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I, David James Poissant, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English & Comparative Literature.

It is entitled:

**The Cost of Living: Stories**

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# The Cost of Living: Stories

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by

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## *Abstract*

*The Cost of Living: Stories* is a collection of thematically linked short fiction that explores the drama of the everyday in the lives of children, women, and men. In fifteen stories, *The Cost of Living* illuminates life in and beyond the contemporary urban and suburban southeastern United States. Characters, plagued by hardships of their own making, struggle with relationships and the demands of family. Animals, too, find their way into the fiction, as characters intrude on the natural world. By turns comic, dramatic, and frightening, and written in modes both realist and experimental, this collection gives voice to the heroes of the conflicts that often go unnoticed in our own backyards.



## *Acknowledgements*

“The Heaven of Animals” was published by *The Atlantic*.

“Lizard Man” (Winner: *Playboy* College Fiction Contest) appeared in *Playboy*, *New Stories from the South 2008*, *Best New American Voices 2010*, and was named a Distinguished Mystery Story of 2007 in *Best American Mystery Stories*.

“Refund” (Third Prize: *Atlantic Monthly* Student Writing Contest) will appear in *One Story*.

“What the Wolf Wants” appeared in *West Branch*.

“The Caterer” (Winner: Matt Clark Prize) appeared in the *New Delta Review*.

“Lake in Winter” appeared in *Iron Horse*.

“Last of the Great Land Mammals” was awarded the Alice White Reeves Memorial Award from the National Society of Arts & Letters and took Third Prize in the 2010 NSAL National Literature Competition.

“Measuring the Drop” appeared in *The Greensboro Review*.

“100% Cotton” will appear in *The Southern Review*.

“This is My Body” appeared in *The Pinch*.

“The Cost of Living” (Finalist: Mississippi Review Prize) appeared in *The Mississippi Review*.

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## LIZARD MAN

I rattle into the driveway around sunup and Cam's on my front stoop with his boy, Bobby. Cam stands. He's a huge man, thick and muscled from a decade of work in construction. Sleeves of green dragons run armpit to wrist. He claims there's a pair of naked ladies tattooed into all those scales if you look close enough.

When Crystal left him, Cam got the boy, which tells you what kind of a mother Crystal was. Cam's my last friend. He's a saint when he's sober, and he hasn't touched liquor in ten years.

He puts a hand on the boy's shoulder, but Bobby spins from his grip and charges. He meets me at the truck, grabs my leg and hugs it with his whole body. I head toward Cam. Bobby bounces and laughs with every step.

We shake hands, but Cam's expression is no-nonsense.

"Graveyard again?" he says. My apron, rolled into a tan tube, hangs from my front pocket and I reek of kitchen grease.

"Yeah," I say. I haven't told Cam how I lost my temper and yelled at a customer, how apparently some people don't know what *over easy* means, how my agreement to work the ten-to-six shift is the only thing keeping my electricity on and the water running.

"Bobby," Cam says, "go play for a minute, OK?" Bobby releases my leg and stares at his father skeptically. "Don't make me tell you twice," Cam says. The boy runs to my mailbox, drops to the lawn, cross-legged, and scowls. "Keep going," Cam says. Slowly, deliberately, Bobby stands and sulks toward their house.

“What is it?” I say. “What’s wrong?”

Cam shakes his head. “Red’s dead,” he says.

Red is Cam’s dad. “Bastard used to beat the fuck out of me,” Cam said one night back when we both drank too much and swapped sad stories. When he turned 18, Cam enlisted and left for the first Gulf War. The last time he saw his father, the man was staggering, drunk, across the lawn. “Go then!” he screamed. “Go die for your fucking country!” Bobby never knew he had a grandfather.

I don’t know whether Cam is upset or relieved, and I don’t know what to say. Cam must see this because he says: “It’s OK. I’m OK.”

“How’d it happen?” I ask.

“He was drinking,” Cam says. “Bartender said one minute Red was laughing, the next his forehead was on the bar. When they went to shake him awake, he was dead.

“Wow.” It’s a stupid thing to say, but I’ve been up all night. My hand still grips an invisible steel spatula. I can feel lard under my nails.

“I need a favor,” Cam says.

“Anything,” I say. When I was in jail, it was Cam who bailed me out. When my wife and son moved to Baton Rouge, it was Cam who knocked down my door, kicked my ass, threw the contents of my liquor cabinet onto the front lawn, set it on fire, and got me a job at his friend’s diner.

“I need a ride to Red’s house,” Cam says.

“OK,” I say. Cam hasn’t had a car for years. Half the people on our block can’t afford storm shutters, let alone cars, but it’s St. Petersburg, a pedestrian city, and downtown’s only a five-minute walk.



“Well, don’t say OK yet,” Cam says. “It’s in Lee.”

“Lee, Florida?”

Cam nods. Lee is four hours north, the last city you pass on I-75 before you hit Georgia.

“No problem,” I say, “as long as I’m back before ten tonight.”

“Another graveyard?” Cam asks. I nod. “OK,” he says, “let’s go.”

#

Last year, I threw my son through the family room window. I don’t remember how it happened, not exactly. I remember stepping into the room. I remember seeing Jack, his mouth pressed to the mouth of the other boy, his hands moving fast in the boy’s lap. Then I stood over him in the garden. Lynn ran from the house, screaming. She saw Jack and hit me in the face. She battered my shoulders and my chest. Above us, through the window frame, the other boy stood, staring, shaking, hugging himself with his thin arms. Jack lay on the ground. He did not move except for the rise and fall of his chest. The window had broken cleanly and there was no blood, just shards of glass scattered over flowers, but one of Jack’s arms was bent behind his head, as though he had gone to sleep that way, an elbow for a pillow.

“Call 911,” Lynn yelled to the boy above.

“No,” I said. Whatever else I didn’t know in that time and place, I knew we could never afford an ambulance ride. “I’ll take him,” I said.

“No!” Lynn cried. “You’ll kill him!”

“I’m not going to kill him,” I said. “Come here.” I gestured to the boy. He shook his head and stepped back. “Please,” I said.

Tentatively, the boy stepped over the jagged edge of the sill. He planted his feet on the brick ledge of the front wall, then dropped the few feet to the ground. Glass crunched beneath his sneakers.

“Grab his ankles,” I said. I hooked my hands under Jack’s armpits and we lifted him. One arm trailed the ground as we walked him to the car. Lynn opened the hatchback. We laid Jack in the back and covered him with a blanket. It seemed like the right thing, what you see on TV.

A few neighbors had come outside to watch. We ignored them.

“I’ll need you with me,” I said to the boy. “When we’re done, I’ll take you home.” The boy was wringing the hem of his shirt in both hands. His eyes brimmed with tears. “I won’t hurt you, if that’s what you think.”

We set off for the hospital, Lynn following in my pickup. The boy sat beside me in the passenger seat, his body pressed to the door, face against the window, the seatbelt strap clenched in one hand at his waist. With each bump in the road, he turned to look at Jack.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Alan,” he said.

“How old are you, Alan?”

“Seventeen.”

“Seventeen. Seventeen. And have you ever been with a woman, Alan?”

Alan looked at me. His face drained of color. His hand tightened on the seatbelt.

“It’s a simple question, Alan. I’m asking you: Have you been with a woman?”

“No,” Alan said. “No, sir.”

“Then how do you know you’re gay?”

In back, Jack began to stir. He moaned, then grew silent. Alan watched him.

“Look at me, Alan,” I said. “I asked you a question. If you’ve never been with a woman, then how do you know you’re gay?”

“I don’t know,” Alan said.

“You mean, you don’t know that you’re gay, or you don’t know how you know?”

“I don’t know how I know,” Alan said. “I just do.”

We passed the bakery, the Laundromat, the supermarket, and entered the city limits. In the distance, the silhouette of the helicopter on the hospital’s roof. Behind us, the steady pursuit of the pickup truck.

“And your parents, do they know about this?” I asked.

“Yes,” Alan said.

“And do they approve?”

“Not really.”

“No. I bet they don’t, Alan. I’ll bet they do not.”

I glanced in the rearview mirror. Jack had not opened his eyes, but he had a hand to his temple. The other hand, the one attached to the broken arm, lay at his side. The fingers moved, but without purpose, the hand spasming from fist to open palm.

“I just have one more question for you, Alan,” I said.

Alan looked like he might be sick. He watched the road unfurl before us. He was afraid of me, afraid to look at Jack.

“What right do you have teaching my son to be gay?”

“I didn’t!” Alan said. “I’m not!”

“You’re not? Then what do you call that? Back there? That business on the couch?”

“Mr. Lawson,” Alan said, and, here, the tone of his voice changed, and I felt as though I were speaking to another man. “With all due respect, sir, Jack came on to me.”

“Jack is not gay.”

“He is. I know it. Jack knows it. Your *wife* knows it. I don’t know how you couldn’t know it. I don’t see how you’ve missed the signals.”

I tried to imagine what signals, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t recall a thing that would have signaled that I’d wind up here, delivering my son to the hospital with a concussion and a broken arm. What signal might have foretold that, following this day, after two months spent in a motel and two months in prison, my wife of 20 years would divorce me because, as she put it, I was *full of hate*?

I pulled up to the emergency room’s entryway and Alan helped me pull Jack from the car. A nurse with a wheelchair ran out to meet us. We settled Jack into the chair and she wheeled him away.

I pulled the car into a parking spot and walked back to the entrance. Alan stood on the curb where I had left him.

“Where’s Lynn?” I said.

“Inside,” Alan said. “Jack’s awake.”

“All right, I’m going in. I suggest you get out of here.”

“But, you said you’d drive me home.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I changed my mind.”

Alan stared at me, dumbfounded. His hands groped the air.

“Hey,” I said, “I got a signal for you.” I gave him a hitchhiker’s thumb’s up and cast it over my shoulder as I entered the hospital.

#

I wake and Cam's making his way down back roads, their surfaces cratered with potholes.

"Rise and shine," he says, "and welcome to Lee."

It's nearly noon. The sun is bright and the cab is hot. I wipe gunk from my eyes and drool from the corner of my mouth. Cam watches the road with one eye and studies directions he's scrawled in black ink across the back of a cereal box. He's never seen the house where his father spent his last 20 years.

We turn onto a dirt road. The truck lurches into and then out of an enormous, waterlogged hole. Pines line the road. Their needles shiver as we go by. We pass turn after turn, but only half of the roads are marked. Every few miles, we pass a driveway, the house deep in the trees and out of sight. It's a haunted place and I'm already ready to leave.

Cam says, "I don't know where the fuck we are."

We drive some more. I think about Bobby home alone, how Cam gave him six VHS tapes. "By the time you watch all of these," he said, "I'll be back." Then he put in the first movie, something Disney, and we left. "He'll be fine," Cam said. "He'll never even know we're gone."

"We could bring him with us," I said, but Cam had refused.

"There's no telling what we'll find there," he said.

Ahead, a child stands beside the road. Cam slows the truck to a halt and rolls down the window. The girl steps forward. She looks over her shoulder, then back at us. She is barefoot and her face is smeared with dirt. She wears a brown dress and a green bow in her hair. A string is looped around her wrist and from the end of the string floats a blue balloon.

“Hi there,” Cam says. He leans out the window, his hand extended, but the child does not take it. Instead, she stares at his arms, the coiled dragons. She takes a step back.

“You’re scaring her,” I say.

Cam glares at me, but he returns his head to the cab and his hand to the wheel and gives the girl his warmest smile. “Do you know where we could find Cherry Road?” he says.

“Sure,” the girl says. She pumps her arm and the balloon bobs in response. “It’s that way,” she says, pointing in the direction from which we’ve come.

“About how far?” Cam asks.

“Not the next road but the next. But it’s a dead end. There’s only one house.” She flails her wrist and the balloon thunks against her fist.

Cam glances at the cereal box. “That’s the one,” he says.

“Oh,” the girl says, and for a moment she is silent. “You’re going to visit the Lizard Man. I seen him. I seen him once.”

Cam looks at me. I shrug. We look at the girl.

“Well, thank you,” Cam says. The girl gives the balloon a good shake. Cam turns the truck around and the girl waves goodbye.

“Cute kid,” I say. We turn onto Cherry.

“Creepy little fucker,” Cam says.

#

The house is hidden in pines and the yard is overgrown with knee-high weeds. Tire tracks mark where the driveway used to be. Plastic flamingos dot the yard, their curved beaks peeking out of the weeds, wire legs rusted, bodies bleached a light pink.

The roof of the house is littered with pine needles and piles of shingles where someone abandoned a roofing project. The porch has buckled and the siding is rotten, the planks loose. I press a fingernail to the soft wood and it slides in.

Our mission is unclear. There's no body to I.D. or papers to sign. Nothing to inherit, and there will be no funeral. But I know why we're here. This is how Cam will say goodbye.

The front door is locked but gives with two kicks. "Right here," Cam says. He taps the wood a foot above the lock before slamming the heel of his boot through the door.

Inside, the house waits for its owner's return. The hallway light is on. The A.C. unit shakes in the window over the kitchen sink. Tan wallpaper curls away from the cabinets like birch bark exposing thin ribbons of yellow glue on the walls.

We hear voices. Cam puts a hand to my chest and a finger to his lips. He brings a hand to his waist and feels for a gun that is not there. Neither of us moves for a full minute, then Cam laughs.

"Fuck!" he says. "That's a TV." He hoots. He runs a hand through his hair. "About scared the shit out of me."

We move to the main room. It, too, is in disarray, the lampshades thick with dust, a coffee table awash in a sea of newspapers and unopened mail. There is an old and scary looking couch, its arms held to its sides with duct tape. A pair of springs pokes through the cushion, ripe with tetanus.

The exception is the television. It is beautiful. It is six feet of widescreen glory. "Look at that picture," I say, and Cam and I step back to take it in. The TV's tuned to the Military Channel, some cable extravagance. B-2 Bombers streak the sky in black and white, propellers the size of my head. On top of the set sits a bottle of Windex and a filthy washcloth along with

several many-buttoned remote controls. Cam grabs one, fondles it, holds down a button, and the sound swells. The drone of plane engines and firefight tear across the room from one speaker to another. I jump. Cam grins.

“We’re taking it,” he says. “We are so taking this shit.”

He pushes another button and the picture blips to a single point of white at the center of the screen. The point fades and dies.

“No!” Cam says. “No!”

“What did you do?” I say.

“I don’t know. I don’t know!”

Cam shakes the remote, picks up another, punches more buttons, picks up a third, presses its buttons. The television hums and the picture shimmers back to life.

“Ahhh,” Cam says. We sit, careful to avoid the springs. While we watch, the beaches at Normandy are stormed, two bombs are dropped, and the war is won. We’re halfway into Vietnam when Cam says, “I’m going to check out his room.” It is not an invitation.

Cam’s gone for half an hour. When he returns, he looks terrible. The color is gone from his face and his eyes are red-rimmed. He carries a shoebox under one arm. I don’t ask and he doesn’t offer.

“Let’s load up the set and get out of here,” Cam says. “I’ll pull the truck around.”

I hear a glass door slide open then shut behind me. I hear something like a scream. Then the door slides open again. I turn around to see Cam. If he looked bad before, now he looks downright awful.

“What is it?” I say.

“Big,” Cam says. “In the backyard.”



“What? What’s big in the backyard?”

“Big. Fucking. Alligator.”

#

It *is* a big fucking alligator. I’ve seen alligators before, in movies, at zoos, but never this big and never so close. We stare at him. We don’t know it’s a *him*, but we decide it’s a *him*. He is big. It’s insane.

It’s also the saddest fucking thing I have ever seen. In the backyard is a makeshift cage, an oval of chain link fence with a chicken wire roof. Inside, the alligator straddles an old kiddie pool. The pool’s cracked plastic lip strains with the alligator’s weight. His middle fills the pool, his belly submerged in a few inches of syrupy brown water, legs hanging out. His tail, the span of a man, curls against a length of chain link.

When he sees us, the alligator hisses and paddles his front feet in the air. He opens his jaws, baring yellow teeth and white, fleshy gums. Everywhere there are flies and gnats. They fly into his open mouth and land on his teeth. Others swarm open wounds along his back.

“What is he doing here?” Cam asks.

“Red was the Lizard Man,” I say. “Apparently.”

We stare at the alligator. He stares back. I consider the cage and wonder whether the alligator can turn around.

“He looks bored,” Cam says. And it’s true. He looks bored, and sick. He shuts his mouth and his open eyes are the only thing reminding me he’s alive.

“We can’t leave him here,” Cam says.

“We should call someone,” I say. But who would we call? The authorities? Animal control?

“We can’t,” Cam says. “They’ll kill him.”

Cam is right. I’ve seen it before, on the news. Some jackass raises a gator. The gator gets loose. It’s been handfed and knows no fear of man. The segments always end the same way:

*Sadly, the alligator had to be destroyed.*

“I don’t see that we have a choice,” I say.

“We have the pickup,” Cam says.

My mouth says, *No*, but my eyes must say, *Yes*, because before I know what’s happening, we’re in the front yard examining the bed of the truck, Cam measuring the length with his open arms.

“This won’t work,” I say. Cam ignores me. He pulls a blue tarp from the backseat and unrolls it on the ground beside the truck.

“He’ll never fit,” I say.

“He’ll fit. It’ll be close, but he’ll fit.”

“Cam,” I say. “Wait. Stop.” Cam leans against the truck. He looks right at me. “Say we get the alligator out of the cage and into the truck. Say we manage to do this and keep all of our fingers. Where do we take him? I mean, what the hell, Cam? What the hell do you do with twelve feet of living, breathing, alligator? And what about the TV? I thought you wanted to take the TV.”

“Shit. I forgot about the TV.”

We stare at the truck. I look up. The sky has turned from bright to light blue and the sun has disappeared behind a scatter of clouds. On the ground, one corner of the tarp flaps in the breeze, winking its gold eyelet.

Cam bows his head, as if in mourning. “Maybe if we stand the set up on its end.”

“Cam,” I say. “We can take the alligator or we can take the television, but we can’t take both.”

#

Electric-taping the snout, Cam decides, will be the hard part.

“All of it’s the hard part,” I say, but Cam’s not listening.

Cam finds a T-bone in Red’s refrigerator. It’s spoiled, but the alligator doesn’t seem to mind. Cam sets the steak near the cage and the alligator waddles out of the pool. He presses his nostrils to the fence. The thick musk of alligator and reek of rotten meat turn my stomach and I retch.

“You puke, I kick your ass,” Cam says.

We’ve raided Red’s garage for supplies. Lying scattered at our feet are bolt cutters, a roll of electric tape, a spool of twine, bungee cords, a dozen two-by-fours, my tarp, and, for no reason I’m immediately able to ascertain, a chainsaw.

“Protection,” Cam says, nudging the old Sears model with his toe. The chain is rusted and hangs loose from the blade. I imagine Cam starting the chainsaw, the chain snapping, flying, landing far away in the tall grass. I try to picture the struggle between man and beast, Cam pinned beneath 500 pounds of alligator, Cam’s head in the gator’s mouth, Cam dragged in circles around the yard, a tangle of limbs and screams. Throughout each scenario, the chainsaw offers little assistance.

Cam’s hands are sheathed in oven mitts, a compromise he accepted begrudgingly when the boxing gloves he found, while offering superior protection, failed to provide him the ability to grip, pick up, or hold.

“This is stupid,” I say. “Are we really doing this?”

“We’re doing this,” Cam says. He swats a fly from his face with one potholdered hand.

There is a clatter of chain link. We turn to see the alligator nudging the fence with his snout. He snorts, eyes the T-bone, opens and shuts his mouth. He really is surprisingly large.

Cam’s parked the pickup in the backyard. He pulls off his oven mitts, lowers the gate, exposing the wide, bare bed of the truck, and we set to work angling the two-by-fours from gate to grass. We press the planks together and Cam cinches them tight with the bungee cords. The boards are long, ten or twelve feet, so physics is on our side. We should be able to drag him up the incline.

We return our attention to the alligator who is sort of throwing himself against the fence, except that he can only back up a few feet and therefore build very little momentum. Above his head, at knee level, is a hand-sized wire mesh door held shut by a combination lock. With each lunge, the lock jumps, then clatters against the door. With each charge, I jump too.

“He can’t break out,” Cam says. He picks up the bolt cutters.

“You don’t know that,” I say.

“If he could, don’t you think he’d have done it by now?” Cam positions the bolt cutters on the loop of lock, bows his legs, and squats. He squeezes and his face reddens. He grunts, there’s a snap, and the lock falls away, followed by a flash of movement. Cam howls and falls. The alligator’s open jaws stretch halfway through the hole. All I see is teeth.

“Motherfucker!” Cam yells.

“You OK?” I say.

Cam holds up his hands, wiggles ten fingers.

“OK,” Cam says. “OK.” He picks up the T-bone and throws it at the alligator. The steak lands on his nose, hangs there, then slides off.

“It’s not a dog,” I say. “This isn’t catch.”

Cam puts on the oven mitts and slowly reaches for the meat resting in the grass just a few feet beneath all those teeth. Suddenly, the pen looks less sturdy, less like a thing the alligator could never escape.

The cage shakes, but this time it’s the wind, which has really picked up. I wonder whether it’s storming in St. Petersburg. Cam should be at home with Bobby, and I almost say as much. But Cam’s eyes are wild. He’s dead-set on doing this.

Cam says, “I’m going to put the steak into his mouth, and, when I do, I want you to tape the jaws shut.”

“No way,” I say. “No way am I putting my hand in range of that thing.” And then this happens: My son walks out of my memory and into my thoughts, his arm hanging loose at the elbow. The nurse asks what happened, and he looks up, ready to lie for me. There is something beautiful in the pause between this question and the one to come. Then there’s the officer’s hand on my shoulder, the “Would you mind stepping out with me, please?” Oh, I’ve heard it a hundred times. It never leaves me. It is a whisper. It is a prison sentence.

I want to put the elbow back into the socket myself. I want to turn back time. I want Jack at five or ten. I want him curled in my lap like a dog. I want him writing on the walls with an orange crayon and blaming the angels that live in the attic. I want him before his voice plummeted two octaves, before he learned to stand with a hand on one hip, before he grew confused. I want my boy back.

“Come on!” Cam shouts. “Don’t puss out on me now. As soon as he bites down, just wrap the tape around it.”

“Give me your oven mitts,” I say.

“No!”

“Give me the mitts and I’ll do it.”

“But you won’t be able to handle the tape.”

“Trust me,” I say, “I’ll find a way.”

We do it. Cam waves the cut of meat at the snout until it smacks teeth. The jaws grab. There’s an unnatural crunch as the T in the T-Bone becomes two Is and then a pile of periods. I drape a length of tape over the nose, fasten the ends beneath the jaws, then run my gloved hands up both strands of tape, sealing them. Then I start wrapping like crazy. I wind the roll of tape around and around the jaws. The tape unspools from the roll and coils in a flat, black worm around the snout.

When I step back, the alligator’s jaws are shut tight and my hands shake.

“I can’t believe it,” Cam says. “I can’t believe you actually did that shit.”

#

The alligator’s one heavy son of a bitch. We hold him in a kind of headlock, arms cradling his neck and front legs, fingers gripping his scaly hide. It’s a good 20 feet from cage to truck. We sidestep toward the pickup, the alligator’s back end and tail tracing a path through the grass. Every few feet, we stop to rest.

When we drag, the alligator’s back feet scramble and claw at the ground, but he doesn’t writhe or thrash. He is not a healthy alligator. I stop.

“C’mon,” Cam says. “Almost there.”

“What are we doing?” I say.

“We’re putting an alligator into your truck,” Cam says. “C’mon.”

“But look at him,” I say. Cam looks down, examines the alligator’s wide, green head, his wet, ping-pong ball eyes. He looks up.

“No,” I say. “Really look.”

“What?” Cam’s impatient. He shifts his weight, gets a better grip on the gator. “I don’t know what you want me to see.”

“He’s not even fighting us. He’s too sick. Even if we set him free, how do we know he’ll make it?”

“We don’t.”

“No, we don’t. We don’t know where he came from. We don’t know where to take him. And what if Red raised him? How will he survive in the wild? How will he learn to hunt and catch fish and stuff?”

Cam shrugs, shakes his head.

“So, why?” I ask. “Why are we doing this?”

Cam locks eyes with me. After a minute, I look away. My arms are weak with the weight of alligator. My legs quiver. We shuffle forward.

#

I didn’t give Jack the chance to lie. I admitted guilt to second-degree battery and kept everyone out of court. I got four months and served two, plus fines, plus community service. Had that been the end of it, I’d have gotten off easy. Instead, I lost my family.

The last time I saw Jack, he stood beside his mother’s car showing Alan his new driver’s license. They reclined like girls against the hood but laughed like men at something on the license: a typo. *Weight: 1500*. I watched them from the doorway. Jack kept his distance, flinched when I came close.

Alan had helped me load the furniture. With each piece, I thought of Jack's body. How it hung between us that afternoon, how it swayed, how much like a game wherein you and a friend grab another boy by ankles and wrists and throw him off a dock and into a lake.

Everything Jack and Lynn owned we'd packed into a U-Haul truck. I was not meant to know where they were going. I was not meant to see them again, but I'd found maps and directions in a pile of Lynn's things and had written down the address of their new place in Baton Rouge. I could forgive Lynn not wanting to see me, but taking my son away was a thing I could not abide.

I decided I would go there one day, a day that seems more distant with each passing afternoon. And what would Jack do when he opened the door? In my dreams, it was always Jack who opened the door. I would open my arms in invitation. I would say what I had not said.

But that afternoon, it was Alan who sent Jack to me. Lynn waited in the U-Haul, ready to drive away. Alan gestured in my direction. He and Jack argued in hushed voices. And finally, remarkably, Jack moved toward me. I did not leave the doorway, and Jack stopped just short of the stoop.

What can I tell you about my son? He had been a beautiful boy, and, standing before me, I saw that he had become something different: A man I did not understand. His t-shirt was too tight for him and the hem rode just above his navel. A trail of light brown hair led from there and disappeared behind a silver belt buckle. His fingernails were painted black. The cast had come off, and his right arm was a nest of curly, dark hairs.

I wanted to say, "I want to understand you."

I wanted to say, "I will do whatever it takes to earn your trust."



I wanted to say, “I love you,” but I had never said it, not to Jack—yes, I am one of those men—and I could not bear the thought of speaking these words to my son for the first time and not hearing them spoken in return.

Instead, I said nothing.

Jack held out his hand and we shook like strangers.

I still feel it, the infinity of Jack’s handshake: The nod of pressed palms, flesh of my flesh.

#

The rain arrives in sheets and the windshield wipers can hardly keep up. I drive. Cam sits beside me. He’s placed the shoebox on the seat between us. His arm rests protectively against the lid. The alligator slides around with the two-by-fours in the back. We fastened the tarp over the bed of the truck to conceal our cargo, but we didn’t pull it taut. The tarp sags with water, threatening to smother the animal underneath.

Cam flips on the radio and we catch snippets of the weather before the speakers turn to static.

*“...upgraded to a tropical storm...usually signals the formation of a hurricane...storm will pick up speed as it makes its way across the Gulf...expected to come ashore as far north as the panhandle...far south as St. Petersburg...”*

Cam turns the radio off. We watch rain pelt the windshield, the black flash of wipers pushing water.

I don’t ask whether Bobby is afraid of storms. As a boy, I’d been frightened, but not Jack. During storms, Jack had stood at the window and watched as branches skittered down the street and power lines unraveled onto the sidewalks. He smiled and stared until Lynn pulled him away

from the glass and we moved to the bathroom with our blankets and flashlights. It was only then, huddled in the dark, that Jack sometimes cried.

“We should go back,” I say. “The power could be out.”

“Bobby’s a tough kid,” Cam says. “He’ll be fine.”

“Cam,” I say.

“In case you’ve forgotten, there’s a fucking alligator in the back of your truck.”

I say nothing. Whatever happens is Cam’s responsibility. *This, I tell myself, is not your fault.*

Thunder shakes the truck. Not far ahead, a cell tower ignites with lightning. A shower of sparks waterfalls onto the highway. Cars and trucks are dusted with fire. Everyone drives on.

I don’t know where we’re headed, but Cam says we’re close.

*Cam, I think, after this, I owe you nothing. Once this is over, we’re even.*

“If it’s work you’re worried about,” Cam says, “I’ll talk to Mickey. I’ll tell him about Red. He’ll understand if you’re late.”

“It’s not Mickey I’m worried about,” I say. I don’t say: *Mickey can kiss my ass.* I don’t say: *You and Mickey can go to hell.*

“Look,” Cam says, “I know why you’re pulling the graveyard shift. Mickey told me what you did. But this is different. This he’ll understand.”

I recognize the ache at the back of my throat immediately. The second I’m alone, it will take a miracle to keep a bottle out of my hand.

“Take this exit,” Cam says. “At the bottom, turn right.”

I guide the truck down the ramp toward Grove Street. The water in back sloshes forward and un-floods the tarp. Alligator feet scratch for purchase on the truck bed's corrugated plastic lining.

"Where are you taking us?" I ask.

"Havenbrook," he says. I wait for Cam to say he's kidding. But Cam isn't kidding.

#

The largest of the lakes cradles the 17th green. Cam's seen gators there before, big bastards who come ashore to sun themselves and scare off golfers. I've never golfed in my life, and neither has he, but Cam led the team that patched the clubhouse roof following last year's hurricane season. He remembers the five-digit code, and it still works. The security gate slides open, and we head down the paved drive reserved for maintenance.

No one's on the course. Fallen limbs litter the greens. An abandoned white cart lies turned on its side where the golf cart path rounds the 15th hole.

Lightning streaks the sky. The rain has turned the windshield to water and sudden gusts of wind jostle the truck from every direction. I fight the steering wheel to stay on the asphalt. Even Cam is wide-eyed, his fingers buried in the seat cushions. The shoebox bounces between us.

We reach the lake, but the shore is half a football field away. The green is soggy, thick with water, and already the lake is flooding its banks. The first tire that leaves the road, I know, will sink into the mud and we'll never get the truck out.

"I can't drive out there," I tell Cam. I have to yell over the wind and rain, the deafening thunder. It's like the world is pulling apart. "This is the closest I can get us."

Cam says something I can't hear and then he's out of the truck, the door slamming behind him. I jump out and the wet cold slaps me. Within seconds, I'm drenched, my clothes heavy. All I hear is the wind. I move as if underwater.

As soon as Cam gets the tarp off, the storm catches it and it billows into the sky like a flaming blue parachute, up into the trees overhead. It tangles itself into the branches and then there is only the *smack smack* of the tarp's uncaught corners pummeled by gusts.

Cam screams at me. His teeth flash in bursts of lightning, but his words are choked by wind. I tap my ear and he nods. He motions toward the alligator. We approach it slowly. I expect the animal to charge, but he lies motionless. I check the jaws. They're still wrapped tight. This, I realize, will be our last challenge. If he gets away from us before we remove the tape, he's doomed.

I'm wondering which of us will climb into the bed of the truck when the gator starts scuttling forward. We leap out of the way as hundreds of pounds of reptile spill from the truck and onto the green. The gate cracks under the weight and swings loose like a trapdoor in midair, the hinges busted. Then the alligator is free on the grass. We don't move and neither does he.

Cam approaches me. He makes a megaphone of his cupped hands and mouth and leans in close to my ear. His hot breath on my face is startling and sudden and wonderful in all that fierce cold and rain.

"I think he's stunned," Cam yells. "We've got to get the tape off, now."

I nod. I am exhausted and anxious and I know there's no way we'll be able to lug the alligator to the water's edge. I wonder whether he'll make it, if he'll find his way to the water, or if this fall from the truck was the final blow, if tomorrow the groundskeepers will find an

alligator carcass 50 yards from the lake. It would make the *St. Petersburg Times*'s front page. A giant alligator killed in the hurricane. Officials would be baffled.

“I want you to straddle its neck,” Cam yells. “Keep its head pressed to the ground. I’ll try to get the tape off.”

“No,” I say. I point to my chest. I circle my hand through the air, pantomiming the unraveling. Cam looks surprised, but he nods.

Cam brings his hands to my face again and yells his hot words into my ear. “On my signal,” he screams, but I push him away.

I don’t wait for a signal. Before I know it, I’m on the ground, my side hugging mud, and I’m digging my nails into the tape. My eye is inches from the alligator’s eye. He blinks without blinking, a thin, clear membrane sliding over his eyeball, then up and under his eyelid. It is a thing to see. It is a knowing wink. I see this and I feel safe.

The tape is harder to unwrap than it was to wrap. The rain has made it soft, the glue gooey. Every few turns, I lose my grip. Finally, I let the tape coil around my hand like a snake. It unwinds and soon my fist is a ball of dark, sticky fruit. The last of the tape pulls cleanly from the snout and I roll away from the alligator. I stand and Cam pulls me back. He holds me up. The alligator flexes his jaws. His mouth opens wide, then slams shut. And then he’s off, zigzagging toward the water.

He is swift and strong, and I’m glad it is cold and raining so Cam can’t see the tears streaking my cheeks and won’t know that my shivering is from sobbing. Cam lets go of me and I think I will fall, but instead I am running. Running! And I’m laughing and hollering and leaping. I’m pumping my fist into the air. I’m screaming, “Go! Go!” And, just before the alligator reaches the water, I lunge and my fingertips trace the last ridges and scales of tail whipping their way

ahead of me. The sky is alive with lightning and I see the hulking body, so awkward and graceless on land, slide into the water as it was meant to do. That great body cuts the water, fast and sleek, and the alligator dives out of sight, at home in the world where he belongs, safe in the warm quiet of mud and fish and unseen things that thrive in deep, green darkness.

#

Cam and I don't say much on the ride home. The rain has slowed to an even, steady downpour. The truck's cab has grown cold. Cam holds his hands close to the vents to catch whatever weak streams of heat trickle out. We have done a good thing, Cam says, and I agree, but I worry at what cost? We listen to the radio, but the storm has headed north. The reporters have moved on to new cities: Clearwater, Crystal Springs, Ocala.

"There was this one time," Cam says at last. "About five years back. I spoke to Red."

This is news to me. This, I know, is no small revelation.

"I called him," Cam says. "I called him up, and I said, 'Dad? I just want you to know that you have a grandson and that his name is Robert and that I think he should know his grandfather.' And you know what that prick did? He hung up. The only thing Red said to me in 20 years was 'Hello' when he picked up the phone."

"I'm sorry," I say.

"If he'd even once told me he was sorry, I'd have forgiven him anything. I'd have forgiven him my own murder. He was my father. I would have forgiven everything.

"Do you know why I got all these fucking tattoos? To hide the fucking scars from the night Red cut me with a fillet knife, and I'd have forgiven that if he'd just said something, anything, when he answered the phone."

Cam doesn't shake or sob or bang a fist on the dashboard, but, when I look away, I catch his reflection in the window, a knuckle in each eye socket, and I'm suddenly sorry for my impatience, the grudge I've carried all afternoon.

"But you tried," I say. "At least you won't spend your life wondering."

We sit in silence for a while. The rain on the roof beats a cadence into the cab and it soothes me.

"You know, I served with gay guys in the Gulf," Cam says, and I almost drive the truck off the road. A tire slips over the lip of asphalt and my side mirror nearly catches a guardrail before I bring the truck back to the center of the lane.

"Jesus!" Cam says. "I'm just saying, they were OK guys, and if Jack's gay it's not the end of the world."

"Jack's confused," I say. "He isn't gay."

"Well, either he is or he isn't, and what you think or want or say won't change it."

"Cam," I say, "all due respect. This doesn't concern you."

"I know," Cam says. He sits up straighter in his seat, grips the door handle as we pull onto our block. "I'm just saying, it isn't too late."

We pull into the driveway. Cam jumps out of the truck before it's in park. The yard is a mess of fallen limbs and garbage. Two shutters have been torn from the front of the house. The mailbox is on its side. Otherwise, everything looks all right. I glance down the street and see that my house is still standing.

When I turn back to Cam's house, what I see breaks my heart in ten places. I see Cam running across the lawn. I see Bobby, his hands pressed to the big bay window. His face is puffy and red. Cam disappears into the house, and then he is there with the boy, he is there on his

knees, and he pulls Bobby to him. He mouths the words, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” over and over again, and Bobby collapses into him, buries his head in Cam’s chest, and my friend wraps his son in dragons.

I watch them. They stay like that for minutes, framed by window and house and the darkening sky. I watch, and then I open the shoebox and look inside.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t this. What I find are letters, over a hundred of them. About a letter a month for roughly ten years, all of them unopened. Each has been dated and stamped *RETURN TO SENDER*, the last one sent back just a week ago. Each is marked by the same shaky handwriting. Each is addressed to a single recipient, Mr. Cameron Starnes, from a single sender: Red.

And I know then that there was no phone call, no forgiveness on Cam’s part, that Cam never came close until after the monster was safely out of reach.

I stare at the letters and I know who it is Cam wants to keep me from becoming.

I pull out of Cam’s driveway. I stop to right Cam’s mailbox, then I tuck the shoebox safely inside. I follow the street to the end of the block. At the stop sign, I pause. I don’t know whether to turn right or left. Finally, I head for the interstate. There’s a spare uniform at the diner, clean and dry, and, if I hurry, I won’t be late for work.

But I’m not going to work.

It’s a ten-hour drive to Baton Rouge, but I will make it in eight. I will make it before morning. I will drive north, following the storm. I will drive through the wind and the rain. I will drive all night.



## THE COST OF LIVING

I've got a felt tip to the padded envelope when the phone rings, which is strange since it's late, too late for telemarketers, too late for the fire station begging contributions, strange since I can't remember the last time someone called just because. My blood pulses at the thought of tragedy, then settles when I remember there's no one left, no one I care about enough to die and wreck my night.

The voice on the phone doesn't boom so much as echo, isn't deep so much as insistent, like the guy's got a megaphone between his teeth.

"You think they can't smell piss?" he says. His words growl together, and he sounds older, fifty or sixty to my twenty-six.

"Beg pardon?" I say, Dad's phrase. There was that and *saved his bacon*, as in: *I thought the guy was gonna miss his quota, but at the last minute he cinched the deal and saved his bacon.*

My father: a man born for sales. He spoke evenly and with the kind of limited vocabulary that never made a customer think Dad thought he was smarter. Friends at the wake called him a *man's man*, *good guy*, *wise*, the kind of life-encompassing shorthand of which my father would no doubt have approved. I could have written him a book, and it wouldn't have meant what I know it meant to him each time a sales guy took him by the arm and said he was *the real deal*. All afternoon, I stood beside the casket, shook hands, and marveled at how many men in thousand-dollar suits came through the door.

“Smell like that, I don’t care how much shampoo you use,” the man on the phone is saying. “Water seeks its level, piss seeks the pad. Nothing left to do but tear it up.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I think it’s someone else you want.”

There was *finesse*, for when Dad couldn’t find the word. A pilot light would go out, a lock would jam, or say I couldn’t turn a rust-caked spigot. In person, Dad made problems disappear. But he was useless on the phone. “You gotta finesse it,” he’d say, and I’d say, “Right or left?” There’d be silence before Dad said, “I’d have to see it. Just give it some *finesse*.”

The voice on the phone is louder now, firmer: “See, I don’t know what you had, cat, dog. Hell, a petting zoo, don’t care. What matters is you paid no pet fee, so there’s that, plus the carpet, plus the pad. That makes eight hundred. Ask me, you got off *easy*. Thing like this, I’ve seen them sue, four figures, breach of contract, the works.”

“I don’t keep pets,” I say.

Guy moves past aggressive and on toward furious. “Listen, you little shit,” he says, which is when I hang up.

I finish the mailer, stamp MEDIA MAIL, slip the book in. I guess fifteen ounces, drop it on the scale. Sixteen. Sixteen ounces makes \$2.38.

Maybe half the time, I turn a profit on the book itself, first editions found cheap in library sales, Stephen Kings in Wal-Mart clearance bins. Given Amazon, E-bay, and time, everything sells. It’s a living, and like any living, there are tricks to it. The Pattersons, the Picoult—any writer who pumps out a book a year—these you buy ahead of time, in bulk at deep discount, and then, come release day, sell at cover price.

Shipping and handling, though, that’s where you make your money. Mailing’s maybe two, never more than four. You charge five, and there’s your profit, minus Costco mailers—nine,

ten cents apiece. Move fifty books a day, you're set. Four-hour evenings selling, weighing, licking stamps, plus weekends scouting stores—sounds dull, but it beats the nine-to-five.

The real work's how to fill up all the hours in a day. The gym helps, dumbbells, hours on the treadmill reading books.

The phone again—no surprise.

“Yes,” I say.

“I lost my temper,” he says. “I apologize. Some people don't like swearing, and I can appreciate that. But, Roger, you have to understand, you owed Trinity Estates a lot of money. You didn't return their calls, so they did what apartments do. They sold their debt.”

I address another mailer, this one to Laramie, Wyoming, a street I know I've written down before. The book goes in, the strip comes off, the flap is folded down—muscle memory, a move I've made a thousand thousand times.

“Let's keep this simple, Roger. Pay in full, I disappear. You never see or hear from me again. Can't swing that, we put you on a plan, say seventy-five a month, plus interest, for a year. You wait six months, the debt doubles. After that, we're talking jail time. I don't want that, Roger. That's not what I'm after.”

“This isn't Roger,” I say.

“Don't you lie to me,” the man says.

“Name's Silas.” Like my father, his father, the father before him.

The man on the phone reads me my phone number, and I confirm.

“Phone company says you're Roger,” the man says.

“I'm new in town,” I say. “It's the number I got.”

I've heard of things like this, aggressive collection agencies and the calls they make. They harass whoever's unlucky enough to get the listing of the guy who just skipped town and skipped out on the rent.

"You may not be Roger," the man says, "but I'm guessing you know where he is."

"I'm hanging up now," I say.

"Give the phone to Roger, you lying fuck!"

I drop the phone and disconnect the line.

It was books brought me to Tucson. Fourteen used bookstores and a culture that doesn't recognize the value of the spines that line those shelves, plus a city so economically depressed the prices haven't caught up to the twenty-first century.

Dad said it couldn't be done, said you couldn't make money buying books and selling them the way people flip houses, so after college I set out to prove him wrong.

My big mistake was picking Manhattan to make my start. A place like NYC, forget it. Any book you want, but getting by is another thing. Sick and no insurance, one night I watched the thermometer's red line hit 105°, was sure I'd die before the fever broke. How many nights I begged bakeries for bread, then fished stale loaves from dumpsters in the back. Overnight, it seemed, my life had turned to bad TV. Dad tried to help, sent checks I was too proud to cash.

A year later, at twenty-three, I was ready to abandon the experiment when I heard of a guy doing what I did out of Detroit. Which is when it hit me: Books weren't what broke the budget. The cost of living, that's what killed.

In Tucson, I can rent a two-room, furnished, at half the cost of a rat-clawed Manhattan loft. Furnished is good. I travel light, pay month to month, and like any other parasite, move once I've sapped the source. I gorge, leave the landscape barren in my wake. As it was in Roanoke,

Fort Worth, and St. Pete's, so it shall be in Tucson. Give me seven months, eight, and I'll be off, money in the bank, the city's best books on my back.

It's true, there's more money to be made, lots more, but then there are the books—so many books—I just can't help keeping for myself.

I buckle the jack to the wall, and already the phone is ringing.

"I'll knock your teeth down your fucking throat, I swear to God."

What does he look like, I wonder, the owner of the voice on the phone? I picture something reptilian, an aging tortoise—neck-folds like foreskin, hooked nose, shell for a back. Does he call from a cubicle or home, inland or the coast? Does he live alone, or do his son's toys break underfoot as he paces the kitchen floor and screams at those who can't or won't pay?

A guy like this, I can't imagine he makes much, and in this way maybe we're the same—two guys scraping by. How many debts, I want to ask, does he collect, and how many go unpaid? How many calls are answered, and how many, as with me, reach the wrong man?

The voice on the phone reads me my address.

I check the clock. Midnight's coming fast. I cut the line again.

Before he went, all he wanted for me, my father said, was a steady job, work that paid a living wage.

I like what I do and told him so. The way he sold dock levelers, industrial loading equipment, I tried to sell him on the idea of my life.

"But *people*, son," he said. "This Internet business, it isolates. Don't you want to get out in the sun and rub elbows, shake hands, share a drink?"

How to say what happiness is? For me, it's a row of shelves higher than my head and another to my back. To be pressed between them as between the pages of a book. The smell

should be smoke and spice and not mustiness, and the lighting should be dim but not so dark as to obscure the spines. My favorite sound: the rattle of pages. Least favorite: the crack that means the glue's about to give.

The life Dad imagined for me was one of loneliness, but if this—if what I know—is loneliness, worse for my father were the years that followed Mom's death, worse the weather, the ice that pulled her off the road.

How a telephone pole can stop a heart.

Before the wreck, I didn't read so much. Dad had a theory: that books are how I keep people at bay.

Because I was a boy.

Because I was in the car.

It's true the funeral found me with *Encyclopedia Brown* open on my lap, true that, afterward, Dad pulled me to the bathroom and knocked my head against the wall. Because he didn't understand, couldn't have, my father whose bible was *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, who maybe never read another book. How could he know how, in books, the bootlegger dies—shot, sunk, the surface of the pool gone red with blood—how you shut the book and he's reborn, returned to shore, light green across the bay.

How, books, we read again to raise the dead.

I was in Cincinnati the night Dad's heart hiccupped, then slowed to match the quiet of my mom's. This was a year ago. I got the call, drove all night, and with daybreak hit Atlanta, the suburbs, the cul-de-sac, the driveway of the too-big house that, even with Mom gone and me moved out, Dad wouldn't sell.

There was nothing I wanted, nothing I planned to keep but the money from the estate sale, until I came across the matches—hundreds of packs sealed tight in a five-gallon pickle tub under a tin lid, a collection made in secret. My father didn't smoke, but work took him far and wide. And business being a thing so often settled over meals, somewhere along the line my father had become a collector of restaurant matchbooks. So many colors, so many designs. I dumped them out and laid them side by side. Rank and file, they filled the kitchen floor, stared back at me, colorful as dust jackets, and I cried.

I plug the phone back in, and all is quiet.

My night's work done, I stack manila envelopes beside the door, ready for the morning's post office run. I move to the bathroom, brush my teeth for bed and wash my face.

The knock wakes me, and I don't have to wonder who it is, though it surprises me to learn he's local. The clock says 2 AM. I rise, pull on sweatpants and a shirt. All my walls are books, and I move through the dark, feeling my way along the shelves.

The man, when the door is open, is nothing like I'd pictured. He's my age, thirty maybe. Behind him, a half-moon scrapes the mountains, lights him up, and he's as unintimidating in person as he was frightening on the phone. Glasses, facial hair, a swimmer's build—he's tall, but there's no muscle there, or not enough to back up all that height.

Me, I'm big, short but built. I wanted, I could break this guy in two.

The look on his face says just dropping by he thought I'd fold, that, seeing me, he's giving whatever plan he had some reconsideration.

There could be a weapon, and it occurs to me to phone the police, but I try to think what Dad would do, how he'd handle a situation like this. Probably he'd ask him in, offer the guy a drink. *If we put our heads together*, I can hear my father saying, *I'll just bet we can work this out.*

I open the door wide, and the guy hesitates, then steps inside.

I gesture toward the couch that came with the place, an oversized loveseat in a lurid floral print, and he sits. I pour two glasses of water, set them on the coffee table, then pull up a chair, the table between us.

“This middle-of-the-night drop-in,” I say. “Standard operating procedure?”

The man says nothing, only grips his knees and glares.

“Your boss know you’re here?”

“I am my boss,” he says.

“I know something about that,” I say. I stand and cross the room.

“Just give me the money,” the man says. “Give me the money, and I’m gone.”

“I want to show you something,” I say.

I pull the pickle jar down from a bookcase and hand it over. The guy grunts at the weight. He gives the thing a shake. Matchbooks rattle. He rests the jar between his legs, which I don’t like. It may as well be my father’s ashes, his urn wedged in this guy’s crotch.

“You know what that is?” I say.

“A fire hazard?” He smirks, taps the lid twice.

“That,” I say, “is my father’s life.” I wave a hand to take in the room, the walls held up by books. “And this is mine.”

My father never remarried, as far as I know never had a date. Hermits, each of us. But hermitage is only as much a prison as you make it. And in the end, who’s to say which is better, which is worse, a prison built of books or one made up of meetings over lunch?

My whole adult life, I’ve meant to make it on my own and in this way make my father eat his words. Proving my father wrong—I thought that was what I wanted.



Only, tonight, I'm thinking maybe this, all of it, was about something else, about proving we weren't the same man, Dad and me. But we are, we are—businessmen, collectors, both of us. And this man here, the man who watches me from one end of my rented couch, he's one of us, except for this: He's not a man whose days will forever orbit a patch of ice.

“The most important thing,” I say, “what you loved best. Losing it, do you know what that's like?”

The guy shakes his head. “The money,” he says. “That's all I want.” He looks suddenly tired, on the brink of giving up.

Now's when I could throw him out. Or call the cops, have them do it for me.

Instead, I take in the room. In seconds, I've picked five books, any one of which I could sell tomorrow and make enough to cover another man's debt. There isn't one I'd want to part with, but maybe it's time, a first step. You can only live one way so long.

I lift my glass and take a drink.

“Eight hundred?” I say.

“Eight hundred,” he says.

“Shake on it?” I say.

The guy looks worried. “I don't want any trouble,” he says.

“No trouble,” I say. “A handshake, that's all I'm asking.”

He moves the tub of matches to the floor, then stands and extends a hand. I drain my glass, return it to the table.

“Roger,” I say, only it's another man I've suddenly become.

He gives me his name. I stand, offer my hand, and we shake.

“Good man,” I say, and it feels right, saying it, not being afraid. There are things worse than turning into your father.

Tomorrow will begin the great winnowing. The books first, the matches, and then the moving on. Maybe there will be a bookstore, a house. Maybe someone to share my days. There is permanence and there is disaster, and if one doesn't court the other, then maybe permanence is a thing I'd like to try.

Thinking it, I feel suddenly off balance, like my torso could, at any moment, come unzipped from my legs, slide off and hit the floor. I sit.

My pen is on the table from where, earlier, I sat addressing envelopes. I pocket it, then rise to write a check.

## 100% COTTON

The night is cold. The buildings are tall. The sky, except where it's starlit, is black. Black like black checker pieces or what's left of wood after the fire.

Also, I should mention that there's a large gun pointed at my face.

And because there's a large gun pointed at my face, things speed up the way they do in nature films, how a seed sprouts, turns to stalk and takes leaves in ten seconds.

Things here are speeding up just that way. Stars pinwheel beyond the buildings. The moon rises, sets, rises again. And then things slow way, way down.

"If you don't want to be caught dead in that shirt," he says, "you'd best take it off."

The guy with the gun's not fucking around. I don't know anything about guns, but this is a big one. It looks like the kind that holds a lot of bullets, the kind that shoots those bullets faster than you can dodge them, that leaves your corpse unrecognizable when the cops come, which is okay because there's no one to miss me, no one left on this spinning planet to faint when the coroner lifts the sheet from my bullet-riddled face.

The gun's pointed at me because the guy asked for my wallet and I said *no*.

"No," I said, and he said, "How'd you like to die?" and I said, "Well, I wouldn't want to be caught dead in this shirt."

Which wasn't exactly true. If I hadn't wanted to be caught dead in this shirt, I wouldn't have worn it. It seemed fitting for the occasion. The shirt's black with a skull-and-crossbones emblem on the pocket, what you see printed on bottles, the kind with caps to keep out babies and old people.

Maybe the skull-and-crossbones wasn't an inspired choice, but fuck you. Pick out your own death-shirt.

The guy with the gun didn't like my tone. He said, "I don't like your tone."

He didn't get that I was being smug, so I said it again, the thing about not wanting to be caught dead in this shirt, which is when he told me to take it off. Which pretty much brings you up to speed.

Maybe, telling me to take it off, he's being smug right back, or maybe he's stupid. Maybe he's smart but doesn't know the expression, like the time I lost weight and a woman at work said I looked *fit as a fiddle*. I thought she was coming on to me and asked her out and she said *no* because she wasn't coming on to me. Turns out she just had this tendency toward really clichéd language.

I pull my shirt over my head, slap my six-pack. "Fit as a fiddle," I say.

I kneel and fold the shirt on the sidewalk, a rectangle, department-store-perfect. Work five years at The Gap, and you get really good at folding clothes.

"You've never been held up," the gunman says.

I could tell him the truth, that it's my third time this week, that for months I've watched the local news in order to pinpoint the Atlanta intersection most likely to get me offed. That I picked *this* street in *this* neighborhood and wander it nightly. That I've been roughed up, cursed, and mugged. I've lost two wallets, a watch, my phone, but not one guy would pull the trigger, because it turns out what they want, really, isn't blood—it's money.

Noncompliance, I decided, was my best option.

Last night, I sang, did a little dance. “My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard!” I belted it, gyrated my hips, but that only freaked the guy out. He didn’t even stick around for the cash.

This guy, though. This guy looks like he wouldn’t mind firing a round through your forehead if only you found the right words to provoke him.

“Wallet,” he says. “Now.”

I’m on my knees, the shirt the only thing between me and his feet. We’re in the dark where he grabbed me, but there’s enough moonlight to light up the skull, which isn’t the same material as the rest of the shirt, but something firmer, rubbery, like a kid’s iron-on jersey decal.

I point at the shirt. “100% cotton,” I sign. English is my first language. My second’s American Sign Language.

The guy looks around. He’s getting antsy.

This is how my father died.

My father was born deaf and he taught me his language, though it wasn’t his language, not for years. In this country’s history, there was a time when sign language wasn’t allowed, when the deaf were taught to speak in tongues, to mouth sounds they couldn’t hear leave their lips, as though all of America was afraid of hands, of what the deaf might do with a language all their own.

My father found happiness with a deaf woman who taught him to speak with his body. She stuck around just long enough to give him a son. He never remarried. He died last year when a man asked for his wallet. Dad kept walking, and the man shot him.

“Couldn’t your father read lips?” people ask, as though the answer to this question determines whose fault it is he’s dead.

A wind kicks up. Shirtless, my skin prickles. The sidewalk hurts my knees.

“Count of five,” the guy says. “Five.”

At The Gap, I read tags until I came to know a material at the touch of a sleeve. Even cotton/polyester blends I can guess, give or take 10% on the ratio.

My t-shirt between us looks lonely, and I wonder if my father fell like that, whether he folded or crumpled like a dropped shirt.

“Machine wash, warm, with like colors,” I sign.

“Four,” the guy says.

I don’t know whether my father misunderstood his killer, whether he saw the gun, whether he walked on knowing what came next.

“Gentle cycle,” I sign.

“Keep it up,” the guy says. His thumb jumps and something clicks at his end of the gun. He steps on the shirt, closes the space between us. His shoes are boots, black lace-ups.

It won’t be long now.

“Three.”

You want to know why I want to die, but what answer could I give good enough for you, you who want to *live*?

Putting a thing like that into words, it’s like trying to explain what stands between people, what keeps us from communicating—I mean *really communicating*—with each other.

We move through the days with our hands at our sides, and I believe that whatever holds us back, whatever keeps people at bay, maybe it’s the same thing that left my mother tethered at the neck by an orange extension cord to our attic’s rafters.

Maybe it’s what sings in my ear to follow her.

She wasn't afraid to do to herself what I'm asking someone to do for me.

"Tumble dry, low," I sign.

If I fall forward, my head will catch the shirt like a pillow. I'm ready.

"Two."

We talk in our sleep, and so do the deaf. Nights I snuck into my father's room, his hands worked over his chest, signing. It was the language of dreams, incomprehensible, but it was gorgeous. His hands rose and fell like birds with his breathing.

"One."

Except sometimes, sometimes, meaning crept in. A transmission. My father, who spent his life missing my mom, that sign: An index finger beckoning, meeting the rest, then the hand sweeping air, a palm pulling spilled salt over the surface of a table.

I close my eyes, and it's there, the gun muzzle, ice between my eyes.

I want to cry out. I hold my breath.

I wait.

I wait.

You want to know what my father was saying, and I'll tell you. It's what I shout once the gunman's given up, returned his weapon to his jacket pocket. It's what I call after his heels slapping the sidewalk.

It's my voice to the gunman and my father's hands to my mother in the night, calling:  
"Come back. Come back. Come back."

## THE DISAPPEARING BOY

The summer before sixth grade, we both hoped we would turn into superheroes. When it was just the two of us, we went by our code names. I was Quicksilver, after the Marvel hero, a poor man's Flash. I was a born runner. Since the first grade, I had always been the fastest kid on the playground, a fact undisputed at River Run Elementary, though, soon enough, middle school would find me in competition with older boys whose legs, dark with hair, would carry them at speeds I'd never match. Chris's moniker was more original. He dreamed of being invisible, but the only invisible hero we could think of was the Fantastic Four's Invisible Girl. I said he could be the Invisible Boy, but Chris said that was gay and dubbed himself The Disappearing Boy. We had our own gang too. Chris was the leader and I was his sidekick. We called ourselves the Wolverines, after another of our favorite comic book characters. There was no one else in the gang.

It was a strange time in our lives, a difficult time. It was the summer we began competing with one another for no good reason, seeing who could swim the most laps holding his breath underwater. By mid-June, Chris could do one lap and I could do two, the length of the public pool in both directions, kicking like a frog until the tiled wall tilted and flashes of light confused my underwater eyes.

This was the long, hot summer of war games and tree forts, ice cream sandwiches and backyard tents, ghost stories and PG-13 movies, which Chris's mom rented whenever we asked, though we were two years too young. It was the summer of the new neighborhood and our secret hideout, the place where it all happened, where we first became acquainted with the flesh.



#

We found the magazines in the basement of an unfinished house, a place older kids came nights to smoke and make out. Days, though, we had the place to ourselves.

The magazines: Neither of us had seen anything like them before. Here were women, just like our mothers, but with no clothes. The first time, we glanced then put the things back in their place. We left the house, scared and a little ashamed. We knew we shouldn't have seen what we'd seen, otherwise we would have been shown before. What we'd seen was wrong, we just weren't sure how. We spoke of the pictures to no one. The next day we returned, just to make sure someone had come back for them, we told ourselves, but the magazines were still there, a small, mildewed stack in one dusty corner of the basement. After some deliberation, we decided it wouldn't hurt to examine a few more.

Chris opened one to a picture that spanned two pages of red satin backdrop. On hands and knees, and wearing only a kind of lacey, black scarf, a woman arched her back like a cat stretching after a nap.

"Holy bastard!" Chris said. (This was also the summer we learned to cuss.) Chris was better at it than I was. He modeled his obscenities, best he could, after R-rated movies, the ones he watched alone on HBO when his mom was out, which was almost always. He modeled them on the words he heard from men his mom brought home, which was also often. My mother wouldn't spring for cable, let alone HBO, and a man hadn't set foot in our house in years. This put me at a disadvantage when it came to cursing and was one more reason I envied the life Chris led.

"Cock fuck!" I said. I looked to Chris to see how I'd done, but he was too immersed in the magazine.

“Here, Nathan,” he said. He threw a magazine at my feet.

We spent our mornings in the basement like that, thumbing through glossy pages. By July, we had divided the magazines into two piles. Chris had his favorites. I had mine. I liked the thin girls with smaller breasts. They reminded me of girls I knew. Now, seeing girls around town, I considered their clothes and what must be beneath. I’d watch a girl and think of my other girls, the ones in the magazines, and I’d wonder which, undressed, she’d most resemble.

Chris, on the other hand, loved the boobs. “The bigger the better,” he howled. “Gimme them sweater cows!” His favorite pages pictured women with heaving breasts and flat, brown nipples the size of silver dollars, so big they scared me.

Sometimes, a magazine in his lap, I’d catch Chris with his eyes closed, hands outstretched, groping the air.

“If you think really hard,” he said, “I swear you can feel them.”

The summer became one of bodies. We’d pull down our shorts to see who had more hair, whose was bigger, then we’d look at the magazines and pull our shorts down again to see whose was bigger *now*. Sometimes, after looking, Chris went upstairs to use the bathroom. Sometimes he was gone a long time.

#

My mom asked about Chris’s mom a lot.

“How *is* Marie doing?” she’d ask.

“Fine,” I’d say.

“Still smoking?”

“Yes.”

“House a mess?”

Marie and my mom weren't like Chris and me. They rarely spoke, not to each other, not to anyone on our street. Chris had no brothers or sisters, no father, and neither did I. Chris's dad was in prison in Salt Lake City. I never found out what for. I asked Chris once. "Shut your hole," he said. I didn't ask twice.

I have no memory of the father who left before I learned to crawl. He and my mom were happy once, or so she says. I don't know what drives people apart, or how a good man goes bad. I have two things from my father. One is the medal he gave my mother upon his return from Korea. The other's a love letter, one he wrote while he was over there, from before he and my mother married.

I didn't find these until much later, as a young man helping his mother move in with her new husband. I liked that she'd kept them, liked the idea that there'd been love there once, that whatever force had brought me into the world had not been fueled by hate or lust alone.

Except, rereading the letter, I saw why she'd kept it. A confession of love, the letter was also a confession of the documents my dad fudged to get a medal he never earned. The letter, the medal, why Mom kept them in her sock drawer and was only too happy to hand them over, they weren't there to remind her of what she'd had, but what she'd escaped.

#

The day it happened, the thing in the house that changed everything, was a Wednesday. Wednesdays were War Days because they both started with *W*. That was the rule Chris had made, and it made a kind of alphabetical sense, so I obeyed. There were no other gangs, so we'd declared war on the men in hard hats building River Run Heights, the big, fancy development rising from the tree-cleaved swath of mud down the street.

"Suburban sprawl," my mom called it.

“A fucking amusement park,” Chris’s mom said.

“Bastard Heights” was Chris’s name for the neighborhood. A week earlier, a man in an orange vest had whistled and yelled something ugly at Chris’s mom as she stooped to pick up a newspaper from the driveway.

“Cock-sucking roof jockeys,” Chris said.

“Damnable asses,” I said.

Our headquarters was the tree fort in Chris’s backyard. The fort was a rope ladder and two boards nailed to a branch. We met there Wednesdays and hatched our battle plans, plans that had, as yet, never been carried out. This morning, though, would be different. This morning we were determined to get things done.

Since I was the fast one, I ran short reconnaissance missions, hiding behind the big, brick sign at the neighborhood entrance, watching the workers, then reporting back to Chris whatever I’d seen. Chris waited in the fort and practiced being invisible.

“They’re taking another break,” I said, back from my last run.

“What are they doing?” Chris said.

“Eating.”

“Eating what?”

“Donuts,” I said. “And coffee. Some of them are drinking coffee.”

“Excellent,” Chris said.

We drew up what Chris called a *schematic*. The new neighborhood was not large, not yet. The woods were cleared, divided into lots, but the subdivision’s main road had only been paved for a few blocks. At one end, the road met our street. At the other, the road turned to dirt and wound past houses in staggered stages of completion. That day, the workers poured sidewalks to

run the length of the road and circle the cul-de-sacs, where the children of parents better off than ours would soon roller-skate and ride their bikes without having to worry about cars.

Chris's plan was this: We would carve every vulgar word we knew into the soft concrete, ruining the laborers' job. They'd be forced to repave, or, better yet, they'd leave the sidewalk scarred by our handiwork. Already we imagined it, the shock of the rich kids who slowed their silver ten-speeds to read...could it be...*PENIS*?

Chris pulled a triangle of glass from his pocket, the curve of a broken beer bottle. Chris lifted the glass. It caught the sun like caramel.

"Vengeance," he said, "will be ours."

#

By noon, the sun blazed and the workers had retreated to the shade of the bulldozers for lunch. One house at a time, we skirted our way down the road to the freshest sections of sidewalk, out of sight of the big men too busy eating and smoking to notice.

Chris kneeled on the curb, pulled the glass from his pocket, and bowed his head. There was something sacred in this, though, at the time, I thought only of being caught, imagined those enormous arms holding us down, the men kicking us, spitting in our faces.

"Hurry," I said.

Chris was up to his knuckles in concrete. He slashed at the surface, and a trinity of genital slang took shape: *COCK*, *CUNT*, *ASSHOLE*.

Chris moved to a new square, carved words I had never seen before, words I only knew must represent things terrible and profound and obscene: *CLITORIS*, *LABIA*, *VULVA*.

"Your turn," Chris said.

I took the shard from his hand and heard shouts, cries, hollers. The men were a long way off but coming fast.

“Fuckers!” one yelled. “You little fuckers!”

I dropped the glass. I turned to Chris.

“Well,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Oh, how we ran.

#

I’d never seen Chris move like that. Me, I’d always been the fast one, but Chris stayed with me the first thirty, forty yards. Then, he slowed.

“Secret hideout,” he gasped.

*“You little fuckers better run!”*

I ran, glanced. A few men had stopped. They stood by the sidewalk and read Chris’s scribbles. The rest kept on, closing in. I cut between two houses and ours came into view, the basement door open like an invitation. I’d lost Chris. Then, he turned the corner, moving as though in slow motion.

He crossed the threshold in time for me to shut the door and pull him away from the windows. In the shadows, shaking, his hand on my arm, we watched the men run past.

“One more,” Chris whispered. “There were five.”

In a moment, a single worker stopped before us. He pressed his face to the window. His skin was dark, his face unshaven, lips chapped. A line of dried blood divided his bottom lip. But his eyes, when he smiled, were kind. He saw us, winked. He would not tell.

When he was out of sight, Chris dropped to the floor. He didn’t say a word, didn’t shout or moan. He simply lifted his foot and I saw the nail protruding from the sole of his shoe.

#

“I think I’m going to throw up,” Chris said.

He sat cross-legged, his back to the wall. Every few minutes, he doubled over, his forehead touching the basement floor.

“Nathan, this really hurts,” he said.

“How deep?” I asked.

“Can’t tell.”

“Take off your shoe. Let’s see.”

“I can’t, dumbass. The nail’s *through* the shoe. I can’t do anything until the nail comes out.”

I thought back to health class, my mother’s warnings, a lone year of Cub Scouts, but I couldn’t remember what to do for a puncture wound, whether to leave the nail in or not.

“I have to get this thing out of my foot,” Chris said. “I can’t walk home this way.”

“Let me get your mom,” I say.

“You step outside, they’ll kill you.”

“I’ll run the whole way. I’m Quicksilver, remember?”

“And leave me here to get my ass kicked?”

“You’re the Disappearing Boy! Be invisible. They’ll never find you.”

“Nathan!” Chris said. “What the fuck’s wrong with you? This isn’t a *game* anymore.

There is a *nail* in my *foot*. There are *men* who want to kick our *asses*. Come on, man! Grow the fuck *up!*”

His voice rose, high-pitched and hysterical. His face was white, his eyes wide. Watching him rock back and forth on the floor, foot cradled in his hands, I suddenly didn't like him very much.

"My mom can't find out," he said. "I'm not supposed to be here. I'm not allowed to play at the construction site. This is exactly what she said would happen, that I'd step on a nail."

"You can't just not tell anybody."

"Oh, yes I can. I cut myself last year. I got the shot. I'll be all right once it's out."

It was insane, I knew that, irrational and unsafe, but what choice did I have? A sidekick's never in charge, and boys don't tell on each other to their mothers, even when it's what should be done.

"Okay," I said.

"I have to pee," Chris said.

"Okay," I said and helped him up the stairs.

#

I'd never seen men kiss before. We came up the stairs, opened the door to the main floor, hobbled down a hall, and there they were, in the living room, facing each other on the new carpet before the empty fireplace, their faces pressed together, one's hands down the other's shorts.

They were in their twenties, thin and pale with matching haircuts, dark and spiked in every direction like horns, crusty with hairspray. Their shirts were off, and I was surprised by their armpits, how hairy they were. The room smelled stale and sweet.

Seeing us, they pulled away, but they took their time about it. They faced us, and they looked so much alike, they might have been brothers. One wore sunglasses, the other a tattoo that rode his stomach, blue stars around the bellybutton in a ring.



Chris, balancing on one leg, hopped back

“Well,” the man in the sunglasses said.

“Hello,” said the other. A choked laugh made the stars dance across his abdomen.

Chris hopped and winced. “We won’t tell!” he blurted. “Come on, Nathan. Let’s go.”

“Whoa,” Sunglasses said. He stood, trailing a black t-shirt from the fireplace hearth.

“What’s the hurry?”

“My friend’s got a nail in his foot,” I said.

“Do what, now?” Sunglasses said. He pulled the shirt over his head.

“He stepped on a nail,” I said. “Out there.” I gestured toward the window, as though that explained everything.

“Jesus,” Stars said. “Let’s see!” He jumped up and stumbled forward, leaving his own shirt crumpled on the floor.

Chris met my eyes. He was ready to run. But it felt like the wrong time, like we might not make it to the door.

“Show them,” I said. I hoped they were harmless, that they’d see the foot, get their kicks, and let us go.

We made a circle on the floor and Chris lifted his sneaker.

“No way!” Stars said. He looked away. “Sickness.” The nail stuck out an inch or two, bent in the middle. It was orange, the head caked with dirt.

“Bad place to keep your nails,” Sunglasses said.

He smacked Stars’s arm, and the man leaned too far to one side. He righted himself, then ran a hand through his hair.

“Give me your knife, retard” Sunglasses said. Stars’s hand disappeared into his front pocket for what seemed like forever, then emerged wrapped around a black handle. His thumb stroked the handle’s side and a blade sprung from his fist. He stared at the knife a few seconds, as though confused by how it got there, there in his hand. He pointed the blade at Sunglasses.

Sunglasses grabbed the knife and turned to Chris. “First,” he said, “the shoe must come off.”

Chris, wide-eyed, didn’t move as Sunglasses perched over his foot. I put my hand on Chris’s shoulder. I wasn’t sure what for, but I’d seen people do this. It was supposed to bring comfort to a person in distress. Mostly, though, I was holding Chris down.

Sunglasses worked at the sole methodically, trimming away the rubber, carving a hole through which the head of the nail could slip as we pulled away the shoe. He hummed as he worked. Stars watched, entranced.

Sunglasses was careful, and the sneaker released. It was the sock that caught the nail and made Chris cry.

“Faggot,” Sunglasses said. Stars laughed, falling all the way over this time and rolling to his side. The sock, off, Sunglasses retracted the knife. “Your turn,” he said.

Chris shook his head. “I can’t.” He coughed and cried harder. “I have to pee. I have to throw up.” The brave boy from the morning was gone. The gang leader with the battle plans and schematics was nowhere to be seen.

We sat a few minutes, waiting for Chris to settle down. Stars smoked a cigarette. Sunglasses twirled the switchblade. The house yawned around us.

“Well,” Sunglasses said, “someone’s gotta pull it out.”

Stars extinguished his cigarette in the carpet, then flicked the butt into the fireplace. The spot was black, the fibers charred where he'd pressed the ash to the floor, and I thought it was a shame that he'd gone and ruined a perfectly good thing like that for no reason. Right then, I wanted to be out of the house, to get away fast as I could. I couldn't leave Chris, but I could hurry things up.

"Let me," I said.

Chris nodded. He thrust his bare foot onto my lap. The nail bloomed from his heel. There was no way to tell how far it went in. I grabbed the end like a syringe, my thumb against the head, two fingers beneath.

I pulled, up and out, fast. The foot rose then crashed to the floor. Chris screamed. Sunglasses jumped. Stars cursed. A line on the nail revealed the inch that had nested in the flesh. It came out clean. The hole was not wide and there was no blood. Still, I stretched a sock tight around the heel and tied it in a knot at the ankle like a tourniquet. I pulled the shoe on but left the laces loose.

Chris nodded and stood. He did not make a face when his foot touched the floor. He was himself again. He was in charge.

"I'm ready," he said.

I didn't see it coming, the hand that knocked Chris down. Stunned, Chris stood again, and again he was pushed to the floor. He stayed down. He drew his knees up to his chest. Sunglasses drew the knife.

"That's it?" Sunglasses said. "After all we done for you? You're out the door without so much as *thank you*?"

"Thank you," Chris said.

“We did your ass a favor,” Stars said.

“Thank you,” Chris said, his voice grown shaky.

“Favors, favors,” Stars said. He undid the button at his waist, pulled on the zipper, and let his shorts fall to the floor. He wore no underwear. The stars did not end at his navel but followed a trail to a tangle of hair and something unfamiliar. What was between his legs was nothing like my own. It hung, swollen, distended, the end purple as a plum

Chris began to cry softly.

One of the men laughed, and his laughter echoed in the open house. I’m not sure which of them it was, the man laughing, because I was already down the hall. I ran out the front door, down the steps, the driveway, the dirt road. Where were the workers? It was not light out, but dark. It didn’t seem possible. It had just been noon. I ran and I swear the moon rose overhead. The birds turned to crickets. The stars streaked overhead like confetti. The earth turned.

#

Chris didn’t come to school in August, and by Labor Day he was gone. His mother sold the house next door. They packed up their things and moved to Seattle. What they couldn’t fit in the moving van, they left on the front lawn. All of it vanished overnight: chairs, lamps, a card table, my friend.

“I think Marie wanted a fresh start,” my mother said. “I tried to tell her, a new city isn’t a new life, but whatever. Some people you can’t protect from themselves.”

Sometimes, when it was the two of us, over dinner or during a television commercial, my mother would ask, “What happened that summer, to you boys? You were so close, then it was like you weren’t friends at all.”

I’d shrug my shoulders.

“Was there a fight?” she’d ask. “A falling out?”

“Not that I can remember,” I’d say, and this would satisfy her, for a while anyway. She’d sigh and shake her head, saying, “Boys.”

#

I saw Chris once before he moved. Summer vacation was almost over. A few weeks had passed since I’d run from him, the men, the house. I’d spent the weeks worrying about what had happened, whether I should tell my mother, whether Chris had told anybody. I wasn’t sure what was done to Chris or what they’d made him do. I still don’t know. It was a secret I hated keeping, but one I was also afraid to let go of.

In the end, I did nothing, save this: One morning, I walked next door. I rang the doorbell, but no one answered. I moved to the side of the house. Chris’s bedroom was on the main floor, and, standing on tiptoes, I could see in through his window. He was lying in bed, propped up on a pillow. The TV had been moved into his room and set on a plastic crate in the corner.

I tapped on the glass and Chris came to the window. He was thinner than I remembered. Dark circles stained his eye sockets. We stared at each other a minute. I didn’t know what to say. It was Chris who spoke first.

“You left me,” he said. His voice was different, muffled behind the windowpane, and I had to strain to hear him. “You ran away.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He moved closer to the window, his bangs licking the glass. “You haven’t said anything?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“To anyone? Promise?”

“I promise,” I said.

He didn't smile, but I saw he was relieved. I watched him go back to the bed and lie down. I tried to see what show he was watching, but an open closet door threw a shadow across the screen. I couldn't be sure the television was even on.

I never saw Chris again. After that day, he disappeared. In this way, we both lived up to our namesakes.

## REFUND

The evening began in argument.

Dinner was over, the table cleared of everything but a cup, a fork, and my son's plate. On the plate sat a sad mound of boiled-to-death broccoli. Josh had never been big on vegetables. Even as a baby, he'd spit out anything green.

"No cookies," Joy said. "No dessert until dinner's done."

In the pantry, the Oreos waited, their torn cellophane and the stale ones I always skipped on my way down the rows to the cookies that still snapped when halved.

"Come on, Sam," Joy said, "back me up on this."

I said nothing. A limp stalk hung from Josh's fork, wet and terrible, and all I could think was how I hadn't eaten mine.

Josh didn't whimper. He didn't whine or cry. He was a quiet kid. If he had complaints, he kept them mostly to himself. His fork rose, pushed the pale green past his lips and into his mouth. He chewed, eyes closed. He wanted to keep from showing it, the taste and how much he hated it.

"Come on, Joy," I said, "let the kid have an Oreo."

Joy's look let me know that, once again, I'd fucked up. We were supposed to be a team, to put up a unified front, and here I'd gone and Abbotted her ass—the challenge a slap in the face. But we both knew who was Abbott in this marriage and who was Costello, who was made to feel stupid and who called the shots. And, even if I got all of the boy's laughs, it was always Joy who got the first goodnight kiss, the first hug home from school.

Josh shoveled the last of what was on his plate into his mouth, chewed, and chased the broccoli down with milk from a coffee cup, the blue one with the black locomotive circling the mug.

“Very good,” Joy said. She pulled the Oreos from the pantry. Our rule was two, but, because he’d been such a good boy, Joy said, he could have three. Josh beamed, squeezed her arm.

That *I* had been his Oreo advocate had, it seemed, slipped my son’s mind.

“I’m going for a walk,” I said. Walking the neighborhood’s what I did when I was angry, when I was tired but couldn’t sleep, when I was bored. But mostly when I was angry.

“In this weather?” Joy said.

I slipped on my jacket, hat, shoes.

“Well, hurry,” she said. “We’ve got an hour.”

The week before, Josh’s first grade teacher had called a parent/teacher conference. This was not the standard mid-year check-in, but something else. On the phone, Miss Morrell had refused to elaborate.

“Is there something you want to tell us, buddy?” I’d said, and Josh had shrugged, shaken his head.

Joy was braced for the worst. “Whatever it is, you can tell us,” she’d said, all dramatic, like maybe he’d stabbed the class hamster.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” I’d said, and Josh had run to his room to play.

But, a week later, I wasn’t so sure. Something was up with our son, I just wasn’t sure what.

#



At the neighborhood's entrance, a small, white house leaned into the wind. The house was not like the others. It was old and without brick, and it was ours. It was a house that, with its peeling paint and mossy shingles, failed to advertise the opulence of the neighborhood, just as River Run Heights failed to live up to its namesake: Amid the property lines and cul-de-sacs of the developer's wet dream, there was not now—nor had there ever been—a river. Instead, there was a dry creek bed that, in spring, trickled runoff approximating, in both color and odor, raw sewage.

We belonged to the neighborhood and we did not, which is to say that the land behind us was purchased after we moved in. We were offered good money for our lot, twice what the house was worth, but Joy and I were newly married and very much in love. The implications—of our first home wrecking-balled into oblivion—we found unsavory and metaphorically problematic.

We stayed and were accepted, reluctantly, into the development. Our neighbors didn't hate us, though most kept their distance. We were enemies of symmetry. We'd thrown off the development's feng shui, imperiling property values. In the end, we scored free lawn service, plus access to tennis and two pools, in exchange for which a concrete marker the size of a compact car was lowered by crane onto our lawn. In imitation marble, it read: *River Run Heights*. And, below this: *A Ken Butler Property*.

Across the street from the neighborhood stood the new school. Tall and boxy, it rose into the stratosphere. Who'd ever heard of a four-story elementary school? But Atlanta land was at a premium. Desperate architects were reaching new heights of creativity and whimsy.

That week, we were in the grip of an ice storm, the city's first in two decades, and so the windows of River Run Elementary hovered in suspended animation, frosted, opaque. Standing

on my front lawn, I watched the school a while, my breath coming out in clouds, and then I turned and made my way, cautiously, down the driveway to the sidewalk and into the neighborhood.

I'd been walking a lot since the giraffe incident.

Let me explain: I'm not a bad man, at least I hope I'm not. I never hit my wife. I never put my fist through the drywall by her face. But I *wanted* to. And it was when I recognized that I wanted to that I knew something had come loose inside me, something that, after a decade of marriage, I couldn't find a way to put back.

It scared me, the rage that geysered almost without provocation. Never before had I felt it toward Josh, but, then again, never in nine years had I felt anything like it toward Joy. Now, times, the way she looked at me could make me want to shake her shoulders from her head.

And it was in this state of mind, one evening, that, mid-fight, I launched Joy's wooden giraffe through the living room and into the television. There was a *ping* and the screen spiderwebbed. It was an old set, no real loss. No, the real loss was the carved figurine—the giraffe—a memento, a keepsake from a childhood trip to Africa with her parents, now dead.

The animal had hit the floor in pieces. I gathered up the neck, the trunk, four legs, the head. We never found the tail. Wood glue was applied, but, splay-legged, the giraffe leaned, retarded-looking, until, one day, disgusted, Joy threw it away.

There'd been a whole table of trinkets to choose from, ceramic kittens and *Willow Tree* angels, none of which would have been missed, so how could Joy assume anything *but* that I'd picked the giraffe on purpose? How, then, to explain that the giraffe was an accident, the first thing to hand? How without admitting to my wife that it hadn't been the giraffe I'd wanted to throw across the room—it had been her.

And so I walked. Whenever I felt whatever it was rising in my chest, this, *God*, this fury, I walked. In rain, I walked. In rain and tornadoes. In ice storms.

Around me, the houses of River Run Heights huddled for warmth, rooftops licked by moonlight. Icicles hung from rain gutters and made mouths of windowsills. Driveways glowed gray beneath streetlights.

I needed to be getting back. I didn't want to be the one to make us late.

Back home, we'd bundle our boy in his warmest coat. I'd sling his train bag over my shoulder, we'd each take a hand, and, with Josh between us, Joy and I would cross the street. We'd take small steps.

#

The elementary school was well-lit and clinically clean. We followed our son up three flights of stairs, Josh bounding the whole way, Joy and I pausing at each landing to catch our breaths. The stairwell smelled like paint and character education. Each wall was plastered with artwork, the deformed dogs and amputated cats of childhood rendered in finger-paints. Everywhere were smiling suns and happy rabbits. On a wall left over from November, Native Americans and Pilgrims enjoyed a smallpox-free feast.

Miss Morrell met us at the door. She was a stern-looking woman, tall, in her thirties, with dark eyes and dark hair that hung to her shoulders. Her bangs had been cut to fall in a sharp line across her forehead. They line seemed to balance on her eyebrows. She led us to her desk. A pair of chairs faced the desk and we filled them. Joy emptied Josh's train set onto the floor. He sat and began fitting track together.

"Well," Miss Morrell said, "you must be very proud."

Joy and I looked at each other, shrugged, turned back to Josh's teacher.

“You got my memo, yes? The yellow sheet in Joshua’s Friday folder?”

I looked at Joy again. Again, nothing.

Miss Morrell drew in an exaggerated breath. “Okay,” she said. “The reason you’re here is that we would like to enroll Joshua in River Run Elementary’s Gifted and Talented Program. It’s not curriculum replacement, but it *is* enrichment, enrichment that we believe Joshua needs.”

There was a long pause before Joy asked, “So he’s not in trouble?” All year, we’d been getting notes. Josh wasn’t finishing his schoolwork. Josh wasn’t paying attention in class. Josh didn’t play well with others.

Miss Morrell returned our look of confusion with one of pity. I recognized the expression. It was the one Joy gave the Kroger bagboy, Down’s Syndrome Doug, whenever he lowered a melon onto our bread or bagged meat with bleach.

“You may have noticed that Joshua is not like other boys his age,” Miss Morrell said.

Joy nodded. That night, I would get the I-told-you-so talk of the century. Since his infancy, Joy had speculated that Josh was special. I’d chalked this up to a mother’s love and maybe a small dose of naiveté. Now, Joy had the confirmation she needed. I expected never to hear the end of it.

“The first graders take IQ tests,” Miss Morrell continued. “Joshua’s score is several standard deviations above the mean. He fell into the hundredth percentile.”

“That’s wonderful,” Joy said.

“It’s beyond wonderful,” Miss Morrell said. “I’m not saying he’s bright. I’m saying that your son is effectively smarter than 99% of his first grade peers. Nationwide.” She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms, as though to let that sink in.

“Well, so is everyone in this room,” I said. I reached down and ran a hand through Josh’s hair. He was intent on his trains. He didn’t look up.

Miss Morrell leaned forward. She uncrossed her arms, grabbed the lip of the desk, and squeezed her knuckles pink.

“Mr. Davis,” she said.

“Call me Sam,” I said.

“Sam,” she said, “I don’t doubt that you’re smarter than a first grader. But I will tell you that if Joshua’s development is allowed to proceed uninterrupted, if his intellect is properly nourished, then his mind will surpass everyone’s in this room. And I don’t mean by a little bit.” She let go of the desk and leaned back.

I wanted to say that Joy and I were secret geniuses, something to smack the smug look from this woman’s face, but it wasn’t true and, anyway, no one would have believed it. Josh’s mother sold makeup. I got by in telemarketing. Together, we made one occasionally savvy—though often not so smart—person. I’d never considered the apple, how sometimes it rolls far away from the tree.

On the floor, Josh had assembled his wooden set into a circle. One train waited on the tracks while he added an engine to the cars and red caboose of another. The assembly was taking longer than usual, maybe because he’d been listening, maybe because he was wallowing in his puffy winter coat. Sitting there, fitting together toy trains, he didn’t look like anything special.

“You have to understand,” Miss Morrell said. “Most parents would kill for a kid like yours. Parents *beg* me to place their children in the gifted program. I’ve turned away bribes.”

Joy and I knew these parents. At fundraisers and picnics, on skate nights, conversation invariably turned to the kids: Which children were walking by one, potty-trained by two, reading

by five. I'd never taken any of it too seriously. When Josh was reading at four, it was Joy who convinced me that this was unusual.

"I've always known Josh was special," Joy said.

Miss Morrell nodded. She had found her ally. Already I could see her joining Joy in the fight against me, and I hated this woman for it. I hated the way she looked at me. I hated her hair, those bangs like a black gash opening up her pale forehead. But mostly I hated the way she called Josh *Joshua*, how she talked like he wasn't in the room, like he wasn't 60 pounds of living, breathing muscle and heart and flesh at my feet, as though my boy's only redeeming feature was his brain.

I turned to the window. From the fourth floor, the view of midtown was striking: River Run Heights' cluster of homes and the tall buildings beyond, the city blued by night. All the world was ice.

"We owe it to Josh to see that his potential is reached," Miss Morrell said. She spoke slowly, succinctly, eyes and bangs blazing. Joy nodded like crazy. "We'll do everything we can with him at school, but you two..." She paused, watched me, resumed: "You must create an environment in the home that fosters learning."

"What does that mean?" I said. I knew, but I was tired of playing along.

"It means," Miss Morrell said, "that you do whatever it takes."

On the floor, Josh brought two trains together in a head-on collision. He pulled an engineer from the cab of one and pantomimed a spine-crushing dive to the tracks below.

"I'm on fire!" he yelled. "Help! The pain! The pain!"

The other engineer joined him, screaming, "Stop, drop, and roll! For the love of God, stop, drop, and roll!"

The plastic men were spun up and down the tracks. They muttered in fiery agony.

“Look, Joy,” I said. “Our boy’s a genius.”

#

I made my living making phone calls. I was given products to sell and the phone numbers of those to whom I should try to sell them. People hated me. Most hung up within seconds. The danger of such a job is that you get used to this. You start thinking everyone on earth’s an asshole when only *most* everyone is.

Joy worked part-time at Lenox, Atlanta’s fanciest mall. Her job was selling cosmetics to average-looking women who left her counter looking like supermodels. “This lip liner,” she would say, “will change your life.” She talked and women listened. Her targets were the sad, the disenchanted, those desperate to believe in the restorative power of an eyebrow pencil. These women surrendered startling sums of money, unaware that, at home, they’d never be able to duplicate what Joy had done.

“They don’t know it’s not the makeup,” Joy said. “It’s me, these hands.”

For years, she’d tried to persuade me to sit for her. “Men’s makeup,” she said. “It’s never taken off, but you’d be amazed. You can’t even tell. No one would know you’re wearing it.”

There was a logic problem here, which I’d more than once brought to Joy’s attention.

“With men, it’s not about accenting,” she said. “It’s about concealing: Blemishes. Broken capillaries. The creases at the corners of your eyes.”

“I could make you look twenty again.” She studied my face, sighed. “Twenty-five.”

In the end, the work I did and the work Joy did wasn’t so different. We caught customers unaware, at the dinner table or walking through the mall, then pressed our merchandise upon them. Difference was, Joy was good at what she did. That, and her clients loved her.

Our jobs had another thing in common: the pay. In the five years since our son's birth, Joy and I had enjoyed a half-dozen nights out. Even anniversaries and birthdays had turned to quiet, at-home affairs to make budgetary room for Little League uniforms and Wiggles tickets. This sort of thing takes a marital toll, and Joy and I had recently found ourselves at the tollbooth shaking our coats out for coins.

But I don't blame money, not really. I blame romance. Namely: *the death of*. Whatever flame was kindled when our eyes met had since dimmed. It flickered now, amber and gasping.

You want to ask: Did it have to be this way?

And I answer: Of course it didn't have to be this way. But it was.

Sure, we knew couples, couples, like us, whose kids were their world, who struggled to cover the rent and who still fucked like bunnies. But Joy and I had not navigated this territory successfully. Somewhere along the way, we'd started seeing ourselves less as lovers and more as parents. We caught ourselves calling each other *Mom* and *Dad* without Josh around, and around this time the anger crept in.

Then, the evening of the giraffe incident. We'd been fighting, as we often fought, about money and how to spend it. And then the giraffe was in pieces and we'd retired to different rooms. We'd slept in separate beds since. The night we got the news of Josh's giftedness made six months.

#

The next day, Joy came home late laden with yellow bags. Each bag sported a blue label that read *Baby Galileo*. Joy dropped the bags and joined me at the kitchen table.

"I stopped at the education supply store," she said. "It's where teachers shop. Miss Morrell recommended it."



“Okay,” I said. I stared at the bags. There were six of them, each overflowing. “But what’s all *this*?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about Josh’s environment and how we can foster it.” She pulled items from the bags. Picture books, workbooks, thick tomes on parenting: *Your Special Child* and *Pick My Brain*. I picked up *Pick My Brain*. On the cover, a well-adjusted looking boy, hair stiff with hairspray, overalls stiff with starch, sat in a chair and puzzled over a Rubik’s cube. He wore sensible shoes and an expression that said: *This is all well and good, but my real passion is long division.*

I flipped to the author’s bio.

“MD and PhD,” Joy said quickly.

“Then we’re in good hands,” I said.

The corner was torn from the dust jacket, the place where, in small black print, the price would have appeared. I set the book on the table. I reached into a bag and pulled out a shrink-wrapped bundle of CDs.

“Music,” Joy said. “Classical. For the synapses.”

“Synapses?”

“They’re stems, like these little hairy carrots in the brain. If they don’t connect, Josh won’t be able to learn a foreign language. The lady at the store explained it.” In case I still had doubts, she added, “It’s scientific.”

“That may be,” I said, “but we have libraries. We have the Internet.”

I moved to the floor. Spilling the contents from the remaining bags, I was surrounded by shiny, pricey merchandise: Maps (geographic and constellation) slipped from their long, plastic

cylinders. DVD cases advertised happy children. A small, heavy box marketed itself as the first safe, child-friendly chemistry set. “No Acid, No Glass” the box bragged in splashy red letters.

“Christ, Joy,” I said, but I said no more. Already Joy was standing. She left the room.

A minute later, she returned. She’d been crying.

“I knew you’d do this,” she said. “I knew you’d take one look and make me the bad guy. Well, excuse me, Sam. Excuse me for caring.”

“That’s not fair,” I said.

Joy sat on the floor across from me. She crossed her long legs. She crossed her arms over her chest.

“I want what’s best for our son,” she said.

“Joy, this is our entire holiday budget.” I lifted a bag and shook it. “Right here. You think, Christmas morning, Josh wants to unwrap Mozart?”

Joy watched me. Her thumb traced the hem of her shirtsleeve. “Maybe,” she said.

“Oh, bullshit.”

Joy stood. “You’ve never appreciated how smart he is,” she said.

“That’s not true. I just want the kid to have fun, to get a few toys at Christmas.”

“We can still get him toys,” Joy said, but standing there, nudging a Baby Galileo bag with her toe, I saw she knew that we couldn’t.

“It’s okay,” I said. “We can return these and use the money to buy normal toys.”

“That’s what you’d like?”

“That’s what I’d like.”

“For Josh to be normal?” she said.

For a minute, we didn't speak. Joy admired the ceiling, a practiced move for keeping tears from spilling over.

"I appreciate what you're trying to do," I said, "but Josh is *six*. I don't care how smart they are, when it comes to Christmas, kids want baseballs, they want bicycles, not—" I pulled a box from a bag, held it up. "—not *Kiddie Accountant: The fast paced coin-counting game that's fun for the whole family!*"

"I won't let you deny Josh the mental stimulation he craves."

"Craves?" I said. "Where's craves? I see a kid who enjoys a steady diet of play dough and crayon wax, but I don't see craves."

Joy took a deep breath, exhaled, sat. She put a hand on my knee and a shiver ran down my spine. It was the most intimate moment we'd shared in weeks.

"Sam," she said. "Haven't you noticed that Josh has no friends? None. He's not like other kids. He needs to be challenged."

"Great," I said, "then we'll get him friends, gifted friends, and they can all play abacus together."

"Sam, I'm serious."

"So am I. I'll find the kid friends. When I'm finished, he'll have so many friends it'll be like a fucking NBC sitcom."

"I'm done," Joy said. She stood. "Goodnight."

And then I was alone, adrift in a sea of flashy, expensive packaging. I rose and made the rounds, extinguishing lights and locking doors. Heading to bed, though, I couldn't stop thinking about Josh's synapses.

For the first time, I worried that his potential was being squelched.

For the first time, I worried about the welfare of my son's hairy carrots.

#

I was determined to find children like Josh, and, in the end, the neighbors did the work for me. Not forty-eight hours had passed before the phone rang.

It was Devon Tweed, the Englishman who lived four doors down. "The house with the purple wreath hanging from the portico," Devon said.

"Yes," I said. I did not say that I had no idea what a *portico* was.

As it turned out, there was already a group dedicated to the gifted youth of River Run Heights. The children numbered five and gathered on Friday nights. While the kids played, the adults enjoyed card games and wine.

"We meet fortnightly," Devon said.

I rolled my eyes, but, for Josh's sake, I would make a good impression. Still, something troubled me.

"How did you hear?" I asked. "About Josh."

Devon let loose a throaty laugh. "Secrets?" he said. "In this neighborhood?"

I grimaced.

"This Friday," Devon said. "It's the last gathering before the holidays. Do come."

I waited for him to say, "Ta ta" or "Cheerio." Instead, I got only the click of a cradled receiver. It was a sound I was used to.

Joy was beside herself.

"What will Josh wear?" she said.

"Clothes, I imagine. Unless they're beyond all that. Clothes," I said, trying on my best Devon Tweed, "should be reserved for peasants and vagabonds."

Joy shook her head. “Don’t mess this up.”

“Skullduggery,” I said.

#

Josh was in bed reading from a picture book called *If it Runs on Rails*. This, Joy said, was to be expected. According to her parenting books, obsession was a common trait among the gifted. *Obsession* was not the word the books used, but obsession is what it amounted to, the tendency of the gifted to cling to things, to identify themselves as experts in a chosen field. Among the young, common interests included dinosaurs, horses, and space exploration. Josh’s thing was trains. He couldn’t get enough of them.

He sat up when I came in, his locomotive comforter bunching at his waist. He wore a Thomas the Tank Engine pajama top.

“Dad,” he said, “I bet you can’t guess the top speed of Japan’s fastest bullet train.”

“Bet I can’t,” I said.

“Come on,” Josh said. “*Try*.”

“Hundred miles an hour.”

“Ha! Try twice that.”

I sat on the bed. Josh pulled the comforter aside and scuttled into my lap. “Look,” he said. He held out the book and I took it. In the picture, a train traversed the Asian countryside. Trees traced the track. Mountains rose, majestic, in the distance. The train was a blue-gray blur. I admired the picture for what seemed an appropriate amount of time, then returned the book to Josh’s lap.

“Listen,” I said, “I have good news. You know how Miss Morrell said you get to be in a special class?”

Josh nodded.

“Well, you get to be in a special club too.”

“A club?” Josh said. He frowned and his brow furrowed. He had remarkably bushy eyebrows for a child.

“A special club,” I said. “With special kids like you. Kids from the neighborhood.”

“Will Marcy Jenkins be there?” Josh said.

“I don’t know,” I said, excited. I pictured a little girl, blonde hair twisted into pigtails, the object of my son’s first crush.

“Because she kicks me,” Josh said. “On the bus.” He lifted the cuff of one pajama leg and revealed his shin, the two green-brown bruises there.

“Maybe she likes you,” I said. But the bruises, they looked fierce.

“No,” Josh said. “I know what you’re talking about, but not Marcy. Marcy pretty much hates my guts. She calls me Butt-Face.”

*That little bitch*, I thought. I pictured Marcy run over, pigtails flattened, face black with the latticework of fat school bus tires.

I rubbed my son’s legs. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m sure she won’t be there. This is a club for good kids, like you. So, what do you think? Want to give it a shot?”

Josh thought about it for a minute. He left my lap and crawled back under the comforter.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll give it a shot.”

“That’s my boy,” I said. I kissed his forehead and turned out the light. A nightlight in the shape of a steam engine dusted one wall with yellow light.

“Night, Dad,” Josh said.

“Goodnight,” I said. But I stopped in the doorway. I watched Josh for a minute, and then this happened: I saw him for the first time not as a father does but as another first grader might. He was puny, and his brown hair, cut in the shape of a bowl, stuck up in the back. His front teeth betrayed a gap that would one day need braces. And his glasses, resting in their plastic case on his bedside table, were too big for his face.

“Josh,” I said, “the kids at school. Do many of them pick on you?”

Josh stared at the ceiling, seemed to consider the question, then turned his head, looked me in the eye, and said, “Yeah.”

Before then, I hadn’t recognized it, the power of a single word to make you suddenly, unaccountably sad.

#

A week before Christmas found us shivering on the front stoop of the Tweeds’ massive brick house, Joy and me, Josh between. The purple wreath hung, as promised, from the ledge above the front door.

“You know,” I said, running my hand along the ledge, “in England, they call this the *portico*.”

Josh and Joy stared at me, unimpressed. Through the O in the wreath and a window in the door, I saw a fireplace and a fire and a number of people milling about, dressed up, drinks in hand. I had not thought to dress up. Joy and I wore jeans and old jackets. I considered going home to change, and then the door opened. Standing before us was a girl, and, judging by the look on Josh’s face, I knew exactly which girl this was.

Marcy Jenkins was not cute with blonde pigtails. Marcy Jenkins was wide of body and forehead, a young linebacker in training. Her lips were puffy and her eyes bulged not unlike a

particular breed of small dog's. Her face swollen like that, I wondered briefly whether she was undergoing an allergic reaction. I thought of a friend so allergic to shellfish that, upon kissing his wife who had just eaten shrimp, he had gone into anaphylactic shock and nearly died.

Marcy smiled, did an odd sort of curtsy, and said, "Hello, Joshua."

Josh said nothing. I felt his small hand on my leg.

"Won't you come in?" she said.

We stepped inside.

"Kids upstairs," Marcy said before scampering up a staircase.

"Watch out for the shellfish," I called after her. Joy gave me a look. I shrugged.

I crouched and ran a hand over Josh's head, smoothing his cowlick. "Josh," I said, "if you don't want to do this," but I could not continue. Joy's fingernails were poised on the back of my neck. I stood.

Joy brought her face to my ear. "Don't coddle him," she hissed. "He needs this. He's starved for interaction."

I looked down at Josh. He did not look starved. He looked scared.

"He's fine," she said, then, turning to Josh: "Go upstairs, Sweetie."

Slowly, pitifully, Josh mounted the staircase. At the top, his fingers lingered on the banister. He watched us.

"Don't give me that look," Joy said, before pulling me into the next room.

And then Devon Tweed was upon us, ushering us forward, into the living room and onto a couch. Glasses were fitted into our hands, wine was poured, and the guests gathered round, smiling, expectant.



“Thanks for having us,” I said at last, and the crowd nodded, a sea of khaki and holiday-themed sweater vests. No kidding, all of the holiday icons were in attendance: Frosty, top hat in hand, bisected by buttons; Rudolph, nose like an angry red pimple; and jolly Santa Claus, squat in his sleigh, a cadre of tired-looking reindeer braced to do his bidding.

“We were so pleased to hear about Joshua,” said a tall woman with stringy red hair. She seemed to choose each word with care. “I’ve been telling Frank,” she said, elbowing a man, assumedly Frank, in the side, “that *giftedness* has nothing to do with, well, you know, *privilege*, or what have you.”

Everyone laughed. Then everyone stopped laughing. Then Joy smiled, raised her glass, and laughed, and everyone resumed laughing. I chewed the inside of my cheek. I was already ready to leave. I wondered whether I’d maybe interrupted their dinners, whether one of these assholes had ever hung up on me.

The couples proceeded to introduce themselves. There were the Tweeds, Devon and Marie and their dear friends the Martins, Judith and the aforementioned Frank. There were the Rays, Alan and Debra, college professors both, and the Porters, Ted and Sue, the couple closest in age to Joy and myself. He was an electrical engineer. She was a *baby engineer*. She practically squealed this, patting her waist, and the room roared.

Then there were the Jenkins, Tag and Meredith. Like the offspring they’d spawned, they were large people. Big-hipped and pendulous of breast, Meredith Jenkins had half a sofa to herself. Her husband stood behind her. Hands like steaks draped her shoulders.

“Our Marcy simply adores your boy,” Meredith said. When she spoke, her flesh undulated like the cheeks of test pilots reaching however many *Gs*. “She’s been looking forward to this all week.”

“That’s wonderful,” Joy said.

I hadn’t told Joy what Josh had said about Marcy or the kids at school, and now I wasn’t sure why. Perhaps I wanted Joy not to worry. Perhaps I hoped to protect Josh from Joy’s smothering. But, thinking these things, I knew that neither of them was true.

The truth was this: Already I foresaw the day when I would be out of the picture, or, if not out of the picture, then relegated to a corner, half-hidden by mat and frame. And here was something, a secret that Josh had chosen to give me and *only* me. I didn’t want to share.

Footfalls and yelps echoed from upstairs.

“They have so much energy at this age,” Tag said, clapping his hand with a ripple to his wife’s back-fat.

Things went on this way for a while. But, after a time, the upstairs grew suspiciously quiet.

“I’ll check on them,” Devon Tweed said.

I jumped up. My legs were wobbly with wine.

“Let me,” I said, and, before anyone could argue, I started up the stairs.

What I found made my stomach summersault. Josh’s t-shirt and red caboose sweater lay crumpled at the top of the stairs. I followed a hallway toward the sound of laughter and found Josh’s pants folded neatly on the floor. At the end of the hall, I opened a door to the Tweed’s bedroom. The room was enormous. A wide canopy bed rested against one wall. Along other walls stood the massive mahogany pieces of a designer bedroom set.

I heard whispers. There were two doors. The first opened to a walk-in closet and a row of suit coats arranged by shade. Racks of many-colored sweaters scaled the walls. Dozens of pairs of shoes lined the floor.

The second door opened to the master bathroom and to Josh. He stood on the lid of the toilet seat, arms at his sides. He stood in his underwear. A thick coat of red lipstick streaked his face. Two crimson ovals encircled his nipples. The other children had begun wrapping him in toilet paper. Ribbons of it ringed his chest. Loose loops circled his legs. A single strip fluttered from his underwear's elastic waistband.

Josh saw me and he did not cry. Except for Marcy, the children looked terrified. Marcy met my eyes, then held my gaze with steely determination. The other children ran from the room. Josh did not move. Marcy stood her ground.

I knelt, grabbed Marcy, and pulled her to me. I held her by the arms and squeezed too hard. I pictured welts rising to the skin's surface, bruises taking shape before morning. She was a child and it was unforgivable and I didn't care.

Marcy's eyes grew wide. She looked down.

"Look at me," I said, and she did. "Get. My. Son's. Clothes." I let go. She did not move. "Now!" I said.

She did not run. With whatever remained of her dignity, Marcy left the room at an ordinary pace. She appeared a minute later with Josh's clothes. She set them at my feet, turned, and walked away without a word. I shut the bathroom door.

"You said she wouldn't be here," Josh said. He had begun to shiver.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"When I asked, you didn't really know if she'd be here. You shouldn't have told me when you didn't know."

I nodded. "You're absolutely right," I said.

He held out his hands and I scooped him into my arms. I pulled the toilet paper from him. I wetted a washcloth with warm water and wiped the lipstick from his mouth. It was only when I dabbed at the red circles on his chest that Josh began to cry.

It took a long time. When I was done, Josh's face and chest were raw, smeared pink, and the washcloth was ruined. I dropped it into a ceramic trashcan. The lipstick lay on the floor, its tip ground into the tile. I threw it away, then rubbed the floor with a tissue until the tile came clean. I lowered the lid of Marie Tweed's makeup case. I returned the toilet paper roll to its tube on the wall.

Josh stopped crying and I helped him dress. He held the sleeves of his shirt while I fitted his sweater over his head. He sat very still while I tied his shoes. Then he took my hand and we made our way downstairs and out the front door.

We were two houses down when Joy caught up to us on the sidewalk.

"What's going on?" she said.

I looked at Josh. His expression was not unlike Marcy's moments before I'd come to my senses and relaxed my grip on her chubby arms. He was ashamed, terrified. He let go of my hand.

"Josh was ready to go," I said. "That's all."

Joy studied us, then squatted so that she and Josh were eye-to-eye. "Don't you like your new friends, sweetie?" she said.

Josh was mute. She ran two fingers over the boy's brow. He flinched, took my hand. Joy stood. She watched me for a long time, then, the way she did when she knew I'd be of no use to her but wanted the moment for later, for when she would say, *I could have used your help back there, you know?*

“Fine,” she said. “I’m going back for our coats. And to tell the Tweeds that we had a nice time. And to apologize.” She turned and marched up the sidewalk. Every few steps, she paused, then shuffled over a patch of ice.

Josh still held my hand. Wordlessly, we turned and walked home.

#

Though we no longer shared a bed, Joy and I still shared a bathroom. That evening, getting ready for sleep, Joy let me have it. I sat on the bathtub ledge. Joy stood at the sink, face pasty with cold cream, a towel curled like a shell on her head.

“We’ll be lucky if those people ever ask us back the way you two took off,” she said. “I was mortified.”

“Is this about you or Josh?” I said. It was a cheap shot, I knew, but it had been a long day. I wanted the fight over with, even if that meant making Joy cry to end it.

“I mean it,” she said. “I refuse to let you screw up our son. You always think you know what’s best for him, but you don’t. You don’t listen to the experts, and you certainly don’t listen to me. You haven’t cracked one book I bought.”

“You said you’d take those books back.”

“No,” Joy said. “*You* said I’d take those books back. I agreed to no such thing.”

I couldn’t shake it, the thought of Josh perched on that toilet, his nipples, the lipstick. It was my fault. I’d known he’d be picked on, and I’d done nothing. And, yet, I couldn’t protect him forever. It was a terrible feeling, not knowing how to help your own child.

Joy pulled a pair of tweezers from a drawer. Staring into the mirror above the sink, she brought the tweezers to her face and pulled a single, creamy hair from the center of her chin.

She watched my reflection in the mirror. She said, “You should be nicer to me.”

“Don’t threaten me,” I said, and Joy said, “It’s not a threat. I’m serious as fuck.”

I stood. I moved to the door. I moved back. I sat.

They say a relationship is over when one person walks out. I don’t mean walks out for good. It’s over then, of course. I mean, when one of the two of you interrupts fight after fight with a door in the face, with keys in the ignition or a walk round the block. Call it blowing off steam, but this article I read—I forget where, *Men’s Health*, *Time*, maybe—called it the first clue that a marriage is doomed. I know this now, though I didn’t know it then, was just coming to know it, to recognize what I’d wrought.

Months, I’d walked out on our arguments. Wrath welling up in me, I’d wanted to remove myself before I’d done something I regretted. But the only thing I regretted that night in that bathroom was what should have been obvious, what I’d missed. When I put on my coat, tied my shoes, Joy didn’t see a noble man working hard not to hit her, she saw a man unwilling to fight for his marriage. In her eyes, I’d already given up.

I gripped the edge of the tub. “Okay,” I said. “Do me.”

Joy staggered like I’d sunk my fist into her stomach.

“You have to be kidding,” she said.

“I’m not asking you to sleep with me,” I said. I stood and approached her. I uncoiled the bath towel from her head, folded it and dropped it into the laundry hamper. I moved to the linen closet and pulled down the purple, polyester satchel of men’s makeup. Joy watched me with something like wonder. I returned to the tub. I cradled the bag in my lap.

“Last chance,” I said.

Joy stood still for a long time, not speaking, then she nodded. She knelt on the shaggy mat at the foot of our bath. She pulled a box from the purple bag. Across the front of the box was stenciled *Jeffers: Men's Line*, in blue curlicue.

“Close your eyes,” Joy said, and I did. “Don’t open ‘til I say *when*.”

I felt her hands on my face, the first dab of cream on my cheeks.

“Will we make it through Christmas?” I asked.

“Don’t talk,” she said. “You’ll mess me up.”

“Will we make it through Christmas?” I asked again.

Something cold was rubbed in circles at the corners of my eyes. My chest was tight with anticipation.

“Okay,” Joy said. “Christmas.”

If we could do that, then what kept us from continuing? If we could just make it to New Year’s, to Valentine’s Day, St. Patrick’s. From one holiday to the next. Who was to say we couldn’t go on like that, until, until—

“Keep them closed,” Joy said.

When I opened my eyes, I imagined, I would be young again.

For a while I felt Joy’s hands on my face, and then for a while I didn’t. And then I looked.

Sitting there, I’d half wondered whether I’d open my eyes to a clown face or to a woman’s, whether she’d make me up like one of the guys from KISS. But, no. There was no lipstick or eyeliner, no whiskers or rosy cheeks. Joy had done a good job, just as she’d always promised she would.

From the look of things, she'd used only powders and creams. Anyone who knew me maybe could have told, but I understood now what she'd meant. I didn't look like a man wearing makeup. I looked like a younger, healthier version of myself, a healthy young man who could no longer pretend that things were not at an end.

The bathroom lights, after having my eyes closed so long, were bright and headachy. The boxes and products, the little brushes and swabs, scattered the countertop. Beige smears stained the sink's silver faucet and both knobs. Tissues, like damp scabs, littered the floor. What I noticed mostly, though, was the quiet and the still.

After all, Joy had left the room, left before I'd opened my eyes.

#

The neighborhood at midnight was ice. I'd tried to sleep, couldn't, had dressed and stepped outside. Our house, our tiny house, was caked in crystal. It stood apart from the others and looked ready to fall down. Soon, we would sell and the neighborhood would gobble it up. The house would be knocked down and a new one would stand in its place, a house that matched the rest.

I followed the sidewalk a while, beneath streetlights and power lines that hummed in their jackets of ice, past lawns tucked into curbs like blue blankets and the dark houses beyond.

I slipped twice. Once I caught myself. Once I fell onto my side, stood, and kept going.

I walked until the cold cut through my coat, then I buried my hands in my armpits and turned back.

Josh's room was warm. I slipped off my shoes and coat and sat on the floor.

He was rolled toward me. The train nightlight illuminated his face. His eyelids fluttered in sleep.



I did not want to lose my son, and, right then, the thought came that I could scoop him up, be out the door and in the car in seconds. We wouldn't need clothes or toothbrushes or food. We would just drive. Or, better yet, we could hop a train. We'd be stowaways. Together, we'd trade Atlanta for Montana. Somewhere wild. Somewhere no one would find us.

"Josh," I said. He stirred. I cupped a hand over my mouth. I wanted so badly to believe that I was as much his world as he was mine.

He slept. He slept.

Tomorrow, I would collect all of the Baby Galileo products and dump them in the trunk of my car. I would drive to the store, pile everything beside the register, and demand a refund. I didn't care about store policy. I didn't care about receipts or time limits or torn packaging. I would make the return. I would get our money back. And then I would drive to the toy store and buy everything with a train on it that I could find.

I stood, moved close, but the bed was too narrow, so I balled up my coat for a pillow and stretched out on the floor, close as I could. The bed was not so high. In the morning, my boy's hand might slip over the side and find my hair. He'd find me in the morning, was how I imagined it, find me there, his father, waiting for him.

## WHAT THE WOLF WANTS

So, it's the middle of the night and there's this wolf at my window. He stands like a man on his back legs. His hindquarters bulge, all muscled and stuff. He's so silver he'd almost be blue in the moonlight, were there moonlight. But this is the suburbs, so, instead, he's almost blue in the lamplight, the streetlights, back porch security lights, light from the flicker of across-the-street TVs, the radiant glow spilling out of downtown. A lot of artificial illumination around these parts, is what I'm getting at.

Delusions aren't new to me. This last year, I haven't been getting much sleep. But, the longer I stare at the wolf, the more I realize he's no delusion—this one's *real*.

He's not a werewolf, not exactly. There's nothing mannish about him. No human hands or face. No pants. His balls hang immodestly between his knees. They swing in the breeze like something, like balls.

I shouldn't open the window, but I do, and he climbs in. I'm in just boxers, but his balls are out, plus, he's a wolf, so what does he care? I slide my feet into moccasins. They're my favorite, a gift from Tyler, leather with fur lining.

The wolf follows me to the kitchen, seats himself in my Rooms-to-Go Dynasty Collection dining room chair at my Rooms-to-Go Dynasty Collection dining room table. I want to put down a towel, something to get those balls off the chair's imitation maple laminate surface, but the look on the wolf's face tells me I'd best keep my hands away from his testicles.

“Coffee?” I say.

The wolf nods and does that thing dogs do, that bob of head, curl of lip, that almost-smile. His teeth *gleam*.

Wolves like instant. I learned this somewhere, Wikipedia I think. I'd been out of instant since the 80's, but just last week stocked up on Starbucks, this new line, VIA. They won't call it instant, but instant's what it is.

I pour the coffee into a shallow bowl for him to lap from. I set the bowl on the table before the wolf. He blows on it to cool it down. He does this, and I think of my mother, how she taught us, me and my brother, to cool soup by blowing on it. It never worked, just like kissed cuts never hurt less. The first sip still scalded, but we pretended—me, Tyler, Mom. We drank our soup, pretending we could taste it, pretending our mouths weren't on fire.

The wolf does not pretend. The first sip burns. He lifts his head and howls. It's so loud, I cover my ears. He growls, and for the first time I wonder about the welfare of a man with a wolf in his house. My body parts, I like all of them.

The wolf watches me.

*A toe's not the end of the world*, I think. *I could lose a toe*. I bend to unslipper one foot.

"Yes," the wolf says. Here, I should be surprised, should be like, "Oh, oh my God, it's a talking wolf, ahhhh!"

But I'm not surprised, not really. Because why else *would* he be here, if not to talk, if not to ask a question or offer me wolfly counsel?

Except that it's not advice he's here to give, there's something he wants. And it's not a question he wants answered, or a piece of me to eat, it's my *slippers*.

"Moccasins," I say.

"Whatever," the wolf says. "Those are what I want."

“Anything else,” I say. I’m hoping he’ll take the chair. *Take the chair and your ball sweat with you*, I want to say but don’t.

*Let’s be adult about this*, I think. *Here you were, ready to give up a toe, and all he asks is one worldly possession, a souvenir from his big trip out of the woods.*

I consider furniture, clothing, maybe a nice household appliance. Something he can show off to all of his wolf friends and be like, “See, I went inside, man. I went into the box with the roof!”

“Consider the Whirlpool,” I say. Only two years old, the dishwasher’s good, the kind you can load without washing things first. “Seriously,” I say. “I tried it. Just like in the commercials. A whole cake went in there, and, when it was done? The dishes? *Spotless.*”

The wolf shakes his head.

I proffer an Emerson brand microwave, a Land’s End thermal fleece, a 2005 Storybook Mountain Vineyards Zinfandel, my favorite. “Fifty dollars, retail,” I say. “Excellent vintage.”

But the wolf, he needs none of these. Food he eats raw. Fur keeps him warm. And wine, well. Wolves, he informs me, drink white.

“The moccasins,” he says. “Really, they’re all I want.”

I ask why. The wolf shrugs.

“It’s rough out there,” he says. “You ever had a pine needle jammed in your pads? Ever cross a snow-covered field in bare feet?”

I admit that, no, I have not.

“Try it,” he says, “Try it, and, trust me, you’ll be begging for moccasins.”

I sigh. “Okay,” I say.

I slip off the first moccasin, then the second. The stitching is yellow. It rises like Morse code through the leather. The fur lining is soft, white.

“Real rabbit,” I say, and the wolf gives me a look like, *There’s nothing that you can teach me about rabbit.*

I hand the moccasins over and the wolf stands and steps into them. They’re too big, but he tugs on the laces until they bunch up around his paws like tennis balls, the kind that Tyler fastened to the feet of his walker after he lost the first leg.

“They’re all I have left of him,” I say.

The wolf closes his eyes and lowers his muzzle, somber-like, an expression that says *I’m real sorry* and *I’m still taking them* at the same time.

His tail wags.

“Gotta go,” he says, and, before I can say goodbye, he’s out the front door and down the driveway, running fast in moccasined feet.

I shouldn’t have said what I said to my brother that Christmas: “Slippers? What the hell am I supposed to do with *slippers?*”

He’d just returned from Alaska, where I guess buying local was the thing to do.

“I like them,” my mother said. She held out her matching pair. A tongue of tissue paper hung from one of the holes where the feet go in.

“I buy you a thousand-dollar Cuisinart Espresso Machine, the Tastemaker’s Model, with dual espresso dispensers and an advanced steaming action wand, and all I get is a couple of lousy *slippers?*”

“They’re moccasins,” Tyler said. “Hand-stitched.”

“They smell like dead animal,” I said.

Tyler shook his head. His hair had just grown in. He'd lose it again before summer. From the casket, he'd look back at us without eyebrows.

"I don't know what to say," he said. "I'm sorry."

I shoved my moccasins back into the box.

I was a bad person then. Maybe I still am. It's been a year, but it takes longer than that. I think maybe it takes a while to redeem yourself in the eyes of the dead.

I go back to my room. The window's still open from where the wolf came in, and I close it. Outside, more light's coming on, real light, the sun's pink peeking through the black.

I move to the phone by my bed. I call my mother.

Her voice, when she picks up, is soft and faraway-seeming. I picture her in her bed, alone in her big house on the other side of the country. The red Renaissance quilt I got her two birthdays back comes up to her chin, and there's fright in her eyes.

"Mom," I say, "there's a wolf at my window."

"Yes," she says. "There's one at mine too. I'm just now looking at him."

## THIS IS MY BODY

As a girl, my job each Sunday after Mass was feeding God to the birds. It was a problem that wouldn't go away. Transubstantiation left more heavenly host than the congregation could consume, and, bread turned to body, one couldn't just take a loaf home and make sandwiches. One was not to enjoy, say, God slathered in butter or a nice hunk of divine flesh toasted with jelly. Wine kept the week, but not bread. So, there were rules. And the easiest way to dispose of the Body of Christ without breaking rules was to feed it to birds.

My father, a deacon, was bestowed with the burden of the bread, and he, in turn, passed it on to me. Beyond our yard, across a creek and past the barbed wire fence at the edge of our Virginia farm, were woods. The woods, my father said, were full of deer and squirrels and birds of all kinds who could fill themselves on that which we were forbidden to eat. My instructions were to crumble the bread and toss the pieces to the woods. "Throw them far as you can," my father said. "We don't want animals at the house looking for handouts."

The first time I performed the task, my father came with me. I was excited and frightened. It was winter, and my mittened hands trembled under the crumbs. What we were doing, I knew it was somehow important, consecrated even, dividing God's body again and again. "Smaller," my father said as I tore the bread into the smallest pieces I could. "Take them off," he said. He pointed at the red, woolen mittens my mother had knitted for me. Working the bread, breaking it up best I could, my hands trembled not from fear but cold.

The next week, my father asked, "You know what to do?"

"Yes," I said.

“Then it is now your duty,” he said.

I wanted to believe that it was God I held in my hands. But what can be said of the weeks when, in a hurry, I tore the pieces too large and the Body sat, untouched, in the grass, when it rained and God grew mold at the edge of the woods? And what of those Sunday afternoons when, my mother making lunch, I nibbled on the Body, swallowed the blessed flesh because I was hungry, because no one was looking—*because I could?*

Such days are the exception. Most Sundays, I crumbled the bread, flung the pieces past the fence, and, by the next day, like magic, or something approaching magic, they’d vanished.

#

A spring passed, a summer and a fall, and, after so many months of Sundays, birds began waiting for me. One Christmas morning found me crossing the field, midnight mass leftovers cradled by the same now-too-tight mittens. I needed glasses badly, but still I could make out the ghosts perched on the property line, so gray they were almost blue. I knew them for the mourning doves my father was forever shooing from the attic where, winters especially, the rafters became a roost. Drawing near, I worried the birds would swarm, but they didn’t. Not one took wing as I unfolded the plastic bag, freed the loaf and tore it to bird-sized bites.

It wasn’t long before my Sundays turned to ritual: The way doves lined the wire, my steely-eyed, winged parishioners. The way I walked the row, crumbs in my hand’s cup, while my flock pecked at the Body of Christ.

I would have baptized them if I could.

In church, I strained to capture the priest’s words until, at last, I knew the Liturgy by heart. “This is His body,” I intoned. The birds fed. “This is His body, broken for you.” The bread



gone, I'd wave my arms and the doves would rise, a cyclone of plumage, wings scattering the sky like fireworks bloomed to birds.

Soon, they were the fattest, most glorious birds you'd ever seen.

#

The day my father caught me, I was sure there'd be a beating. I cried, begged his forgiveness. Had I not done what was asked? But this was no mere matter of bread and birds, my father said. It was a matter of the sacred, of the profane, of how I'd gone about my business. I'd made a mockery of God's chore. I'd broken the rules. I'd assumed a mantle not my own. I was no priest. I was a girl, not even confirmed, and here I'd gone and conferred blessings onto birds, onto wild and soulless things.

I was not beaten, not this time. Instead, I was taken straightaway to the parsonage.

"You'll tell him everything," my father said.

The door opened at the second knock, and a hushed voice beckoned us in. The priest took his place on an old sofa. A book lay open on a table before him, along with a bowl of soup and the stiff curl of his collar. I'd never seen him free of that careful square at his throat. Even my father appeared uncomfortable, as though we'd caught the man in the act of changing clothes.

The room was small and dark, the walls built of bookshelves. Apart from the couch, there was nowhere to sit. The greatest surprise, though, was that the couch didn't face a television. In fact, there didn't seem to be a TV anywhere, not in the room or the kitchen, nor in the bedroom, glimpsed through an open doorway down the hall. In our home, even in the hardest years, when my mother sold the piano and my father took a second job, when dinners were little more than cornbread and boiled eggs, we'd never been without TV.

The priest smiled, but his smile wavered when his eyes met my father's. "How can I be of help?" he asked.

My father didn't hesitate to tell on me. Tears in his eyes, he reported my blasphemy. To think, his daughter, a priest of pigeons, filthy, unholy. He told how I'd appropriated the Liturgy. When he was finished, the priest asked him to step outside so that he might hear my confession. My father, shaking, let the door swing hard on his way out.

"Come, child," the priest said. "Sit." He patted the cushion beside him. I'm sure I did not imagine the plume of dust that rose by his leg.

I sat. Our knees touched. I was not afraid.

The man seemed very old to me. His white beard blossomed like moss along his jaw-line, and his eyes shone, watery, behind spectacles. His hand gripped my shoulder, and I smelled garlic. When he spoke, I smelled wine.

"Just a second," he said. "Let's make this official." He lifted his collar from the table and secured it around his neck. "Very well," he said.

I repeated my father's version of the story for the priest. I didn't try to defend myself. I wanted only to be home, to check on the birds that had scattered at my father's curses.

I'd hoped he'd heard it all before, every confession one might make, and so I was surprised when the priest, after studying the ceiling for what must have been minutes, turned, smiling, and asked, "You're sorry, then, for what you've done?"

I shook my head *yes*. I knotted my brow into what I hoped was a look of grave concern. Neither of us spoke, then a bellow broke the air. The bookcases, the walls, they shook with the man's laughter.

“Oh, my child,” he said. “This thing you do? I do not believe it is evil. You recall, His eye is on the sparrow. Or, the pigeon, as the case may be.”

“Doves,” I said.

The priest said, “Ah, and even so, I suppose we must relieve you of your duties. I’ll find another child to do this work.”

I did not say that the work was never mine, that it had always been my father’s, work handed down to me out of a sense of what, years later, I’d recognize was not quite idleness, but pride, an idea of God’s jobs, of those beneath him and those of worth.

“But, why?” I asked.

“I’m afraid it has to be this way,” he said. “For the faith of your father.”

My father entered, then, and an agreement was reached. The Body was no longer mine to handle. Still, the birds had grown accustomed. So long as I no longer made communion out of it, the priest saw no harm in my feeding the birds from my mother’s humble loaves. My father could accompany me, even, to see that I obeyed. I was to say one Hail Mary and one Our Father, and all would be forgiven.

Outside, my father didn’t start the car until I had recited both prayers aloud. The ride home, he watched the road and wouldn’t speak, and I wondered, there, on the door’s second side, how much he’d heard.

#

And would you believe that I did not stop? After the confession, the warnings, the prayers, would it surprise you to hear that I still spoke the words under my breath? That of course I was caught again? That I was whipped with a belt until buckle broke skin and my mother pulled my father off of me?

All this for a thing I wasn't sure I believed.

But this was years ago. I'm still unsure but not unwise, and this winter, when we lowered my father into the frozen ground, what I felt was something closer to thanks than anger, closer to sadness than relief. Because he taught me something, my father, a thing he never recognized in life: That fear and love are not two halves of the same heart. They are the hearts of separate, untame animals. One you ride. The other one rides you.

Sunday lunches, after being caught again, were long. Crusts tucked in my pocket, I tried to excuse myself, but my father would have none of it. No longer could I leave the house on Sundays. What's worse, I'd been given new sight: Glasses, a gift from my mother. Afternoons, through the kitchen window, I watched my birds perch and preen, grow impatient and fly away.

And yet, a few doves rode the wire until dusk thickened the woods and the trees wrapped themselves in darkness. Ever the faithful, these few remained, waiting for me. They would wait, it seemed, as long as it took, until the moon scraped our rooftop, rose huge and ivory over the farm, and I was sent to bed. They'd be there in the morning, I imagined. In the morning, they'd be there, and I would run to them. But always, by daybreak, when I woke and went to the window, they were gone.

## THE CATERER

The husband was not my husband, but I would make him mine. I did not feel sorry for the wife because he did not feel sorry for the wife. She had, after all, let herself get fat. I was not fat. I was tall and leggy and lean. I had a stomach you could scrape spoons across and make music. The wife had also let herself get old. She had gone as far as to turn fifty. The husband was fifty, but he was a *young* fifty. I was twenty-five, which any woman will tell you is a man's favorite age.

The husband had a mustache that rode his lip like some furry Amazonian caterpillar. It tickled when we kissed and tasted like whatever he'd eaten. If he'd had his head between my legs, his mustache tasted like me. I'd say I hated the taste, but that wouldn't be true. I came to adore it, to look forward to it the way those tattooed with frequency come to relish the pain.

Sometimes, when we fucked, the husband pressed his mouth hard to mine. Those times, the mustache bristled more than tickled. Mornings, my mouth wore a rash like red pepper.

Our first fuck was nothing like this. The husband was a gentle lover. He did not do a thing without asking permission. He was quiet when he came and together we cleaned up the coat closet floor. Outside, his wife asked whether anyone had seen Gerald. We snickered, we hid. We hid in the closet a long, long time. We held one another, waiting for the open door.

#

We met at a party the husband held in his home. The husband was an Atlanta CEO, his guests business partners and employees, men mostly. Each man was accompanied by a woman ten years younger and a hundred pounds lighter than himself. I was one of eight girls who

navigated the 3,000 square foot apartment balancing a silver platter piled with shrimp. I should not even have been there that night, wouldn't have been had Melinda not called in sick, had I not needed the \$15.00 an hour I earned serving food for a midlevel catering company who cut costs watering down drinks and shorting their clients on anything tough to keep track of: pounds of pasta, quarts of strawberries, ice by the bucketful.

The party was Christmas-themed. In place of our usual uniform accented by bowtie and maroon cummerbund, we wore red sashes and sprigs of holly pinned to our shirts. All night, the leaves dug like tiny tridents into my chest.

Guests, too, dressed idiotically. Otherwise beautiful women brandished elf ears, felt antlers, and the gaudiest of holiday jewelry. Men's guts bulged red and green beneath sweater vests. A lone yarmulke bobbed in a sea of Santa hats.

The exception was the husband. He wore a dark suit, lightly pinstriped, and a black tie. His one concession to ornamentation was a small silver candy cane that hung like a question mark from his lapel. The wide woman at his side was wrapped like a Christmas present, her hair done up in festive, gold ringlets, face caked with blush. It was hard to imagine that this woman could be the man's wife. Sure, the man wasn't tops in the attractiveness department. Maybe he was a little old. Maybe a handful of waist spilled over his belt. And that mustache—unfashionable, perhaps. *But. But.* There was something exquisite about him, some indefinable quality, the way, in catering, you can tell, ten times out of eleven, which men will slip a dollar bill into the wineglass at the bar.

I could not predict what the husband might do for me, whether he might slip anything of his into anything of mine, but I had to find out. All evening, I orbited him. When I watched him, I was contented. When I drew near, I was warm.

The husband kept a hand on his wife's waist. He steered her through throngs of employees, introducing her to each but never settling in one place for more than a minute. He hovered, he spoke, he glided away. Hover and glide: It was a pattern with him, one I would come to recognize, one not peculiar to dinner parties.

When, finally, I approached, the husband plucked a shrimp from my tray without looking. Then, mid-chew, his eyes met mine. The shrimp's pink tail peeked out between his lips like an arrow's fletching, feathery, obscene. Slowly, he reached up, touched his face, and pulled the tail away. I held out a cupped hand and he dropped the shell in. I want to say that I trembled, but that's only memory's imagination. In truth, at the time, I did not recognize the man, his power or wealth. I only knew that a large, vaguely obese fellow in a Brooks Brother's suit had just dropped spitty seafood into my palm and that, when he had, his wife had noticed. Her eyelids fluttered. Her eyeballs bulged. Cupping the tail, making a hasty retreat, I felt—there is no other word for it—*alive*.

After the first guests left but before the crowd thinned, the husband found me. He took me by the elbow and guided me to a closet. I did not resist. I did not resist when he licked my neck. I did not resist when he cupped my breasts. And, when he asked, his hands like meat hooks on my thighs, it was all I could do to release a breathy *Yes*.

#

The husband had many homes. He kept a small apartment in Buckhead where we met Tuesday mornings and Fridays at 4:00. It was not an apartment the wife knew about. No name graced the mail slot. No number adorned the door.

Inside, the walls were white, the thermostat set to 70°. The main room boasted one couch, one coffee table, and two shaggy plants. Arriving was like stepping into a doctor's office. In the

bedroom, blank walls rose to meet a ceiling white and bare as a beach. Except for the bed, a four-poster tucked into blue linens, the room remained vacant. I asked to decorate only once. The husband sighed and shook his head. “Of course not,” he said.

In my most paranoid moments, I wondered whether there were others, girls like me he brought to our room. I wondered whether he had apartments all over the city.

The husband only laughed. “You think I have time for two of you?” he said. He licked his lips. He ran his hands up and down my legs.

The husband could not be relied upon to be on time, and sometimes he could not be relied upon to show up. He would have to work late or he would forget. Hours I’d wait, watching the walls. I learned to bring newspapers, books. Or I’d fall asleep and wake to his hand on my hip, teeth on my neck.

The husband always showered after sex. He took short showers in hot water and scrubbed until he smelled like himself, then dried himself and dabbed his wrists with whatever cologne he’d put on that morning. Dressed, he pulled a tiny comb from his pocket, ran it several times through his mustache, zipped the teeth across his collar with a flourish and returned the comb to his pocket.

“I feel like a new man,” the husband would say. Or, “Clean as a whistle.” Or, “Yessiree, Bob, now that’s what I call clean.”

The husband did not kiss me or come close before he left, and he always left first. I left once he was safely away. Understand: There was no prenup. He could not afford to be caught, no matter what.



And what will you think of me when I say that, sometimes, I would not wash? Will you trust me once I tell you that, times, I did not shower for days? Whatever this makes me, I was happiest smelling like him.

#

The husband bought me dresses and bracelets, bags and jackets, shoes and scarves. He bought me a piano and a Pekingese, a temperamental puffball, butter-yellow with a white belly. I named the dog after the husband. “Gerald, off the sofa,” I’d yell, then watch the dog rise and run. This felt liberating, always.

The husband bought me pen sets. The husband bought me paintings. The husband bought me bakeware and a stove that would wet the pants of master chefs.

The husband bought me a fish tank and had it filled with tropical fish.

If a fish died, I had only to call a number and, within hours, Randy arrived. Randy’s van featured a portrait of a goldfish in profile, across which had been stenciled, in blue curlicue: *Water you waiting for? Call Randy’s Fish and Aquarium Emporium today!* Wielding a green, long-handled net, Randy deftly removed the corpse. He filled vials, ran tests, raised eyedroppers over the tank and squirted green streams into the water. He siphoned water from the tank into an orange bucket, then tipped gallons of distilled water into the aquarium. “Recycling bin?” Randy said, ankle-deep in plastic jugs. Each time, feeling guilty, I shook my head, and, each time, Randy sighed, then left, taking the empty containers with him to some better, landfill-free place.

The husband bought me things he would never see, for he never set foot in my house. “Come,” I begged. “Come once. Just to meet Gerald. Just to see the fish. Just to admire the Cassatt by the bed.” But the husband was nothing doing.

#

The husband bought me everything but a ring.

#

After the first year, I asked when the husband was leaving the wife. The husband said I talked too much about the wife, said he was sick of discussing the wife, that he mustn't hear the word *wife* again. *One more time*, he said. But that was all he said: *One more time*.

#

The first time was an accident. The husband meant to punch past my face. Aiming for drywall, his fist caught my ear, which rang for days.

The husband was sorry. He worried. His worst fear was that I would be afraid of him. Everyone, he said, in business, in life, was afraid of him. He needed me not to be afraid of him. I wasn't, but I let him think I might be.

The husband bought me a car, a Mazda RX-7 with extra cup holders and a sound system that made you think the singer was in the backseat. When I could not afford the car insurance, the husband paid for that too.

#

The husband loved lemurs. He loved them the way he loved whatever he could not have, something I know a thing or two about. This is the condition of all collectors, love born of lack.

The husband acquired whatever he wanted: An early Van Gogh, a journal penned by Miguel de Cervantes, the molars of an Aztec prince. The teeth, pocked and pitted with cavities, he lined up in a humidor alongside the cigar from Fidel Castro. When it came to *lack*, the husband lacked only a lemur.

“Why a monkey?” I asked.

“Lemurs are not monkeys,” the husband said. “Say it with me.”

“Not monkeys,” I said.

“Not monkeys,” the husband said.

Lemurs, the husband said, were prosimians, apes’ ancestors, and Madagascar the only place in the world they were found. Madagascar was an island and its own country.

“Like Australia,” I said.

“Australia’s a continent,” the husband said. “Madagascar’s an island off the coast of Africa. Jungles, mostly. Very beautiful. But the lemurs they keep to themselves.”

“Lemur hogs,” I said.

The husband had hoped for years to have one smuggled from a zoo. In the end, it was easier to have one smuggled off the island. When he told me, already a lemur was in route, stowed away below deck on a cruise ship. I pictured the lemur crossing the Atlantic, its little hands gripping the bars of a steel cage, its belly retching with seasickness. Because I did not know what lemurs looked like, I pictured a monkey.

The thing that arrived looked nothing like a monkey. The thing that arrived looked like a raccoon, an underfed raccoon with a pointy nose and a tail that wouldn’t quit. The lemur wore a raccoon’s dark mask. Stripes like black bracelets banded his tail. His hands, though: The lemur’s hands were human. Five fingers, opposable thumbs.

The husband had commissioned an enclosure that now filled the secret apartment’s front room. The walls were Plexiglas for optimum viewability. Branches bolted to the terrarium’s sides bridged the space between. Ropes hung from the roof. A hideaway rose from one of the branches.

The kitchen—which had persisted without appliances—now housed a refrigerator stocked with fruits, nuts, and tan bags labeled CHOW.

I couldn't imagine where it all came from. As with so many things—the car found parked in the driveway, packages waiting on my front steps—the cage, and the lemur it held, had simply *appeared*. Tuesday, the apartment was as it had always been. Friday, the apartment was half lemur playground.

That evening, the husband and I did not fuck. We sat side by side on the husband's couch and watched the lemur. From his branch, the lemur watched us back. He sat on his haunches, hands on his knees. He wore his black mask like a little bandito.

The husband held grapes, but each time he stood, each time he approached the cage and the easy-access trapdoor that unhinged for feeding, the lemur scampered up the branch and into his narrow, domed shelter.

The following Tuesday, the hideaway was gone. The lemur sat on the floor of the enclosure. He held his tail in his hands the way, in pictures, a Swiss guard holds his lance at the mouth of the Vatican.

"This is why I wanted a *zoo* lemur," the husband said. His left hand was bandaged. Five stitches held the end of one eyebrow in place.

"He's scared," I said.

"Little fucker," the husband said.

"Give him back his house," I said.

"He has to learn," the husband said.

The next day we were to meet, I arrived early. The lemur was on his side on the floor of the cage, an arm outstretched. The fingers of his hand curled and uncurled in spasms. His long toes twitched. His stomach, swollen and white, rose in successive bursts before deflating. When I crossed the room, his eyes did not follow me.

I knelt and tapped the Plexiglas. The lemur did not move. Tiny bugs crawled in and out of his eyes. He blinked. I ran.

I don't know if the door closed behind me. I don't know whether the husband arrived within minutes or hours of my departure, or if he'd planned to come at all, whether he knew what I'd find, or not. Whether he wanted me to see.

That night, Gerald—dog Gerald—sat in my lap and whined when I cried. The husband would have called me ridiculous, crying over a creature I'd known for a handful of hours. But seeing an animal like that, weak, broken on the floor of a cage, tells you everything you need to know about its owner. I had accepted that the husband was imperfect. I had come to understand that he could be unkind. But I had not known that he could be cruel.

When we met next, the cage was gone. The square of carpet had been replaced, the room returned to its original configuration of plants, table, and couch. The refrigerator was empty. It was as though there had never been a lemur.

When the husband arrived, he moved through the room and directly to the bed. He did not say a word. He took me in his arms. I fought the urge to shudder.

#

For our second anniversary, the husband and I took a vacation. We had never vacationed before. Outside of the apartment, beyond our two trysts each week, we had not spent time together the way that lovers spend time together. Never in public. Never by daylight below a blue sky.

Together, I imagined, we would walk on the beach. We would have dinner at long tables with other couples, and I would tell anyone who asked that I was his wife. I would tell stories about our home in the Hamptons and our children, Doug with his love of Little League and Meg

with her passion for finger-paints. Meg had begun first grade that fall. She was nervous but made the transition beautifully. My husband was up for two awards with the company. He would retire soon, whereupon we would sell the house in the Hamptons and move to Madagascar. Even now, workers waited to break ground on our ten tropical acres, but my husband, I would admit, was very particular. He couldn't decide between two houses and three. "If he doesn't make up his mind soon," I would say, "the mansions will never be ready by summer."

We would take separate flights and meet in St. Lucia, the southernmost U.S. Virgin Island. In Atlanta, December was icy and cold, but in the Caribbean it would be luscious, warm. The brochures promised water and sunshine and sand.

Except that, once we reached the resort, the husband would not leave the room.

"Everything we need is here," the husband said. "Bathtub, bed, bar." The bed was soft, the tub a small pool. The wet bar was stocked with every mixer and drink imaginable. A wine rack cradled two-dozen bottles.

Beyond the window, the tide, coming in, licked the shore.

"Let's sail," I said.

The husband said, "Later."

"Let's swim," I said.

The husband said, "I have a paralyzing fear of sharks."

"Let's tan," I said.

But the husband could not return with a tan. "She thinks I'm in Salt Lake," the husband said, "and the rest of the week in Denver."

The husband was not stupid. He lied well and might have told the wife that he had business here, or in Florida, anywhere one might return from with a tan. He was being difficult

on purpose, and so I would be too. I would not spend my days in our room and nothing but fuck him.

That evening, a bellhop brought us dinner. At the center of his cart rode a vase and a single white rose. Lids were lifted from two silver trays revealing thick steaks in their own juice puddles. They were gorgeous cuts, their presentation superior to anything we did where I worked.

You're maybe wondering why, when I had the husband, I still carried trays and submitted myself to the minor abuses of catering. And I answer: The husband gave me gifts, but he did not cover my rent. He did not buy my groceries or pay the electric bill. Many times he offered me money, wide, manila envelopes stuffed with rubber-banded bundles of cash. And, each time, I gave them back. I was a girlfriend, a lover, a mistress if you must. But to take his money, that might have made me something else.

That night, I stared at my steak. I was hungry. I said I was not.

"Try it," the husband said. Already he had swallowed two forkfuls. I cut into my piece. The center was warm and red, a perfect mid-rare.

"I can't eat this," I said. "It's bloody."

The husband said, "That's how you like it."

I couldn't argue but did.

"How would you know?" I said. "How would you know how I like it?" Had we ever been out? Had we ever shared a meal? Had we ever shared more than two hours at a time in a cramped apartment reserved only for lovemaking?

No, the husband said, we had not. This did not seem to bother him. Quickly, he dispatched his steak and then mine.

That night, when his fingers found my side, I rolled away. I waited for more, ready for him to try to talk me into it, but, within minutes, he was snoring.

#

Our last night on the island, the husband conceded to dinner out. I picked a Hibachi joint I knew he would hate, the kind of place where they cook the food while you watch, where they do tricks with onions and cutlery. We took our seats at a high U-shaped counter alongside other guests. We faced a long, silver cooktop and sipped hot tea and read menus that assigned our birth years to animals.

An islander dressed in Japanese garb, or the restaurant's idea of Japanese garb, appeared at our table and spun eggs on the stovetop. One at a time, he lifted the spinning eggs into the air on the end of a spatula and flipped them into his tall, white chef's hat. With each egg, our group cheered.

The husband was not having fun. I was not having fun.

I said, "Isn't this fun?"

The husband grimaced.

A few minutes in, the man to my left introduced himself. He was young and thin. He was attractive in a fussy, glasses-wearing kind of way. Before long, we flirted, openly, loudly.

"Where are you staying?" the man asked.

The husband leaned close and whispered something I could not hear.

"Oh," the young man said. "I'm sorry." He looked at the husband, searched his face. He asked, "Is this your father?"



The husband took me by the arm. He pulled me from the table and out of the restaurant and onto the street. He pulled me down the sidewalk and into a cab. He pulled me along the beach, through the resort, and into our room.

#

The second time was not an accident, just as, certainly, the first time had not been an accident. There would be no third time. That night, I purchased a plane ticket I could not afford and flew home.

#

Without the husband, I didn't know who to be. Tuesdays found me checking my watch, as though there was still an appointed hour, as though there was still somewhere to be. Nights, I drove past the building. Sometimes, I parked. When I parked, I watched the rectangle where white curtains hid our room. I watched for shadows. I watched for other women.

I watched for him.

By spring, my fish were imperiled. Green algae climbed the tank walls and choked the filters with mossy tendrils. I called Randy, who rushed to my house just as he had when the husband and I were whatever we were. An hour later, the fish swam, happy in fresh water.

"I was paid to come if you called," Randy said. "But this will be the last time."

It shouldn't have surprised me, but it did, that even this contingency had been accounted for, that I had been closed like a business deal in the same detached, efficient manner that had made the husband a very rich man.

"How is he?" I asked.

Randy shrugged, and I gathered that he had been told what to say and what not to. He spun his long-handled fish net like a gun about to be holstered.

“Recycling?” he said.

I shook my head. Randy nodded. He gathered his gallons and left.

#

I sold the paintings, the jewelry, the car. I kept the piano. I kept the dog. They reminded me of the husband, but that was okay. I did not mean to forget him entirely. He would be with me, always, a thumbprint caught in wet paint.

And then, one day, *her*. I saw her at a wedding reception, the wife.

That afternoon, I had been relegated to the carving station. It was not my specialty, but the butcher took long smoke breaks, and I was the only server who could work the chopping block.

I stood rending ribbons of golden fat from meat when I spotted the wife in line. I surveyed the room to be sure that he was not with her, and then I took my time, carving carefully, deliberately, until wedding guests grew impatient. Slowly, I moved meat from board to plate. I hoped that the line might go on forever, that the wife might never reach me, but, soon, she was there, standing before me, dish raised like an offering plate.

I did not look up.

“How do you like your prime rib?” I asked. “Rare? Well-done?”

“Either’s fine,” the wife said, and her voice was so quiet I wanted to cry. I looked up. The wife smiled. She was not as fat as I remembered, and neither was her makeup too bright or too thick. Her hair had been stripped of its highlights and had turned a somber, muted gray, the color of putty. She looked dignified, classy.

What I felt, seeing her, made my hands shake. I worried that I would drop the knife. I lowered a pile of slices onto the plate.

Right then, I wanted to tell her that I was sorry. I wanted to tell her that she was my only regret. I wanted to admit, seeing her, that I knew now what I had been.

Instead, I said, “You’ll find condiments at your table.”

The wife thanked me and walked on. She joined a group of women at another table. They spoke and nodded and smiled and laughed and were beautiful together the way all women are beautiful among people they love.

## LAKE IN WINTER

It is night and I ease the Suburban over the lip of shore and onto the ice. There is the moment when we hold our breaths—Claire and I—the moment when the back tires catch, spin, and let go. There is the sound of the lake accepting our car, the groan of ice holding, holding, and then we are released and we exhale and we glide.

We move through pitch-black, chasing our headlights. The light illuminates the ice ahead in two distended ovals that meet in the middle, a Venn diagram of light, brightest where the ovals overlap. Beneath the light is ice, and the ice is blue, marbled like meat with white veins. There are cracks, fissures, but nothing wide, nothing deep enough for a car to drop through.

The surface is solid, a sheet for skating, a foundation for icehouses. Young couples are even said to drag mattresses to the lake's center and make hasty love in the cold. The lake is only a few miles wide. Deer cross it, and, in spring, the ice thinning, fall through. When this happens, a deer must swim in circles until firemen arrive with canoe and noose or until the animal goes under.

In the car, Claire and I proceed with caution, first five miles an hour, then ten. I'm afraid. It's not like in the daytime, and I am waiting for something to materialize in the headlights, and, when it does, to discover whether I'll have time to stop before what's arrived goes through our windshield or under the car.

And then Claire's hand is on my arm. "Let me," she says.

I release my foot from the gas and the vehicle slows, shivers, slides to a stop. There's a lever to my left, and I pull it. The seat slides back. I undo my belt. Claire's seatbelt releases. She

climbs over the armrest and into my lap. She's never done this, but she moves with the purposefulness and grace of someone who has done the thing a thousand times. She settles between my legs, her back to my chest, and she's heavy. Twenty pounds in twenty weeks. Nights, she spreads a paste, thick as peanut butter, over her belly and breasts, around her nipples and inside her navel, a magic meant to keep stretch marks at bay. I lift the hem of her shirt and the stomach I find is taut as the skin of a balloon.

"What do you feel?" she says, and I don't say because I don't know. I haven't learned to decipher the movements, whether a pulse beneath skin telegraphs a heartbeat, a hiccup, a kick.

Claire grips the steering wheel and her feet find the pedals. The Suburban lurches, then shudders. Lurches again, spins, then chugs forward.

For a minute, she's all over the ice, then she gets the hang of it. Soon, we're sailing through the dark, eating the lake up with our high-beams. There are patterns in frost, like someone's swept a broom over the ice. There are fissures that seem to run for miles, threads pulled from a forever-unraveling sweater.

Claire lifts a hand from the wheel and feels in the dark for my fingers. She lifts my hand to her face, then finds my other hand and brings it to her face too. I cup her cheeks in my palms.

"The cold?" I say, and Claire shakes her head *no*.

"Cover them," she says. "Cover them and tell me where to go."

I slide my hands over her eyes.

Claire steers and I make stuff up. "Left here," I say, and she guides the Suburban to the left. We head that way for a while before I say, "Hard right." Claire wrenches the wheel to the right and the car spins, four or five full rotations across the surface of the lake. Her arms fly up

and she squeals. My hands leave her eyes and hold her stomach tight. The force of the spin presses her close and it's warm where our laps meet.

We stop. Her head turns. Tears stream down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry," I say. "I didn't mean to scare you."

She shakes her head. "Not that," she says.

It's our third try and, for the first time, we're approaching the third trimester. This time it's twins, as though to make up for the other two. Except that after the second ultrasound, the doctor said they would need another. "Tomorrow," the doctor said. "Downtown." Then we would know what the spot meant, the white smudge like a thumbprint on one baby's brain. "So that you can make an informed decision," the doctor said.

"A decision?" Claire said.

"Regarding how to manage your pregnancy," the doctor said.

"*Manage?*" I said.

The small examination room filled up with silence, and for a while nobody moved.

Claire asked, "What if it's just the one, can they—" Then, she said, "No. I don't want to know. If they can, I don't want to know about it."

Her foot crushes the accelerator. We're up to twenty when her head starts bobbing, thirty when her shoulders heave. But, once we hit forty, I see she's not sobbing. She's laughing.

We reach fifty, fifty-five. We trace circles, gaping figure eights. We weave banners into the ice, tread marks, wide arcs and paths that we cross and re-cross. With tire and car, we carve up the clean, uncharted blue.

I've tried to keep track of our place, approximating our distance from shore, but all the ice looks alike and before long we're lost. In daylight, you can see clear across the lake. With the

sunrise, we'll be able to steer ourselves back to land, maybe even make our appointment on time. Until then, we'll watch the ice ahead of us, those few feet the light catches. We'll watch and we'll circle. We'll wait for the sun to rise.

Or for something to hit. By now, we're moving fast, too fast to stop, and I can imagine it, the antlers clattering beneath our bumper, the man, airborne, a stringer of fish following his feet like the tail of a comet. Or the lovers at the heart of the lake, the twin *O*s their faces make moved from ecstasy to surprise. The crush of their bodies into one.

Sixty. Sixty-five. We *fly*, and it's almost as though the light can't keep up with us, our speed, all that ice, everything beyond the windshield unpeeling, a blurred pocket of blue.

"Shut them off," Claire says, and I do.

The lights go out, and now the only illumination is the moon's and the faraway pinpricks of stars. Ahead and behind and to all sides of us is night and dark and ice, but we move, we move. We lower the windows, and we can hear the ice pop and heave, can taste the freeze in the air.

We soar and don't stop.

We'll keep going like this. Until morning, or until it's too much. Until we can't take any more.

## MEASURING THE DROP

Our bad habits were piling up. Butts in the ashtrays. Dirty clothes in dirty piles. Pans in stacks that begged scouring. Here it was Halloween, and all over the house were reminders of July. Empty bookshelves yawned like toothless mouths from the walls. An anthropologist, jettisoned from the distant future to our doorstep, could, with no knowledge of our civilization, take one look and surmise that, indeed, some serious shit had gone down.

We had to get out of the house, if only for a weekend, if only to a bed and breakfast one state away. It was not the romantic upheaval I'd hoped for, but Laura refused to set foot on a plane. The car was okay, as long as the trip was short and she wasn't expected to speak.

Six months she'd given me, six months to make her love me again, and already I was down by four. Months of groveling, begging, and presents, and nothing to show for it. The B & B was my last chance. Before long, we'd slip into Thanksgiving. She'd spend Christmas with her parents, come home, pack, and, with the ball's touchdown in Times Square, she'd be gone.

Here, though, you want to ask what happened. How did it come to this? How, you ask, do two people in their thirties with no children, no illness, no money woes or the thousand-pound grief of multiple miscarriages, find themselves, after ten years of seemingly blissful wedlock, standing before a door marked EXIT?

Welcome to the stage our old friend: Infidelity. And I would have gotten away with it too. Isn't that what the Scooby-Doo villains, bound and shaking in their bell-bottoms, always say the second they're unmasked? Well, I would have gotten away with it. Because I wasn't caught. I confessed. You would too after four hours in a parking lot, pacing, praying, knowing all along



that just inside that bank, a gun's muzzle is tattooing its steely indentation into your wife's forehead. Love and fear, the proximity of death—these do funny things to people. Such things beg confession. That night, grateful and sobbing, I spilled my guts, told Laura everything. Maybe I thought she'd let it go. Maybe I imagined she'd be grateful to be alive and so forgive me. But she didn't.

And still, the afternoon of our departure, I awaited forgiveness. While Laura was at work, I packed bags and combed the house for the cigarettes she had insisted she'd never make it through the weekend without, the carton that was not, as she put it so many times, in the goddamned nightstand. Soon, her shift at the bank would be over. I couldn't leave her waiting, not there, not after what had happened. Cigarettes we could buy on the way. Better to show up without than to show up late, knowing Laura.

Knowing Laura. How much did I know about my wife? These days, not much.

#

I was late.

"You're late," the police officer said. He was a big bastard. I'd parked, hadn't had time to unlatch my seatbelt, even, before he left his cruiser and came striding across the lot, baton in hand. He rapped my window with a force I'd characterize as unnecessary. He wore aviator glasses and had thin, pink lips. His scowl was a scar.

"You the guy the branch manager's expecting?" he asked.

I told him I was. The cop offered neither hand nor name.

"Laura told me to expect a guy who looks like a ferret," he said. He stepped back, watched me hard through the window. "You fit the description."

“I’m sorry?” I said. We’d agreed, Laura and me, to tell no one. If we were going to do this, really try to make the marriage work, she couldn’t go around telling everyone about my indiscretion. To do so was to risk the goodwill of whatever relatives and friends who didn’t yet look at us sideways. Recently, though, voices on the phone, evenings with neighbors—the little signals people disclose without knowing—these had led me to question Laura’s commitment to what we’d agreed.

I wondered how much this man knew.

“License,” he said.

“I’m Carson,” I said. “Laura’s husband. She’s expecting me, like you said.”

The cop moved close to the window. The brim of his hat was pulled tight to the rims of his sunglasses, hiding his forehead. The skin of his face hung in stiff, unnatural folds like Silly Putty. His uniform, blue, was a size too small. The word slovenly came to mind.

“Sir,” he said, “please produce your license.” His breath was spice and sweat. His tongue bulged against his cheek, turning something over in his mouth.

I undid my seatbelt, fished my wallet from my pocket and the license from my wallet. I handed it over.

“Expired,” he said. He held out the license for me to inspect. Sure enough, the card was up for renewal, had been since my birthday, an event that had passed a month before without Laura’s acknowledgement.

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to step out of the car.”

Here, his hand moved to the gun at his waist. His thumb paused, polishing the brass button that held holster to belt.

I laughed, sure he was joking. This was a mistake. Then my door was open, and I was moving, falling. Pain licked my forehead. I was on my stomach, arms at my sides, face pressed to the pavement. I saw gravel and ground and a thin pocket of cool blue sky. I tried to breathe through the boot in my back. And then the sky was interrupted—*click, click*—by red stilettos.

“Son of a gun,” she said. “What’d he do this time, Lonnie?”

“This your husband?” the cop asked.

Laura was quiet. I waited for her to claim me. At last, sound, but no words. She was giggling.

“Dear,” she said, “you look very uncomfortable.” Her heels disappeared from view. The boot left my back. I sat up, put a hand to my forehead. My fingers came away crimson, sticky.

“Sorry, darling. Lonnie’s kept a tight watch on us since we were robbed.”

“At gunpoint,” Lonnie added. “The suspect, you match his description.”

“That guy had a beard,” I said. Like a bird’s nest, Laura had said, shaking, shaking. Had that been it, her convulsions? Had they triggered my confession?

“No beard here,” I said.

Lonnie shrugged. “You could have shaved it.”

He swished his mouth juice before spitting. Tobacco hit the ground, a fat black wad. It was inches from my feet. He lifted one finger, caught a curl of saliva and transferred it to his pant leg.

I looked to Laura. She seemed my only salvation. This is fucked—I tried to say it with my eyes. She held out a hand to help me up, I took it, and it was as though all of it had been worth it—the cop, the assault—because I could not remember the last time we’d touched.

That's not true. I remember it exactly: We were seated on the bed, our eyes on the bedroom's small TV set. We held hands and watched the grainy footage. Again and again, the screen flashed shots of the bank's exterior, police cars circling the building, close-ups of caution tape, a yellow tendril caught by the wind. In one shot, you can see my shoe. The robbery had begun with the bank's opening and ended at noon. My affair, short-lived and anything but epic, had unraveled months before, but the guilt—when the robbery was over, when I had my wife back, alive at my side—it was like nothing I'd ever known. I knew then that I would tell her.

We'd spent the afternoon at police headquarters, Laura giving her testimony, then we went home. What came before is something of which Laura seldom speaks. I know that she tried to get the money into a bag and the guy out the door. I know that an old man spotted the gun and yelled, that the robber pulled Laura over the counter. After that, the pistol never left her head. What I don't know is what went through her mind, how she passed the hours, the tongue of the gun on her temple, or how she summoned the courage to show back up at work the next week.

We sat in the half-light, the TV telling us what we already knew, her fingers tight in mine, kneading. Calamity had brought us together. It was the closest we'd ever been, and it needn't ever have ended, except that I opened my mouth.

In the parking lot, Lonnie spit again.

"This man is taking me away for a few days," Laura said, letting go of my hand.

"Get that license renewed," Lonnie said. He turned to Laura. His sunglasses flashed. "Ma'am." He touched two fingers to the brim of his hat, gave Laura a nod, and, smiling, turned and crossed the lot to his cruiser.

"This your idea?" I said. "Have him rough me up?"

“I promise it wasn’t,” Laura said. I believed her, and then I didn’t. I could have gone either way.

I had to admit this, at least: She looked great. It had been some time since I’d seen her dressed up. At home, she lounged in sweatpants and old sorority T-shirts, clothes that reminded me of her beauty and youth without showing off either. Always she beat me home from work, and, always, before I stepped through the door, she’d have changed, baggy clothes in place, face scrubbed white. But not today. Today, she wore lipstick, and her long, brown hair was pulled back by a black clip. Her eyes shone, and her red suit and heels were bright but becoming. In my T-shirt and jeans, I felt suddenly underdressed.

“Cigarettes?” she said. Dating, we’d both worked hard to quit, and, for a decade, neither of us had touched one. Laura started up after the holdup, and who could blame her? No sooner had we left the police station than she asked a woman on the sidewalk for a smoke and a light.

“We’ll have to stop on the way,” I said.

Laura let a loud sigh escape her lips. “And you’re late,” she said.

By now, you’re wondering why I hadn’t given up, why I insisted on such an unlikely pardon. By way of answer, let me tell you this: In the last shot, the one that gets all the airtime, rebroadcast on CNN, CNBC, FOX, all of them, the SWAT team enters the bank and the people pour out. Laura’s last, and she runs past all of them, past an officer who tries to grab her, past the tape, through the crowd and into my arms.

#

The affair was a two-week, five-fuck stint with a girl doing community service at the library for misdemeanor marijuana possession. I didn’t love her. I didn’t even particularly like her, except for the flexible, feet-to-the-headboard sex she offered, which was hard not to like.

I can't say why I did it when my marriage was perfect, except to say that maybe I did it *because* my marriage was perfect. Because bliss is overrated. Should you be lucky enough to know it, after a time, you may, like me, find yourself willing to trade bliss for danger.

Here, you want to tell me that my regret is cheap, that it stems from Laura's near-death experience and, therefore, does not count. And I say, okay, think that if you want. It's your right as an American. Go ahead and say that things like this don't happen to people like you, but I'm here to tell you: Your turn's coming.

You'll be rocking right along, unsuspecting, checking in books at the smallest branch of Atlanta's public library system, wondering why you needed a master's degree in library science for this, and there she'll be, crouched in the children's section, tucking *Charlotte's Web* into the Cs for Charlotte instead of the Ws for E. B. White, because what the fuck does she care as long as she gets through the hundred hours that keep her out of prison, when, wham, Stacey—her name, though that's a thing you won't learn until after you've had your tongue in her mouth—Stacey will turn her head, her bangs making a wishbone around her eye, and she'll catch you staring and your stomach will feel like a wasp's nest, and she'll look at the book, turn it over in her hands, then stand and move to the Ws and actually slide the book into place where it belongs, not because she has to, not because she wants to, but because she's guessing that, in spite of yourself, you're the kind of guy who will find that kind of thing suddenly, unaccountably sexy, and she'll be right—my God, you just can't comprehend how right she'll be—and, message sent, transmission received, she'll glide to the break room, and, not quite believing it yourself, you'll follow her in and find her seated on the counter, her ass to the microwave, knees at ten and two, and, five minutes later, you'll emerge, dazed and sloppy with make-out mouth. Sex you'll save for the motel. You'll be careful, tell no one, and never get caught.

So, there it was, the first dark mark on my record, and a biggie at that, the kind you imagine will make God frown and look a little closer when you stand beyond the gates, just hoping to get into the cheap seats. After two weeks, I couldn't take it. The secret was like a fish swimming blind in my head. Every few hours, it bumped the glass, reminding me it was still there.

I agonized over how to end it with Stacey. I worried that, overcome with a jealous rage, she'd call the house and tell Laura everything. Then, I just worried that her feelings would be hurt. In the end, Stacey shrugged, fingered her nose ring, and went back to shelving books.

#

Two hours driving and all Laura said was, "Cigarettes." Nearing the state line, I pulled under the awning of an Amoco and topped off the tank. The sun bobbed big and pink beyond the gas pumps. Sunday marked the end of Daylight Savings. By this time next week, the sky would be dark.

Laura left the car and walked into the station. I watched her speak to the boy at the register, then emerge with a key lassoed to a hunk of wood. Then she disappeared behind the building.

Inside, the gas station teemed with cardboard cutouts of Halloween mascots, vampires and mummies, black cats posed mid-hiss. Witches on the walls jousting with broomsticks, negotiating their limited airspace. Frankenstein's monster stalked the chip aisle guzzling a popular brand of sports drink. At the back of the store, the cheap, plastic-bagged Halloween costumes of my childhood hung from a wire carousel: Warner Brothers' cartoons, Marvel superheroes, white masks that put one in mind of Munch's *The Scream*, the latex interrupted

only by eyeholes and the mouth, a ghoulish, black gash. One hung from its open packaging, and I slipped it on.

The door chimed, swung open, and Laura was back. The boy at the register watched her. He was sixteen, seventeen, and, eyes working her over, I knew the things he was thinking. How easy it would be for Laura to make him her Stacey, and I wondered, not for the first time, whether she'd ever considered something along those lines by way of revenge, and whether I'd want that, whether it would work or maybe end us for good. Something had to happen, something to make us even.

Laura placed the key on the counter, turned, and caught my eye. We were still, and we watched each other a long time. My heart throbbed, and I felt the latex hot on my face. She took a step toward me. I peeled the latex away, Laura hesitated, and then she was out the door. I returned the mask to the rack.

I moved to the counter. Beyond the register, cigarette cartons climbed the wall in bright rows. The attendant looked bored. I pointed to a box of Camels.

"ID," the boy said. He was thin, his face pimply, but his eyes floated beneath fat, bushy eyebrows, the hairs wiry as an old man's. His hat bore the emblem of South Carolina's flag, the palm tree and crescent moon, white on a blue field. Hair uncurled from under the cap in greasy, black waves.

I laughed. I hadn't been carded in years.

"Identification," he said. "Driver's license." He extended a hand, palm up. With his other hand, he cradled the Camels protectively against his side. My license was not in my wallet. Then I knew exactly where it was. Back home, I would report Lonnie: the attitude, the abuse, the stolen license. I touched my forehead, the fresh scab, shocked at the way I'd been treated. Now,



standing in a shithole gas station a hundred miles away, wanting nothing more than to purchase the one thing that might make my wife happy, if only for a few minutes—to be denied this by a zit-faced little fucker—I wanted their heads on a platter, the kid’s and Lonnie’s both.

“I’m old enough,” I said. “Please just sell me the cigarettes.”

“Can’t,” he said. “I’ll lose my job.”

I respected the kid’s argument. Also, I hated him. A line formed behind me. I pulled a fifty from my wallet and slid it across the counter.

“Keep the change,” I said.

“No ID, no deal.” He stepped back like the money was a trap. He gestured to where a corkboard hung from the store’s cinderblock wall. The board displayed the confiscated fake IDs of a few dozen unlucky teenagers and, above these, the crooked photocopy of a government-issued pamphlet. There was a bulleted list of regulations concerning the sale of tobacco and a black-and-white photo, a cop handcuffing a boy who couldn’t have been a day over twelve. A caption read: *Don’t Even Think About It!*

The cigarettes were slipping away from me. Outside, Laura leaned against the car. She crossed her arms.

“I’m no goddamned minor,” I said. “I’m thirty-fucking-five years old.” A girl at the end of the line snickered. A man groaned.

The boy moved to return the carton to the wall.

“Don’t,” I said.

He stopped. Then, tentatively, his hand began the slow migration toward the shelf.

“Don’t you fucking do it,” I whispered.

The boy's eyes narrowed. His lips curled and, for the first time, I got a good look at his teeth—perfect, white, aligned, an orthodontist's wet dream. I wanted to knock them out of his head. I wanted to put my fist through his face, but I didn't. It was the box I wanted, and I grabbed it. There was a brief tug-of-war.

And then I was running, cigarettes in hand. Laura stretched, an arm in the air, a hand on the hood.

“In the car,” I yelled. “Get in the car!”

Mercifully, wordlessly, Laura slipped into the car, and we were off. I tore out of the lot, down the ramp, and onto the highway. I couldn't breathe.

I was sure, any minute, they'd be there, the red lights in my rearview. I'd be pulled over, cuffed, thrown in jail. I wondered whether Laura would bail me out.

I drove. We crossed into South Carolina. Nothing happened.

“These are menthols,” Laura said.

#

When I was sure I could speak without screaming, I said, “Your cop friend kept my ID.”

Laura's hand found her pocket, and, like magic—or something approaching magic—she produced the license, waved it in my face.

“Why?” I asked.

I wanted to know why she'd done it, why she'd gotten the license from Lonnie but hadn't given it back. The question was bigger than that, though, and she knew it. I wanted to know why she insisted on torturing me by small, mean measures. And, really, really, what I wanted to know was why, why, if she had no intention of taking me back, had she given me hope?

“Why?” I said.

The question was Laura's before it was mine. When I'd admitted what I admitted, why was all she wanted to know—a question for which I had no answer. The TV blared. I cried. “I don't know,” I said. “I don't know. I don't know.” And Laura said, “Why? Why? Why?” And I said, “Why does anyone do anything?” Laura let go of my hands. She pushed me back on the bed. She stood, pointed to the mark on her forehead, the handgun's souvenir. She said, “Buddy, that's a question I've been asking myself all day.” Onscreen, she ran from the bank and into my arms.

Books make good kindling. Following a sleepless night at the Super 8 down the street, I returned to a bonfire in the front yard. Laura had pulled a lawn chair up to the fire. She held a bottle of wine in one hand, a novel in the other. My rare and antique book collection lay scattered across the lawn. A stack of first editions leaned at her side waiting to be tossed in.

I calculated the loss at twenty thousand dollars. I hoped it would be enough. But it wasn't. Nothing had been.

In the car, Laura pulled a pack from the cigarette carton.

“What will it take?” I asked. “What is enough?”

Laura peeled the cellophane away, smacked the pack against her palm a half dozen times, opened the lid and tugged at the foil lip. She brought the pack to her nose, sniffed, groaned, and tucked the pack into her purse.

About that time, I saw the first sign for Fun World.

#

Laura's a roller coaster junkie from way back. She grew up in Atlanta and every summer called Six Flags home. Once, in our twenties and dating, she'd dragged me to the amusement park and even managed to pull me onto something called The Mindbender. “It's a baby coaster,”

she said. “It’s so short, it’s almost nothing.” “I prefer nothing,” I said, but, anxious to impress her, I suppressed all of my fears—high speeds, heights, things that spin—and climbed aboard. We were still making our way up the tracks for the initial plunge when I felt the tightening in my chest and the world went wavy. I don’t remember the ride. I only remember Laura shaking me awake and the long walk back to the car. It was our first and only joint roller coaster ride. I’d sworn, at the time, there would never be another. Now, I was reconsidering.

Another ten miles and the third sign loomed in the distance, the sun setting behind it. The billboard rose blue and red from a gray pole, the Fun World logo a silver signature that uncoiled like a spring from a modest *F* to a three-dimensional *D*. The *D* leapt off the sign and into the air. An LED screen below the sign unscrolled the words: *Halloween Weekend: Late Nights, Come in Costume, Pay Half Price!*

The bed and breakfast wouldn’t work. It had been a delusion, a romantic fantasy. No weekend getaway would fix us. I’d pictured an old house with a wraparound porch and the kind of big, fireplace-laden bedroom that can’t help inspiring intimacy, but now I saw the weekend for what it would be . . . Laura in bed and me on a cot. Laura not talking and me begging her to. Laura refusing to leave the bedroom, and me wandering the town, which, according to the ads, was one of those self-described “old fashioned Southern hideaways,” the kind that allow you to “step back in time” to streets with names like Antebellum Avenue and Olden Days Way, and ivory-colored carriages drawn by the sorry corpses of poorly fed horses with their wide-set eyes and scooped forehead hollows. I knew then I needed something new, something unexpected, a Hail Mary to end all Hail Marys.

I moved the car into the right lane and took the exit for Fun World.

“No,” Laura said.

The word hurt, but I drove on.

We approached the parking lot. I paid a uniformed woman ten dollars, and the orange, mechanical arm lifted to let us in. I parked.

“Carson,” Laura said. “You hate these places.”

“But you love them,” I said.

“It’s been ten years.”

“And all that time, you’ve never thought, not once, what fun it would be? You’ve never wished that this was a thing we could do together?”

Laura said nothing.

“Let’s make a deal,” I said. “You do this, the ultimatum’s over. Do this, and you still want me out, I’m out. Next week. Tomorrow. Soon as I can.”

Laura seemed to give this some consideration. She met my eyes. “You’re serious?”

I was suddenly giddy. We were approaching it, at last, the end of something.

“We do this, we do it on my terms,” she said.

“Agreed.”

“One ride.” She didn’t wait for an answer. “One ride, and I get to pick it.”

It was the best I was going to get. “If that’s what you want,” I said.

“What I want? None of this is what I want. What I want is what we had, and what we had we can’t get back. And what did we have? I don’t know. You were able to do what you did, so what we had isn’t what I thought we had. It was something else.”

I opened my mouth and Laura clamped a hand over it, tight.

“And now you want to fix it. But you don’t know how to fix it, and so you search for the one thing, this elusive thing you think will make it right, but it’s a lie, Carson. There is no one thing.”

What could I say to that? I pocketed my keys and got out of the car. I waited for Laura. Then, together, we approached the big wrought-iron park gates.

The lines were long, almost everyone in costume. A king and queen herded four princesses toward the ticket booth. Dracula and Cleopatra kissed in a corner. A gang of ghosts crowded the turnstiles. Ahead of us, a woman with seashells spun into her hair and a crimson *C* on her chest argued loudly with a drunk Elvis. “The Red *Sea*,” she was saying. “What’s not to get?”

A werewolf behind Plexiglas greeted us. “Two adults, eighty dollars,” she said, her voice muffled. “Unless you’re dressed up.”

I thought back to the night before, unable to sleep, and the movie I’d caught on late-night TV.

“I am Dr. Richard Kimble,” I said. “I’m a fugitive from justice, hot on the trail of the one-armed man who murdered my wife.”

The werewolf was quiet a minute. I imagined an eyebrow lifting under all that rubber and hair. Then, she turned to Laura, took in the red pantsuit, the jacket’s wide lapels.

“You supposed to be something?”

Laura didn’t answer. She looked past me and into the park.

I nudged her. “Say you’re something.”

Laura looked at me. “Say I’m what?”

“Anything,” I said. “Anyone.”

“And who would you have me be?”

“I’m not believing this,” I said. I slapped sixty dollars on the countertop.

“One costume,” I said. “One full price.”

The werewolf tore two tickets, handed me the stubs, and extended a human hand in the direction of the park. Laura walked ahead, and I followed.

The park was jammed. A pair of Tweety Birds ran screaming ahead of us. A man followed them. “Wait!” he yelled. “Wait for Daddy!”

Dusk was upon us. Floodlights and luminaries shaped like pumpkins lit the pathways. In the distance, a pirate ship did its metronome thing like the blade of an ax. Spotlit from above, the ship was violet-hued, a black pinstripe tracing its side. As I watched, the ship reached its peak. It hovered upside down for seconds before looping again, slowing, and reaching a shuddering stop. I prayed Laura would not pick it.

“One ride,” Laura said. I nodded. “That one,” she said. But she did not finger the ship. Instead, I followed her hand up and up the impossibly high pole that ascended dead center from the heart of the park.

“Jesus God,” I said. It was my worst nightmare, and Laura knew it.

Four silver, suppository-shaped capsules stood fastened to the pole. At once, they raced toward the top, then dropped. Rose and dropped. Some climbed the column halfway before falling. Others reached the zenith.

The ride was The Silver Bullet, so named for the shape of the torture chamber into which we’d be fitted before being lifted and let go. A sign at line’s end estimated a half-hour wait. Two boys ahead of us discussed the ride’s merits, its drawbacks, and I saw that there were no short drops and long drops, or, that there were, but that you had no choice in the matter. “You never

know what you're going to get," one boy said. The other: "Ever been to the very top?" And the first: "Only once. It was awesome."

I couldn't keep my eyes off the tower. It was wide as a redwood and rose into the stratosphere. It was a long way to fall.

"It must be a mile up," I said. Already I was shaky.

"Not even close," Laura said. The line shuffled forward.

"I can't do this," I said.

Laura was quiet a while. Then she said, "No one's making you but you."

"And if I don't?" I said. Laura shrugged. "Same as if I do?"

By way of answer, Laura pulled the cigarettes from her purse, shook the pack open, pulled two free and placed them between her lips. She lit both and handed one over. I took it.

"I'm fresh out of blindfolds," she said. "This is the best I can do."

I watched the cigarette in my hand. Night had fallen, and the ember burned red like the head of a child's sparkler. I said, "You'll be the death of me." I brought the cigarette to my face and fit my mouth over the smudge Laura's lips had left on the filter. There was the burn, the mint smacking my tongue, and then the old, familiar stir in my lungs. I felt light, ready to rise.

We moved forward, stepped up to a white line, and were told to extinguish our cigarettes.

"I have to pee," I said.

We followed a man down a ramp to a track. Four bullets sat on the track, awaiting their victims, each a bullet built for two.

The man led us to our bullet. He pulled back a steel panel. Inside was a chamber, a cage of what looked like heavy-duty chicken wire. There was a bench and black straps with bronze buckles. The man tucked Laura into the chamber, then me, pulling on the straps until my



shoulders hurt, my waist ached. I looked at Laura, and she looked straight ahead. Our knees touched. Then the man slid the panel into place and we were alone in the pitch-black, fastened for flight.

There was movement, a rumble, and the bullet traveled its track. Another rumble signaled we'd reached the pole.

Slowly, we rose.

"Smile," Laura said.

I tried, but I was shaking too hard. My mouth, the corners felt hooked by fishing lines. The fishermen tugged in every direction at once.

"Those were his words," Laura said. "Keep smiling, and no one has to know. And I did. I did exactly as I was told. I emptied my drawer into his bag. I smiled right up to the second he pulled out the gun."

We climbed higher. My legs spasmed, the muscles jumping beneath my jeans. I worried that my bowels would release.

"That night, I promised myself that no one would ever make me smile. Not by coercion. Not by force. And that's what you asked, Carson. All this time, smile and pretend nothing's happening. But I couldn't do it. And I can't pretend anymore. I'm sorry I told you I'd try."

The capsule screeched. Straps grabbed my chest and the world fell away. We were falling. Then we weren't. The lurch pushed my tongue between my teeth. I tasted blood. My stomach seized. It was over.

And then we were climbing again, steadily, up and up, farther than before.

"What's happening?" I said.

"I think that was just a taste," Laura said.

“Wait,” I said. My lap grew warm, wet.

Laura took my hand.

I wanted to speak. “Please—”

The capsule’s climb commenced. Two pairs of panels separated. They opened like eyes, and I could see how far we’d come. We’d reached the top, the whole park spread before us. The evening’s monsters prowled the grounds in miniature. Roller coaster peaks rose prehistoric between trees like the backs of dinosaurs. The pirate ship was a purple pendulum, carving all hell out of the night sky.

A hiss of pistons, and the panels slammed shut. Laura let go. For a moment, we levitated, but only for a moment.

And then we began the quiet descent into whatever the future held for us, or failed to hold.

## LAST OF THE GREAT LAND MAMMALS

She's still waiting when Arnie pulls up in the white truck, tires spraying gravel. A curve of jaw, the weekend beard, shows through the window tint. He has on flannel, a checkerboard of red and blue.

She stands, turns. The stump she'd been seated on, the top is smooth, rings blurred by a century of sittings. The sides sag, soft and damp. A spine of yellow mushrooms climbs the bark, plate-shaped, like Frisbees someone's hammered into the wood. There's grit under her nails from where, the last hour, she's worried the bark.

She knows Arnie's behind her before she feels hands on her waist, before she bends into the abbreviated hug. It's enough, for now, and they separate.

"Maddy's soccer game," he says. "I'm sorry."

"That's all right," she says.

She's learned to wait, sometimes for hours. It used to upset her, but it doesn't upset her anymore. He always shows up. The waiting, that's just part of it.

He's married, and she's waiting for him not to be. He'll never not be. She knows this and she doesn't. She knows it and at the same time thinks: *Some day*.

*In a heartbeat*. That's what she told him. In a heartbeat, she'd leave the man she married.

But Arnie won't leave Maddy, won't leave his wife, his house or his yard, his money, his dogs. Far as she can tell, everything is as he likes it—his cake, her too.

So where does *she* fit in? What is she to him?

She is cufflinks. She's a pocket watch. A thing slipped on for special occasions.

#

Linda looks good. Tight jeans and a shirt he can see her nipples through. And—these are new—boots. They're leather, the sides fringe-lined. The toes are something. Each comes to a point you could chop wood with.

Her lips are red, her face done-up, but the look she gives him, it's like she hasn't made up her mind whether she's happy he's here. Some days, one look and he knows there will be trouble. Days with no makeup, days a comb hasn't touched her hair. Those days, they'll talk, she'll cry, he'll leave feeling bad. Days like that, they might not even fuck, which is kind of supposed to be the whole point.

It's those days make him miss the way things started, before sex was a given, when this, all of it, was new, startling, like, as a boy, the first time he watched the hand reach in, in *Indiana Jones*, saw it leave the man's chest, the heart and the fist around it, pulsing.

Those first times together: The shock of the body, white, shadowy beneath the sheets. The weight of pearls on the tongue. How she didn't feel like any girl he'd been with. How, now, she feels nothing like his wife.

The sex is great, don't get him wrong, but *this*. In some ways, it's his favorite part, the meeting place, the place they go *before*. Any place will do—bus station, museum, shopping mall. His favorites, though, are places with animals. The zoo, the game ranch, the aquarium in Newport with its loggerheads and moray eels, the tube that steers you through the tank of sharks.

Tentacles, fur, these put him in the mood. Four legs: *Good*. He can't explain it, would never tell her. But, then, you could fill a book with things he's not telling people these days.

Their rule, *each month, somewhere new*, and there are only so many animal hotspots in Ohio. Even given the tri-state, it's like a riddle: How close to Cincinnati can you stay before you run out of animals?

This one, the state park in Kentucky, came like providence. Maddy's birthday party, a sleepover, and one of her friends brings this stuffed buffalo. He'd been like, "Hey, that's some buffalo," and the child said, "Bison," and he said, "Nice bison, then." She let him examine the tag, which read *Big Bone Lick*. A joke, he thought, porn-perfect. But then he was online, looking it up, and there it was: Big Bone Lick State Park. Which was when he learned that *lick* wasn't just something you did with your tongue. It could mean *salt spring* or *topographical depression*. In this case, *lick* meant: *basin full of bones*. Go back thirty thousand years, and here you had a place where the last of the great North American land mammals came to die.

"Romantic," Linda said. Her voice on the phone always sounded pinched and faraway.

"And, get this," he said. "*Bison*. They have real, live bison. *A herd!*"

"Aren't they mean?" she said, and he said, "No, no, darling. You're thinking bulls. Bison are the gentle giants, the land-equivalent of manatees."

"Manatees," she said.

"Equivalently," he said.

After, he promised to take her wherever she wanted, which, he knew, meant somewhere fancy.

Now, the two of them beside his truck and her in these boots, her saying nothing, he's not sure what kind of day it will be, and this, the not being sure, it's enough to make him want to hop back in the truck. Because he can't stand the thought of it, another sobbing, face-in-the-pillow day—and, lately, there have been more and more—another round of: *Leave her if you love me*.

But, then, he hasn't given Linda a chance. He owes her that.

"New boots," he says.

Linda looks down. "No place like home," she says. She gives the heels a click.

He waits. What she says next could make or break the day.

And then she is smiling, she's moving, she's saying, "Come on," working those boots across the gravel lot, walking like she knows where she's going.

#

She *hates* the expression. How come no "kissing sisters?" Why no "fucking uncles?"

They can't be the only ones. But, if it's so widespread, so common there's a name for it, how come she's never met anyone like them?

#

What he calls *fucking*, she calls *making love*. And where they fuck/make love depends on who picks.

He likes motels, stucco-walled and neon-bright, places they bolt television sets to bureaus and tables to telephones, places they don't bother asking, "Smoking or non?" when you buy the room, places you share a bed, and, later, the crabs that come with it.

It's not that he can't afford nice things, far from it. It's the *chaos* of a place that he loves, the mismatched furniture and threadbare sheets, the coffeemaker someone's used and not cleaned out, the *art*, if that's the word for it, all those seagulls and beachscapes in cheap pastels. A place like that, he can *relax*, because in no way does it remind him of his house with its white walls, its careful rooms, and the maid keeping everything clean, clean, clean.

His favorite motel room, the one about which Linda said, "Never again," boasted a watercolor of a blue heron. The usual, except that someone had torn the picture from the frame

and returned the canvas, corners curling, to its place on the wall. The hook poked through like some profane and silver tail sprung from the heron's head.

That room had a sink that ran hot water but no cold. The water came in staccato bursts, rousing from Linda the kind of profanity that he thought might liven things up if she brought it back to bed. He suggested as much, they tried it, but, really, it wasn't Linda's style, and the dirty talk left them feeling weirder than they already do.

Linda likes nice places. She likes resorts, bed and breakfasts, anything with *Inn* in the name, places whose rates aren't tacked to billboards that overhang the highway. Linda likes wherever there's wallpaper or white china or rugs so plush the fibers reach between your toes to tickle the tops of your feet.

Her favorite's a golf resort and spa they frequent in Indiana, the one by the riverboat casino. Neither of them golf or gamble, nor have they seen the inside of the spa. They stay in, mostly, watch TV, order room service, drink wine and do what they came to do.

The suites come with bathrobes, his and hers. Soon as they're there, she puts hers on. She takes it off for sex, sometimes not even then. He never changes into his. Before they go, she returns it to the closet. Her robe hangs next to his, and always she's sad to leave them there, suspended, their middles cinched by belts. White in the dark closet, the robes look like ghosts, the ghosts of former, better selves. Or skins, she thinks, shed in the name of not knowing what comes next.

#

They begin with the museum, one room and a winding hallway that details the park's two-century history. Before it was a park, she reads, Big Bone Lick was a dig site. Before that, a stop on Lewis and Clark's cross-country expedition. Mostly, the museum is dusty skulls in glass

cases. The bones are mammoth and mastodon, the remains of a giant sloth. The cases gleam, bright with track lighting, greasy with fingerprints, and she can't help thinking what Windex and paper towels could do for the place.

She stops before one of the displays. A bone, coffee-brown and long as a broom handle, fills the case. She thinks of Sammy on Halloween night, bounding across the kitchen, singing the song he'd brought home from school: "The thigh bone's connected to the hip bone..."

Arnie leans in. "Big bone," he says, his voice a cartoon caveman's. He steps closer, their shoulders touching, then she feels it, her neck, his tongue. "Big bone *lick*."

She moves out of reach, looks to be sure no one's seen.

"Jesus Christ," she says, and Arnie laughs, like it's a game. Times, she wonders whether, to him, that's all this is.

The corridor dead-ends in a gift shop, t-shirts and state park paraphernalia. A wire carousel of postcards creaks at her touch. A shelf of shot glasses announce: *Lick This!* She wonders when the park gave up and got in on the joke.

Arnie moves to a bin of stuffed animals and pulls out a bison, brown with gray horns. He carries it to the register where a woman waits in a green state park shirt. Glasses hang from her neck on a cord of tanned leather. She buffs her fingernails with an Emory board.

"These," he says. He holds the bison up. "Where can I find them?"

The woman is older, tired-looking. She gives Arnie a look that seems to say she'd be polite if only they paid her more. She gestures toward the gift shop bin, then returns her attention to her nails.

"No," he says. "Real ones. You know, the kind that snort and eat grass." He gallops the stuffed animal over the countertop, a bison pantomime.



The woman sighs. She lays down her file, blows on the nails of her right hand, then pulls a paper map from a rack beside the register. She unfolds the map, points, refolds the map, slides it toward—but not quite to—Arnie, then picks up her file and begins work on the left hand.

Arnie leaves the bison on the counter. He turns, and now he's moving toward her, grinning, goofy-looking in his enthusiasm.

“Oh give me a home...” he sings, and the excitement must be contagious, because suddenly she feels it too, a thrill, and, forgiving his carelessness—because, really, what are the chances, way out here, that they'll see someone they know—she lets him take her hand.

#

*Practice.*

That's what he called it the first time. Because what else *can* you call it when you're horny and fourteen and trying to get your cousin to kiss you? Linda was fourteen too, both of them too old to have never been kissed.

“It's not like it counts,” he said. “You still get to have your first kiss. It's just practice, so, when the first kiss comes, you don't fuck it up.”

Linda's expression advertised her skepticism.

They'd spent the afternoon at the public pool and now lounged in damp swimsuits in front of the television, their skin grown pimply with air-conditioning. As kids, they'd run through the sprinklers with their shirts off while, on the back porch, their fathers sipped scotch and talked shop. But those days were over, her parents weren't home, and he hadn't seen Linda shirtless in a decade. The summer had filled in the blank of her bathing suit, and just to catch a glimpse or kiss her, the idea was almost more than he could bear.

On TV, an earthquake, an elevator. Zack delivered Mr. Belding's baby. The theme music kicked on and the credits scrolled.

"Never mind," Arnie said. "It was a dumb idea. Anyway, I was just kidding."

But, then, something happened, something approaching the miraculous. Linda scooted across the carpet. She was close to him, then closer. Their knees touched.

"Just practice?" she said.

He nodded. He couldn't speak. He could barely catch his breath as, with a flutter of lashes, her eyes closed, her face scrunched, and her head moved toward his. He shut his eyes.

The first kiss was quick, hardly a kiss at all. Their eyes opened, closed. They tried again.

#

Get-togethers make her edgy. Those dinners or afternoons when it's the six of them, Arnie and his wife, she and Frank, the children.

Sammy and Maddy kicking each other beneath the kitchen table, and all she can think is that it starts with kicks, then fingers, mouths and tongues.

It's not that she doesn't like the wife. There's nothing *wrong* with Anne except that she's married to Arnie. Apart from that, Anne's kind, she's generous. She makes good pies.

And Frank and Arnie get along just fine. They like the same movies, the same sports teams, same beer. Standing in the garage, they'll smoke cigars and contemplate for hours the intricacies of a new table saw or the finer points of ping pong.

Watching them together, she can't understand it.

"Frank's a good guy," Arnie says. "What's not to like?"

"But doesn't it drive you crazy?" she says. "Seeing him. Knowing when you're not with me, he *is*?"

She wants this to drive him crazy, wants to know, when they're apart, that Arnie's overcome with grief, is at least *occasionally* overcome with grief—that the thought of her, of Frank on top of her, is enough to make him want to strangle the man.

But Arnie only shrugs, says, "I like knowing you're with him. You're safe with him. You could do much worse."

She wants to shake him. It's been twenty years. They've been together longer than they haven't.

Except, she had her chance. After his father died but before he married Anne, Arnie extended the invitation.

"Let's just come out with it," he said. "Come out and fuck what people think."

She'd offered all the old arguments. Their mothers would disown them. Their friends would freak out. And their jobs, who knew?

Arnie was very patient with her. "Cousin-fucking," he said, "is not grounds for termination."

"No," she said.

"Please," he said.

It was her who said, "Never," and Arnie who moved on.

Her predicament now, it was like when she played games with her son, Candy Land or Life. Sammy would roll the dice and land on a square that sent him back. "Do-over!" he'd scream. "I want a do-over!" When she didn't let him roll again, he'd scream and scream until he choked on throw-up.

That was what she needed, a do-over, the chance to prove Arnie right, to prove they belonged together, should have been together all along.

But there'd been a chance, and she could not imagine the day when there would be another.

#

The trail winds through the woods, and he's walking fast because he can't wait to see the bison. He's trying to remember whether he's seen one before, anywhere besides in a book or on TV, and he doesn't think he has.

"Picture it," he says. "These things side-by-side with mammoths, saber-toothed tigers, and they're what's left."

He's decided that there must be something special about the bison to have survived the centuries unscathed.

Because sometimes it's hard to make it out alive.

At fifteen, he watched his father use a tire iron to turn his mother's face into something from a horror movie. He swore he'd never become that man, and he hasn't. He hasn't. He's become something else—adulterer, cousin fucker—but his father? No. He's never hit his wife or wanted to.

But he can't say it's not in him, whatever made Dad do it, that nod in the direction of recklessness, of something *wild*.

Sometimes he just wants to *he doesn't even know what*.

His father's dead. Pulled over for a DUI, he unloaded a revolver into the policeman's chest. When the other officers arrived, they found him handcuffed to the car. "I done it," he said. "I done it myself, so there." This did not keep the cops from beating him senseless in the name of their fallen friend, an act that led to hemorrhaging, then death, an act that a woman with a

camcorder got on tape, start to finish, an act that triggered the lawsuit that left Arnie with two million.

He loves the money, though, secretly, he'd trade it, all of it, to have been there, to have said, "Hand me a baton," and shaken the other men's bloody hands clean at the end.

His father is dead, but not so the mighty bison.

*Survival.*

"An animal like that has dignity," he says.

He throws a hand up to the woods, as though, any second now, a bison might come lumbering through the trees.

"An animal like that demands respect!"

And he sees she's no longer at his side. Linda's seated on the footpath ten yards back, her hands at her ankle.

"These boots," she says.

He kneels before her and takes her feet into his lap. "Cinderella," he says. He pulls off one boot, then the other.

Her feet are swollen, red.

"Boots like these," he says, "you have to break them in."

He lifts one foot and rubs the heel between his palms. The toes curl like shrimp, make him want to fit the foot into his mouth.

He says, "I wonder if their hooves ever hurt."

"What?"

"The bison," he says.

She groans. "You and these fucking bisons."

“The plural of bison” he says, “is bison.”

It could end any number of ways.

They could be caught. Unlikely, but it could happen. The thing about sleeping with your cousin is that you’d have to try hard to get caught. People see you in public, they think: *How nice that family gets along so well.*

There’s pregnancy to consider—that accidental henchman. Linda’s not the type to get rid of it, so they’d be stuck with who knows what. Some three-eyed horror. Some tangle of incest and limbs.

But Linda’s on the pill. She doesn’t want another kid, not his, not Frank’s. If she wanted to trap him, that’s not how she’d do it.

How she’d do it, that’s what scares him. An announcement, maybe. Linda, at dinner, standing before his wife and daughter, her husband and son, saying, “Since we were fourteen, Arnie and I have been in love,” after which Frank’s fist would find his nose, the kids would cry, and Anne would leave him.

And he can’t have that. He loves Linda, but he loves Anne too. And he loves Maddy maybe most of all. Seeing her today, working the ball up and down the field, blasting it from grass to sky, past the goalie’s gloves and into that wide expanse of net, he knows he couldn’t stand it, a divorce, anything that means weeks on and off.

No, the way things are, it will have to do. There was a time. Now, though, once, twice a month with Linda—it’s enough.

Her feet are hot in his hand. He’s rubbing, rubbing.

“Carry me,” she says, and he does. He expects the weight he feels at parades or amusement parks, Maddy on his back, but Linda’s heavier, too heavy. Before long, his knees, his back, they hurt.

They follow a trail of yellow, bison-branded markers. Sunlight fights its way through the canopy and the day grows sticky. Still, he presses on, through pines that threaten to swallow the path, branches closing in on either side, a labyrinth of needle-thickened limbs.

#

Through the trees, she sees them, sees them even before Arnie steps into the clearing. Then, the trees part and there they stand, the bison, ten of them.

“Eureka!” Arnie hollers.

Up close, the bison are huge, cows on steroids. One is larger than the rest with horns like cornucopias. The rest have horns, though less dramatic ones, even the single calf who weaves among the bent necks, the mouths that graze like cattle. The calf butts a bison across its flank. The larger animal flicks its tail.

Their hair is brown and black, matted and patchy, and she wonders how they tolerate the heat. Not far from the bison stands a gleaming, silver trough, its surface bright with water, but the water seems a small consolation. She imagines them shaven, like dogs in summer, and wonders how much of their bulk is muscle, how much hair.

A tall, chain-link fence cuts the clearing in half. No other visitors have braved the heat and the hike to see the animals, and the field this side of the fence is empty. From the fence hang signs, many signs. They read: *No Trespassing* and *Keep Out*. They warn of the aggressive animals.

Arnie moves toward the fence. She's still on his back. Her feet throb. She carries her boots under one arm.

The boots were a gift, sweet and stupid, from Frank. She only wore them so when Arnie asked, she could say, "Birthday present," and he would feel bad. But Arnie failed to ask, just as he failed to remember her birthday. And now a week has passed without a gift, a card, a message on her phone.

Arnie stops before a trademark brown and yellow state park placard. The placard is titled *Adam's Harem*. It seems the bison, all but one, are female, and all belong to Adam, the herd's "Alpha Male."

"Now that's what I'm talking about," Arnie says. He says it sing-songy, joking. He laughs. Her body lifts as he leans forward, snorts and stamps a foot.

"Please," she says. "Please put me down."

She's thirty-five years old. In fifty, she'll be dead, and everything reminds her of this fact but him. With him, she imagines she might live forever.

And what would it look like, to be with him at last?

It would look like Christmas morning. Arnie curled beside her before the fire, his huge, brick house—now theirs—yawning around them. The hearth is lined with four cocoa-stained mugs. The floor is carpeted in torn wrapping and tissue paper. Outside, Sammy fits a carrot into the snowman's face while Maddy buttons his chest with charcoal briquettes.

And where have the spouses gone? What's become of poor Frank and Anne?

She doesn't like to think it, but perhaps they're dead. A messy business, but over with so quickly, the kind of cancer that ravages the body and you're gone almost before you know it.



Or else they've moved away, left her and Arnie with the children and run off to Mexico together. Even now, they're drinking daiquiris, and no hard feelings.

Oh, and the children? The children are happy, well-adjusted. They never miss their other parents, never miss the way it was.

Arnie's arms pull her close. His body keeps her warm. They watch the fire and wait for the New Year.

Or, that's the dream.

But, then, there's the dream and there's how it *would* be, and she's not so naive she doesn't know the difference. Only, she's never chosen to navigate that gulf. Recognition is a boat in the distance, and today, for the first time, she swims. She swims and pulls herself, dripping, into the boat.

He'd lose the house, that's a given. He'd lose half of everything, and so would she.

The spouses would be bitter.

Their friends would defect to Frank and Anne's side in the fight.

At best, both couples would share custody. And what if Arnie only got Maddy, say, two weekends a month? Already, she can picture Anne, angry and vindictive. She'd show up late with Maddy Friday nights, be there early Sundays with someplace to be, Arnie fighting Anne for every hour.

It's her he'd blame for his unhappiness, not Anne. "Your fault, Linda" he'd say. "Your fault my baby girl's a stranger."

And the risk, the luscious *risk*. Danger translated to the everyday, Arnie's body grown familiar as Frank's—*the sex*. What would become of the sex?

In the end, resentment. And would Arnie take his father's lead? Would he drink, spend his afternoons in bed? Would he raise a crowbar to her face?

The heads of bison buried in the grass. They eat and eat.

Arnie shrugs her from his shoulders as one does a coat.

Her feet touch the ground, and now she's shaking because, oh God, all this time, and what has she been waiting for?

She sits. She whimpers with the pain of pulling on her boots. And Arnie above, watching her with wonder, saying, "What is it? What on Earth?"

If she could put it into words, she'd tell him that their two-decade experiment has reached an end. He'd ask: *Why now?* And she'd shake her head, unsure, understanding only that what's come before is gone and what she wants can never be. The future, the past—both impossible.

Arnie seems to sense it, the approach of something that, when it arrives, will be irrevocable. "I'll take you anywhere," he says. "That place you like. The place with the robes."

For a moment, it's almost enough. She pictures herself in bed, and him, finally, tucked in beside her, their twin skins. It's enough to make her take his hand, to let him lift her to her boot-heavy feet, and then the moment is gone.

She does not cry. She does not collapse into his arms.

The bison are anything but *gentle*. All the signs say so, and she wonders whether Arnie believed this or whether it was just a thing to say, the kind of thing he knew she'd like to hear.

But they aren't gentle, and she'll show him.

She climbs the fence, and, before he can follow, she's across the field. The bison cease their grazing. Their heads lift. The calf skitters away and tucks itself between two huge members of the herd.

She picks one and moves to it. She does not know whether age determines size in bison, but, if it does, she guesses this one's a scraggly teenager. It's head rears back, huge and sharp-horned. A blue tag marked 32 hugs one horn.

She's close, now, and Arnie's calling her name, yelling in a way that lets her know he knows just what these animals are capable of.

She lays a hand on the bison's coat and a shiver ripples its side. One eye, wet and wide, bobs in its socket. Its nose, black and snot-slick, expels air with a tremendous snort.

Arnie rattles the fence, begging her back, and the other bison break away, bodies and tails twitching. They move across the field with a sound like a dozen bowling balls launched down a dozen lanes, the balls rolling and rolling, picking up speed and no pins in sight.

But her bison doesn't budge. It snorts and snorts. Its pupil slips beneath an eyelid.

Arnie is climbing the fence, so she climbs too, and it's just like childhood, like summer camp, when she and a friend left their cabins in the night and rode the horses bareback through the field. The bison's pelt twists in her hands and she's up and over and aloft, the animal warm and trembling and alive under her.

And now Arnie is over the fence, and now he is waving, sprinting, screaming her name, his face otherworldly in its fear, his voice a siren, and she has never seen him move so fast, and she is not afraid.

She kicks, she kicks again, and, at last, the great beast charges. It ignores Arnie, moves right past him. It moves away from the fence, away from the other bison, in the direction of the open, uncomprehending field.

And, for a few glorious moments, just like that, she rides.

## NUDISTS

Outside, Mark's brother lit a second cigarette. Above him, tacked to a stone column, a sign directed smokers to other stretches of sidewalk. Joshua seemed not to notice the sign or, beyond the wide glass doors and across the crowded baggage claim, his brother.

Mark was in no hurry to have his attention. The flight had been long, the movie unwatchable, his seatmate more than a little on the smelly side. And now he had Joshua to endure, the brother who, even as a boy, refused to let anyone shorten his name. Call him *Josh* and you were guaranteed a tirade, followed by a sulk.

He watched Joshua smoke the cigarette to the filter, watched him drop the butt, then ground it into the sidewalk with the bright toe of a black leather boot. When the doors opened and the boots shuffled through, Mark quickly turned away, then turned back, his expression arranged into what he hoped was a look of happy surprise.

Joshua's hug was a pounce and a squeeze. He held on too long, long past the point by which Mark had grown uncomfortable, and past that, until, gently, Mark pushed him away, and the men stood, studying each other.

Last he'd seen him, Joshua had looked weary, old for his age. Now, he was the kind of thirty that got carded at bars. He was lean, muscled, like someone who played sports, though Mark couldn't imagine it—Joshua kicking a field goal or working a basketball down the court. His skin was bronzed, hair black, curls tangled thick as sheep's wool. Full of gel, his head had the appearance that comes from one's working very hard to make hair look messy. It glistened under the airport lights as though lacquered. Mark had expected a gut, an invasion of gray hairs,

those plagues of age he'd endured, was enduring still. Had he hoped them for his brother? But his brother looked the best he ever had, healthy, fit—*young*—and Mark told him so.

“You look good too,” Joshua said.

“I got fat. You don't have to pretend I didn't.”

Joshua shrugged. He ran a hand over his hair, which didn't move.

An employee of the federal park service, Joshua had pinballed from park to park before landing a permanent position at the San Francisco Maritime Museum. For two years, he'd held Mark to the promise to visit, a promise he'd felt no real obligation to keep. He was always the one emptying his wallet for flights to Jackson Hole or Salt Lake or Tucson, wherever Joshua landed seasonal work. Joshua had never returned the favor, had never traveled to Vermont, never, in ten years, seen their home or Lorrie's gardens in full bloom. And now it was too late. The house—it was no longer his. The flowers, which he'd let wilt, then die, had been pulled up. Where there'd been flowerbeds, the new owners had laid sod. It shone in the sun, neon, indisputable as Astroturf.

The baggage carousel snaked past them, silver, a river of ladders, rungs spinning. The other passengers from his flight had left, bags in hand, all but a woman in a yellow dress. Three times, a white duffel bag circled. A red ribbon fluttered from its handle. On the fourth pass, the woman cried, “Oh!” She got a hand on the bag, fought to pull it from the trough. Joshua stepped forward, and, with an *Allow me* lifted the bag and lowered it onto a cart stacked high with matching luggage.

“Thank you!” she said.

“My pleasure,” Joshua said. He raised a hand, touched the brim of a hat that wasn't there. He turned to Mark, crossed his arms.

“Marisa’s thrilled you came,” he said.

Marisa was Joshua’s girlfriend. She was smart, smarter than Joshua. Kinder, too, so that Mark often wondered what she saw in the brother who couldn’t commit to a job or a home or, even after years together, a wedding and all that came after.

But the bond was undeniable, and their relationship, whatever else it may have been, was not an unhappy one. It wasn’t that Joshua and Marisa never fought. It was that they fought without raising their voices. It wasn’t that they finished each other’s sentences, but how each smiled when the other spoke. He’d once stood in a doorway and watched them wash dishes. They’d moved side-by-side at the sink with a shared tempo, Marisa humming something, hands working fast with a rag. They were good for each other, in dishwashing and in life, and, following a visit, Lorrie had never failed to bring this up.

“I think you’ll like the place we picked out for Thursday,” Joshua said.

Mark nodded. He wished like hell that he had not come.

The carousel circled, bagless. A new group of passengers filed in from a bank of escalators and flooded the lobby.

“This right here is why I carry on,” Joshua said.

He wanted to tell Joshua that he *had* carried on, that he’d been stopped at boarding by a flight attendant who insisted his bag was *oversized*. He’d argued, then pleaded. The bag would fit, had fit many times before. But it was no use. The suitcase was ticketed, whisked away.

A siren squawked and the carousel shuddered to a stop.

He took a deep breath. He tried to calculate how much satisfaction he’d get kicking the machine’s serpentine wall versus, say, the risk of arrest.

“Fuck,” he said.

“Easy,” Joshua said. “It’s just luggage.”

But it wasn’t just luggage. This, this very moment, was the culmination of everything that had conspired, that year, to wreck him. Everything resurfacing, the way it did daily, today in the guise of lost luggage. He thought he might cry. Thinking it, he was ashamed, and then he was sure he *would* cry.

“Hey, they’ll find it,” Joshua said. “Till then, mi ropa es tu ropa, you know?”

The girl in the Hemingway story, how many *pleases* had she piled up before asking the bastard to *stop talking*? A verbal pummeling was what it was. Joshua could use one of those, that and a punch or two in the face. But Joshua wouldn’t know the story. Half a dozen years ago, he’d read a book on deforestation, probably the last book he’d finished. He’d called Mark up, excited, wanting to talk it over. Mark didn’t know the book. “I thought you read everything.” Joshua had said. “I thought you had to for your job.”

A high school English teacher, Mark was used to shit like that. The assumption that his nose was forever buried in a book, that and the way people corrected—or just as often *miscorrected*—their grammar in front of him, it was enough, times, to make Mark want to be anything else, an electrician, say, though he was sure every profession carried its particular cross. Become an electrician, and suddenly the neighbors want you to tour their homes. *Is this circuit breaker too rusty? Could I fit an outlet there?*

So, people asked what he did and he told them and always they’d say, “Oh, I really should read more,” to which Mark wanted to reply, “Well, you really don’t have to.” But, no, he’d nod, the way one does at New Year’s resolutions or the self-improvement plans of friends, the kind you know even they know will never come true. How many times had Lorrie said, “A week in Rome, wouldn’t that be wonderful?” before booking a trip to Cancun with Club Med?

“I have a toothbrush you can use,” Joshua said. “I always keep an extra on hand, in case one falls in the toilet or whatever.”

Spare toothbrushes? Who the fuck kept a spare toothbrushes? It was too much.

“Boy Scout motto,” Joshua said, and, when Mark couldn’t fill in the blank, he said, “Be prepared.”

#

But what could have prepared Mark for that year? What prepares one for a life left, submerged, beneath a bridge in blue water?

*Three cars spinning*, was how one witness described what he’d seen. Lorrie’s car was the one to go through the guardrail, to eat the sky and fall. The river was frozen and the car cracked it open.

When Mark reached the river, he pushed past paramedics and reporters and saw what everyone saw: Two circles projected onto the underside of the ice. They glowed, ghostly, moons in the river. He vomited, staggered forward, was caught before he fell through.

As he watched, a shadow crossed one beam, then the other. It grew in the light. He prayed that it was Lorrie even as he knew that it could not be Lorrie. The shadow was like a great fish rising, and then an angel, and then shadow was the figure of a man. The man appeared through a hole in the ice, elbowed his way onto the ice, and moved toward shore. He was pulled onto the bank by police officers in black coats with thick collars. The swimmer’s feet were fins, his face a bubble of glass. A blue skin covered him, head to toe, and a tank hung from his back. A regulator’s bulb fell from his mouth and, shivering, the man pulled the mask from his face. He said nothing, only shook his head, dropped to the bank, and wept.



The following day, on the phone, Joshua said over and over how sorry he was. He asked how he could help. When Mark suggested Joshua board the first flight to Burlington, Joshua said that sort of thing could be difficult, that he'd have to discuss it with Marisa, that it was a *tough time*, which meant that he didn't want to spend the money.

Mark might have said two words, right then, two words to make him change his mind. Silence stood between them like the quiet after the click of a grenade pin pulled, and, in that moment, Mark could no longer stand the thought of his brother beside his wife's casket. Joshua would put his arm around him, mutter words of comfort approximating those of whatever movie he'd last seen, and Mark would be sorry he'd made him come, then ashamed for being sorry.

Two words: *I'll pay*. Or, if his brother were a better man: *Please, come*. Though, if his brother were a better man, he wouldn't need the words, and so Mark would not say them. He would not beg.

And so Joshua had not come. And so they had not spoken, not until the year had unraveled into autumn and one day there was a surprise in the mail. It was Marisa's name at the bottom of the card in blue ink, her invitation to Thanksgiving dinner that he'd accepted, and then only because he was ready to face his brother.

He'd come for his apology. And already he wanted back on the plane. After this, he would not to return. He would wait. In Vermont, in his new, one-room apartment, he would wait. If Joshua wanted to see him again, he'd have to come to him.

#

Joshua drove fast, an arm out the window. He pointed and smoked. He had a park ranger's trademark memory and could, when called upon to do so, expound at length on his

surroundings. Each block of San Francisco brought another restaurant, storefront, or statue, and, with each, an anecdote, a history, the confirmation or rejection of local lore.

Mark sat low in his seat, half-listening. He felt his pockets for his wallet, his keys, his phone. His suitcase held everything else. The bag would be delivered by morning. He had the airline's assurances.

Bad music shook the speakers, something about *mammals...something, something...Discovery Channel*.

"Here's the Haight," Joshua said. "Haight Ashbury. Hippie shit. Late sixties, heart of the free love movement. Now it's a place you don't walk nights."

They stopped at a light. A man in a floppy stovepipe hat, red and white like the Cat in the Hat's, shuffled down the sidewalk. Ahead of him, a mohawked woman jogged, tracksuit billowing.

"Freak show," Joshua said. "A lot of that here. Not just here, but *here*." He nodded, as if to indict the city, all of it, or else the west coast. The song changed and Joshua's arm returned to the cab and drummed the dash. Every few taps, his other hand left the wheel to stick an invisible cymbal.

The mohawked woman was getting farther and farther away. She was tall and thin and moved with a bouncy, assured gait. He would have liked to run a hand over her head, to feel the smooth scalp turn to hair, then back to skin. He thought of highways, of the grassy medians that divide them. He thought—he couldn't help himself—of Lorrie.

They drove on until he was sure they'd left the city, and then the car approached a bend. Joshua took the turn hard and Mark flinched, breathed. When they straightened out, he relaxed

his grip on the door handle. It had been like this since the accident. His new place, he'd picked it by its proximity to the school. Excepting rainstorms, he walked to work.

They followed the road down a hill and pulled over to join a line of cars on the shoulder. The sight had been picked to astonish: The Golden Gate Bridge, fat in the fog, many-spindled and majestic. They left the car, climbed a bluff, and looked down on the bridge, which looked to Mark more red than gold. Through the fog, trying to take in the bridge, the enormity of it, was like picturing a puzzle with gaps at the center and sides. Below, ships navigated the channel. A sailboat cut through the mist and emerged beneath the bridge.

"I stop here sometimes on my way to work," Joshua said. "Just to see it. An absolute feat of engineering. Took ten thousand workers and ten years to complete. Two million rivets, each one solid iron." He sighed, shook his head. "Men died to make this bridge."

Far back as he could remember, Joshua had been like this. He was the kind of guy who took his truth where he could find it. And because, given his line of work, factoids were the sacrosanct morsels that comprised his communion, he was prone to flights of false import. He might note with a tone of authority that the blind were known for their acute sense of hearing or that elephants ran trunks over the tusks of ancestors, and, invariably, he would follow these truths up with *It just goes to show you*, or, *It really makes you think*. But could he tell you what you'd been shown? Could he say what you were meant to be thinking? He could not. His metaphors went forever unfinished, as though to turn them toward relevance might diminish their vague power. The right listener might smile, amused or awed, but Mark was not the right listener. Most of these little treatises left him resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

As a child, Joshua had been drawn to nature documentaries. He'd harried the family at mealtimes with the sleeping habits of lions, the diets of zebras, the migration patterns of various African birds. Traits were occasionally attributed to family members.

"You," he told Mark over a dinner of hotdogs, "are a rhino." He hadn't said why. Instead, he had taken a big bite of dog, mustard shooting onto his shirtfront. He'd set the hotdog down, pulled the shirt to his mouth, and nimbly tongued the fabric clean.

Each evening brought new animals to the table. What he didn't know, Mark suspected Joshua made up. He suspected this still.

On the bluff, Mark watched him. They shared the same hawk's nose, the same narrow forehead and cleft chin—hard features, *presidential*, Lorrie had said. That they were related was unmistakable, except that every time Joshua opened his mouth, Mark wondered how they could be brothers.

"This bridge," Joshua said. "It really makes you think."

"It does," he said, thinking how a moment can mean two things to two people.

He thought this and did not speak it. Neither did he remind the man at his side that a bridge in winter had killed his wife.

#

They drove on, following the coastline, until they came to a kind of compound. Identical concrete units rose between trees from green hills, the buildings dark-roofed and many-antennaed. They had reached The Presidio.

"Former military base," Joshua said. "And now—"

"Housing for hippies?" he said.

"You got it."

The units were small, three-storied, drab but for plants in window boxes and flags hung from ledges.

“Batteries line the beach,” Joshua said. “The government was all set for the Japanese.”

They took the streets through the compound too fast, up steep hills and down steeper ones. They nose-dived down one slope until Joshua jerked the wheel and ground the car’s tires into the curb.

“While you’re here, it’s important to angle your tires on inclines,” Joshua said. He appeared unconcerned that Mark had no car and, therefore, no tires to angle. Another fact, another thing to know. “The city’s notorious for runaway cars. This way, your brakes give out, you stay put. It’s the law.”

Mark reached into the backseat for his bag, then he remembered he didn’t have one. He was still in the passenger seat, still facing the back, when he thought he heard Joshua mumble something insane.

“I’m sorry?” he said.

“This funeral business,” Joshua repeated. “That’s behind us, right?” He put a hand on Mark’s shoulder, squeezed.

And what could he say? The funeral was not behind them. The very subject was a river rising fast, a river to be crossed and one that might never be crossed with Joshua so quick to dismiss it.

“Marisa feels bad,” Joshua said. “I tell her you’re fine, but she won’t believe me. She misses Lorrie. I made her promise not to bring it up.” He undid his seatbelt and stepped from the car. He knelt, face framed by the open door. Beyond him, the sky sank into ocean. “Just know, say something and she’ll cry for sure.”

The door swung shut and Joshua crossed the parking lot, before turning to see whether Mark would follow.

#

There had been a letter.

This was not long after the funeral, when the weight of what *was* pressed so hard upon him that he woke once, twice a night and sobbed. His dreams were ice, tires smoking, vehicles catapulted through glass.

Other dreams, he stood before an enormous arcade game, a pinball machine. Cars ricocheted, propelled by bumpers. Cars looped and spun, and he jammed like mad on the buttons, but the flippers were locked, always locked, and one by one the cars tumbled, fell, slipped past the flippers and into the mouth of the machine—swallowed, *gone*.

There were dreams of the river, the car bubbling, a hole in the windshield and Lorrie's hair trailing, current-caught and swaying like kelp.

Another dream, the dream that compelled the letter, found him fighting the water filling the car. Heels dug into the riverbed, he pulled at the handle, but the door would not give. Lorrie's words were gurgles. The water would not stop coming. And then there was a hand on his back. And then there was Joshua. The car was lifted, heaved from the river to shore. Lorrie tumbled out in a rush of water and into his brother's arms.

That morning, trembling, he'd picked up a pen. The dreams were horrors, but they were his horrors, and Joshua had no place invading them. He did not arrange his thoughts. He wrote. Letters leaned into angry words. Words tangled into hateful sentences. There was no proofreading, no organization or revision. His students, had they cared, would have been

appalled. Furious, dazed, perhaps half-asleep, he'd folded the letter, folded it again, addressed an envelope, and mailed the letter before he could change his mind.

He couldn't say, now, what the letter had said, whether it had been legible. Certainly there had been some *fucks* in there, some *fucks* and some *motherfucking cocksuckers* that must have come across no matter how sloppy the penmanship. There'd been a list of grievances, he remembered—boyhood stuff. There was the trivial: a model airplane stolen and broken, a borrowed shirt torn at the sleeve. And there was the consequential: a door left open and a runaway dog, a seatbelt slung and the cleft it had left in Mark's eyebrow.

The list had likely culminated with the missed funeral, but he couldn't be sure. What blue rage had he written the letter in, what boiling soup?

The fury had cooled, ultimately, to an ache, persistent, arthritic, nothing like the fire from before. Or else it had turned inward. Times, he wondered whether Joshua had ever been a suitable target. Joshua, after all, had not cursed her, had not heard the unspeakable pass between his teeth, had not hung up hoping she'd die.

Joshua had not sent her off the bridge. No, that had been him.

#

The clothes did not fit. Mark's stomach hung over the waistline of jeans he'd barely managed to button. Even the largest of Joshua's t-shirts clung to his chest, exposing his navel, the stretch marks that radiated from it like the crayoned lines circling a child's sun.

"It's a good look for you," Joshua said, and Marisa laughed through the hand at her face.

Like Joshua, Marisa looked healthy, fit, young. She credited the weather, the water, and her decision to move to a diet of all-natural and organic foods.

"We tried vegetarianism," she said, "but your brother missed meat."

Joshua lowed like cattle.

Marisa's hair was long and straight, still blonde, and Mark wondered whether Joshua knew that Marisa was, as she'd once confided in Lorrie, gray under all that gold.

She'd met them at the door, and, like Joshua, she'd held him for too long.

The past nine months, he'd become a connoisseur of hugs. There were the hugs offered out of pity, those offered out of duty, even the few that meant sympathy, genuine and unforced. Marisa's was one of those, and it was only once she'd let go, left his chest warm, that he missed how it had felt, having her in his arms, and he thought of the mohawked woman, and he was afraid. Whatever was surfacing, pushing through, he wasn't ready.

Joshua and Marisa left the room and he changed back into his clothes. His socks clung, sweaty, to his feet. His shirt smelled like he'd worn it all day on a plane.

He'd been given the spare room, which turned out to be a kind of oversized storage closet. The room was free, at least, from the rest of the apartment's ashtray stink. Boxes and piles of papers had been pushed into corners. An inflated air mattress filled the floor, and an unzipped sleeping bag covered the mattress. A towel and washcloth sat stacked on a pillow. The room's walls were white, the ceiling low and mottled with what he'd once heard a realtor call *popcorn*, the bubbly sealant that hid the seams of badly hung drywall. The ceiling ran from the doorframe's apex to the floor like the hypotenuse of a triangle. He would have to sleep with his head at the door to keep from rising and cracking his skull upon waking. He ran a hand over the ceiling, and it snowed—the sleeping bag, pillow, towel, washcloth, all of it, mottled with a pebbly white dust.

He joined Joshua and Marisa in the main room. The room was sparsely decorated, the furniture an assemblage of pieces probably salvaged from sidewalks and yard sales. The room's



focal point was a widescreen TV perched on a coffee table. The table's legs were thin and looked ready to buckle. Beneath the table, three gaming systems sat piled beside jewel cases. Discs scattered the hardwood floor, a perimeter of silver puddles. He tallied the expense in his head, wondered how many games would buy a plane ticket.

“We thought we'd lay low tonight,” Marisa said. “We figured you'd be tired.”

He wasn't tired. Already, he felt trapped by the small apartment, the smell. How did Marisa, a nonsmoker, stand it? He could not imagine the three of them confined, breathing the same stale air as the evening turned over. But he said nothing.

He fell into the lap of a white, wide-armed chair. Across the room, Marisa and Joshua shared a couch. Above them, and through a window, the apartments of The Presidio were overtaken by trees and, beyond these, a blue, Pacific strip.

The silence in the room was approaching insurmountable.

“You have a nice home,” he said.

“We like it,” Marisa said.

“We were just happy to find a clean, safe place,” Joshua said. “You wouldn't believe what it costs to live—” He stopped short, as though he'd said too much.

And then they were all thinking money, of flights to funerals.

He turned to Marisa, forced a change of subject: “How's the world of physical therapy?”

She laughed. “You make it sound so *noble*. It's nothing like that. I massage the rich and the tense.”

Marisa was famous for her backrubs. During visits, Lorrie removed her top and lay on the floor. Marisa squatted over her, working her hands between Lorrie's shoulder blades and down her spine. Finished, Lorrie slipped into his arms, limp and lithe. “Nothing sexual about

massages,” Lorrie would say, “they’re relaxing is all,” but he didn’t believe it. Always, he could count on those nights to get some. Which was why when Marisa offered, hands oiled, legs crossed on the floor and his wife watching, Mark had always said *no*.

A bird flew past the window, then another.

“She’s good,” Joshua said. “Really good. Number one requested masseuse at Salon Six. Does all the San Francisco celebs. Robin Williams—”

“Okay, sweetie,” Marisa said. She raised a hand to her cheek. She had large, clean hands with trimmed nails. He could still see them kneading Lorrie’s skin like floured dough.

“Sorry, Mark,” Marisa said. “Our client list is confidential. We get stars, sure, but more has-beens than anything else. Reality hacks, old soap divas.”

“Alex Trebek,” Joshua laughed. “Hundred dollar tip.” He put his arm around Marisa.

“That was one time,” she said.

“Asked her to rub his mustache.”

“He did no such thing,” Marisa said.

But she must have gotten them on occasion, given her line of work, the requests, the inappropriate proposals. He was curious but not enough to ask.

“You should let her give you one,” Joshua said. “I mean it. When she’s done, you won’t have a care in the world.” He turned to Marisa. “You have time tomorrow, right?”

“I might have an hour,” Marisa said.

But the idea had rattled her. He could see her surprise, see her registering his seeing.

“Really,” she was saying, a recovery, “I don’t mind.”

“That’s okay,” Mark said. “But I appreciate the offer.”

“I insist,” Joshua said. “I’ll pay.”

After that, what could anyone say? Marisa coughed. Mark watched the window.

Later, from his bed on the floor and through the thin walls, he heard them fucking. They were trying to be quiet about it, you could tell, but there it was, the rhythm of the bed, his brother's grunt, and, at the climax, not a moan from Marisa, but a breathy exhalation—like what comes before the whistle, a teakettle's exquisite, satisfied sigh.

#

And who could say for sure that he had not killed his wife?

“Go to hell,” he'd said, and what if she had? He wasn't a believer, before that night hadn't given much thought to heaven or hell, to an afterlife of any kind. He'd never believed—not really—that he or anyone he loved would die. At the river, though, wet cutting through his socks and into his shoes, he'd watched the man in the wetsuit emerge from the water and known that some place followed this place, that Lorrie was there, and that he'd been her dispatcher.

*Go to hell.*

A fight they'd had for years. School let out at three, which left him home hours alone, bored, while Lorrie, a lawyer, worked late. He wanted her there. She was on her way, wasn't she? And where had she been all evening?

But, that night, he did something he'd never done. He questioned her fidelity. He hadn't believed it, only wanted the slap to sting. The truth was, she was good, a lawyer with lots of work who refused to half-ass a case, which meant long hours, and if he wanted to talk fidelity, they could start with the smut she'd found tucked beneath the bathmat. He suggested he wouldn't need magazines were she fulfilling her wifely duties while she observed that such duties might be palatable were he less of a *raving jackass*.

“Go to hell,” he said. He hung up. His cell phone buzzed, then pinged with the message she’d left. He made no move to check it.

When, hours later, the house phone rang, it was not Lorrie. It was no voice he knew. He listened to the voice while something blossomed, black and taloned, and then there was a severing, and then his understanding of the world came loose from his place in it.

That her death had saved them an inevitable divorce was no comfort, was *worse* than no comfort. And so what if the thing he wanted back was not her, but them, and not them, but an *idea* of them—them as they’d been, once, long ago? He didn’t care. He wanted her back, if only to tell her that he was sorry, that he hadn’t meant it, not a word.

#

Sunup, and Joshua walking fast. Mark hustled to keep up. They crossed the green grounds of Victorian Park under the shadows of factories and canneries, turned, this century, to shops and motels. The windows of the buildings glowed, awnings striped and stretched into toothy grins.

They passed a beach. Offshore, swimmers moved in a line between buoys, all flutter kicks and swim caps, arms scissoring the bay.

The plan was for Mark to spend the morning at the Maritime Museum. He would see the ships, watch Joshua give talks to tourists. Then it was off to Salon Six and Marisa.

“You’re not *naked*, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Joshua said. “There’s a towel.”

Mark pulled on his shirt collar. The suitcase had not arrived. An attendant had reminded him, over the phone, that today was the day before Thanksgiving, *a very busy day*, and that, in the future, Mark might *consider carrying on*. He’d wanted to scream. Instead, he’d returned the phone to his pocket and cut the tape on the container that Joshua had pulled from storage, a

cardboard box with clobbered corners labeled *FAT CLOTHES*. He settled on jeans and a white shirt, short sleeves, the black outline of a lion faded on the front. The clothes fit, but itched, and the stink of cigarettes was all over them.

Joshua wore his uniform, the trademark brown slacks and green, button-down shirt of the park service. His hat, perched high and unfriendly-looking on his mound of hair, sported a brim stiff as the blade of a shovel. It was a uniform you expected to come across in a forest, one that looked out of place alongside blue sea and white sand.

They passed a trash barrel and Joshua flicked a spent cigarette into it.

They continued up a hill and across a street and through an open gate to a small, dilapidated building.

“Here we are,” Joshua said.

Mark had expected a museum, something grand with a winding staircase, portraits of dead sea captains on the walls. What he saw was something like a public restroom. The walls were brown, unsanded, and the roof was tin. The real attraction was just ahead, a pier that reached into the bay and a dozen ships, docked.

They walked the pier. The ships varied in size and in age. There were naval vessels, holes cut from their sides for the mouths of canons, and brigs whose sails hung like the masts of pirate ships. The ships stood in various stages of disrepair, some bright, hulls gleaming, others rusted and begging restoration.

The crown jewel, Joshua said, was the *Thayer*, a tall sailing ship with wide, white masts and a prominent black bow. A red stripe divided its middle. Its anchor chain disappeared into the bay, links big as refrigerators.

“A million bucks,” Joshua said. “New hull, new floors, new masts.”

The ship towered over them, masts flapping.

“These old ships, you can’t just spit on them and scrub off the barnacles,” he said, as though to drive home some point lost on Mark. “It takes time, craftsmanship. A lot of love.”

A gangplank stuck out like a tongue from the ship and touched the pier. A traffic barrel, orange and white, blocked the plank.

“Closed to the public,” Joshua said. “Below deck’s a mess. But next year—”

He talked more about the ships, park plans, Mark not really listening. They reached the end of the pier. Joshua lit a cigarette and leaned into a railing. He stared out at the bay where an island broke the water’s surface like a turtle’s back. At the center of the island stood Alcatraz, condemned prison turned weary tourist trap.

“Only three men ever got off that island,” Joshua said. “Their bodies were never found.”

“Sharks?” he asked, and Joshua shook his head.

It wasn’t sharks or the distance to shore. It was the cold, the heart giving out before the body clawed its way to dry land.

“It’s all about conditioning,” Joshua said. “You take an athlete whose muscles can keep up, he’ll produce the heat to make the swim. Drop anyone else in this water, you got yourself a Popsicle in under an hour. They pulled a guy from the bay last week, your typical Joe Desk Job. Went hypothermic in ten minutes.”

The wind changed direction and suddenly Joshua’s smoke was in his face. He coughed.

“Are you sorry you came?”

Jesus. Leave it to Joshua to make him feel accused. He wanted, what, assurances? For Mark to comfort *him*?

He said nothing.

Joshua put his cigarette out on the railing, exhaled, and, as though something had been settled, let the butt drop into the bay.

“I think you’ll like dinner tomorrow,” Joshua said. “The place, it’s no home cooking, but they do a good job. We went last year. Pumpkin pie’s out of this world.” He ran a finger along the brim of his hat, then glanced at the tip, as though checking for dust. “Anyhow, dinner’s on me.”

Oh, regret, that shape-shifting thing. The massage, the meal, and why couldn’t the fucker just say the words?

“That’s not necessary,” Mark said.

“My treat,” Joshua said. “I insist.”

#

The foyer of Salon Six was spacious and high-ceilinged. The furniture was sleek, modern-looking. Contoured chairs littered the lobby, and Mark lowered himself into something resembling the tortured body of a bent letter *S*.

He didn’t want to be here, but neither did he want to insult Marisa. She and Lorrie had been, if not close, at least closer than he and Joshua had been—were. Lorrie wouldn’t have wanted him mad at her, and so he hadn’t been. There was more to it than that, must have been, though he couldn’t have said what or why, when she might have shared Joshua’s blame, she too seemed a victim in this.

Tables lolled low to the floor like collapsed TV trays. From one of these, Mark grabbed an uncreased copy of *The USA Today*. The paper informed him that the President, as per tradition, had pardoned a pair of Thanksgiving turkeys. The birds would live out the rest of their lives at a game ranch in north Georgia. He put down the paper.

An exhausting morning had given way to an interminable afternoon. All day, he'd watched Joshua do his thing. The talks were a collage of history and statistical tidbits: How many trees had gone into the construction of this ship, how many tons of steel had gone into that one. Men and women with sunglasses and shopping bags nodded, smiled, and held their squirming children's hands. Occasionally, someone posed a challenging question. Joshua had the answer, always, and, each time, an awed murmur rose from the audience, like the call and response of a crowd watching fireworks.

He understood it, then, why Joshua had stuck with this job. Here was work, at last, that allowed—no, *encouraged*—his brother's very nature, his unmitigated know-it-all-ness.

Was he jealous of the attention his brother got, the applause at the end, the respect garnered over a logorrhea of facts forgotten by most even before the shopping bags were put away, before the sunglasses left their heads? Jealous when, back home, he was lucky to have one, two kids a class actually understand, let alone appreciate, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock?" Or was it America that disappointed him, how a boat impressed where beauty could not?

A door opened to the waiting room, and he heard his name. He stood and followed a woman in a white down a white hall to a small, white room. The room smelled like mint and incense. At the center, stood a long table. An O, like a spare tire, hung from the table's end. Against a wall stood a counter and a few cabinets. One might have mistaken the room for a doctor's office if not for the lighting—dim—and the flicker of a candle on the countertop.

"You may disrobe and lie down," the woman said. She handed him a white towel, then left the room.

He didn't move. A minute later, there was a knock at the door and Marisa walked in.



“Oh,” she said. “You’re dressed.”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” he said. It was a final plea. He hoped she’d let him off the hook. Together, they could tell Joshua whatever she wanted. *Just please don’t make me lie down on that table.*

But, no. She gave him instructions. She left the room.

When she returned, he lay naked on his stomach, face tucked into the table’s spongy O. The towel covered his middle. The position was not a comfortable one. It pained him to lie flat with his hands at his sides, but it seemed wrong to let his arms hang from the table.

She asked how his morning had been, how he liked the ships and whether he was enjoying the city. There was an opening and closing of cabinet doors, the scrape of a lid coming loose.

“Your brother is so smart,” she said. “I watch his presentations, and I’m amazed.”

Something cold splashed his back, and then Marisa was rubbing vigorously. The oil warmed where she rubbed. He felt the towel folded from his lower back to his waist. Through the O, he could see only the square pattern and white grout of a tile floor.

“You have great skin,” Marisa said. “Some backs, you should see them. They’re so blemished, I have to glove-up. And then the client gets mad because it doesn’t feel the same, the latex.”

She rubbed hard, but her hands were soft, uncalloused. Gradually, he relaxed. He felt warm all over.

“I can see now why people like this,” he said. He meant it. He closed his eyes. The room swayed. Light burrowed up his back and burst into his shoulders, then moved, hot and bright, through his whole body. “You’re very good.”

“I’ve been at it a long time,” she said. Then, lowering her voice, she said, “But not much longer. I’m in school.”

She was studying sign language, she said. As a translator, she’d help people communicate with one another. The idea had captivated her, how a gesture becomes words, how words become the movement of hands.

“I want to be that conduit,” she said.

In Burlington, they’d had a pair of deaf neighbors. Summer evenings, he and Lorrie sometimes sat on their porch while the deaf couple sat on their porch and spoke with their hands. Always, she’d have to remind him not to stare. But how could he not? The movements, the transmissions, were gorgeous. And Marisa’s hands—the choice was perfect, the language made for hands like hers.

She worked his back, pressing, kneading. Her body cut shadows through the candlelight and across his small patch of tile. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. She moved to the end of the table and her shirt’s hem grazed his hair.

He lifted his head and there was her arm at his face. Veins pulsed, delicate and blue, the image suddenly lovely, this wrist, pale and soft-seeming, and these veins, tattooed in the shape of a tuning fork to her skin. Her wrist brushed his chin, and he kissed it. A second only—a kiss so close to a breath, he was sure she would not notice.

But already Marisa was backing away. Her hands lifted from his shoulders. He sat up, careful keep himself covered. She was as far from him as the room allowed, backed into a corner beside the counter. The candle’s flame danced by her wrist.

“Watch yourself,” he said.

She brought her hands to her chest, but her eyes did not leave his.

“I’m so sorry,” he said.

“Why did you do that?”

“I wish I knew.” Because he didn’t know. He couldn’t say why he’d done it, couldn’t fathom the impulse or the compulsion to follow it, couldn’t believe he had.

“Your brother would be so hurt if he knew.”

“I wish you wouldn’t tell him.”

Marisa’s cheeks puffed and her bottom lip lengthened. She exhaled and the breath scattered her bangs. She lifted his brother’s clothes from the counter and set them on the table beside him. She moved to the door, opened it, but stopped short of the hall. She turned and stood in the open doorway.

“He’s sorry,” Marisa said. “I can promise you that. He’s embarrassed. He’s ashamed. We both are. We should have come, and we didn’t. I can’t explain it, what happened, why we weren’t there. I can’t explain, so I guess that makes two of us.”

The towel was bunched at his waist, and he smoothed it, covered his legs to the knees.

“That’s why you came, isn’t it?” she said. “To make us say it? To tell you how sorry we are?”

“Not you,” he said. “I want to hear it from him.”

Marisa looked away.

“You won’t,” she said. “You won’t, and, what’s more, you know you won’t. Joshua doesn’t work that way. Which is why *I’m* saying he’s sorry, so you’ll know. Because he can’t say it. And because that should be enough. For a brother. It should be enough to know.”

Marisa’s hands ran down her thighs, their sides. And then her hands were balled and the material of her pants ballooned from her fists.

Knowing it, it should have been enough. And wasn't. He wondered what would be.

"He cried, you know?" she said. "That letter? He wouldn't let me read it, but I found it, and I read it. It was...awful."

"I was angry."

"And you're angry still. And none of us know what to do. We can't move forward until you give the word, and you're not giving it."

Her hands relaxed, fell open at her sides. She shuffled out. The door pulled shut.

He dressed quickly. The towel he left on the table folded in a tight, white square.

#

At the apartment, Mark showered. He wanted the smells off of him, the oil, the candle smoke. He showered a long time, stood beneath the showerhead until the bathroom door rattled with Joshua's knocking. "Hey, save some water for the rest of the planet!" he called. His brother, the park ranger who would save the planet except for the million cigarette butts he'd add to it.

He cut off the water, dried, and dressed. The room was steam-filled, condensation collecting on the mirror, the faucet, the backs of toothbrushes. Everything glistened in the wet. Beside the toilet, a bin overflowed with the wavy pages of old *National Geographics*. When he stepped from the bathroom, he was damp, his brother's shirt bunched at the armpits and plastered to his back.

He found Joshua on the couch. He still wore his uniform, the shirt tucked in but unbuttoned to the belt, a white t-shirt beneath. Mercifully, the hat had been removed. It sat stiffly on the couch beside him. He was playing a video game, and his body bobbed in tandem with the lunges and leaps of the armored man onscreen.

"I'm going for a walk," Mark said. "Clear my head."

“Marisa will be home soon,” Joshua said. “If you’ll wait, we can all go.”

He didn’t want to wait. He didn’t want to be there when Marisa arrived.

“I’m just going to go now,” he said.

Joshua didn’t look up. There was a scream as the knight plunged his sword into a short, hobbit-looking thing. The creature collapsed, blood jetting from its chest.

“Take the road down to Lincoln,” Joshua said. “The first side street will bring you to Baker Beach. It’s a mile, but you can’t beat the view.”

Mark felt in his pocket. He came up with an extra key Joshua had given him, but no phone.

“Just stay away from the boulder end of the beach.”

He moved quickly to the spare room. He pulled the covers from the air mattress, one layer at a time, shook them, then lifted the mattress. He dropped it.

“Joshua?” he said.

He lifted Joshua’s clothes from the floor, dropped them. He patted his pockets, then pulled them inside out.

“Joshua!” he called.

He retraced his steps down the hallway to the living room. He shook each of his shoes over the doormat. He opened the front door and glanced outside. He shut the door. His hands shook.

“Goddamn it.” He moved to the center of the room. He stood between Joshua and the TV. His brother craned his neck to see around him.

“Move!” he said.

“I need your help.”

“In a minute,” Joshua said. “Move.”

A gray umbilical uncoiled from a box on the floor and into the controller in Joshua’s hands. He grabbed and pulled.

Joshua shot up. “Whoa!”

He got a hand on Joshua’s wrist, squeezed. The controller dropped. He kicked it across the floor. And then a hand was on his neck, a knee in his stomach, and Joshua’s fist found his face.

He went backward, arms windmilling. A crash, and then he was on his back, the TV beneath him. The coffee table’s legs were gone, the gaming consoles crushed. Cords snaked out like intestines from the mess.

“What the fuck?” Joshua said. He stood over him.

“My phone,” he said. “I can’t find it. You hit me.”

Joshua offered a hand, pulled him up, and then they turned to take in the TV, the line splitting the screen in two. Joshua shook his head. He unbuckled his belt, then pulled his shirttails from his pants. He undid the last button, then let the shirt slip to the floor. In his left hand, he held his fist, cradled it. The human hand had a bunch of bones, and Mark wondered whether something had snapped. He hoped something had.

In the bathroom, he touched a fingertip to each of his teeth, felt the bridge of his nose. No blood. No, the fist had caught him in the eye socket. Even now, blood seeped to the surface. By morning, there’d be a perfect ring.

Something else in the mirror caught his eye. Past his reflection, on the windowsill and under the toothbrush his brother had given him, there it was—his phone.

#

Dark water, blue sky, and already the sun was settling, just enough light to whiten the sand. A few beachgoers lingered, umbrellas bent to block the wind. One couple sat side by side and read from the same book. Another dipped hands into a bag of shared potato chips. Another walked the shore. A dog, white and brown, raced seagulls up and down the beach.

He stood at the water's edge. To his left, the land curled into a point. If he followed the coastline to the right, he'd reach a rocky outcropping. Beyond the rocks rose the giant legs of the Golden Gate Bridge. He counted cars. He hoped to know how many passed in a minute, but he could not keep up. There were hundreds, so many cars traveling at high speeds, neat and safe in single-file lines.

He thought of the apartment and what awaited him. Maybe Marisa would say nothing. Or else she'd take one look at the television and tell Joshua everything. Either way, he'd be asked to leave. This would give him two days to kill. He pictured himself seated on a motel room bed, Chinese takeout in his lap. Was this a thing he deserved? He wasn't sure, sure only that, whatever came next, he'd brought it upon himself.

He pulled off his shoes and socks and rolled the cuffs of his pants to his knees. The sand underfoot was cold. He stirred the surf with a toe and the water was colder. He couldn't tell whether the tide was going out or coming in. He walked up the beach, tucked his shoes into a hollow of sand, then returned to the shore.

He picked the rocks and walked toward them. The beach was a confusion of seaweed and cracked shells, twigs and clear, bulbous sacs, like jellyfish minus their legs. He knelt, lifted one and weighed it in his hand. The thing was cool, rubbery. Given a squeeze, the sac shot water from its middle. He dropped it into the water and walked on.

The sun had set, and people gathered at the rocks. A tent glowed, yellow, and a couple moved to the rhythm of music that emerged, choked and tinny, from an old radio. A small fire in a rock-lined pit shot orange sparks into the air.

He'd begun to shiver. Memory, cold. He sat and felt the sand wet through his pants. He pulled the phone from his pocket. He lived with the fear that if he didn't listen, saving and resaving it daily, the message might be lost.

He pressed a button, and there it was, her voice on the phone, her last words: *Mark, this is silly. Once you've calmed down, call me. Please. I may be a while. The roads are ice.* There was a long pause before she said, *For what it's worth, I'm sorry.*

How long had it been? How long between message and bridge? Seconds? Minutes? Had the first car struck her hanging up? Had the phone left her hand when the second car hit, or had she held it tight?

Quickly, is how it would have happened, over before she'd had time to be afraid. Everyone said so, and he wanted to believe them, wanted to and did not. What must she have thought, seeing the gap in the guardrail, the ice missing to meet her, then opening to let her in?

He saved the message and flipped the phone shut. He stood. He could whip the phone into the ocean and be free, but that was a fantasy. He'd never be free.

He could jettison her voice, and still there would be photo albums, home movies, the house to drive past. He'd wept to see Lorrie's flowers dug up. And what would the new owners have thought looking out, the car parked beside their mailbox and the man they remembered vaguely from closing crying inside?



He moved down the beach, and, at his approach, the campers stirred. The dancing couple separated. The woman moved to a sleeping bag on the sand beside the fire and the man joined another man at the water's edge.

When he was close enough to see, Mark stopped. The men were naked. One, the dancer, was maybe twenty. He had a potbelly and a bulldog's jowls. He kept his gaze steady on the horizon. The second man was older, short and thin. He rested his hands on his hips and his elbows stuck out like trowels. His brown hair was shot through with silver and tied back in a ponytail. The tail hung to the small of the man's back. A beard, tied into a matching tail, hung from the man's chin and was pressed by the wind to his waist, a waist not indicated by tan line or pants. The beard bunched in places, banded by silver coils.

The older man turned only his head in Mark's direction.

"It's not polite to stare," he said.

He hadn't meant to, but it had surprised him, this sight. He'd heard of nude beaches but thought they were myth, like the rumored highways out west without speed limits. Anyhow, there wasn't much call for nude beaches in Vermont.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's your beard. It's impressive."

The man nodded. "I have a deal with God," he said. "I won't cut my hair until the war has ended."

"Which war?"

The man smiled. "All of them."

He brought a hand to his chin, scratched, then ran two fingers along the rope of hair. With its bunched bits, it reminded Mark of bed sheets, knotted, the kind children in movies hung from widow ledges to run away.

“If it’s world peace you’re after,” he said, “I imagine you’ll wear that hair to the grave.”

The man frowned. “You’re one of those.”

“One of what?”

“A man who believes that things as they are are exactly as they always will be.”

The younger man laughed. His belly trembled. But the bearded man turned and shook his head and, wordlessly, the young man about-faced and made his way up the beach.

The sky was black, the bridge above brown. There was the rush of cars overhead and the whine of night insects turning on. The nudists, maybe ten of them and in various states of undress, watched him from their chairs and sleeping bags around the fire. A topless woman dropped a log onto the fire and there was an eruption of sparks. Embers feathered, then settled on the sand.

“Quite a shiner,” the man said.

He felt his eye. The skin was puffy and hurt to touch. His shivering had grown visible. Wasn’t this California? He hadn’t anticipated the cold. And this other man, still and at peace. He wondered how the man kept warm. He asked.

The man smiled. “Cold is a state of mind.” He bowed his head and shut his eyes. A gust of wind grabbed his beard and twirled it about his stomach. The man lifted one leg, drawing his knee almost to his chest. His penis poked forward, shriveled, from a pocket of dense, gray hair. His arms stretched behind him until the hands met and his fingers interlocked. The man was a heron, he thought, or else some great shorebird, long extinct.

After a time, the man opened his eyes. His leg dropped and he turned to face Mark.

“My state of mind has changed,” he said.

“I’m sorry?”

“I’m freezing my ass off.” The man winked. His beard swung. “There’s a place for you by the fire, if you’d like.”

The man rejoined his friends, their circle by the fire, then looked back. He patted the sand and waved. A second hand beckoned, and then it seemed that all of them were waving.

He wanted to go to them, to warm himself by the fire. But there was a better place for him. He felt the tug, turned, and faced the bay. The pants and shirt came away as though pulled from him. His boxers dropped, and he ran.

The water on his feet, calves, thighs telegraphed the terrible mistake, but he did not stop. He fell forward, and the cold took him. He went under. He pushed against the bottom. His face broke the surface, he breathed, and soon the water was warm.

#

The four of them had shared a Thanksgiving, once, years before. Joshua and Marisa were a new couple, and he and Lorrie had traveled to Tucson to see them. Joshua gave them a tour of the Sonoran Desert with its fierce, chalky landscape and cactuses that stood, arms out, like tellers in a bad bank robbery movie.

On Thanksgiving Day, Marisa prepared a turkey and Joshua carved. He cut into the bird, then proceeded to mutilate one of the breasts. Mark tried to help. He encouraged Joshua not to chop, but to draw the blade over the bird. “It’s not a machete,” he said.

They argued until he said, “You’re ruining it,” and Joshua plunged the blade into the bird and sat down.

He’d stood, then, unsunk the blade, and peeled smooth, even slices from the second breast.

None of which had mattered, in the end, for, halfway through the breast, the blade had caught and the meat would not give. At its center, the turkey was frozen. They'd returned it to the oven, but, cooked through, the meat was dry and crumbed beneath the blade.

They ate, then, not speaking, and though Joshua and Marisa would, over the years, invite them often to visit, they would never again ask them back for Thanksgiving.

That night, on the foldout couch, Mark and Lorrie had argued.

"You should be nicer to your brother," she said.

He'd done his best to defend himself, chided her for taking sides.

She yawned like she'd heard it all before.

"And he's smoking again," he said. "When did that start? I told him that was a good way to kill himself."

Lorrie pulled the pillow from under her head, held her face to it, and fake-smothered herself.

"What do you want from me?" he said.

"I want you to try," she said.

"I am trying," he said, and she said, "Try harder."

She'd meant more than Joshua, of course. She meant them, their marriage, which, only that year, had taken an unexpected turn. It was as though they'd been piloting a poorly-made tandem bicycle, the two of them. Approaching a tree, they'd veered, each in a different direction, and been left on the pavement, bloodied, half a bike apiece.

Their lives, their time and how they spent it, what they wanted and what came next—they weren't the people they'd married. They'd changed, and Mark was afraid.

“You’re so damn hard on people,” she said. “One day he’ll be gone, and you’ll regret every word.”

But he wasn’t gone, and it seemed a cruel joke that Lorrie was.

That night, she’d watched him a long time. She did the thing he liked, traced his face, running a fingertip over his forehead, his cheeks and chin, over the bridge of his nose.

She said, “I predict for you a very long and unhappy life.”

And then she’d fallen asleep. And then she’d stayed with him, years, trying to make it work, trying harder than him, trying right up to the second she went under the ice.

#

It wasn’t the old man or the young man who pulled him, sobbing, from the water. It was none of the nudists.

Though it was dark and he was too far out to be sure, he thought he recognized the figure moving down the beach, was sure he knew the gait, the frame illuminated by firelight. The figure paused by the fire, arms pointed seaward, and he knew who it must be, for who else would tear at his shirt like that, who would kick off his shoes, charge the water, dive and swim at him with a clean, even stroke?

Water and time, and the figure reached him. And it was his brother, waving and hollering. Things had slowed—the water’s slosh, and his brother, biting the waves—everything ground to a hesitating, bubbling churn, like syrup oiling a hot skillet. Joshua’s teeth flashed. His words were roars. And then his hands were on him and he was in a kind of headlock, dragged, pulled through the water while Joshua reached one-armed toward shore.

The current was strong, the tide going out. How unprepared he'd been for that, for the current and the cold, a cold that encased his body, stiffening his limbs and turning his hands to slabs.

The pulling kept up, the water at his back, waves cresting his head. The arm at his neck loosened and tightened with each wave. And he knew he could not take his brother with him. Joshua would go under before he let go, and so he'd have to—he'd have to swim.

He yelled. He struggled and was not released. He swung and the fist met Joshua's jaw. Then he was free and he swam. Joshua cut a path through the water, and he followed, followed until sand squeaked underfoot, and he gave in, let Joshua pull him to shore, over the sand and up the beach to the waiting fire.

But the fire was not enough. Stretched on a blanket before the flames, he felt nothing. His body was an unmoving blue, the fire was a yellow blur around which danced bodies like pink blobs. His brother's voice was there, and then a heaviness. Arms wrapped his chest, and he knew that the body was his brother's. The body held him like a new skin.

"Come on, people," Joshua called, and there were more, bodies at all sides, hair and fat, bodies on bodies, until the numbness became an itch and, Jesus, God, the worst pain of his life. Needles, trillions of them, drove their pointed heads into his flesh. Was he convulsing? The spasms, he couldn't hold them back. His teeth chattered until he could taste and the taste on his tongue was blood.

Back in Vermont, the killing frosts would have blued the old house's new lawn, the trimmed grass where, before, there'd been gardens. But the bulbs remained. He laughed, thinking it. Like time-bombs, they waited, the bulbs, waited belowground through the shuffle of seasons for heat, their cue to crumble the soil and skewer the sod. And how funny it would be to see

them, all those tulips sticking up like middle fingers from the lawn, his wife's voice, her laugh, in each one.

The shaking subsided. The bodies backed away, until there was only Joshua shivering at his back. There was presence of mind now, enough to know he was naked, he and his brother behind him, enough to know and not to care. The heat came, and he took it.

#

A light glowed in the apartment stairwell, and Mark watched a moth crash into it. Below the light, on the stoop, having been left without letter or explanation, sat his suitcase. A pink ticket hung, bungeed, from the handle. A fresh tear marked the fringe of piping that hugged the zipper's track.

"I told you they'd find it," Joshua said before saying, "I didn't mean that. I didn't mean 'I told you so.'"

Mark could feel himself swaying. His feet throbbed and his arms ached. The cold had emptied him of longing, of emotion of any kind. He wanted nothing more than to lie down, to be warm and to sleep a while.

He owed his brother an explanation. He couldn't say why he'd jumped in or what he'd been after, only that he'd never meant to get so far out. Though, in the end, when he'd come close, when he'd held up his hands, seen the shore and calculated the space between, when he'd known he would sink before making it back, he had not been afraid. He'd marveled at the distance he'd come and had not been afraid.

"I'm sorry about the eye," Joshua said.

He nodded. "I'm sorry about the jaw." Red splashed Joshua's face where he'd hit him, the jaw line purpling. "And the television."

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll buy you another one.”

“I said don’t,” Joshua said. He pulled Mark’s phone from his pocket. “It was on the sand by your pants—my pants.” He lit a cigarette.

Mark held out two fingers. He hadn’t smoked since college, had never been a smoker. Joshua was surprised but trying to hide it, he could tell. He passed the cigarette, and Mark took a drag, deep, then coughed. His throat, his lungs, burned, but he felt buoyant, untethered in just the right way.

Joshua lit a cigarette for himself, and together they filled up the stairwell with smoke.

Overhead, the moth rattled the bulb. It dove until a final smack sent it to the ground, where it fluttered the concrete before flying away.

Joshua dropped his cigarette and ground it out, so Mark did the same.

He wondered what waited inside. Marisa, he wouldn’t know what to say when he saw her. Already, though, Joshua had his bag and was through the open door.

Marisa was on the floor, legs crossed, a screwdriver in her hand, a table leg in her lap. She stood at the sight of them, and he could only imagine how they must look to her, the pair of them, their busted faces, their salt-slicked hair. She might have begged an explanation, and Joshua might have given it, but she did not ask and Joshua did not offer, a humiliation averted. And another one, the massage, the wrist—if she’d told him, he’d dismissed it, or else she’d not told him. There would be no motel room, no takeout. They would pass through this instead, without apology.



From his neighbors, he knew the sign for *thank you*, a hand brought to the mouth and dropped, falling away from the body with an open arm. His fingers found his lips, and Marisa smiled. He was absolved, forgiven before his hand left his face.

## WAKE THE BABY

Lisa sleeping. Lisa turning in sleep, moonlight sliding cheek to chin. She kicks. She wakes, watches me.

At last, she says, “Another one.”

“Which one?” I say.

“The one where she’s five,” Lisa says. “She was five and we called her *Junie*.” She uncovers herself and stands. “Would we ever have called her Junie?”

Lisa moves to the bedroom door.

“Please don’t,” I say.

“I won’t wake him,” she says.

In a minute, in the other room, Michael is crying.

#

The next morning it is Sunday and we take Michael to the park. We sit on a bench and watch the big kids climb the jungle gym. Lisa holds Michael in her lap. He laughs and points when birds fly overhead.

“Let him crawl,” I say.

Lisa ruffles the grass with the toe of her sneaker. “It’s dirty,” she says. “There’re bugs.”

“It’s nature,” I say. This is not really true. The park is a twenty-acre rectangle of green at the city’s center. Stand anywhere in the park and you still hear cars whiz by. But there is a playground, a walking trail, a duck pond. It’s the best you’re going to get around here.

“Do you want to see the ducks?” I say. Michael gurgles. He’s not quite a year old. “Let’s go see the ducks,” I say.

Lisa holds Michael close as we walk the pond’s perimeter. We find another bench and sit. Some of the ducks paddle our way, and this really gets Michael going. He reaches. He waves. He shrieks.

“You like the duckies?” I say.

“Gaaaauuuuu!” Michael says.

There’s no fishing allowed, but an older man in overalls stands with a bucket and rod on the other side of the pond. He tips his hat and I half-wave.

I begin looking through Lisa’s bag.

“Anything to eat?” I ask.

“Animal crackers,” Lisa says. “But those are Michael’s.”

“Not for me. For the ducks.”

“Oh, don’t do it. You know how much I hate that.”

“But he loves it,” I say. “Don’t you?” I say to Michael. “Don’t you love when Daddy feeds the duckies?”

I find the crackers, pull out a lion, and snap off it’s head.

The head in the water excites the birds. Soon there’s a dozen of them: A mallard with its scaly green cap, a couple of drab brown ducks, a white swan with a tumorous orange knob sprouting from it’s beak. There’s a cluster of sleek, black and tan Canada geese, all honking, their heads bobbing on long, delicate necks.

I fling crackers and Michael squeals. I've done this before, but, this time, something is different. The birds are louder, closer, like they've been promised food all day and I've just now shown up without enough to go around. They're frenzied.

I take a step back. They take a collective step forward on their little, yellow dragon feet, wings flapping, beaks stabbing the air.

"Gaaaaaaa!" Michael screams.

"Honey?" Lisa says.

I'm out of crackers, but the ducks, the geese, they keep coming.

"Richard!" Lisa yells.

She stands, and, as she stands, the white goose charges, hissing. It plunges its orange bill into Lisa's leg. Lisa doesn't make a sound.

I reach for her bag and see the goose peck her again. I swing the purse and miss. I swing again and the purse connects solidly with the bird's back. The goose squawks, flaps its wings, and turns toward the water, followed by the rest. It's only then that I see what I've done.

Lisa's bag, unzipped, sits at my feet. Everything that was in it has flown out. The birds swim through the bobbing flotsam: lipstick, sunglasses, tampons, pens.

I turn to see Lisa. There is a bright, red mark where beak broke flesh, a trickle of blood shin to shoe. But it is the rest of her I watch with something like reverence. She holds Michael high, overhead. One hand cradles his neck, his soft skull, the other his crotch. She holds him and her eyes do not leave him, and I know that her legs could be sawed off and still she would not let go.

#

Back home, Lisa stands at the sink wringing water out of anything from which water can be wrung. A compact mirror and reading glasses are still somewhere at the bottom of the pond.

A row of wet one-dollar bills wallpapers the kitchen counter.

“How can I help?” I say. I put a hand on Lisa’s waist.

“Don’t touch me,” she says. A bandage conceals the gash on her leg. There’s a red point at the center of the bandage where the blood has seeped through.

“Let me do this.”

“Richard,” she says.

At the bottom of the sink, a tampon has bloomed with pond water and burst from its plastic tube. Beneath it is Lisa’s wallet. Tucked inside, no doubt, are pictures of June. Not big pictures. Not even good pictures. Little Olan Mills two-inch by three-inch cheapies, of which there are another dozen in a dresser drawer. Already, though, I can foresee the day when Lisa will hold this against me, the destruction of these pictures from her wallet, these photographs from June’s last afternoon.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

Lisa says nothing.

“The ducks were just hungry,” I say. “Michael’s fine. He was never in danger. I wouldn’t have let it get to that point.”

“*You* wouldn’t,” Lisa says. “Say it again.”

“Lisa.”

“No, say it. I want to hear you say it again.”

“All right, fine. I *wouldn’t*. I wouldn’t have let it get to that point.”

“Good,” Lisa says. “Now say it to my leg.”

#

Once Michael's down for the night, I join Lisa in bed. She has not said more than ten words to me all evening.

"It was an accident," I say. "You can't make me feel like this is my fault."

"I'm not making you," she says. "If you feel that way, maybe there's a reason."

"Jesus," I say. "Goodnight."

A minute later, Lisa is crying. *Don't touch me*, she had said, and I don't.

But then she turns to me and I can't help wrapping my arms around her.

"I can't sleep," she says.

"You just laid down," I say.

"No. I mean, I can't. I can't do it. I can't stand them anymore."

"The dreams will go away."

"In three years they haven't gone away."

We lie like that for a while, Lisa's body against mine, her head in the hollow made by my shoulder, face, and neck. Her breathing settles. Her heartbeat slows.

"Richard?" she says. "Would you have called her Junie?"

"I would have called her whatever you liked best," I say.

Soon, she is sleeping. I'm almost asleep when Lisa snaps awake and jumps up.

"No," I say.

"I just want to check," she says.

"He's fine. You'll wake him."

"I'll stand at the door."

“You say that. And then you’re just at the crib. And then you’re just feeling for breath. And then you’re just checking for fever. And then and then and then, and he never sleeps. He’s a baby. You have to let him sleep.”

“Richard, move.”

But I do not leave the doorway.

“Richard,” Lisa says, “I swear to God.”

She reaches for the doorknob. I hold it tight in my hand.

“Let me see my baby!”

She slaps my hand. I hold tight. And then she is kicking me, screaming, yelling, “Move!” But I’m twice her size. I will not be moved. I sink to the floor. I feel her kicks in my stomach, my ribs, my groin. I cover my face with my hands.

She does not stop until Michael’s crying can be heard from the other room. She backs away from me. She sits on the edge of the bed, breathing heavy.

I hurt all over.

She says, “If you do that again, I’ll leave you.”

But we both know I won’t have to.

Because now, somehow, we are even.

## THE FOX KING: A FAIRY TALE

One morning, the girls went into the woods and by lunchtime were lost. The girls, whose names were Isabelle and Ellie, had long, blonde hair and eyes like movie swimming pools. The girls were friends and not twins, though people mistook them often for sisters. The girls were fine with this. Already, they'd done the hard work of gouging their fingers, pressing flesh to flesh, Isabelle crying at the cut, Ellie laughing, sucking her finger for hours when it was done for the tang like a tongue touched to a 9-volt battery.

The girls lived in white houses with blue shutters on a tree-lined street in a small county at the north end of a southern state. They lived in the mountains, took their water from wells, and in winter stacked logs on the porch for their fires. Sure, there was electricity, but electric was expensive and in winter went out often.

These girls, they knew their mothers by their aprons and their fathers by the black boots at the doorstep, the black clothes left in black piles on the porch, the tin helmets and the small lights that shone when the black was rubbed away.

All around the girls were woods, and, summers, they wandered the woods often. It should be noted that the woods here had a habit of eating people. Given this, you may be tempted to site the girls' mothers with negligence. But, you who are not of the woods, you who buckle your babies into cars that will crash, who climb into elevators that will drop and planes that will fall from the sky, you who buy food you haven't prepared, food wrapped in plastic and paper and bagged, you of the suburbs, the cities, you more than anyone should understand that when you're of the woods, you trust the woods, even when you know what the woods can do. And so you let



your children into them, just as you let your husbands tunnel into the belly of a mountain that might, any moment, close its mouth. To live is to walk a rope of risk, and so we let our children into the woods. Knowing what could happen, knowing full well, we let our children into the woods again and again.

Often, Isabelle and Ellie had traveled deep into the woods. They knew by the sun and the heat of the day when it was time to turn back, and always, it seemed, they emerged from the thicket just as one mother or another stepped through the door to call for them. The girls would sip tomato soup, eat sandwiches cut long-ways like wings, and with a nod were dismissed into the woods again, only to return for supper.

This particular morning, however, the girls had walked very deep into the woods, deeper than ever before. Twice, Isabelle had begged Ellie to turn back, but then a squirrel had leapt between trees, a bird had lifted from a branch, and home had been forgotten. They followed the animals until their bellies twisted beneath their shirts and hunger urged them home.

But where was home? They looked around. The woods were unrecognizable. Every tree, each rotted log and bend of root, was new. Moss furred the forest floor, and toadstools hiccupped from the moss, velvety and unbroken, as though no animal or man had passed through this part of the woods before.

Isabelle cried, and Ellie hit her. There were, after all, many things to eat in the woods. The woods would sustain them. So they found raspberries and ate them. They found a stream and drank from it. And, following the stream, they came upon a clearing.

#

The clearing was not wide, its reach that of two, three girls laid on their backs, heel to head. It was a circle of trampled grass littered by black twigs, a clearing unremarkable in every

respect, save one. What was interesting about this clearing was what it held, and what it held was a red fox.

Never before, except in picture books, had the girls seen a red fox. They had seen the sly, orange variety. Those popped up often in their county. More than once, an orange fox had slithered from Isabelle's mother's hen house, its face a fireworks of wings. And, once, Ellie's father had shot an orange fox dancing in the street, its mouth busy with suds like an overworked horse.

But a red fox was a new and marvelous thing. Its coat was thin, the hair brittle looking, and its tail was black-ringed, the tip thick, white as unskimmed milk. The fox lay on its back. Its legs, three of them, hung stiff in the air, paws bent like the curled tongues of coat hangers. It was, to the girls, as though the fox had been pedaling an upside-down bicycle when someone had paused the movie and pulled the bicycle away.

The fourth leg was the crooked leg. It did not hang in the air but hugged the grass. A metallic half-moon gripped the leg like an enormous pair of silver dentures. Up the leg a ways, a band of white marked where the fox's fur and skin appeared to have been whittled away, whittled to the bone.

Here was a curious situation. Why a fox should sleep on its back, should let someone tattoo its leg in this way, why it should lie with its leg between teeth? But, of course, the girls' fathers hunted. Springs, trees bent with the weight of bucks tethered and spinning, necks open over buckets. And so the girls recognized death for what it was, that other kind of sleep.

In the clearing, the girls approached the red fox. They stroked its head, its black whiskers and the white stripe of its muzzle. Ellie followed the stripe down the neck of the fox to where it widened into the white of the animal's belly. There, a surprise. The skin of the fox *rippled*. It

was, to Ellie, as when her father would lift the blue, hole-punched lid from a plastic tub before fishing, the feeling the pink things made on her palm tunneling through the soil inside. It was just that way. Through the stiff fur, through the cool, taut skin, she felt life, the tumble of little ones warm inside. She pressed Isabelle's hand to the spot, watched her eyes widen, and then all four hands were on the body, feeling and rubbing, then falling still.

The girls were not old, but they knew enough. They knew body parts by their names, both vulgar and proper, and they knew, when bodies came together, just where those parts went. And though they had yet to feel the first, hot stirrings in their abdomens, they had seen horses, seen chickens, had known, in the seeing, what was happening and what, done right, could come of the coupling. Thus, they knew the ripple for what it was, knew that, one way or another, the little foxes must come out.

#

In their play, the girls often imagined themselves princesses. The woods were where one went to become royalty, to care for the denizens of the kingdom, while home was the place to which one returned when one wished to be cared for. The girls would not have thought to express the situation in such terms. Nevertheless, these were the terms of the situation.

In the woods, then, the girls were no longer Isabelle and Ellie, but Princess Isabella and Princess Ella. In dreams, in games, in the woods, the girls were accompanied by a staff of friendly animals, rabbit and deer and squirrel and quail, all of whom spoke and allowed themselves to be ordered around by the princesses. Often, the animals were naughty and needed to be spanked. The girls were also accompanied by a prince, Prince Samuel, a boy with red lips and bright eyes, a boy shared by the girls in the way that the girls shared all things—toys, clothes, the last cookie pulled from the cookie jar and halved. Never had it occurred to the girls

that there might be a prince apiece. One prince was sufficient. Like the animals, he took orders, and, as with the animals, a spanking was sometimes required.

Never before had the girls seen a red fox, and never before had the boy-prince appeared to them in the woods. Or, to say that never before had he appeared would be wrong. Certainly, the prince had appeared. Today, though, the prince *appeared*. His movements were not hazy, imagined. The woods moved to admit him, and then he stood before them. He was the prince of their imaginations, but real, *really* real.

Though the boy had the prince's eyes, his lips, he was not dressed as the girls had pictured him dressed. The boy-prince wore blue overalls with copper-colored buttons. His shirt was that shade of tan that indicated the material had once been white. His hair was cut close to his head and his eyebrows had been sheared. The girls knew this meant lice. Both had had lice, but both found it rather distasteful that a prince should allow himself to become the victim of such a common, un-princely pest. In the clearing, the prince stood very still. He breathed in and he breathed out and he watched the girls. His mouth worked as though to say something very important, but the first word was swallowed up by the crash of the King.

Limbs snapped. Bramble flattened, and then the King was among them in the clearing. The King was impossibly tall. He was long of beard and prodigious of gut and his eyes shone like buckshot. Dressed in white and red, he might have been mistaken for Santa Claus, except that his beard was red and his eyes were not the kind eyes of Saint Nick. They were the eyes of a man forced to lop off many a head in order to maintain the peace of his kingdom.

Never before, in play, had the girls imagined a king. Had they, the king they imagined would have been adorned in robes, a crown for his head, a scepter for his hand. This king carried no scepter. He wore red pants and boots of animal skin. The boots reached his knees and laces

coiled the boots like snakes. The tops of the boots were fox-furred. His shirt was red and white and black. It was pink where the red and white met, and gray where the white and black met, and blood-colored where the black and red met. The word for the pattern was *plaid*, the word for the shirt *flannel*, but these were not the girls' words, and so the girls thought of the shirt as a checkerboard, pretty and precise and not a little hypnotizing. The man's face hung in folds, as though fishhooks bit into his chin and tugged, and fitted to the man's head was a covering like a coonskin cap, only the skin was the skin of a fox and the tail that hung between the man's shoulders was a fox's tail.

The King surveyed his surroundings, and then his eyes fell upon the girls. His eyes met the girls' eyes and burrowed into them like grubs, and here the girls felt a bob in their heads, a smoldering in their chests. The prince was their prince, but this king was not their king. He was a king, surely, but not theirs, for, had he been theirs, they would not have wanted to run. No, he was some other king, a king rare as the red creature asleep at their feet—a king of foxes.

For a long time, nobody moved, and then the Fox King asked the girls where were their parents. The girls said nothing.

The Fox King asked the girls when they had last eaten, and the girls shrugged. Their mouths, they knew from looking at one another, were berry-stained, their shirtfronts wet from the churn of the stream.

The Fox King asked whether the girls were hungry. They were, but Isabelle would not say it, so, at last, Ellie whispered, "Yes."

The Fox King then fitted his boot over the half-moon of bright teeth. The mouth unclamped, and the teeth, those perfect triangles, let go the leg. The boy hefted the fox by its armpits and slid the animal free from the teeth. Lifted, the fox's head did not loll. It was

suspended, stiff as the end of an ironing board. Only the tail sashayed in the breeze. (And, here, you've caught me once again. *Sashay* would no more be the girls' word than *conciliatory* or *riboflavin*. Nevertheless, for our purposes, the tail sashayed.) The Fox King knelt to receive the fox from the boy-prince. He frowned, turning the animal in his hands, then he held the fox's stomach to his face. He closed his eyes and pressed his cheek, then his ear, hard, very hard to the belly of the animal.

He smiled and his teeth were green.

"Follow me," he said. "We will find your parents. But, first, we shall eat."

The girls, being girls, were trusting of adults—parents especially—and, though they did not trust this man, they considered the boy who stood, hands in pockets, looking up at the man, this prince looking up at his king, and each girl worked hard to imagine what bad could possibly befall her when nothing bad, it seemed, had befallen the boy. And, coming up with nothing, both followed man and boy across the clearing and into the woods.

#

They walked and walked. In one place, the woods grew thick, very thick, as though made up not of trees but of a single tree with many, many trunks. Times, limb and leaf blotted out the sun. More than once, the girls dropped to their stomachs and followed the Fox King through brambles and beneath low-hanging branches tangled by vines. By the time they reached the second clearing, the girls were very tired, arms and legs aching from the burrs and thorns, their skins calligraphies.

The house in the clearing was a small one. It was not brick and wood, like the girls' houses. No, this house was built of mud and stone. It looked the way the girls imagined the house of the third little pig must have looked, only less sturdy. Had the third little pig lived in

this house of stone, the wolf no doubt would have huffed and puffed and eaten them all. The house—the stones were long and gray, river stones, and not stacked like hands, but piled, crowded together. Without mud to keep them up, surely the stones would have tumbled, as though the mud were magic and magic held the house up. A stone chimney rose crooked like the fourth leg of the fox from the house, and smoke twisted crooked from the chimney.

Into the house they went, the Fox King first followed by the boy followed by Ellie followed by Isabelle. Inside, the house was all one room and very small. There was a large pit for the fireplace. Settled into the pit was a black cauldron and beneath the cauldron white coals that ringed the cauldron red. One half of the room was a table and cupboards and many pots and pans and knives in wooden blocks. The other half was a dresser and a bed, the headboard carved into the shape of two foxes wrestling, a bird between them, a pheasant. Stretched on the floor, at the foot of the bed, was the skin of a fox—all of it—the paws, the face, the thick tail, all but the eyes. Brown stones fitted the holes where the eyes belonged.

The bed itself was piled with orange skins, the pelts of a hundred foxes stitched together, though with no real care, so that a snout peeked out here, a paw clawed there, the quilt an almost-quivering puddle of foxes freed of meat and bone. The girls watched the bed and it did not move. But, when they looked away, from the corners of their eyes, they could have sworn they saw the quilt squirming.

There was no bed for the boy.

The Fox King moved quickly now, pulling a long knife from a butcher block. He rested the fox on the table.

“A red fox,” he said. “A very special fox for our very special guests.”

Then, with the tip of his knife, The Fox King unzipped the belly of the fox. The insides did not spill out. The belly opened like a purse, and the king reached in. What he pulled out were six sacs, smooth and wet. Dropped to the table, some of the sacs wriggled like fat worms. Others were still. The still ones looked to the girls like cocoons—gossamer, velvet—like what they'd found hung from the porch railing and torn open to find the black and yellow inside. They'd unfurled the antennae, unfolded the soft, damp wings, but the butterfly had never taken flight, and the next day, on the railing where they'd left it, they'd found only a shimmery, golden dust.

The Fox King moved to the cauldron, pulled a rag from a hook on the wall, and lifted the pot's lid. He stood beside the fire, and soon the room had filled with the scent of clover and thyme, of wildflowers and of honeysuckle and fresh earth. There was a smell like rot, like leaves raked into piles, and there was a buttery smell like cornbread crumbled into cold milk. The smell that was all of the smells was wonderful, and the girls' hunger doubled.

Now the boy, without instruction, carried the first of the six pouches to the cauldron and dropped it in. He repeated the ceremony twice, then he returned to the table. The three that remained were the three that wriggled. It had not escaped the comprehension of the girls that what moved inside each pouch, what pushed to get out, was the body of a young fox, nor had it escaped their imaginations what might happen should these bodies be dropped into the bubbling cauldron. What they were coming to understand, the girls, was an idea faraway-seeming as the most distant star, but it moved toward them, the star, racing their way and zeroing in at the speed of thought, which, after all, is a speed so many times faster than the speed of light.

Blood-slick on the table, the foxes pawed at their bags to be free, and it struck the girls that the Fox King was also the King of Death.



The girls thought, then—thought back to two summers past when each had lost her Grandpappy to a heart attack—and the girls wondered, if there was a King of Foxes who was also the King of Death, whether there wasn't a King of Grandpappys. They considered last month, when the ground had puckered like a kissing mouth, and their fathers' friends, ten of them, had been lost. Was there, then, a King of Coal Miners? And, if there was, then certainly there must be a King of Coal Miners' Canaries, in which case there would have been a King of Dogs Who Chased Cars and a King of Butterflies Too Soon Un-cocooned and a King of Little Girls Lost in the Woods.

The King of Death, then, went by many names and many faces, and who could say whether one king was not also another? If he could unzipper the belly of a fox, then who was to say that this king, this very king, could not unzipper their own?

The girls knew then that they must run. But running meant leaving the foxes, meant leaving the boy who was not a prince at all, but a servant of Death, perhaps Death-in-Training.

The boy's hands hovered over the table, trembled, and the King called to him, sweetly.

“Bring them to me,” he said.

The boy's hands shook hard, and the King growled. “Bring me the ones that move!”

The boy leaned into table and a pouch slithered into his cupped hands. It turned and would not be still. But the boy was still.

The King roared. “Bring me my dinner!” His mouth twisted beneath his beard, but the boy would not move. He held the unstill thing close to him, cradled it in the crook of his arm.

The girls moved forward, Ellie first, for in all things she was bold, and Isabelle second, for in all things she was timid. Each took a fox into her hands and marveled at the way it slithered, jellylike, in its warm, diaphanous bag.

“I will have my way!” the King bellowed, but by now his mouth was pulling in many directions at once. The lips tugged, and the mouth opened, and the face unfolded until the mouth had swallowed the face and the head had turned inside out. The fox-skin cap slipped to the floor. The body shuddered and collapsed like dropped clothes. And, from the pile, from the tangle of boots and pants, flannel and flesh, from the hole in the neck where the head had sunk like a deflated balloon, from the midst of all of this leapt a fox, crimson and sleek, the most beautiful fox the children had ever seen.

This new fox—its fur glowed like chrome and its breast shone like white sand. The fox curled before the fire and, following some instinct the children couldn’t have put into words but trusted the way they trusted their mothers—the way you trust love when it enters a room—the children set what was in their arms before the fox who licked each bag open and licked clean what sprang free. The red fox licked and nuzzled and cleaned, and then she fell to her side, and the little ones took to her and drank until they were full, and, when they were full, the four foxes curled together and slept.

By now, the girls were very tired and very, very hungry, and so was the boy. He had been a servant of Death for almost as long as he could remember. But there had been another time, a time before this, distant but real, when he, like the girls, had had a mother and a father of his own. The girls spoke of their homes, and the boy nodded, for he’d had one of those too, a home and a bedroom and a bed all his own. He’d been in the woods a long time, but not so long he didn’t remember his way out.

He would lead them home, the girls first, into the arms of fathers who would leave their faces black with kisses, into the arms of mothers who would know that the girls were too old to

be rocked and who would rock them still. And the girls would be given big dinners and be drawn bright, warm baths, would be kissed more and rocked more and tucked into bed.

And then the boy would find his way home. The house would be darker than he remembered, the man and woman at the door older and looking sadder, sad because they had waited a long time, so long that they hoped now not for the return of a boy but for the return of a shirt, a shoe, evidence any that once a boy, their boy, had passed through this world. They would look on him sadly, would look and then watch him, until, unbelievably, he would speak and in a word become their boy. He would be the answer to an already forgotten prayer.

## THE HEAVEN OF ANIMALS

Dan Lawson had made the trip before. After he discovered that his boy, Jack, was gay and threw him through a living-room window, after Dan's family left him, after he got sober and worked for years at redeeming himself in the eyes of his son—the language of regret transformed to checks that covered Jack's college tuition—he'd made the trip. Jack had taken a degree in marine biology and then a position researching ocean life on the Pacific coast. Dan rented a moving van, and, towing Jack's car, they had driven the three long days to California. Now, 10 years later, he would make the trip alone.

That afternoon, Jack had called from La Jolla to say he'd be dead any day now. Someone was with him, but what he really wanted was Dan at his side, and could he maybe come, and soon?

The phone shook in Dan's hand like a live fish. His thoughts hurdled toward cancer, the scourge that had ravaged his parents, pushed friends into fresh graves, and finally taken the life of Lynn, his ex-wife and Jack's mother, a woman who, like her son, had been, if not too good for this world, then too good, certainly, for him.

But the problem wasn't cancer.

"I've got a pretty bad case of pneumonia," Jack said. His voice was raspy, unrecognizable. He paused between sentences to catch his breath.

"I don't understand," Dan said. He imagined the worst, and Jack raced to meet him there.

Jack said, "I've got a pretty bad case of AIDS." He told Dan about the hospitals. He told him about the drugs that had kept him alive for years and might have given him more, many more, had he not waited so long to seek treatment.

"I'm not the first to think if I ignored it, it would go away," he said. "I've killed men. I know I have. What I've done is unforgivable."

For years, Jack had suspected and been afraid to tell until Marcus, a friend, had guessed and made him get tested. "The body's bad at keeping secrets," Jack said. "This disease, it tattoos its name on you in bruises."

He'd traced the illness back to his high-school history teacher. He had been 17, impressionable, and the man had taught him everything but responsibility. Now, 15 years later, the disease had run its course.

The line was quiet, and Dan fought to fill up the silence. "I'm sorry," he said.

Three days a week, Jack said, Marcus collapsed his wheelchair into the back of his car, drove him the half hour to San Diego, and wheeled him into the room where a technician waited to ease a needle between his ribs and pull pints of fluid from his lungs. But Jack had had enough of that. He would keep going only if Dan would come, after which he looked forward to drowning quietly in his sleep. He apologized for the morbidity of the confession, but not its directness.

Dan couldn't speak. He felt untethered. He held on to the phone, tight, as though to let go might cause him to float away.

Jack said, "I understand that I'm asking you to come to terms in minutes with something I've been coming to terms with for years."

That word, *years*. Dan winced to hear it. He brought a hand to his damp forehead.

Not so long ago, he'd helped Jack set up his office and move into the house in La Jolla. Impossible that a decade could pass, *like that*, without visit or invitation.

Jack was silent for so long, Dan worried the line had gone dead.

"I'm here," Jack said.

How extraordinary to think that—together, crossing the country—the virus had been with them even then, that already it had made a nest in the boy's guts without their knowing. How long, then, had Jack known? How long had he known and said nothing? And, if he had said, would Dan have moved to be near him? What did fathers *do*?

He would have tried harder, that at least.

"I have to go," Jack said, and before Dan could protest, he was gone.

That night, Dan left his house and crossed the highway and walked down to the familiar shoreline. He watched the still, cold waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Two men sat on the beach. One chopped up a bonito for bait. The silver fish came apart in fat, red chunks, and the sand bloomed pink beneath it. The other man baited three-pronged, baseball-size hooks with the flesh and cast the bait as far as he could into the surf. The men had rigged four poles in stands in the sand.

Jack was no fisherman. Dan had taken him once, but the boy had cried at the catch of the first fish. He worried over the fish's welfare, the silver hook caught in the jaw. Standing beside the livewell, looking in, he'd wept until Dan dipped a hand in, caught the fish by its middle, and returned it to the water.

Jack would grow up that way, sensitive, in love with the world above water and below. As adults, those rare times they spoke on the phone, their conversations circled back, inevitably, to Jack's work, his study of an endangered species or his latest tide-pool discovery. Jack's

favorites were the seals that watched him work. He spoke of them often, their playfulness, their curiosity, how, on a hot day, they blanketed the rocks and basked. *Like marble*, he said once, *like stones curled over stones*. And, from his chair, elbows propped on a kitchen table 3,000 miles away, Dan had seen them, the animals and the rocks, the sight startling him, like a drawer flung open to an intimacy of spoons.

On the beach, a pole bowed. Dan moved closer. The man with the pole dug his heels into the sand. The line unraveled in a *whirr*. The second man hurried across the beach, pulling in the other lines. “Black tip?” the man called.

“Bigger,” the other said. The spinner screamed as the shark pulled more and more line. If it did not tire, Dan knew, the line would run out and release, the shark swimming away, a mile of filament tracing its wake.

But the line did not run out. The hum subsided into the steady crank of the reel.

Dan imagined the men landing a 10-foot bull shark, the beast silvered by moonlight, thrashing the sand.

He did not stay to see it. Instead, he walked down the beach to a bar and ordered a scotch, neat. He stared at the tumbler a long time. The drink would be his first in ... forever, since he'd stood, drunk and disbelieving, in the glassy flowerbed over the body of his son, Lynn screaming for the other boy to call 9-1-1.

His deepest grief. His greatest shame. An act for which no conceivable penance existed. With the last tuition bill covered and Jack tucked away, as far from his father as he could get, Dan recognized that the thing he wanted most in the world was a thing he'd never get, and so he'd given up hope for forgiveness. A friend had suggested that perhaps Dan was already forgiven. That by taking his money, begging his father's help, the boy had relented—these,

concessions of something like love. The idea was almost as believable as it was untrue. For Jack had not asked out of love. He had asked out of necessity. The calls for help, when they came, were frantic. Jack had gotten into college but couldn't pay. He'd found work, but his ride had fallen through and he had to be in California by week's end. Dan was a last resort, always. He'd known this. He'd known this and not cared, just as he knew that a decade of Christmas cards and the occasional phone call from California were born of nothing greater than a son's sense of obligation to his father.

Tonight, though. Tonight presented something new—a chance, final, but full with possibility. And just because forgiveness was a thing he didn't deserve, that didn't make it not worth chasing. Only the entirety of a country was between them. He couldn't catch the lost years, but he could cross the country.

From a pay phone at the bar, he called his son. He said, "Of course I'll come. I'll leave in the morning, first thing," and Jack thanked him and hung up.

Dan returned to the counter, paid, and passed the tumbler, still full, to the man on the stool beside him before walking back up the beach and home.

Near sunup he fell, at last, to sleep.

#

And woke late. He cursed himself then, and again when the car wouldn't start. The car was old and prone to breakdowns. It overheated. It stalled. It threw belts the way a dog shakes off water.

He checked the starter, then, relieved, moved to the shed. He pulled a battery down from its shelf. The battery was new, stolen from the garage. The job had never paid well, but the work was easy. He changed oil mostly, a simple service for which people handed over startling sums



for the sake of clean hands. The garage kept poor track of inventory, and over the years he'd lifted car parts and merchandise to the tune of several thousand dollars.

He'd called Steve to say he'd be gone a while, maybe weeks. "Not if you want a job when you get back," Steve had said, and Dan said that Steve could go fuck himself. He wouldn't sit around St. Pete's rotating tires while his boy lay dying on the other side of the country.

He wasn't really mad at Steve. Steve didn't know he had a son. No one did. Already, he felt the hand on his shoulder, Steve's apology upon his return. For days, the men would work in respectful silence, then, gradually, at break or in the pit, the jokes would sneak back in, the elbow nudges, talk of women and how best to get them into bed. Steve would be the last to forget. He might say, "If you ever want to talk about it," and both men would understand that he did not mean it.

Midmorning, the car cranked and Dan left town. In his trunk, he carried oil filters, belts, another battery, talismans against any force that might impede his progress. By noon, he'd traded I-75 for I-10, the interstate that would carry him west, a straight shot through six states, until, north of Tucson, he took I-8. He'd follow the signs to San Diego, then head north to La Jolla. He wouldn't need a map. He knew the drive as though he'd made it not a decade, but a day, before.

#

The bridge was rust-colored and seemed to rattle beneath him. Beyond the bridge, a sign announced the state line, and the sun sank into the highway. He was suspended: below him, the Pearl River churned, muddy as chocolate milk. Above, the sky squatted, pink and orange, the color pulled east across the blue, as if smudged by a thumb.

He crossed the water and pulled his car to the side of the road. He had not stopped in hours, and his sides ached with soda. He followed a path through tall grass and down a steep

embankment to the water's edge. Cars flew overhead. Trucks roared. He unzipped and pissed into the Pearl. The current surprised him, the water rushing by, filmy, its surface like burnt plastic.

Downstream, a boy sat beneath the bridge watching him. Embarrassed, Dan zipped up and walked over. The boy was young, 7 or 8, his face black, his mouth drawn in a frown. He sat on an overturned plastic bucket and held a cane pole in his hands. A line ran from the tip of the pole to the water. A blue length of nylon ran from a loop at the boy's ankle and into the river. At the end of the blue line, the silver sides of a few small fish spun in the current. The boy wore dirty jeans, cuffed at the knee, and a torn white T-shirt. Across its front, in tall black letters, the shirt read: THE END IS NEAR.

"Sir," the boy said, "you just peed on my fish."

"I didn't see you," Dan said. "I'm sorry."

The boy watched him, then the water. Dan didn't know where they stood, whether the boy had accepted his apology. The river rolled by.

"Here," he said. He pulled his wallet from his pocket and a \$5 bill from the wallet. The boy scrunched up his face.

"Man," he said, "what do I look like to you?"

Dan shook his head. He returned the money and wallet to his pocket. The shoreline held a rind of foam. He nudged the foam with his tan work boot's toe. A chunk let go and floated away.

And then the boy was up. The pole's tip disappeared into the water. He turned the pole in his hands, winding the line around the cane. Something large splashed at the water's edge, a flash of gills.

The fish followed the cane up and out of the water and landed, flopping, on the bank. The boy straddled the fish, pulled the hook from its mouth, then stood and held it out. It was a bass, a largemouth, five or six pounds, big and gleaming. Its dorsal fin unfolded, webbed, against the sky, and its stomach hung, white and distended, between the boy's hands. It was a beautiful catch.

Dan reached forward. He meant only to trace the fish's side; to run a finger along the signature pinstripe, eye to tail; to feel the cool, smooth slime. But at his hand's approach, the boy pulled the fish back. Without a word, he dropped it into the river. The fish hit the surface with a terrific smack and was gone.

The boy waded into the water and the river made wishbones around his ankles. His small catches darted, pulling futilely at their tether. He bent and let the current run over his hands, then dried his palms on the seat of his pants.

"Why?" Dan asked.

"Sow," he said. "Belly full of eggs."

Dan stared at the boy, his worn clothes, his gaunt face. Ribs hugged his stomach on either side.

Dan said, "But you're fishing for food."

"I throw her back now, next year I'll have more fish to catch."

The boy returned to the shore, knelt, and unfastened the stringer from his leg. He righted his bucket and dropped the line of fish into it. A few flapped their protest against the bucket's dry bottom. The boy stood and, with bucket and pole, made his way up the hill toward the highway. Dan followed. He wished suddenly that Jack could meet this kid. He would have

admired the boy, his sense of—what was it—*ecology*? No, it was more than that, a kind of animal morality. He still couldn't believe it. The boy had thrown the fish back.

“What does it mean?” he asked. “Your shirt?”

The boy walked on but stopped at the top of the hill. Behind him, cars raced into Louisiana.

“*The end is near*,” Dan said. “What does that mean?”

The boy looked confused. “It means what it says,” he said.

“You mean, like biblically. Like the apocalypse?”

The boy shrugged. “I seen Him,” he said. “Sometimes, when I'm under the bridge, I look up and He's coming over the water, walking just like you or me.”

Dan waited for more. He watched the river, but he couldn't see it. He couldn't imagine a man, anybody, crossing the water, not the way he could when he closed his eyes and saw Jack's seals.

When he turned, the boy was already up the road. Dan watched until he was a speck against the sun. Then the sun dipped below the horizon, and the boy followed.

#

Passing through Baton Rouge, Dan thought of the night when, miraculously, Jack was a voice on the phone. After five years, Jack was through with LSU. He had his degree and, now, a job. His voice was no longer a boy's, and Dan's heart broke to hear it.

They met at a restaurant near campus. Jack did not hug him, but stepped forward and shook his hand. Dan had braced himself for anything. He'd expected someone meek, effeminate, the teenage Jack, who, for a time, Dan had forgotten how to love. But this Jack was tall and

muscled, with a tanned face and copper-colored arms. He had a good, strong chin that reminded Dan of his own. He wore a sensible haircut.

Still, some things set Jack apart. Not the way he talked or dressed, not exactly, but a hiccup in his step, or the way his arms hung at his sides, or his habit of bringing one hand to his face when he spoke. He ordered a meal off the menu that would have been Dan's last choice, and, in conversation, used words at whose meanings Dan could only guess. He was changed. Dan could not say whether for the better, and the journey began like a foot, the truck's cramped cab a new boot, the men pressed like toes, close, each too close to the other.

The first day, they did not speak. They listened to the radio and took turns at the wheel. At each stop, Dan checked the hitch that joined Jack's car to the back of the van. At a Texas motel, they took separate rooms. The second day, though, Jack told Dan about his studies and Dan discussed work at the garage, and that night they shared a room. By the third day's end, navigating the mountains of Southern California, the boot's leather had stretched, and they flexed, they laughed, breathed easy. Jack even asked Dan's advice on taxes and car repair.

They hit the ocean too soon. Dan did not want the trip to be over. He did not want to say goodbye. But he was not asked to stay, so the next day, with Jack's belongings secured and the moving van returned, he stepped onto a plane. Had he been asked when he would see his son again, he'd have said *soon*, sure he'd see Jack before long. But *before long* had turned into 10 years, and Dan couldn't explain it.

He might, in those rarest, most honest of moments, have confessed that he'd been afraid, scared of what closeness required—an acknowledgement of boyfriends, lovers, of a life he didn't want for his son. He'd wanted to appreciate Jack's *other* qualities, the kind heart, the elegant mind. But he had so many aspects of Jack to contend with, so many Jacks: the Jack who was gay

and the Jacks who made up his son—the baby in the cradle; the toddler crouched, laughing, beneath the kitchen sink; the boy on the lawn—sunshine and the haze the sprinklers made, the water a mist, then steam, before it hit the ground—and Dan could not reconcile the one with the rest.

He'd hoped to learn, in time, to take Jack as he was, to not have to cut a phone call short, afraid of what he might hear, or who—a voice in the background, a man on the line, listening in.

He'd hoped to learn, in time, been certain there was time, always more time.

He drove on, past billboard-strewn Baton Rouge, across a wing of the Mississippi wide as memory, through Lafayette, past green fields and black swamps, and on, and on, toward Texas.

#

Late in the day, he reached the rest stop outside Lake Charles. They'd taken their first break here. Jack stepped out of the van, stretched, and his spine marked his shirt like links in a chain. The hem lifted, and Jack's back was as dark as his arms. His skin was that of a man who spent his days not under cars, but on boats and knee-deep in waterways, bent to net specimens. Dan felt something at the sight of it, a pain, dull and deep, and another seeing the hairs—light, feathery—that crossed the hollow where back meets waist. The fall from the window had broken Jack's arm, and the hairs had come out of the cast curly, elbow to wrist, a living nest.

Dan counted his cash. The first trip, business had been better, gas cheaper. He'd have to be careful. He had no savings to fall back on—nothing but the house and the car, both so far gone as to be of no real value. He bought two bags of chips from a vending machine, ate them leaning against the car, then found a phone booth, the old-fashioned kind with windows and a door that closed.

The man named Marcus answered the phone.

“How is he?” Dan asked.

“He’s sleeping,” Marcus said, and his voice was like hot gravel pressed to a fresh road.

“Today wasn’t terrible. But every day is different. Each day’s a surprise.”

Dan asked whether he was in a lot of pain, and Marcus said that he was.

“But he won’t show it,” he said. “He’s being brave. He won’t take the morphine.”

Dan understood what Marcus meant, that Jack was waiting for him, that Jack needed him there faster, needed him now.

And how would Jack look when he saw him? He pictured a skeleton, bones draped in bedsheets, eyes swollen in their sockets, yellow as yolks.

“Make sure he eats,” Dan said, and Marcus said, “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Food means nothing. We’re way past food.”

The man on the phone was not on Dan’s side. He was dangerous, but he was all Dan had. He was the one keeping Jack alive, and so Dan would have to be careful.

“Just tell me when you’ll be here and how I can reach you,” Marcus said.

Dan promised to be there in two days. He would call along the way, whenever he stopped, wherever he found a pay phone.

He thought Marcus was coughing before he knew he was laughing.

“Hello to the 21st century,” Marcus said. “Cell phones and airplanes. These are not new things.” And then Dan heard a screech, and then a recorded voice. The voice asked him to deposit more money. He patted his pockets for coins, then hung up.

Behind the wheel, he considered pulling away, driving all night and the rest of the following day. He had come 900 miles. He still had far to go. He’d need caffeine, lots of it, or he could try to score a few turnarounds at a truck stop. He shut his eyes. The headrest was warm on

his neck. He could almost see Jack beyond the windshield, stretching, stretching, his fingers tangled in sunlight, ready for takeoff.

#

Raindrops came through the open window and pelted his shoulder. It was early, still dark. Dan rolled up the window, then ran through the rain to the restrooms. He stood beneath an overhang, watching the water come down. He dreaded the day ahead, the monotony of the road, the cramped gas stations and the blank faces of the women and men who worked the registers. And he was afraid. He feared that his tires, leather-smooth, would run off the road. He feared that the wipers, which rattled and slapped even in light rain, would seize and leave him blind in the downpour. And the one true fear, what the other fears suggested, was that he might not reach Jack in time.

Today, he would have to drive faster, go farther, and he did, until the silver smolder of the diner on the hill compelled him to exit. No cars filled the spaces in front of the diner, but a blue neon sign in the window glowed *OPEN*.

The diner was smaller than he remembered. They'd stopped here the first night, before finding a place to sleep. A gas station, long boarded up, stood in the adjacent lot. The vast absence of anything else extended as far as he could see.

Inside, Dan took a seat at the counter. Across the empty diner was the booth where they'd sat, Jack stacking sugar packets into spires until the food came. When they'd left, Jack said he'd forgotten something and ran back in. Through the window, Dan watched his son add a few bills to the tip he'd left, an embarrassment that made him feel cheap, accused. He wished Jack had just come out and said it. But Jack was not his father's son. Given discretion and confrontation,



Jack would always choose discretion. Between these, Dan imagined a third way to be, but neither of them had ever been good at in-between, each already too much of himself.

Through an opening in the wall, Dan could see into the kitchen. A man in a paper hat stood at the grill. He pressed bacon with a steel spatula. Before he'd learned cars, Dan had done this work. He came home nights stinking of lard and lemon-scented cleaners. Now, most days, he smelled of grease and gasoline, which was okay. Garage smells didn't bother him the way the restaurant had, how the stink clung to your clothes, how it combed itself into your hair.

"Annie will be with you in a minute," the man said, without looking up.

Dan pulled a red menu from a greasy rack fastened to the laminate countertop. The menu was the kind with pictures in place of descriptions. Grainy photographs advertised the Hungry Man Special, the Lumberjack Breakfast, and the Ultimate Combo. The Ultimate Combo was pancakes, toast, potatoes, eggs, and a mess of meats. He was hungry enough to eat it all.

"It's a lot of food," she said.

Annie was short and wide around the middle. She wore a blue-and-white getup and an apron, as though she belonged not here, but in a diner from Dan's youth. Her hair, blond, then brown where the roots reached out, was brushed forward in a stiff wave over her forehead. The rest fell in curls that settled on her shoulders. The bridge of her nose was wide, but her skin was smooth and unblemished, her mouth small and red. Her eyes were blue pools, and her face tapered from a high forehead to a point of chin, like an egg balanced upside down, the way you can only on the equinox. A middle-school science experiment—Jack had shown him that.

She set a napkin in front of him, then weighted it with silverware. "Coffee?"

"Please," he said. He could order the enormous meal. Jack would never know. But that thought, the not knowing, brought him no comfort.

“And toast,” he said.

“Just toast?” Annie asked.

He nodded. Her features, in spite of them, or because of them, their strange assemblage, all of them added up to something he didn't want to admit.

Her eyes did not leave his, and how much time had passed since he'd been with a woman? But she was no woman. She was no older than Jack had been when Dan had found him in the other boy's arms. Children, all of them.

Dan looked away. He coughed. He pressed his longing into a ball, returned his menu to the rack with a slap, and, with this act, jettisoned his desire—that small, round ache—into the universe.

“Just toast,” Annie called to the man in the paper hat.

The man grunted and shook his head.

Annie rattled his silverware with a mug, poured him coffee from a plastic-handled pot. She watched him with an intensity he missed from the years before he married. The way he looked now, his face, people gave him room in a crowd. Maybe it was the missing tooth, the scar that ran eyebrow to ear, or the sky that filled up an absence of earlobe. Souvenirs of his drinking days and of the fights and dares that accompanied those days. But, returning the coffeepot to its warmer, offering him a plate of toast, Annie didn't look afraid.

She smiled. “Nothing more?”

“No,” he said. “Thank you.”

She tore a ticket from her pad and tucked it under his mug, then turned and pretended to busy herself with the coffeemaker. Her apron strings were tied into a bow at eyelevel. He tried

not to stare. He ate quickly, guzzled his coffee, and left a five on the counter. He would hit the bathroom, and then he'd be gone.

But, standing at the urinal, he wasn't alone long. He smelled her first, soda and maple syrup. The door opened behind him, shut. A hand brushed his waist and took hold of him. He stiffened even as the last of the piss left him, and then she was pumping. The handle of her jaw found his shoulder and he felt her heat, her apron-front warm against the back of his pants, all of it happening fast, familiar as bad TV, practiced as pornography.

"Wait," he said, but she did not stop. Her hand found his hair, his head pulled back and back, teeth like bee stings down his neck. He spun and she fell away.

He found her on the floor, face hidden by hair, her apron a twisted, knotted thing. She was trembling.

He didn't have time for this. He knelt and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Are you all right?" he said.

The slap came hard. "Fuck you!" She screamed it. "Fucking pervert!"

Dan stood and did the front of his pants.

"Molester!"

A crash echoed from the kitchen, and Dan knew what came next. Already he saw the policeman's hand on his head, the firm push into the back of the car. His phone call, he knew who it would have to be. And how to explain? Jack, his absence, it would be unforgivable as the window. It would be worse.

The screaming did not stop. Annie squirmed and kicked.

"If I miss this," he said, but he didn't bother with the rest. He'd fought many men, knocked some unconscious, fucked up his fist with the snap of another man's nose. He'd never

so much as pushed a woman. This girl, though—he could see himself doing things. Her foot caught his shin, and, right then, he wanted to take her head between his hands and lift her from the floor. There was a hook bolted to the door, dull, but he figured he could wedge it through the back of her skull if he wanted.

“Heaven help you,” he said. “Heaven help you if I don’t make it out of here.”

His words, or the thing that thickened his words—the fury, the resolve—turned Annie’s shouts to whimpers. Wide-eyed, she watched him.

Dan moved away from the door. He felt sorry for the man, but he knew what this looked like, knew that no explanation would suffice. He planted his feet. He’d get one chance at this.

The door flew open and he threw the punch with everything that was in him. His arm was a rocket. It was a battering ram knocking down the castle door. Splinters. His fist found face, something cracked, the man was down. Annie didn’t scream. She didn’t move. The cook was out, his paper hat crumpled beneath him.

He stepped over the body. He did not look back at Annie. He moved quickly from the restaurant and into the rain. In the rearview mirror, though, pulling away, he could have sworn he caught a glimpse of the girl’s face at the window, her mouth open, tongue between her teeth, and he could not tell which it was, whether she cursed him or whether she called him back.

#

Texas was a bastard, the road unraveling in a graphite blanket of forever. Blue sky had strangled the rain, and now steam rose in waves from the asphalt, the land blurred in a chemical spill of browns and reds. He passed derricks that bobbed like birds drilling the earth for food. He passed something dead and fly-covered on the side of the road, belly full of wings where buzzards crouched, heads burrowed in the carcass.

The afternoon brought the kind of heat that clogs your head and slows your thinking. He adjusted the air-conditioning to half-blast, afraid for the car and the overheating that could leave him 30 miles or more between gas stations. The radio was fuzz, and he drove long stretches without passing another car or truck. He was all over the road. He fought sleep. On this stretch, he and Jack had traded seats often and talked to keep each other awake.

He wondered whether Jack had made the fish up.

“I won’t go back,” Jack had said. “I mean, the project was funded, and I was in the Amazon, so I can’t complain, but, Jesus, the number of things that can kill you. They have these eels there, enough volts to knock down a grown man. They have stingrays, of course, and caimans, plus the catfish.”

“How big?” Dan asked.

“Big enough that children go missing.”

He pictured it, whiskers thick as garden hoses, the mouth pried open and the body inside.

“How about piranhas?”

“Well, sure.” Jack smiled. He laced his fingers across his lap. “Really, though, their reputation overwhelms them. File them under *Misunderstood*. They’re like sharks. No open wound, you’ve probably got nothing to worry about.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Dan said, “next time I visit the Amazon.”

Jack nodded. He was waiting to talk. Dan knew Jack didn’t hear half of what he said, and he didn’t care. A week before, he wouldn’t have believed he’d be crossing the country with his boy at his side.

“What trumps them all,” Jack said, “is this parasitic fish, an inch long. What it does, it slips between the gills of bigger fish and eats its host from the inside out. Only, these fish,

sometimes they swim into people—ears, anus, whichever orifice they find first. This guy I know, Toby, the thing wriggled up his dick and ate the urethra.”

Later, Dan would blame the heat. But it was the fish, the idea, that made him pull over, leap out, and dry-heave into the weeds beside the road. In the van, Jack howled, and slapped the dash.

All those years, and Dan couldn't shake it. At times the thought snuck up on him, scaring him with its forcefulness, and he felt the fish inside him, not eating, but struggling to rip free.

Out his window, Dan watched the Chihuahua mountains rise and fall. They scraped the sky for miles where I-10 hugged the border with Mexico. The day was ending, and the land unflattened, the road surrendering to dips and bends, channels of orange and red rock. Scarred cliffs marked where dynamite had met the mountains and made way for the road. The rock rose in walls around him, earth, millions of years of it, etched in ribbons of sediment.

Another hundred miles, and he'd put Texas behind him. He drove on, fighting the fish the whole way. The sensation, when it came, rose, gut to throat, twisting, an ember in a fire, then lifting like ash.

#

New Mexico welcomed Dan into exhaustion. Night had come. He drove until he could no longer keep awake for the next exit, then pulled the car onto the shoulder of the road. The desert floor lay beyond him, a wide-open expanse of sand and sage. He navigated past a boulder, a clump of prickly pear, hands like paddles, and brought the car to rest behind a tower of rocks where he hoped he wouldn't be bothered. He drained his last jug of water. He had a bag of beef jerky from an earlier stop, and he finished that too. At a BP, he'd meant to call Jack but found

the pay phone's receiver missing, the cord frayed as though chewed through by an animal. He would have to wait until morning.

He wanted sleep, but the heat, the car, were suffocating, so he climbed onto the roof. He imagined the morning, snakes in his boots, and left them on. But his shirt he pulled off for a pillow. He lay back and let his legs hang over the windshield, heels on the hood. Above him, the stars seemed to spill out of a white rip in the night. A coyote called and was answered by another. A breeze swept his chest like a hand.

His eyes burned. He was going to make it. Against all odds, the car, the rain, the fight at the diner that might have left him in jail, he would get to his son. Gulf Coast to Pacific in three days.

*Son, he thought, stay. Stay and wait for me.*

#

The morning was an orange, peeled and held fast in a fist, pulpy and hot. Dan cursed again and kicked a tire. The car should not have broken down. He'd tended to it the whole trip, monitoring fluid levels, topping off the gas tank, keeping the air low and the coolant full. It should not have broken down, but it had.

He'd woken at first light and hit the road. At a gas station, he'd stocked up on food and water and driven on. The earth around him turned brown. The bushes were scorched, the landscape flat, calm like the surface of a sea. Ahead, the asphalt split the sea, an unbending avenue of black.

Half of New Mexico was behind him when the car first steamed and shook. An exit came into view. He took it and pulled into an Amoco station in time for the car to gasp and die with an unceremonious shudder. He waited an hour to add coolant and still the tank blew like a geyser

when the cap came off. Antifreeze gushed green, bubbled and puddled on the ground where the thirsty air licked the pavement dry in seconds. An old man stood at the window inside the Amoco. He shook his head, and Dan hated him. He knew what the man was thinking, but Dan knew everything about cars, knew this car better than any. He just hadn't known what *heat* was, not really, until today. His trip with Jack had been in May. But this was July, in one of the hottest summers on record, or so said the people on the radio. A few locals looked on from the shade of the awning that overhung the gas pumps.

“You let it cool down?” a boy called.

Dan shot him a look that could cleave meat. The boy looked away.

Hours passed, and the car would not cool down. Then, when the car did cool down, it would not start, and Dan knew that his problem was that most delicate, most temperamental of instruments: the transmission. Only the smallest part need break off and cycle through to make a mess of your machine. At the garage, they called it sudden catastrophic failure. This was their way of saying: *Get ready to fork over thousands, you're fucked.*

In the distance, over vacancies of brown, an honest-to-God tumbleweed cruised by.

The car would not be repaired, not with the money he had or in time to reach Jack. He would have to find a new way. Whatever happened, his trip could not end like this, him stranded two states away. He'd come too far. He was too close.

He found the pay phone beside the building, a steel box lashed to a cement pole that was planted between two restroom doors. Over the blue-and-white women's symbol, someone had carved *CUNT*. Over this, someone had scribbled the crude outline of a dick in black marker. It shot a thin, dark stream up the door.

To Dan's surprise, Jack picked up the phone.



“Marcus says you’ll be here tonight,” Jack said.

“That’s the plan,” Dan said. “How are you?”

“Dying,” Jack said, “*still*.” He laughed, but his voice was soft and faraway-seeming, as when, as a boy, he’d fashioned phones from tin cans coupled by a length of yarn. Then Dan heard a voice in the background and the rustle of Jack resting the phone in his lap. They argued and, when Jack returned, he sounded anxious.

“He wants to know when,” Jack said.

“Soon,” Dan said.

“Soon or *soon*?”

Dan said nothing. Jack wanted a promise he wasn’t sure he could keep. A phone book lay open on the ground. He nudged it with the toe of his boot. Its pages stood stiff, wavy in space, as though bronzed.

On the line, more argument, then Jack yelled, “He’s coming, all right? Go away.”

A door slammed, and Jack apologized. Across the parking lot, a tan Honda pulled up to the pumps, a 2005, Dan guessed. A girl got out and walked into the station.

“Things okay there?” Dan said, but Jack didn’t hear or didn’t want to talk about it. What he said next surprised Dan, the past rushing at him like a wall of water over the desert floor.

“That winter,” Jack said, “in the Florida house. All those sounds coming through the ceiling. You remember?”

“You couldn’t sleep,” Dan said. “You thought they were monsters.”

“Remember what you told me?” Jack said. “To make me sleep?”

“I don’t,” Dan said. He did but wanted to hear his son say it.

“Angels,” Jack said. “Angels in the attic.”

He'd meant only to comfort the child. An invention, like the idea of a heaven for animals, a consolation to make easier the death of the family dog.

Jack's voice sharpened. "Ten years old, and I believed you. And I wanted to see them. I thought they'd be so beautiful. But I was afraid to go up. Until the noise stopped and the stink started. One night, I got brave. I pulled the cord and climbed the ladder, and you know what I found? *Squirrels*. Dead fucking *squirrels* all over the place."

Dan remembered it well. He'd poisoned them, then collected the dead into a garbage bag, tails stiff as handles, eyes glazed in a way that filled his dreams for weeks.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean for you to—" But already Jack was speaking again.

"No," he said. "What I'm saying is, they're *here*, the angels. They weren't there, but they're here, now, in this house. I see them. Before I fall asleep, they fill up the ceiling."

Dan felt suddenly sick. He wondered whether Marcus had started the morphine, whether a fever had sunk its teeth into Jack's brain. Before his own father died, he'd claimed a troll crawled out each night from under the hospital bed to gnaw on his toes. The dying suffered delusions, Dan knew this. Still, he was sorry Jack saw things that weren't there. He wanted Jack still in the world when he arrived, awake and clearheaded. Maybe he was selfish to want it, but, when he knelt at Jack's side, he wanted his child to know who he was.

Jack was silent a long time before he said, "Dad?"

The word had not found his ear in 15 years, and Dan trembled to hear it.

"Dad, am I going crazy?"

"No," Dan said. "No, you're just fine."

"Then, they're there, what I see?" Jack's voice, it had turned to a boy's.

"They're there," Dan said. His throat ached.

“And they won’t leave?”

“They won’t leave.”

“Good,” Jack said. “I don’t want them to leave.”

“They won’t,” Dan said, “I’ll make sure of it.” And he hoped he was not mistaken.

Because the angels, if they went away, would be his fault. He’d brought them into the world, into his son’s imagination, yet he could not control what became of them. And, should they vanish, what then? What chance then at Jack’s forgiveness?

“Promise not to tell Marcus,” Jack said.

Dan promised, and the promise warmed him with what the other man didn’t know. Dan was trusted. Whatever the other man was to Jack, he wasn’t his father, wasn’t the one in whom the son placed his confidence at the end. He promised again, but Jack had already said goodbye, his words cut off with a click.

Time. The enemy had always been *time*. He walked past the Honda, dust-colored, waiting, and saw the thing he’d hoped for. He didn’t want to do it, but he had no choice, could think of no other way. Buses, taxis, these took money. Hitchhiking wasn’t new to him, but the travel was unpredictable, slow. He hurried to his car. He’d packed one bag. He pulled it from the backseat and walked, calm as he could, to the Honda. Beside the car, hoses hung from their pump, a trio of elephant trunks, wrinkled, their middles cinched by metal rings. Through the open window, the rabbit’s foot. It dangled like life from the chain, the chain from the key, the key snug in the ignition, a gift. Dan opened the door to California.

#

Except that he’d forgotten about the checkpoint.

He'd been sailing along, the car handling like a dream. He didn't have to fight the wheel to stay in his lane. He didn't have to squint past a bug-covered windshield. He'd driven the other so long, he'd forgotten what a car felt like only a few years old, 20,000 miles on the odometer.

And then the building was upon him, low on the horizon, its tower screaming several stories into the sky. It straddled the interstate, an upturned tuning fork. The station was there to weed out illegals, but Dan didn't doubt that stolen cars rode the border-patrol bandwidth. And how quickly were tags called in? He'd had the car for an hour. He could see no other roads, no way out. To turn here, make an about-face across the highway, guaranteed a cop would be on your ass in seconds. No choice but to kamikaze right into the thing.

The checkpoint was concrete, the roof blue, solar-paneled on either side of the watchtower. From the tower hung a huge and old-fashioned-looking searchlight. Along the building's front, red lights pulsed and signs ordered motorists to come to a complete stop. Ahead, orange cones funneled vehicles into two lanes. At the end of each lane, men in brown uniforms and black sunglasses either waved you on or directed you to the side of the road where more men in uniforms and sunglasses waited to interrogate or peek into your trunk.

Cars took one lane, trucks another. He followed the car ahead of him, an '80s station wagon with whitewalls and wood paneling. His heart hammered in his chest. Then, without warning, everything went sideways. His last thought: *So this is what it's like, passing out.*

He woke to the rap at his window and rolled it down. He saw himself reflected in the sunglasses of the man. He tried not to appear frightened. The man was his age, his face like cracked leather. The hint of a mustache traced his upper lip, a few days' growth.

"Sir?" the man said. Beyond, cars pulled around them and rejoined the line ahead. Above, the sky shone, sun-bright and dizzying.

“Sir, are you all right?”

Dan felt hot all over. A bead of sweat rolled into one eye, but he did not move to wipe it. The steering wheel, his hands fixed on it, he was sure if he let go he'd be out again.

“Please put your vehicle in park, step out of the car, and come with me.”

Dan followed the patrolman to a door on the side of the building. The door read *NO ENTRANCE / NUNCA ENTRADA*.

The room was small, crowded by shelves full of folders and books bound by black spirals. The uniformed man sat in the only chair. He reached into a cooler on the floor and handed Dan a bottle of water. He gestured toward an overturned milk crate. Dan sat and drank. The water and the room were warm. He drained the bottle and was offered another. He wasn't thirsty, but the drinking bought him time. He tried to think up answers to the questions that would come next—his daughter's car, married, different last name, business trip—but the possibilities were endless, and he quickly lost track of the story he meant to tell. In one corner, an electric fan buzzed. The breeze didn't make a dent in the heat.

“We see this all the time,” the man said. Dan nodded. He wondered whether the cuffs would be metal, or whether they'd use the restraints he'd seen on TV, plastic ones that sounded like zippers fastening the wrists. Prison would not be new to him. He'd done two months after Jack. He had not asked the boy to lie for him, and Jack hadn't. In the emergency room, the nurse asked what happened. Jack only shook his head, and Dan was led to a small, well-lit room. An hour later, an officer escorted him from the hospital and into his cruiser. Dan in the backseat, a metal screen between them, the cop said, “It's fuckers like you give dads a bad name. If you're not knocking the kid around, you're hitting the wife.”

Dan had never hit Lynn, or Jack before that. But he didn't argue. The whiskey was wearing off, and he could see the trouble he was in. He'd been on a bender, a week or two by then, and the sight of it, stepping into the room, Jack's face pressed to the face of the other boy, it had sent hot sparks up his spine. He'd regretted the reflex, regretted it before Jack went through the window, regretted it seeing his son still in air. He would have gone back, if he could, stopped time and stepped forward—the child suspended, aloft—would have cradled him, flown with him, dropped with him, broken the fall.

Dan sucked the water down.

"Everyday occurrence around here." The patrolman patted the cooler. "Reason we keep these around," he said, and Dan realized that the man didn't mean stolen cars, but heatstroke, dehydration.

"One for the road," the patrolman said. He passed him another bottle. "You got A/C?"

"I do," he said.

"Use it."

Dan tried not to appear in a hurry. He cracked the new bottle and took a long pull. Air bubbled up in chugs. He lowered the bottle, balanced it on his knee. Finally, he held the bottle skyward, as though to offer a toast.

The gesture sent the patrolman to the door, and Dan followed the man into the heat. He nodded at the car when he was told to *drive safe*, then pulled ahead to rejoin the line. At the checkpoint, they were no longer stopping cars. Everyone was waved through. He drove slow until the station dropped from the rearview, then his foot hit the accelerator.

Sun sinking, the weight of what he'd done settled on him. Tracking him down would be easy. They had only to run the plates or VIN from the car where he'd left it at the Amoco.

Already, his name and face had likely joined a list of the WANTED. His one chance: no way would they guess his direction. Back home, they'd have him, but that was all right. Because what he wanted, his investment in what was left of Jack's life, he'd have before heading home. Let them have him then. Locks, and throw away the key. As long as he saw his son, as long as he was given a chance at goodbye, he'd allow it, the trip back, and whatever came after.

#

Arizona loomed, a succession of boulders balanced on boulders, rocks that reached up and up, like arms, their shadows bent over the interstate, a playful, haunted geography. Catastrophe took only one rock to dislodge from its perch. Everywhere, signs warned of it, as though the driver could do anything in the face of chance and bad luck.

He hit Benson past nightfall and recognized the exit he'd been looking for. He followed the signs to the parking lot and approached the motel. The building leaned, gingerbread-colored, a gust of wind away from falling over. A billboard boasted: BENSON INN: HOME OF TED, WORLD'S LARGEST GILA MONSTER!

A Gila monster really had been there, and it had been big. Black and pink in its beadwork, its face more toad than lizard, the animal had lain curled like a question mark on a slab of slate behind an aquarium's glass walls. Its tail was a tube, its jaw the curve of a soda can.

"Venomous," Jack said.

"I thought that was just snakes," Dan said, and Jack shook his head. Then, he surprised Dan. He moved to the desk and asked for a double. "To save money," Jack said. Dan nodded, but this was big, more than money, and both of them knew it. They spent the night each in his own bed, each turned toward his own wall, not a word beyond *goodnight*—but they were together, and Dan was awake a long time, listening to the in-and-out of his boy's breath. Sometimes the

breathing caught, followed by a thick, mucousy cough. Jack would stir, sigh, then fall back to sleep, and Dan would fight the urge to turn and look.

Inside, Dan found the lobby as he'd left it, as old and worn-out-looking as the woman who worked the front desk. The skin of her face hung in folds, and her chin begged plucking. Her hair, done up in gray waves, was wispy, thin as spider's silk. A tag fastened to her shirtfront read MARGARET in red, raised print. He thought it was her, the woman who'd placed the key in his hand a decade before, but this seemed impossible, the kind of trick that comes when memory and hope collide. A row of incandescent bulbs flickered and hummed overhead. Paperback books crowded the counter. Dust coated the wide leaves of plastic plants in clay pots.

The woman named Margaret watched him a long time before she said, "Yes?"

"I'm here for Ted," he said. It was the wrong thing to say.

"We're no zoo," she said. "You want to see Ted, you have to stay the night."

He asked how much. Margaret sized him up, then looked past him to the car in the parking lot.

"Fifty," she said.

He opened his wallet. Five twenties lined the pocket. It was all the money he had left.

He offered forty. Margaret took the money and jerked her thumb at a cardboard box behind the counter. The box sat on a low table. Its corners had been reinforced with duct tape, and a pillowcase, sky blue with white stitching, lay draped where a lid should have been. He stepped past the counter and pulled the pillowcase away.

Inside, a lizard stretched from one corner of the box to the other. The creature was scaly and green, rib-thin. A ridge of black teeth traced its back like a child's construction-paper cutout



of a dragon. The box's sides were crazy with claw marks, the bottom nothing but sand and a head of broccoli, wilted and gray.

This was not Ted. This was not even a Gila monster.

"This is an iguana," Dan said. He turned to face Margaret. She frowned, shrugged, scratched her side.

"What happened to Ted?"

"Park service got him," she said. "I'm here 30 years and no one says a word. Next thing I know, this lady tells me I need a permit. Says Gila monsters are on the list. Not the endangered-species list, but, get this, the list that comes *before* the list. *Threatened*, she called it. She called Ted threatened and took him away. Said she'd see me shut down, but it was all hot air."

He waited for more, but Margaret seemed to have reached the end of the story.

"Smoking or non?" she asked.

"I'm sorry?" He couldn't understand it. The Gila monster, it should have been there to tell Jack about. "I saw Ted," he would say, and Jack, remembering, would laugh. "Remember the fish you told me about?" he'd say. "Remember the diner, how you covered the table with pink and blue towers? I stopped there, too. And this boy I met by the Pearl River, I've got to tell you about him." He needed this, needed Ted there at the bottom of the box. But Ted wasn't there.

Something had gotten fucked up. Something had gotten tremendously fucked up this time around, and here he stood, stolen car in the parking lot and the wrong fucking animal at the bottom of the box.

"Your room," Margaret said. "You want smoking?"

The aquarium was cardboard, and the cover, when it fell away, revealed nothing, no monster, only this green pet-store reject.

“Sir?” She’d almost yelled it. Her fingers drummed the desk.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I never meant to stay.”

The woman scowled. “Well, don’t think you’re getting your money back.”

“Keep the money,” he said. “Just let me use your phone.”

She eyed him, suspicious, then shrugged. “Dial 9 to get out,” she said, gesturing toward a tan phone on a corner table.

The earpiece, when it touched his face, was sticky, warm, as though it had just left someone’s ear. A square blinked red beside the buttons. He dialed Jack’s number.

Marcus answered, and Dan made no excuses.

“I’ll be there by morning,” he said. “Please put Jack on the phone.”

“Be patient with him,” Marcus said. “It’s been a bad day.”

But he didn’t know what Marcus meant. Jack sounded terrific, the best he’d been since the first call came.

“They drained the left today,” he said. “It’s great—I can *breathe*.”

He waited for Jack to ask where he was. He was prepared to tell everything, to exaggerate or lie, whatever it took, only don’t let Jack be mad at him. Except, Jack didn’t ask. If he remembered Dan’s promise to be there that night, he didn’t mention it.

“I’m in Benson,” he said. “Remember Ted?”

“Ted,” Jack said.

“The Gila monster? The hotel outside Tucson?”

Jack coughed.

“I’m making the trip,” Dan said. “Just like we made it when you moved out there.”

Jack said something, and Dan, sure he'd misheard, asked him to repeat it. Only, he'd heard right. Again, Jack said: "Mom?"

"I'm Dan," he said. "Your dad."

"Mom and I," Jack was saying, "we rented a truck this time and drove it cross-country and the lizard was there at this hotel in a tank with a rock."

"Jack," he said, but how could he tell him? How did you tell someone politely that, at the time, his mother was already dead?

"And Mom asked if she could touch it!" Jack said. He laughed, choked, laughed again. "A venomous lizard! Can you believe it?"

"Son," he said. He needed Jack to remember because, if not this, what? What did they have? Nothing else, nothing shared, nothing from Jack's adulthood but the van, the stops, their words, three days.

"How *is* old Ted?" Jack said.

Across the room, Dan watched as the pillowcase was lowered over the box. The box rattled back. Margaret stepped away.

"Fine," Dan said. "Really just fine. He's got a new cage, a big one. Lots of room for him to run around."

"I'm glad," Jack said.

"You should see it," Dan said, and he had a wild thought. Maybe he could steal his son from the house, bring him here. Or, not here, because Ted was not here, but some right place, a place to make Jack happy. They could go to the beach, see Jack's seals. They'd have to lose Marcus, and he wasn't sure how that would go over. He'd have to see the man, size him up. On

the phone, Marcus was someone not to be fucked with, but the man on the phone wasn't necessarily the man in real life.

"I have to go now," Dan said. "I'll be there before you know it."

He heard static on the other end, a rustle, then Marcus, his voice a whisper.

"He's asleep," Marcus said.

"Just like that?"

"It's what happens."

Dan couldn't believe it. He imagined Jack muffled, the man's hand over his mouth. His son, thin, weak, flailed for the phone.

Marcus began to detail Jack's condition. He implored Dan to hurry.

Dan hung up.

His eyes burned. His stomach ached. Exhaustion foamed in the back of his brain, a bottle opened too soon after shaking. Already he'd bought the room. How easy it would be to check in, to fill up his ears with a shower's roar then lie down.

But he could not do it. He had to move forward.

The highway unspooled under starlight. Dashes marked his lane like Morse code. Bone-white, they sailed past his high beams with the regularity of a metronome. Sleep's tease was strong, but he felt a tug stronger than sleep, stronger than dread or regret, than death. An invisible thread ran over mountains, over rivers and roads, up his bumper and right through the windshield. The thread caught his throat and bound, at the other end, his boy's heart. A word, *the* word, for this—it wasn't Dan's, didn't belong to him.

And so he imagined the pull as the work of water. Blue, the view from Jack's window, the Pacific a rectangle over the kitchen sink. It was water called him west—the waiting coast, the cold and silver crash of waves.

#

La Jolla was a city on a cliff, dips and hills, a trapeze flung above the bay. Trees were here, and wealth. Couples in matching sweaters walked well-groomed dogs through the crosswalks. Children in sunglasses and name-brand clothes talked into cell phones. Storefronts advertised merchandise that, on sale, cost a month of Dan's income.

He'd been a day and a night without sleep. All night he'd driven, stopping three times only. He'd gotten to where he could hit the bathroom, buy food, and pump gas in five minutes. The whole way, he'd pushed the speed limit. He hadn't slowed down, not once, not even for the armadillo he'd sent spinning over the road like a top. Now, his head swam and his eyes, when he blinked, felt sand-filled and asymmetrical, his skull small.

He sat behind the wheel of the car on the street before a row of blue mailboxes. A box on one end held a quiet surprise: a maiden name—his wife's. He did not know when Jack had changed the name or if it was official. He wondered which name the boy would be buried with, then he shook this off. Some things here were worth worrying about. His name wasn't one.

Beyond the sidewalk and up a hill, the building waited. Houses rose on either side, so close a man might stand between, reach, and touch two walls. The buildings, a street's worth, stood white and red, stucco and brick, brightly shuttered, with Spanish tile on top. The sun, just up, painted the clay roofs pink.

For too long, he'd sat, trying to catch his breath. Now he stood and swung the car door shut. No matter what awaited him, no matter what looked back at him from the bed, he would

smile. That was the first thing he would do. He would smile and he would not cry. He would kneel and, if Jack would let him, he'd open his arms.

Jack's door hung orange inside the white frame. A brass ring marked its middle. It was only a staircase away.

*Dispensation.* Was that the word for what he wanted?

And how long would he wait before he begged?

But the door, when he moved to knock, stood ajar. Dan leaned and the door opened. Inside, a kettle's curve on the stove, dishes overflowing the kitchen sink, and, rolled at the wrist, a single latex glove. Thumb tucked under, fingers splayed, it hugged the floor like shed skin. Against the linoleum, two fingers gleamed red up to the knuckle.

Beyond the kitchen was the main room. Against one wall stood an enormous saltwater aquarium, and, circling inside, a pair of striped, spine-covered fish. Their bodies glimmered brown and white in the yellow glow of the tank light, their fins silk-webbed and see-through.

The first step, once he took it, set him moving fast. He moved through the kitchen and past the room with the fish, down a hallway and toward the two bedroom doors. One door stood open, the room a study. The walls were bookcases, the shelves spilling over into piles on the floor. Among the mounds was wedged a blue blow-up mattress, its black tail plugged into a pump the size of a cylinder block. A duffel bag yawned at the foot of the bed, a red sock sprung like a tongue between unzipped teeth.

The other door was shut. He remembered to breathe. He pressed his palm to the wood, hesitant, as though to feel for a fire inside. He waited.

And pushed the door open to an empty bed, the sheets strangled into a rope that stretched to the door. Beside the bed stood an IV stand and a cluster of gray-faced, many-buttoned

machines. Wires and tubes hung disconnected along the floor. In one corner, a wheelchair lay on its side.

He felt a need, just then, to go to the chair, to right it, as though it lived, as though to lift the thing might save its life. The chair, once he had hold of it, was heavy. He tipped it up, tried to make it roll, but someone had set the brake. The floor's planks pushed back at the wheels with a sneaker's squeak.

He moved to the bed. He sat, ran his hand over the mattress. Stains the shape of continents stared back through the scrim of the fitted sheet. His knees found his chin. His head found the pillow. It was soft, and he took one corner into his mouth. He tasted salt.

He wasn't sure how long he slept before a door's slam echoed down the hall. From beneath the pillow, he could see a sliver of floor, then shoes in the doorway. They were red with white laces, a white cap on the toe, the kind he'd worn as a kid, played basketball in. He didn't have to look up to know whose shoes.

"Don't say I almost made it," Dan said.

Marcus said nothing. The feet were planted far apart.

"Just, please don't tell me how close I was."

"He died last night," Marcus said. "You weren't even close."

#

In the kitchen, Marcus boiled water. He was tall, thin, and tan, his hair dark, cropped close along the sides of his head. His sideburns touched his jaw's hinges, and his face wore stubble's mossy mask. Black crescents cradled his sockets like the bottom halves of punched eyes.

At the kettle's whistle, Marcus tipped the water into a glass. The glass was beaker-shaped and tapered at the mouth like a vase. Coffee grounds waited at the bottom. The stream hit the grounds, swirled, and steamed. Together, they made mud, and the mud rose, bubbling. Marcus fastened a lid to the lip of the glass, and the two of them watched the brown water. In the other room, the bubbler hummed. Dan imagined the fish's gill plates going in and out. Then Marcus pushed a kind of plunger into the mix and a silver disc separated the grounds from what had been brewed.

It was a miracle—the world, and his son gone, blinked from existence. How a body, breathing, turned to lungs. He pictured them, sticky, deflated, gray balloons trampled into a wet sidewalk. And still the march of days, sunrise and weather and water for coffee. Jack dead, and still beans would be dried and crushed and strained through water, and men and women would raise their mugs and read the day's news and make grocery lists and worry over coupons and wonder whether their tires were in need of rotation.

Marcus was talking oxygen, how everyone went by oxygen in the end. Oxygen or water, and, anyway, water *was* one part oxygen. Too little, too much, these were what killed you. You suffocated or swelled, dehydrated or drowned. Life was balance; imbalance, death.

*Proportion. Equilibrium.* A needle in the arm had kept water in Jack's body. A needle in the lung had kept it out. In this way, they'd kept Jack alive. In the end, his lungs filled up faster than they could be cleaned out.

Marcus poured coffee into cups and joined Dan at the kitchen table. He looked calm, and Dan couldn't stand it, how matter-of-fact he acted, as though every day your lover died and you sat and sipped coffee across the table from his father. Marcus watched the table, and Dan watched Marcus, wanting to throttle the calm from him.



“You have it too?” Dan asked.

Marcus started. Then, his face collapsed into something approaching amusement.

“Not all of us live with AIDS, Mr. Lawson,” he said. “Some do. Some live with HIV. But most of us just ... live.”

“I only thought—the two of you.”

“Friends,” Marcus said. “It only seems like more because I was here at the end.”

Dan thought of breaking the man in half. What held him back was *need*. Marcus alone knew Jack’s final hours, his words, the last look on his face.

“Did Jack—”

“—say anything?” Marcus laughed. He seemed to Dan a man who, in this life, had enjoyed very little power, a man who now relished his dominion over the last half day and what had gone on in it. Marcus was looking into his cup, but when his eyes lifted, his expression was no-nonsense.

“You want me to tell you he had some special shit saved just for you, but no such luck.” He spun his mug in his hands. The steam rose in ribbons. “The magic words were supposed to be yours. This was your last chance, and, let’s face it, you blew it.”

Dan brought his mug to his mouth. The rim was chipped, the coffee strong.

“How much did my son tell you?”

“Enough for me to know what you were to him.”

“And what was that?”

“A curiosity.” Marcus said. “Last century’s last holdout.”

The mug was hot in his hands, but Dan would not put it down.

“I was trying to get used to the idea,” he said.

“*Try harder.* The country’s growing up. Before long, no one will be left, no one to accommodate what you call *love.*”

Dan stood and launched his cup across the room. It hit and exploded. Coffee streaked the wall.

He hurried to the door. One boot was on the stoop before Marcus’s voice reached him.

“Squirrels,” he said. “I don’t know if that means anything to you, but, at the end, it’s all he talked about. Squirrels in the bed. Squirrels running up the walls.”

“Squirrels,” Dan said. He gripped the doorframe to keep steady. He locked his knees.

“The morphine,” Marcus said. “That’s probably all it was.”

“Morphine,” Dan said.

Marcus’s shoulders heaved. His head dropped. His brow touched the table.

Dan winced. The fish was there again, set loose in his gut, writhing, careening to get out. He stepped inside.

Beneath the kitchen sink, he found a roll of paper towels. He wetted one. He wiped clean the spot on the wall then picked up the china fragments from the floor. He moved to the kitchen sink. He stacked the dishes, the trays, the pans caked with burnt food, all of it, onto the counter. He let the sink fill with soapy water and dropped the dishes in. And then—because what else could he do—he began to scrub.

#

The water, when his feet finally found it, was cold. His socks were balled up in his boots, his boots lassoed by their laces and slung over one shoulder. The cold climbed his legs, and he walked until the water reached his knees.

He had worked steadily for an hour. When the kitchen was clean, he stepped outside, his stomach still writhing. He could see the beach and he walked to it.

He'd left without a word, Marcus collapsed at the table, a sentry over the dead.

Dan pushed through water, following the shoreline. The beach was not like the beach back home. The Gulf ran to sand, but, here, the shore was crowded with stones, outcroppings of rock and reef. He walked until he hit a rock wall, the water too deep to go around. Steps were carved into stone, and he followed them to a ledge where he found megaphones and signs and people gathered.

"Save the seals," one woman shouted. And a man: "Let them live in peace."

Dan pressed through the people, past a brass plaque that announced his arrival at *The Children's Pool*, to the iron banister skirting the ledge. The towering rock on which he stood reached into the ocean, where it met a concrete wall. The wall circled back like a curled arm beckoning into a bay. Below, a sandy cove lay carpeted with seals.

The seals numbered 50. He counted them, then counted them again. Half of them dozed. The others rubbed their sides and snouts with flippers or raised their heads to watch the waves. Their hides were white and black and brown, cloudy, the colors running together. Just like marble, just as Jack had said. They were small, each no bigger than a sleeping child, and their bodies threw long shadows across the sand. A boy and girl, teenagers, sat, legs crossed, not far from the seals and holding hands.

A staircase traced the ledge and wound down to the cove, but, at the first step, a woman blocked the way. The woman wore a T-shirt, white with a blue seal silhouette across the chest.

"What's the cost?" he said.

The woman laughed and he saw all of her fillings.

“Only your soul,” she said.

“I’m sorry?”

“I’m not charging admission,” she said. “I’m telling you why you need to leave the seals alone.” Her hair was long, held back in a thick braid that swung when she spoke. “One foot on that beach, and you break nature’s contract.”

Dan looked down. Beyond the seals, following the wall, footprints crossed and recrossed the sand, the autograph of an impossible dance.

“We need to preserve nature’s delicate balance.”

He hadn’t meant to make her flinch, but now Dan discovered his hand on the woman’s shoulder. He squeezed the shoulder gently, then brought the hand to his side.

“Sweetheart,” he said. “Nature has no balance. You can stand here all day. You can keep as many people off that beach as you want, but one way or another, those seals, all of them, are going to die. You and I are going to die. Because, you know what? You know what nature is?”

Her shake of head was so slight, the braid hung still.

“Nature is a fucking monster.”

The woman hugged her chest. She stepped aside, and Dan made his way down the stairs and onto the beach. The couple holding hands looked up, then returned their attention to the seals. Twenty yards away, the animals yawned and turned in the sand. One of the largest watched the sky, his head bobbing, as though forcing something down his throat.

Jack had said how sometimes seals swallowed stones. “For ballast,” he said. “The way a diver wears a belt to keep him down.” Weight controlled a dive. Men threaded belts with lead. Seals ate stones. In this way, buoyed otherwise by fat or air, both animals sank.

Dan imagined filling up his gut. He'd start small, grains of sand, pebbles polished ocean-smooth, before he wore his teeth down chewing rocks. He'd obliterate the interloper, fill himself so full of stones the fish inside him would have no place to swim, then he'd swallow more—just watch, just wait and see—more and more, enough to grind the motherfucker out of existence. Then no more churn, no fiery twisting thing.

He watched the seals, the couple on the beach. The girl stood and the boy brushed sand from her pants, then the boy stood and, hand in hand, they climbed the stairs.

Dan watched the seals a while longer, then looked past them to where the water met the sky. A line, pencil-thin, marked the place planes touched, so faint it almost wasn't a line at all. The end, the way he saw it, would be when that line lifted and the two halves crashed, a cosmic collapse. It would come, the end, when blue met blue.

Passing Fashions:

*Netherland*, the Two-Path Mentality, and the Problem of the Contemporary Book Review

Seven years ago, I was approached by the editor of a small literary quarterly to review a collection of short stories. A voracious reader, I was not, however, a reader of book reviews. I had nothing against book reviews, philosophically speaking, only avoided them for the same reason that I avoided *Siskel & Ebert*. I hate spoilers and worried that a review might poison the experience of reading a book I'd have otherwise loved. Desperate, though, to see my own fiction in print, I figured that, however tangentially, the critiquing of others' fiction might help me to find a home for my own. That conjecture proved untrue. I reviewed fiction for years before my fiction began to be published, and by then the publishing had nothing to do with my work as a reviewer. But the habit of reviewing stuck with me, at least for a little while.

I reviewed my last book in 2008. That year, Joseph O'Neill cemented his reputation as a novelist, and Zadie Smith, already a lauded novelist, now a critic for *Harper's*, cemented her reputation as a book reviewer. And how did Smith make a name for herself in the book review world? By drawing a line in the sand. Or, to borrow her metaphor, by marking the two paths on the great, make-believe map of Anglophone literature, the way, one imagines, that park rangers arrow the bark of trees with differently-colored spray paints in order to keep visitors on the right track. Would it be fair to say that Smith's criticism left me disillusioned, so disappointed with the form that I was never able to return to book reviewing? Probably not. That year found me completing a foreign language requirement and my second year of coursework for a PhD in English and Comparative Literature, found me at work on a novel and a collection of stories, and found me the recipient of the news that I would soon be the even busier stay-at-home father of twins. Blame any one of those circumstances, in other words, for my waning devotion to what is,

for most, a low-paying and little-appreciated art. Would it be fair, though, to say that “Two Paths for the Novel,” Smith’s now-infamous *New York Review of Books* skewering of O’Neill’s *Netherland* left me—leaves me still—questioning the nature and aims of the book review as a form? Yes, fair, and a question that is, I believe, worth exploring.

In his 1928 Knopf journalism handbook *Book Reviewing*, then director of the Grinnell College journalism program, Wayne Gard, laments the state of the publishing industry, noting that “during 1926 American publishers issued 7,549 works; the British figure was 12,799, and the German figure was still higher.” Gard calls this a “magnitude without precedent” (v) and asks, in a culture that spends more money on candy than books, just who is reading all of this material? He wonders, too, whether “the writing and printing of books is not being overdone” (v). One hesitates to imagine what word—if not *overdone*—might compensate for the current industry situation. Could Gard, for example, ever have imagined a time when more than 150,000 books a year would be published in the United States alone, indeed, when the *New York Times Book Review* would review roughly 2,000 books a year (Pool 16), or over a quarter of the complete American works of 1926? In short, there are many, many novels being written in the English language, and there are many, many book reviews to account for them.

But what are these reviews *doing*? Is the purpose of a book review section, as Gard argues, the “sorting and selection” (v) of books, a kind of *Consumer Reports* for the intellectually- or culturally-attuned set? If ever it was, it is no more. We’ve entered an age when *New York Times* heavyweight Michiko Kakutani will just as soon review *Netherland* as a *Harry Potter* novel. Neither can it be argued that the purpose of a review is to offer an unbiased take on a book when, as Gail Pool notes in *Faint Praise: The Plight of Book Reviewing in America*, the field is overrun by “overpraise, undernote, [and] bias” (14).

Given the circumstances, it's easy, then, to regard all book reviews with suspicion, but it would be a mistake to dismiss them as inconsequential. An evenhanded review that appears in a small venue may be innocuous—unlikely to be read by a sizeable audience, to sell many copies of the book, or to gain the reviewer or the book's author much attention—but a flashy review in a newspaper, magazine, or trade publication does have the power to make or break a book. (I would refer anyone who finds *power* too strong a word to Jim F. English's *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* and his argument regarding what Pierre Bourdieu calls “‘circuits of legitimization,’ systems of sponsorship, evaluation, and consecration by means of which *power* [italics mine] euphemizes itself as merit (as intrinsic and proper rather than imposed and arbitrary) and thereby secures its symbolic efficacy” (111).) As Pool points out, “reviewers’ assessments indirectly help determine which books will win awards and which authors will be well published. Their commentary influences not only literary standards but also cultural attitudes, helping to shape what we think about many issues and whether we think about certain issues at all” (3). In short, books that win reviews, like books that win awards, garner maximum visual dominance and are, for better or worse—I'd argue worse—the books you're likely to read regardless of whether or not they're that year's *best*—whatever that means—books. The little book that gets a big review can generate a domino effect that then wins that book glowing reviews in newspapers across the country. So, while an individual review may seem incidental, the attention it can stir up on behalf of a book can conceivably change the course of a writer's life, winning that writer a readership, book contracts, and the attention that often leads to awards that then lead to more book contracts and a wider readership, and, providing the writer is still writing well—and sometimes even when he or she isn't—further awards.



Reviews can certainly be damaging as well. In at least one case, a review has even thwarted a book's publication. "Hapworth 16, 1924," J.D. Salinger's long—and last—published story was scheduled by Orchises Press for a 1997 single-volume hardcover publication. The book would have been Salinger's first in 32 years but was pulled—possibly pulped—by Orchises at Salinger's demand following Kakutani's preemptive *New York Times* panning of the *New Yorker* original, which she deemed "a sour, implausible, and, sad to say, completely charmless story" (Woo).

Veteran writer and reviewer Joyce Carol Oates points out in *The Profane Art* that criticism "exists not in and for itself; it justifies itself as a service" (3). That's as good a justification for book reviewing as I've ever come across and poses, perhaps, a better question than *What does a review do?* Whom, then, does a review *serve*? A review's mission statement might read: "I exist to serve the reader." But let's not forget that, except in the case of non-profit publications, a review must help sell the publication in which it appears. To this end, a review is to some degree a form of *entertainment*, and in a buzzing, whirring, raucous consumer culture, the quiet, evenhanded review that considers a work without fanfare does little to entertain and thereby move product. If there is less room in the academy than there once was for what Oates calls a "'disinterested' conversation...between equals, systematic, unhurried...[and] reflective" (5), then there is certainly less room in the pages of *Entertainment Weekly*.

Before it may serve its reader, then, a review must serve its publisher. For that matter, a review must serve its publisher's advertisers. And so a review must serve its book review section editor's aesthetic. In this way, one kind of reader *is* served. An editor knows his publication's readership—I'm tempted here to say *market*—and the editor is likely to assign reviews based on which books he or she knows the readers are likely to want along with the corresponding verdicts

that he or she knows the readers are likely to expect. And while few, if any, editors will ever tell a reviewer how to interpret a book, his or her choice of reviewer “will not only determine the outcome of the review but may predetermine it as well” (Pool 50). Even the intended reader’s needs are secondary to something else: a predetermined aesthetic. For, while they should never prostitute themselves or dumb themselves down, reviews, like novels, should at least hope for a wider readership than those reading them already, shouldn’t they? A reviewer who seeks the favor of what he or she has pegged as a particular type of reader isn’t working very hard. And what’s the point, after all, of preaching merely to the choir? As long as reviews, like political campaigns, target one way of thinking, readers, rather than reading widely, will likely reward themselves only with the works that subscribe to a particular review section’s literary aesthetic. So, whatever else may be wrong with them—and we’ll get to that—let’s examine what I’d call contemporary reviewing’s chief offense: *the Two-Path Mentality*.

Joseph O’Neill could not have predicted that, upon its publication, his third novel, *Netherland*, would rekindle a longstanding writers’ feud, but that’s precisely what it did. The argument is one provoked not as much by the novel or its author as by the book’s reviewers. Novelists Zadie Smith and Benjamin Kunkel, among others, were quick to come down hard on a book they took to be the embodiment of an out-of-date realist aesthetic. Other critics and fiction writers defended the novel, including, oddly, President Obama, whose blurb was later printed on the novel’s American paperback cover.

*Netherland*, briefly, is the story of Hans van den Broek, a Dutchman, who, with his British wife, Rachel, trades life in London for life in America. Rachel, Hans, and their son, Jake, settle in New York where Hans works as an equities analyst speculating on oil futures for an enormous, unnamed American bank. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, Hans and

Rachel are forced out of their Tribeca loft. They move into the Chelsea Hotel, and, soon after, Rachel returns to London with Jake. Though Hans—for whom money is no object—returns to London every two weeks to visit, it becomes increasingly clear that his marriage is on the line. Later, he learns that Rachel has taken a lover.

Alone in New York, Hans becomes something of a *flaneur*, a character type defined by critic James Wood (drawing from Baudelaire) in *How Fiction Works*, as a “loafer, usually a young man, who walks the streets with no great urgency, seeing, looking, reflecting” (48). Hans reflects upon—among other things—his childhood in the Netherlands, his mother, the young man at his hotel whom he frequently finds dressed as an angel, and the game of cricket and its styles of play as dictated by the country in which it is played. O’Neill’s modern flaneur walks, but he also relies on public transportation and taxis in which to do his remembering and considering. (Due to numerous complications of paperwork, Hans has no American driver’s license.)

*Netherland* opens with a phone call. Chuck Ramkissoo’s remains have been fished from the Gowanus Canal. Rachel asks, “So who’s this man?” (O’Neill 6). The question becomes the occasion for Hans’s telling of the complicated story of “Chuck Ramkissoo, who’d been a friend during my final East Coast summer” (O’Neill 4). Before his death, Chuck is a larger-than-life businessman from Trinidad who dreams of a glamorous and profitable life in America. Chuck’s motto is, “Think fantastic” (O’Neill 80), and his schemes include a kosher sushi restaurant, an underground lottery, and plans to turn the sport of cricket into America’s national pastime. In order to lend an air of legitimacy to his operations, Chuck surrounds himself with respectable-looking—read: white—businessmen. Though he does not recognize it immediately, Hans is one

of these men. In exchange for chauffeuring Chuck and appearing with him at various functions, Chuck affords Hans the use of his car as practice for an upcoming driver's test.

Ultimately, Hans returns to London to win Rachel back, and Chuck “in the way of these things, becomes a transitory figure” (O’Neill 4) in Hans’s life. Despite Rachel’s insistence that Hans and Chuck “were two completely different people from different backgrounds...[with] nothing important in common” (O’Neill 166), Hans sets out to prove Rachel wrong. In their time together, Chuck and Hans had forged an intense friendship based on a mutual love of cricket. Hans even “began to dream in all seriousness of a stadium, and black and brown and even a few white faces crowded in bleachers” (176), Chuck’s dream, in other words, of cricket transformed from an immigrant sport to a sport taken seriously in America. Of course, nothing comes of this dream. By *Netherland*’s end, Chuck is dead and the land he had purchased and dubbed “Bald Eagle Field” (82) has turned from green to brown.

On its surface, then, *Netherland* seems an unlikely candidate to ignite a critical conversation over aesthetics and taste in contemporary fiction. Smith and Kunkel, however, saw the novel as tinder and were quick to strike their matches. Their particularly fierce critical responses to *Netherland* are characterized by the logic that fiction falls on either one side or the other of an imagined great divide and must, therefore, be judged accordingly. Their theses, simplified, might well read: *Extol the new and experimental! Beware the familiar and realist!* (My interest, by the way, is not in rescuing *Netherland* from every charge leveled against it, but in suggesting, by the examination of one constructed binary or false choice—here, the choice between realism and experimentalism—that the current culture of book reviewing promotes careless—or careful but willfully unbalanced—critiques, critiques whose chief aim is to endorse a particular literary aesthetic. In my discussion, I will be conflating—helpfully, I hope—the

terms *realism* and *convention* on the one hand and *experimentalism*, *difficulty*, and *innovation* on the other hand. It is, of course, possible to pen a work of magical realism or surrealism that is stylistically conventional, just as it is possible to produce a narrative that holds tight to the reigns of psychological realism but challenges the reader by virtue of its innovative punctuation and usage. By and large, though—and, here, I recognize that I am submitting to the very sin of binary-making that I seek to unsettle—one finds that novels in the vein of the realists tend to tilt toward the stylistically-conventional.) Let's consider the reviews, then, in order of their appearance in print.

Benjamin Kunkel is more than a book critic. He is a novelist and co-founder of what Deresiewicz calls the “hipster literary journal” *n+1* (“How”). The mission of *n+1* is clear: As Caleb Crain puts it, “‘literature is only an art,’ no more worthy of university instruction than wine tasting” (qtd. in Deresiewicz, “How”). The editors of *n+1* not only print these words, they live by them. One of Kunkel's *n+1* accomplices, Keith Gessen, famously attended Syracuse University's MFA program, finished the coursework, completed a manuscript, and then refused, for unspecified reasons, to file his paperwork and accept the degree. Such behavior is Gessen's right as a human being, but it does call into question what machinations he—and, by extension, Kunkel—have planned for the field of contemporary fiction, as well as the lengths they'll go to in order to turn the tide of critical favor toward their particular literary aesthetic.

Kunkel's criticism is guided by a mission to challenge the status quo. In his review of *Netherland*, “Men in White,” Kunkel offers few compliments. For him, the book is poisoned by “decorous prose,” “well-carpentered plots,” a character immersed in “deep thoughts,” and descriptions of cricket that “depend on a sort of autistic remove from everything else” (“Men”). Kunkel is impressed only by the book's “satisfying descriptions...of new phenomena like the

satellite images available on your laptop screen from Google Maps” (“Men”). In one passage highlighted by Kunkel, Hans considers a satellite image of Chuck’s Bald Eagle field, the grass now burned, the field ruined. O’Neill writes of Hans, “...with a single brush on the touch pad I flee upward into the atmosphere and at once have in my sights the physical planet, submarine wrinkles and all—have the option, if so moved, to go anywhere” (252). Never mind that the passage shares the same “decorous prose” as the rest of the book, Kunkel elevates it for modest praise. But, he does so for the wrong reasons. Such a passage, he says, “is exciting simply because it represents new territory, or at least new subject matter, claimed for fiction” (“Men”).

Such admiration at the expense of the rest of the book signals at least two flaws in the critic’s thinking, what Jonathan Franzen, in his essay “Mr. Difficult; William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard-to-Read Books,” would call the “Fallacy of Capture” and the “Fallacy of Art Historicism” (“Mr. Difficult”). Franzen’s Fallacy of Capture is predicated on the ideology that to record a thing, and especially to record a thing for the *first time* in fiction, merits approval. By this measuring stick, the success of a work of fiction depends on whether the work “captures” a particular reality, as if “a novel were primarily an ethnographic recording, as if the point of reading fiction were not to go fishing but to admire somebody else’s catch” (“Mr. Difficult”). In extolling the virtues of O’Neill’s ability to “represent new territory” (“Men”), Kunkel falls exactly into this trap. His is a review not of a novel but of “subject matter” (“Men”).

The second Franzen fallacy, the Fallacy of Art Historicism, contends that “a work’s value substantially depends on its novelty...as if what makes *The Great Gatsby* and *O Pioneers!* good novels were primarily their technical innovations” (“Mr. Difficult”). Those novels are, of course, seldom pegged as technically innovative, yet they are touted by most critics as important works of American fiction. Subscribers to the Fallacy of Art Historicism, then, like the probable readers

of *n+1*, belong to what I would call the Cult of the New. And Kunkel is among those leading the charge. In praising only those parts of *Netherland* that he considers innovative or “new territory” (“Men”), and praising them for no other reason than that they are new—and, therefore, exciting—Kunkel praises not *Netherland*, but *newness*, experimentation’s aesthetic.

The bulk of Kunkel’s criticism consists of railing against that which is not new enough to suit his tastes, which is much of the novel. Kunkel calls *Netherland* “old-fashioned” twice, though he never unpacks the term (“Men”). He also takes issue with the novel’s verisimilitude, labeling many of its realist details unrealistic. He dismisses Hans’s job, for example, as “barely credible,” (“Men”) though he does so without explanation. He also criticizes Hans’s speech, writing that “it would violate the old-fashioned lyrical decorum of O’Neill’s prose to introduce the sort of therapeutic or neurological language that a contemporary man in Hans’s situation—an unhappy financial analyst recently left by his wife—would be likely to employ” (“Men”), though it remains unclear, at least to me, just what kind of language Kunkel believes financial analysts ought to employ or how such language mutates given one’s marital status. And, for a critic of all things old-fashioned, Kunkel comes off as particularly uptight when criticizing O’Neill for Hans’s use of “the word *fuck* without any effect of self-consciousness” (“Men”). But Hans’s unapologetic use of the word is, to my mind, precisely the sort of characteristic called for by Kunkel. Such a detail rescues *Netherland* from reading *as* overtly old-fashioned. The character of Hans, like most contemporary people living in America, is unafraid of the word. But this is the sort of *newness* Kunkel chooses to ignore. In essence, Kunkel is critiquing the book both for not being new and for not being old-fashioned enough.

If Kunkel’s primary concern is newness, then Zadie Smith’s is experimentation. In her review/essay “Two Paths for the Novel,” Smith considers *Netherland* alongside Tom

McCarthy's novel *Remainder*. Smith announces the novels as "antipodal—indeed one is the strong refusal of the other" ("Two"). For Smith, there is no in-between, only "two paths for the novel" ("Two"). The first path is that of "lyrical Realism," represented by *Netherland*. While Smith never defines her terms, she characterizes the lyrically realistic *Netherland* as "so precisely the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction that it throws that image into a kind of existential crisis, as the photograph gifts a nervous breakdown to the painted portrait" ("Two"). The second path is even less well-defined, but might fairly be termed "experimental," as Smith looks to authors like "Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon, Gaddis, DeLillo, [and] David Foster Wallace" ("Two") for representation. She argues that these Second Path writers have been "dismissed by our most famous public critics" ("Two"), and, here, one can't help assuming that she means James Wood—we'll get to him. In deeming these authors "dismissed," Smith of course overlooks the trends of the publishing industry's last ten years. She conveniently ignores the fact that DeLillo, Pynchon, and Wallace have received frequent rave reviews from many "public critics" and found their books straddling multiple bestseller lists, and that Donald Barthelme's uncollected stories were, at last, assembled in the volume *Flying to America* to critical acclaim. Finally, in her assessment of the two novels, Smith praises Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* for being ironical, wry, and open to "expressions of perverse, self-ridiculing humor" ("Two"), all elements notably absent from O'Neill's *Netherland*. For these reasons, among others, she christens *Remainder* "one of the great English novels of the past ten years" while *Netherland* receives only the qualified compliment: "It seems perfectly done—in a sense that's the problem" ("Two").

But what does such a statement *mean*? Is *Netherland* too perfect for Smith, or does the novel merely *seem* perfect, and, either way, what distinction is being made here? In one



interview, Smith says that fiction's job isn't "to tell us how somebody felt about something, it's to tell us how the world works" (qtd. in "Human" 43). Smith's preference, then, is for fiction that concerns character less than philosophy, narrative less than the well honed thought experiment. This explains Smith's preoccupation with *Netherland's* "'meditation' on identities both personal and national, immigrant relations, terror, anxiety, the attack of futility on the human consciousness and the defense against same" ("Two"). Unfortunately for O'Neill, there apparently isn't enough of this material to satisfy Smith, and so she takes issue with the element of realism that ruins the novel for her: characterization.

Smith argues that "this is the founding, consoling myth of lyrical realism—the self is a bottomless pool" ("Two"). Even if one concedes this point to Smith, it follows that one must then ask, if it is not bottomless, just how shallow does Smith expect that pool to be? Smith formerly acknowledged the necessity of the *self* in contemporary fiction. Citing David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers as models, Smith has called for fiction that combines the ideas inherent to math and philosophy, among other disciplines, with the characterization inherent to individuals who participate in the acts of family, love, and sex. "That," Smith says, "is an incredibly fruitful combination. If you can get the balance right" (qtd. in Wood, "Human" 43). This Smith would seem to be arguing that balance must be restored between realism and experimentalism, between the fiction of ideas and the fiction of characterization. In her assessment of *Netherland*, however, Smith the book reviewer makes characterization her target's bullseye. Borrowing from Robbe-Grillet, Smith characterizes *Netherland* as the "most recent masterful example" of a novel in which objects are "'merely the vague reflection of the hero's vague soul, the image of his torments, the shadow of his desires" ("Two"). (For Smith, the terms *soul* and *self* appear to be interchangeable.) Early in Smith's assessment, O'Neill is at fault for

sacrificing ideas for the sake of characterization. Later, O'Neill is at fault for presenting characters who appear vague in comparison to the objects around them. *Netherland*, then, for Smith, is both character-centric and character-deprived. That Smith finds the novel unbalanced is clear. What her argument fails to make clear is just which side of the fulcrum she finds too heavily weighted.

What is perhaps most startling about Smith's review, however, is her unsubstantiated claim that there are only two directions in which the novel may head and that readers and writers must pick their paths. Smith anticipates the argument—"Why only two?"—and counters it with the following mantra: "In healthy times, we cut multiple roads, allowing for the possibility of a Jean Genet as surely as a Graham Greene. These aren't particularly healthy times" ("Two"). Smith never qualifies *healthy times* or explains the means by which one might assess those time periods that, in the unqualified past, have been deemed either healthy, unhealthy, or semi-healthy. But, once more, there is no in-between. For Smith, the times are either healthy or they aren't. One must swallow this bitter pill, then swallow Smith's premise that the future of the novel depends on which path is followed, as though—to mix metaphors—the two books chosen for her review belonged to a literary boxing match that only one novel could escape unscathed. For Smith, the winner is the experimental *Remainder*. She leaves *Netherland* on the mat gasping.

But, since when have we become resigned to such choices? Writers from Cervantes to F. Scott Fitzgerald have worked in various modes. Some writers, like J.D. Salinger, who moved from the realist *The Catcher in the Rye* to the experimental *Seymour: An Introduction* and the aforementioned "Hapworth 16, 1924," grow more experimental with age, while a writer like Ernest Hemingway began his career in narrative experimentation and ended it with *The Old Man and the Sea*, his most straightforward character- and narrative-driven novel.

Ironically, while critics like Kunkel and Smith push against realism, it's a fight that seems contained more to the critics than to the writers involved. Don DeLillo writes that "the novel is whatever novelists are doing at a given time" before noting that "writing is a form of personal freedom" (qtd. in Franzen, "Why" 95). DeLillo continues: "In the end, writers will write not to be outlaw heroes of some underculture but mainly to save themselves, to survive as individuals" (qtd. in Franzen, "Why" 95-96). In light of this logic, critics' attacks on O'Neill for not being the kind of writer that *they* want him to be read as attacks on O'Neill's personal freedom as a novelist, hardly the purpose of book reviewing.

Interestingly, no one involved in the realism/experimentalism or old/new or traditional/innovative argument appears to have acknowledged that the debate is nothing new. Author Joe David Bellamy, in *Literary Luxuries: American Writing at the End of the Millennium*, traces these types of skirmishes back to "the fiction of the sixties...full of worlds where fantasies are allowed to get up and walk around" (64). He points to critic Robert Scholes who predicted a "return to a more verbal kind of fiction...a less realistic and more artistic kind of narrative...more concerned with ideas and ideals, less concerned with things" (qtd. in Bellamy 64). This breed of experimental fiction was indeed on the horizon, but it did not constitute a "return." Realism moved forward right along with whatever Scholes might have envisioned.

Andreas Huyssen also argues for the 1960s as the origin of the debates regarding realism's suppression by experimental fiction. She dubs the decade one that "benefited the postmodernists' claim to novelty in their struggle against...entrenched traditions" (167). It's important, though, that we pause to note that *postmodernism* (which I won't seek to define, decry, or defend here) is not the true source of the issue at hand. Too often stylistic

experimentation and an affectation approaching irony are conflated with postmodernism. As Eric Miles Williamson puts it, “When literary critics and book reviewers use the word postmodern to describe a writer, what they’re usually talking about is the writer’s style—a goofiness on the page or a structurally non-linear work, referring primarily to ‘experimental’ authors such as Donald Barthelme...the William Gass and Gaddis, John Barth. While these authors are most certainly postmodernists, their postmodernism is not a product of a quirkiness of style, but rather of their location in the historical timeline” (229). Any novel that is perceived to break with the tradition of realism might, in other words, be considered experimental, but that doesn’t necessarily prove the novel postmodern. Let’s not forget that, in many ways, what some call postmodernism was merely the carrying on of what critic and fiction writer Greg Johnson has called “the experimental spirit of modernism” (243). The revolt against realism was in place long before postmodernism came along and, I’d argue, long before that.

John Barth, who considers the realist Raymond Carver, of all people, a “distinguished contemporary” (Barth 213), would likely concur. In calling for a move away from “the novel as we know it,” Kunkel, Smith, and others are merely reiterating an argument that Barth says has existed for centuries (218). He points to Samuel Richardson, an English novelist, who, in 1758, predicted the death of the realist novel. “‘There was a time,’ Richardson writes, ‘when every bookseller wanted something of that kind. But Miller [Richardson’s own publisher] tells me that the fashion has passed’” (qtd. in Barth 218). Over 250 years later, the fashion is still with us. It survived Miller’s verdict, and it will persevere. Which is not to say that experimental fiction is less important than realism, only that the sandbox is big enough for everyone to play in and to continue playing in for centuries to come.

As critic Walter Benjamin notes, “In every era the attempt must be made to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (qtd. in Huysen 161). Among novels, maybe no tradition is more conformed to than realism, yet *Don Quixote*, the text that most critics consider the first novel, shares little, structurally or tonally, with what we’d like to think of as realism’s longstanding tradition. Certainly it is more playful than the work of Dickens, than much of the work that would follow it by hundreds of years, so neither is our argument chronological. In the great game of the wresting of tradition, the contributions to experimentation, whether tendered over 400 years ago in Spain or a few years ago in London by McCarthy’s *Remainder*, will continue unabated but will not likely unseat realism. More likely, these stylistic tics and tocks will be accepted and adapted by realists until what once looked “goofy on the page” or appeared “structurally non-linear” becomes the norm. After all, the experimental is only and always the *new new*, that which transcends what was beforehand merely *new*. Or else it is whatever was new at one time, forgotten, and is being resurrected. As James Wood writes in *How Fiction Works*:

...all fiction is conventional in one way or another, and if you reject a certain kind of realism for being conventional, you will also have to reject for the same reason surrealism, science fiction, self-reflexive postmodernism, novels with four different endings, and so on. Convention is everywhere, and triumphs like old age: once you have reached a certain seniority, you either die of it, or with it. (234)

Experimentation may be a departure from convention, but any departure is destined to become just one more kind of convention. Wood isn’t arguing that absolutely nothing is new, and neither am I. But nothing stays new for very long.

In “Mr. Difficult,” Jonathan Franzen offers another binary, but to a different end. Franzen bundles novels into two groups, the “Status model” and the “Contract model.” Put simply, Franzen’s argument is that authors who subscribe to the Contract model write books generally considered accessible for a wide audience of readers, while, for Status model subscribers, “difficulty tends to signal excellence” (“Mr. Difficult”). Put another way, Contract books are typically realist while status books are typically more experimental in nature. Franzen, however, takes a refreshing stand: He refuses to keep things simple. Demonstrating the squishiness of the terms and the falsity of the binary they promote, he points out that much of what makes a writer one or the other depends entirely on the *reader*. Franzen, for example, considers himself a Contract writer. However, he’s been accused of being a Status writer by some readers, one of whom excoriated Franzen’s novel *The Corrections* for its difficulty. The book, this reader claimed, was marred by “fancy words and phrases” and an inaccessibility for “the average person who just enjoys a good read” (“Mr. Difficult”). A book, then, is perhaps only as difficult as the background and needs that a reader brings to it.

If, then, we throw out the poles of realism and experimentalism, of any two aesthetics, really, and consider instead the *spectrum*, we open ourselves up to reading—and reviewing—a book with a little more depth and complication. Many “realist” novels—*Netherland* being just one example—are less conventional and more technically innovative than the books’ opponents recognize. But, when one’s purpose is polemical, one is less free to bother with nuance, with a spectrum rather than a spectrum’s far-flung ends. Like Franzen’s model of Contract and Status novels, I would argue that Smith and Kunkel’s sense of realism versus experimentalism is less two designations than a continuum, where one reader’s realism approaches another’s sense of experimentalism. Let’s consider *Netherland*, then, via a more open-minded reading.

*Netherland* is an ambitious book—and perhaps it is that ambition, in part, that rankles the book’s critics—with an exceedingly complicated narrative structure, a novel deemed, prior to its publication, “not easy to read” (“O’Neill”) by *Kirkus Reviews*. *Netherland*, with its departures from tradition, is, ultimately, what Jonathan Franzen would call a “difficult book.” The first mark of difficulty, for Franzen, is an elaborateness of language. A quick scan of *Netherland* turns up the phrases “the immemorial uniform of the bourgeois” (203), “ill-omened, idiotic slowness” (240), and “a self-evident and prefabricated symbolism” (254), along with an army of words and phrases from cricket terminology—like one bowler’s specialized “fizzing Chinamen” (175)—that O’Neill feels no compunction to illuminate for the uninitiated. In another case, a definition of “lepidopterist” (247) can only be guessed at from the word’s context. Reminiscing over the near-disintegration of his marriage, Hans muses, “My family, the spine of my days, had crumbled. I was lost in invertebrate time” (30). Such prose delights, but it hardly makes for easy reading for the average reader.

Which raises the puzzling question: If *Netherland* is no easy read, why have particular critics labeled it a Contract book? Perhaps, in an era of literature trending toward the *very difficult*—I’m thinking here of the academic and critical canonization of Pynchon, DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace—critics have forgotten what mere *difficulty* looks like. *Netherland* is a difficult book, and its difficulty extends beyond its “fancy language.” The narrative itself is of that “structurally non-linear” ilk said to accompany not traditional realism but the experimental. The classic model of storytelling presupposes that a reader reads to learn *what* will happen, not merely *how* it has happened. In *Netherland*’s first four pages, the reader discovers that Hans and Rachel have been reunited and that Chuck is dead. Such a premise foils the reader’s expectations, daring him or her to keep reading. The novel then becomes an exercise in

chronological dissolution that makes the narrative games of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* simplistic by comparison. This is not to say that Tarantino wasn't doing some cool things in that movie, but observe a juggler with three balls alongside a juggler with six balls and the contrast in degree of skill inherent to the act heaves into stark and immediate relief. *Netherland* begins in 2006 before returning to the summer of 2002. There follow forays into 1999, 2000, and 2001, as well as numerous "cuts back and forth in time, looping back to [Hans's] childhood in the Netherlands, and his life in London" (Kakutani E25). Such unconventional narration, so many settings, and the "big ideas" signaled by these regarding narratology, nationalism, etc, are overlooked by those critics quick to call the novel formulaic or "old-fashioned" (Kunkel).

If certain critics, unlike the *Kirkus* reviewer, had little trouble navigating *Netherland's* storyline, is that not a testament to O'Neill's craftsmanship as a writer, not the albatross of his failure to further challenge the reader? Not all difficult writing is "great," after all, just as not all "great" writing need be difficult. The significant difference between O'Neill and a more experimental writer like William Gaddis (which is not to say *all* experimental writers) is that O'Neill rarely allows his difficulty to get in the way of a reader's comprehension of the basic—if patently scattered—storyline. For Franzen, with the exception of *The Recognitions*, there is no "key to Gaddis that will unlock his difficulty" because "literary difficulty can operate as a smoke screen for an author who has nothing interesting, wise, or entertaining to say" ("Mr. Difficult"). Unlike Gaddis, though, O'Neill keeps quotation marks, section breaks, and markers of time in his stylist's toolbox. He's able, then, to present a difficult story more simply while what Franzen calls Gaddis's "smoke screen" of "thousands of dashes and ellipses" ("Mr. Difficult") complicates most readers' readings of what are already difficult novels. But, whether one deems *Netherland* Contract, Status, or something in between—whether one chooses to submit to



Franzen's methodology at all—it seems to me a petty complaint to fault O'Neill's novel for being *too* readable.

*Netherland*, as I've attempted to demonstrate, dares, at times, to be difficult, and even dares, at times, to break with conventional methods of storytelling. But the novel never advertises itself as *new*. In asking O'Neill to be more experimental, more challenging, newer, Kunkel and Smith ask the author to assume a mantle not his own. This is not unlike criticizing a dairy cow for yielding poor steaks or a Black Angus bull for failing to produce milk. But no matter how hard you tug on a bull, milk won't come out. And while, unlike that bull, O'Neill might choose to write with a greater degree of experimentation in the future, he chose not to do so for *Netherland*—that was not his project. To criticize the book, then, by experimentation's standards, is to enforce a Two-Paths standard and ignore the book at hand.

If not every reviewer considers the book at hand, perhaps not every reviewer is even reviewing a book. Enter the Aesthetic Wars. Is it possible that Smith's literary street fight was prompted not by *Netherland* but by one of the novel's earliest and most vocal proponents: James Wood? Wood was defending *Netherland* before the novel needed defending. Two months before Kunkel's dismissal of the novel, and a full six months before Smith's attack on the book, Wood praised *Netherland* as an "exquisitely written novel...a large fictional achievement, and one of the most remarkable post-colonial books I have ever read" ("Beyond"). Such words, especially from a *New Yorker* review, typically constitute bragging rights among writers; from Wood, however, such words have the power to incite debate. James Wood may be "the best critic of his generation" (qtd. in Deresiewicz, "How"), but the bestowal of such status invariably begs backlash.

For proof of the current trend of Wood-lash, one need look no further than William Deresiewicz's scouring assessment, "How Wood Works: The Riches and Limits of James Wood." The essay appeared in *The Nation* one day before Smith's review of *Netherland* appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, as though the entire critical community was assembling in order to check Wood's power, mount a defense for experimentalism, and plan an attack on what many see as Wood's privileging of realism. In his argument, Deresiewicz takes Wood to task for his "realist aesthetic" ("How"). He writes: "To Roland Barthes's charge that realism is merely a collection of effects, Wood correctly replies that 'realism can be an effect and still be true.' But so can antirealism" ("How"). Deresiewicz mistakenly believes that he's made a point unrecognized by Wood. But Wood already made the point for him. In *How Fiction Works*, Wood goes so far as to say, "So let us replace the always problematic world 'realism' with the much more problematic word 'truth'... Once we throw the term 'realism' overboard, we can account for the ways in which, say, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Hamsun's *Hunger* and Beckett's *Endgame* are not representations of likely or typical human activity but are nevertheless harrowingly truthful texts" (238). Wood recognizes implicitly the merits, "truthfulness" among them, of antirealist books, regardless of his preference for realism, but this is one point that Deresiewicz appears unwilling to concede. (Deresiewicz begrudgingly concedes Wood's fondness for Joyce, Kafka, Beckett, and Jose Saramago ("How"), but seems mystified by it.) Further concession, after all, would only complicate the argument. And complication, in a Two-Paths critical climate, is the enemy. So, while Franzen refuses to let his terms settle down—he is at once a Contract writer and a Status writer, and one reader's difficult status book is another reader's unchallenging contract novel—and while Wood can find the truth of realism at the heart of even the most unreal texts, for Deresiewicz there remains no compromise, only

camp, and Wood must enter the tent of one or the other. That Wood has extended realism's olive branch over the campfire and passed it, unsung, to Beckett must, it seems, be ignored.

But can a book ever be reviewed on its own terms? In his foreword to *Picked-up Pieces*, John Updike, the author of hundreds of book reviews, contends that it can. In reviewing everything from works of fictions to books on theology and the hard sciences, Updike held to six tenets to help him through tough reviewing times. Two are pertinent to our discussion. First, Updike encourages the reviewer to “try to understand what the author wished to do, and [to] not blame him for not achieving what he did not attempt” (14). While I agree with this principle in theory, I wonder whether it can be realistically carried out in practice. In the case of a novel, what an author “wished to do” can be difficult, at times, to divine. Fiction is its own end, after all. But to the extent that a novel presents the reader with its particular style, I read Updike's advice as fair warning that a realist novel cannot be easily reviewed alongside experimental expectations. And, if I'm reading too much into Updike's warning here, then certainly his sixth supports my position. “Do not,” Updike writes, “imagine yourself a caretaker of any tradition, an enforcer of any party standards, a warrior in any ideological battle, a corrections officer of any kind. Never, never...try to put the author ‘in his place,’ making of him a pawn in a contest with other reviewers” (15). This, of course, is the ideal. Whether it can be carried out remains questionable.

The worst kind of book coverage, of course, is no review at all, hence the popular phrase: *No such thing as a bad review*. In many cases, the “worse” the review, the more attention the reviewer is sure to garner for the book under consideration and for its author. Had Dale Peck, for example, truly wanted to put an axe between Rick Moody's eyes, he might have turned down the opportunity to publicly skewer the writer's memoir, but by beginning his review of *The Black*

*Veil* with the line, “Rick Moody is the worst writer of his generation” (170), Peck was virtually guaranteeing “the second worst of Rick Moody’s very bad books” (171) the very sales and attention he argued the book didn’t deserve.

Yet, for all of the negative attention garnered by what Peck has called his “hatchet jobs” (2), and despite the fact that Peck would go on to “throw away [his] red pen” (2) and abandon negative book reviewing, this much can be said for Peck: he more often than not began his reviews by foregrounding his aesthetic for the reader. Consider Peck’s review of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. Peck begins with a discussion of Thomas Pynchon and the aesthetic “camps” (42) divided in support or detraction of that writer’s work. Peck goes on to admit freely to matters of “taste” (42), stating his own, before making the inevitable comparison between Pynchon and Wallace and proceeding to rip *Infinite Jest* a new one. I point this out neither to defend or repudiate Peck’s take on Wallace or Moody—and often the takes are just that, critiques more of the author than of the book at hand—but to recognize that Peck owns up to a notion that Updike, however well-intentioned in his cry for objective assessment, may miss, namely that, just as it is in the world of news coverage, there is likely no such thing as a perfectly “fair and balanced” book review. Peck, at the very least—and I think that *the least* is the best I can offer a critic who would write in a review of *Infinite Jest* that what Wallace needs is “a dick up his ass” (55)—informs his reader of his taste, offering his assessments less as *truths* than as verdicts of *taste*. Even the hyperbolic *Black Veil* review warns the reader, in its initial incarnation, to “stop reading here if you are looking for a calm dissection” (qtd. in Pool 72), and, in its reprinting in *Hatchet Jobs*, “an objective or, for that matter, rational dissection of the work of Hiram Frederick Moody III” (171). Short of pulling off the objective review, the reviewer, I think, owes it to his

reader to foreground his aesthetic bias, should that bias be the source that calls a book's success into question.

The book review, as a form, is plagued by problems beyond the Two-Path Mentality or the Aesthetic Wars. Perhaps, here, Peck is due some additional degree of credit for acquainting himself with Moody's body of work, having seemingly read all of the writer's novels, if not the novellas or story collections, before coming down hard on the memoir. The same cannot be said of most reviewers, a fault owed less to the reviewer than to the constraints of the form. As Pool points out, reviews seldom pay the reviewer an amount that makes the work of tracking down and reading an author's oeuvre financially viable (57). Assigning a reviewer the corpus of an author's work for review rather than a single tome would be cruel and, in the book review industry, unusual. But the inability to do so often makes for uninformed and occasionally humorous assessments, the reviewer often betraying, if inadvertently, an ignorance of a writer's style, subject matter, or concerns. By way of example, a *Publishers Weekly* review of Frederick Barthelme's *Waveland* charged the novel with a "detached exploration of the post-Katrina Mississippi Gulf coast," then, three sentences later, noted protagonist Vaughn's "cordial yet detached friendship with his ex-wife" ("Fiction"). Never mind the redundancy, the reviewer is clearly preoccupied with all of this detachment. But were the reviewer more familiar with Barthelme's other novels, he or she would know that all of his narrative explorations and characters' relationships might be characterized as "detached." This is not to let Barthelme off the hook. The reviewer, having read the other novels, might have still chosen to argue for *Waveland*'s omnipresent detachment, but he or she might then have done so in comparison to Barthelme's past work. A fan of Barthelme, having read this review, I'm left wondering whether Vaughn feels somehow more detached than the typical Barthelme hero, or less so, but this

reviewer, likely unfamiliar with Barthelme's body of work, fails to anticipate—and thereby answer—my question.

All of which is not to say that I approve of Peck's former methodology for book reviewing. For, even as I'm willing to own up to the unrealistic nature of Updike's call for entirely objective assessment, and even while I concede that sometimes a bad review deserves writing, too often Peck wants it both ways. He admits to his "taste" and the inherent bias of any book reviewer in order that we might not hold his harshness against him, yet he intentionally baits critics and readers with language so incendiary and truly beside-the-point for the purposes of review that we can't help suspecting him of the intention of making his reviews less about the books and more about the reviewer. Peck's reviews frequently clarify, express what he means to say, cite what he wants to say but won't, or highlight "a polite way of saying" (44) what he really thinks. To *almost* say something is, of course, to say it, but Peck, in this way, has at least armed himself with the ammunition to later defend his prose. One can almost hear him arguing, "But, I didn't *say* that. I specifically said that I wasn't quite saying that even though I really wanted to." Consider too Peck's penchant for the first-person singular. *I*, *me*, or the possessive equivalent pops up eight times in the first paragraph alone of Peck's review of Wallace, and seven times in the second paragraph of his critique of Moody—the first paragraph being reserved for that opening, damning sentence.

But, if Peck won't do, and neither will Smith or Kunkel, and if even Wood does little to restrain his bias toward realism, then who gets it right? Not the enthusiastic reviewer who looks for the good in everything, certainly. A good review for the wrong reasons is no better than a bad review for the wrong reasons. I'm unprepared to push the pedestal beneath the critical buttocks

of any single reviewer, but, having said that, let me now, like Peck, have it both ways by offering up a fortuitous clutch of reviews for consideration.

In the same month that Smith was attempting to tear *Netherland* down, Stefan Beck, in an overlooked *New Criterion* review, was lifting up both O'Neill's novel and *All the Sad Young Literary Men*, the first novel by Kunkel's *n+1* co-editor, Keith Gessen. As one might expect, Gessen's novel falls closer to *Remainder* than *Netherland* on the experimentation spectrum, but that doesn't keep Beck, who cites *Netherland* as the book he "enjoyed the most" (34) among Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, Marilynne Robinson's *Home*, and Gessen's novel, from writing: "I come to praise Gessen, not to bury him" (30). (And, lest one assume that Beck simply has a light touch, one need only look to his review of Morrison's novel and consider the rigor with which he approaches those books with which he finds fault.)

What bothers Beck most about Gessen is not the writer's novel, but Gessen's response to any and all criticisms of his novel—and there were many. Beck notes that Gessen told one interviewer, "I think deep down inside...they know we're right. Because we are right. And we will bury them" (qtd. in Beck 30). Beck characterizes Gessen and his compatriots—Kunkel among them—as writers who advertise themselves as those caught in a "generational struggle" with critics (30). Beck is fearful of this kind of "us versus them" mentality, and with good reason. How, after all, do writers who consider themselves opponents in a literary struggle fight back? It's not chic, after all, to criticize those critical of your fiction. Your reviewer's favorite books, however—like babies you joke about being ugly when a parent leaves the room—well, those are fair game. Wood, after all, in his review "Human, All Too Inhuman," ravaged Smith's first novel, *White Teeth*. It's not so far-fetched, then, to presume that she might choose Wood's

favorite book of the year, six months later—once the hype had built and the lines were drawn—for special thrashing.

Again, I'm not arguing that all books deserve favorable reviews. However, if a reviewer recognizes that he or she is predisposed to dislike a novel, perhaps he or she ought to consider reviewing a different book. Beck, I'd like to think, would agree with me. He writes: "Where Gessen says, 'We will bury them,' O'Neill seems to say, 'We will unearth them'" (35). The point is less unsubstantiated than it sounds. *Netherland* is, after all, a novel that explores ideas of inclusion. The Chelsea Hotel houses a motley crew of characters. New York City is expressed as a city grown increasingly comfortable with its multiculturalism. And, even the game of cricket is portrayed as one "in which anybody can join" (Beck 34). It seems likely, then, that the attitude toward literature to which O'Neill subscribes would fall in line with the one that Beck ascribes to him: "*We are all in this together*" (35). Not, I'd wager, a bad mantra for the book reviewer.

O'Neill never asked to be a poster child for realism or conventionalism or traditionalism. Nevertheless, in the battle over *-isms*, *Netherland*, one way or another, got caught in the crossfire. The question reviewers should have asked is not whether *Netherland* falls on one side of the battle line or the other, but why the line has been drawn and why exactly we need this battle? The Two-Paths argument is contrived. There are many paths, and many side paths that connect the paths—a spider web of literary tradition and influence, experimentation and degrees of realism. We shouldn't disparage the old simply because it is old. Convention is not dead, merely familiar. And, just as we should not fear the new, we must not praise the new for the sake of its unfamiliarity alone. A novel like *Netherland*, love it or hate—there it is again, that language of mutual exclusion—deserves consideration on its own terms. To dismiss the book in



order to further an agenda not only does harm to the novel, it does harm to the discourse of contemporary criticism.

Near the end of *Netherland*, Chuck leads Hans on a tour of the graveyard in which he hopes to be buried. There, he draws Hans's attention to a column topped by what Hans takes to be "an oversize baseball, judging from its meandering seam" (O'Neill 209). The column marks the resting place of Henry Chadwick, the man who wrote baseball's first rules. "What's interesting about this guy," Chuck tells Hans, "is he was a cricket nut, too. He didn't think it was America's fate, or America's national character, or what have you, to play baseball. He played cricket *and* baseball" (O'Neill 209). Perhaps it's a stretch to argue that, here, cricket and baseball are O'Neill's stand-ins for realism and experimentalism, but Chuck's argument is convincing regardless, and his logic of sport, I think, applicable to a logic of literary aesthetics. Chuck continues: "They were totally compatible as far as [Chadwick] was concerned. He didn't see them as a fork in the road" (209). For Chadwick, Chuck's saying, there weren't two roads. When it came to sports, Chadwick wasn't made to choose. And, so, I ask: What if, when it came to the novel, we held our reviewers, indeed, ourselves, to the same standard?

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