaning in the best fiction.

I found her to be one of the most fascinating women I'd ever met. When she left at the end of our clandestine summer lessons, she handed me a copy of *The Idiot.* It took me three years to read that book. In that time I changed jobs six times, lived in three different states, and began living with another woman. This one was much more open to open relationships. Maybe a little too much.

We had been off and on for close to two years when, while off on one of her nearly ritual disappearing acts, I was with a friend at a used record/bookstore on the

campus of Evergreen State University. While I was waiting for my friend to pay for her albums I perused the shelves next to the checkout. One book caught my eye; it's cool, pulpy, rough stock cover bore a gray, dog-faced gargoyle that glared over the title, *Love is a Dog from Hell*. I pulled it from the shelf, flipped it open and read the first poem I think I'd ever read by a professional: "how to be a great writer." Sounds ridiculous, I know, but it's true. Granted it's not the best poem, that's for sure, and I don't think Bukowski would argue, but it sang to me like, like, I don't know, it just sang, or maybe it just spoke. Regardless, I got in line and paid for the first book that I'd ever bought, not knowing what it would start. I read that book three times through in a week. I couldn't get enough. I felt like Bukowski gave voice to regular guys like me, took all the stuffiness and esoteric muddle out of poetry; he kicked the shit out of all that highbrow, dusty academic snobbery. He turned me on to other authors as well, authors I'd never heard of, not that I'd heard of many. That first poem name dropped Hemingway, Celine (who quickly became a favorite), Dostoevsky (because of this I finally finished *The Idiot*), and Hamsun (*Hunger* painting the picaresque starving artist falling into madness). I imitated Bukowski and Celine as best I could because they were all I was reading.

I sat in dingy dive bars where the professional drunks were there by noon slouched on their stools, half empty rocks glasses in front of them, more reliable than the tax man. I swapped rounds and got loaded with them, watched reruns of Magnum P.I., and staggered out alone into the night. I quit and picked up new jobs left and right, got in more than my share of punch ups, had reckless one night stands, sat in my efficiency apartment or the basement bedroom of a flophouse writing awful poems and worse short stories, becoming more anti-social in self-imposed exile trying to find my voice and a

good story. What I didn't understand at the time was that this was no way to write, no way to find a voice or a story, and it was certainly no way to become a writer. You can't find it in the bottom of a bottle, under the plunger of a needle, rolled up in a zig-zag or in the panties of some woman who never told you her name. But I was also unconsciously living like the characters I would later write about—regular people making mistakes in a messy world trying desperately to do the right thing. I was adding to my life experiences, adding to my understanding, or misunderstanding of the Sartrian anguish of liberty. I was meeting and adding more people to a wide variety of characters of whose lives I might someday attempt to inhabit and render as best I can, trying to understand why we act the way we do, why we make the decisions we make and what happens after the deluge, though I was more likely to go mad or die young than I was to write anything worth a damn.

Bukowski once said something to the effect that some people never go mad. What horrible lives they must lead. Gardner writes, in *On Becoming a Novelist*, "Writers would clearly be madmen if they weren't so psychologically complicated ('too complex,' a famous psychiatrist once wrote, 'to settle on any given madness')—and some go mad anyway." So, as Bill Murray says in *Caddy Shack*, reflecting on a conversation he had with the Dalai Lama, at least I got that going for me, which is nice.

Gardner asserts that "If the young writer is to achieve intellectual and emotional significance in his fiction, he must have the common sense to tell foolish ideas from interesting ones and important emotions from trivial ones." And that, "the writer's sense of what questions are really interesting and what ones aren't worth bothering with may be heightened a little by wide reading, by conversation with intelligent people, and by the

conscious attempt to, as James said, 'be someone on whom nothing is lost.'" Try telling that to a bunch of lug-headed pipe layers, machine operators, line cooks, landscapers, house painters, and mechanics as you're being made fun of for reading Malamud, Kerouac, Celine, Kazantzakis, or Grass during lunch breaks.

My younger brother—seven years younger—knew how much I was interested in literature and how badly I wanted to learn how to write; he also knew that I was slowly killing myself with labor, liquor, and bad company, and I think that's why he stole my wallet one night while we were at our parents' home for the holidays. He copied down all of my vitals and mailing address and filed an application for admission under my name to the University of Akron. To my surprise, on all counts, I was accepted. I didn't understand what open enrollment meant. Bless him. But I had no idea what I was getting into.

I was thirty years old, had barely graduated high school—I'm still convinced they gave me my diploma just to get me out of there—and the pinnacle of my analytical thought to that point had been whether or not Kokosing made a better high-track dozer than Caterpillar. Now I was going to be surrounded by a bunch of book nerds and the stuffy academics Bukowski warned against. Granted, I quickly found out that not everyone on a college campus is brilliant; nevertheless, I could hardly wait to talk about authors I'd read and learn about those I'd never heard of, not to mention take a creative writing class.

Again from Gardner:

> In a writers' community, nearly all the talk is about writing. Even if you don't agree with most of what is said, you come to take for granted that no other talk is quite so important. Talk about writing, even in a mediocre community of

> writers, is exciting. It makes you forget that by your own standards, whatever they may be, you're not very good yet. It fills you with nervous energy, makes you want to leave the party and go home and write. And it's the sheer act of writing, more than anything else, that makes a writer.

He was right. I was so excited I had a hard time concentrating on other classes. All I wanted to do was write all day. But that's what I was doing all along when I wasn't kicking a shovel. Did I really need a college atmosphere and enormous loans to become a writer? There are accomplished writers out there who have never completed a college education. The difference, I later discovered, was that those accomplished authors without college degrees had the luxury of a circle of friends, large or small, that shared the same interests; writing and honing their craft. My friends only cared about souping up an old Ford Falcon, drinking beer, skateboarding, or scraping together enough cash to get a bag of dope.

My father, who has, until recently, always considered fiction writing a socially irresponsible illness, now incessantly asks me when I'll be publishing a novel and offers a multitude of "great book ideas." My mother, who has always hoped to pick up a *New York Times* to find me reviewed in it, called during this year's Oscars to remind me to mention her when I have my novel made into an Oscar-winning movie. I find both of their ideas of fiction writing to be hilarious. But who am I to laugh?

One thing I do know is that as a writer, like Richard Hugo said, "You owe reality nothing and the truth about your feelings everything." I realize that, like Chekhov, "Everything I have written up to now is trifling compared to that which I would like to write and would write with great pleasure." I also feel like I am finally beginning to

understand that the value of a story is in the journey not the arrival. So I guess I'm at least heading in the right direction.

SECTION II

THE HAOLE

Radiating from the rooftop, the heat burned through my boots and into the soles of my feet. I shifted from side to side trying to give each foot a bit of a respite. I had folded over the top half of my coveralls, tying the arms together like a belt around my waist. My shoulders burned with fatigue and sun. Tar spatter dotted my skin and the front of my T-shirt.

Across the long grey rooftop everything trembled in the heat of the sun—the air ducts, the fans, the stink pipes, the squat blue metal buckets of tar, the strips of shining sheet metal bent in the stretcher, the row of square air conditioners—even the boss where he leaned against the parapet. The sky was clear except for the scars of jet spray.

On the sidewalks below, Pioneer Square bustled. For the third time since lunch, Kai ran through the itinerary for the weekend. "I'll pick you up around eight. That should put us at the beach by ten or eleven. Saturday we'll get up early and surf all day." Saturday was my first birthday away from home.

It had been a long week: lugging equipment up and down ladders; tearing off old roofing, the dirt and fibers clinging to anything damp; then sweeping all the debris against the parapet to shovel it over the side down into the dumpster. This killed our backs. And one little rise in the wind coming off of the Sound would send tar paper and dust back up to the rooftop. When fatigue was at its worst it was hard to keep balance on

the ladder or to lean against the parapet. Falling was always a danger. To keep things moving quickly, we never tied off to anything no matter what the city inspectors said.

The one good part of the job was the view. Looking across all the roofs of the city, or a small town, even an industrial park, made me forget for a moment that I was working. The city was the best for people watching, but the industrial parks were the best for staring off into miles of emptiness. There wasn't anything in the way cutting up the landscape or horizon. Mt. Baker and Mt. Hood could be seen on a clear day. Once, in Snohomish, we all stopped working to watch a hot-air balloon race pass over, the sound of the flames blasting in spurts like the torches we used to dry puddles. We waved, they waved, then floated away.

I was the mop boy. I slopped hot tar on the patches of shingling behind Kai as he dried standing water with the propane torch. We had been working together for three months now—the same thing everyday, just a different roof. I pulled a handkerchief from my back pocket, leaned the mop handle against my chest, and blew my nose. I folded the dirty hankie, wiped it across my top lip, and shoved it back in my pocket.

"Pick up the pace, man. You waiting for a bus?" I said.

Kai moved on to the next puddle and waved the flame across the water, working around the edges toward the middle. At its deepest point the puddle boiled. That wasn't good, too hot; a fire could start under the roofing and if it wasn't caught in time the roof might go up in flames. Kai had already come close first thing in the morning. One of the prep-cooks had climbed to the top of the ladder and shouted, "Hey! Hey, man! You guys are burning the place down!" It was nothing really. Some of the tar had burned and the

fumes were pumped into the restaurant by the fans. I checked it out. It didn't smell too good, but the place wasn't burning.

Kai talked about Ginny all day every day. They were always fighting about something. This time the week before last, she left him again and hadn't called until yesterday. Usually a couple days passed and she would call him leaving a message about being sorry and stupid; about how she was no good for him and didn't deserve him. What she meant was she had done whatever she had to do, she had over-stayed her welcome wherever she was, and now she was tired, out of money, and ready to come back home. At least that's what he told me.

Normally he took her back. "Not this time," Kai said. He reminded me that this time she had gone too far. Things were thrown and broken—a couple of dishes and his favorite coffee mug. Books were shoved from shelves, a chair turned over. "She threatened me with a fork," he said. Then she threw it at him. "I ducked it, but when I looked up, she took a couple of swings at me; caught me one good in the nose. She even drew blood," he said. Kai pushed his thumb against his nose as if to see if it was still bleeding. "Then she kicked the cat," he said.

"Did you let her have it?" I asked.

She was always knocking him around, and he'd just take it, said he didn't want to be like his old man. He said that's why he left home.

"No. But I grabbed her by the arms, just above the elbows, and pushed her onto the couch." He pushed at the air as he told his story. "She sat there with her mouth open and her eyes wide. I felt terrible." He shook his head at the thought of it. "I said I was sorry, but she got up, went to the bathroom, and locked herself in. I listened at the door.

‘Come on, Ginny,’ I said. ‘This is ridiculous.’ I shook the handle and smacked the door, but she didn’t answer. I heard the shower curtain slide along the rod. Then the water started. ‘Will you just talk to me for a minute?’ I was begging.”

“‘Fuck you, Kai! And your cat!’ she said. I couldn’t believe it. She loves that cat more than I do. I thought a little space might help settle her down, so I went for a walk. When I opened the door to leave, my neighbor was standing there shaking her head. She said she was going to call the cops. She always says that. When I came back Ginny was gone.”

“Hey, man! You’re boiling!” I said watching the dark bubbles roil.

Startled, Kai dipped the torch into the puddle and put out the flame. “Shit, man. That girl’s got me all kinds of messed up. You’re smart to stay solo.”

Five o’clock rolled round and we packed up for the day. All the cans, the rolls of shingling, everything but the sheet metal, were hauled back down the ladder and thrown in the bed of the truck. I nearly lost a roll of shingling halfway down, but managed to pull it across my shoulder. It left a long abrasion, tiny particles sticking to my torn skin.

The boss handed out paychecks while we stripped out of the white coveralls spattered with tar. “I’ll see you around eight,” I said to Kai, and walked up Jackson Avenue toward SeaFirst to cash my check.

There was a piano sonata on the radio when I got home. I stripped down to my shorts leaving everything on the floor by the door, walked into the kitchen and threw the keys on the counter. The red light of the answering machine was dark. I opened the refrigerator door; stood there for a moment, grabbed a beer and pressed it against my chest and stomach. In the living room I dropped into the couch.

The phone rang at 7:00 p.m. I had fallen asleep. The bottle of beer was on its side next to me, the cushion soaked. I let the machine take the call. It was Kai. "We're on our way, haole. Be out front." Kai was from O'ahu, but he hadn't been back there for more than ten years. Still, he called everyone that wasn't Hawaiian *haole*—an outsider.

I went to the bedroom, threw some things in a bag, pulled on a pair of jeans and a clean T-shirt, and stepped into my slip-on sneakers. I was tired. I stunk like I was smuggling scallions, and my body ached. I didn't feel like going anymore.

At twenty after seven I sat on a parking block in the pay parking lot across the street from my apartment meditating on the Cascades and rubbing at the grit between my fingers. A trip to the beach will be good for me—relax a little, swim in the ocean—it'll be fun, I thought. I had fifty bucks in my pocket and a grocery bag with a change of underwear, a flannel shirt, my tooth brush, swim trunks, and a paperback. Joy—my androgynous, dope addicted friend—called from the shrubs commonly referred to as Catullus Park. "Hey, Johnny! You souping?" It didn't matter if it was 5:30 a.m. and I was waiting for the bus, if she saw me, she wanted to know if I wanted to get high with her.

"No, man. Just waiting on a friend," I said.

The tinny patter of Kai's Squareback could be heard before it came whipping around the corner, the surfboards bouncing against the roof of the car. He leaned on the horn, made a face like he was out of control and crossed his hands over and over along the steering wheel. One tire scratched against the curb in front of us before he stood on the brake. I jumped out of the way. Jane stood and stared angrily.

"Spare a buck, baby?" she asked turning to me, unimpressed.

No singles, I gave her five and told her to stay out of trouble.

"Kisses, baby. If you can't be good, be good at it!" She walked back into the bushes.

Kai laughed and waved his arm out the window. "Come on, haole. We're running late." He threw open the door and leaned forward in his seat as he spoke. "You should've seen your face. Whoa-ho, man! Did you think I was going to hit you?"

"Yes, you prick," I said climbing into the backseat.

Ginny turned to me smiling big as a horse. "Did you want to bring your girlfriend, John Boy?" Ginny thought everyone in the Midwest lived on a farm and drove a tractor.

"Nah, she wouldn't like you much," I said. "Where you been?"

"Visiting friends. What's it to you?"

"Just asking."

"That all you brought, farmer John?" she asked.

"We're only going for the weekend, right?"

Kai and Ginny smiled at each other and then back at me. "You're gonna freeze your ass off," Ginny said. "It's the ocean, not a hot spring." The car dropped off the curb. Ginny pulled an unlit joint from behind her ear, handed it back to me, then turned to play with the radio. "Wait until we get on the freeway to light that," she said.

Kai ground the gears. The car bolted like a whipped mare. Dipped below the horizon, the sun left Mt. Rainier blue-black, like a welt raised on the skyline. The drive passed quickly. The radio played and the grass burned while Kai told island stories he heard as a kid and stories about his family—his dad had gone to prison for stabbing a

man outside a grocery store. “He said the guy gave him the stink eye. That’s all. His temper was like a volcano. Always at risk of blowing his top.” Kai said. Everyone was quiet for a while. I read a little, dozed off, then stared out the windows watching the signs, the miles until Ocean Shores shrinking. I looked at my watch. It was just after ten.

At Iron Springs we found a 24-hour Red Apple and State Liquor store. We bought a couple of sole filets, rice, a couple habaneros, salad stuff, milk, a baguette, a case of Weinhardt’s, two bottles of John Powers, and some cleaning supplies. At the checkout Ginny bought a *Cosmopolitan*. We loaded the groceries and drove another ten minutes until we reached the cabins.

The office was a tiny wooden shack beaten gray by years of ocean spray and wind. Ginny went in to get the keys. Kai told me to open one of the bottles of whisky. I peeled the label and passed it forward.

“So, what happened?” I asked.

“When?”

“Don’t act stupid.”

Kai took a long hard pull from the bottle. “She was sitting on the couch when I got home, waiting to apologize,” he said smiling. “I’m only human.”

The bottle went from front to back a few times before Ginny came back with the keys.

We were in #23, a one bedroom double-wide that looked onto the ocean between two mounds of sand and sea grass. After the car was unloaded Kai started cooking. The place was furnished with a sleeper-sofa in the living room, a dining area with a wooden oval table and four mismatched chairs. There was no carpeting anywhere. The linoleum

in the kitchen was yellow with grime and curled up where it met the cupboards. Little red ant motels were randomly placed around the entire cabin, in the corners of every room; in the cupboards behind the thrift store plates and glasses; in the drawers underneath the bowls and silverware; next to the refrigerator, and on the windowsills. Ginny pulled down some glasses, wiped them out with a paper towel and poured a round of whiskies.

"Here's to Johnny Apple Seed," Ginny said raising her glass.

"Happy birthday, haole!" With a fishy hand Kai lifted his glass and knocked back the booze.

Ginny smiled, drank down her glass, and poured herself another.

"Thanks." I drank. The whisky burned. I slid my glass in front of Ginny for a refill.

While Kai finished cleaning the fish and set the rice to simmer, Ginny started reading from the advice column in her magazine. One woman wrote in about her body image issues. Her dilemma, she wrote, was that she was too embarrassed to let her lovers see her privates. Ginny laughed through the words as she read. "She says—she says her—her labia swing. They swing! Like a turkey wattle!" She was beside herself with laughter. She said, "The woman should stop letting guys swing on them like gymnastic rings." I laughed along. Kai rolled his eyes, shook his head, and cut vegetables into chunks, throwing them into a big yellow Tupperware bowl.

"What's the advice?" I asked.

Ginny said, "I'll tell you my advice—See a plastic surgeon, or keep doing it in the dark."

Kai thought we should go check out the property. He dried his hands on his pant legs and put some of the beers in a grocery bag. In the darkness outside, there wasn't much to see. The nearest trailer was behind a dark stand of cedars and rhododendrons. There was a stone-ringed fire pit about thirty yards from our backdoor. We walked down to the water. The air was cold. It smelled of rain and pine. We watched the breaks roll in and out, a toenail moon shining on the pewter waters. I kicked off my shoes, rolled up my pants, and walked into the water up to my ankles.

"Holy shit, that's cold!" I jumped back, my toes already numb.

"And you only brought trunks?" Ginny said.

Kai laughed shaking his head. "Your nuts are going to run up into your throat." He looked up and down the beach, then suggested we start a fire. The air was cold, made my nipples stand, but it felt good.

We gathered a large stack of pine branches and drift wood. I snapped and separated the kindling from the bigger branches and put a handful of dry pine needles in the middle of the pit. I built a twig teepee over the needles and asked Kai for his lighter. The wind was too much. I couldn't get anything lit.

"I'm going inside," Ginny said.

Kai went to the car. He came back with a bottle of thirty weight oil and his guitar.

"What's that for?" I asked

"For playing songs, haole. What do you think it's for?"

"Not that. The oil."

Kai handed me the guitar, leaned over the fire pit, and drizzled a thin line of oil over the twigs. "Give me the lighter."

He bent down, cupped his hand over the lighter, flicked it, and touched the flame to the pile. A blue-green fire slowly spread over the twigs.

"I'm going inside," Kai said.

In the wind the orange belly of the fire pulsed. The waves crashed in and out, reliable as radio static. Fingers of flames wrapped their way around the larger branches. I lay one thick piece of drift wood across the pit and walked back to the trailer. Through the window I could see Kai and Ginny talking inside.

Kai busied himself in the kitchen handing Ginny silverware, bowls, and the salad. She set the table, pulled out a chair and sat. She looked angry, her face screwed up, shaking her head. Leaning heavily against the counter, Kai looked like he might push the whole kitchen over. He was squinting and rocking while he spoke. Ginny slouched in her chair, one hand wrapped around her empty glass. She turned it between her fingers, slid it back and forth on the table, staring at it. She said something without looking up. Kai shouted something and slammed his fist on the countertop. Ginny stood and walked out of sight.

Everything was quiet when I walked in, awkward, tense. Kai carried the baguette and the two bottles of whisky, one nearly empty, the other still unopened.

"It's time to eat," he said with a forced smile.

"Can I help?" I asked.

"Sure, sit down and help me eat this food and drink this booze." Kai set the bottles on the table. He cracked the bread in half and dropped the two halves on the table. Ginny came out of the bathroom and sat down quietly next to her glass. She

reached for the unopened bottle, tore off the label, and poured herself a heavy drink. We all sat to eat.

The salad was passed, then a big bowl of rice and fish. Kai tore off a hunk of the bread and handed the larger end to me. I tore a piece for myself and before I could pass it on to Ginny, she had already cut two slices from the other half. Kai poured the last of the first bottle into his glass, then filled mine from the other bottle.

It felt like lunch time at work, talking about the job—the boss, raises, trying to get a four ten hour day schedule during the summer months, the need for new trucks, Mitch, the high school kid who fell from the top of the J&M at the beginning of the spring.

Ginny washed down every bite with a gulp of whisky. She was drunk before she finished her meal. Drink always affected her more in disposition than motor skills. She started asking Kai when he was going to get a real job, one with a salary and benefits.

"What, my job's not a real job?" Kai asked.

"You don't make any money and you work with a bunch of dolts."

"Seems to be enough money for you. You sure know how to help spend it." Ginny pulled her hair in front of her face and raised her middle finger to Kai. He turned to me and shook his head, then tore off another piece of bread and used it to wipe out his bowl.

"Beer?" he asked standing from the table.

"I'm good."

"Oh, come on Johnny cake." Ginny teased. She told Kai to bring a round of beers for everyone. She came around the table and sat in my lap. "Don't you want to drink with me, Johnny baby? We could have some fun." She had her arm wrapped around my

neck and pressed her forehead against mine. "Tell Mama what you want for your birthday." She stroked and pulled at my earlobe, tapped a finger on my nose. I looked toward the kitchen hoping that Kai wasn't looking, or that he would come save me. She grabbed my wrist and tried to put it on her breast. "Come on, hon. What? Are you gay? Or do you only like bony girls? Bone for the dog, doll, meat for the man." She reached into my lap cupping her hand around my crotch.

"What the hell are you doing?" Kai barked.

I jumped up. Ginny fell to the floor. She sat laughing.

"I didn't do anything. Really," I said.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked again, leaning over Ginny.

"Trying to be nice. It's John Boy's birthday." She got to her feet.

"Trying to be nice? What the hell does that mean?"

Laughing softly, she pulled her hair back from her face and stared at Kai. Then she turned to me and said, "I thought since we're all such good friends we might make some time together."

"You wanted to fuck my friend?" The veins stood out on Kai's forehead. He squeezed a beer bottle in each hand.

Kai turned to me as if looking for an okay and held out the beers. I took them from him. He turned. It happened so fast I almost didn't see it. One big brown hand shot out and caught Ginny in the face. She fell to the floor with a thud.

When she stood, she tugged her hair behind her ears. There was a blue welt rising below one eye. She looked at both of us, stretched her neck, turned and, with a deliberate

stride, walked to the bedroom at the end of the hall. She closed the door gently behind her.

The room was silent. Kai turned and took one of the beers from my hand. “Sorry, man,” he said and walked down the hall. He knocked lightly, opened the door, slid into the dark room, then closed it behind him.

Outside the flames were all but gone. The drift wood had burned through, both halves rising up and out from the pit like dark arms—the coals still glowing between them. I sat at the table, and opened the beer. I rolled the cap around in my hand, and drank to the weekend, to my birthday, and to being alone.

SECTION III

EARLY MAY

Mamma was peeling potatoes for supper, dropping the skins in a bucket to feed to the hogs, while I took a break from reading my lessons and watched the clouds passing. I pointed out to Mamma the ones that took shapes like covered wagons and broncos at a rodeo. Then the sky turned an ugly green, not the sparkly green like dung flies, but a sick green, soft and dark.

"Mamma, we better go inside," I said. But she wasn't listening, just rocking slowly, peeling away. The clouds seemed to disappear, and the sky cracked blue like a Ball jar. Across the dirt road, old man Burns's combine stopped moving and to the west everything looked fuzzy. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. "Mamma, look!" It was like somebody was pulling a curtain closed, the way the rain was coming at us.

Mamma hollered, "Trudy!" Trudy was one of our dogs, a Chesapeake. We had two others, Belgian shepherds. Trudy was the only animal Mamma let in the house. She only had three legs because one got stepped on by a cow, but she was still pretty quick. Trudy ran as fast as she could to the porch, just in front of the rain. Thunder rumbled and rain covered the house when Trudy ducked under Mamma's legs. Mamma looked down and laughed. The rain poured five or ten minutes and the wind bent the trees. Lightning shot to the ground, three pronged and shiny, behind old man Burns's silo like a pitch fork and then it was gone. Mamma and I watched from the couch in the living room. That

was the only kind of rain we got all spring, and it only came three or four times that I remember.

Old man Burns always brought me and Mamma small bouquets of corn flowers when he'd bring Daddy feed for the cows. Then he would drive his truck back to the milk house and Daddy and me would load up the front of the bed with milk jugs. I stood in the truck and slid the jugs up against the back of the cab since I wasn't strong enough to lift them. But that was two summers ago. I'm stronger now.

"Say Earl," old man Burns joked once, "shouldn't you be helping your ma in the kitchen?"

"Heck, no!" I said, pulling my ponytail back under my ball cap.

"I heard of a boy named Sue, but a girl named Earl . . . Whew-ee, man . . . that takes the cake." Old man Burns pat Daddy on his back and spit juice in the dirt.

"Close as I'm gonna get to having a boy around here, Burnsey." Daddy winked at me, and looked at the ground, his thumbs hooked in his pockets.

Mamma had problems when I was five. I don't remember real well what happened because I wasn't at the hospital to see it. I know she was going to have another baby when something happened and she didn't. It was going to be a little boy, and everybody cried. Daddy was gone for days and when he came back, he had a different truck and a cracked head. I remember that because Mamma and Daddy yelled at each other all night. Stuff was knocked off the walls while I hid in my room under my bed. It was sunny outside and a black calf was nosing Dixie, one of the Belgians, around the side yard. Sheriff Melaney pulled in the drive behind Daddy and stopped. He waited for

Daddy to turn off the truck, tipped his hat to Mamma on the porch, backed out, and drove away.

That's when Daddy took to calling me Earl. Nine years ago.

Old man Burns's corn never got much taller than me this past year. Mamma's garden didn't do so well either. Mamma and Daddy argued a lot over selling the farm and moving away, to the city where there were more opportunities for us, and I could go to a better school, that's what Mamma said. Daddy didn't know what to do. If he wasn't yelling, he was quiet. He would sit at the table in the morning chewing toast, washing it down with big gulps of coffee, breathing heavy through his nose. He was dead-set on keeping the farm.

But one morning, reading the paper, Mamma shouted from the kitchen, "It says here, 10,000 people have died so far because of the drought. Some $20 billion dollars of damage in the mid-west and eastern states. Government says it."

Daddy looked at me over the rim of his coffee cup then put it down. He stared into it turning the cup between his thumb and fingers like a screwdriver. He breathed through his nose like a horse, pushed himself from the table, and walked out on the front porch to sit on the steps. I filled his coffee cup and followed him. With me leaning on his arm, we sat there staring across the way as old man Burns carved patterns like snakes down the swales in the dry black dirt of his corn fields. Dust rose in big clouds behind the tires.

Daddy said, "Wish those were rain clouds."

Daddy started going into Meadville for feed. He hated going into town. He had no patience for traffic and crowds. That's why Mamma did the shopping. I rode with both of them. I liked to ride in the truck while Trudy stood in my lap. Her head stuck out the window with her eyes closed and her lips and ears flapping in the wind. At Kroger's with Mamma, I'd push the cart around, one foot on the back like a scooter, and pick up the heavy stuff for her. I'd tip my hat to all the ladies and nod to all the men.

When Daddy drove, he'd play the bluegrass station real loud and strum at the steering wheel like a guitar, tapping his foot on the floor. If it was a good part of the song, he'd let me shift the gears so he wouldn't mess up his picking. Other times, he would explain to me why barter and trade worked better than cash, but I couldn't understand exactly what he was saying. I'd think about how I'd be riding horses if they'd let me. I'd ride far away through the woods with Trudy behind, and we'd sleep under the stars and not be afraid.

"Understand me?" he'd say, back-handing me on the arm.

"Yes, sir," I'd say, wrinkling my cheeks and raising my eyebrows.

"No feed, no milk. No milk, no feed."

Our cows were still pumping out milk, but not so much. With the drought came the bankers.

"Blood sucking bastards," that's what Daddy always called them. They had come in and bought up a couple of farms, Mikalschek's wheat and Wagner's beef cattle. They were working on old man Burns's. He was staying firm like Daddy, but he broke down after a while.

"They got a grain embargo against the Russians and the country's choking on grain." I heard him tell that to Daddy on the porch one night, as they sat drinking beers.

A few weeks later Mr. Bagwell, from the bank, paid visits to everyone on our road. He was always smiling. Daddy took to cussing him under his breath any time he saw Mr. Bagwell's shiny white truck.

On a Tuesday afternoon Mr. Bagwell came and "called in Burnsey's loan." That's what Daddy told me. I wasn't sure what that meant, but it wasn't good, because three days later a big tractor trailer came and towed old man Burns's combine away. Early that Saturday, I was walking buckets to the milk house when a handful of trucks drove up the road into old man Burns's drive. Men were in the front yard until late that afternoon raising hands and hats, writing checks on the hoods of their trucks, loading stuff into trailers. Mr. Bagwell stood on the porch reading from a clipboard, pointing at tools, shouting numbers. When they were done, he drove by real slow in his big white diesel pick up.

After old man Burns left, things got real quiet around our place. It was like we were mourning the dead. Daddy went into Meadville to find another job because we weren't selling enough milk. That meant we didn't have money for feed. He got hired at Sterling Tool and Die, the graveyard shift. I'd do the morning chores by myself. I didn't mind, really. Daddy said he always wanted a boy, and I was doing my best to make him proud. I even practiced peeing standing up behind the barn, chewed tobacco a couple times, but I didn't care for it much. I'd get up at the "butt crack of dawn," like Daddy always said, pull on a t-shirt and my overalls. I took to wearing overalls all the time. I'd walk downstairs quietly so's not to wake Mamma and start some coffee. I didn't really

like the taste of it, but it kept me warm. I'd button up my flannel, slip into my wellies, and head out to my chores. The dogs would nip at my feet all the way to the barn—they wanted fed first. The barn was quiet except for the rustle of straw under hooves and the grunts of the cows.

Our bull, Ferdinand, would always press his enormous head against the rails of his pen and watch with his big dumb eyes. I named him after the bull in the book, the one that Mamma used to read to me when I was little. It was about a bull that liked to sit and smell flowers instead of rough-house with the other bulls. I used to be scared of Ferdinand, seeing as how he was so big, until Daddy told me he was dumb.

"See his eyes?" he whispered. "See how they're all black? That means he's got nothing going on in his brain except wanting food and girls."

"And smell flowers," I said.

Ferdinand had a big metal ring in his nose, like the bull in the picture book. That's where Daddy hooked his lead when he took him to pasture. Sometimes he'd let me hook Ferdinand up, and I'd grab the damp ring, feeling the warm air of his breath on my hand, and loop the lead the way Daddy showed me. I wasn't much afraid of Ferdinand after that.

Daddy told me to go inside with Mamma for a while when he and Ferdinand were out walking with the cows. What Daddy didn't know was I watched from my room. Ferdinand's strong black flanks worked, reflecting the hot summer sun.

I'd take Ferdinand a couple of apples from one of the trees in back and giggle while he gobbled them from my hand, a little scared he'd get my fingers. But apple blossoms came and went and apples never followed. With no fruit, there weren't any

bees buzzing around making honey and the bird feeders went without birdseed. Chickens didn't lay eggs. Dorothy and Nelson, our pigs, were skinny and quiet. Their babies died early, Dorothy's teats withered like jerky.

In the barn, I'd clean out the gutters of any cow pats and straw, fill the trough with water, put out the feed. We were down to three cows. Daddy sold two to pay on the mortgage. While the girls ate, I'd get the milking stool and the big green can of Bag Balm and smooth the cream on their udders. The cream made it easier to slip on the teat cups but didn't make more milk. From three cows, I got two buckets of milk. That wasn't good.

With school out for the summer, I could spend more time in the pasture while the cows went about their business—chewing little tufts of yellow grass, swatting flies, mooing back and forth. The only calf bounced around playfully. Trudy, Dixie and Jack, our Shepherds, and me would walk out back to the pond. Normally, Trudy and Dixie would dive in the water and scare the fish while Jack darted around after field mice. But no mice were around and whatever fish were alive were surely at the bottom, hiding from the sun. I heard Daddy's truck coming up the road and I ran back to the house.

Daddy got out of the truck, so dirty with grease he almost looked like Otis, the darky that bagged our groceries. "Been farming long?" he said, smiling. He said that every morning when he came home.

"Since I was—" I was cut off by the sound of a diesel engine coming up the road. The two of us stood looking at the brown dust clouds rising above the trees like smoke. With the sun just above the treetops, and the dust blowing, it looked like the woods were

on fire. A big white pick-up pulled into our drive. Daddy walked me up onto the porch, told me to get inside.

I shut the door and Mamma, setting the table for breakfast, asked who was here.

"Mr. Bagwell," I said.

Mamma told me to go up to my room. I went upstairs and tip-toed into Mamma's sewing room. Out the window I couldn't see him, but I could hear Daddy's boots across the porch. Mr. Bagwell was with another man in white shirt and blue jeans. They walked up the drive, the diesel engine clug, clug, clugging.

"Mr. Palace! How are you, sir?" Mr. Bagwell touched the brim of his hat.

"Just fine, thank you."

I couldn't see Daddy, but I could hear his voice, real plain, like when he's talking to Grandpa Butler on the telephone.

"What is it you want?"

"Well sir, this here is Phillip Gold with Milk Marketing Incorporated. He's taken an interest in your farm."

Mr. Gold held his white Stetson in his hand, patting it on his pant leg. His head was bald and red, except for the gray hair around his ears, and his belly was round like a pumpkin. "Good morning, Mr. Palace."

"What is it you want? My wife's got breakfast on the table, and I got a lot of work to do." Daddy ignored the pudgy hand that Mr. Gold offered him.

"Well, Mr. Palace . . ." Mr. Gold began was cut off by Mr. Bagwell.

"Listen, Will. You're three months behind on your loan, and I can't keep making excuses for you." He crossed his arms over his belly.

"Hell, Jim. You're the one talked me into the damned loan. I was fine with what I had. I was never trying to get rich." Daddy's voice was strained.

"All I can say to you, Will, is that it's in your best interest to sell to Mr. Gold while you can. Your land isn't worth as much as you owe right now, and it can only get worse. What are you going to do? Sell more cows?"

He turned to Mr. Gold, smiled and turned back to Daddy. "Then what would you do to pay the loan? I know you aren't making enough at that factory."

"Mr. Palace," Mr. Gold broke in, putting his hat on his head. "I am willing to give you a good price on your farm, and, under the circumstances, I think you should take it now. If you choose not to, the next time I come, and I *will* be back, it will be with the sheriff to have you removed."

Mr. Gold's hands were in his back pockets, and he took a step backwards as Daddy stepped down from the porch. "I'm trying to save you from the poor-house. Think about it. Let's go, Jim." Mr. Gold turned toward the truck.

Mr. Bagwell followed, saying over his shoulder, "I'll give you 'til the end of the month."

Daddy stood like a statue as we both watched the white truck drive away.

For two weeks, Daddy took to coming home from the factory drunk. He would shuffle to the table for breakfast at noon, hunched over in his chair, forearms and fists pressed hard on the table. For two weeks, he hadn't spoken a kind word. Instead of washing up and checking on my chores, he would disappear, up in the hay loft, drinking away the afternoon. He'd wake in his greasy factory clothes, straw stuck to his cheek,

and stomp clumsily down the ladder and into the house to brush his teeth. He'd take a spoonful Pepto-Bismol, gulp down a glass of the stinking well water that ran from our tap—that water never smelled as bad as it did then—then get in his truck and drive off to work.

Daddy took Ferdinand and a bottle of booze out to pasture one day. I went along. Trudy and Dixie went running to the pond, but came back quick, their front legs and chests covered in black mud. Daddy was quiet, sulky and sipping from his bottle. I tried to say something, but my voice didn't work. Ferdinand loped off toward the soft pines to the right of the pond where there was shade. Playfully, I reached at the bottle in Daddy's hand. He looked down at me, his eyes black in the shade of his hat. We sat quietly under one of the empty apple trees. It wasn't long before I fell asleep.

I dreamt I was sitting in tall grass. A shiny Palomino ran in the pasture chased by Trudy, Dixie, and Jack. The grass hadn't been cut for so long it had gone to seed. Crickets and honey bees buzzed and chirped everywhere. The cows drank from the pond and Ferdinand stood watching them with his big black eyes. The trees were calico with the back drop of a bright blue sky, and Mamma was hanging wash on the line behind the house. Daddy and old man Burns sat on stools in the shade next to the barn, drinking beer, as swallows whizzed by everyone's legs. I lay back, staring at the clouds, neither of us sure what we wanted to be. I heard the braying of a big animal. Two long mournful sounds.

Trudy barked. I felt Daddy move behind me. I opened my eyes and saw the dogs running toward us. Daddy got up and walked to meet them. I followed.

The dogs stopped and barked frantically, bouncing off their front legs. *MMMMUH!! MMMMUH!* It sounded like Ferdinand. We ran to the pond. Ferdinand was chest deep in the black mud of the pond. He craned his neck keeping his head just above the water. Daddy smacked me on the back, "Come on!" We got down to the bank of the pond but couldn't get near Ferdinand. He was too far in, and his hind end was sinking now from digging in. All the muscles along his back flexed and twisted. *MMMMUH!* The sound was horrible. The whites of his eyes searched everywhere, confused, dizzy with panic, looking for help. The dogs were barking like mad, and Daddy kept saying, "Shit…Shit…"

He shouted at me, "Earl, run to barn and get a rope!" I ran as fast as I could, my cap falling behind me. We only had two lengths of rope. One for the bale hoist, the other looped through the ring in Ferdinand's nose. Daddy was already starting the truck. "Daddy! We don't have any rope!"

"Damn it! Damn it!" He shouted, banging his fists on the steering wheel. He shut off the engine, got out of the truck, slammed the door, and ran into the house. I froze. I didn't know what to do. I looked back and forth, from the house to the pond, covering my ears to block out the braying. I couldn't look at Ferdinand. The screen door banged and Daddy stepped off the side of the porch with his rifle in his hand.

"Get in the house."

"No, Daddy," I cried.

"Get in the house, you hear!" He stepped with long deliberate strides to the pond. I ran inside.

Mamma was sitting, her head in hands, at the dinner table. Standing on a wooden stepstool, I watched out the kitchen window above the sink. My throat tightened as he pulled the bolt back, pushed it forward, and shoved the stock of the rifle in the crook of his shoulder. I felt the tears well up as he leveled the barrel at Ferdinand. I tensed every muscle and clenched my teeth waiting for the bang. Then Daddy lowered the rifle back to his side.

He's not going to do it, I thought. He started to pace back and forth, looking at Ferdinand, then the truck, then back to Ferdinand. He looked scared. Sinking one boot into the mud, he tried to get closer to Ferdinand, but couldn't. I watched as Daddy struggled to get his foot free.

"Mamma, he's not going to do it," I shouted over my shoulder, turning to see Mamma had her hands folded on the table.

Pow!

I started at the sound, too shocked to cry.

My breath fogged the glass as I looked at the rifle dangling against Daddy's leg, loose in his hand. He stood still for a long time, his pants muddy, one boot missing. I looked for Ferdinand and saw his body sinking further into the muddy water. When Daddy turned around, I ducked out of the window to run and meet him. Instead, I crashed into Mamma.

I looked up, scared.

"It's alright, baby," she said. She folded her arms around me and stroked my hair as I cried into her apron. We stood like that, quiet, for a long time. Long enough that we never heard Daddy's truck pull away.

I watched from my room as Mamma walked out back, picked up Daddy's bottle and went down to the pond. I fell on my bed and cried myself to sleep.

Daddy had been gone for a week. Mamma never said a word about it, and I knew that I wasn't meant to bring it up. She was busy on the phone for hours a day, talking to Grandpa Butler and other people. I heard her talking to Mr. Gold a couple of times and to some of Daddy's friends from the factory. She busied herself around the house as usual, but now she cleaned every room like the First Lady was coming for supper. She washed windows, dusted every sill, washed the floors on hands and knees, pulled pictures down to Murphy the walls. She called me in to help her bring the two big trunks up from the fruit cellar.

She stood in front of the rack of empty jars and pushed at her eyes with the back of her hands.

"You okay, Mamma?" I asked. Before she could answer, the phone rang. She ran upstairs, and I heard her feet walk across the kitchen floor to the hall.

Her voice was muffled, but I could make out some of what she said. "Yes, sir…no…haven't seen…no, I didn't…mmhhm…thank you, sir." She came back toward the cellar stairs.

"How about a little barter and trade, Earl?" she asked. "You help me, and I'll help you. There might even be some red velvet cake in it for you."

"Sure, Mamma," I said, not knowing how to feel.

"You help get these trunks upstairs, give the barn and the milk house a thorough washing, ride with me into town to run some errands, and cake and sodas are on me. What do you say?"

She gave a half smile, and I said, "Deal."

We rode into town in Mamma's Duster, Trudy's head out the window. Mamma kept the radio off, and after a while she said, "Listen, baby girl. I'm sorry that you've had to grow up so fast. I wish to God things were different, but I suppose life is what it is and, well . . ." She went on to tell me how Daddy's boss called, said he'd forgotten some things in his locker, and could we pick them up. He was fired for coming in drunk too many times, and the last time he showed up he just sat at his machine for an hour and a half not doing anything. She told me we were going to be moving to Cleveland, to live with her Daddy—Grandpa Butler—and I'd be going to a big school with three floors and a swimming pool.

"Can the dogs come?" I asked.

"I don't know, sweetheart. I'll ask." We stopped in front of Sterling Tool and Die and Mamma ran inside.

She was in there for a long time, and when she came out she looked like she was going to cry. Not from sadness, but from anger. The muscles in her jaw were working hard where the sweat trickled down to her neck. She had a Kroger's bag of Daddy's stuff in her arms and a long envelope in her hand.

Then we went to First Federal Bank. Mamma left the keys so I could listen to the radio. I turned to the bluegrass station and watched the breeze blow through the two birch trees by the door of the bank, their leaves dry and wrinkled as old dollar bills.

When she came back, Mr. Bagwell was with her. His belly pushed against the stripes in his shirt as he pulled at his suspenders. He was smiling after Mamma, watching her walk to the car, rocking on his heels. He looked at me and waved. When Mamma scooted in the car, she jumped forward the vinyl seat was that hot. She tucked two envelopes under her leg as she started the car.

"I hope that man chokes on a turkey bone," Mamma said under her breath. "What do you say we go get that red velvet cake and a couple of sodas?"

"A deal's a deal," I said. I didn't know at the time how much those words meant.

That night, we were sitting on the porch, full of cake, when Daddy's old Ford pulled in the drive, gravel crunching like bones in a mill. High beams flashed across the yard like search lights passing over Mamma and me. The Ford sat crooked in the drive, headlights still shining. I could see the shadow of his rifle resting in the window rack as he slammed the door and staggered to the house.

"Go to your room," Mamma said.

I got to the top of the stairs and sat, looking down through the banister. The door opened, and the cool evening air blew through the house giving me goose pimples.

"What are you two still doing up? Earl's got work to do in the morning."

His voice was bitter and his speech slurred. I could only see his long shadow moving in the truck lights across the walls and the stairs, then Mamma's. Their shadows mixed on the cracked wallpaper.

"You smell like whiskey. Where—" she stopped short. He didn't say anything. The floor boards squeaked. I heard the hutch doors open. "Haven't you had enough?" Mamma asked.

"I'm a grown-assed man, I'll drink as much as I like. 'Sides, it's you that drives me to it, always watchin' over me like a warden. It's like the goddamned Gulag around here. Get outta my way, woman."

"I never ask you anything. Maybe that's the problem. I always took it for granted what you said about being the man of the house and how you'd always do right by Earl and me. Sometimes I think Earl is more man than y—"

She crashed hard against the banister and broke one of the spindles. I shrunk against the wall looking at Mamma against the rail.

"Where've you been? You smell like a brewery and your ear's blee—" She was stopped by Daddy's hand grabbing her face, squishing her cheeks together. He pushed her head back, hard, and told her to shut her damned mouth. Mamma was getting louder.

"That kid has done more to keep this farm going than—" Daddy slapped her hard across the mouth. It didn't stop her. "Sterling called today. They told me you were fired days ago. I picked up your check and the gear you left in your locker."

Daddy banged a cupboard in the kitchen, went back out on the porch, and Mamma followed. I climbed down to the bottom of the stairs trying to watch while staying hidden. My heart was pounding and my head was hot.

"I sold the farm, as is, today. I got the papers, and the money in the lock box. Earl helped me pack, and I called my father. He said we could—" He spun, hitting her again on the side of the head with a heavy coffee mug.

"No!" I yelled. I pushed open the door and ran passed both of them to the truck.

"Earl!" his voice was loud and hurt. "Get back here!"

Thunder rolled in the distance.

I climbed into the truck and pulled down the rifle. Daddy was walking toward me. "What are you doing?" He came closer, bottle in one hand and coffee mug in the other. "What? You gonna shoot your Daddy?"

A light rain started to fall.

The gun was heavy. I raised it up into my arm pit and squeezed the wooden stock against my ribs.

"Baby, girl! Don't do it!" Mamma was pleading, stepping down from the porch.

"I'm not going to let him hurt you, Mamma." I wanted to cry, but I couldn't.

"If you don't put that gun down, I'm coming after you." Daddy's eyes were all black and I saw the moon duck behind some clouds. I lowered the barrel and pulled the bolt back. There was a long brassy bullet inside. I pushed the bolt back, and as I raised my head I saw something flying at me. I stepped back to avoid it and slipped on the wet ground.

The shot near deafened me.

The rifle flew out of my hands knocking me on my shoulders. Everything froze, except the voices screaming in the dark as rain fell harder.

SECTION IV

RENT BOY

He walked erect, squared shoulders, chin tucked, his buttocks clenched, his pelvis thrust forward, a cross between an automaton and an arrogant sailor. I was certain he was cruising. I had just left a rock and roll show at the *Comet* and was enjoying a sobering stroll down Broadway when I saw him. It was all too familiar—the eye contact, the feigned innocence, the trailing, the stopping to read a flier on a wall, the passing, then the turn down the first side street, the phantom stone in my shoe, the meet. "Nice night." He couldn't have been a day over twenty-one. He said he had a place and we walked there making idle chat. I would be hard pressed to remember a word of it, but I recall he wore dark jeans and a snug v-neck T-shirt.

Inside his apartment he offered me a beer, poured it in a water glass, and sat on the couch across from me. I took a sip, the pilsner cold on my tongue, and set the glass carefully on the coffee table. Turning toward him, I put my hand on his knee and leaned in to kiss him. His face was so smooth I wondered if he ever had to shave. I moved my hand deep into his lap and measured him through his jeans. Someone closed a door in another part of the apartment. He grabbed my hand and quietly led me to his room.

I took the bus home. A young mulatto woman in black slacks and polo sat behind the driver reading, her hair tied in a painful looking ponytail. A dingy bearded man

mumbled incessantly under his thick wool hat. She never looked up from her book. I sat in the back and watched the beer signs and strip joints pass, avoiding my reflection in the glass, semen slowly drying in my pants and the smell of sex on my fingers. On Yesler Way two beat cops had a homeless woman pressed against a wall.

In the shower I stood pruning and brushing my teeth. The curtain swayed and a moment later I heard the door close. Mena was home from work.

"James, are you almost done? I really have to pee." I shut off the water and toweled off. When I opened the door the steam rolled out like fog into the cold living room. Mena rushed in.

"Thanks, man. I was about to burst." She closed the door behind her.

Mena and I have the perfect arrangement. She works at *The Rendezvous*, a swanky 1920's style boozer on 2nd and Bell; she's never home before four in the morning Tuesday through Saturday. I'm out the door by four thirty to catch the number 2 bus to the ferry Monday through Friday. We rarely see each other.

In my room, standing naked in front of the mirror, I looked at myself—stretched the soft skin of my scrotum, flexed my thighs, patted lightly at my ass, tightened my abs, the muscles knotted like tiny fists. I ran my hands over my chest and shoulders, through the curls in my hair then spread my arms like daVinci's Vitruvian Man. Mena knocked on my door.

"Are you alright?"

Startled, I covered myself and made sure the door was locked. "I'm fine," I said. "Just tired."

"Good night then."

I took a pill and sat staring out the window over the roofs of China Town until my eyes burned with fatigue, then climbed under the covers and fell asleep.

I slept until two in the afternoon, wakened by the vacuum. Mena said she was sorry over the noise. I waved her off and shuffled to the toilet in my shorts to make my morning constitution, the aftertaste of sex still in my throat.

"What did you get into last night?" Mena asked, pouring us both a cup of tea.

"Nothing really. Went up to Capitol Hill and sat at *City Books* for hours drinking too much coffee, then I walked around a bit." I turned the warm cup in my hands trying not to think about the previous night—how brash and cold he was, how forceful and clumsy, how he'd held my head down while he came and then, only moments after, how plainly he'd said "You'd better get going" and slapped a few bills on the nightstand.

"You should have stopped in last night. There was a great party in The Velvet Room," she said.

The Velvet Room was on the second floor of *The Rendezvous*, appropriately named for the dark red velvet drapes hanging like veal across three walls. It's reserved for private parties of thirty or more. I'd been to some. All of them were pretty much the same—copious amounts of drinking, drugs of various sorts, strippers, and sex. In short, a small slice of Sodom and Gomorra. One night, I sat watching a little person sniffing lines of coke from the ass of a transsexual stripper until I was overwhelmed by the urge to vomit.

Mena had gone on to tell me about some girl she wanted me to meet. Some "knock-out red head from San Diego," who, apparently, loved bookish guys. So I agreed

to go with Mena down to the smoothie shop where this girl worked. Playing both sides all but guaranteed me a date on Saturday night.

Her name was Prudence. I wanted to laugh. Nevertheless, she was, in fact, very attractive. We went out several times, always to some bar. After a night of vodka martinis we walked back to her place. She had a nice place on the top of Pine Ave. overlooking downtown, modestly furnished in 50's kitsch. Hanging in the hall was a framed, black and white print of Bukowski leaning against a small refrigerator, gut hanging out, hand choking a bottle of beer. We sat on the floor looking through albums and smoking some grass. Then, unprovoked, she bowled me over and stuck her tongue in my mouth. I hardened as she rubbed her pubic bone forward and back, straddling me, pinning my wrists firmly to the floor.

"I've wanted to kiss you all night. I think you're fascinating," she half whispered, breathing heavily. I almost laughed. She pressed her hand against my cock and said we'd better stop or she'd want me to stay the night. I assumed that this was her coquettish way of asking me to spend the night, but instead I agreed with her, rolled her off of me, and stood to leave. She kissed me at the door and I left.

We dated a few months. A really cool girl, but I was having a hard time getting my head around sleeping at her place one night, and the next night getting a mustached blow job against a tree in Green Lake Park. Granted, I made money doing the latter.

I was up at the UW Theater one night, to see a performance of *Oh, Calcutta!* when I met a gray-haired gentleman during the intermission. He had been trying to light a cigarette but his matches were no good. I handed him my lighter and we talked briefly

about the show. I excused myself and went to the toilet. He followed shortly after and stepped to the urinal next to me.

"You forgot this." He handed me the lighter. "Do you live around here?" he asked and glanced downward.

"No. Do you?" I asked, mirroring his glance.

We missed the finale.

He lived just up the hill. It was a really nice place on the bottom floor. He put some Dave Brubeck on the turntable and poured a little scotch over ice. Before the A-side finished we were in bed. I lingered afterwards, looking at the embroidery of the caramel sheets, the torn eiderdown, the huge mantelpiece with chipped glass ornaments and a picture of his wife. He'd fallen asleep and, after pinching a few extra dollars from his wallet, I left.

I'd taken the bus to Capitol Hill and had just purchased a used copy of Conrad's *Lord Jim* when I ran into Prudence.

"Hey, I was just thinking of calling you. Do you want to go to grab a bite?"

I was famished. "Sure." I said. "Where?"

"How about burritos?"

We walked to *Bimbo's*, a little techno-taqueria down Pine Ave.

We ate and had a couple of beers, talked about work and the Fat Tuesday riots. Then she said, "Listen, James. I really like you."

Oh, god, I thought. What is she doing?

"But the thing is, I've been seeing someone else, too." She looked so disappointed and apologetic. "I know it's not fair to you that I've waited so long to tell you, but I didn't know what to do."

I let her go on spilling her guts about this other guy and how she was trying to sort herself out. She promised me not to take long in deciding what she wanted to do about "us." Feeling guilty for the wicked enjoyment I was getting from all of this, I excused myself from the table and went to the toilet.

I took a pill and stuck my mouth under the tap. When I stood, there was a man standing behind me, looking at my reflection.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" he asked.

How cliché, I thought. "No, I'm afraid not," I said and walked out.

"Look, it's getting late," I said, "and I'm feeling a bit upset at the moment." I pulled out a ten dollar bill and dropped it on the table. "I don't want to say something I'll regret, so I'm going to go. Call me when you've made up your mind." I kissed her on the forehead and walked out the door.

In front of Seattle Central a Chevy S-10 drove passed. The tail lights lit as it pulled to the curb. Leaning across the bench seat, a young blond with braces asked if I needed a ride. I said sure and climbed in.

"Where're you going?" he asked.

"Fifth and Washington," I said.

When he pulled up in front of my building, I pointed to the parking lot across the street. "Want to pull in there?" He did.

He was a good size. When he finished I let it run into his lap, thanked him, and got out.

Upstairs I brushed my teeth, washed my hands, took another pill, and thought of Prudence and what she'd said. I thought, with a rush of shame, about the guy who was driving home with fresh spunk warm in his lap. I turned out the lights and went to sleep.

"James, wake up," Mena was knocking at my door. "You have a phone call. It's your dad." I hadn't spoken to my father in over five years. I looked at the clock. It was six o'clock in the morning, nine o'clock in Cleveland.

"It's your mother," he said. "She's gone. I thought you'd want to come see her before—" He couldn't say the words, or wouldn't— just like he wouldn't talk to me after he found my friend Vince and me kissing in my room, just like he wouldn't sit in the same room with me for more than a minute, just like he wouldn't say my name or look at me when I left home.

"How'd it happen?"

"Aneurism," he said.

"When is—"

He cut me short, "It's on Tuesday."

"Can I stay with you?"

"No." He hung up.

Mena asked who died. I told her. She held me for a while, and I looked out the window over her shoulder and thought about getting drunk.

In the shower the hot water beat green and blue against by eyelids. I wanted to cry. I knew I should, but I couldn't. I attributed it to abusing my medication. My

mother and I had written each other at least twice a week since the day I left Ohio. I saved all of her letters in a shoebox—the banal, the exciting, the gossipy, and the apologetic. She was always reminding me about how sorry she was for not doing something about my father, not defending me enough. Once a month she sent a couple hundred dollars cash.

I dressed and called Zhang, a friend from work who lived in my building. He was awake and said to come down.

The stairwell smelled of matches and chemicals. A door slammed and echoed hollow against the concrete stairs. On the first floor, the landlord was scrubbing the carpet in the elevator, cursing. He looked up as I passed.

"Morning," I said.

"Man, you know the mother fucker that keeps pissing in the damn elevator?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"If you catch him," he shook his fist in front of him, "you tell me who he is first thing. You hear?"

"Yes, sir, I will. But, what if it's a woman?" I smiled.

"A woman got more class than that," he said angrily and went back to scrubbing.

I thought of asking if he'd seen some of the women that loitered around this place, but I left it alone and walked down the cigarette burned hallway to Zhang's.

Zhang shared an apartment with his father and his grandmother. It was an open floor plan with two sleeping areas hidden behind tapestries hung from the ceiling, one in the back of the kitchen, and another behind a pressboard entertainment console. His

grandmother sat shaking her head in front of the window watching the action in Catullus Park. Zhang was watching an episode of *M*A*S*H** and frying kimchi.

I explained what had happened and asked if he'd cover my shifts on the ferry for a few days. He said he would. I thanked him and left. I don't think his grandmother even knew I was there.

Mena drove me to the airport on Monday night. I was flying stand-by. Carrying only an overnight bag and dressed in a neat black suit and pea coat, I must have looked important. The ticket agent gave me a first-class seat to Cleveland. Slouched in the soft leather seat, I had three double gin and tonics and watched *Dante's Peak*.

The captain's voice came over the PA and told everyone to prepare for final descent. Looking out the window, the dark sky juxtaposed with the blanket of snow that covered the landscape, I began to regret coming.

I took a shuttle to the *Budget Inn* in Brook Park and got a room. After scheduling an eight o'clock wake up call, I hung my suit, closed the curtains, and slept.

When the phone rang I woke not knowing where I was. I opened the curtains. The sun burned white through the room. Covering my eyes with the back of my hand until they adjusted, *Ford Motor's Engine Plant No. 1* slowly came into focus, smokestacks belching grey and white in the distance.

I showered and shaved, called *Baker Funeral Home*, dressed, and took the elevator down to the lobby. The elevator smelled of cheap perfume and carpet cleaner. A soft bell chimed and the dingy brass doors opened.

The same stout and slightly balding manager was at the front desk.

"Good morning," I said. "I need to get a taxi to Berea."

He called and I sat waiting in a dusty arm chair by the front doors sipping from a Styrofoam cup of coffee. I hated being there already and I dreaded seeing my father. My stomach rumbled as I walked quickly to the toilets.

When I came out the taxi was already there.

It was colder outside than it looked. The air in the cab was warm, but the vinyl seat was cold against my legs. The tires chirped as we pulled into traffic nearly cutting off a UPS box van.

"Where you headed? Berea?" The driver was an older, mustached man wearing a black NASCAR hat, a leaning number "3" embroidered across the front.

"Yes," I said. "Front Street."

"Got a job interview?" he asked as we bolted through a yellow light.

"A funeral," I said.

"Who died?"

"My mother," I said.

He looked back at me in the rearview mirror. "Sorry," he said, and went silent.

I stared out the window watching the bleak winter landscape roll by—one strip mall and half empty office park and car dealer and factory and super store and gas station and church after another.

The cab parked in front of the funeral home. I didn't want to get out. I wanted to tell the driver to turn around and go back to the airport. I hadn't seen my mother for over five years. Why come to see her now? I liked thinking of her pulling weeds and tomatoes from her garden. I liked remembering her laughing and handing out presents on Christmas. I liked remembering her pulling out that damned camera everywhere she

went to take pictures of me playing baseball, skateboarding, swimming, sleeping, graduating high school. All the time saying, "You'll be glad to have these memories when you get older. Mark my words." I liked looking at the black and white senior photograph that I kept in my wallet, her long straight hair perfectly parted down the middle, her innocent smile. I didn't want all those memories dashed by the sight of her corpse, or even the sight of her box lowered into the ground. For the first time since my father called, I broke down, sobbing uncontrollably in the backseat of a Yellow Cab. The driver gave me his small package of Kleenex.

"We can just sit here for awhile if you'd like," he said, and turned off the engine.

We sat quietly for a few minutes. Then I gathered myself and thanked the driver.

"My name's Chuck." He handed me his card. "Call me when you're ready to go back, if you want, no matter where you are."

I got out and tried to pay, but he said it was on him. We shook hands and he shared his condolences. I wondered how many more times I was going to hear, "I'm sorry for your loss."

When I walked across the street, my Uncle Joe and Aunt Nadine were smoking at the apron of the driveway. They both nodded and kept smoking.

Inside, people I hadn't seen since I was a child or never at all milled around quietly drinking coffee, wiping eyes, hugging, shaking hands, and a line had formed to walk past the casket. I saw my father talking to a large woman in a purple dress. When he saw me, he excused himself from her. My stomach knotted. I thought he was coming to talk to me, but, he turned and walked into another room. A loud voice came from a group of people in the back of the lobby. "She was drunk as hell and singing to beat the

band." A number of the group laughed and others turned scolding looks to see who was causing the disturbance. The crowd shifted and I saw my godmother, Aunt Mary, smiling and waving off the unappreciative listeners like a bad smell.

"Oh my word," she said, and made a b-line over to me, her arms wide. "Look at you, you handsome devil." She wrapped her arms around me and stretched up to kiss me. The tears came again.

"This isn't the way to go about seeing those you miss, now is it?" She tightened her hold on me, rubbed my back, and then led me out the front doors. "You want a coffee, darling?"

"Sure," I said and lit a cigarette.

When she came back, we walked around the side of the building and tried to catch up on lost time. I told her about working a bunch of labor jobs across the country until finally settling in Seattle. "Working on the ferry is a good job for me," I said. She said she'd always wanted to see the San Juan's and look for Orcas. "You should come visit," I told her, and scratched out my cigarette against the brick building.

"Got anyone special?" she asked.

"Not at the moment."

When I asked what she knew about my mother's aneurism, she said "the way your dad tells it, she was sitting on the back porch with the dogs, snapping beans into a bucket, and then she stopped." Mother had been in and out of the doctor's for a month complaining of migraines, and they had scheduled a CAT scan. But she didn't make it.

Aunt Mary and I rode together behind my father's car and the hearse. We talked about when her mother died. Then she talked about Uncle Ted passing. After his funeral

she unplugged the phone, pulled the blinds, and didn't leave the house for a week. "I'm not over it yet, and I probably never will be, but, we have no choice, do we?"

"No, ma'am. Afraid not."

The freeways, streets and sidewalks, parking lots and tree lawns were edged in the frozen filth of traffic and castoffs from the snowplows. The color of the snow changed from black to brown to yellow, then white. Cigarette butts and gum wrappers, an empty bottle of Wild Irish Rose, and a lone sock, were pushed against the curb at the exit of the Metro Park.

When we parked at the cemetery, I put on the gloves I was given by the funeral director and quietly joined my Uncles Cy and Ambrose, and my father, who still hadn't said a word to me, behind the hearse. The backdoor opened and the casket rolled out, a beautiful box—thickly lacquered bird's eye walnut with scalloped silver handles. Mother hated gold. It was gaudy and ostentatious. The enormous wreath of white chrysanthemums was already browning in the winter air.

Uncle Cy shook my hand and said, "You look good." Uncle Ambrose gave a quiet nod and looked at my father. The two of them carried the front of the casket while Uncle Cy and I carried the rear. Walking toward the big green tent I looked at the long line of cars—at all the people gathered under and around the gravesite, at the yellow backhoe looming no more than a hundred feet away, the pile of dirt conspicuously hidden under a green tarp—wondering what my funeral would be like.

One bright afternoon on the ferry to Victoria, I watched an older woman, short and frail, walk to the stern. She leaned against the railing holding a small gourd, singing. It was cold, but she took off her hat, letting her pepper-flecked hair blow, and kept

singing, her hair swirling madly about her, her chin in the air. I couldn't hear the words, but when she'd stopped, she pulled her hair back from her face, twisted out the thick cork from the gourd and shook gray ashes into the wake. When she turned, she saw me watching her. I nodded in quiet condolence; she smiled and walked up the stairs to the sun deck. She smiled. That, to me, was the most beautiful thing I'd seen in years. That's how I want to go, I decided. But who was going to shake me into the sea?

Father Maloney finished the ceremony by inviting everyone to my parents' house and we all turned toward the cars. As Aunt Mary drove along the winding cemetery road, I watched a man climb into the backhoe. The baffle clapped black smoke, and the steel of the boom and bucket echoed in the still afternoon as the machine rolled toward the pile of dirt under the tarp.

Back at the house, the driveway and the cul-de-sac were filled with parked cars. The glass of the storm door was fogged over so only dark shapes could be seen moving inside. I didn't want to go in. Nervous hands deep in my pockets, I felt Chuck's business card and considered calling him as soon as I got inside.

"Don't worry, hon." my aunt said. "You'll be fine. You don't have to stay long, but it would be worse if you didn't go in at all."

Of course, I knew she was right. But then I thought, who cares what these people say? My mother's dead, my father can't stand the sight of me, and all these other people…? I haven't seen them for years, and when I leave, I doubt I'll ever see them again. So why do I care about making a good impression?

"Your mother would be so happy to know you came," my aunt said as if she could hear my thoughts.

Inside, people were talking loudly and laughing. The smells of coffee, corned beef and cabbage, city chicken, stuffed shells, buttered rolls, and mashed potatoes with beef gravy warmed the air. I made my way through the crowd. Some people stroked my arm briefly, some patted my back, my Great Aunt Sally even kissed me on the cheek. All of them offered condolences. Someone turned on the radio, the same classical station that it always played. My mother had longed for a piano ever since I could remember. Listening to concertos on WKSU was the only way she got one.

The day turned slowly into night, and the number of people that remained dwindled. For the first time that day, my father spoke to me as he walked to the back of the house. "There's a case of beer in the garage and a few bottles of liquor. Bring them into the kitchen."

The garage was cold and neat. The old black paint of the old Skylark, immaculately shined, looked like it hadn't moved in years. The Armor-All tires and every strip of chrome reflected the ceiling lights like diamonds. Hanging on two red hooks from the rafters was the *CW California Freestyle* bike my father bought me when I was thirteen.

We had just come home from Friedrich's bike shop in Cleveland, and I was upset that we hadn't come back with one. "Is it warm in here?" my father asked. I didn't care if the place was on fire; I wanted a new bicycle, and not just any bike. I wanted the triple-dipped chrome *CW* with the white tires and lavender five spoke graphite mag-wheels with matching mushroom grips.

"It is kind of warm," my mother said.

"James, go around and open up some windows, please," he said.

I opened the patio door, went into the game room and cranked the window open, then moped down the hall to my bedroom. I reached in and turned on the light. In the middle of the room, glorious and shining in all its chrome and lavender majesty, was that *CW California Freestyle* bike. When I turned around, they were both standing in the hall smiling. I threw myself at my father and squeezed him, thanking him in a spasm of excitement. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. You're the greatest!" I couldn't wait to ride it and pedaled it down the hallway, through the game room, nearly breaking the door into the garage, and out into the street.

Standing at the apron of the driveway, sipping from a bottle of beer, he had shouted, "Show me some tricks."

I bunny-hopped manhole covers, popped wheelies, endos, and tried over and over to ride a catwalk from one end of the cul-de-sac to the other.

The garage door opened. "Find it?" he said, snapping me out of my revelry.

"Yeah, I got it."

"Here," he said, opening his hands. "I'll take the bottles."

Back inside, Uncle Ambrose poured glasses of John Powers for anyone that would take one. He gulped one down himself. "James!" he said loudly. "Come here, boy." He raised a glass of the auburn liquid. "You've done your mother proud today, son." He handed me the glass, poured himself another and clinked his glass against mine. He winked at me and we drank.

"Thanks," I said, though I wasn't sure what I'd done, and held my glass out for a refill.

Then someone put a Chieftains CD in the stereo. My father came into the living room with a liter mug of stout and passed it around singing along with Kevin Conneff on the stereo. *So here's a health to the company and my lass*. The mug of beer was passed around the room. *Let's drink and be merry all out of one glass.* Those who knew the song sang; everyone drank. *Let's drink and be merry all grief to refrain*. I took a mouthful and handed the mug to my father. *For we may or might never all meet here again*. He drank the rest down, and then walked into the kitchen.

Later, with everyone gone—except for Uncle Ambrose who was asleep on the couch—my father came into the living room and set an old hat box with bluebell print on the coffee table. "She said she wanted you to have these," he said, and sat heavily in his chair.

I removed the lid and found inside—all of them neatly tied together with green twine—every letter I had ever mailed to her, and a picture of me at fifteen, waving from the high dive, in that damned blue Speedo, at Longbrook pool. "Have you read these?" I asked, not really wanting to know the answer.

"Did you want me to?"

"I don't know." I didn't.

There was a long pause as I felt the weight of the letters in my hand.

"I'll never understand you," he said.

Now I knew he had read them. "I don't expect you to," I said. "I don't know that I do."

The muscles in his jaws flexed and relaxed, flexed and relaxed.

"Maybe I should get going," I said. "It's getting pretty late."

He looked up at the clock on the wall. It was close to midnight.

"You can stay here, if you want."

Uncle Ambrose stirred on the couch. "He can have my room," I said, and packed everything back into the hatbox. "I need to use your phone."

When the cab pulled up, I was already waiting on the sidewalk.

The streetlights passed—yellow and dark, yellow and dark—over the photograph in my hand.

I had been so embarrassed of those blue Speedos; the way they clung, when they were wet, to everything you didn't want to show. But if you were on the swim team you had to wear them. "That's your uniform," my father had said, laughing. I can still remember the day my mother took that picture, the day I tried a flip from the high dive and held my tuck too long. My back slapped loudly against the surface. I screamed huge bubbles underwater. Trying hard not to cry, I ran to the boys' room, my back burning terribly. I sat in the stall furthest from the doors, across from the showers. Eli Davis, one of my swim team coaches, looked out from behind a shower curtain, water running over his head and shining on his shoulders.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"I smacked my back in the pool."

"Ouch," he said, scrunching his face in painful sympathy. "Let me see."

I showed him.

"It's all red. I should put some aloe on it for you." He stepped out of the shower naked, walked to his bag, and got a small bottle of aloe. He rubbed it on my back, and it worked to cool the burn almost instantly. "Let me see your chest. Is it red, too?"

I turned and looked at my chest. "No. It's okay," I said. Then I saw it. He was big and uncircumcised. I had never seen one like that before. It was still growing as I watched, as if for my benefit.

"Here," he said, handing me the bottle. "You rub some on me, and I'll rub some on you."

I didn't know what to do at first. But when he slid his aloed hand into my suit, I hardened. I grabbed him, and he urged me into the shower.

"You cocksucker!" Chuck yelled as he braked suddenly. A Ford Explorer had cut into our lane and sped off. I looked around to see we were already on the freeway, almost to the hotel. I put the photograph back in the box.

When he dropped me off, I gave Chuck twenty bucks, shook his hand, and headed into the hotel lobby. The same manager was at the desk, and I asked him for the same 8.00 a.m. wake-up call. The same smell lingered in the elevator, and the bed was the same mess I had left it. In the bathroom, the door open and the mirror steamed over, I stripped and stepped into the shower.

When I got home, Mena was angry I hadn't called her to pick me up from the airport. "I didn't want to bother you." I said. The truth was that I didn't want her trying to console me, or ask me about the funeral or my family. I just wanted to ride the bus with complete strangers, people that had no idea who I was and didn't care to know. I

just wanted to sit and ride; I wanted to stare out the window at the mountains; I wanted to sit quietly, holding my box of letters, hoping the bus would never stop.

"Prudence called," Mena said. "She said she really needs to talk to you."

I met Prudence at the *J&M*. We sat at a table near the window.

"I'm sorry about your mother," she said.

"Thanks."

Over the course of several rounds of Red Hook, we talked about Ohio and my trip home, about why she'd left San Diego, about what I wanted to do next, and about what she thought was important in life.

"The most important thing is to feel loved, you know?"

"I suppose." I said. "I'm not real sure."

"Everyone needs to feel like they mean something to someone, that their life matters."

"Isn't that a bit egotistical, narcissistic even?"

"No," she said. "If you never feel like you mean something to someone beside yourself, what's the point of struggling through life? You might as well jump in the fucking Sound." I thought about the how cold the Sound was.

We sat quietly. Then I went to the bar for another round feeling more than a little drunk. When I returned to our table I said, "What about the idea that we're alone in this world, that when we die it's just us that dies, alone." I couldn't really get a grip on what I was trying to say.

"Fuck the existentialists. Do you think your mother died a lonely death?" she asked. "To hell with this." Her face was flushed. "You know, I was going to tell you that I think I might be in love with you."

"No. No you're not," I said.

"Maybe you're right. James, one of these days you're going to realize that you need to start living for someone else. You're selfish, a selfish 29-year-old boy."

"I have to go." I stood from my chair. "I'm drunk, you're drunk, and I'm tired. I just got home today and I want to go to bed."

I walked her to the bus stop and kissed her goodnight. "I'm sorry." I said. "I'll call you tomorrow."

I took a walk down to the water before heading home. The wind was frigid and sobering, the water, black and choppy. A very tall blond man walked by slowly and looked me up and down. I shook my head, then started up Jackson Ave. toward home.

The elevator opened, and the landlord's son, Dwight, ran out and down the hall. I got in and pressed the button for the third floor. The doors closed shutting in the dank smell of urine.

The Shamrock and Thistle radio show was on KCMU when I turned on the stereo, a sad fiddle playing "The Strayaway Child." The answering machine blinked red on the kitchen wall. It was Prudence. *Listen, James. I'm really sorry if I upset you or scared you or whatever*. A horn honked in the background. *But I meant what I said, all of it*.

I took a pill and chased it with a gulp of Mena's Riesling. In the bedroom I pulled my mother's letters from under my bed and started pairing hers with mine according to the post dates. I sat on the floor, three stacks of letters between my legs, and started

reading. When I finished it was almost four in the morning. Mena would be home soon. I took the letters into the kitchen and pulled a cookie tin from the cupboard. I put the letters inside and set the tin on the counter, turned on the burner, and held the photograph of me on the high dive over the flame until it curled in blue-green flame. Then I dropped it in the tin. Standing on a kitchen chair, I pulled down the smoke detector and removed the batteries. The flames floated blackened pieces of paper in the air. They twisted like burnt moths. Once the flames died down, I closed the lid tightly and, with my sleeves pulled down over my hands, picked up the hot can and left.

Stumpy, the captain of our ferry, was standing near the ticket booth when I walked up. "Hey, man. You're home early." He grabbed my hand in both of his and said, "Sorry about your mom, buddy."

"Thanks." I said.

"What do you have there," he asked, looking at the cookie tin, "cookies?"

I told him it was a package for a friend across the water.

"You know, if you need more time off—"

"Thanks, Stumpy, but I think I need to work. I'm broke now," I said. "Have to make the rent."

"Sure, bud," he said, and I walked on board.

The smooth body of a harbor seal emerged from the cold dark water sending gentle ripples across the glassy surface. Then, just as quickly, it was gone. Only the ripples remained until they too disappeared, merging with the wake of the ferry. I moved along the outer deck to watch the sun come up. It looked like a blood orange over the

leaden water of the Sound. I grasped the cold hand rail, picked absently at a canker of paint and, eyes closed, tilted my face to the sky, taking in the briny, salt-tinged wind.

As we neared Bainbridge I moved stern-side and looked back toward the city. I watched our wake spread open like loving watery arms and removed the top of the tin. The ashes flew, black and grey, into the wind and disappeared into the water.

Lighting a cigarette, I spotted the seal again as its slick brown head surfaced. Its nostrils opening and closing, its whiskers flat against its jowls. It flipped up and dived, the ripples broadcast in perfect rolling rings. All the while the ferry started to weave its path around Bainbridge Island toward Bremerton. Link tangs rang against the naked masts of anchored dinghies calling attention to the wooded shores spotted with houses.

I looked around. No one else seemed to notice any of it. Some familiar faces talked loudly on the upper deck, but most of the passengers stirred between vehicles, the snack bar, and the toilets, then quickly returned to the shelter of their cars where they tried to squeeze in twenty minutes of sleep or read the morning edition or mass market paperbacks, or the bumper stickers on the vehicles in front of them. Some just stared blankly through their windshields.

Zhang sidled up against the rail next to me. “Spare a smoke?” I shook out a cigarette. “Got a light?”

“Want me to smoke it for you, too?” I handed him my lighter.

He turned his back to the wind and cupped his hands around the lighter, flicking it several times until he finally got the cigarette lit. Handing the lighter back, he inhaled deeply. “It’s not quite lit,” I said.

Zhang took the cigarette from his mouth and looked at the half glowing cherry. “Somebody loves me,” he said, a tiny piece of the paper clinging to his lip.

We watched a handful of pipits rise from the thickly forested horizon. The sun reflected off the silver water and burned the darkness from the glacier-crested peaks above. Zhang reached across my chest, cigarette pinched between his almond fingers, and pointed to a lone sailboat cutting sharply through the gauze of morning fog.

“Perfect morning for a boat ride,” I said. Zhang, nodding quietly in agreement, smiled and stuck the cigarette back in his mouth. Behind us Seattle had disappeared as if behind a smoky curtain.

The ferry bumped firmly into the dock at Bremerton, and all deck hands moved quickly around the boat securing everything for unloading. Car doors slammed, engines started, motorcycles revved, bicycles were walked to the pedestrian ramps, and Stumpy barked the all clear.

“Thanks for riding our ferry. Enjoy your time in Bremerton,” came over the PA system. The ramps lowered. Zhang waved everyone off, one row at a time.

SECTION V

GARBAGE MAN

The blue-green onion tops of St. Theodosius appeared to tremble in the summer heat. Barry Fortune felt as if he were breathing through cotton. A dank, warm breeze blew in his face where he stood on the back of the number seven garbage truck. Stray cats hid from the sun under dust covered cars and in the shade of alleys. The sun was ripe; swollen to bursting. The heat waves rising off the pavement reeked of toxins and sulfur fallout from the steel foundries, hot tar and rotten eggs. The churches in the neighborhood all had their doors wide open. The bells of St. John Cantius rang through the streets.

On Professor Avenue the retired and the jobless sat on front porches in lawn chairs and swings; they walked dogs and children, and dragged last minute garbage cans to the curb. Up the street, at the corner of Jefferson Ave., a road crew's jackhammer blasted like gunfire. Startled, a young mother quickly knelt shielding her child. Two young boys panicked and ducked into a side yard. An old man sat on his front steps, a yellow-white undershirt tucked neatly into plaid shorts. A dark blue U.A.W. ball cap sat snuggly on his head exaggerating his obscenely large ears. They looked like the handles of a sugar bowl. He raised a few fingers lazily and nodded in salutation to the garbage men as their rust-pocked white truck sighed to a stop in front of his house. Barry jumped down from the back of the truck and hollered "How are you, Mr. Mazscienski?" and

flipped the tin lids off two trash cans, 2049 spray-painted on them in black. "Better'n you, I imagine." A vinegar-lipped smile spread widely under his prescription sunglasses. "What's the good word?"

"Can't think there is one today. Maybe . . . hot." Barry tossed the two cans into the back of the truck, shook each one out, and banged one then the other firmly on the filth-blackened tailgate. He squinted at the sounds of tinkling bottles. Turning his head into his shoulder, he blew through his lips heavily as the sweep and slosh of wet paper was followed by the familiar smell of decaying food—the black grease of banana skins, dusty green balls that might have been oranges, stale beer, the noxious burn of gray meat.

"That it is. Hotter than a whore's ass on dollar day." Mazscienski's belly shook a little under his folded hands. "Where's your helper?"

"He quit. Rather pay more in fines than throw trash for a few more weeks."

Barry and Sam Hicks, the driver, were one of three crews that used the court mandated labor of those in trouble, but not too much trouble, with the law. That's how Barry got his job; a thousand hours of community service instead of jail time and huge fines was a good deal. At the end of it all he was offered the position full-time, going on two years now.

"Martin died," Mazscienski said.

"What?" Barry paused, one foot on the curb, still holding the two cans. He looked down the street behind him, staring at the aluminum cans he'd left for Martin in the tree lawns.

It had been Barry's first day on the job. A guy named Kinell had quit two days earlier. The city hired Barry on a temporary basis. He was required to work community service for a punch-up he'd gotten into with some frat boys from Baldwin-Wallace.

The garbage route started on 14th Street and Clark Avenue, picked up four blocks of Ohio City, then, passing all of the store fronts on West 25th, snaked through Tremont and down to West 3rd. From there they collected the condos, studios, and apartments along the river before ending up in the Flats on Stone's Levee where they dumped trash onto a concrete deck. All the trash was pushed into a heap inside three cinderblock walls twelve feet tall. A rubber tired front end loader scraped its steel four-in-one bucket across the pavement and transported it all to a barge. Newspaper and fast food wrappers blew around the dock like urban tumbleweed, as seagulls circled, waiting to dive in for scraps.

Down Starkweather Avenue, Barry was confused by the number of aluminum cans in nearly every yard, some tied up in plastic shopping bags, some scattered like litter in the tree lawn. Barry threw them in the truck with the other trash. As they stopped near Browns' Market, Barry walked to the cab.

"What's the deal with all these cans?" Barry asked.

Sam was doing tiny windmills on the steering wheel. He turned to Barry ripping another air guitar riff and let out a falsetto wail, "WHAAABIGAIL…see what you've done to me…" He sounded like a cat caught in a screen door. "Those are for Martin. Don't toss those."

"Who's Martin?"

"Martin. I forgot to tell you, there's this crazy old-timer rides all around here and Ohio City picking up aluminum cans to recycle. He's late today. He's usually got half this street done by the time I get here."

"I've been pitching them all."

"Well, just don't toss any more of them. Let's go." Sam slid his thumb up the steering wheel still in time with the guitar riffs on the radio.

Walking to the back of the truck, Barry saw a man pedaling furiously on a bicycle, shaking his arm, his fist clenching a straw fedora. He waved the hat high in the air like he was drowning. "Leave the cans! Leave those cans!"

"Martin," Barry said to himself.

Martin appeared to be in his sixties, dressed in a chocolate linen suit, a white dress shirt, and black espadrilles. His bicycle was an old Sears Roebuck model with a calico sort of paint job with an orange milk crate bungeed to the handlebars and two large wire baskets were welded like saddle bags on either side of the rear fender. From the rear hub, a long improvised hitch connected to a wagon with high chicken wired sides. All of the baskets were still empty.

"Didn't anyone tell you not to throw away those cans?" Martin panted.

"Not until just now. Sorry. I'm new."

"Where's Kinell?"

"He quit."

"Doesn't anyone believe in work anymore?" Martin pulled a red handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped the sweat from his face. He folded it neatly and returned it to his pocket. He reached out a scarred, calloused hand standing astride his bicycle.

"Martin. Martin Dent."

"Barry Fortune. Nice to meet you." Martin's hand was boney but strong, the handshake firm.

Week after week, Martin rode along the number seven truck most of the day, peppering Barry's ears with story after story. He'd been born and raised in the hills of western Pennsylvania by a hard working, hard drinking father and a doting but stern mother. His gay older brother had run away to Cleveland when Martin was fifteen. He had done two tours in Vietnam and Cambodia as an M.P. and worked as a dentist for years.

Martin told him how he had run a private family practice in Meadville until his wife and infant son were killed in an accident with a logging truck. "The logger came around the bend in Georgia overdrive, moving way too fast. Must have been straddling the center line, saw Maxine late, and panicked. Rolled right on top of the car, crushed her and Fanon, our boy. Trooper said they never felt a thing, happened so fast. How the hell would he know what they felt?"

He told Barry how his brother, Kyle, had knocked on his front door one autumn morning, marched in, and told Martin to start packing.

"'What are you doing here?' I asked him. 'I'm taking you home with me,' he says, 'I can't take anymore of Mother's sobbing phone calls about you trying to drink yourself to death.' 'He was already up the stairs opening cupboards and pulling bags and suitcases from the hall closet.' The way I saw it, I had a right to be depressed. But, Kyle didn't see it that way, and that's how I got here."

"How long have you been here?" Barry asked.

"Going on twenty years."

"What do you do?"

"I sculpt trash, help out at my brother's antique shop. Aside from that, you're looking at it." Martin pointed to the roof of the Polish Legion, "That's one of mine." Above the red façade and the sign boasting "POST 58" was a dark metal sculpture of a regal two-headed phoenix. The necks were straight and strong, two large pieces of glass fitted into their eye sockets. Beer bottle bottom monocles shining green in the sun. The wings were broad and each tin feather was discernable from the rest. A pair of three tined garden tool talons gripped the top of the parapet.

"Wow. That's pretty cool," Barry said.

Martin smiled and straightened his back. His shoulders swaggered while he pedaled.

Barry looked up and down the street, half expecting to see Martin leaning on his bike, talking to someone. He set the cans down, stepped off the curb and asked Mazscienski, "How'd he die?"

"Fire."

"No shit."

"Yep. You'll see it. Doesn't look too bad from the street but no such thing as a good house fire."

"A bad one?"

"Bad enough he died. From the smoke, not the fire."

Barry set the cans back in the dry yellow grass of the tree lawn, shook his head. "Take care, Mazza." He walked back to the truck, swung himself up on his perch,

squeezed tightly to his hand-hold and repeated Mazscienski's words, "Martin died." The air breaks wheezed and the truck moved up the street. Old man Mazscienski pushed back in his chair resting it hard against the wall.

Barry took off his hat and rubbed his forehead on his shoulder. Sam tapped the brakes, looked back in the passenger side mirror, shook his thumb at a lone black bag on the curb. He slowed the truck to a roll. Pushing the compactor lever down, metal on metal echoing between the houses, Barry watched the bag get closer then jumped off. Sam pulled down to the next drive. Barry picked up the lone bag, lumbered to the truck, and threw it inside.

At the next house three brown plastic trash bags sat squat and fat against the curb. They looked air-sealed. Next to the bags stood the nemesis green can, Crazy Karen Demeter the cat lady's only trash can. It had never had a lid, and every week Barry was stung by the smell of cat piss before he got to it. The frail short haired woman had six cats, maybe more. "Crazier than a shithouse rat," was how Martin described her, "but the sweetest lady you'd care to meet."

Barry dragged the can behind him, hard plastic scratching across the asphalt. The can bent against the tailgate. The dust of litter rose in a cloud around Barry's head, a nimbus of salt and urea. "This shit's gonna make me blind one day," he said sending the empty can cart wheeling onto the sidewalk. He glared at the plastic bag of cat food tins and looked away. The three brown bags were heavy, leaking green-brown juice into the gutter. Taking one bag at a time to the truck, Barry had to urge each one up with the help of his thigh. His pant leg soaked through. He frowned at the darkened patch on his navy coveralls. The last of the bags hung up on the tailgate and tore open, dumping moldy

brown grass and plant clippings onto his boots and the street. The stench was bitter. *When's the last time the grass needed cut?* It hadn't rained in weeks. Barry kicked at the pile, scattering it under the truck, and climbed on. He slapped at the side of the truck again and watched Sam lean forward, checking his mirrors before moving on.

Karen opened her front gate carrying a paper grocery bag as Barry banged a can against the tailgate. He watched fat white maggots bounce and roll like grains of rice. They fell into a pile against the steel door of the compactor writhing and wiggling over each other. Karen walked in her bare feet to where Barry dropped the can in the grass.

"You hear the news?" Karen asked from the sidewalk.

"Yeah." Barry looked down at the squirming larvae clinging to the inside of the can. Karen handed him the bag.

"It's just some hot peppers and zucchini," she said. "I saw Purdy putting stuff out on the curb this morning." Purdy was Kyle's business partner and lover. "He said he came home around four from some party and the place was glowing. The fire trucks were already there, guys running everywhere breaking out windows, climbing ladders, wrestling hoses. The Fire Chief wouldn't let him anywhere near."

"Man." Barry looked at the ground, shaking his head.

"Yeah, and that asshole Purdy was concerned about smoke and water damage to some Louis XVI chaise. Not a word about Martin until I asked him."

"Prick," Barry said.

Sam honked the horn and rolled forward, his outstretched arm waving Barry back to work.

"Well, I have to go," Karen said. "Some of us are going to Edison's for drinks tonight. Raise a glass for him. If you're up for it you should come down."

Karen squeezed his shoulder and let her hand slide down his arm.

Barry lumbered to the cab, climbed up on the step hanging onto the mirror, and threw the paper bag in the passenger window. Sam was beating on his chest to match the double bass drum grind-core on the radio. He turned to Barry, wide-eyed and growling like a demon.

"Martin died," Barry shouted over the radio.

Sam's hands stopped. "No."

"Had a fire."

Sam clicked off the radio. "What happened?"

"Don't know."

"What did Karen say?" Sam asked.

"Kyle's buddy was putting everything out on the curb this morning."

"Wanna go check it out?"

"We'll get there when we get there," Barry said.

"It's probably already picked through." Sam jammed the truck into gear. "Hang on."

They rounded the corner onto Literary Ave., raced downhill and turned a hard right on West 5th Street. The truck felt like it was going to flip. The house—ground floor bordered in yellow tape, windows boarded up, the second story drowned in sunlight—had been badly burned. Between the barn and the house, half of an ancient pin oak stretched shadows across the side of the house. Some leaves still hung from the half nearest the

barn, curled and yellowed at the edges. The blackened rafters on the second floor could be seen from the street. The glass had been broken out, no doubt by fire fighters. Soot stains bled up toward the gutters and led to a green tarp sagging into a hole in the roof. The tree lawn was filled with trash cans, furniture, boxes and piles of debris—glass from the windows, bundles of charred floor boards and molding. Carpet and carpet padding dripped dark water into the storm drain. A small oval television and a stack of hi-fi equipment stood warped and melted together.

The air brakes whined. Barry jumped down. Climbing out of the truck, Sam whistled in awe as he walked toward the curb. The air smelled like a camp fire. Ashes rose and fell, drifted left and right like the flight of so many moths. Fire had mixed with sulfuric odors of the foundries. A distant child's tantrum cut through the neighborhood.

"It looks untouched," Sam said, and began opening boxes.

"Maybe we should just leave it," Barry said. He stood, transfixed, looking around at everything. There was a whole life laid out on a tree lawn. One man's world boxed, bundled, and tied up. And here they were, two garbage men in filthy coveralls and stinking gloves come to take it away and put it on a barge.

"There's a lot of shit here, man," Sam said. "Got some water-logged magazines and newspapers over here," he said, opening another. "Check this guy out." Sam held up a *Life* magazine with a black and white photograph of Solzhenitsyn on the cover.

"Alexander Solzhenitsyn. That's who that guy is," Barry said. Sam stared at him. "Russian. He won a Nobel Prize for literature."

"Pinko, commie prick. Why you read that shit--" Sam left off shaking his head. He dropped the magazine back into the box.

Barry was drawn to a small metal footlocker on top of a long wooden trunk with chunky rope handles. He knelt down in front of the footlocker, pulled off a glove and clicked open the two brass latches. Inside, two loosely stacked rows of albums, a green and white Slippery Rock coffee cup filled with a pair of heavy scissors, pencils and pens, and a dental toothpick. A short stack of singed, yellow letters curled like dead leaves between the jaws of a grey plaster cast of a gap-toothed smile.

Shaking off his other glove, Barry lifted the teeth from the footlocker and held them like a sandwich. He tried to mimic the grin and his bottom lip split. Rubbing the crack with his tongue, tasting alkaline and soot in the blood, he turned the plaster mold around in his hands. Under the bottom jaw, *Maxine*, etched in a shaky hand. Putting them back where he found them, Barry noticed a metal band wrapped around the rear molars. He lifted the top jaw. A thin metal contraption spanned the palette. In the middle was a tumbler and tiny key. He pushed on the key like flipping a light switch, and the plaster cracked. He put the pieces back in the box.

Thumbing through the records, he found Captain Beefheart's "Safe as Milk," wrinkled around the edges. There were few that hadn't been warped: a Blind Faith album, The Birds' "Sweetheart of the Rodeo," and an album without a title by The New Lost City Ramblers. He tucked the albums under his arm and looked over toward Sam.

Sam had dumped a barrel of scrap metal onto the grass, separating it into piles: aluminum window frames and cans, tin, cast iron pipes, black gas pipe, and copper waterline. "You planning on junking that stuff?" Barry asked.

"Yeah, long as you don't mind riding with it."

"That's cool with me. I have some vinyl that needs to ride with you."

"Anything good?"

Barry looked down at the albums, fanned through them again. "I don't think you'd like this stuff."

"Well, what is it?" Sam said looking at his piles of scrap.

Barry walked over to him and showed him the albums.

"Commie Hillbilly shit," Sam said.

Barry smirked and shook his head like he'd heard some off-colored joke. "Do you ever listen to the things that come out of your mouth?" He asked. He walked to the truck and, feeling the heat on the vinyl seat, set the albums on the floor.

A high pitched horn honked as a white Alfa Romeo rolled up the Belgian block driveway. Cankers of rust blistered the paint around the wheel wells and the rocker panels. The top was down and Purdy shouted, "Don't take it! Not yet!" He yanked on the parking brake, one foot already out the door.

Purdy was a thin man with closely cropped gray hair, always clean shaven and shiny. His cheek bones jutted like knuckles on a fist. His small lens Ray Bans, two black dots punched into his head, cut into the tanned skin of his pointed nose. He wore his clothes a little too big, a cream linen shirt on his boney shoulders like canvas over a picture frame. His thin legs covered to an inch above the knees in black shorts. His leather sandals clapped his heels as he marched to the curb.

"You haven't thrown anything away, have you?" His voice was worried.

"No, sir," Sam said.

"Good. I need to put this stuff back by the house."

"Why you want to put anything back in there?" Sam asked.

Barry walked back toward the two men.

"I'm not putting anything back in the house. Can't you see it's burned?" Purdy's eyes squinted against the sun and his lips clenched as he measured his words. "I need you to move it all into the back, behind the barn." His speech was stern and slow.

"You need *us* to move it. Now, wait a minute. We can't do that. We--"

"I'll pay you," Purdy interrupted.

"I don't know." Sam looked to Barry. "What do you think?"

"Why are you moving it back?" Barry asked.

"Because, I don't want to throw it out yet. Look, I'll pay you."

Purdy was growing irritated.

"It's not that easy," Sam said. "We could get in big trouble. It's against Union--"

"All I'm asking is that you help move a few of these things to the back. You can keep what you've rummaged and I'll pay you fifty dollars."

"Each?" Sam asked.

"Total," Purdy said.

Sam shrugged his shoulders and Barry scratched the back of his neck.

Barry wanted to laugh. Purdy and Martin had never gotten along. Martin's moving in with him and Kyle was a disruption to everything. Martin told Barry about the ways he egged Purdy on, the whining gripes he'd overheard him making to Martin's brother about how, when he helped around the store, Martin was always telling some ridiculous anecdote, whistling honky-tonk tunes, bantering with customers, or, while reading through the newspaper, he'd spout off about social politics. As if that weren't bad enough, at home, in the barn, Martin was always banging on metals, firing up torches

for welding monstrosities, driving Purdy mad with the sounds of a die-grinder against steel. Purdy never hid the fact that he hated Martin, and Martin never hid the fact that he enjoyed his effect on Purdy.

"Where do you want it?" Sam asked.

"We'll take it in back," Purdy said, already dragging a wooden desk chair toward the house.

Sam and Barry grabbed either end of the wooden trunk and followed after Purdy, who fumbled with the padlock and chain, hastily pulling the links through the wooden slats of the fence. Opening the gate, he threw the chain and the lock in the thick green grass. The garbage men were surprised to see a garden of rugged sculptures. "Mylanta! Would you look at that?" Sam set down his end of the trunk.

"Yeah, garish aren't they?" Purdy asked.

"Huh?" Sam walked towards the sculptures.

"Ugly. Junk." Purdy had his arms folded over his stomach, a cheek pinched back in disgust as he looked around the yard.

They all stood in loose regimentation, a battalion of junk creatures varying in size, most of them too abstract to understand. In front of them all, unmistakably, a soldier dressed in a war-belt, an American flag wrapped around its neck. Its base was the metal skeleton of an old barber's chair. The chest was made up of a keyboard and a bird cage, open and empty. The head—a gas mask and an army helmet—was connected to the torso by a lightning rod. A thirty-ought-six rifle, with a steak knife fastened to the barrel, and a drive shaft for arms. Strapped to its back was a C.B. radio, multi-colored pacifiers stacked ten tall on an antenna pointing high in the air.

Next to it was a caryatid holding nothing, built entirely out of bicycle parts—welded forks and frames for arms and legs, sprockets at the major joints, an inverted seat at the crotch, pedals and rubber grips for hands and feet. Sam walked up to it and spun the red-tired rims mounted to the chest. "You ever see tits like these, man?"

Sam smiled back at Barry.

"Are we going to move the rest of that trash back here, or what?" Purdy's voice snapped each of the garbage men out of his treasure-drunk dreams.

"Oh yeah. Hey, what's up with all of these? Are you getting rid of them?" Sam was eager to stake his claim on the junk art.

"No. We're not getting rid of anything. Not yet anyhow." Purdy's voice trailed off at the end, nearly inaudible.

They moved everything into the back and Purdy closed the gate behind them. Barry noticed that the chain and lock were still in the grass on the other side of the fence. Purdy climbed into his car and started the engine.

"Wait a minute there, chief." Sam walked toward the car in long strides. "We need to settle up, don't we?"

"Yeah, sorry." Purdy dug into his back pocket for his wallet. Sam watched as he pulled out two crisp bills from among many others. "Here you go."

Sam took the money and slid the bills against each other looking at the twin faces of Andrew Jackson. "Hey, man. That's only forty bucks. You said fifty."

Purdy was already backing down the drive. "Sorry, all I had. Besides, it's easier to split that way." The gear box ground into first and jumped forward, the tires chirping on the hot pavement.

"Cock smoker." Sam looked back at Barry and stabbed a twenty at him. "We better hustle. We're way behind now."

For the rest of the morning, Sam released the air brakes, jumped out of the cab, and ran around throwing bags and cans like an Olympic hammer thrower in order to get back on schedule. The two of them running and sweating, jumping from truck to curb, bouncing cans, and tearing bags of diapers, milk cartons, and leftovers. Barry leaned his face in the hot breeze to avoid the stench of the truck.

The bells at St. John Cantius rang four times.

"You wanna stop off at Angel's for pops?" Sam asked standing on the jump step of the truck.

"Sure."

Angel's was the local ma-and-pa service station. Angel, the old man who owned the place, came from Oaxaca chasing the American dream. He used to send money home to his wife hoping to bring the rest of the family to Ohio, but she refused to leave Mexico and moved in with her sister where she continued carving *alebrijes*, colorful animal figurines Angel sold in the store.

The garage was becoming obsolete. Five years earlier, a truck had rolled off its jack, pinning Angel between a tool chest and the grill, crushing two vertebrae. Besides the injury, Angel was getting too old to work on cars anymore and didn't have the money for updated diagnostic machines. His son Angelito, better known as Spider for the black web tattooed across the back of his hand, was doing most of the work now. He had taken a Modern Automotives correspondence course while locked up in Lima and had gotten out a year earlier after doing a twelve year bit for manslaughter.

Sam parked on the curb and both men walked into Angel's.

"'Ello, *amigos*." Angel was taking inventory of belts and clamps on the white peg board behind the counter. A small fan oscillated atop the drinks cooler next to a framed picture of Zapata. "What can I do for you today?" Angel stuck his pencil behind his ear and leaned on his dark, scarred hands. His smile spread wide as the ring of the church bells, and his pencil thin moustache gave him a look of proud tradition. The pomade in his hair glistened in the sun.

"Just getting some sodas. Sure is hot today." Sam slid open the heavy glass door. He grabbed two Goya pineapple sodas, and Barry pulled a bag of chicherones from the chip tree on the counter. Barry paid and they walked outside. Sam was back to complaining about the forty bucks. Spider was supine on a mechanic's trundle under an old AMC Eagle, his legs sticking out, one foot digging into the pavement for leverage.

"That asshole's gonna get it one day," Sam said.

A wrench bounced against the concrete. "*Mierda*!" Spider rolled out from under the car and stood up rubbing at a fresh gash in his knuckle. "Oh, just you guys. Thought there was about to be some fighting here." When Spider smiled, the wrinkles at the corner of his left eye split between two tear drop tattoos like a scar. He wiped the blood from the back of his hand on his coveralls and stuck it out to shake. The webbed hand caught and pulled Sam into a friendly one armed hug. Spider repeated this with Barry, the hug always punctuated with a heavy slap on the back.

"Who's the asshole you're talking about?"

Barry said, "The guy down the hill with the Alfa Romeo."

Spider chuckled. "Yeah, I know him. *Maricon*. Cheap bastard, too. Always wants work on his car for free. Said I scratched his paint up last time it was in here. You ever look at that paint up close?"

"A fucking mess," Sam said.

"Like he drove it through a wall. Wanted me to pay for a new paint job. *Pinche gringo culero*." Spider shook his head, opening and closing his fist, watching the meniscus of blood rise above the wound. "D'you hear about the fire?"

"Yeah, we were there this morning," Barry said.

Sam told him the story of the morning, the loads of stuff in the yard, the charred second floor, the weird statues in the back, and Purdy's rip-off.

"That faggot really pisses me off. Twenty bucks to save his ass. That's all right. He'll get his in the end."

"Be careful what you say, *amigo*. He might have some antique pistol and shoot you." Spider laughed and punched Sam in the arm.

The sun was invisible in the sky as the three men talked about what each of them knew of the fire. It wasn't much. They made plans to meet at Edison's later that night, and Sam said, "Well, we better get out of here."

Dumping the load of trash on the deck, Barry hopped out of the cab with his new albums. Sam asked, "You want to try and go back for that junk? I really want to get all that scrap. There has to be a hundred bucks in metals there."

"Yeah, but."

"But what? Go with me back to the yard. We'll drive back in my truck and load it up."

"How are we going to get in? And what if someone's there?"

"The fence is open. We never put the chain back, and if someone's there…"

"Okay," Barry said. "Let's go."

Martin's brother was sitting under the tree looking at the truck when Sam pulled up to the curb, the tire rubbing against it gently. Kyle raised a dark, meaty hand and waved. The garbage men, still in their coveralls, climbed out of the truck and banged the doors closed. Barry nodded, "Kyle."

Kyle, husky and tall even when seated, looked up from the grass, patted his knees and nodded back, "Barry."

"Been a while. Heard about what happened." Barry continued, "Our condolences. Really liked your brother, man. Anything we can do to help?"

Kyle took in a deep breath through his nose, his lips pinched at the corners. He exhaled long and slow, thinking. His hands and the wrinkles in his rugged face were black with soot. He pointed to the front door. The yellow caution tape, torn in two, snapped in the rising wind like whips. "You can help me empty the rest of the house."

Barry walked over to Kyle, reached out his hand and helped pull him to his feet. The three men walked toward the house. "Bunch of people have driven by, but nobody stops. Don't blame them really."

"We saw Purdy here earlier," Sam said.

"He was throwing everything out wasn't he?" Kyle asked. The men stopped at the top of the front steps.

"Yeah," Sam said. "Everything was out on the curb, then he asked if we could help him put everything back. Scared as hell you were coming home soon and would be pissed."

"Yeah, well."

Barry tried to get the conversation away from Purdy. "You going to drag everything out of here?"

"Yeah. Everything is ruined, water damage, smoke, or just plain burned. Not a damned thing worth saving."

"How'd it start?" Sam asked.

"Fire Marshall called it an electrical discrepancy in the wall of the kitchen, but..." Kyle paused, chewed his lip. The men entered the house. Kyle continued where he left off, "Some say it was intentional."

The place was a disaster. A few walls were nothing but exposed studs, charred and crumbling. Black dust floated in the air like coke dust around the foundries. Small puddles of water gathered reflections of the empty blackness, muddy around the edges. The precious chaise that troubled Purdy dripped slowly into the puddle underneath. Barry rested his hand on the back of it. It was cold to the touch.

"No offense, but I'm kind of . . . creeped out. You want me to haul the stuff out of the back yard for you?" Sam was looking around like he was waiting for ghosts to fly out of the corners or beams to fall from the ceiling.

"No offense taken. I'll need to unlock the gate."

"Already open. We never put the chain back." Sam walked toward the door.

Kyle looked at Barry with a curious eye. The two men carried out the chaise, chairs, a settee, a small desk, a soggy cardboard box of coats and flannels, and set them on the porch. They moved up the stairs, stepping carefully over the few that were missing. The planks groaned under the weight of Kyle's girth. Barry reached for the banister and a spindle shook and fell like a loose tooth. The second floor appeared to be in better shape. There was a strange green hue to everything.

"Not so bad up here," Barry said.

"Just looks that way. It's the sun shining through the hole in the roof. Nice glow from the tarp." Kyle pointed up to the ceiling. The tarp shook, a green plastic wave.

They stepped into Martin's room. Nothing had been boxed. A single bed lay in the corner, a small writing table was pushed against the wall under the window, and a short bookshelf—three levels of wood planks and cinderblocks—leaned against the back wall of the room. Barry stepped on a tin hummingbird in the middle of the floor. A lone swallow still hung from a wire just above the window, mottled green, spinning slowly in flight.

Kyle broke the silence. "You know, he liked you, too."

"What?"

"You said you liked him. He talked about you often, said you reminded him of—"

"Hey!" Sam hollered from below.

Kyle moved to the window and yelled back, "Yeah?"

"Mind if I take this scrap?"

"No, go ahead. Take whatever you like." Kyle turned to Barry. "That goes for you, too. Whatever you want, you can take. I don't want any of this stuff."

"You sure? You might want to keep some of this."

"I have all the memories I need right here." Kyle tapped two fingers on his wrinkled forehead, leaving black prints in the sweat.

Barry looked at the hummingbird on the floor. "You know, there are legends that say hummingbirds carry hopes . . ." He was interrupted by the sound of a corner of the tarp tearing up from the roof. It flapped loudly in the wind. The hallway was suffused with a gray light playing on the dust in the air.

"Martin said you were a pretty smart fellow. How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"Working your way through college?"

"Just working." Barry picked up the damp books on the floor, considering their titles.

Kyle said he didn't see why he shouldn't be in college if he liked reading so much. "Why waste potential collecting trash?"

"Somebody's has to do it."

"You're happy with your life? Is this all you aspire to do?"

"That's what my girlfriend always asked." Barry stacked the books on the desk. The swallow swung in ellipses in the growing wind.

"She's gone, I take it?"

"Yeah, said she couldn't waste any more of her time."

"So, why a garbage man?" Kyle asked.

"It's a job. Easy hours, benefits, decent pay. No boss always lording it over you."

Kyle smirked. "Fair enough. Take those books if you want them. Nothing else up here, really." The tarp flapped wildly. "Something's blowing in. Let's get out of here."

In the back, Sam was tying up aluminum scraps. The yard was nearly empty, aside from the sculptures. "What are you going to do with these? I can scrap these, too, if you want," Sam said.

"No, I'm keeping them. Figured I'd donate some and keep the others at the store. That ought to make Purdy happy." They all laughed.

Sam hauled out the last of the metals, and Barry looked for a box to put the books and the hummingbird in. The footlocker was still in a pile of boxes against the fence. He opened it, looked at the broken cast of teeth, and set the books inside.

"You said anything, right?" Barry asked.

Kyle nodded and helped Barry carry the box out to Sam's truck. There was all kinds of junk piled high in the bed. Sam turned, smiled, and started whistling the theme from *Sanford and Son*.

"How are you getting all that home?"

Sam said, "Very carefully."

They set Barry's footlocker in the grass and looked around. Kyle looked toward the barn, then back to Barry. "You own a bike?"

"No. Why?"

"Because, I know where you can find a real gem for free." Kyle smiled at Barry and walked over to Martin's bike.

"I'd feel weird taking your brother's bike," Barry said.

"What would I do with it? I think he'd be pretty happy if you took it. You'd at least use it."

Both men stared at the bike, while Sam checked on his load.

"Okay, I'll take it. Thanks." Barry said.

Barry loaded his new things, including the albums from Sam's truck, in the cart. They talked about meeting up at Edison's later. Kyle walked back into the house alone, Sam—eager to get to the scrap yard before they closed—sped off, hazards flashing.

Barry climbed humbly on his new bike and took a drag from the pipe in his pocket and pedaled away, not sure where he was going. He headed down to West 3rd looking at the boarded up windows of other houses—houses that had had no fires, houses with chain-linked front yards, candy wrappers and want ads blown into the corners. Quart-sized beer bottles—shared between men sitting in driveways, rolling on the sidewalk, standing empty on the corner—adorned the neighborhood. A little high now, he pedaled harder. The air watering his eyes and obscuring his vision grew colder as the sun slowly burned out. He thought of the city, this part of the city, the bottom. He saw glitter floating in the air in front of him, blowing across the street, sands blowing off dunes of glass.

The glass recycling plant was closed for the night and Barry decided he wanted to climb the multi-colored glass mounds. Pulling the bike against the fence, he looked up and down the street. He opened the top of the footlocker, grabbed the book on top, *Ask the Dust.* He rolled it up, shoved it into the back pocket of his coveralls, and climbed the fence.

The dunes were separated into cobalt, clear, brown, green and a mix of reds and yellows. The blue mound was the tallest, the one Barry chose to climb. He kicked the toe of his boot into the side of the mound and glass dust rose, shards clinked and tumbled. One cautious step after another, Barry made his way to the top, but when he sat, his palms and ass were stung by dozens of glass splinters.

"Shit!" Barry jumped to his feet and slid down to the bottom. "Real smart, buddy," he said to himself. Back over the fence, he wiped gently at the dust in his hands, smearing little pin pricks of blood. The bells of the small cantilever train bridge rang their warning. Barry walked to the edge of the river and sat down listening to rhythm of the train.

Setting the book in his lap, the pages opened to three folded pieces of light blue paper. Barry unfolded it and read the salutation: Dearest Maxine, dated May 11, 1970 in heavy-handed black script. Martin wrote of American operations in Cambodia, about missing his wife, his home, his family, all things typical of a soldier in the middle of battle. He responded to letters received, but in the middle of the second page the tone changed, became angry. *I feel a profound repulsion for all that is bellicose. I can't quiet my head from wondering to what extent a victory attained at the cost of a destroyed country is victory—I no longer have any enthusiasm for anything but peace.* Barry felt a guilty pleasure and excitement in reading on. *If I get through these great crises that life holds in store for me, perhaps I will be less unhappy than another, for I want to learn and know.* A car chirped its tires.

The train continued to rattle across the bridge. Barry looked at the palm of his hand and thought of how strangely foreshadowing the letter was, considering the fate of

Maxine and their son Fanon. He read on. Martin's words had grown more philosophical and fatalistic. *Maybe that's what we're all looking for throughout our lives, just this, the greatest possible sorrow so we can become ourselves before dying.* The train was gone now and so was the sun. Barry shook his head at the pages in his hands and looked at the dark waters of the river. What had *he* accomplished in his life? He'd never really been anywhere. He had nothing better than a checkered high school education. His live-in girlfriend of four years had decided he was a waste of her time and left. The only people he knew were the people he worked with or for—nothing going for him but a job. He walked to the back of the bike and put the book in the footlocker.

Walking his bike up the hill to Edison's, Barry could still smell the fire mixed with his own odors. "Ripe," he said to himself. He took another pull from his pipe, parked the bike next to the building, and walked into the bar.

Karen was already there, a glass of wine in her hand. "Barry! I'm glad you came." She slapped her hand on the stool next to her. Barry sat down.

"Hey, Barry." Jessica, the bartender, a thin Trustafarian grad student at the art school downtown, wore her hair in a thick ponytail of dirty blonde dreadlocks. Of all the trust fund hippy kid idiots, Jessica was pretty cool.

Barry nodded, asked for a can of Pabst. Turning to Karen, he asked where everyone was. She said that some were out back on the patio and others were shooting pool. He asked why she wasn't back there with them.

"It's starting to sink in, I guess." She pointed to the mirror. Barry looked at his reflection and saw how filthy he was. Jessica set the beer in front of him and ducked under the bar.

"Yeah, I know. I haven't been home yet," he said in his defense.

"No. Not you, pig pen," she said. "The picture."

"Oh." Barry looked at the small framed photograph of Martin standing next to his bike, one hand holding onto the handle bar, the other, the thumb hooked in a vest pocket, held back his jacket, exposing a younger man's waistline. The bike, of course, was loaded to the gills with scrap metal cans and glass bottles. In the background, the green, white, and red painted wall of Angel's Garage.

"Pretty nice, huh?

"Very cool." Barry took a long pull at his beer, swallowed. "Aaaahh. Man. Cheap beer tastes so good when it's ice cold. Jessica?"

"Yeah." Jessica popped up and set a thin book on the bar in front of Barry.

"Can I have lime for this?"

"For that piss?"

"Sure, can't I be pretentious about something?"

"You are, about your books." She pointed to the book on the bar. "Finished it. Crazy bastard, that *Professor Y*."

Barry laughed. "Easy enough read. 'What do you think of Aristophenes?'"

"'Aristophenes, now he was somebody!'" Jessica played along.

Barry smiled. She had not simply read the book, she remembered it and understood the humor. "'And what do you think he invented?'"

She paused, searching her head for the next line.

Barry burst in with exaggerated bravado, "'Thunder! Clouds! Rhetoric!'"

"Why in the hell are you settling with being a garbage man? I just don't get you." Jessica said, smiling in the way that suggests light-heartedness, but at the same time a sincere frustration.

The night was filled with reminiscences of Martin and his work, his kind words: *Every time is a good time to practice a little bit of kindness, patience, and understanding.* Yet, after several rounds of whiskey and pitchers of beer came the drunken arguments over his art, its meaning, its worth. Then came the teary-eyed toasts. Glasses were raised high and everyone *here-here'd* to the sappy, the clever, and the crass.

Sam and Spider showed up late, with stars in their eyes. Barry was pretty well tanked.

"Where've you been?" Barry asked.

"Sold some scrap, paid a visit to a friend, and had some beers with this guy."

Sam and Spider looked at each other and laughed. They were high as kites. "Turn you on?" Sam asked.

Barry looked at the clock: 12:20. He thought about the bike outside and his ride home. "Sure."

Sam handed him a white contact case, and Barry walked down to the toilets. He closed the stall door and carefully opening the container, just the sight of the powder gave Barry the quivers. He tapped a little of it on the back of his hand and sniffed it.

Barry washed his hands up to his elbows like a surgeon scrubbing in. He looked in the mirror at eyes wide and shining like green glass. "What are you doing with your life, man?" he said. Cupping cold water in his hands, he soaked his face in the sink, and

dried his face with paper towels. He leaned his head back and inhaled deeply, nearly choking on the bitter drip in his throat.

"Wow." He said, and walked back upstairs.

There was a glass of whiskey waiting for him at the bar. Everybody was out on the patio. Kyle had set up Martin's caryatid on a flat stone in the Koi pond, and Purdy was adjusting the spotlight to shine up behind her. Glasses were raised again, as Purdy made a toast to the "creative environmental consciousness of a local artistic genius, and one of the kindest men to have graced my life."

"Asshole." This came from a dark corner of the patio, as everyone silently sipped in honor of the truth of the statement.

Maybe it was the booze, maybe it was the coke, or maybe just Barry's visceral nature coming to a head, but he couldn't resist toasting loudly, "To bombastic, placating effrontery."

"What did he say?"

"Hell if I know."

Barry threw back the whiskey and went back inside. Sam followed him in. He grabbed Barry by the arm.

"Hey, you crazy fuck. What the hell did you mean by that?"

"I'm loaded and I need to go home." Barry felt his ears growing hot. His scalp itched terribly and the muscles in his jaw shook. "I've got to get out of here. Thanks for the bump."

"Wait, you crazy bastard. You want a ride?" Sam was still holding on to Barry's arm.

"No. I'm riding the bike home." Barry shook free.

"Okay, man. See you in the morning."

Over his shoulder he said, "Maybe you will, maybe you won't." And he threw open the door, walked around the corner, but he misjudged his angles and slammed his shoulder into the brick wall. He cursed and climbed on the bike.

A cool wind blew with no stars visible in the sky as Barry pedaled across Abbey Bridge and down West 25th toward Ohio City. He unzipped the front of his coveralls and pulled them down to his waist, tying the sleeves together in his lap. The night air felt great rushing past him, through his chest hairs and under his arms. Turning onto West 34th, he laced his fingers behind his head and pedaled slowly with eyes wide, watering, and his chin pointing to the sky.

When he pulled into the back yard of his apartment, he parked the bike next to the garage and wrestled the footlocker up the metal stairs of the fire escape.

Inside the apartment, Barry flipped through the contents of the footlocker in the middle of the floor. He looked at the cover of "Sweet Heart of the Rodeo," walked across the wood floor and put the album on the turntable. The speakers crackled. Barry opened the windows and walked to the bathroom.

Emptying his pockets in the sink, he held the white case. He opened one side and tapped a small pile of powder on the top of the toilet tank. Then he stripped, turned on the shower, took a whiff of the powder, and stepped into the water.

Standing with his hands against the tile shower wall, the water beating against his face, directing a hard stream of piss into the drain, the bitter drip of cocaine slipped down his gullet. He swallowed hard and began washing every inch of himself—washing away

the dirt of the day, the bacteria of spoiled food, the smells of cat litter, baby diapers, yard waste; washing away the soot that permeated his coveralls, the glass dust still sticking to his buttocks, the cigarette smoke from the bar; washing away images of Martin burning alone in a tiny room, thoughts of what he might have done to keep Michelle from leaving him.

It's the devil testing me. Trying to see how much I can take before I give in. He squeezed paste on his tooth brush and scrubbed away the day's residue—pineapple soda, chicherones, more soot, the grass, the beers, the whiskey, the bad taste of an angry toast. No matter how hard he brushed, the numbness of his teeth stayed. "What the hell are you doing?" he said, and spit minty foam and blood at the drain, then rinsed his mouth under the shower head.

Toweling off, music mixing with the shower steam, Barry thought about what classes he would take if he went to school—psychology, because he was always trying to figure out why people acted the way they did. Biology, because genetics had to be considered in that conundrum of Why. English, of course, because he'd like to know if he really knew anything about books. French, so he could better understand Céline, ceramics, painting, philosophy. He threw his towel over the curtain rod, carried the white container into the other room and set it on the stereo. In the bedroom he pulled on a pair of shorts, then went back to the stereo and flipped the album. He grabbed the container, sat at the small breakfast table, and cut himself two more lines. He inhaled the shorter of the two and the dust shot straight to the back of his throat. He needed a drink.

In the kitchen he ate three aspirin and pounded two glasses of water. He pushed his fingers through his wet hair until they stuck in a tangle. It made him think of Jessica at the bar. Who was she to question his choices? What the hell was she doing?

Spending her daddy's money going to school to paint, working in a shitty little bar in Cleveland? He paced in front of the window, sat on the sill. Staring out at the skyline, he planned to quit his job and apply to college. But which one? Where would he find the money? How would he pay the bills?

Maybe he just needed a different job. What was he qualified to do? How long was the record just spinning? He flipped the switch to the radio. A Tchaikovsky violin concerto cried from the speakers. In the bedroom, he searched for a t-shirt and pulled out Michelle's blue PETA shirt. He felt his stomach knot up. Holding it up to his nose, he took in a deep breath of the fabric and her Bulgarian Green Tea perfume. Neatly folded, he tucked back in the corner of the drawer. He pulled out another, slipped it on and went back to the sitting room.

He sat in front of the footlocker and pulled everything out—the broken plaster cast of teeth, more books and letters. He dumped out the contents of the Slippery Rock coffee cup, grabbed the rest of the albums, and wiped the inside clean with the palm of his hand. Closing the top and pushing it in front of the couch, he sat with his feet propped on top of it, opened a book and started to read: *Captain Michales gnashed his teeth. He usually did so when wrath took charge of him. "Captain Wildboar" was his apt nickname in Megalokastro…"*

Barry's alarm clock screamed from the bedroom. He bolted upright, dropping the book on the floor. "Shit," he said, rubbing at his face with both hands. He walked into the bedroom and turned off the alarm. "I can't do this today." The thought of the first garbage can spilling its contents in the back of a stinking truck, and Sam's heavy metal music, had Barry on his knees in front of the toilet, dry heaves echoing in the bowl. He ran cold water over his head in the tub.

In the sitting room, he dialed the number of the dispatch office. The phone rang. Barry paced in front of the window thinking about what he was doing. Was he calling off? Was he quitting? Would they fire him?

He looked at the first bluing of the morning sky. He heard bottles clinking into a dumpster, plastic cans scraping across concrete. While looking below the window, the dispatcher answered: "City of Cleveland Waste Management."

Barry looked at the orange crates attached to his new bike.

"Hello. City of Cleveland Waste Management."

Barry said, "Doesn't anyone believe in work any more?"

The operator said, "Whatever you say, asshole."

Barry hung up the phone, and stood in front of the refrigerator pulling on his boots. He gulped down half a quart of cranberry juice and ran down the stairs. With the trailer easily unhitched, Barry jumped on the bike and pedaled furiously to work.

SECTION VI

BACKWATER

So I'm sitting on this bus out of Atlanta next to a mousy little guy with a narrow tie and a dark suit and he introduces himself as Dr. Cicero Hardscrabble, head of the department of anthropology at Backwater A&M. Apparently, the fact that my nose was buried in a book was not enough to indicate that I didn't care to talk to anyone.

Being polite, I try to let on that I have heard of the school but he smiles and says I probably haven't because it isn't an accredited institution and limits its enrollment to students who are willing to listen to professors and sleep in sexually segregated dormitories. That makes it very small, indeed, he says.

The only distinguished anthropologists I am familiar with are Dr. Margaret Mead, whose assertion that pot smoking doesn't hurt anybody made her a national celebrity, and Dr. Viktor E. Frankl, who has given very intriguing notions of the ways in which to sort out the proper paths in search of meaning. So I drop these two names and he says that, of course, he has read their works but that he hasn't met them because he was thrown out of the only learned society he ever belonged to.

I venture to ask why that was, and he says it was because he supports the SPRR, which, he adds, is not to be confused with the Southern Pacific Railroad, but instead stands for the Society for the Promotion of Russian Roulette.

I nearly choke in surprise as Dr. Hardscrabble tells me that he thought up the society on the theory that if humanity is to avoid sinking further into a quagmire of idiocy at its present, alarming rate, the current determination by people of goodwill to preserve damn fools at any cost must be reversed. Damn fools, says the good professor, must be allowed to go, but only voluntarily and, if possible, pleasurably.

That's the beauty of Russian roulette, the professor points out. No one has to play it. Only damn fools will. And after an average of only six spins of a six-shooter—of course, it must be played with a revolver—one in six potential genetic problems is immediately solved.

The professor also maintains that "Stop—Bridge Out" signs should be changed to read, "Bridge Out—Proceed at Will." This, he says, would not only cut the next generation population (we are reaching a dangerous population level), but raise its I.Q.

He also believes the "Danger" should be removed from all "High Voltage" signs since sans the warning people who are too dumb to know what high voltage denotes might not have any more children.

He tells me that Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* story, *Through the Looking Glass*, inspired him to write an essay, "Through the Windshield Glass," which he wasn't able to sell to any of the learned magazines. In the article, the professor posits that people stupid enough to sit on their seatbelts should be allowed to pass through their windshields because this would slow the dow-breeding of human intelligence. He has big plans for motor arenas where those so minded may play high-speed games of chicken. Wild drivers would have an opportunity to eliminate each other at an early age without endangering law-abiding citizens.

He is currently writing for grants to purchase and develop Happy Island, a pet project intended as a resort for narcotics abusers where addicts would be allowed room and board plus all the dope they desire with the single proviso that they agree to stay locked on the island.

"Mainliners don't last long," he says, "and they lose practically all of their sex drive. Therefore, my plan will produce euphoria, birth control, early funerals, and most importantly, improved safety for the general public. Now, alas," he continues, "all is reserved. We spend billions to keep to keep idiots healthy and prolific, perpetuating bad genetics. My projects are certain to produce amazing and noticeable results within two to three generations."

The bus pulls into a sleepy Southern town and, sure enough, there is a group of dilapidated clapboard buildings behind a faded sign, "Backwater A&M."

The good professor stands and, with a supercilious and owlish brow, he says as way of apology, "We can't get any public funds. We aren't accredited." With that he turns and climbs off the bus. I watch him disappear as the bus brakes hiss and we roll forward. I think about what he said for a moment, then put my nose back in my book and try to forget.

SECTION VII

CLARET AND BLUE

9:30 Saturday morning, the day after Christmas, Boxing Day; Lucas Bellamy sat in his Pioneer Square apartment. He slouched in his only chair in a T-shirt and boxers, barefooted and four beers deep into a six pack of Weinhard's. The final whistle had blown on the television as Southampton defeated Arsenal 2-0 at Highbury. Two exquisite goals from Leon Best, one stuck neatly from twenty-five yards out, in the top right corner like a stamp, the other dipping and swerving through a crowd of defenders like a pickpocket nicking the inside of the post, sending goalkeeper Lars Lehman's water bottle cart wheeling into the back of the net.

"Go on, you Saints!" Lucas raised his beer into the air, drained it, and set it on the edge of the bookshelves next to him. Startled, the cat jumped from the back of the chair and disappeared down the hall of the tiny apartment above Elliott Bay Book Company. "Sorry, Albert," he said over his shoulder.

As the highlights from the match were reviewed, Lucas stared at the raised pink scar that arched over his ankle bone like a frown. He pointed and flexed his foot. The expression of the scar never changed.

It had been twelve years since he'd left London. He'd moved in with his cousin Chris, a computer programmer for Microsoft, until he took a job bartending at the J&M.

A pewter afternoon at Upton Square dripped into evening as Terry Adams—the man whose voice haunted him now from the television, and whose face he saw every time his ankle clicked loudly like a door closing—chased after him. Lucas, having pushed the ball cleverly between Adams's legs, was headed towards goal, one on one with David Kirkland, the wide-eyed and mustachioed goalkeeper. With Kirkland creeping off his line, poised like a wrestler, Lucas looked down, measured the ball, and swung back his foot to chip the keeper. Lucas never heard the shouts of "Man-on!" or the sound of sod tearing up behind him as Adams's studded heels rooted like hogs, searching out the truffle that was Lucas's ankle.

Adams was sent off. Referee, Paul Alcock could hardly get the card out quickly enough as he ran at Adams, his cheeks puffed and the whistle blasting rooster tails of spittle and rain. The Football Association, having reviewed the tape, suspended Adams for five matches and fined him £12,000. None of which served as any consolation to Lucas.

The bone had snapped just above the ankle. A compound fracture of the tibia had not only torn through the skin but had also forced its way past the shin pad and through the claret sock. The men in the green jumpers ran onto the pitch, strapped Lucas to the orange stretcher, and transported him directly to Newton General Hospital and out of the game forever. The tibia, diagonally broken in two, required a rod and six screws. The lateral malleolus was splintered and irreparable, the medial malleolus was cracked in the shape of a "*y*", and the tendons and ligaments surrounding them all were torn to bits, as was Lucas's pending contract with West Hampton United.

"All I can say about that tackle is the lad got there as soon as he could. It was a terrible tackle and a worse no-call by the official." Adams's face filled the screen. Badly-coifed, long-chinned, longer-necked, with ears that stuck out like the handles on a trophy—Adams was referring to a tackle by Claus Lundekvam on Ces Fabregas in the middle of the park. A tackle that led to the first of Best's goals.

Flattening his nose with two fingers, Lucas scowled at the television, raised one leg, forced a half-drunken fart, and growled, "Aw, fuck off you horse's arse!" He stood, flipped two fingers at the television, and clicked it off.

Lucas stood at the window and looked out across the bay. Albert sniffed at the cold window, his nose leaving clear lines in the fog of his breath. The sun rolled up and down with every crest and trough of the small waves like a slick white ball. He rose up on his toes and his right ankle popped. Albert looked down at it.

It wasn't so much that Lucas loathed Terry Adams for what he'd done; it was more for the fame he gained from doing it, from being a hard man, a goon, a thug. Sure, it's a contact sport—aggressive, physical, and impassioned—derby days especially. Hell, Lucas had given just as much as he had taken. He was certainly no ballerina. But Adams continued to play—he won trophies, played on some of the most storied European stages in the world. He played in the Champions' League, the European Championships, and the World cup. He did T.V. commercials, signed an enormous contract, received boat loads of endorsement money, drove fine foreign cars, and lived in a bleeding mansion. All this and the joy of getting piss drunk on the best booze, shagging more than his share of birds, and trashing hotels on week long boozers all over the globe like a goddamn rock star.

What did Lucas get? Trying to run away from football and England, he got to live in a two roomed flat above a book store in a city just as rainy, grey, and depressing as London. He had the pleasure of serving snot-nosed, baby-faced young professionals their fancy cocktails and imported beers 8 p.m. to close every night except Monday. At least they tipped in the states.

Lucas ran his hand over Albert's head, down his back, and—the cat raising his grey and black brindled bottom in the air—pulled gently on his tail. Albert took a swing, a soft pat on the wrist at Lucas as he turned away from the window.

"Easy there, chopper." A little warm about the cheeks and ears, Lucas went to the closet to dress.

When he pulled the chain, the light clicked on and popped off like the flash of a camera. "Damn." In the dark of the closet tiny blue-white balls bounced all around him until his eyes adjusted. He got dressed in the half light of the hallway.

Downstairs in the bookstore Lucas bought a coffee and perused the "New Arrival" shelves near the front doors. Skimming the spines of books and the portraits of covers faced out, Lucas burnt his tongue and spat his Turkish dark-roast on the front of his coat when he saw, staring back at him—fancy new haircut, blue eyes glaring, a bit of blue-black growth about his jowls and chin, smartly intimidating black jacket—the formidably flattened, dented, and scarred sugar bowl that was Terry Adams.

"For fuck's sake, you've got to be—"

Lucas pulled the book from the shelf and set his cup in its place. He read the cover allowed, "*Terry Adams . . . Addicted . . . the sports book of the year . . .* Are you they taking the piss?" He turned the book over and read the blurbs. "*A ground-breaking*

life journey . . . An impressive and candid memoir . . . extraordinarily frank and honourable." Inside were three sections of glossy color photos—photos as a boy, photos of him with family and friends, photos of him playing golf and cricket, photos of him raising trophies and children, photos of him training and playing and showering—but the one that got to Lucas was the photo of Adams lunging, scowling, and reaching at a referee who is pointing to the penalty spot, as a forgotten West Hampton player looks to be picking himself up from the ground, the white Mitre league ball yards away from all of them. The stewards are in winter coats, caution yellow, reflective bands around the cuffs and hems. Clumps of turf lay around the billiard green pitch and the fog of exasperated breaths hang like clouds. All of them frozen in time. The hairs rose at the back of Lucas's neck as the cold air from outside, and the smell of mud and rain, followed a customer in through the doors. Lucas grabbed his coffee and placed the book back on the shelf faced backwards.

He bought a bag of roasted cashews from Pioneer News and walked through the brick square. It was a noisy Saturday. There was a fracas coming from the quad in front of Planet Java. A worn leather ball skipped and rolled across the wet bricks toward Lucas. Angry voices echoed off the surrounding buildings. Lucas stopped the ball with the bottom of his shoe.

"Immanquable!"

"What? It was a terrible pass!"

"Quel nul!"

"You couldn't pass water!"

"Va te coucher!"

A young man, sweatpants tucked into his socks and a hooded sweatshirt darkened by sweat and rain, ran after the ball laughing and shaking his head.

Lucas was staring at the ball, rolling it back and forth under his shoe.

“Ball, please,” the young man said mussing water from his hair.

Lucas looked up, then back down to the ball. He pushed it forward, rolled it back, and slipped the toe of his shoe under it flipping it into the air in front of him. He gave it a few soft touches, keeping it in the air, and then cradled it to a stop atop his laces. He looked up at the young man and flipping the ball just above his head, he turned a hard shoulder at it sending the ball into the young man’s arms.

He rolled the ball in his hands searching the leather for street scars. A shout came from the group.

“On y va!”

The young man turned and rejoined his friends.

Lucas walked into the mini-mart and bought a bottle of claret and took it home to drink.

At 5:00 p.m. Lucas called in sick. He said he was going to Harbor View to have his ankle looked at.

“I got a bum wheel.”

Jimmy, the “J” in the J&M, asked what happened.

“I slipped walking downstairs and something in the ankle gave way.”

Jimmy told Lucas to take a couple of days off of his feet.

“Cheers, Jimmy. I’ll call you.”

By 10:30 Lucas was down at Temple Billiards belly up to the bar. He was heavy with wine and had switched to whiskey. People came and left. Lucas sat and drank.

"Alex, what say you gimme another Finnian shipwreck."

Alexander Alexandrokis—olive-skinned, dark-haired, and thinly mustached—poured Lucas another drink. "I'm timing you. You'd better slow it down."

Lucas waved the back of his hand at Alex as if he were shooing a fly or an odor.

A little after midnight Lucas pushed himself up from the bar, paused to steady his balance, and shuffled to the toilet. Music played on the jukebox and some people danced, some chalked cues and racked balls, and some sat talking on the couch by the window.

He pissed leaning his head against his the forearm that leaned against the wall above the urinal. From the bar the sounds of voices in unison could be heard singing. Though muffled by the walls, Lucas could make out the shouts of "We are the champions!" The door opened and in came a smiling, glassy-eyed, and singing man in Kappa warm-ups.

Lucas sorted himself out, pulled down the cold chrome lever, and zipped. He paused in front of the mirror and noticed two circular wet spots on the front of his pants. He rubbed vigorously at them with a wad of brown paper towel, but gave up easily and went back to his seat at the bar.

There was a large group of men—some giving high-fives and patting shoulders, some giving drunken you're-the-best-hugs, and two turning from the bar with pitchers of beer and a tray of spilling shot glasses—all of them celebrating some victory.

One man turned and bumped into Lucas as he tried to reclaim his stool.

"Oh, man. I'm sorry old-timer. Didn't see you there. Hey, Alex. Get this guy a round on me, would you?" The man patted Lucas on the back, apologized again, and turned to join his friends.

Alex asked Lucas what he wanted, walked away, and came back with a bottle of Weinhard's and a glass of water. "It's 2:1 water to beer from here on out."

"Aye," said Lucas. He looked over his shoulder at the group of men and asked what they were all on about.

"They just won the Greater Seattle Corporate Indoor Soccer Tournament at the Dome."

"No shit, huh!"

Two guys were tossing around a tiny white ball with corporate logos printed on each panel. Lucas watched the ball rise, arch, and fall in the mirror behind the bar. He drained his beer, dumped the ice water in the fichus next to him, and tapped the bottom of his glass on the bar to get Alex's attention.

By 1:30 a.m. the bar was nearly empty and a small-sided game had started along the far wall beyond the billiard tables. Lucas stood, nearly knocking over his stool, walked slowly toward the toilet, and paused to watch the game.

"You wanna join in, pops?" It was the same guy that bumped him at the bar.

Everyone playing looked at Lucas. Some of them laughed. All of them went on playing.

Lucas pissed and mumbled to the urinal cake. "Fucking moppets! What do they know? There's no one fitter at my age except maybe Raquel Welch." He laughed a little at his own wit, zipped, and flushed.

As he made his way back to the bar the ball squirted loose and hit the wall behind Lucas.

"Little help!" someone shouted.

Lucas turned to the ball and nudged it with the toe of his shoe.

"Come on, pops. Kick it over here."

Lucas stared down at the ball. He looked at the stitching between the panels, the names of the companies printed on them—Sea First Bank, Fred Meyers, Safeway, Key Bank, Microsoft, and Salvation Army.

"Aux chiottes!"

Lucas looked up. It was the kid from the square. He was standing in front of the goal—two bar stools set about three feet apart. Lucas rocked a little on his heels and put his palm against the wall. He sized up the distance, looked down at the ball, and back at the goal. Someone touched his shoulder. He turned and, for an instant, lost his focus and balance. The man grabbed him by the coat sleeves. It was Alex.

Alex had come out from behind the bar and was trying to get everyone to quiet down. "Come on, Lucas. Go sit down. Have a coffee and I'll walk you home later."

"Ah, shit in your hat. Watch me cork this mother."

Lucas urged Alex back with his elbow, looked down again, and set his leg in motion.

Chairs were sliding across the floor, people were laughing and zipping up their coats, glasses clinked as they were stacked, and lights were turning off when Lucas sat up

on the couch by the window. He kept his eyes half closed as everyone left except for Alex.

Outside, shuffling across the shining bricks of the square, one arm draped over Alex's shoulder, Alex explained to Lucas what had happened. Lucas, with his heavily diluted depth perception, had misjudged the size of the small ball and had driven his toe into the wooden floor, sending him tumbling to the floor head first. Lucas pushed his fingers into his hairline and felt the small hard lump.

"Damn it," he said.

"Don't worry. Those guys are assholes anyway."

"Wish I had that shot back. I was pretty good once."

"I'm sure you were."

Upstairs, in boxers and a T-shirt, sitting in his chair looking out across the bay, Lucas stared at the reflection of the moon. It was as round and full as a Mitre league ball, the Marias like muddy panels of leather as it sat on the black waters of Elliott Bay, a lost ball waiting to be kicked.

He clicked on the television and Setanta was showing a replay of Arsenal's 1997/98 title clinching match. They beat Everton 4-0 and Terry Adams was on the score sheet.

Lucas flattened his nose with his finger tips and said, "Putting the 'arse' in Arsenal," flashed two fingers at the T.V., and fell asleep with Albert purring in his lap.

SECTION VIII

BACILLUS

Eduard Bernhardt with his fists sliding open and closed in his slicked hair, fingernails picking at tiny scabs on his scalp, sat blindly staring between his thinly pointed elbows at the disarray atop his worktable. Normally an exacting, meticulous man, he had been, of late, coming more and more undone, much like the inner workings of the Dutch coo-coo clock—its tiny geometric fugue in black, browns, grays and gold, its gears, tiny screws, pins and cogs, sprockets and springs—that lay scattered all around him like the debris of a bombed city. He checked his pocket watch: It was time to go see his wife.

At Dorothy's bedside in Saranac, the first night of her permanent move, Eduard sat hunched over from the weight of his secret in her wheelchair patting her hand with a feeble smile. His shame had risen like flood waters in his throat, dark and bilious. He was almost drowning in it.

"You will come and visit me often won't you?" she asked without looking at him.

"Of course I will, every Sunday," he said staring at their hands. Pulling the silver watch from his breast pocket, the one she'd bought for him in Le Havre. He opened it and moved the big hand forward two roman numerals. "I'll be early every time," he said through a half smile, clicked the watch closed and put it back in his pocket.

"But don't bring the boy. I don't want him to have to see his mother like this."

"No. No, of course you don't," he said softly. A tall nurse peered over the shoulder high divider. "Excuse me. Mrs. Bernhardt?"

"Yes," Dorothy said.

"I'm going to start an IV and," the young woman looked coyly toward Eduard and said softly behind her hand, "and your catheter." Her cheeks reddened as she asked if Eduard might excuse them for a few minutes.

He sat underneath a block-lettered sign that read Nurse's Office and flipped through a *Life* magazine. Somewhere in the ward a radio played *Adeste Fidelas*. He found an advertisement for a new Timex wristwatch boasting its glow in the dark hands, that it was waterproof and self-winding.

Eduard remembered how he and Dorothy had argued one night over his ridiculous habit of setting all of his watches and clocks ten minutes fast, even his customers'.

"No one will be late, Dotty. Don't you see? Nobody will have to rush if they know they're going to be early."

"Eduard Bernhardt, you are the stupidest man alive. That makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. And who would pay a watch fixer who can't set the proper time?"

"You just have to learn to treat the time on your clocks as the real time. Then you'll always be early. If I treat the time on my watch like it's the real time, but I know it's really ten minutes fast…"

"Dear God, Ed. Shut up! You aren't making any sense!"

"Shhh…You'll wake the boy."

"That boy," he thought. Run off in a fit of patriotic idealism to fight Rommel in Tunisia. Eduard's chest tightened as he remembered how little attention they'd paid to Jakob. Always too busy arguing. What Eduard would do to hold him now. He recalled a distant winter when Dorothy had first started coughing in large gravely bursts. They were violent hacks.

Reaching for a cup of tea, she'd knocked the china cup to the floor where it broke into splinters. The baby cried out from the other room.

"Damn it. You take care of him. He's your son," she'd said through her balled kerchief.

"My son? He's our son. And, in case you've forgotten, it was you who wanted that child, not me." He stopped himself short, not wanting to have that argument now. "Listen, take it easy. Relax. You're getting yourself all worked up over nothing." He tried to calm her, but she only teemed in silence, her eyes welling and her jaw muscles pulsing. "We just need some time to get things going," he said as he made his way to the bedroom, but she wasn't listening. She'd pulled a blanket from the back of the sofa then sat heavily in the chair in front of the window and closed her eyes. Jakob cried from the bedroom, "Mama!"

Jakob had always preferred his mother to Eduard, especially when in need of comforting. Eduard didn't blame him. He always felt Jakob—whom he certainly loved but never really wanted—was a shackle, a constraint barring him from any sort of freedom he'd once enjoyed. And the child was another mouth to feed, someone else to

demand his attention, someone else whose needs he couldn't understand, his pessimism in such opposition to this greatest symbol of hope and trust in life that is a child.

Jakob stood at the foot of his crib, large tears welling at the corners of his eyes.

"What's the matter?" Eduard asked standing in the doorway.

"I had a bad dream." Jakob rubbed at one eye with the back of his hand.

Eduard picked him up. Jakob, hands pushing against his father's chest, whined, "I wanted Mama."

"She's sleeping."

"No she's not. I heard you talking."

"She's trying to sleep," Eduard said walking to the window. "What were you dreaming about?"

"A bad man chasing Mama down the stairs."

"How do you know he was bad?" Eduard leaned against the window frame and looked out on the flickering gas-lamps.

"Mama yelled for him to go away."

"Okay, well it's over now. There's no bad man, and your mother is in the other room." Eduard breathed a fog on the glass and Jakob pressed his hand print in the middle of it.

"It's cold outside."

"It sure is," Eduard said as he sat in the chair near the window and rocked the boy to sleep.

He turned the glossy pages back to front, skimming articles about Army warplanes tested at Wright Field, about The Marx Brother's ninth film, "At the Circus," and one about William Saroyan writing Vaudeville in "The Time of Your Life."

That's what their friends had all said to the Bernhardts before their sojourn abroad, "Oh, isn't that swell. You'll have the time of your life."

The couple had left the States for France shortly after the Great War hoping to escape the doldrums of American life under Warren G. Harding's "return to normalcy" and prohibition with the help of an only recently matured family trust fund set up by Dorothy's now deceased father. The very day the money had become available she happily put down her shears and left the cutting tables of Hayden, Stone and Company. "Finally," she'd said, and coughed thick phlegm into the kerchief she carried tucked into the waist of her skirt or clenched in her arthritic right hand. Years of gripping those heavy shears were not kind to her once feminine hands. Now they looked like the hands of a laborer, a man, both hands muscular, one perpetually curled into a loose fist.

Reluctant and resentful, Eduard left his job at Waltham after ten years of working in Quality Control—deftly working his calipers and squinting through the loupe tucked neatly into his eye socket, examining every clock and watch built in that bright, sterile factory. It would be hard to find another job like that.

Though ostensibly going to Paris to see a specialist by the name of Déstouches for a third opinion regarding Dorothy's illness, she had planned on soaking up culture and the good life while their three year old son Jakob stayed with Eduard's parents in Gröbming. But it wasn't long before their adventure as aspiring expatriates was cut

short, and they were forced to return after Dorothy, a stubborn woman of increasingly delicate health, had finally accepted the fact that she was dying of tuberculosis.

"But, Eduard . . . Why do we have to leave?" she had begged, not wanting to go back to the ennui she suffered in New York—the grey buildings, the somber walk of the living dead downtown, the melting pot that reduced everyone into a single bland and cultureless broth. In Europe at least she felt as if they were living. In Europe there was a rich history and art and architecture. People had ideas about the world outside of themselves. There was flavor in everything and everyone, and in a single train ride one could be in an entirely different world with new flavors, new languages, and new streets. "Maybe I *want* to die here. Besides, there are plenty of hospitals here" she had begged.

"Yes, there are, and all of them full of incompetent witch doctors," he'd snapped. Always thin on patience, he had tired of the expensive series of odysseys, first to Paris, then to Switzerland, and back again. "We're getting the child and going home." And that was the end of it. Eduard was tired of Paris and its people. They had no use for Americans, especially those that couldn't speak the language. Every clock maker, jeweler, and pawn shop in Paris had turned him away, most of them pretending to not understand his broken French.

Once, after hours of searching for work, he had stopped at a small café and ordered a cup of coffee. He'd placed a bill on the counter and received a single large coin in change. He'd stared down at it knowing it wasn't the correct amount, but when he'd looked up, the waiter had already turned to help a young couple at the other end of the counter. Eduard, having taken up his coffee and gone out to find a table on the sidewalk, looked back to see the waiter and the couple looking over their shoulders

smirking. “Damned Frogs,” he’d said under his breath, gulped down the tepid coffee, turned the cup over on the table, and then stormed off.

With Dorothy at the doctor’s for a day of observations, Eduard wandered the streets with nothing to do. He walked aimlessly, accomplishing nothing, working up an angry thirst. In Pigalle he stopped into another café and purchased a carafe of wine without saying a word, only pointing and gesturing with a jerk of his stubbled chin. He’d just tucked into his second carafe when a young woman, tall and lean, dressed all in yellow—her standing collar blouse opened, exposing her powdered clavicle and a long thin neck—sat across from him, grabbed his glass and took a sip. “How long?” she asked. The silent “H”—like a fly caught in a frog’s throat—swallowed in her smoky voice.

“How long what?” He stared at her long painted nails as she pushed the glass back in front of him.

“How long you been here?” She tapped a rose fingernail on the metal table.

He lifted the carafe and considered the weight of its contents. “Not very,” he said.

She crossed her legs under the table and tapped her instep gently against Eduard’s calf. Very little conversation passed between them, but her eyes never stopped studying him—his face, his shirt collar, his hair, and the veins on the back of his hands. She seemed to be strumming them as if gently playing the strings of a lyre. When the carafe was empty they walked arm in arm to a flat she said she shared with a friend.

Stepping back out onto the street Eduard opened his pocket watch; it was after six. The sun was going down, and the clouds were cast in pinks and purples, bruises that followed him back to the hotel as his footfalls echoed in his head. Outside of the hotel,

where Dorothy was sure to be waiting for him at the bar, he ducked into the alley and emptied his stomach in an impressive gush of wine and guilt. After one last empty wretch, he pulled his handkerchief from his pocket, breathing heavily, and wiped his mouth. He lit a cigarette, took a couple long drags staring up at the front doors, then punched the cigarette out against the brick wall. His head pounded behind his ears. He couldn't wait to be away from Paris.

"Are you all right, Mr. Bernhardt?"

Eduard started at the voice. He'd had his head in his hands, shaking it in quiet disbelief.

It was Nurse Eckert, the old woman who'd been in charge of the TB Ward long before the Bernhardt's had first visited. "Sorry to startle you. You looked troubled." Eduard thought how ironic that was. She looked as worn as everyone in the ward with that gray-washed pallor of a prisoner of war.

"Oh. No. I'm fine, thank you. Just a little tired. Don't want to leave before the Mrs. is back in bed." They both looked around the ward, at the faded green walls, the yellow linens, the bedridden surrounded by sputum cups, playing cards, and Kleenex.

"I understand, Mr. Bernhardt," the old woman said, and left him to his waiting.

He just wanted to take his wife home, he thought. He wanted to tell her how sorry he was for all the wrong he'd ever done. But he wanted to do it at home, where she could lie comfortably on her daybed and he could sit at her feet. But here? To tell her here, in front of all of these strangers, knowing that when he left she wasn't coming with him; knowing that she'd be left alone to deal with her anger. Knowing, too that if she

were to rage against him it would be an embarrassment to them both. He wanted to take her home, carry her up the stairs, lay her down gently in front of her window, and beg forgiveness in the safety of their own apartment. It wasn't the greatest place, but it was home, and it was theirs. Was that too much to ask? He walked out into the cold to smoke a cigarette.

He recalled returning from Europe and the fights they'd had after moving into that ordinary building, like any other on 8th Avenue. It had a dark brick façade. They were on the third floor left; their two windows with metal shutters bolted to the sills faced the Hudson River. It was a very humble three room/kitchen/bathroom that was also to serve as Eduard's Time Keeper's Repair Shop. In a building without originality, without spirit, without anything; the perfect building in which to lead an ordinary life; one that would rapidly stagnate between poverty and opulence as the Bernhardt's raised their son in the great, gray desperation of factory smoke, sweltering summer humidity and bitter winter storms.

During one particularly cold winter, when the building's pipes had frozen then burst, Dorothy, perhaps just to get warm, worked herself up into a frenzy and tore into Eduard. "What sort of life is this? What have you done to us?" She stood, arms akimbo and vinegar-lipped.

"What have *I* done? I've taken you to the best doctors we could buy. I've given you a home, a son. I've tried giving you everything you've ever wanted."

"Oh yes, I'd forgotten how much I craved to live in a dump, held prisoner on a miserable daybed, forced to watch you tinkering with your damned pocket watch, expecting business to fall from the sky."

It was no secret that Eduard's shop, much like Dorothy's health, went through crests and troughs, never quite stabilizing in any semblance of normalcy. The only things steady for either of them were Dorothy's extended stays at Saranac Lake Sanatorium and Eduard's too infrequent trips to the neighborhood of Christopher St. and West Fourth. That's where he really made his money, Greenwich Village. Here he picked up and dropped off carriage clocks, pocket watches, lantern clocks, barometers, and skeleton clocks in glass domes, all of which were carefully wrapped in flannels and packed into a Lansdowne suitcase.

These excursions began innocently enough; a peaceful, drowsy bus ride to a verdant street lined with three-story houses before which bloomed sober little gardens contained in square-cut Privet hedges; a whispering neighborhood for those possessing incomes as rounded as their bellies, where Eduard liked to imagine himself quietly consuming the latest books, he and Dorothy entertaining and lampooning the bloated, absentminded rich bohemians of the art scene. He wanted so badly to dig a deep and poignant furrow into the era he had yet to survive. But the time for that had passed him by, no matter how fast he'd set his watch.

Eduard flicked his cigarette into a snowdrift and watched it fade out. He looked in through the front window to see Dorothy's bed was still empty. He lit another cigarette and walked the salted sidewalks of the hospital campus. Near the entrance he paused to watch the Christmas lights tap against the big Saranac sign.

"What would you have me do? I've hung my sign outside our window; now we wait. Business will come. This is a decent home and we eat, don't we? I have no pretensions."

"Nor any ambitions either. All I wanted was to breathe a little better, and live my life in peace, and where did you take us? On a spending spree with father's money like a sailor on leave, bouncing us around from Paris to Zurich only to wind up back here, to this; this dirty dump of a city where even the river stinks of death!"

Even now, Eduard swallowed hard at the anger rising in his throat. He could never accept the fact that they were only able to go to Europe with the help of that damned trust fund. It wasn't his fault it had made her a social butterfly, sent carousing with the posturing elite in the city pretending not to be petite-bourgeois. Eduard had always harbored a tacit resentment, not simply of the money, but of what they were able to do with it, how much it was, and, most importantly, that he hadn't been the provider of it. He could never make enough money for her.

"Quiet. Does everyone in this building need to know our business? Be patient."

"Patience? What do you know about patience? You, who rushed me into bed then into marriage and a family; you, who rushed us onto a steam ship and to a foreign country, only to rush us back when things didn't go your way?"

Eduard ground his teeth as he remembered that night.

In a fit of anger, Dorothy coughed up something wet into her strangled kerchief. The door opened. Jakob marched in, set the Lansdowne next to the door, and slapped a small stack of bills on the coffee table. He reached deep into his pocket where coins jingled.

"No," Eduard said. "Keep it."

Jakob let the coins drop. "I'm leaving," he said.

Dorothy turned to Jakob. "Where to? It's late."

"Not tonight, mother. Tomorrow."

The couple looked puzzled.

"I'm joining the Army."

The family talked, shouted, cried, and pleaded with each other for what felt like hours. No one understanding anyone else. Eduard tried to convince his son to take his time and think about what he was getting himself into, what he would be doing to his poor sick mother.

"I've made up my mind. I've already enlisted. I leave tomorrow."

The evening ended with the first sooty light of morning. Jakob had gone to his room and, after pulling a blanket over Dorothy where she'd cried herself to sleep at her spot in front of the wind, Eduard sat at his worktable.

The lights slapped harder at the sign with the increasing winds, and Eduard's nose and ears were freezing. He spit his cigarette to ground and kicked a heavy clump of snow over it. As he made his way back to the ward, he saw Dorothy standing in the window.

It had been early summer and, outside the parlor window of her parents' home in Syracuse, the green, green grass was growing in the blue shade of the tall Tidal Basin cherry trees.

"Mom, Dad . . . Ed and I are pregnant."

Her father had turned his back and walked upstairs. He never liked the idea of his daughter being married to Eduard, a damned Gerry, a tinker man and a rake. A door slammed and Dorothy's mother had cried and cried without saying a word, even as the couple closed the front door behind them and walked down the porch steps.

Back inside, amongst the echoing radio, the phlegm-filled laughter and coughing, Dorothy lay stretched out on her bed. Eduard sat next to her gently stroking her hair.

"Have they told you anything new?"

"No dear. They won't know anything for some time, a few months maybe."

They were quiet for a long time. Their silence—in the middle of all the shuffling slippers, rattle of bedpans, the static hiss of a changing radio channel—felt heavy, strange.

"They said that they will be removing a few ribs to help with the draining," she said, her eyes closed. Her skin at her chin wrinkled and shook.

"You'll be okay, Dotty. I'm here for you. Whatever you need." Eduard tried to remain stoic.

Then, in a sudden outpouring, Dorothy told him how terrible she felt; that she was a dreadful person because she had always blamed Eduard for her illness. If it weren't for him, she explained, she wouldn't have had to work herself to death leaning over a cutting

table for twelve hours a day. She wouldn't have been breathing in all those damned fibers, all that dust. "At least," she continued softly, "that's what I thought. I don't really believe that anymore. I'm so sorry Eduard." She grabbed his hand tightly in hers. "I didn't want to die and leave you thinking it was all your fault." Through her tears she kissed at the knuckle above his wedding ring.

With this, the levy of Eduard's resolve had given way. He had begun to sob heavily, without modesty, overwhelmed with sadness, a heavy sadness that rocked him like waves. He struggled to calm himself, taking in deep breaths, steeling himself like a man in question of his virility.

"Please just tell me you forgive me," she whispered.

"Of course I forgive you. But you've done nothing wrong."

Eduard drove home through the purple night as the road became a highway, his throat tight as the streetlights blurred in his tears. Outside the hollow cab of the truck, gray clouds passed—gray like bone; like breath on a window; like the mule deer in the ditch on the side of the road, a shroud of snow spread over its head by the plows.

SECTION IX

REASON ENOUGH

We parked against the curb behind the basketball courts off Pine Avenue. I cut the engine and left the radio playing; the yellow light glowed in the space between us. Neither of us spoke. Alex leaned against the door, watching the action on the courts. She plucked at one front tooth with her thumbnail. I pulled the key from the ignition. She pulled the latch with her left hand and stepped out of the truck. The door echoed behind her when she slammed it shut.

Walking down to Broadway she turned into me, out of the wind that blew against us, and lit a cigarette. She smoked lazily, holding each languid drag until smoke seemed to dissipate within her only to escape in long exasperated exhale. Disinterested plumes of gray smoke poured from her nostrils. When we got to Broadway and turned the corner we nearly crashed into some guy in a tight red T-shirt. He smelled strongly of spiced cologne. No one said a word, only side-stepped and kept right on moving. She laughed at something secret. I told her that her shoelace was untied. With her foot pressed against a mailbox and her cigarette pinched between her teeth, she turned her head to me and asked if I was sure that I still wanted to go along with her. "I'm still here," I said. She closed one eye against a wisp of smoke.

The sidewalks were busy with people. The city lights reflected against the cars cruising up and down the avenue.

"Let's get a coffee," she said flipping her cigarette into the street.We bought coffees and talked about mudslides, the riot, the earthquake. One man had been killed. Not by the earthquake or a mudslide, but by four kids during what the news media called The Fat Tuesday Riot. The man was surrounded and beaten to death as hundreds of people walked passed or stood and watched.

"It's things like that that make me want to run to the hills, or turn vigilante," I said.

"What?"

"Four kids beating some poor guy to death."

"How do you know he didn't deserve it?" she said and lit another cigarette. "How do you know he wasn't drunk as hell and started some shit with them? Maybe he . . ."

"That's not reason enough to beat someone to death."

She sipped at her coffee, set the cup down and asked, "What is reason enough?"

It was quiet for a while. The side door of the café opened and a short woman walked in. Her wet hair was pulled back into a painful looking bun. She was holding a tall paper cup full of flowers and dressed in several layers too heavy for the weather. The last layer was a dingy yellow down coat. Smiling and waving, she walked straight over to where we were sitting. Her chin tilted against one shoulder. The woman's head seemed to be forever ducking away from something, her face was the color and texture of a rotten apple core. "Buy a flower for your sweetheart?" She held up the flowers in front of her. Only her eyes moved. The hand holding the cup was calloused, the first and second fingers brown with nicotine.

Alex laughed and punched out her cigarette. "I'm not his sweetheart." She stood from the table. "We gotta go."

"Got a cigarette?" The woman called after her.

"All out, hon," Alex said over her shoulder.

As I stood, the woman reached across me and pulled the smoldering butt from the ashtray. "Assholes," she said under her breath. She stuck the cigarette in her mouth and puffed the cherry red again.

Outside, a mist was falling. The clock in SeaFirst Bank read twenty after midnight.

"Well, sweetheart," she mocked. "If you want to bail, this is your last chance." We turned down the alley behind Jack-In-the Box. Our shadows stretched across the dumpsters. Every footfall seemed to echo between the buildings. At the back of the news stand Alex pointed to the missing bulb from the lamp above the door. "I did that today." She smiled. She was proud that she'd thought of everything. She grabbed my shoulders and stared at my face, studied my eyes, my nose, my mouth. I leaned in.

"No," she said. "Give me a boost." She looked down to my hands and raised her foot. I knit my fingers together. She stepped into my hands, swung her other leg over my shoulders and worked her way to standing. My hands held the backs of her ankles. I could feel her Achilles twitch. She was so light.

"Were you ever a cheerleader?" she joked. The soles of her Converse soaked through my shirt. I looked up as she reached for the fire escape. Water dripped in my face. She jumped from my shoulders and pulled the stairs down. The metal groaned and banged at the bottom. Everything went strangely quiet. With our backs pressed against

the damp bricks Alex shook out two cigarettes. We smoked silently, looking up and down the alley. No one came. The cigarette went to my head.

"Okay, let's go," she said dropping her cigarette in a puddle. I flicked mine at a dumpster. Half way up my foot slipped and I smashed my shin against the iron rung. She opened the window and climbed in. Once we were inside she led me straight to an office door near the end of a long hallway. She pulled a key from her pocket and opened the door. The office was dark except for the light coming from a twenty gallon tank on one of the bookshelves that lined the walls from floor to ceiling. The bottom of the tank was full of saw dust and two tangled pieces of drift wood arranged in the middle. There were three chameleons in the tank, two of them lounging on the drift wood, one with a single front leg raised, slowly stretching its toes. The third clung to the underside of the wire tank cover, one eye spastically surveying from its turret. I moved up against the tank. Something crunched under my shoe. When I looked down, a white cricket jumped behind the huge desk. Alex already had the corner of an arabesque area rug turned up and the door of a floor safe opened.

"This guy's got chameleons in here?"

"Uh-huh. You should see them eat; it's wild." She tucked three small stacks of bound bills into her pockets. "Catch one of those crickets. I'll show you."

I looked around. The crickets bounced in the corners of the room and around a wingback reading chair. I caught one and Alex flicked the toes of the hanging chameleon. It didn't budge, so she lifted the top and told me to toss the cricket inside. When it landed in the sawdust, it froze. Wrinkled black eyes turned round frantically trying to locate the insect. One of the chameleons spotted the cricket quickly and, as fast

as I guessed any chameleon had ever moved, made long, sticky steps to a better vantage point on the driftwood. Its triangular jaws were opening and closing, a thick pink tongue stretched and worked at the roof of its mouth. One eye zeroed in on its prey and didn't move. The chameleon worked its mouth more and more slowly until it seemed to pause. Then the tongue shot down with so much force that a small cloud of sawdust spread out from where the cricket was. Two jagged white legs stuck out of the chameleon's mouth, and with two shakes of its head, the cricket was gone.

"Wasn't that awesome?" Alex stared into the tank wide-eyed and smiling.

I agreed that it was.

"We better get going," she said.

She told me to start messing things around. She left the lid of the tank off, and we started knocking things off of the desk, pulling things from the shelves and the table. We turned over plastic trays full of invoices, dumped drawers of receipts and office supplies all over the floor. Back down the hall she opened every door. Two of them were storage rooms filled with boxes, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, cases of candy, bottled water, and soda-pop. One was the mop room. One had a small sink and a canvas cot with a folded blanket and an airline pillow. "So that's where he did it," I thought, and all the anger I felt the day she told me about it boiled up again. "That's a good reason." I said.

"What?" Alex was already standing at the window.

"Nothing."

I climbed out first. It had stopped raining. I was back down the fire escape when I heard glass break. I pressed myself against the wall, trying to blend into the shadows

and nervously looked up and down the alley. Alex dropped onto the pavement and we walked slowly back the way we came.

Passing a payphone, Alex asked if I had a quarter. I did.

"Who you calling?"

"Close Talking," she said. "We gotta celebrate this, right?"

I nodded. Close Talking Eddie was her dude. While she was on the phone I tried to rationalize what we'd done. Would it have been better, and more personal, to have just beaten the guy to a pulp? I could have killed his chameleons. That's what I should have done, dumped the creepy things on to the floor and ground them into the rug.

"Come on. He's going to meet us at The Comet."

We turned toward the bar, and she stopped me. "Wait a sec. Here." She pulled one of the bunches of bills from her back pocket and, with both hands, squeezed it in mine.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"For helping out a friend."

"I would have rather . . . ." I couldn't bring myself to say the words. She stared at me with the wide, shining eyes of a little girl who's lost something precious. "That's reason enough."

We walked to the bar in silence.

Inside The Comet it was darker than usual, the only light coming from the TV behind the bar, the jukebox, and the hall light that led to the toilets. No bands were playing, and the crowd was very thin. We ordered bourbons and toasted the night. She smiled a little, but quickly sank back into quietude. I studied her reflection in the mirror

as she smoked. She didn't look sad or pensive. It was more like nothing. She looked like someone who had no one, nothing to say, nowhere to be. I have never felt more useless. I couldn't think of anything to say to break the silence. As if to save me, the door opened and everyone turned to see who it was.

"Ha-ha. Hey, man." It was two young guys. They were yelling at a table in the back. One of them walked straight to the table and the other ordered a pitcher of beer. He looked down the bar and nodded, then carried the beer and two glasses to the back.

I ordered another round, pulled a twenty from the roll in my pocket and set it on the bar. I bummed one of Alex's cigarettes. Again, the nicotine went straight to my head. "I'll be right back." I stood and went to the toilet.

When I came back, Close Talking Eddie was sitting next to Alex at the bar, practically in her lap. His hand was on her knee. I pulled another twenty from my pocket and asked the guys in back if they had change. They didn't, so I stood at the jukebox pressing the buttons, flipping forward and back pretending to pick songs.

Eddie walked to the end of the bar and into the phone booth. He closed the folding door and picked up the receiver. I watched him as he pulled something from his shirt pocket and put it in the change return.

I turned to watch Alex folding some money in her lap into a small square.

In the phone booth Eddie pressed some buttons, said a few things into the phone, nodded and hung up. I thought if I had a chameleon's turrets I could watch both of them.

When Eddie walked back to Alex, he leaned into her, kissed her cheek, and she stuck the folded bills under his hand, where it rested on her thigh.

Eddie left, and Alex went to the phone booth, closed the door, and picked up the receiver. Like Eddie, she never put money into it, only pressed at the numbers. But Alex didn't say anything into the phone. She hung up and dug her finger into the change return. She sat back at the bar, put a cigarette behind her ear, drained her glass, and looked around for me. She nodded toward the door, and got up to leave. We walked back toward Pine. Alex was quiet and stretched her legs with purpose.

Back in the truck, under the streetlight, Alex pulled a small yellow balloon from her pocket. I watched as she tore it open with her teeth and dumped out a ball of resin the size of a marble on the back of the open glove box. The whole ritual always sickened me in the way freak shows do. She pinched the ball in half and took the cigarette from behind her ear. My stomach ached as I watched her bite into the filter and pull out a piece of the cotton.

She reached deep into the glove box for her silver cigarette case. Inside it was all of her gear, a tiny traveling kitchen where she could cook up her soup. Then she tied off as I watched her stitch another blue button in her sleeve. She leaned against the door, her eyes closed. "We should get married," she said.

"Oh yeah? Why do you say that?"

"Because we don't care. Take me home."

I turned over the engine. "We don't care about what?" I asked.

"Exactly," she said, folding her arms around herself.

I looked in the mirror, back down the street. It was quiet and dark except for the streetlamps shining on the parked cars and the empty basketball courts. I turned the wheel and drove away

SECTION X

THE MONKEY PUZZLE TREE

Looking back at it all they had been fighting for months, to the point where neither would even look at the other. Only passing, vague, mechanical statements were made. Things like: “Hey,” “See you later,” “Good night,” or “Did you feed the animals?” All very dry, morose. They often had conflicts about his collecting and dismissing of occupations, her eating too frequently at her boss’s house (babysitting or not), drinking, and shopping. That’s just the sort of relationship they had. This time, it had gone on for so long that they were both trying to forget what it was all about.

Jake had been working as a window washer. Mostly high rise office buildings and malls with a steady weekly routine of fancy homes. He even had some stars of television and sports on his route. It was his fifth job in six months. But this one seemed to be steady, at least for the moment.

Elizabeth worked as a book keeper for a well known meat distributor, two big Italian brothers, the kind of Italians that transcend the bullish mob dago stereotype, and part-time for Payless Shoes.

They lived together modestly in a two story, two bedroom house. The house was really quite awful. They both hated it. It had bad, old carpeting, a shaggy periwinkle blue with cigarette burns from previous tenants. A dark stain was hidden under the

coffee table where Jake, in a drunken stupor, had once kicked over a glass of Guinness. The bedrooms and bathroom were inconveniently located upstairs. To have to climb those stairs every time one needed to relieve one's self was quite annoying, especially when one was drinking.

They both liked a drink but he had a thirst the size of Texas and a bladder to match. There were times when they had been drinking all night that she would head upstairs joking, "Do you ever piss?" He would wait until he heard the door of the bathroom close, then sneak out onto the porch and let rip over the railing into the bushes. By the time she came back down he was sitting on the couch smiling and sipping at his beer. The place had a small front porch with no yard to speak of, only a 9' X 12' patch of tree lawn that held a tiny Ash tree in the center. The downstairs consisted of a fair sized living room with a couch (hand me down and spray painted with bizarre Egyptian-ish eyes), a chair, coffee table, and an entertainment center that was barely held together with wood glue and finishing nails that flaked the particle board in the back. The entertainment center bowed like a tired pack mule under the weight of the television, stereo, compact discs, albums, and some nick-knacks. This was where they watched too much television in order to either spur conversation and laughter or avoid it altogether.

To the rear was the enormous kitchen. It had as much floor space as the living room, with only the tiny table and two chairs taking up their small portion. This is where Jake felt at peace. He found cooking and cleaning quite therapeutic. Elizabeth knew when he was in a frump because he'd be in there tearing apart the fridge, rearranging cupboards or pushing his culinary skills. Always in dead silence, except for the tiny transistor radio perched on the window sill above the sink.

There was also a back door which led out onto another porch, rarely used. The neighboring houses were so close that one could easily spit on the home in either direction. Nevertheless, this is where they kept the kettle grill. At the top of the stairs every thing shrunk. To the left and right were the bedrooms. The one to the left was the weight room and study. There were about 250 pounds of cast iron weights, a straight bar, dumb bells, and a bench. Along two of the walls were make-shift book shelves. Planks of clear white pine with bricks and cinder blocks separating the space for books, magazines, and a small collection of skulls and antlers Jake had found in the woods, all from his hikes in forests from middle-west to Vancouver. Next to the small single sash window sat a wooden chair that Jake had purchased for two dollars at a garage sale in Fremont. This was Jake's favorite hide away, but he was always challenged on his impetus for retiring there with the door only just ajar.

"What's wrong?" Elizabeth would ask.

"Nothing" was always the reply, sincere or otherwise.

The other room was completely taken up by the queen sized bed and two small sets of drawers for her things. Things like tee-shirts, socks, undies and stockings, among other feminine articles. This room was hers and the other his, though they slept together in hers. The bathroom was minuscule. Sink, toilet, and shower nothing else. The only variable was the one roommate they had decided to take in to help with the rent. That worked for about two weeks during the early winter and then he had left. It turned out he was sleeping with Elizabeth's brother's girlfriend. The final straw came when Jake and Elizabeth were lying in bed talking about the usual problems and from down the small hall came the ecstatic cries of, "Joe, Joe, Joe, Oh God Joe!"

Jake stared at the ceiling no longer listening to Elizabeth and thought of Sierra, naked and moaning.

"Jesus, do you hear that? Jake! Do you hear that?"

Of course he did. He smiled, "Yes."

"Why are you smiling, that's disgusting?"

"Why? Because they're having fun and we're lying hear listening? Now *that* is disgusting."

Joe was moved out by the week's end.

The house sat adjacent to the busiest post office in the city, on a street always buzzing—one really had to keep an eye out for pets and kids and cyclists.

The neighborhood was made up mostly of Norwegian fishermen and dock workers. It was from hanging out with these men, mostly reprobates and/or retirees, that Jake learned several derogatory comments in Norwegian he took with him to work and to parties. These licentious linguists also offered tips on available work and even set him up with a job fishing halibut from the Puget Sound to Alaska. That was a great learning experience for Jake, on the open sea for weeks at a time, working his ass off and making good money with nowhere to spend it. When they docked, all hell broke loose once they all got their checks cashed. Therein lay the trouble.

This first dock was in Alaska. Jake would come home with only a small pocket full of cash and coins, a black eye or a split lip, and stories to make his mother cry. On the last trip his long time buddy Damon lost his thumb after it was stolen by a hook. On this particular ship, *Sweets MacGhee*, anchors were tied to a cable two inches thick, which carried hundreds of hooks. The anchors upon release screamed from their

positions seeking out their purpose of sinking into giant halibut, along with several miscellanies. One or two men, depending on the line, would usher the cable to avoid kinking. There are gloves worn for protection, yet in an episode of unfortunate laziness Damon wore only his favorite pair of cheap leather motorcycling gloves, thinned by years of wear, oil, and axle grease. One of the hooks bit him in the meat of his right thumb and took it down as an offering to Neptune. Damon, once he had recovered, joked about waiting to hear of someone biting into his thumb in a fish burrito at Taco Del Mar. After this, Seattle was Jake's last dock.

Ballard, at the time, was a big receiver of imports from Alaska, Canada, and Hawaii. I'm not sure what went out besides contraband, rats, and runaways. Living that close to the water was both good and bad. Late nights and early mornings, one could easily hear the barking of sea lions and drunken sailors inland for the weekends. If one was lucky, the smell of the salt water could be good for one's health, before the carbon monoxide cancelled it out as rush hour thickened. The water was therapeutic for both Elizabeth and Jake. They would often take walks down to the docks, slip under the railing and out on the giant concrete jacks that formed a break-wall and smoke Hawaiian, talking about hopes for better times ahead, smiling and kissing. A major draw back, however, was when the winds came gusting in off the bay. The house was so poorly built that Jake would often joke it felt as if it were made of Balsa wood. One could actually feel the house swaying in the gales like a hanging traffic light.

All this was shared with a half wolf, half shepherd, 125 pounds of quadruped named Puskas after the Hungarian soccer legend, Ferenc Puskas. It was like having another room mate, only this one slept with them, required more attention as well as more

food, and didn't have a job. Jake really couldn't complain about the latter as he was known to go jobless for spells. "We should take all of this hair and knit sweaters to sell at Pike's Place to pay some of the rent," Jake teased when brushing the monster.

Then came the cat and the curse. He was big and strong. Beautiful, the color of an amber stone partially drowned in a bowl of cream. He would crawl under the sheets and fight off Elizabeth for position in Jake's bread basket. Elizabeth had given the cat to Jake as a Valentine's Day present. She'd gotten it from some crazy old bird out in the sticks that had a nation of the little things. "I know it's kind of shady but look at him. Isn't he great?" Jake had to admit it was gorgeous. At the time it made him well up with love. They named him Hank because Jake had just gotten home from work and was reading Bukowski's *Post Office* on the bus.

One morning on his way out, Jake bent over to feed Hank and noticed that the bowl was still full. He looked around for the thing but couldn't find him. He looked at Puskas curled up by the corner of the entertainment center and asked playfully, "Where's your buddy, boy." Puskas looked up at Jake without raising his head and let out a deep sigh and whine.

They were truly buddies. Puskas would bounce Hank around on the couch on the bridge of his big snout and Hank would swat at the giant wagging tail of Puskas, chasing him out of the room. In the middle of the day, when Jake was either not working or too hung over to go to work, he would come downstairs to find the two curled up together at the foot of the couch.

That night when he came home, the bowl was still full. He asked Elizabeth if she had seen the cat. "No, I thought you let him out for the day."

"Have I ever let him out for the day?" He had a sharp bitterness in his voice.

"Well, you let him out for an hour or so sometimes."

"Yeah, but not the whole fucking day, especially the way people drive around here." He lowered his voice, realizing that he was on the border of taking this to fever pitch. "I'm sorry. It's not your fault. I just have a bad feeling."

They looked for the cat for an hour or so when finally they realized that Puskas had not moved from the corner of the entertainment center. In fact he was now lying with his snout buried between it and the wall. Jake moved him and found Hank hiding deep in the chasm. "Oh, man, this isn't good, babe." The cat turned to look at Jake and Jake could see that there was no more fun or want in the once lustrous hazel eyes. He went upstairs and got in the shower and yelled down the stairs, "Hey, Elizabeth!"

"Yeah?"

"Will you do me a favor? Call the vet and set up an appointment for tomorrow?"

"Sure. What time?" She was trying not to cry.

"Doesn't matter, I'm going to call off work, the earlier the better." He stood there in the hot water letting it beat against his face. The pressure made little kaleidoscopes on the backs of his eyelids. He just stood there, not washing, just thinking about that poor cat. He knew about the habits of dying animals, how they stopped eating and then looked for a place to go and die, alone. That's what Hank was doing, finding his final resting place. He would have stayed behind that pile of junk forever if they hadn't gone looking for him.

The next morning they all went to the vet together. Jake went in with Hank while Elizabeth and Puskas stayed in the truck, they both hated the vet. The Dr. told Jake that

Hank had such a bad case of heart worms and kitty leukemia that tapping his chest alone would probably have killed him. Jake stayed in the room alone with the cat, which was now slowly falling asleep, crying and petting him. He thought of the old bag that sold Elizabeth the cat and why Elizabeth hadn't taken it to the vet to have him checked out.

Now back in the truck, they drove home in silence. Elizabeth and the dog were dropped off and Jake went in to work, driving blindly, barely able to see through his tears.

After all of this, he decided that there was some kind of "curse or something" on the house and it was time to move. He started working the grave yard shift on top of his regular hours in order to save more money. This was when Elizabeth took on the supplementary job at the shoe store around the corner from the house. Now the two rarely saw each other, and when they did it seemed to be just to eat and sleep. The normal intimacies were becoming rare. There weren't even the exchanges in frustration for a time. Both of them began harboring insecurities about the other cheating. The arguments began to grow again, to painful extremes.

They had been at this new regimen of work, eat, and sleep now for about a month. Thursday night, they were just finishing a quiet dinner. Neither really spoke until, "Thanks Jake. That was really good. We haven't done this for a long time." She washed down the last bite of mahi.

"I'm glad you liked it. Listen, Greg's got shit lined up for me tonight and then he's picking me up in the morning to do the houses. I should be home around six or seven. He said I could have the weekend off and I thought maybe we could go to Deer Island and study. I'll even pack us a lunch and some beers." They were both working on

a certificate of completion from an international correspondence courses in motorcycle mechanics.

"Sounds good," she said, not really listening. "This really sucks. All this working and never seeing each other."

"I know, but don't you want to get out of this house?" Nothing more was said as they sat there staring at nothing, in their own little worlds. He looked across the table, leaning in on his elbows, wanting to reach out and grab her hands.

She got up from the table and moved the dishes to the sink. Jake turned and looked at Puskas lying on the floor. The dog's eyes raised and Jake flipped him the rest of his biscuit. The dog gulped it down in one bite as Jake pat him on his head and ruffled his ears. "See ya' buddy."

He looked up at Elizabeth. She was standing at the sink waiting for the water to warm, looking for a different radio station. He stared her up and down. God, she was beautiful. He wanted to go to her and grab her from behind, under the arms and kiss her gently behind the ear and on the neck, smelling her hair. But he didn't. There was a painful hunger in his heart as he looked at her. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said, finally getting up from the table. She said nothing and had now found a station that suited her. She never cared for the public radio jazz that Jake always blared.

He grabbed his coat, book bag, and keys and made for the door. The dog was close behind him. "You can't come buddy" he said, feeling like he was going to cry.

"Come'ear boy!" she called from the kitchen, patting her thigh with a wet hand. The dog went to her, and she looked up at Jake.

"I love you," he said.

"I know," she answered, and he was out the door.

He walked up the street to catch the bus like usual. He was thinking about her, moving, the job, but mostly her and the essays on teleology that he had been reading. Everything has its place in the universe according to the purpose it serves. But what was his, hers, anyone's other than those in positions of power and influence?

Once at the mall, where he was to do all the inside work when the stores closed, he decided to go into the florist's. "Do you guys deliver?"

"Of course," said the woman behind the counter, all dolled up. He looked at her and she reminded him of his grandmother back in Pennsylvania. At one time this woman standing in front of him was beautiful. He imagined briefly Elizabeth getting to that age and wondered if she would still be this attractive. Of course she would, it's in the eyes, those portals of the soul.

"Can I pick out my own custom bouquet?" he asked, already knowing what he wanted.

"Certainly" a sort of manly, crisp lisp came from behind him. He was scared to turn to see the speaker so he just smiled at the woman.

"Great. First off, I just want a simple paper wrap . . . ." Jake went on picking out an arrangement of honeysuckle, cactus dahlia, daisies, fox glove and wisteria vine. It was dizzying, the smells. He had them set to be at her office by 10:00 in the morning.

At home, she was listening to the radio and wondering what would become of them. Would it last? Was he cheating? Did she really know he loved her? On the kitchen counter she found a scratch piece of paper that had some vague bus directions to

the mall. She had a Gestalt to go see him at work. To herself she thought aloud, "Nobody will be there. We'll have the whole building to ourselves. We can make love anywhere and everywhere, run around naked even." She laughed at herself and went upstairs to shower, out of breath from the excitement.

Once out of the shower she went to the bedroom and was standing in front of the mirror. She sprayed her rose petal perfume into the air just in front of her, stepping into the mist as it fell in cool droplets on her naked body. She went to the closet and dressed herself up sexily. She donned the thigh high stockings she had worn the first time they had shared a Valentine's Day and a knee-high skirt that clung to her hips. She put on the silk almost transparent blouse he bought her for Christmas and tucked it tightly into her skirt. It was revealing, she could see the darkened areas of fabric that brushed above her nipples but she'd have on a coat until she got to him.

She bounced down the annoying stairs and grabbed her coat, bag, and keys. She left, leaving the radio on for the dog. She locked the dead bolt, headed across the street and looked back to see Puskas leaning stoically on top of the couch, fogging up the window as he watched her go. She could hear him whine and give a solitary bark as she took the instructions out of her pocket and started off.

It took three buses to get there, so she had plenty of time for daydreaming and listening to her walkman. She wasn't quite sure what she was doing, but figured at worst she could always call his cell phone. The last bus was a 237 but she wasn't certain if she was to be going east or west. It was now around 10:30pm. She decided that she would just get on the bus and ask the driver. As she did, a mix of embarrassment and shyness

took over, but she stubbornly went to the middle of the bus and sat down. "I'll just keep my eyes open for signs," she told herself.

The driver was a little intimidating, a big guy, tall even seated. He had a thick frame with an indecent amount of fat covering it all. His greasy brown hair reflected the overhead lights, and small flurries of dandruff fell on his shoulders when he adjusted his cap.

Jake was done with the common ground areas of the mall and was beginning the interiors of the offices. It was fun having the master keys to every room in the building. He could even walk in on security. The Micro-Soft offices were myriad in size and scope, and he usually left those alone. Those offices had so much glass that it was a full day's work alone. Most of the others were really nicely decorated with leather couches, giant saltwater fish tanks, tribal artwork from Japan and the Inuit tribes of the Pacific Northwest, and most had full kitchens.

One exceptionally large office space had five adjoining rooms: There was the big waiting area with a leather pit group couch and two secretarial desks. Three big offices branched off of this area, all with a view of Mt. Rainier and the rest of the city. Jake was fascinated by these rooms. Not because of the decor, but because of the pictures and names in them. The women in all of the pictures, on the desks or on the walls, were all beautiful. Not just beautiful either. They all had that exotic European look and name tags on their desks that had names like Pedrag Ivanisovic and Zvladomir Myzscinski. He always went to the desk that belonged to Diamanda Rebrov. The picture on her desk was

of a woman with her arms around a tall, chiseled man. They both had drinks in their hands and wore lip splitting smiles.

Once in a while Jake would sit at her desk and try to make his smile as big. It never worked. It was more elusive than the old "itch in the middle of the back." Not even fish hooks could get a smile like that on his face. Jake figured that they must be Cossacks or something close to that, a theory based on the contents of the fifth room, a storage closet bigger than his reading room, with shelving that went from the waist to the ceiling. Every item on these shelves appeared to be labeled in Russian, jars of olives, sauces, something that resembled okra. There were cans of sardines. But most important were the bottles of potato vodka. Every time that he was in there he flirted with the idea of snatching one, but he could never bring himself to do it. "What if these guys have video cameras in here? I like having ten digits in the places they're supposed to be."

Elizabeth was beginning to notice that the conductor was ogling her via the rearview mirror. Every time she felt the weight of his eyes, she would look up and catch him looking away quickly. *Just keep your eyes on the road, fat boy,* she thought to herself. It wasn't anything new, this being gawked at, but that didn't mean it was comfortable. She leaned her head against the window and stared blankly into the night, too preoccupied now to be watching for signs.

Jake was starting to get depressed, too depressed to work, so he took a break to sit with a coffee and his book. Reading was the great escape when he couldn't separate his head with drink. Only, this night the thoughts were so heavy he found himself reading

the same paragraph several times. Each time thoughts of Elizabeth took over. Before he knew it, his eyes were at the bottom of the page and he hadn't read a word. He closed the book, defeated, and grabbed his coffee. He stood from the table, threw his bag over his shoulder, and headed for the roof.

There were no more people on the bus now. Elizabeth was becoming more and more uneasy. It was just the conductor and herself. His looks were no longer passing or hidden. She pulled one speaker from an ear, and asked how much longer until the mall. She could see his pupils dilate in the mirror as he adjusted his cap, snowy scalp squalls falling about his jacketed shoulders.

"Sorry ma'am, but the mall is the other way. You're on the wrong 237. This one goes out to Juanita and then I lay over for twenty minutes, then head back to the hub."

She could feel her stomach knot and the blood rush from her face.

"It's alright though," the conductor went on, "I'm not suppose to, but I'll let you stay on and ride back. I'll even give you a new transfer. The one you have won't be any good by the time we get back. The other 237 runs until 3:00am for the drunks on the other side of town."

It was now fifteen minutes until midnight. The bus slowed down, coasted into the Park and Ride and stopped. The brakes let out a wheeze as the conductor opened the doors. Elizabeth didn't know what to do and was now beginning to regret her decision. She stood up, got off the bus, and went to the pay phone to call Jake. She punched in the number; it rang three times and then went to voicemail. She hung up, turning to see the conductor changing the destination boards on the front and sides of the bus.

Jake was on the roof, leaning against one of the corner gargoyles with his legs stretched out along the top edge of the parapet. He was sipping at his coffee, staring at the night sky, fancying himself one of those workers in the black and white photos eating from their lunch pails with their legs dangling over the edge of the iron beams. His thigh started to vibrate. "Who the hell is calling me at this hour? It must be mamma" his nickname for Elizabeth. He got the name from the movie *Kalifornia*. Setting down his cup he dug into his pocket for the phone.

He looked at the caller I.D., didn't recognize the number, and shoved the phone back into his pants. No calls were ever answered or returned if the number wasn't known. Elizabeth, in her panic and intent to surprise left no message.

The conductor was now off the bus and heading towards the restrooms, eyeing her as he walked. She was really nervous now, and clenched at the directions tightly with a sweaty palm. She searched her coat pocket for change to call again. The conductor was now making his way back to the bus. He was staring over at her when he yelled, "We're leaving soon!"

"Okay, thank you!" She didn't want to get back on that bus, but she knew she had to, even if it was just to go back home. Juanita was way the hell out there and there wouldn't be anymore buses until the morning. She climbed on the bus and sat close to the back door. She wanted to be able to get off as quickly as she could. The conductor dropped heavily in his seat, and the cushion sighed in a cloud of dust. He started the bus and the doors closed. With a little rumble, a puff of exhaust, and the hiss of the air brakes releasing, they were off.

Jake was still sitting on the ledge, but now his legs were bouncing, his heels rapping over the side against the window below. Reaching behind him, he unzipped the front pocket of his book bag and began rummaging around with blind fingers for his pill box of grass and rolling papers. He set the papers next to him, tucking the corner under his leg so they wouldn't blow away. He opened the small tin box with the picture of The Last Supper on it and took out two small buds of the stuff. Breaking it between his thumb and forefinger on his pant leg, he started thinking their lives in general compared to the lives he imagined of Diamanda Rebrov and others. *It's all teleology, I suppose,* he thought. *Some lives are meant to be wasted. Someday I won't be here and there aren't many who will care.* He rolled up the contraband.

Jake always had these lapses into a suffocating anxiety about death. It always came out of the blue and took hold of his mind in a paranoid stranglehold. *What is this? Why am I bothering to worry about anything or anyone? When it's over it will all have been the outcome that was designed for me or it will have been for nothing. Then, when those who've known me are dead and gone, my existence will be forgotten, and if that be so, then will I have ever really existed at all?*

This existential theorizing was beginning to sound too silly to him. He turned his thoughts back to her. *I wish I could explain to her that my anger and quietude is because of me and not because of anything she did or didn't do. It just always sounds so cliché. I just hate myself so much sometimes, and I don't want to pull her down with me. Listen to me. I haven't even lit this thing yet and I'm spouting off in some psycho babble.*

His head was in his hand, elbow on his knee, and he was still holding the joint, unlit, between his fingers like a cigarette. *I love her so much, and yet I wish I'd never*

met her. I'm such a bum and I don't know what I want out of life or where I'm going. She's so organized and motivated to accomplish things. And then I despise her when she tries to point me in the 'right' direction. It's like an insult or an assault. I don't know. That's the problem, I don't know. I do know that I don't want anyone telling me what I might want.

He was beginning to get himself wound up and irritated. He was staring down past his feet at the cobbled alleyway below. All he had to do was lean forward and in just 34 stories he could find freedom. For a moment there were no thoughts of anything in his head, a complete void, empty of everything besides the matter that lived there. Thirty-four stories . . . but there was her, the dog and family, however remote. How could he? It would be so selfish.

The bus was humming down the cliff line, the posts of the guardrails flying by too fast to count. She had her headphones on, listening to Modest Mouse, staring out past the houses into the inky dark night. The water was calm, smooth like a picture window. Then there was a thump, heavy and hard. Elizabeth was jolted out of her gaze. She looked up at the conductor, pulling a speaker from one ear. He pulled the bus to the soft shoulder of the road, applied the emergency brake and told her to sit tight.

"I'm gonna go have a look." Both sets of doors opened and a cool, salty breeze blew in like a ghost. She watched him descend the steps and go to the front of the bus. He bent down and disappeared from sight. She returned the speaker to her ear and looked back out the window. The conductor was walking to each tire, taking his time and having a good look.

Elizabeth was thinking about how badly she wanted Jake to be the one and knew he was, even if he didn't believe it. *If only he would get it through that thick fucking head of his that he could do whatever he wanted. That I would love him just the same if he didn't want to do anything but wash windows.* She looked down and leaned over her lap to rub away a scuff she spotted on her shoe. As she did this, the conductor came in the back doors as gingerly as his hugeness would allow.

Jake put the reefer to his mouth and struck a blue tip against the mortar joint next to him. The flame flashed bright as he touched it to the twisted paper end in front of his face. He inhaled in three short breathes, exhaled through his nose. He pulled the joint from his mouth and it stuck a little, leaving a tiny piece of paper on his lower lip. He pinched it off, looked at it, and threw it over the ledge. He blew on the cherry to stoke it and had another drag, this one long and deep.

The conductor was behind her now, opening and closing his hands. He looked like a "B" movie monster, only he was real. Semi-circles of sweat were growing under his arms and he wiped a sleeve across his brow. He was dripping with nervous anticipation. As Elizabeth sat upright, he reached over her quickly and at once had the headphone wire cinched in tight, cutting around her neck. She was flailing, kicking at the seat in front of her, trying to get her fingers between the wire and her neck. It was too tight. Tiny rivulets of blood were gathering around the black wire. The giant moved quickly into the seat with her, pushing his sweaty girth against her, pinning her to the wall. Elizabeth tried for his eyes, but he grabbed her wrist and shoved her arm in

between them, and now had it pinned as well. He had the wire clenched in one hand, wrapped around two of his hulking fingers, turning them purple. His forearm and elbow were crushed against her jaw. She was facing the front the bus, her head pressed hard against the window. His immensity was too much to fight. She couldn't move and her energy was running out. She was staring out the front window and praying that a car would come around the bend. He was smashing his frothing jowles against her cheek, neck, and ear. The music was still playing as he squeezed at her breasts and her crotch. The tears were now filling her eyes and her breath was leaving, slowly.

Jake threw the remainder of the joint, still glowing, to the cobbles below like a shooting star. Now stoned and relaxing, he smiled. He was thinking about *the look on her face when she sees those flowers tomorrow*. He looked up at the stars and muttered quietly, "God . . . If You're listening, I love that girl more than life itself, and I just wanted to thank You for sending her."

The conductor had Elizabeth over his shoulder and was looking both ways down the vacant road. He leaned against the damp guardrail and dumped her body over the side, watching her tumbling down until her limpness halted against a small Monkey Puzzle tree. He reached down next to his feet, grabbed her bag and threw it down after her. He looked at the tires once more and climbed back on the bus.

Jake looked out over the horizon, at all the lights of downtown Seattle, at the pale toe nail moon with its sideways smile, as if it were sneering diabolically at the ships on

the water and at the silhouettes of Mt. Rainier and both the Cascades and Olympics, blacker than the black of the celestial night behind them, and he smiled himself, saying through his gap toothed grin, “Everything’s going to be alright. We all will end up wherever we end up.”

SECTION XI

IN THE LAP OF LINCOLN

I woke to the smell of honeyed bacon. I looked next to me and saw Anne, my wife, staring at the ceiling, her eyes shining in the blue moonlight. I asked, "Are you awake?" Of course I knew she was; I could see her blinking.

"Do you know what time it is?" she asked. I said that I didn't. "It's 3:00 a.m.," she said. Getting out of bed I put on a t-shirt and my striped pajama bottoms. I pulled the children's doors closed as I made my way downstairs to investigate. From the bottom of the stairs I could hear grease spitting and feel the heat radiating from the kitchen. I turned the corner and shuffled down the hall, down the gauntlet of hanging family faces. There she was with the refrigerator door wide open, staring out of the window above the sink, while bacon jumped in a pan on the stove. The light from the refrigerator cast her, in her long blue caftan, in a strangely attractive glow, her hair hanging about her head like a white hood.

"Hey, mother. What are you doing?"

"Making an omelet. Are you hungry?"

"Sure. Do you need a hand?"

"No. Just sit down. It'll be ready in a minute."

"Do you know what time it is?" I asked.

"Does it matter?" She acted as if there was nothing at all odd about cooking an omelet at 3:00 in the morning. "I guess not," I said. We never had the pleasure of eating those omelets. She had piled too much bacon in the skillet and the dancing fat caught fire. The flames were like fingers grabbing at her sleeve. She wasn't burned badly and didn't seem to care. She was more concerned about her favorite robe. We spent an hour that morning, cleaning her wounds, applying antiseptic salve and bandages, and talking about how she would "obviously" need a new housecoat.

The accidents and non-sequiturs of her conversations and reasoning grew in frequency and scope in an insidious onset. She left the car running, the front door open, and the oven on. She would forget a cup of tea in the microwave and leave the dog out for hours. I had come home on one occasion to find her berating the mailman for stealing her letters and trying to spy on her through the mail slot. Another time Safeway called, and Anne had to pick her up from the store. She was causing trouble with some of the employees, trying to get them to walk-out to show support for the unjust wages of migrant pickers. One afternoon I received a phone call at my office; it was mother. She was panicked and not making a whole lot of sense. I managed to calm her down and she explained she was lost and scared. After a few minutes of struggled coaxing I managed to find out where she was.

When I got to her she was sitting on a parking block in front of a convenience store with the car door open. There was a woman standing beside her asking mother questions and my mother was holding herself tightly, rocking back and forth. She was only a couple of blocks away from home. We left the car and I drove her back. At the

time, my wife was studying ageing and illness, and she was growing more and more suspicious of my mother's mental decline.

My wife and I tried to talk to my mother about her condition with carefully chosen words, but she would immediately take the defensive, telling us to stay out of her affairs. Anne grew increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of my mother being at home alone until our children came home from school, and we began discussing the options of assisted living facilities. As much as I hated the idea, I agreed it was best for all of us.

For a long time I had been on an emotional seesaw. On a fulcrum of confusion I pitched from shame to justification with bi-polar quickness and regularity. I felt an overwhelming sense of defeat in putting her in a home. How could anyone call it a home? A home is a place where someone finds respite from the trials and tribulations of the outside world, a safe place where no one is allowed to get to you. That's why kid's games have "home base" and "home free." These phrases suggest an idea of safety; no one can tag you, or shine a flashlight on you marking you as "it."

"I have put my mother in a home." I said it over and over to myself; in the car, in line at the grocer's, at the bank, in the shower, everywhere. It had become my monster's mantra. This wonderful woman who had given birth to me, fed me, clothed me, given me a proper home all on her own, I had now turned away from my own home. I thought of myself then, and at times still do, as a despicable and heartless son.

She had never married. She was one of the new bohemians in the mid-sixties. She attended Evergreen College in Bellingham, Washington, where she attained a doctorate in modern philosophy. After graduating, she traveled extensively to Europe and all over America with her Russian immigrant boyfriend, later to become the man

who fathered me, Victor Tamarchenko. They were distraught over the socio-political upheaval at the end of the sixties and early seventies that stemmed from the Vietnam War, resulting in their involvement with the Revolutionary Youth Movement, a Maoist sect of the Students for a Democratic Society. They were always on the road, living in squats or in my father's van. My mother was proud to say she had shared a basement hideout for two days in Marin County with Angela Davis. And there were drugs, of course, but my mother maintained that she never used anything harder than an Alice B. Toklas brownie.

My father on the other hand, followed the writings of people like Timothy Leary and Aldous Huxley and a few of the Beats. I never knew him. From what I was told, he was a severe revolutionary, one of many leaving a shotgun instead of flowers at the funeral of George Jackson. In a demonstration of angst towards the Nixon administration, in the afternoon of the fourth of July 1973, he climbed into the stone lap of Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial and set fire to himself. It was a political suicide that Security, with the cooperation of the media, was able to cover up.

I was born three months later.

After that, my mother moved back to Washington State and took a job as a professor of philosophy at the University of Washington. She taught there for twenty-six years, an accomplished and revered member of the faculty. The university let certain issues slide. She had developed a tendency to slip off topic, ranting about socio-economic atrocities perpetrated by our government, the role of guns in the United States, the atrocities of Cambodia, nature's weather assault on the human race. She began passing out leaflets to her classes informing them where certain anti-establishment

functions were taking place, copies of essays from her old issues of the *Daily Barbarian*, and then she started speaking too loudly about the need to raise a fist or brick when a voice wasn't enough.

"Nonviolence is a false ideal that presupposes the existence of compassion and a sense of justice on the part of one's adversary. When this adversary has everything to lose and nothing to gain by exercising justice and compassion, his/her reaction can only be negative." Things started to get out of hand, and her tenure was cleverly ignored as she was "forced" into retirement.

"A clear breech of contract, a malicious patriarchal conspiracy conducted by the fascists in D.C.," she had screamed the day she left the university for the last time. She ranted for weeks. "We are a country founded upon the free fulfillment of each individual, and I refuse to recognize the authority of any nation or state to forbid me, or anyone, the right to the use of drugs, cigarettes, alcohol, sex with a consenting partner, or, especially being a woman, the right to an abortion. I take these rights, and others, to be absolute, damn it. And should the few persist in their quest to rule the private lives of the many, I will forever suggest force as a means of changing their minds."

This notwithstanding, it didn't take her long to relax and enjoy her retirement—no papers to grade, no more repetition of the same texts, no more hierarchical repression of fresh ideas. She was back to reading for leisure as well as enrichment. She read everything that passed under her face. She was also back to the cathartic afternoon British walks she used to take to the market, tending the gardens on our property.

My wife and I had moved in with my mother to help her maintain her estate, and in exchange we got a free babysitter. My mother and our two children, Zoë and Sol, got

along famously. They could be found in the backyard under the ancient willow that hung like a fairytale umbrella shading them from the afternoon sun, or in the solarium, their faces glowing like hot house flowers. The two children sat, listening with eager ears, to the lively tales the wrinkled raconteur would tell.

My wife and I had only been talking about treatment for mother for a couple of weeks when the final incident happened. I had been raking leaves in the backyard. I made three separate calico piles for the children and myself to jump and somersault into, when I heard Sol scream, "That's enough, Grandma, I don't wanna hear anymore!" I moved, with the weighted anxiety of a child destined for bad news, toward the solarium.

"What's going on in here?"

"Grandma's telling stories about soldiers killing mothers and babies." Sol was on the verge of tears and Zoë quietly held her head in her hands, staring at the floor.

"Mom!"

"But dear, they killed Genji!" My mother had puddles of tears welling up in the sacks of her eyelids. Genji was her Siamese, named after the boy in Lady Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji.*

I had heard the story several times before. She was lying low after my father's suicide and living with some friends of a friend. The house was a three floor Victorian with a revolving door of renters and freeloaders. She had come home from a walk to find two squatters spinning Genji in rapid revolutions on the linoleum of the kitchen floor. The man doing the spinning was holding a joint in his free hand and blowing large clouds of smoke into the cat's face. The other man stood laughing as he sprayed bursts of window cleaner on the cat's head. Hours after mother had broken up the atrocity, Genji

was still stumbling around unable to regain his equilibrium. Through her tears, while everyone was watching *Two Mules for Sister Sara*, she held him on the couch stroking him and whispering calming endearments as much for her benefit as the cat's. The cat died in her lap.

"They killed my Victor and they killed Genji!" She was now blaming my father's death on the children as well. Sol, only eight years old, cried into my pant leg as I stood staring at a woman I no longer recognized. Zoë too was staring inquisitively. She was thirteen at the time.

I couldn't understand what was happening. My wife had been reading a book by David Snowden called *Aging with Grace*, a study of elderly nuns slipping into Alzheimer's disease and dementia, for a graduate class. Every night in bed she would read aloud passages that related to mother's case. Snowden described the benefits of reading and long walks, the effects of frequent and extended personal contact through dialogue with family and friends. These were constants in our home. So why was this happening--and at such a rapid pace?

She had been in the home for five years now. For five years I had banished my mother from our home. She was in exile, imprisoned at Belle Maison, the best facility we could afford on a high school teacher's salary and a graduate student's stipend. I visited her twice a week, not only from the weight of my guilt, but also because I love my mother and enjoyed our conversations. This ritual of visiting was good, I hoped, for both of us. Truth be told, I hated that place, with its stench of tincture of green soap, the smell

of ancient urine pouring forth from the toilets and soiled seat cushions. The odors of ointments and powdered medicines hung and turned in the air like mobiles. There was one television, as old and worn-out as most of the residents, opposite a long tweed davenport and a high backed tartan chair with ottoman, and a faded blue rocker. There was some derangement in the tubes of the television. The blue green tube was failing, leaving the images of Maury Povich and Dr. Phil moving in strange reds and yellows. Sitting on the couch we talked about her favorite students, about philosophers like Spinoza, Hume, and Wittgenstein, about the other residents that amused or bothered her. We played Scruples, Scrabble, and chess. She was one hell of a chess player. On a few occasions, she had beaten me within six moves. I often drove home wondering how a woman of such high intellect and reason, who has fallen so far, and so abruptly, holds on to certain things like a knight's gambit, plans plays for triple word scores several turns in advance and answers Scruples questions with unwavering reason? I felt that I had made a huge mistake in putting her there.

Often during our conversations, however, she would go off on tangents. On one occasion specifically, discussing Spinoza's notions of natural knowledge as prophecy or revelation revealed to men by God, she shifted gears to Mr. Danowicz, who was always trying to show her his umbilical cord. According to him, he had escaped from his mother's womb three months early due to a calling from God. He claimed to have pulled his way through the birth canal, side stroking and slipping out onto the bed before biting through the umbilical cord and throwing the piece still attached around his neck like a scarf. He jumped from the table and ran out of the hospital.

"It's really his penis, you know? I looked once, purely out of curiosity, of course. It is an interesting story you must admit, Seth. Anyway, it was immediately obvious that it was his penis. Quite the specimen for sure but, oh, dear, the poor crazed man."

This type of gossiping gave her great laughs that she hid behind the back of her shaky blue grey hand.

On Saturdays I always stopped at Zach's Deli to pick up pulled pork sandwiches and ginger beer for her lunch. She adored pulled pork sandwiches. She had renounced Judaism after my father's death, and embraced godlessness, turning towards existentialism. She wouldn't revere a god that would deny her the simple pleasure of a pulled pork sandwich dripping with mesquite barbeque sauce. The two of us would walk out into the big garden and sit under the shade of the pergola to hide from the Washington sun. The wrought iron table and chairs were an uncomfortable contrast to the soothing effect of the wisteria vine and verbena that covered the pergola and the flagstone floor. Out there we would talk about summer trips to D.C. and Bethany Beach. We laughed about our crab eating contests and the flounder I caught when I was fifteen. She taught me how to clean and gut it, and then we stuffed it with spinach, garlic cloves, gorgonzola and threw it on the grill. I have always been allergic to most fish, but it didn't matter. It was the act of doing all of this with my mother that was important to me.

In that garden at the Belle Maison, she never had any problems, but when we were back inside she grew quarrelsome. It might have been the fatigue from a long day of visiting, but I often thought it was due to the contagion of the atmosphere within that dreaded place I had put her. Our conversations on the dusty davenport would grow unintelligible and bizarre. I would sit and listen, not wanting to interrupt or anger her.

That last night she had thrown the remote control at my head, cursing loudly, “Why did you do that to me? Why? I loved you!”

It cut me deeply. My chest felt constricted. I couldn’t breathe. It was true. I had put her here, my mother, the woman who gave me unconditional love. Then she slapped me across the mouth. “Damn you Victor, I hate you for what you’ve done! How could you expect me to go on without you? We were beautiful together, and to leave me with child. I can never forgive you for that.”

“Mother, it’s me, Seth, your son. Mother?” She had withdrawn into herself playing with her lazy, braided silver ponytail. We sat quietly for an hour before she stood. Leaning over, kissing me on the forehead, she whispered, “I’m sorry, dear, I am very tired.” She turned toward her room, and I watched her forlorn gait under her rust colored robe, and listened to the shuffle of her slippers whispering a hundred questions.

I walked out of that terrible place thinking about my father, thinking about the pain my mother must have endured dragging the yoke of his death everywhere she went. I wondered how she must have struggled to bury that memory, and yet, with all of the other things her hippocampus did not myelinize, the plaque that was building up there could not obscure the memory of my father. My mouth felt sewn shut walking through the lobby. The night watchman said goodnight, and I only heard it as an afterthought as I unlocked my car.

The sun and the moon were both in the sky, mocking each other. The horizon was a confusion of dusk and dawn as a light rain began to fall. I turned the key in the ignition and the radio was playing Paul Simon’s “Still Crazy After All These Years.” I

laughed. “I love you, mom,” I said, pulling out of the parking lot. The windshield wipers were metronomes keeping time to my back and forth reasoning as I considered the ways my wife and I could bring mother back to our home—her home. It would be difficult, but I drove home hopeful that I could requite all her years of sacrifice.

The following Tuesday, I received a call from my wife at the school. Belle Maison had phoned. Mother fell asleep under the pergola. It was her last afternoon nap in the sun. That Thursday she was cremated, as she wished. Saturday I flew her ashes to the Lincoln Memorial. I walked up the stairs remembering the stories mother told about the rallies held here. I remembered her telling me about the man in blue coveralls that scrubbed for a week at the mark my father left. Holding tightly to the small tin container in my coat pocket, I slinked nervously past the men in sunglasses and black suits. My chest was tight and my ears were hot. I looked once, twice over my shoulder and then my mother, a grey cloud of dust, fell lazily, but with an air of dignity, into the lap of Lincoln, reunited finally, with my father.

“Hey!” I heard a voice yell. I turned to see the sun glaring off a pair of dark lenses under a severe crew cut and a squarely chiseled jaw that seemed to point at me derisively. I bolted down the stairs, scared as hell. I could feel the tears running back into my ears as I ran, and yet I couldn’t stop from smiling. I didn’t stop until I stood on the platform at Arlington Cemetery Station.

Anne and the children greeted me at the airport early Sunday morning. Though we lived only half of an hour from the airport, it was a long, quiet ride home. Zoë stared out of the window with her headphones jammed in her ears and Sol slept on her shoulder as I sat quietly staring at the snow covered mountains along I-5, the window pressed cold

against my forehead. Anne drove. She pulled in the driveway, leaned over kissing me on the ear, and whispered, “Honey, we’re home.”