

Stories for the Mongrel Heart

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This dissertation titled
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ABSTRACT

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Stories for the Mongrel Heart

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A collection of six short stories, generally of a realist, minimalist aesthetic. They center around middle-class Americans stumbling through changes, looking for work, distraction, renewal. Other subjects include flies, gorillas, infertility, ducks, basketball, telepathy, marriage, Chinook jargon, spear fishing, tourism, impending nuclear doom, and dogs. Lots of dogs. Critical introduction seeks to examine how fiction operates, paying special attention to the “elasticity” of literary language and drawing on the ideas of William Gass, Flannery O’Connor, John Gardner, Roland Barthes, James Wood, and others, as well on personal observations on the craft and process of writing fiction.

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To Emily

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INTRODUCTION: FICTION AND THE ELASTICITY OF LANGUAGE

I want to defend fiction, but I can't.

I *wanted* to defend fiction. I wanted to defend it against friends who say, "I'd read fiction if I had time. But right now, if I'm going to read, I want to at least learn something from it." I wanted to defend it against students who might ask, "Why read something made up when a true story can teach us the same thing?"¹ I wanted to defend literary fiction against the cruelties of market publishing. I wanted to defend fiction against non-fiction, movies, video games, preachers and politicians.

So I tried to defend fiction, and I failed. I wrote and wrote. I confused myself. I confused other people. And then I realized that I wasn't really trying to defend fiction at all. Fiction didn't need me to defend it. What I was doing was defending myself. Against myself, maybe. Will people stop reading and writing fiction if they can't intellectually justify or valorize it? Maybe some will, but the real question is: will I? And the answer I came to is *no*, as I expect the answer is for many other people. Do we refuse to take a medication because we don't know how it works?

And yet, I don't think I could write another story without at least gesturing towards a critical understanding of an enterprise as arcane and, at times, tedious as the production and consumption of fictional texts. I agree with Robert Hass when he said, "It's hell writing, but it's hell not writing. The only tolerable state is just having written." Writing is not a punishment, but I think Hass's sentiment is that most of the time there is not much glamour in it. For one writing fiction that aims to enter

¹ A question posed to Kansas English teacher and blogger, John B.

the world as an “object of contemplation” (10) as William Gass says in “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction,” and maybe even be printed on a page of paper, it’s hard to convince oneself that such quaint notions of art (a tale! a novel!) truly matter. And yes, in a world of war, catastrophe and up-to-the-minute body counts flashing before our eyes, my ambition or devotion as one guy plunking out stories on my fancy keyboard is properly irrelevant.

More to the point, on planet internet, there are so many ways to be informed, entertained, inspired, and laid low. So many formats. So much video and audio and instant transmission. I am compelled to embrace this new way of being in the world. The volume, speed, and constant wonder of it all command my cooperation. But I still want to write stories—stories that have little or nothing to do with trending topics, that are the result of hard labor and emotional investment, and that are in no hurry to mean anything that could be tweeted. And I want to hold these stories in my hands.

The responsible question to ask, I guess, is why. It’s a question that must be acknowledged.

So, I start with this: I want to define fiction. Perhaps I can define what it does for me. I can even try to understand how it does it, though in this I will surely fail again. I will dash myself against the sharp rocks of contradiction. I will see my arguments deconstruct as soon as I make them. But I will do it anyway. Maybe defining fiction is a shade away from defending it. This is likely the case. But I intend to focus on what fiction might do and not whether fiction is imperative or even

valuable. My final answer as to the ultimate merits of fiction can only be, if you'll forgive me an empty platitude or maybe a just a quip: Fiction *is*. Or stories *are*. And some of them happen to be made up.

The Language of Fiction: It Opens Up

What can fiction do? It can speak to us. Sometimes it can move us. But the only way it can do that is through words. Plain old words. Most often written words, read silently.

For me, fiction at its best, not unlike poetry and creative nonfiction, breathes life into the worn language we use day in and day out. It *opens* language up, *spreads* it out, *takes* the same old raw materials and *makes* them into something that people notice rather than gloss over—thereby revealing new pathways of thought and sparking new feelings, or unearthing old ones. Such elastic language comfortably lives in fiction. *The language of fiction is elastic*. It expands. It communicates, but it overflows the banks of simple communication.

When I first read Willa Cather's *My Antonia* I was in college. It taxed me. The pages in my Dover Thrift Edition were crammed to the edges with text. I took to reading sitting up at a desk as opposed to my usual practice of reading on my back. Everything I knew about myself up to that point told me I should not like this book set on the old pioneer plains, so concerned with the domestic side of frontier living, slow-paced and introspective. My immediate, unthinking, visceral association was with my mother making me watch *Little House on the Prairie* with her.

But I persisted. Something drew me on. When it was over I felt something new. The book had taken something from me—time, of course, but it had also required a genuine purchase on my part, an expenditure of imagination. It troubled me, punched a little hole in my gut. I had known stories like this one before, vaguely. I'd read *The Grapes of Wrath* in high school under pain of a bad grade, seen covered wagons on screen and in textbooks. I knew something of immigration and westward expansion. But it was *this* story, this piece of fiction, that made me *feel* something about it. I certainly would have flunked a history test with questions based on the official documentation (“true” stories) of rural life and Eastern European immigration to the Great Plains circa the turn of the 20th century, but, I *felt* like I really knew something about it. It was quietly thrilling.

Now, I realize this is not quantifiable knowledge. Reading Willa Cather's novel, even though she was an eyewitness to prairie life as a child, is no substitute for rigorous historical research. But that doesn't erase the weird way in which that *feeling* the book furnished became a way of knowing something about the world, or maybe specifically about myself, or maybe even about nothing in particular—call it 'life.' I can try to trace, in some small way, the development of a feeling like that.

I have since read *My Antonia* many times over. The music and mastery of Cather's sentences still sing to me. When Cather writes of the high school girls in Nebraska, “the daughters of Black Hawk merchants,” comparing them to the working immigrant girls—the “hired girls”—whom her protagonist, Jim Burden, is in love with, she writes, “When one danced with them their bodies never moved

inside their clothes; their muscles seemed to ask one thing—not to be disturbed” (97). All sentences have a rhythm. This one always did echo in my mind, something like, da DUM DUM da DUM / da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM/ da DUM da DUM da DUM DUM DUM / DUM da DUM da DUM. This isn’t to prove anything, except that I happen to like the cadence of this sentence. What matters, maybe, is that I cared enough to notice it.

Why do I linger over this sentence? Because it’s pretty? Others might disagree, or not care. Because I, too, have danced with girls like that? I don’t know that I have. Because I know, or want to know, what it is to dance with girls like Antonia, Lena, and Tiny? I’ll admit there is an erotic sway in the sentence that both conjures and confirms such vague desires.

I think all of this is potentially rolled up in any reader’s response to such a sentence. There is no telling what will affect a particular reader or when. But what I do know, when I read this sentence, is that I haven’t heard it anywhere else. Of course, Cather could have written the sentence in many other ways. The sentence, “Those girls were horrible dancers, they hardly moved,” says something similar to what Cather wrote. It makes sense. It is closer to a sentence I may have heard before. But it has little of the style, movement, and sensuality of Cather’s. It wouldn’t invite such rich inferences about Jim’s state of mind, the manners of the prairie bourgeois, and the physical and emotional power of the Bohemian girls.

As I read, “When one danced with them . . .” I am reminded that Jim is telling his story from a distance, as a man, looking back with nostalgia on the raw vitality of

his boyhood with Antonia and other immigrants. The whole novel, in fact, is infused with nostalgia and carefully questions, even while celebrating, the sentimentality that comes with reliving the past. The sentence again foregrounds that important premise.

Using synecdoche, Cather has “bodies” standing in for the town girls themselves. Their “bodies never moved inside their clothes.” Is Jim a misogynist? Seeing women as objects? Maybe, but when I read this sentence I don’t worry about that. For one thing, Jim isn’t a real person. He’s a fiction and as such my obligation to him is quickly limited; I’m not worried about knowing the quality of his moral character, it doesn’t seem so important, and besides the sentence gives me the feeling he’s trying to get at something else. About what it’s like to live inside of something, a set of clothes or a rigid social order. Being respectable comes with a lot of restrictions. And I’d never thought about what it means to move inside your clothes. Does it mean to move first and think later, to jerk and twist? Yes, it’s a samba. To not move inside your clothes is to move with care, with some deliberation and dignity. It is a waltz.

Jim isn’t thinking about who these girls are individually; he has no need to recall their names or faces. The sentence (and the book) is really, negatively, about the hired girls. To hear the “muscles” personified, asking “not to be disturbed,” is to be immediately directed to the hired girls, whose muscles presumably do ask to be disturbed—we are returned again to Jim’s emergent sexual imagination. And the phrase instantly speaks in dozens of microscopic ways to what Jim has already said

about the hired girls—“[They are] not always trying to imitate other people,” (88) and “Everything [Antonia] said seemed to come right out of her heart,” (86)—and what he will soon say about them—“The country girls were considered a menace to the social order” (98).

This is me trying to show what it means for fiction to *open up* language. I recognize Cather’s sentence as a moment that generally transcends everyday speech acts. (Of course, it is by definition *not* an everyday speech act, but a piece of a larger work of art, something that has been meticulously and purposely crafted for maximum aesthetic (beauty) and interpretative (truth) effect.) I see it pointing forward and backwards to other parts of the text in subtle ways. I see it using synecdoche and personification in ways that we don’t really bother to in casual conversation, where direct communication is often preferred over figurative language. To talk of bodies and muscles instead of girls and women is a strategy that pushes the sentence into a liminal space between the literal—the way the girls dance—and metaphorical—the way the girls dance as a metaphor for Jim’s attitude, sex, womanhood, maturity, vitality. It does double duty. The language of fiction runs towards metaphor and ambiguity, double and triple meanings, something that makes it uncommon—no matter how common the individual words themselves may be—and laden with disclosures about the speaker. When we encounter this language in a work of art it exacts a deeper awareness of how the language sounds in the ear, and what it can signify. It is flexible, extensible, making meaning and

referencing other points in the narrative in multiple ways; but it also springs back quickly to be just a nice sentence describing the way some girls dance.

I don't claim this *opening up* to be something that only fiction can do. Of course not. I'm not saying that sentences like Cather's don't exist 'in the wild,' spontaneously leaving someone's mouth around a campfire or in a mechanic's garage, giving pleasure and inviting ruminations. I think I merely want to claim that fiction is good for showcasing the elasticity of language and, subsequently, thought; it has a tendency to do so. It is a venue where this kind of encounter with language is the norm and, really, the point.

Narrative theorist Richard Walsh writes, "Fictionality, I want to suggest, functions within a communicative framework: it resides in a way of using language, and its distinctiveness consists in the recognizably distinct rhetorical set invoked by that use" (15). In his book, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*—a play on Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*—Walsh spends a lot of time arguing with other narrative theorists. His molasses-thick jargon is barely intelligible to most readers; he draws out the minutia of his entanglement with fifty years of narrative theory in order to cover all his bases and bulletproof his arguments. I'm sure I don't understand some of the nuances of his immensely technical approach. But I find his main idea appealing: in addition to being composed of many rhetorical devices, fiction *itself*, or the idea of something being fictional (what Walsh calls "fictionality"), is *itself* a rhetorical device. In other words, the classification of something as fiction is a signal to both a writer and a reader of how to use language.

So maybe a large part of fiction's *elasticity* stems from the fact that we know it is fiction and we know (or have learned) how to read (or hear) fiction in a certain way. In that sense, maybe it is not so much the language that opens up when we read a story, but ourselves that open up to the language in a new and imaginative way. I see this is something William Gass was getting at in his essay "The Medium of Fiction":

The purpose of a literary work is the capture of a consciousness and the consequent creation, in you, of an imagined sensibility, so that while you read you are that patient pool or cataract of concepts which the author has constructed; and though at first it might seem as if the richness of life had been replaced by something less so—senseless noises, abstract meanings, mere shadows of worldly employment—yet the new self with which fine fiction and good poetry should provide you is as wide as the mind is, and musicked with deep feeling. While listening to such symbols sounding, the blind perceive; thought seems to grow a body; and the will is at rest amid that moving like a gull asleep on the sea. (33)

It is not, for Gass, a matter of 'identifying' with another consciousness (a term that has become, in some classroom settings, short hand for 'easy to take'), but in becoming entwined with a "capture[d]" consciousness, surrendering to its infinite probabilities and liabilities. When I surrender, or open up, to the language of fiction—Gass's "cataract of concepts," my expanding chain of associations and

meanings from a sentence like Cather's—I am allowing the creation of something off the page. An “imagined sensibility,” like that of Jim Burden's, begins to inhabit my mind and, as Gass so capably explains, “thought seems to grow a body.”

Not a real body, of course. Cather's sentence does not tell me what a living, breathing man remembered about dancing in 1904. It doesn't ask me to believe in a living, breathing boy in a dancehall, and then believe that he had this impression of what it was like to dance with certain girls and then articulated that impression years later. I know it's fictional, and am not fooled into thinking it isn't. But I allow the language of the fiction to expand into my own thoughts and feelings, so that while I know the words are written by an author, an actual human being, fiction gives me the option of believing they come from no one real at all—it gives me permission to project that newly created consciousness onto my own. While nonfictional narratives can definitely invoke such imagined sensibilities, maybe fiction does it more categorically, or with less effort. Maybe on the stage of nonfiction there is more competition between the imagined sensibility created in a reader and the embodied sensibility (a true flesh and blood consciousness) that is always implied, if not present, in the voice. Maybe the general advantage of fiction is that the author can more effectively hide, behind a curtain of fictionality, and this is what gives fiction some particular kind of power or effect, if it can claim such.

In that way, fiction sends me a letter with no return address. It makes me wonder. Pause. Step into the darkness. The sentence is up for grabs. It's even possible the sentence becomes mine, briefly, partly. I hold joint custody with the

author. And as opposed to my ponderous, methodical parsing of the Cather sentence above, I would argue—really, I just assume—that all this happens naturally, instantly, mostly subconsciously as I read sentence after sentence in a book like *My Antonia*.

When I write a story, I feel both constrained and set free by the elasticity of fictional language. In “Every Thursday Until Further Notice” I write about a former basketball star named Barry Lawd who is in the last stages of kicking against the fact that he is past his prime, that many of his grand plans failed and can’t be resurrected, and that his wife is still peaking, so to speak, professionally and maybe even personally. At one point I describe Barry as he sits in his friend Gene’s study:

Barry leaned further back and drank the rest of his beer. He stared above the TV, above Gene’s modest desk—a hollow door on two sawhorses—at the most striking object in the room, the Jefferson State flag, forest green with a yellow circle in the center, a gold mining pan, and around the edges of the pan the words, “The Great Seal of the State of Jefferson.” In the center of the pan: two black Xs, like two dazed eyes on a smiley face. The Xs stood for the Double Cross. Double crossed by fat cats in both Salem and Sacramento. Double crossed by history. Double crossed by geography itself.

It’s a pretty straightforward description of Barry looking at this flag belonging to Gene, a former radical and benign eco-terrorist. My story instincts zeroed in on the flag. I knew—hoped—it was a compelling object in the story. To me

it is irresistible: the image doubles as a gold pan and an ominous smiley face, it is a flag for a place that never existed, a fake flag, but it hints at political and private realities. But even as I write this I recoil. I'm beginning to expand, consciously, into the object. What is the flag, why the flag? When I wrote it, I really didn't know, and still don't. And I don't want to know, although if forced to cough up some elegant reading of the flag I suppose I could. For an author enamored with his own tidy genius, or a reader bent on interpretation, the language of the flag opens up, leading to ideas and even symbolic constructions that simply weren't there when the flag first presented itself. You see what I mean? I know the satisfaction of a graceful literary explication. But for me as a writer, the elasticity of fictional language is a force that I need to contain. A writer can begin to stretch the language too far, to a point where it becomes stretched out and even brittle. The flag means this. The flag means that. By the end of the passage, maybe I begin to toe the line with talk of the "double cross." But I try to resist, for once the flag means something in particular, once it becomes, in an explicit way, more than a flag, the language of fiction may have opened up *too* far and can't spring back. The flag is no longer a flag and is now a motif, an insignia for x, y or z. On the other hand, that tension, that stretching of the language to the point where it begins to carry extra meaning, where metaphors start to materialize, but where it can still snap back to its plainest configuration—a flag, a dance—that may be the sweet spot of much fiction.

As far as being set free: at the beginning of the passage, the scene is still being reported by some separate but undefined third-person narrative voice. Me, I

suppose. “Barry leaned back . . .” “He stared above the TV . . .” But there is a migration towards a free indirect style that begins to loosen the narrator’s grip on the language. It starts with the reference to the flag as “the most striking image in the room.” Most striking to whom? Barry, the narrator, or Gene? The answer just floats there between all three. In *How Fiction Works*, popular critic James Wood says the free indirect style allows a reader to “inhabit” multiple perspectives at once. “Thanks to free indirect style,” says Wood, “we see things through the character’s eyes and language but also through the author’s eyes and language. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once” (11). So a word like “striking,” according to Wood, “somehow belongs to both the author and the character; we are not entirely sure who ‘owns’ the word” (11). It is this ambiguity that opens the language up in a piece of fiction and allows us to nurture the “new self” that Gass talks about. While the words may not mean much on their own—“senseless noises, abstract meanings,” Gass calls them—their ability to grant us the rich experience of seeing as the character sees and also seeing more than the character sees, and seeing through multiple characters and narrators, is ultimately a sublime experience—to take from Barthes. By the end of the passage from “Every Thursday Until Further Notice,” the free indirect style has taken over: “Double crossed by fat cats in Salem and Sacramento. Double crossed by history.” There are no subjects in these sentences, no tags or quotation marks. Who is speaking? I am pleased to say I don’t know. I suppose I am speaking. But so is a narrator who may or may not be Barry and/or Gene. The metaphor begins to point in all different directions: we are double

crossed, all of us—Gene by Barry, Barry by Gene, by Lucy, by the narrator, by fate, by circumstance—and so language begins to fill in the cracks of our narrative understanding, even if it is an illusion. The story is larger, fuller, more complex in our minds than on the page. Fiction is like narrative Miracle-Gro, it can turn a seedling (bare words) into a bushy plant (a complex work of art). Compare this to something like television (don't get me wrong, I *like* television), which is like an already-mature plant—you may observe it, enjoy it, appreciate it, but it is mostly done growing. Television has pictures, sound, movement, music, laughter, etc. It is saturated with detail and can hardly open or expand anymore into a reader's consciousness and perception—it doesn't create a consciousness as much as present a consciousness. And so goes the commonplace: television is a *passive* medium.

Barthes notion of the final *jouissance* of a reader becoming lost or immersed in the text may be an appropriate corollary to a discussion of fiction's elasticity. The mechanism of this *jouissance*, I have to think, *is* the elasticity of language, in fiction, as well as in other literary genres. Language that can stretch to touch, pull, cover, and encapsulate a reader. I'm not saying that reading my story is blissful, or anywhere close to it. But sometimes when I write, when the words spill out and begin to float around and detach themselves from me and attach to another character or sensibility, I feel my own little brand of joy in the unfastened language of fiction.

It Spreads Out

Somewhere in the Bible we can read about Jonah, who was swallowed by a “great fish.” He is called to preach, runs away from God, hops on a ship, gets caught in a storm, fesses up to his shipmates that he’s the reason they’re all about to die, is thrown overboard, stashed in a fish’s belly for three days while he prays, apologizes to the powers that be, and is “vomited” onto shore. The Bible is a good place to start (and, admittedly, a somewhat drastic place to start) because it is like a dual rhetoric. There are two traditional, distinct ways of reading the story.

The first is as a nonfiction account, a historical event. Some people read it this way. Other people may think these people are nuts, but it hasn’t been too long since Biblical orthodoxy was rather entrenched. There are varying levels of historicity or truth that people might attribute to God, Jonah and this famous narrative. However, I am going to make it easy and approach the story, for the sake of argument, as if it were factual in every particular. From this rhetorical perspective, the story is a morality tale. It teaches a lesson, or forwards a worldview. It is seen as being mainly about God, or the idea of God. So when I read, “And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil *is* upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah (*King James Bible*, Jonah 1:7), which is an interesting but kind of “unimportant” moment in the story, I tend to move quickly past such a scene. I look ahead for the literal truth that I know is awaiting me on the other side of these foreordained events, and see the sailors, Jonah’s sleeping on the ship, even his intriguing argument with God after

Nineveh is saved, mainly as formalities leading up to the final takeaways: God is miraculous (A man lived in a fish for three days!), merciful (He didn't die! The city was spared!), and has his reasons (Jonah needed to learn a lesson, the people of Nineveh needed to learn a lesson, we all need to learn a lesson!).

It's not that I don't notice the rest of the story. Its relevance, though, may be secondary. My reading, my attention, is framed by an expectation of authenticity that guides my thinking and my focus. In this context, a reader can still be very emotionally invested in the story. For some readers, issues stemming from the story's supposed factuality can be engaging and compelling, carrying a mandate to believe or act a certain way. What does this story teach me about God? How am I like Jonah? These questions can have claim on a reader. However, just because a story has claim on me (demands a response, elicits a psychological involvement), doesn't mean it's *mine* in the way I've proposed fiction formulates itself as a deeply "musicked" (Gass) kind of dual, temporary self in a reader's mind.

But I can also read the book of Jonah as a fiction, a folk tale, as it is more generally received. With this approach, I think some of the more overtly theological moments and lines in the story can make a kind of retreat back into the text. The core assumption that God exists and has miraculous power becomes irrelevant, becomes a given within a story that we already receive as fiction—it isn't relevant except in its relevance to the fictional characters in their own fictional world. And so, other parts of the story come into relief. For instance, Jonah's speech in chapter 2. Verse 7: "The waters compassed me about, even to the soul, the depth closed me

round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.” This sentence speaks to Jonah’s terrifying suffocation inside the great fish. It is vivid and profound. When reading the story as a fiction, Jonah emerges more as a character and less of a pawn or a placeholder in God’s dealings with humans. The horror of Jonah’s experience can be better accessed, as can his devotion. “But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that I have vowed” (Jonah 2:9) prays Jonah.

Later, when God spares Nineveh, Jonah is angry. He pouts, “Therefore now, O Lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for *it is* better for me to die than to live” (Jonah 3:3). Jonah isn’t a coward or a mindless prophet. He questions the peculiar God who made him go back to the city, when it appears God was planning on saving it all along. Taken as fiction, these lesser-known parts of the story of Jonah start to expand and open up.

There is definitely no barrier to a close, imaginative reading of a nonfictional text. But I propose something happens when the truthfulness of a story is fully “beside the point.” The focus of the story, its spotlight, gets diluted. Fiction can foster a democracy of details, where attention to language is divided up and *spread out* more evenly across the story. In the story of Jonah read as fiction, some “key” passages may become less relevant, while some “minor” passages grow in relevance. What looked like a graph line with high peaks and low valleys now looks more like rolling hills. With Jonah, I become less concerned about *what* happened to him and more concerned with *how* it happened and *how* he reacted. This means I have to pay closer attention to more of the story, to more of the language. The relevance the

story has for me is now even more of an internal, imaginative matter and draws less weight from stated or implied realities.

Reading under the looming precision of nonfiction (this precision is relative and scaled on a vast continuum, I realize, from breaking news to lyrical essays), I can't help but use my own faith or lack thereof, my instinctive ability to make the evaluative judgments that help me carry on as safe and sane in the real world, and my own understanding of the author's intentions, to guide and fix my narrative scrutiny. It's a rhetorical mode that serves me well when reading the story as nonfiction—nonfiction implies an engagement with somebody's version of honest truth, and I would be remiss not to meet it with my own version of honest truth—but that correspondingly keeps me at a respectful distance from the speakers and players. Jonah himself, and God, strangely enough, may be more present in my mind in a fiction (I feel it is so), more arresting in their humanity, because I alone must fill them in and fill them up with whatever psycho-emotional power their language carries for me. And that development of the imagined sensibility (call it God, call it Jonah, call it both) isn't concentrated in the language of a few crucial lines or passages, but *spread out* across the language of the entire story. I am reminded of a Flannery O'Connor quote I have been repeatedly drawn to over the space of years. In an essay called "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" she writes:

People have a habit of saying, "What is the theme of your story?" and they expect you to give them a statement: "The theme of my story is the economic pressure of the machine on the middle class"—or some

such absurdity. And when they've got a statement like that, they go off happy and feel it is no longer necessary to read the story.

Some people have the notion that you read the story and then climb out of it into the meaning, but for the fiction writer himself the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction. (73)

O'Connor here does well to articulate in a homespun way what Roland Barthes says about the blissful re-enactment of writing the text through reading it, or "experiencing" the story, as O'Connor says. Reading, "is not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of writing" (5), says Barthes in the essay "From Work to Text." It is, he says, "a form of work" (5) whose real value comes through the act of producing meaning more than in the final product. If read as fiction, the "themes" of the book of Jonah—obedience? repentance? divine power?—are suppressed, partially at least, as the accumulation of details starts to do its work, sounding more subtle notes of inference and association, stretching the reader and shading everything gray. It is a lot of work to separate the meaning of a piece of fiction from not just *some* of the words, but the entire lot of them, through the experience of following their threads and arrows and frayed edges. For meaning, in all literary art forms, is indivisible from form and style. Certainly this is an engine of poetry's special force. But maybe, in fiction, it's not just that the two are especially bound up, but that sense and pleasure are energetically *spread out*. Diffused, like sugar stirred into a cup of tea.

As a writer I am constantly aware of this spreading out in fiction. I don't set out to write a story *about* something, the way that Robert Louis Stevenson writes an essay about idleness in "An Apology for Idlers," or how Brian Doyle often writes about his children in his book *Leaping*. To me, the strength of fiction is that it tries to resist being *about* anything. Or the inverse: the weakness of fiction is that it isn't really suited to be *about* anything. It simply tries to *be* something—much easier said than done I've found. Says Tim O'Brien through his alter ego in *The Things They Carried*, "What fiction can do, I guess, is make things present." It is characters and what they say and do; and it is witnessing these things for one's self without distraction or interference or any kind of stoppage. In this manner John Gardner gets it right in *The Art of Fiction* when he says "fiction does its work by creating a dream in the reader's mind" (31). He goes on:

We may observe, first, that if the effect of the dream is to be powerful, the dream must probably be vivid and continuous—*vivid* because if we are not quite clear about what it is that we're dreaming, who and where the characters are, what it is that they're doing or trying to do and why, our emotions and judgments must be confused, dissipated, or blocked; and *continuous* because a repeatedly interrupted flow of action must necessarily have less force than an action directly carried through from its beginning to its conclusion. There may be exceptions to this general rule—we will consider that possibility later—but insofar as the general rule is persuasive it suggests that one of the

chief mistakes a writer can make is to allow or force the reader's mind to be distracted, even momentarily, from the fictional dream. (31-32)

I like to think of fiction as a dream. Not a literal, sleeping dream—usually absurd, disjointed, and arbitrary—but a “thing of unreal beauty, charm, or excellence,” as the word can mean in English. I'm content to believe that fiction is not like life. Life is full of distractions, interruptions, and stoppages. Fiction announces its unreality—again, the rhetoric of fictionality—and from there its distinctive potency is forged, and we are better off reading as dreamers, and *spreading* our attention wide and far, rather than reading for a point, collecting theses, or racing for an epiphany.

(Epiphanies in fiction, of course, are not uncommon, although the best ones—for instance, the narrator in Raymond Carver's “Cathedral” telling the blind man, “It's really something,” when he draws a picture of a cathedral with his eyes closed—are still only half-formed, half-sprung from their bed of ambiguous intentions. As a general rule, there are few “AHA!” moments in fiction. Or, more accurately, I prefer my fiction with few “AHA!” moments.)

When I am writing a story I try to put aside what I might think the story is *about*. Sometimes I probably fail (see, for instance, “Zoo Passes”). I try to write as if each sentence is the most important one, my priorities not centered on the beginning, middle, or end of the story, but spread out to everywhere in between. This leads me knuckle down on *how*. How can I say this? How could I say this? It's all that matters. Okay, not true. It matters what I say and when. The structure of a plot, the order of events, these things matter in fiction. But I don't have to ask, is this how

it really happened? Is this true to what I felt, what he said, what happened twenty years ago? In fiction there is no frame of authenticity that limits the scope of time in a story (historical fiction is ever popular), or access to a character's thoughts, or the ability to leave out important details without risking dishonesty. I'm not saying this makes writing fiction more arduous or ambitious. Maybe the writer of fiction has it easy in that she doesn't have to worry about every word on the page *and* worry about being true to actual events and people. Only the former.

It Takes and Makes

Though I felt it was a good jumping off point, I allow that the Bible is an extreme example, inscribed with pre-packaged symbolism and lopsided with ground-zero-of-civilization significance. The usual ginned up claims about its truth or fabrication are also way out of proportion with the kind of subtle shades of fiction and nonfiction that occupy the modern literary canon and with which I as a modern reader and writer mainly concern myself. It also doesn't resemble, in its style or substance, the kind of narratives that I seek after as models: what is alternately praised and scorned and taught today as contemporary Literature. So I offer something else. Here is the opening of Barry Hannah's story, "Love Too Long":

My head's burning off and I got a heart about to bust out of my ribs. All I can do is move from chair to chair with my cigarette. I wear shades. I can't read a magazine. Some days I take my binoculars and look out in the air. They laid me off. I can't find work. My wife's got a job and she

takes flying lessons. When she comes over the house in her airplane, I'm afraid she'll screw up and crash.

I got to get back to work and get dulled out again. I got to be a man again. You can't walk around the house drinking coffee and beer all day, thinking about her taking her brassiere off. We been married and divorced twice. Sometimes I wish I had a sport. I bought a croquet set on credit at Penney's. First day I got so tired of it I knocked the balls off in the weeds and they're out there rotting, mildew all over them, I bet, but I don't want to see. (10)

The first-person narrator here is frantic, fidgety, frustrated, and filled with desire. He is unemployed and getting cabin fever sitting around the house while his wife is out flying airplanes. The voice is exhilarating, it is exhausting and neurotic. When I read it I'm holding my breath, waiting for a break in the text, for someone, the narrator himself, to circle back and explain things a few things, like why he got laid off or why he can't find a job, and ease me into the situation. He doesn't, and the text becomes a bit of spectacle, and me a gawker, looking on with some of the same wonderment I have watching daytime television. I almost get anxious as Hannah's language invades my consciousness and starts to break down my resistance. I begin to give in, my "will at rest," says Gass, and then I am like the "gull asleep on the sea," just riding over the waves of Hannah's prose.

To maybe illustrate further, I've indulged myself in rewriting the passage using different language:

I've been unemployed for a while and sitting around the house is really getting me down. I am hot, sweaty, anxious, and I can't sit still even to read. Since I was laid off from my job, I find myself paying special attention to any airplanes in the area. This is because my wife, who does have a job, and who I've married and divorced twice, takes flying lessons and will sometimes fly right over our home. Once in awhile, I even get the crazy idea that she might crash into our house.

I really think I need a job soon. It will help me feel better about myself. It's probably not healthy to just stay home and drink and think about sex all day. In an attempt to be a little more active, I even bought a croquet set at the local department store, even though I didn't have enough money to pay for it up front. I am already bored of it.

That the narrator is bored, jobless, and wants to get out of the house is apparent from both passages. Why is it that the second one, to me, loses something? This is a dangerous game I'm playing, I realize, one where I rig the results by writing my own comparison. But I wanted some parity between the two versions. They both *take* the same basic materials, words and ideas, and *make* something quite different.

In essence, I wrote the second passage in the voice and using the syntax that I might use to relate these events to a friend. Like I'm on the phone, or I'm sitting at a café, and I'm saying, "I've been unemployed for awhile and sitting around the house is really getting me down." This is a conversation with a real person. This is talking

and knowing that you are communicating with your friend in two ways, a) with what you say about your current situation, and b) with how you say it, from which your friend will infer much about your mental and emotional state. “I’ve been unemployed for awhile and sitting around the house is really getting me down,” communicates something different to my friend than if I sit down and say, “My head’s burning off and I’ve got a heart about to bust out of my ribs.”

In a way, the second passage generally approximates for me a language more closely tied to personal essays. Why? The voice is more self-aware, more concerned with introductory language, like “I find myself,” and “This is because.” Nonfiction operates under the assumption that the writer and reader believe a story or statements are true, or refer to some reality. The illusion of a corporeal conversation with another human being comes into play, and one of the common ways to approach such a conversation is through an aesthetic of friendship². Listen to me, says the essayistic voice in the second passage, I can see my problems and my quirks and madness from a distance (“it’s probably not healthy”), I know this must seem a little crazy to you, and I don’t actually consider croquet a sport. This sociality requires a little finesse.

No, I am not saying that a memoirist or essayist can’t write like Barry Hannah. They certainly can and it can be electrifying, like David Shields in the prologue to *The Thing About Life is That One Day You’ll Be Dead*: “I seem to have an

² A term borrowed from my friend and writer David Wanczyk and the introduction to his 2010 Ohio University dissertation entitled, “Let’s Be Friends Please: The Aesthetics of Friendship in Personal Writing.”

Oedipal urge to bury him in a shower of death data. Why do I want to cover my dad in early shroud? He's strong and he's weak and I love him and I hate him and I want him to live forever and I want him to die tomorrow" (xvi). And there is certainly plenty of fiction that reads like my second passage. Much of Henry James, for instance.

But I'm trying to put my finger on something, and I think it's this: built into fiction is a suspension, *not* the much-vaunted suspension of disbelief—I think Richard Walsh properly argues that "disbelief is essential to reading a work of fiction *as fictional*, and it is only by doing so that we apprehend the effects it achieves" (70)—but more accurately a suspension of judgment. If fiction is a dream, unreal, something that asks only to be observed, who tries to evaluate the truth claims of dreams? In fiction we don't have to think about the truthfulness of the person behind the words, we can just let the words become the person. As such, it could be that fiction allows both readers and writers to go farther with a character who not only makes mistakes or contradictory assertions, *but may never acknowledge them*.

(Says Charles Baxter, paraphrasing Chekhov: "[A] writer must try to release the story's characters from the aura of judgment" (13). I would argue that this "release" is built into the experience of fictionality—by entering a fiction we can be released from the paradigm of judgment—and that one of the main generic differences between pop fiction and so-called literary fiction is that in pop fiction oftentimes a brand of clear judgment is re-inscribed by the author in morally

simplistic terms. Literary fiction tends to put the burden on the reader to honestly face how they feel towards characters and events. On the other hand, think thrillers, Cussler, Clancy, stories where the good and bad guys are clearly delineated and, most often, broadly rendered; writing a novel like *Patriot Games* is no easy task, reading one like it can be most gratifying, and maybe akin to decaf coffee—there's a good time and place for the "low-risk" alternative.)

The lack of need to explain or justify blunders—the dirt of living—is something I value and enjoy about writing fiction. I can nurture a character like the narrator in my story, "Dust," and just follow him through all his obsession, selfishness, and delusion. I as an author never have to comment on these things or acknowledge them. True, the character is faintly aware of his own choices. But I don't have to evaluate them as much as I have to behold them. In the story the narrator/main character is driven to a kind of madness. He kidnaps ducks, among other things. The language to describe all this tries for immediacy and muscle, something I admire about Hannah's work. I write, "In fact, I can't even think and it's almost magnificent the way I can't think and I'm just a clear vessel with lines of electricity streaking up and down inside me" (84). In fiction, after a line like this, there is little or no explanation required, either at this moment in the story or before or after. If I have earned the reader's confidence as a storyteller, no one asks what it means to be a clear vessel or to have lines of electricity streaking around. It's figurative, sure, but it also doesn't refer to anything in the real world. It tries to *take* words that we've heard before, like "vessel," "electricity," "magnificent," "can't," and

“think,” and *make* them into something new, that draws attention to itself and that naturally fits with the imagined sensibility being generated in a reader. (Another common term for this, I recognize, is the “defamiliarization” of Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky.)

I may risk writing something stupid, or ugly, or bad, but I am not worried about answering to a reader for how that sentence reflects on my own ethos, or state of mind. To write like the Hannah passage in a piece of nonfiction, perfectly acceptable from a formal, literary standpoint, carries additional risks, depending on how you want readers to perceive you, or at least your on-page persona. To read a personal essay written like a Hannah story could be thrilling, but also exasperating or alienating, in that the writer is constantly trying to take advantage of the elasticity of language to nudge and surprise you, continually taking those commonplace constructions and helpful explanations (like the ones in the passage I wrote) and turning them into sentences that aim first to contribute to an effect (the capture of consciousness) and, second, try to contain meaning. Oftentimes in nonfiction the priorities are reversed: one must be true to what you know first, and then make that truth artful and effecting.

Look at the Hannah sentence again: “My head’s burning off and I got a heart about to bust out of my ribs.” By the second line it is obvious that the narrator’s head isn’t literally burning off of his body. But it’s still a curious phrase. The verb “burning” is a concrete word—usually referring to combustion, but sometimes

referring to other conditions like overheating, blushing, etc—but when still there is no immediate understanding of what the narrator is trying to represent.

The corollary in the second passage, the one I wrote, seems to be a more familiar description: “I’m hot, sweaty . . .” The startling shape of Hannah’s sentence likely has something to do with the fact that the words “head,” “burning,” and “off” form an unusual English collocation (word order). Those words don’t appear next to each other very often, certainly not in contemporary American fiction, at least. “I’m burning up” is a collocation that may be used by someone with a high fever or who is uncomfortably warm. Even “head’s burning *up*” would have had a more customary flavor. And even if Hannah had written, “I feel like my head’s burning off,” or “It’s like my head’s burning off,” the language of the simile could be enough to distance the reader from the image and soften its strange demands. But to use a body part, especially a vital one like the head, burning *off* as a metaphor for a physical or mental or emotional state is an abrupt and ringing statement. You can’t easily scan over it. It resists familiarity.

The phrase “I got a heart about to bust out of my ribs” also carries within it an unanticipated turn. While figurative language about beating hearts, hearts thumping, hearts about to burst, and hearts beating out of chests is fairly standard, Hannah manages to imbue this sentence with a naked newness pleases my ear. Part of it is simply the diction of “ribs” rather than “chest,” which is rather punchy. Also, the phrase conspicuously lacks an auxiliary verb after the first person pronoun—“I got” rather than “I have got,” or, more commonly, “I’ve got.” This rings out as an

informal, slangy construction, a written form that heightens the illusion of actual speech. But also, in an almost unnoticeable way, it places the weight of the sentence more squarely on the verb “got,” rather than splitting it between “have” and “got.” By eliminating the more passive “have,” the sentence grants the narrator a more active stance, allowing him not only to *possess* the heart in question (as “I have got” would have more exclusively connotated), but to fan out into the spectrum of definitions for the verb “to get” that would imply the heart was acquired *by* the narrator or received *from* someone else.

These other shades of the verb “to get” signify nothing important to the story. They don’t really register when you read the sentence. By and by an analysis like this is trivial, and it is absurd to think that Hannah, or any writer, is thinking consciously about collocation and dropping auxiliary verbs as he composes. But still, the ambiguity is there. The sentence is slightly askew. It is the sudden texture of a sentence like this—a sentence, to take from Gass again, that for me “persists past all utility” (*Habitations* 118)—and its many invisible echoes, that make language *elastic* and that fiction feeds on. Fiction is nothing if not a medium to play with words, to tinker and stretch and smash, to find that new and vivid variation that will be able to project a new and vivid imagined sensibility into a fiction reader’s brain.

A Concluding Remark

If I have failed to provide an adequate definition of what fiction can do, as I surely have, I at least hope to have done it with care and curiosity. While I have

made references and comparisons to nonfiction, I have tried to leave the door open and talk not so much about what fiction can do exclusively, but what its tendencies are, its potentials. In these it is not alone. Many of the things I've said about fiction can be said about poetry, nonfiction, and other art forms. No literary genre, no art form, has dibs on the way the language is used. Just like a spoon can be used to dig and shovel to eat, certainly we are better off trying to take stock of each genre's conventions and use those to talk about fiction that acts like nonfiction, nonfiction that acts like fiction, etc., ever ready to concede ground and embrace innovative forms and stories that transcend taxonomy.

As for the stories in this dissertation, I make no claim that they live up to the celebrated books and authors I have cited above. Their heritage is generally of a realist, minimalist aesthetic. They center around middle-class Americans, stumbling through changes, looking for work, distraction, renewal. Often, they include animals. Any talent and industry I possess has been brought to bear on them. But I am merely a striver, a laborer in a long and ever-evolving literary tradition. When I write fiction, I step into the current of history and our collective imagination, a current that overwhelms and carries me. Most of the time, I can't tell if I'm up or down, heads or tails. Once in awhile I swim straight, and that feels good. Right now, I don't ask for more.

I do think, as Frank Kermode famously states in *The Sense of an Ending*, "that it is ourselves we are encountering whenever we invent fictions" (38-39). And when will we cease to be interested in that most mysterious, amusing, and enthralling of

creatures, ourselves? Whether or not—as Kermode also famously worried—we understand that we have a “propensity to seek meaning in details (linguistic, symbolic, anecdotal) that are indifferent, even hostile, to story,”³ as I have likely done just now in this introduction, we, people, will continue to use and abuse stories to possess, redress, and absolve ourselves.

What I hope, simply, for the following stories is not that they tell you how the world is, but maybe allow you to imagine what the world could be like. In his discussion on “realism” in fiction, James Wood zeroes in on why questions of representation—“does fiction make true statements about the world?” (237)—are misleading. Imagination, not belief, is the ontological basis for fiction and so, says Wood, “verisimilitude” is irrelevant, and “the artist’s task is to convince us that this could have happened” (238). He continues: “Internal consistency and plausibility then become more important than referential rectitude. And this task will of course involve much fictive artifice and not mere reportage” (238). When we read fiction, we don’t want to believe, we want to be convinced. Fictive artifice is the ability to bend and mold the language to achieve to a desired effect. To bend and mold the language elastic.

³ Kermode as paraphrased by Lawrence Rainey for *The Independent*, a London newspaper.

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EVERY THURSDAY UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

When Barry got home Roger, his foster dog, was eating the handle off of his wife's tennis racquet. He thought Lucy had gone to play tennis, but it looked like she'd decided on racquetball instead. Her gym bag wasn't in the closet. Barry didn't play racquetball, not since hitting himself in the lip with his own racquet three years ago. In all his years, it was the first and only time he'd gotten stitched up. The doctor marveled at this.

"It's hardly fair, don't you think?" said the doctor. "Forty-eight years and I've got high school kids that I've been sewing up each year since they were two. Forty-eight years and you've never just smacked right into something. That's luck."

Barry was stirring curry on the stove when Lucy barged in with her bag dragging on the floor. New smells came with her: cut grass, vinyl, car exhaust.

"I love Saturdays," she said.

"I'm watching a fight over at the Deming's tonight," he said. "Just so you know."

"I always appreciate knowing, dear," said Lucy.

Lucy played racquetball with a man. Carlo Lombardi. Carlo was taller, stronger, faster, and hairier than Barry. He played water polo. He even played polo, the kind with horses. He was always at the gym. Barry, a semi-world-class athlete himself once upon a time, found it particularly enervating that he and Carlo were almost the same age. He knew he had gone a bit soft.

"Did you shake hands afterwards?" said Barry. "I hope you didn't hug."

“Barry,” said Lucy.

“Big wet mop.”

“Barry,” said Lucy. “Where is the dog?”

“He’s sleeping in the garage. I just gave him his medicine,” Barry said. “He kind of ate your tennis racquet.”

Lucy went to the closet and picked up the racquet. She examined the handle, holding it up to the light. Then she threw it down on a pile of shoes, mumbled something about grip tape. She started toward the bathroom and Barry realized that he wanted to know for sure if she was sleeping with Carlo. But he might never be sure. Not ever. And it might just continue like that always, with her playing racquetball with Carlo, swapping seeds and composting tips with George next door who rode a motorcycle and worked nights, going to Kiwanis Club mixers, and all the while coming home to eat with Barry, to laugh with Barry, to sleep with Barry. Barry felt his heart beat harder and was ashamed. Ungrateful, he thought. Nobody likes a whiner.

When Lucy got out of the shower, Roger was moaning and tapping out a frantic beat with his claws against the garage door.

“Roger is understandably upset,” said Lucy. She was wrapped in a towel. Putting on mascara. “But I don’t want him in the house anymore,” she said.

“I think he feels bad about what he did,” Barry said. “I scolded him good.”

“He doesn’t remember five minutes ago,” said Lucy. “He’s the worst dog you’ve ever had.”

The bathroom blazed with light, intensified by the glare off the foil Mylar wallpaper—Chinese disco, Barry called it—a leftover from the 70s that had become hip again before they ever got the chance to tear it down. Barry leaned over—he stood at six and a half feet—and kissed his wife on the neck. He stuck his nose in her wet hair and breathed deep. Eucalyptus. Mint. Lucy. As magnificent as ever. She was a mountain. A riptide. It didn't take long for people to notice. She moved through life like flypaper, attracting long stares, the conversation of strangers, winners and losers and everyone in between. When the kids were in school, the PTA forced her to be president for nine consecutive years. Other parents called her for advice when their children were sick or unruly. Merchants at the Farmer's Market slipped her free apricot rolls and bags of tomatoes. It was a rare year that went by without her picture appearing in the *Contra Costa Times*. At youth soccer games she seemed surrounded by husbands. She was a frequent lunch guest of Principal Cohen at the high school. Once, their car overheated going over the Grapevine into Los Angeles and Barry hitched a ride to the next gas station to get some water. While he was gone the driver of a melon truck asked Lucy to run away with him. "I've got two kids," she said. "Baby, I got three," said the truck driver. That was the first of at least three or four indecent proposals that Barry knew about.

"It's true," Barry said. "Roger is the worst."

Lucy moved to the bedroom and started picking through a jewelry box on top of the dresser. She settled on a half-dozen earthy bracelets with glass and wood beads, and a pair of amber earrings that brightened against her dark blond hair. She

had, indisputably, to this day, the most beautiful face. The face that launched a thousand blood drives, letter campaigns, and bake sales.

“I don’t think anyone will take him,” said Barry. “I don’t think I could ask anyone to take him. The only way would be to give him back to the shelter.”

“Maybe you should just stop giving him his medicine,” Lucy said.

Barry’s whole face seemed to contract towards a point on the bridge of his nose.

“No!” he said. “That’s an execution. That’s sick. It literally makes me sick.”

“It’s natural,” she said. “Don’t you hassle me with your popsicle stick morality, Barry. If you don’t want him to suffer, give him a lethal injection. They do it to people in Oregon everyday.”

“It sounds a lot like killing,” Barry said. “Maybe you guys can debate it next week.”

Lucy stuck her tongue out and Barry pretended to pinch it with his fingers. Lucy had been on the City Council for five years. They met every Tuesday evening in a single-story office building—City Hall—on San Pablo Avenue. Carlo Lombardi was also on the Council. Last week the discussion centered on how hard the city should crack down on teenagers skateboarding in front of the grocery store, how many lifeguards were needed at the pool, and what colors to repaint the playground at Wildcat Canyon Regional Park. It was a good week, given that Barry considered the mayor, a woman named Susie Green, to be insane. In her brief tenure she had treated the council to a show-and-tell with her collection of carved coconut heads,

argued that loud snoring in apartment buildings constituted a noise ordinance violation, and proposed that the city help the homeless by having everyone plant fruit and nut trees in their front yards. Barry rarely went to the meetings, but he liked to watch the broadcasts on public television. By the end of the meetings he was often drunk and cheering on his wife from the sofa.

“If Susie keeps it up, I’ll be mayor after the next election,” said Lucy. She kissed Barry on the mouth. She went into the kitchen and pulled a plate out of the dishwasher. She heaped on rice and curry and mango chutney and started to eat standing up.

“Get my jacket and umbrella out of the front closet?” she said to Barry. “I wish you would come with me.” She was going to a fundraiser, of course. Not for her, for an assemblywoman from neighboring Richmond.

“I haven’t seen Gene for awhile,” he said. “And I’m officially tired of stump speeches and bacon-wrapped hors d’oeuvres.”

“Oh? You prefer Old Milwaukee and Margaret’s award-winning beans?” she said.

“I do tonight,” he said.

“Gene just gets nuttier with age,” she said.

“His politics are your politics. He voted for you three times,” said Barry.

“I am not a radical, Barry,” she said. “I do not want Northern California to secede from the union.”

“Neither do I. And neither does Gene,” he said. “That was years ago.”

“I like Gene,” said Lucy. “I just don’t love Gene.”

“If anyone asks, I’ll say I’m married to that other Lucy Lawd, the one in real estate in Buffalo,” he said.

Lucy dumped her half-full plate in the sink. “You know I’m not like that,” she said. She looked at her half-eaten meal. “Too much salt, Barry.”

“You’re in the game, now,” Barry said. “I’m a liability. Especially when seen in the company of kooks and whackos like Gene Deming.”

The quickest way to the Demings was on the freeway, but Barry decided to take side streets. He drove slow with the windows rolled down. He liked to hear the big engine in his old Chevy truck—a gift from his dad in 1977. The same year Star Wars came out. Same year he led the conference in rebounds and blocks. Same year he met Lucy after a home game in Tucson, took her out for dessert, and made out with her on an old mattress in the back, the sweet smell of chocolate ice cream on her breath turning pleasantly sour as they kissed and grabbed. It was the same year he signed on to play pro ball in Australia, and the same year he laid out his motorcycle on El Camino Real in south San Jose, ending his basketball career. He tore his back up but still might have had a chance if the Buick behind him hadn’t run over his leg.

He turned the old truck onto a main street and pulled into the drive-through at Roberto’s. The air smelled of grill smoke and rotten fruit, which was probably

coming from the dumpster nearby. A nice breeze moved the shadows of the sweet bay trees on both sides of the truck.

“I’ll have two large guacamoles,” he said into the intercom.

“Eight fifty,” said a voice.

He pulled up to pay and was greeted by Pino, the manager. He’d known Pino since they were boys. Mostly they saw each other at softball games where they faced off, Pino for The Chupacabras and Barry for Contra Costa Humane Society.

“Barrydog,” said Pino. “Just take these and don’t worry about paying today.” He handed Barry two plastic tubs of guacamole and a bag of tortilla chips.

“That’s ridiculous,” Barry said. He shoved a ten-dollar bill out the window. “Don’t make me drop this on the ground.”

Pino straightened his back and held his hands up like he was being robbed. “No way, gringo. No way I take your bloody money,” he said. “Just tell Councilwoman Lawd that we here on the east side thank her for all her hard work.”

“Hard work? What is that, a code? Now you’re buying favors?” Barry said. He stuffed the money, with dramatic flair, into his shirt pocket. Now a couple cooks were standing at the window with Pino. “I’m telling you, Lucy can’t even propose a zoning change without a petition and five hundred signatures,” Barry said. He knew that Pino’s sister wanted to open a salon in the neighborhood across the street.

Pino just grinned and pulled down his black visor. “You know I know,” he said. The two men clasped hands, pulling each other a few inches closer over the gap between the car and the drive-through window.

When Barry got to the Demings he parked in the driveway. The white stucco house and the red tile roof looked the same color of night. He opened the glove box and pulled out a box of cigarillos, the little strawberry kind.

The double front doors were open, but the entryway was dark. The sounds of a cheering crowd echoed up the stairs from Gene's study. Barry walked down the carpeted steps and found Gene alone, watching the fight on a little 12-inch TV. It was a middleweight bout, Jimmy Sanchez Somebody against a guy who just turned pro after winning gold at the Olympics.

"What about the big screen?" Barry said. Gene looked back over his shoulder and a wave of twisty gray hair fell across his face. Barry flashed the guacamole.

Gene stood up quickly and grabbed Barry by the shoulders. "Barry P. Lawd," he said, "the first and only, son of a bitch, *guacamoler* extraordinaire. Sit down and have an ale. It's stout, they say."

Barry complied. "Seriously, Gene," he said. "Where's Margaret?"

"She's not feeling well," said Gene. "Got a headache and needs to sleep. Hence, I am down here. But don't worry, these two aren't putting on much of a show. The red shorts guy is a swarmer with an uppercut so slow you could serve tea on it, and the Hispanic guy's a pretty quick out-fighter but he'll never make it twelve rounds. He looks anemic already."

"Mind if I run up and say hi?" Barry said. He gestured towards the stairs.

"Yes, I do," said Gene. He directed Barry to a wicker rocking chair with a ratty green cushion. Barry sat down. It had been three months since the end of the one

year that Margaret's doctor gave her to live. Last time Barry saw her she was walking downtown with Gene. She looked healthy with hair down past her shoulders, filling out a thin sweater and black stretch pants. Barry and Lucy ran into them outside the world bookstore next to Thai Bistro. "What a body!" Barry had said to Margaret, trying for a compliment but missing on all counts. Besides sounding overly sympathetic and mildly inappropriate on a public street, all four present couldn't help but remember how Barry had slept with Margaret. It seemed petty to talk about it now, after the initial fights and awkwardness, the ups and downs, births and deaths, comings and goings, the way they even joked about it at times, and now a terminal illness for Margaret, but it was still there. The pain was gone but, of course, but the scar remained.

Barry pushed back in his chair. It had been awhile since he'd been down in Gene's study, the walls still covered with maps, mostly west coast maps—road maps, topographic maps, aeronautical maps, maps showing land use, soil, climate, population—and on many of them the outline of a proposed U.S. state, drawn in a thick red line, stretching from Coos Bay in Oregon all the way down to Mendocino, two hours north of San Francisco. The State of Jefferson. A movement started by another crazy mayor two months before Pearl Harbor. On the top shelf of a chipped bookcase, a row of wide accordion folders held every issue of *Seriatim*, the guerilla magazine Gene used to publish after-hours from the copy room at a friend's law firm. It was a mix of commentary and propaganda. Political boundaries should

mirror ecological ones. Fight for your community. Protect the forest. "Did it all without turning the lights on," he used to say.

"Where are Alan and Lolo?" said Barry.

"Good question," said Gene. "I think Alan is in Texas buying up duplexes and fourplexes and whatever comes after that. And Lolo. Lolo. Lolo. He's probably making the rounds. Every week a new girlfriend."

"I'm pretty sure he's slept with all our wives," said Barry.

Gene turned quickly to face Barry. Then said, "Dammit you're probably right. Couldn't happen to a nicer guy, though." The joke felt good, especially to share it with Gene, and yet it wound Barry up just a bit.

"After all these years, I think Lucy might finally be done with me," Barry said.

"You marry up," said Gene. "That's what they say. Why else would you do it unless you're just a jerk or a control freak?"

"I'm not a control freak. Maybe a jerk, when I try," Barry said.

"Then you have nothing to worry about," Gene said. "She jerks you around, you jerk her right back."

"When we met, I was king of the desert," Barry said. "People told me everything I wanted to hear. They told me I would play pro. They told me to run for Congress. You could see it in their eyes, practically begging me to hang onto their business card. I could walk into any restaurant in Tucson and get a free meal."

"Slow down," Gene said. "This just got good."

On the television the two boxers leaned into each other. Suddenly the medalist snapped back and launched a half uppercut into Sanchez's temple, making his knees buckle for a second before he recovered and started flailing back. The crowd noise hit its peak. Lots of missed punches and a few that connected and then the bell and the cutmen rushing in with their endswells and buckets of Vaseline and gauze.

"It didn't feel wrong back then to think she was getting a pretty good deal," said Barry. Gene faced him, eyebrows up and mouth half-open, remote control pointed at the ceiling.

"Listen," he said. "There's just one more round. Then we can go sit in the courtyard."

"Yeah, sure," said Barry.

Barry leaned further back and drank the rest of his beer. He stared above the TV, above Gene's modest desk—a hollow door on two sawhorses—at the most striking object in the room, the Jefferson State flag, forest green with a yellow circle in the center, a gold mining pan, and around the edges of the pan the words, "The Great Seal of State of Jefferson." In the center of the pan: two black Xs, like two dazed eyes on a smiley face. The Xs stood for the Double Cross. Double crossed by fat cats in both Salem and Sacramento. Double crossed by history. Double crossed, thought Barry, by geography itself.

It was a night that stood out in Barry's mind. Call it a shift, a permutation.

Election night, November 1988. Center court, El Cerrito High School gym, surrounded by campaigners and friends and hangers on. It was Barry's concession speech. He lost to the incumbent, Tim Davidson, for a seat representing California's 7th State Senate District. Davidson's family owned 22,000 acres of farmland near Salinas, land Davidson saw with his own eyes maybe once a year.

After Barry's accident, after he came back to California, to his hometown, he started working for a gravel company on Fairmount Avenue. Still a local celebrity, a high school phenomenon, top recruit, center and power forward for the University of Arizona. He had people's respect. He also had their pity.

He got the gravel company a few big contracts with the Department of Transportation. He pushed through construction on a railroad siding so they could unload gravel cars directly into their bunkers without having to send it on trucks. Barry got a reputation. He joined a consulting firm, became a lobbyist basically, which was how he met Gene, who ran with a crew of second-wave hippies and threw a cream pie at Barry's client, a timber boss, while they walked up the steps of the Capitol to a closed-door meeting. Later the rabble-rousers followed Barry's group to a bar on K Street where they confronted each other and found out they lived in the same town. Barry was tall with thick hair and a big handshake. He had held on to the thought of public office for years, like a two-dollar bill in his pocket. And so he ran.

But he lost. And up there on that stage at center court, in the same gym where Creedence Clearwater Revival played their last gig five years before, at their

own twenty-year reunion, Barry found himself completely and utterly emptied of words. Drained. Standing at the top of a hill and knowing he had to start hiking down. His fingers felt stiff and light—he couldn't have held a pencil in his grip. His collar drenched with sweat, his wife looking into his eyes with concern.

And Lucy Lawd grabbed the microphone.

"It's been a good ride," she said to a mass of sullen faces and expensive fabrics. "Barry feels so grateful for all of you, we both do, that he's having a hard time finding the words."

The silence was so gaping you could have crawled inside it. "You tell it, Lucy," someone said. "Davidson's a hick with a golden prick!" another yelled.

The corners of Lucy's mouth moved, just barely, towards a smile. "Now there," she said. "This isn't that kind of party. We wish the best to Tim and his family. But we don't want to think of them too much tonight, do we? We want to have a drink and dance until we can look defeat in the eye!" The crowd buzzed and a few people whooped. Lucy pointed to the DJ under the basketball hoop and within seconds his speakers blared "Let's Hang On" by Frankie Valli, a song Lucy chose in preparation for just such an outcome.

"This reminds me of sitting poolside at my hotel in Jordan," said Gene. "Everybody liked that flavored tobacco there." The fight was over, Sanchez won in a split decision. Gene blew smoke and examined the little plastic mouthpiece on his cigarillo.

“You were never in Jordan,” said Barry. They sat in molded plastic chairs in the Deming’s tiled courtyard out back. The evening fog thickened and hovered in the tops of the valley oaks along the fence. Gene flicked his ashes into an empty fountain shaped like an angel baby. A bush with smooth red bark and ropy branches like giant capillaries looked as holy as anything in the moonlight.

“You couldn’t just give me five minutes? Five minutes to enjoy that idea? And how would you know if I’d never been to Jordan?” Gene said. “True, after getting hepatitis from the cucumber salad I don’t know if I ever want to go back.”

“Gene, I’m not with it tonight,” said Barry. He crossed his legs.

“What is this, your fourth mid-life crisis?” said Gene.

“Second,” said Barry. “Not even a crisis. Just a reckoning maybe.”

“So what are you going to do?” asked Gene.

“Well, I’m not going to think about Carlo. He’s just one guy,” Barry said. “And I probably need to find a new sideline. I may have hit a wall with the dogs. Roger is a sick possum posing as a dog. He’s from another planet. I think he might be the last one I take.”

“Semi-retirement not what you thought?” Gene said. Barry tossed the rest of his cigar in the fountain. When Lucy made it on the Council, Barry got bored. So, Gene got him a spot on the Humane Society’s board of directors and he had such a good time with Hedgehog, a foster dachshund, that he just went with it. He left the consulting firm with a nice pension, still doing some freelance work for friends.

“I’ve never felt crazy about something the way you did about Jefferson,” Barry said. “You got arrested three times. You chained yourself to a redwood tree for a month and made it into the FBI’s file cabinet.”

Gene stretched his hand out to Barry. “And they cut the tree down as soon as I left,” he said. “It was vain as anything. Just to prove myself *skookum tumtum*.” He knew Barry liked it when he used Chinook jargon. Northwestern pidgin words.

“What’s that mean?” Barry asked.

“It means brave, strong-hearted,” Gene said.

“Bull. You’re *hum opoots*,” Barry said. Skunk. Stinky ass.

“And your mother is *tenas kloodchman moos-moos*,” said Gene. A heifer.

“So do you regret anything?” Barry said. He scooted forward in his chair.

“Where is Lucy right now?” said Gene.

Barry rolled his eyes. “Fundraiser,” he said.

“Do you remember what those kids with rifles said when they started stopping traffic and handing out proclamations on Route 99?” Gene said.

“I forget,” said Barry.

Gene cleared his throat. “They said, ‘We are in patriotic rebellion against the States of California and Oregon, and will continue to secede every Thursday until further notice.’”

“Okay,” said Barry. “Why?”

“Margaret will be dead any day now. You, you big bastard, have Lucy for at least a while longer,” Gene said. “Maybe she doesn’t love you like she did. Thank God

for that. But sometimes the futility of a thing has nothing to do with its utility. Eventually things just *are*. She's with you and you can see her whenever you want. Bicker whenever you want. Touch her whenever you want."

Barry wouldn't look Gene in the eye. "Thanks," he muttered.

"I think we should go see her right now," Gene said. He stood up.

Another night that stood out to Barry.

September 1988. Just a couple months before he lost the election. He sat on the couch in the dark house. Lucy was upstairs putting the girls to bed, reading them *Charlotte's Web* and helping them with their final math problems.

It had happened after a campaign rally. Cheryl Halstead wore a red cocktail dress, low in back and with a long slit. Her husband wasn't home and Barry went back to her house to drop off a stack of lawn signs. They stood in the entryway, overwhelmed by the scent of jasmine from the yard, and Barry put his hand on her thigh and in a few minutes they were naked on her couch.

Cheryl, good Christian woman that she was, broke down about a week later and informed her husband of the affair. She told Barry he needed to confess to Lucy or she would do it herself. So he did, and asked Lucy not to tell anyone at least until after the election. She agreed, but told him to stay away from her for a while. It was the third indiscretion she knew about, the last one being Gene's wife, Margaret, her friend, and she had no way of knowing, believe it or not, that it would be his last. Yes, that was it for Barry Lawd—the sudden cresting of a very big hill and the start

of a whole new kind of downward devotion to what he would have left after the election flattened him out. And if that was the night the old Barry died, it was certainly the birth of something else. Or someone. Lucy, perhaps. Call it the way things go, the circle of life, the trajectory of a marriage—of every marriage, perhaps.

But that night was the low point. “I’m going to go help Jess and Maddy with their math and read them a book,” Lucy said on that night. “After I’m done, you need to go up and kiss them goodnight as if nothing is wrong.” She went up the stairs, her footsteps no heavier than any other night. Barry stayed on the couch, with the lights out, arms folded. He waited until he heard Lucy blowing kisses across the girls’ room. Waited until the light in the hallway vanished and the door to the master bedroom clicked shut. He waited. Arms folded. He whistled softly in the dark. Whistled the tune to his favorite sitcom, to the Wolf’s theme from *Peter and the Wolf*, the melody of “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” tried to match the notes of the cars driving by outside, the high-pitched ring of a motorcycle. Finally, he rose and walked up the stairs.

They parking lot at the Hampton Inn was full so they found a spot on the street. On the way in to the Inn’s conference room they passed a cluster of bars and restaurants. A band played at one and a good crowd bunched on the veranda, spilling over the rails, sloshing drinks onto each other. A college kid with a crew cut turned as they went past and said, “Hey! Barry Lawd!”

Barry stopped.

“I saw you play when I was little,” said the boy. “On television. March Madness. I saw the game against Wisconsin where you dribbled the length of the court and sent it into overtime. My dad about shot through the ceiling.”

“You know they lost that one,” Gene said.

“Yeah I know,” said the boy.

Barry fumbled for something to say. “Yeah, well, it felt good,” he said and trailed off. He gestured to the boy, offered his hand awkwardly, but the boy was holding drinks in each hand and held them up in apology. “Okay, then, see you later,” said the boy.

As they entered the hotel, Gene slapped Barry on the back.

“Sent it into overtime!” he said with enthusiasm.

“It was the worst basket I ever made,” Barry said. “I had two guys open on either side of the lane but I muscled it in anyway. I should never have made that basket.”

“You know I’ve never seen the tape,” Gene said. “I’ll take your word for it.”

The doors to the conference room were closed and they heard the muffled sound of someone’s speechmaking on the other side.

“Do we go in?” Gene said, his hand already turning the handle.

They tried to go unnoticed but the room was smaller than one would have thought and all heads rounded in their direction as they plopped down on two office chairs at the back wall. The speaker, one Carlo Lombardi, paused while they settled in. He gave no indication of recognizing Barry.

“Judith Reyes will serve the good citizens of this city, this county, and this state,” Carlo continued. He had managed to look good despite the fact that he was balding and sported a small ponytail. His light colored suit looked very expensive. “She will do for them what no one else can or would,” Carlo finished to modest applause. He sat down behind the podium on a chair next to Lucy, who was looking at Barry and smiling. She gave a little wave. Another speaker now stepped up to the microphone and started into some vapid introductory remarks. *I’m sorry, Lucy* mouthed and pointed at her watch. Carlo leaned over and whispered something in her ear which she seemed to ignore—although she did lay her hand on his wrist as he spoke—as she continued to gesture at Barry and Gene, directing them to the table of picked over finger foods and indicating that she had no idea how long these festivities were to continue.

“Let’s go,” said Barry. “I’ll see her at home.”

On the drive back Gene never stopped changing stations on the radio and reminiscing about his days as an eco-terrorist. Barry laughed a fair amount. “Feel better, *skookum tillikums,*” Gene said as he slid out of Barry’s truck. Friend. Grand old man.

“*Alki,*” Barry said. Someday. In the by and by. Also, the state motto of Washington.

When Barry got home Lucy was still gone. He sat at the table and read *Newsweek* and *Consumer Reports* and ate graham crackers with chocolate milk. He

decided that he would rather have the expensive camera with the big lens than the expensive camera that fit in his pocket. He ate a corndog. The green numbers on the stovetop clock read 12:30.

Roger woke up and started whining and scratching at the door. Barry let him in and tossed him a slice of American cheese. Roger begged some more and Barry poured him a bowl of dog food. Barry got out a small Tupperware with congealed bacon grease in the bottom. He microwaved it until it was liquid again, then poured it on top of Roger's dog food. Roger looked up for a moment and panted at Barry with his permanent doggie smile. "At least you've got that going for you," Barry said. His eyes burned with sleep. He went and lay down on the carpet in front of the cold fireplace. He grabbed a remote control off the coffee table and turned on some jazz, played so low he could barely hear it, mostly just the snare drum and the high hat and a few honky sax notes.

He thought about getting up and putting Roger back in the garage so he couldn't destroy anything before Lucy got home. He didn't move. But some time later Roger came in where Barry lay and stretched out next to him. He licked Barry on the top of the head and sniffed in his ear, which made Barry jolt and put his arm over Roger's ballooning middle and pull him in. Roger, wayward Roger, consented to be hugged and nestled by Barry Lawd, aging lobbyist and handsome ex-athlete.

Barry woke up when Lucy walked in around two a.m. He listened to her drink a glass of water in the kitchen. Listened to her put her keys on the hook and hang her coat up. He heard her walk down the hall and into the bedroom. Heard the

muffled rush of a sink faucet, the tick of the bathroom vanity opening and shutting. He knew he would get up soon and join her. He knew he would throw his jeans in the corner and pull back the light blue sheet. The bedsprings would creak too loudly as he settled next to her and she leaned back into his arms.

URGENT CARE

This, thought Beth Strop, is no way to spend your honeymoon. She sipped tepid peppermint tea and watched her new husband sleep off the pain—the hospital sheet with yellowed edges pulled up to his chin, his cheeks puffed out slightly with every breath, the dour smell of his day-old aftershave, and the line of stitches directly down the center of his forehead, from his hairline to the bridge of his nose. It looked, Beth had to admit, completely ridiculous.

“This is no way to spend your honeymoon,” said the doctor. He was the biggest Portuguese man they’d seen since they crossed over from Spain two weeks ago. Pro wrestler big. And a mustache that was a celebration all its own. She laughed for the doctor. They talked in English.

“So you think this man was trying to break in or something?” asked the doctor.

“No. I think he was just drunk,” Beth said.

“Ahhh,” said the doctor. “Just drunk.” He smiled and his mustache parted like palm fronds. He tipped his thumb back in the universal sign for drink. Then he pointed at her.

“You are young?” he asked.

Beth nodded. “We’re both twenty six,” she said.

The doctor pointed at Ash. “Tell him to slow down,” he said. “Tell him to love is a long, long time,” he said. He made a line on the wall with his finger. He disappeared into the empty hallway.

Beth blushed. How could he know, this doctor? Of Ash, short for Asher, trying to squeeze a lifetime of devotion into one month, driving many kilometers per hour, getting naked on every strip of sand from Seville to Sagres, blinded by the sky, stuffed with gazpacho and tapas, reeling like a royal, high on skin, and, finally (what the doctor had been told for certain), running head first into the corner of the window shutter in their moldy hostel room—a window like a door, a thick slab of hardwood that swung *into* the room—all in her defense, of course.

The doctor came back in with a prescription and Ash started to wake up. He opened his eyes, but he was delirious. He called out for his dead dog. He asked for a chocolate banana. He started humming the theme song to an old Burger King commercial. He asked a bunch of questions about venereal disease, but not all at once. Beth leaned forward and stroked his neck, shushed him back to sleep. Last night, a man had been pacing the courtyard of the Albergue Sempre Aberto—their hostel in granite-walled Guarda—for quite some time before he decided to look in on them. They had been too busy, obviously, trying to get it right, trying to recreate the landscape on each other—but when the window swung open and the moonlight rushed in, and there was no hiding the salt-stained bedspread with iridescent peacock tails pluming across it, then they knew that they had heard him all along. Not *heard* him, but known his presence, shuffling across the clay tiles, as integral as the warm beat of their breathing and shifting. Suddenly, though, he was there, they froze—and in that moment, something wound up inside of Ash. Maybe it was for shame, Beth imagined, for leaving her exposed like that, and what he lacked

in quickness he would make up for with decisiveness. More likely, though, she thought, it was just in keeping with the pace of things—Ash in his new role as husband, just wind him up and watch him go spinny spinny—and in the way form seems to complement function for the recently betrothed. Ash getting knocked out was only a clumsy rendition of Ash getting married. Whatever the case, Ash unwound was a first inning fastball swatted out of the park, his head on the shutter. The sound almost identical. The big difference being the blood. And the man, their spectator, wringing every last ounce of pathos out of his drunken Portuguese, apparently apologizing god bless him, harmless pervert he may be, and it wasn't until Beth closed the window that she realized she hadn't screamed, or even said a thing.

ZOO PASSES

We've got zoo passes this year and my last day of work is coming up. So, on a Thursday after school, I get the kids and we head over. I'm still in my charcoal suit, white shirt and tie. "Nothing more important than family," my boss says when I leave early. Nothing, maybe, except my job, which we both know I won't have for very long.

The zoo has a big gorilla thing going. They've been proclaiming it everywhere, including on the lunch trays at school, and by now the kids are just freaking out about it. Lizzy is three and she keeps asking if gorillas have bellybuttons. A pretty good question. Common sense tells me yes, but have I ever seen a gorilla bellybutton? Maybe they have headbuttons, or thighbuttons. It's funny what you think you know.

In the car my mother calls. I don't feel like answering so I give the phone to Christopher.

"You want to tell her about the zoo?" I say.

He talks to her and I can tell he's excited because his voice gets all squeaky. He has shelves of books on creatures under the sea, creatures in caves, creatures that will kill you with their venoms in less than an hour. He knows more about the fauna of the world than most biology majors, mostly from watching the guy on TV who backslaps wild animals and wields his Australian accent like a billy club.

"Grandma, Dad punched his boss," I hear him say. I turn the radio down. Technically, I didn't punch anybody. I put the guy in a headlock and threw him into a

fake palm tree. Christopher, observant to a fault, overheard me talking about it so I tried to put it into terms he would understand. Besides, punching seemed more gentlemanly than riotous office wrestling. A clean punch in the mouth. Something snappy and direct. Something to rattle the senses without ruffling anyone's necktie. And, technically, I didn't thump my boss. I thumped his boss. My boss's boss. The CFO. A ham-fisted Harvard grad with gleaming shoes and the IQ of a paper shredder.

Christopher nods. Aware that I'm listening, he doesn't say much, just "Okay," and "Yeah," and "I can't wait, Grandma." I haven't told him, but the only reason I'm not fired yet is some company policy that a "full internal investigation is required before action is taken on incidents where no criminal charges are filed." Basically it protects the bank from lawsuits. As soon as a "team" from HR finishes their final report, I'm gone. Really, the only reason I haven't left is to prolong our insurance coverage—sixty days from the day of termination.

"Grandma wants to talk to you," Christopher says. Though she knows I'll be leaving my job, Grandma hasn't been fully informed of the circumstances until now.

"Tell her I can't right now. I'm driving," I say, even though we're just pulling into the parking lot.

As we get out of the car, Mariah calls. We've been married long enough to have three kids, a little dog, and a trampoline. She works a lot at a shop downtown called Pack n' Print.

"How are the kids?" she asks.

"Good. Heather sprained her finger," I say.

“Her finger? Which one?” she asks.

“One of her pinkies, not sure which hand,” I say.

“Maybe you should call Madam Tenille and cancel piano lessons,” she says.

“I think she’s fine,” I say. “She won’t keep the ice on it that the nurse gave her. I think she’s milking it a little.”

There’s a rustling sound on the other end of the line, the sound of crunching boxes and screeching tape. I hold the phone away from my ear.

“So, will you call Madam Tenille?” she says.

I get testy. “Who the hell calls themselves Madam Tenille? In Nebraska? She’s from St. Louis anyway.”

“She was born in London,” Mariah says. “She moved to St. Louis when she was two.”

I apologize for deriding Madam Tenille. I hear beeping in the background as she punches buttons, then the rolling buzz of the copy machine winding up.

“I’ve got a line now,” she says. “Have you talked to your mom?”

“No,” I say.

She starts to answer, then drops it, inhales and says, “Get the kids pizza or something on the way home.”

“Yeah, love you,” I say.

“Love you,” she says. We always say “love you.” The “I” dropped out a while back, but there’s nothing sinister in that, like how some people might try to bring their pop psychology to bear on it and say, “You’ve lost your sense of self. Your

expressions of affection are passive, void of an actor.” But you can just as easily turn it the other way, say, “The absent ‘I’ is beautifully emblematic of your selfless and unified love.” Plus, I know we’re not the only ones. Kevin and Clair do the same thing. Although in their case my brother-in-law Kevin has probably done the math and estimated that cutting out one extraneous syllable from such a frequent phrase will save him 40 seconds per week, or about 34 minutes per year, enough time to fold four loads of laundry or learn “Hey Mr. Tambourine Man” on the guitar.

I show our family pass to the guy in the ticket booth. He gives us one map.

“Dad, I want a map,” says Christopher. He’s nine. Nine and fine. It’s Heather I worry about, two years younger. She looks like her mom but thinks like me. *What if I pasted a slug to my brother’s shorts? How can I steal those gummy bears without getting caught? Truly, spankings are usually always worth whatever you did to get them. Does Richard’s mom have any feeling in those giant, saggy arms of hers?* These are all thoughts I might have had when I was a kid.

I distribute maps to everybody while the ticket guy fumes. He wants to remind me about the global energy crisis, the wisdom in sustainable living, the generous community donors who make map-printing possible. I’m not worried, though. We’ve got a family pass that we’ll probably use only two or three times. Though our map per visit ratio may be a little high, I assure Ticket Man that our total map usage for the year will be quite admirable.

It’s been raining all week but now the sun’s out and steam curls off the blacktops. My collar is wet. Right through the gates is the Desert Dome, moisture

and temperature-controlled, the most pleasant place in the city this time of year. I tell the kids we have to go there first. They want to go right to the gorillas. I tell them the Dome's got wild pigs and giant spiders and the birds—they just fly around free. They consent and soon we are standing in front of the pigs, who do seem surprised and maybe a bit annoyed that people have actually stopped to ogle them instead of going straight to the gorillas or the giraffes or the sharks. They are ugly pigs with bristly hair jutting out from weird places, thick yellow tusks, and bony legs. Lizzy tries to reconcile these creatures with the soft pink ones so regularly encountered in her books. Finally, she gives up.

“Daddy, that’s a no-no!” she says, pointing at the pigs. “Daddy, that’s a no-no!” What she means, I think, is that she has denied them citizenship in the kingdom of pigs and that they are an affront to Nature. But, also, I worry that her verbal abilities have been stunted by her effusive older sister, the one who always speaks for her. Heather is running from exhibit to exhibit, reading aloud the display plaques about habitat, diet, lifespan, etc.

“Springhaas are excellent jumpers, and have to be quick to avoid predators,” she says. “Almost all carnivores in Africa—snakes, lions, owls, and more—eat springhaas. Even people eat them!”

Heather turns to me. “Oh, Daddy!” she shouts, turning the heads of a nearby elderly couple. “I want to eat a springhaa!”

“Maybe someday, honey,” I say. I give the couple a narrow smile. The woman’s in a wheelchair. She’s dressed sharp, in a fine suit and a silky blue scarf.

She wags her head and eyes the springhaas sympathetically. Her husband is behind the wheels with a golf cap and a fool grin on his face. He'd eat a springhaa. I give him a knowing nod.

When we get to The Sonora Desert, we are greeted by about a hundred gangly rabbits. Jackrabbits. We've hit feeding time and rabbits are streaking across the hard dirt, converging on clumps of lettuce, popping out from behind rocks and logs and mounds. Lizzy claps and cheers. Christopher and Heather count the babies. I tell Heather that here is a creature she might reasonably have a chance to sample sometime. She says, "Ewww." I say her grandpa still hunts rabbits with a .22 out in the Mojave. I've never gone with him, but I've eaten my share of rabbit coq au vin on Christmas Eve. It's a French thing apparently, but with a colonial twist. I wonder if we'll be able to afford the trip home this Christmas. I think about the house, the cars. I wonder if Kevin could get me a job at his office in San Diego. He is my brother-in-law and he still owes me for pulling him out of a tight spot during last year's audit. I think about being poor and having to eat our dachshund, Chamomile. Cammy for short. On Christmas Eve. I dismiss the idea on the grounds that she's old and arthritic and probably very unsavory.

My mom calls again. Christopher hands me the phone.

"Stupid, Charlie. It was just really stupid, wasn't it?" my mom says as soon as she hears my breath. She isn't really accusing. It's almost a real question.

"It's hard to explain, Mom," I say. I hate that I have to explain. There's no way to explain. His eyes were too close together. He gave my promotion to a guy half my

age. He disrespects women. He mispronounces my name. He tried to blame my data for his oafish business decisions. I had hot peppers on my sub. I watch too much television. I thought he might respect me more. Nothing sounds quite right. And these days, nothing feels quite right. I'm walking around like I always have, but my insides are all scraped out like some Halloween pumpkin and nobody else can quite see it.

"Maybe you can focus on challenging this," my Mom says, her voice inflated with that mom-optimism that is as necessary as it is toothless. "It was provocation, right?"

"Have you talked to Warner?" I ask. Warner is my stepfather, an old school broker and grubstaker. We grew up listening to his tales of muscular international business travel.

"He's been retired for 25 years," she says.

"I know. I don't want him to get me a job, just give me some contacts," I say.

"He's working on it," Mom says. "His old office is closed up. Moved to Oakland. Rent was cheaper. There's only one guy there he still knows, an old dog named Jeffy."

"Jeffy?" I say. "An old guy named Jeffy?"

"It's his name from the war," she says.

"An old soldier named Jeffy?" I say.

"Yes, he went through it all," she says. "Combat, foxholes, the whole bit. Saw his friends blown up. So he wants to stay Jeffy, let him stay Jeffy."

“Fine.” I don’t know what else to say. Is Jeffy my contact in the world of global lending? I’m willing to overlook a name like that for the chance to get back to California. Mom is talking to Warner on the other end of the line, but I can’t tell what she’s saying.

“Mom, I’ve got to go,” I say loudly into the phone, trying to get her attention. Heather and Christopher are fighting over who gets to push the button at the tarantulas, and I’ve lost sight of Lizzy altogether. I start walking.

“Warner says that Jeffy will call you,” she says.

“When?” I say.

“He doesn’t know. Maybe today,” she says.

I hang up feeling nervous. I haven’t had time to practice what I want to tell Jeffy. I’m not a big shot, just a number cruncher, a calculator clone. But I do it well. Money goes through my desk like ships through the Suez Canal. I can bend a spreadsheet like a pipe cleaner, make it touch its toes and do one-handed push-ups. I’m a CPA, an MBA, a member of the AICPA, and no stranger to the GAAP. I’ve never sat in a boardroom, but I can figure things out. And I can smell danger before I even crack open a client’s file. But you can’t put that on a resume.

I find Lizzy in a corner looking at the hummingbirds. Unlike most of the other birds, they are behind long nets to keep them from wandering off.

She says, “The birds are floating.”

“It’s pretty, huh?” I say. I pick her up and go to grab the other kids out of the dank reptile grotto. Christopher is not ready to leave.

“Dad,” he says, “they’ve got this exhibit downstairs where they keep it dark during the day and then turn on the lights at night, so that all their, um, cycles are all confused and the nocturnal animals are active during the day when people are at the zoo.”

It really sounds smashing, I tell him, but the zoo closes in an hour and I know we have to get to the gorillas.

He hangs his head and starts towards the exit. I grab his hand and hold it—something we haven’t done for a while. He doesn’t squirm away, either. We amble past the bears and the big cats, Lizzy on one hand, Christopher on the other, and Heather running ahead to bring us back facts about the poor creatures we callously glide past.

The gorillas are up and about when we get there. They’ve taken their naps, torn up some phone books, eaten some mash, and are ready for an evening stroll. Gorillas splash around in a kid-size pool and gorillas pace between the trees. A mother is lying on her back with a look of pure weariness. Her kid gorilla has a diaper on and rolls around like a basketball, jumping off of ledges, landing on his mom, sticking his fingers in her gaping nostrils.

Kevin calls.

“Keveeni,” I say. My own voice discomfits me. It says I’m taking it all in stride, couldn’t care less. An irrepressible man of the world, that’s me.

“Dude, did you get the boot yet?” he asks. His voice discomfits me—so assured. Money talks, Kevin talks. A voice that sells. Not threatening, but a voice emptied of something.

“Nahhhh,” I say, stretching my free arm behind my head and sticking my chest out. “I’m hanging on. The ball’s in their court, you know.”

“Yes yes. That’s it. Don’t blink, brother.”

I don’t respond right away as I look around to make sure each kid is in sight. Kevin clears his throat.

“So, Mariah told me you were wanting to talk to me?” he says. His tone is at once softer.

“Yeah, Kev, I’m with the kids. Maybe I can call you back tonight?” I say.

“For sure, man. Forrr sure,” he says. “We can definitely talk, but I just want you to know there’s nothing going on here. I could push and push but we’ve got nothing opening up around the corner. Maybe down in warehouse or something, but I’ve got no pull there. Those guys are like a law unto themselves.”

I haven’t even asked him about work. I wince and feel the warm huff of indignation in my throat, stuffed with Kevin’s jet skis, his thousand dollar “artworks,” his pale skinny legs, the month he lived with us after his first wife left him, the desperate phone call he made to me last spring saying his client accounts were out of whack and his job on the line, his preachy vegetarianism, his habitual way of telling you about the great book he’s reading. Heather squeals as one of the gorillas sticks its tongue up against the glass.

I tell Kevin I'll call him later. I won't.

I did tell Mariah I would take a couple pictures, so I line the kids up in front of a bronze gorilla statue. Then I crouch down with my back against the exhibit glass, with my back to the real gorillas, and steady the shot. A loud crack rings out from behind me and I fall forward to my knees.

I wonder if the walls are coming down, but when I look up I see a gorilla through the glass—a man gorilla, an alpha-mungous male gorilla with fangs and fists that could forge steel—standing over me. His body is heaving with each animal breath he takes and he looks straight ahead into nothing.

“Dad! Dad! That gorilla just attacked you!”

The gorilla, the big one, the silverback, is walking off. He stops, turns sideways, and takes a couple more steps. He is watching me. But he doesn't think that I can see him. Then with one giant, graceful leap he bounds towards me. CRASH! He slaps the glass with both hands. Bares his teeth. He is a wonder, I tell you. A 500-pound hairy Adonis. The kids shriek. The stroller-pumping mothers are leaning down and touching their babies. None of the other gorillas seem to be paying any attention.

Adonis does this routine several more times. He thinks he's so sneaky about it, too, skulking around as if I can't see through the 15-foot-high wall of plate glass between us. Each time, I just stand and wait. Each time he rushes the glass is a detonation of raw power.

By now several caring customers have asked me to leave, or to at least move. I ignore them. My kids aren't sure what to do. I just stand there, waiting for the next volley. Until the zookeeper shows up. Surprisingly, she smiles.

"It's your suit," she says.

I reach for the loosened knot of my tie.

She says, "I don't know if it's something about the white and black. Or the tie. Or the fact that it's like a man's uniform."

At this point, Adonis loses interest. He starts chasing a younger male down the backside of the enclosure, out of sight.

"What's that gorilla's name?" Heather asks the keeper.

"The one that was playing with your dad? Bradley," she says. Still smiling.

I can't help but think about a gorilla named Bradley. What the hell?

"Wow, who chose that name?" I say. The keeper just shrugs.

"Well, sorry to get him stirred up," I say to the keeper. Her nametag says Hannah.

"I don't think it's a bad thing," she says. "Keeps some excitement in their life."

I smile politely and gesture towards my kids. "It's time to go," I say in my good-natured dad voice.

"Oh please! Please no! Five more minutes!"

"The zoo closes at six," says Hannah. She may be admonishing us, I can't tell. Six o'clock is in less than ten minutes. "Five more minutes," I announce, and hold up

five fingers. The kids run to take their turn in a viewing bubble that pops up into the middle of the gorilla habitat.

I remember to call Madam Tenille. I think about what Mariah will say if I don't.

"Madam Tenille," I say. "It's about Heather. She sprained a finger and I think she needs to rest it. So, no lesson tomorrow."

I brace myself for the response. I seem to remember something about a 24-hour cancellation policy. There goes twenty bucks, I think.

"Ohhh, Charlie," she says. "Thank you for letting me know. Heather was my only lesson tomorrow, so I think I'll take the day and go see the tomatoes," she says. There is a tomato festival in Fairfield this time of year. That must be what she is talking about. Then she says, "Charlie, I must say, is everything all right?"

I've never had a personal conversation with Madam Tenille through three years of piano lessons. "Yes," I say. "I mean, no. I lost my job."

"You know, I knew something was happening. It was written all over Heather's face last week," she says.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Financially," she says. "With lessons. I don't want to be nosy, though. Still, you should know that watermelons are on sale at Hamm's. If you look you can usually find a good thirty-pounder, and same price as a ten-pounder."

I imagine Madame Tenille in old-fashioned underwear, sitting at an ornate tea table eating giant slabs of watermelon with one hand and playing ragtime with

the other. I thank her for the tip. As I hang up the phone I forget where I am until Lizzy pulls on my shirt. I bend down to talk to her and my phone rings again.

It's Jeffy.

"Hold on, sweetie," I say and gently push Lizzy away. I hold the phone to my ear and a voice like cracked marble greets me.

"You Warner's son?"

I say, "Yes, yes, is this Jeffy?"

"That's right," he says. "Your dad faxed me your resume."

"Good. You know, I'm just looking for a change. I know I don't have a lot of investment experience, but I've run the figures on hundreds of high-profile loans. I know where the proverbial—

He cuts me off. "I just wanted you to know that I'm putting it on file," he says. "When things come up, it'll be right there waiting for us."

I wait a few seconds. "Okay," I say. "That's good."

"Did you know they still tell stories about your dad around here? Back in the good old days, when we all flew first class, he would purposely schedule his layovers in Hong Kong just so he could eat the duck at some restaurant across town. He never backed down from a dish. He could eat the tentacles off a jellyfish . . ."

He goes on. I hold the phone in front of my face. Then close it.

By now the gorilla exhibit is empty and a grating kind of world music sprays through the zoo's speaker system. The kids have lost interest in the primates and are having a war with the seedpods from a nearby bush. But before I turn to leave I

see Adonis. He is not charging the glass, or getting ready to charge it. He's looking at me. Hands at his sides.

I approach slowly. As I do, he sits down on a tractor tire and tries to appear uninterested. He picks up a few carrot stubs and pops them in his mouth, then grabs a leafy branch and busies himself with back scratching. Adonis is facing me sideways, eyes darting back and forth, trying to watch me without meeting my gaze. I study him, the rubber skin on his face and the steep incline from his brow to his crown, his long shaggy arms—killers—and funny squat legs. His is an improbable body, like the short kid on the football team who rushes for a thousand yards, or the fat guy who turns out to have mastered yoga.

Finally, he stops moving and turns his massive head toward me. *Bradley*, I almost whisper. Somewhere behind me I hear crying. I lean into the glass and feel its press, feel its cool kiss on my hands and head.

DUST

This plague of flies came somewhere around the middle of May, 2003. Three years too late if you ask me. The millennial angst was over. No apocalypse, no terrible societal decay, unless of course you're talking about the sad state of newspaper reporting—but don't even get me started.

We arrived on a Sunday afternoon. My wife, Moira, myself, and our baby daughter, Erika. The cabin belonged, and still does belong, to Moira's sister. It's kind of a family resource. We brought up an awful amount of food from some discount warehouse in Boise. Which reminds me of one more thing that could count as a semi-apocalyptic sign of the times. Grocery store produce. If you've ever grown a melon in your own garden, you know how hopeless things are.

So, it's Sunday afternoon and I'm unloading the food. I've got handfuls of deli meats and I'm crushing bags of sweet onion potato chips under my arms. I'm waiting for Moira to open the front door. But before she does, before we even go in, I notice the window. It's a large window, maybe four feet wide, and it's covered with flies. On the inside, mind you. Probably twenty to thirty flies, sitting like little kings with their hairy legs all over the glass. It seems odd, but nothing abominable. It's spring and everything is wet. Life goes bonkers in the spring, right? After I unload the car I grab the fly swatter from the top of the fridge and get started. The little bastards hardly move. They shift positions, but mostly just wait to be stunned to death by my plastic *whap-whapping* across the window. They fall on the floor, they

fall in the window track. They leave greasy swirls on the window, which does make me feel lousy and angry.

But an hour later they're back. Not the same flies, of course, new ones. I don't know where they're coming from. And then Moira notices that they're pretty much on all the windows.

"This is disgusting," she says. "I'm taking Erika outside."

Luckily, it is nice out. The sun is drying out the grass. The Payette is running high and birds are fighting for a spot on the feeders. This time of year, you just sit on the bend in the river and look up at the holy mountain cloaked in pine-swaths. The river sounds puny and fabled at the same time. The sun plays painter. You might see deer, or elk if you're lucky, maybe even a bear from afar, maybe turkey, some geese, a crane. That's really why we came. That, and I'm supposed to be studying for my big licensing exam. Real estate. Housing prices are rising and I want to rise with them.

"Keep Erika away from the water," I say.

They go sit on a blanket. Meanwhile, I'm searching the cabin for a point of origin. Flies don't just appear. They lay eggs, which makes me sick—the thought of fly eggs all piled up in a corner somewhere under a sink. Because there are literally hundreds of flies. At this point, I've killed hundreds of them, and I'm tired of wiping them off the windowsill with a wet paper towel.

I look in the bathroom, peering down drains and running my fingers along the backs of drawers. I study the window tracks with a magnifying glass. I search the crawlspace for dead animals. I even shimmy under the porch with a flashlight. I

bleach the windows, then spray them with poison. But the flies keep coming. They're not streaming out of some crack in the wall like a horde of raiders. You just turn around and they're there, perched quietly, rubbing their dirty fly-hands together in the afternoon heat.

So I go outside and get Moira and the baby and we drive to town to the hardware store.

"Are there a lot of flies around this time of year?" I ask the old woman at the cash register. We've close to a pound of flypaper rolls in our arms.

"What do you mean?" she says.

I say, "A lot of flies. We're at my sister-in-law's cabin down by the river, and there are literally hundreds of flies in the house. I can't figure it out."

"Flies?" says an old man coming out of a side office.

"Yes, flies," I say.

The couple look at each other and shrug.

"Flies," says the old man, "are nothing big around here."

"Have you tried hanging bags of water?" asks the old woman. "I hear that works. The flies see their own giant reflection and it scares them off."

"Yes, but does it kill them?" I ask.

The old woman looks suddenly cold and folds her arms.

"That I wouldn't know," she says.

"What about the flypaper?" says Moira.

"Never used it," says the old man. "Don't even know where it came from."

On the way home, I tell Moira that we can drive back to her mom's house in Boise.

She says, "Oh, but it's so beautiful this time of year. Let's see if this works."

That night we hang the flypaper. When we're done the house looks eerie with the twisted ribbons of gooey paperboard dangling from the ceiling. They remind me of Shirley Temple's ringlets. That night we set up Erika's crib in our room. While we sleep flies land on our face. We cover the crib with blankets. In the still dead of night I convince myself that I can hear them, a soft, husky, undulating wall of buzz that makes me feel panicked. Nobody sleeps very well and finally, in the early dawn, I sneak out to have a look.

Two. Two flies caught in our gauntlet of deadly adhesives. Dozens still on the windows. Of course, nobody wants to be inside, but it is quite dreary outdoors. Clouds and a light wind blowing over the trees. After breakfast, Moira's mom calls from Boise and says she's reading the news. "They're saying Rancho Bob's had some kind of an 'unauthorized discharge,'" she says. Rancho Bob's is what the locals call the farm of nuke energy reactors upstate near the panhandle. The technical name is Rancho Coloma or something, but the good people of Idaho decided to stick it with the name of its most famous patron, ex-governor Robert Sandberg. My mother-in-law is starting to get worried. She reads to us from the paper, "It says, 'A press release early this morning advised residents from McCall to Twin Falls to stay indoors whenever possible and to avoid drinking or bathing in water from area waterways, as a precaution until officials can gauge the level of oversight.'"

You see what I mean about newspapers? Precautions and oversights are everywhere. A meteor could hit them in the nose and they'd write about what you can do to protect your family from the increasing trend of "errant space rocks." Then some enterprising restaurateur would make a dessert to coincide with the incident, and reporters would be dispatched with boxes of notepads and ballpoint pens to take pictures and write fluff pieces about X-town's very own Meteor Pie.

At about three in the afternoon, Moira goes back to the city with Erika. I say I will figure out the flies and that I just need to buckle down, even if it means studying on the porch.

But I can't. And it's interesting, because if I close my eyes, I wouldn't even know the flies were there. They aren't swarming, building nests, or carrying off small animals. They just stick to the windows like shaggy raisins, occasionally taking flight for a second or two, maybe as nerves misfire in those primitive brains. But just seeing them makes me sweat. And after my wife and daughter leave I hate them even more. My seething soon swells into rage, then obsession. That night is an escalating catastrophe involving Raid, hairspray, a box of matches, a jar of peanut butter, two pints of peppermint Schnapps, and a leaf blower.

When I wake up the next morning I feel like Captain Kirk on a cheap L.A. soundstage. The cabin is not what it used to be. Outside the wind is blowing hard. An odd, blue-ish light is casting light shadows that dance on the walls. There are smoke streaks and gobs of peanut butter on the windows. Papers and ashes are strewn over the floor, books with singed edges, and the leather recliner has a small hole in

the cushion. The air is sharp with an unhealthy chemical odor. And. And. Still flies. They now completely own the place. I eat my cereal on the lawn. If I want to slaughter them, I reason, make them extinct. But I feel small. If it's a head-to-head muscle-mania showdown with Nature in all her fecundity, I lose every time. I have to play it smart. I have to get innovative.

Inside, I take a shower, removing the drain cover so the dead flies wash down easier. I decide to air-dry instead of using what is now the flies' towel, so I'm walking around the house naked in my flip-flops, concentrating on my breathing. I look up the Boise State University Extension office in the phonebook and clean the phone off with a sanitizing bleach wipe.

"University Extension, how may I direct your call?"

"I'm calling about a fly problem," I say. "I'd like to talk to your fly expert."

"That would be Dr. Horsch," says the kid on the phone. I can tell by his voice he must be a sophomore. Junior tops. Had his first beer just last year, but still loves to study plants. "He's actually not teaching right now and is officially out until next fall," he says. I realize that this is unfortunate, but not something we can't work around, so I apply mild pressure to the kid until he gives me Horsch's home number. The doctor is at home, gratefully, but he doesn't have much to say. Basically, he tells me to hire an exterminator.

"If you were in the city I'd come over there," the doctor says. "It sounds interesting."

“Yeah, well, it’s pretty wild,” I say. “It’s a freak show, doc. I can imagine this in *National Geographic* or something.” I’m trying to rile him up, get him to come out. He has no problem with silence—I wonder if he just forgot to hang up the phone and is shuffling around the house watering his plants or something. Finally, he says, “You know, house flies do have some natural predators out there in the world.” I’m listening. “But it seems like a lot of hassle for a house infestation,” he continues. “I would call the exterminator first.”

“I will,” I say, and I mean it. “But what about these natural predators?” I ask. “That sounds fascinating.” I try to say “fascinating” with the wonder and flirtiness I can muster. I remember saying it like that to some girl telling me how she wanted to join the Peace Corps. It works. Dr. Horsch tells me about the fly’s God-given enemies.

“The most common ones, used mostly in agribusiness, are other flies and Muscovy ducks,” he says. “And, of course, spiders. But they’re not really used commercially. Too messy.”

Spiders, ducks, and flies, I think. Other flies. I want to know more, but Dr. Horsch excuses himself. “If things don’t work out, it would be okay to call me again,” he says. “But only on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And only after three.”

I’ll admit that I’m surprised when a woman exterminator shows up that afternoon. Does that make me a bad person? I mean I’m not put off by it. She’s a nice-looking lady with a brown ponytail and a strong jaw accentuated by the cigar in her mouth.

Her name is Donna and her every breath seems like a laughs. She calls herself The Exterminatress, and is one half of D&D Pest Control Co., the other half being Danny, her husband. They operate out of Quail, about ten minutes away. It's got a general store, a nursery, three restaurants, a hair salon, a library, and the hardware store where Moira and I bought the flypaper.

Before Donna even looks inside the cabin, she is digging through her shiny blue van and pulling out tanks and hoses, giant rubber gloves and what looks like a space helmet.

The first thing she says to me is, "Well, aren't you a brave little guy. I thought all the townies went home after the Rancho Bob thing."

"Oh yeah," I say. "I forgot about that."

She throws a folded newspaper at me. Hits me in the chest. IDAHO'S CHERNOBYL? is the headline. And this isn't the weekly Quail rant rag. It's USA Today.

I read about five lines and start laughing. "Can you believe this?" I say to Donna. "Did you read this? They used 'just emerged,' 'in the wake of,' 'known associate,' and 'spate' in the first paragraph alone." She is looking at me now with her elbow in her hand, something approaching mistrust. I realize I've missed the point.

"Reports upstream say some cattle is dropped dead," she says.

"Yeah, scary," I say. I look out at the river. It looks the same as always. But daylight still has that bizarre, bluish quality, like pre-storm except that the clouds

are too high for rain, and no wind. To say it is foreboding is technically correct. But common sense says it's just cloudy out.

Inside, Donna walks right up to the windows and stands, her face six inches from the horrible blanket of flies. "I don't want to scare you, but this is new to me," she says. "To be honest, we don't really deal with flies. Termites, yes, spiders, yes, beetles, sometimes. But this is weird."

I don't like it when The Exterminatress says "weird."

"I'm going to smoke this place out. We'll triple it," she says, which makes my gut leap. She opens a small blue duffel bag and pulls out three canisters. They look like old army canteens, rigged up with some rubber tubing near the mouth. "We make these ourselves," she says. "They're like the ones that the chain exterminators use except ours are stronger." She is smiling—a big, toothy, God-I-love-America grin.

While she is setting up, Donna informs me I'll be sleeping outside. "Oh, and you should take out as much food as you think you can, especially any packages that have been opened," she says and laughs again.

After I've packed my sleeping bag and thrown all the non-perishable food out on the deck, I hear a series of low pops and hear the rumble of Donna's running through the house. She sprints out the door and slams it behind her. She is wearing the space helmet I saw earlier. It, too, has a kind of homemade feel to it. Then she walks over to the van and lifts out a giant Shop-Vac.

“This is for tomorrow,” she says. “I’ll come and pick it up. I’ll even empty it, free of charge.” As she says this she winks, then puts another cigar in her mouth without lighting it.

“Alright,” I say. “So just vacuum everything up in the morning.”

“Yeah, maybe around noon,” she says.

When she leaves I just sit on my sleeping bag in the grass and try to read my real estate stuff. I am a little perturbed that Moira’s sister doesn’t have a tent lying around anywhere. Once the sun starts to go down the mosquitoes start in. I burrow under my bag and read with a flashlight until I get a headache. I eat a couple of cold hot dogs and half a bag of potato chips, then wash it down with a warm 7-Up that make my throat burn. I frequently glance towards the cabin and hope to hell that thousands of flies are writhing in pain as they pile up on the dirty gray Berber carpet. I even run up on the deck and try to see inside, but it’s very dark—there is no moon and I left the porch light off. It seems like the gas bomb is working, but it’s too hard to tell. Everything just looks black, and I get a dozen mosquito bites in less than a minute.

Later that night, in a half-sleep, I hear the phone ringing inside the cabin. I register that it must be Moira, and that I haven’t talked to her in almost 48 hours. We only have one cell phone and she took it. I curse a couple mosquitoes drawing blood from my cheek and resolve to call her back the next day.

In the morning I am repulsed and thrilled by what I see. A massacre. I imagine millions of wispy fly angels rising to the heavens. I think of Donna, nursing a coffee with a *USA Today* in front of her and a cigar in her pocket, and I smile. I happily lug the Shop-Vac inside and start to clean up. It is disgusting, but I try to enjoy it—the thick sound of flies funneling into the canister, the suspicious smell of sulfur and gasoline, the carnage behind seat cushions and on bedspreads. The old me would have thrown up. But I am content: a guy just doing his job, just taking care of another problem.

In an hour I finish up. I decide to zip into town and buy a big jug of bleach and some carpet cleaner. But first, I call Moira. After telling her the epic story of my last two days, she reminds me that my licensing exam is tomorrow afternoon.

“It's Tuesday already?” I say.

She says, “Yes, it is. Erika keeps looking around like she expects to see you.”

I say I've got a whole day to study. “I'm just going to clean up around here a bit first,” I say. “Your sister would appreciate it, I'm sure.”

“People still talking about Rancho Bob's,” she says. “Saying it could be a meltdown. They're saying there's never been anything like it.”

“They always say that,” I say. “I bet they used the word ‘unprecedented.’”

“Actually, they did,” she says. She begs me to come home.

“I'm working,” I say. “I'll call you.”

As soon as we hang up I hop in the Toyota and head into Quail. I see the D&D van parked out in front of a house on the main drag and I stop to tell Donna she is a fine chemist and to come pick up the vacuum anytime.

When I get back to the cabin, the sun is gone again and the afternoon light is striking in the way it seems to ripple over the grass. I notice that, since I left, a huge log has washed up on the little island in the middle of the river across from the cabin. A brown Labrador sniffs around the base of it.

Inside, the flies are back. I am filled with ire. My insides are chafing. I could break a door down. There is something, I don't know, a steely ball of insanity, knocking around upstairs. There is one thing on my mind. I call Dr. Horsch. Nobody answers but it's 2:25 pm. Old dude wasn't lying, I think. Give him credit. With 3:00 a good half-hour off, I drive into town. I lose my front bumper to a fence post on the dirt road—it was already loose.

There is one computer terminal at the Quail Public Library and it is available. I start cruising the Internet like a jet fighter. I've got ten windows open and I'm taking notes on the back of my real estate binder.

On the Orkin website I read that one pair of flies can produce a million offspring in six weeks. And then this, "For every fly seen, there are an estimated 19 more hidden from view. This means humans don't even see 95 percent of flies present at an infestation." Realizing this is a seminal moment in my brief history. I've never felt stronger. Or smaller. I am a human scourge. I am dust on the Earth's

shoulder. I've been called alone to tame the roaring, dripping jaws. And I will surely fail. Anything else would be a mockery of an ancient story and its perennial rituals.

Eventually, I find my weapon. The black dump fly. Scientific name, *Hydotaea aenescens*. They're a biological control agent for house flies especially favored by pig farmers. It seems their larvae feed on the house fly larvae and eventually wipe them out. At the source. Good, good, I think. Other flies—oh, how fitting! Just like you, Mother Nature, you funster!

Meanwhile, I've also pulled up some pages on ducks. Muscovy ducks. The doctor was absolutely right. "In laboratory experiments, ducks were able to remove flies from an enclosed area 30 times faster than fly traps or other control devices." Unbelievable, I think. If only Dr. Horsch could see me now.

I determine there are black dump flies at a huge ranch store just on the edge of Boise, about a 45-minute drive. I can get there and back before 5:00. I don't even hesitate.

When I reach Boise I am attacked by guilt, knowing that Moira and Erika are 15 miles away, oblivious, waiting for me to call. Waiting for me to become a goddamn real estate agent and bring home some bacon, maybe move us out of my in-laws' basement. I try to keep my mind empty. There is leaping in my chest, twirling in my gut, just pure sensation like you wouldn't believe. I'm back to Quail in 35 minutes with small box of black dump flies on the passenger seat. I'm a little skeptical. To me they don't look much different than regular flies, although the guy at the store—a big sunburned man in a tank top—said quite tenderly that, unlike

house flies, these guys stay away from people and animals. “They just like shit,” he said with a huge smiley face. “That’s it. Just give ‘em some shit and they’ll be happy forever.”

I shoot down the washboard road that winds down to the river, heading towards the railroad bridge farther on. It is here that I hope to find some ducks. Muscovy ducks don’t breed around here, but I figure that a duck is mostly a duck. Maybe they’re not the best ducks, but they’ll do.

In no time I am under the bridge with my shoes off, looking for the weakest, slowest ducks that I can catch and put in my trunk for the five-minute drive back to the cabin. To say that I am a vision doesn’t even begin to define me lunging for ducks in the shallow water. They repeatedly scatter, until I remember their vulnerability: bread and bread-like foods. I still have a whole bag of sweet onion potato chips that works nicely, along with my heavy ski jacket that I can throw over them when they get close. I capture four this way. On the way home, I spot a group of Canada geese feeding in a ditch and surprise them with my swiftness. By now my arms are cut up and I’m smeared in putrid river mud. My eyes are burning and my skin sallow. I’ve barely eaten in two days. I drive with the radio loud, trying to ignore the reckless thumping in the trunk, half-praying some kind of forgiveness for such half-assed cruelty.

When I pull up to the cabin, I see Donna’s blue van. She is on the deck, peeking in the windows. She turns around and sees me and starts shaking her head.

“I don’t know,” she shouts when I hop out of the car. “I can’t understand it.”

"I know," I say. "There's something wrong out here." I pick up the box of dump flies off the seat and cradle it close to my side, almost hiding it. "You got your Shop-Vac?" I say to Donna.

"Yes," she says. "It's packed away. Listen, I can give you a partial refund on the service, but I can't refund you for the foggers. They cost quite a bit to manufacture."

"Fine," I say. "It's fine. Don't even worry about it." Donna notices the little teeming package I'm holding.

"Flies?" she says. "What the hell is this?"

"These are fly predators," I say, dragging out the last word.

"You've been lied to, friend," she says.

"Yes," I say with a high loop in my voice. "Something like that."

She says, "Whatever, bud. You read the paper?"

"Not again. Not today," I say. "Why?"

She runs back to the truck and returns with a worn *USA Today*. FEDS ISSUE EVACUATIONS IN IDAHO is on the bottom of page one.

"What's this?" I ask. "Why aren't you gone yet?"

"I don't have anywhere to go," she says. "And what do I care about cancer," she says, waving a cigar in my face. "But the sheriffs have been talking people up all day. And then you got the army convoys. They've been rolling through town. Guys in helmets, big covered trailers."

That does sound alarming. Donna pats me on the shoulder. She has a light touch.

“I’m just gonna grab my empty canisters,” she says.

I set the box of flies inside and run back to my car. When I pop the trunk, there are feathers pretty much everywhere. The ducks are crammed towards the back of the trunk, all huddled together. The geese are up front, dazed by the light, but starting to stretch and stand up to full height. And they are upset, hissing and flapping. They bite and bite. I start to yell. I hear Donna walk behind me.

“You are a bad man,” she says, then drives away.

Finally, I just kind of reach in and sweep the geese out with an arm. They run into the trees. Then I set my jaw and go in strong and scoop up the ducks.

I barrel into the house and drop the ducks in the middle of the kitchen.

Outside I hear cars. A big green truck with a flashing orange light on top. There is some kind of acronym in bold red letters on the side. Two men step out. A park ranger and a man in a suit with no tie. They motion to me to step outside.

I know I don’t have much time. I wave at them, hold up two fingers. I’m just going to scatter the dump flies around the house and then I remember the one thing I don’t have. Shit. I need it for the dump flies to breed in. On the floor there are already several duck turds looking small and unhelpful. My heart pounds. I understand now what I have to do, and that is squat down and take a crap in the middle of the floor. It’s the only way, and I know it, and I know I am a beast for it. But I was never anything else.

When I'm done I take the box of black dump flies and shake it out and they float away like dandelion seeds. The ducks are nowhere to be seen. The men outside shout and I stand up and look around. Flies. Unfeeling, unknowing, and in complete control. They've claimed this patch of earth for themselves, and I'm the only one that can do anything about it. I watch them one last time. As I turn to go I see a pile of dead flies in the sink and I'm flush with sorrow and impulsively I pick one up with my thumb and forefinger, holding it in front of my face. And then what do I do? Do you know? I eat it. I eat that tiny dead fly and I can't even tell if I'm feeling angry or scared, or neither. In fact, I can't even think and it's almost magnificent the way I can't think and I'm just a clear vessel with lines of electricity streaking up and down inside me. The phone starts to ring and I step outside. The park ranger is holding up a newspaper and pointing to the front page. I'm naked. And in complete control.

ANIMAL MAGNETISM

They sat out back around a tiny patio table: Doug, his twin brother Oscar, and Dr. Augustine, the three of them pressed together like bums around a barrel fire. Their mineral waters sweated on the ground, the table completely covered with papers and photographs. Five Jack Russell terriers and a golden retriever shot around the shady lawn beyond them. A row of lilac bushes along the fence sent over waves of perfume.

“And this is a transcript of what Doug got from Lulu about two weeks after she bit him,” said Oscar, holding up a piece of paper, the only one in a plastic sleeve.

Dr. Augustine studied the paper. He played with his nose.

“Yes,” he concluded, setting the paper back on the table. “She’s very bright. Very bright. My Mazy is like that, always observant.” He looked up at Doug and smiled politely.

Doug fiddled with the arrowhead around his neck. He watched Lulu, his golden retriever, digging under a lilac bush, spraying dirt onto a Jack Russell that tried to creep in and sniff under her tail. If he had felt strange receiving telepathic messages from his dog, starting just hours after he stepped on her during a power outage and she bit into his calf, then he felt stranger here in California, a long day’s drive from his home in Colorado, consulting with Dr. Emory Augustine, a rare specialist in the fringe field of animal translation. Augustine seemed more like one of those self-help gurus advertised in airline magazines, which is exactly what Oscar had been hoping for. Barefoot, he wore dark linen pants and a thin white shirt

unbuttoned to his stomach, and he liked to talk about his books. "My books don't sell very well in countries like Mexico, where animal rights are retrograde," he had said.

Out on the lawn two Jack Russells snarled at each other.

"Hey!" shouted Augustine. "Settle!" It was a very untelepathic message.

Oscar waited until the doctor turned back to the table and picked up another paper. "But is this legitimate communication here, doctor?" he said, practically spitting. "How do you go about determining if it's the dog talking or if it's, maybe, well, something else?"

The doctor leaned back in his chair and slammed the rest of his mineral water. He tossed the bottle into a recycling bin by the sliding door.

"I mean look at this," Oscar said. He shoved the paper towards the doctor. "Doesn't it seem a little frivolous to you? Is this what animals think about?"

The doctor reluctantly took the paper from Oscar. On it was written, in Doug's cursive script, the sentence, *We have nine screwdrivers.*

The doctor looked up. "Well," he said, "is it true?"

Doug cleared his throat and spoke plainly. "I counted the number of screwdrivers in the house and there were nine," he said.

"Ten," Oscar said quickly. "There were ten."

"There was one in the car," said Doug.

"Exactly," said Oscar. "And it's ours. We own ten screwdrivers."

"Are the communications always this terse?" said Augustine.

“You mean short?” said Oscar. He grabbed a handful of papers from the table and practically dumped them on the doctor’s lap. The doctor shuffled through the stack, reading sentences like *Doug, thank you for keeping the house cool while you’re at work* and *The tomatoes are looking parched*. He paused at one paper with an entire paragraph on it: *I don’t know why I feel this way sometimes. Even on a day like today, with the sky full of sun and clouds, I just want to lie in the kitchen and stare at the wood grain on the cabinets. I’m not even hungry.*

Their regular vet hadn’t wanted to insult Doug. “Animals do have feelings. I believe that strongly,” he said, stressing the word *that*. And the vet said “No,” emphatically, when Oscar asked him directly if he believed in animal telepathy.

But the messages continued to come. Doug refused to see a psychiatrist. “Everything else in my life is exactly the same,” he said. And it was. He wasn’t unhappy. He still lived with his 58-year-old twin brother in their childhood home. Both had divorced right around the time their mother died and left them the grand old Victorian on Warm Creek Boulevard, fully paid for, of course. The house was a lovely piece of history, with towers and turrets and shingle trim, but slowly deteriorating. The paint peeled and none of the doors stayed shut, and always some board coming loose from the floor. They vowed in a plan hatched at the funeral to sell their own houses, move home together, and fix the place up right glorious, to honor Mom’s memory, then pool the money each would have paid in mortgage to

buy a winter roost somewhere cheap and far, Mexico perhaps. It worked, except for the part about fixing up the old house, which didn't seem very important after all.

Back together, the brothers took to dressing alike, just like old times, and much to the amusement of the neighbors. They could often be seen getting out of their custom Ford camper van, which they shared, Oscar always drove, in khaki shorts and Hawaiian shirts, with identical tennis rackets and identical white hair and identical sharp haircuts. Money was not a problem, especially since now, with their momma gone, each brother owned half of one of the oldest jewelry stores in the city—the one their grandfather started.

On the night Doug got bit Lulu was sleeping at the foot of the stairs, which she'd really never done before, preferring to doze under chairs and in the mudroom near the vent. Maybe she was trying to find a place away from the windows, since a thunderstorm pounded the house and the wind screamed and at about 8:00 pm everything went dark. Doug headed up to the bedroom to retrieve a flashlight, got to the stairs and planted his right foot smack on the dog's ribcage. Lulu came alive with animal swiftness, eyes flashing. A piece of Doug's pants came clean off in her mouth. He refused to go to the hospital, but got Oscar to fix him up with lime juice (a little trick they learned from Magi, their housekeeper in Puerto Vallarta) and a butterfly bandage.

Finally, after a couple months, Oscar did some research. Not surprisingly, animal translator wasn't listed in the yellow pages. He used the computer. As luck

would have it, two lived in California. The cheapest one he found was in Calcutta. He decided to call Augustine, even though the other translator lived three hours closer, probably because Augustine was not an actual veterinarian. Oscar wasn't exactly sure what he hoped would happen when they got to Augustine's house in Santa Barbara. His agenda was more a vague optimism that his brother would come to his senses.

The sun dipped and the desert perked up. Out came the reds, the pinks, the violets on the rocks. Oscar drove towards through Arizona, the van skating along a newly paved stretch of interstate. Their expensive session with Dr. Augustine had concluded hours before. They stopped for gas in a small silent town. Oscar cleaned every window on the van. He checked the oil and then went inside to buy two sandwiches.

On his lap Doug held the folder of his communications with Lulu. He looked back to see her sleeping on the floor, her shiny wheat-colored coat rising and falling. He opened the folder, took out the paper in the plastic sleeve, and read it one more time: *I don't want to upset you, but sometimes I can sense things. About what's going on inside of us. About when something is sick. And I'm worried. Worried about Oscar.*

Augustine hadn't said much about that one. In fact, Augustine didn't say much at all, Doug decided. He seemed to hold himself somewhat aloof, and was far less interested in what Lulu was saying than in Doug himself.

“Have you ever noticed any psychic abilities before this happened?” he asked Doug. “When you hear Lulu, is it in her voice or yours?” “Do you smoke pot?” “Have you ever thought about ways to make money off of this?” “Do you ever doubt yourself?”

Oscar posed a series of questions to Augustine meant to rattle him. Maybe he wouldn't expose himself as a quack per se, Oscar allowed, but at least as an uncomfortably close neighbor to quackdom. But Augustine stepped through Oscar's questions with a practiced glide.

“What are the defining characteristics of legitimate telepathic communication?” Oscar asked.

“Well,” the doctor said, “as far as I know, there is no one way that animals communicate. The imprint of the human voice is singular. A unique register. And so it is with animals.”

“But people talk,” said Oscar. Anyone could see he was getting irritated. His hand swept back through his hair and he tugged at the corners of his eyes. “They move their mouths and make sounds. You can tell when someone is talking because air is being compressed and shaped into by the vocal chords. Our throats are like little trumpets. What is the mechanism of dog telepathy? Are there any theories?”

Augustine mumbled something about brain waves, and for a minute it seemed that maybe he'd run out of gas, but he rallied into an impressive-sounding list of names and dates. Eventually he interrupted himself to yell at the dogs again.

They had been there for over an hour. Oscar was ready to let it all hang out.

“Can you translate something from Lulu?” he asked. Hands folded in front of him.

“Excuse me?”

“I know it’s a, well, a delicate process,” said Oscar. “But could you try and talk to Lulu? Or listen to Lulu, or whatever.”

“Is this what you came here for?” said Augustine. A hint of something different. Augustine talking to his mother, or a bartender. The mask of his face cracking ever so slightly.

Augustine continued, “Because I was under the impression you were seeking counsel. An ‘evaluation,’ I believe, is what you said.”

Oscar’s lips didn’t so much as twitch. He looked at Doug, who closed his eyes and tried not to think about his favorite Mexican cheeses. Augustine pushed back from the table and went inside, only to emerge seconds later with another round of fizzy waters.

“That would take multiple visits, which I am of course happy to accommodate,” Augustine said. “You are right, Oscar. Communication with animals is a delicate thing. It’s unpredictable and, for many, downright strange. Also, I’ve never connected with an animal that I didn’t trust and that didn’t trust me. Since today’s meeting was mostly about Doug”—he threw a glance over to Doug, who was now nodding at Augustine, and his brother, and letting himself feel a rush of resentment for both—“I really would need to be with Lulu. Just the two of us, eventually. That stage of introduction can take anywhere from fifteen minutes to

five hours, depending on the animal. And the owners.” He held out the drinks to his guests.

“We have fifteen minutes,” Oscar said. He took a water from Augustine and twisted the top off immediately. The half-pint bottle looked comical in his big hands. Both he and Doug were built like stevedores, with hands that could wring the life out of something. Not ideal hands for working with fine jewelry, which is what their mother told herself when neither son expressed much interest in the fineries of their family business.

Augustine looked serene as he watched the Jack Russells beating a path through the sedge grass taking over by the back fence. He held a mouthful of cherry-flavored sparkling water in his mouth, then swallowed.

“It’s not going to work for me today,” he said. “I feel . . . fuddled.”

Fuddled. The word caught everyone off guard, including Augustine, like it had forgotten it had guests and just strode naked into the living room. After a moment, Augustine began to shuffle Doug’s papers together and back into the worn manila folder. “I should probably move on,” he said. “Thanks for coming.”

The brothers obliged, stood up, shoved keys and wallets into their pants. No one spoke for several minutes. Oscar wondered if he was winning or losing. Finally, at the door, he said, almost tenderly, “I think you’re a fraud,” to which Augustine replied firmly, “No, sir, I am not.” Then, as an afterthought, he said, “You’re welcome to schedule another session. This one was pre-paid and so we are, I think, square.”

“Yes,” said Doug. He really didn’t know what to say. “We appreciate the efforts in our behalf.”

Oscar and the doctor shook hands and Oscar went first out the hand-carved double doors. And then the most remarkable of all—for Doug, that is. As he leaned in for a handshake what he got instead from Augustine was a hug. A rather stiff, pathetic, maybe wistful, even childlike hug.

The day after they got back from California, Doug and Oscar bought their plane tickets to Puerto Vallarta. They bought one for Lulu as well. They wrote Magi and told her they would be there at the end of the month and would be staying through March. They winterized the van, the lawnmower, the weed whacker, trimmed the hedges, mulched the flower beds.

That night Doug fed Lulu, then opened the fridge to find a snack. Oscar listened to bossa nova in the other room while restringing his tennis racket. Lulu eating sounded like tires on gravel. Doug grabbed the hummus, put a two-liter of Diet 7-Up under his arm, tried to lift a bag of carrots with his fingertips and knocked a tub of margarine onto the floor. He bent down to grab it and stood up feeling faint. He leaned back into the open refrigerator, glass clinking behind him, but behind the fuzzy lightness of rushing blood something started to take shape. Outside, the neighbor children shouted at their friends across the street from the roof of their father’s tool shed. But behind those voices was something else. Another voice, perhaps. The corners of Doug’s vision seemed to darken a little, Lulu had stopped

eating and was looking at him in that familiar way, and then, and then, the words came to him, just like before, pouring through his mind like sand through his fingers.

Kiss her, Doug. Just kiss her this time. Oscar be damned. Kiss her good.

Doug reached for the Post-It pad by the phone. He threw open a drawer but found only a pencil with the tip broke off, so he scurried to the old letter desk in the entryway and found a pen, made his way back to the kitchen with the pen in his pocket—so Oscar wouldn't look up from his tennis racket and know what was happening and start stewing again—and wrote the words down in a thick, heavy script. Sometimes, when transcribing, he scribbled fast, afraid to lose it, worried that if he hesitated the words might become saturated with his own thoughts, grow roots and become his own words and not Lulu's. But not tonight. He wrote carefully, listening with pleasure to the pen scrape, making sure to catch the faint, ferrous odor of the ink. He watched the black line spool out from underneath his steady hand, curving this way and that, a picture of chaos, a mark of order.

The Mexican sun warmed their necks. Their taxi, a kind of souped-up golf cart, navigated heavy traffic on the coastal boulevard. The air swarmed with a pleasant bouquet of exhaust, salt, corn and grease. In the back: a pile of grocery bags full of sweet pastries, fresh cheese, full-sugared sodas and a jumble of overripe fruits and vegetables. Several miles away in a townhouse, in a gated neighborhood guarded by three men with assault rifles in the back of a pickup, Lulu slept within earshot of the shuffling tide. When her owners arrived she would nudge them to the

drawer with the leash, even though leash laws were unheard of, in hopes of going to the beach where she could push trash through the sand with her nose and chase sardines in the shallow water.

Doug traced the contours of a rugged island offshore. Oscar watched people conducting their business: the locals with their bags and papers and carts and brooms, the tourists with their beers and sunglasses. He tried to remember the names of restaurants he wanted to try. A beachside shack called El Jardin de Mariscos. And a local dive that Magi recommended—it served authentic pozole and was tucked behind an aging discotheque where teenagers from one of the big resorts went to drink Jell-O shots and breath heavily on each other. La Regional, it was called. Or maybe El Regional.

Oscar never liked Mexican food until he met Magi. He liked the ocean. He liked shrimp. He liked fresh papayas and avocados, mangoes and limes. But for the first few years they came to Puerto Vallarta he didn't enjoy going with Doug to the shabby taco stands where sweaty, serious men served up a bottomless offering of scalding tortillas and steamy meats. Pig meat, cow meat, thigh meat, brain meat, tongue meat, head meat. It all looked the same, tasted the same to him. And he never failed to complain to Doug afterwards, moaning and clutching himself and demanding they restock on his self-proclaimed "official" Mexican beverage, Pepto-Bismol.

Now it was different. He had adjusted, he explained. His body conceded. He asked Magi to bring tamales and fry plantains. He gushed over her torta with

roasted pork and savory mayonnaise. Upon seeing her most recently, Oscar put Magi's hand to his lips and announced, in battered Spanish, that he had missed her mucho and her food even more mucho. She laughed and pulled his ear and went outside to sweep the porch.

Magi was forty. She had five kids, all before she turned twenty-three. Two still lived with her. One, Manuel, worked at a tire shop and was home about every other night. The other, the youngest, was turning eighteen and already making plans to find his cousin in Houston. Magi hadn't lived with a man for several years. She did fine cleaning units at The Holiday Inn Resort. Her black hair was just starting to streak gray in a lovely way. Six days a week she pulled it back rather severely against her head, but on her day off, the day she cleaned and cooked for the brothers, she washed it and styled it like the women who worked at a desk in the lobby pushing time share presentations.

Magi, for her part, favored Doug. Oscar was brambly. Uneven. She was a little tired of men like him. But she wondered if Oscar wasn't part of some Plan for her—a new life, a reprieve from pushing around a cart full of cleaning supplies, spray mop spray lug lug, day after day until she was too sick or too weak to work. Oscar doted on her. He followed her around the house and demanded she speak to him in Spanish. On this trip he brought her a ring of sapphires. Doug brought nothing. He spoke to her in English, mostly when Oscar wasn't around. His accent was much better than his brother's, but he seemed uninterested in romance. Or maybe shy. And yet, at times she caught him looking at her with thirsty eyes, like a pelican

looking at fish through the sea's glass top. Oscar, on the other hand, had all but declared his intentions and, so, what did she have to lose? They looked the same, no? And yet, she was terrified at the thought of that moment, that pointed intersection where his desire finally caught up with her passive invitation. There would be no stalling then, no giggling and flouncing off to make sandwiches. When she was a teen she kissed an American, a tall pasty redheaded boy from Wisconsin whose family traveled with some Methodist missionaries to spend the summer building schools and digging wells in the villages. They saw each other on a few Sundays, and made out awkwardly for about ten minutes one night behind the church van while his parents met with some local aid workers. She still remembered the look on his face afterwards, bewildered, maybe pained, a stretched moon, as he straightened to his parents' loud call and backed away.

When they got to their neighborhood a smiling guard who looked like he'd never shaved in his life waved them through the gate. At the house, Doug grabbed as many grocery bags as he could while Oscar paid the driver. Just as he put the bags down on the kitchen tile he heard the sharp punch of breaking glass. Outside, Oscar was in the flowerbed, unresponsive. Doug shouted for the taxista still idling in front of their house, talking on his phone and counting cash.

Today is your day, Dougy. Sunshine. Walktime. Nothing unkind. Hoo-Wee!

That was the first message Doug got from Lulu after Oscar went to the hospital. He thought it strange and a little troubling, the communication a little

giddy, another voice almost. He got down and nuzzled Lulu, examining her eyes, smelling her breath. Oscar had a stroke. He was still in the ICU. He didn't seem to remember much, but Dr. Galosa liked his chances for recovery. Today Magi would come by and Doug would explain to her about Oscar and she would put her hand over her mouth and cry like a soap star. Doug would hold her.

“Which hospital?” she would ask.

“Near the airport,” he would say.

“Should we go?” she would ask.

“Yes,” he would say, but they wouldn't move.

Then he would kiss her, holding her elbows and taking in the rich scent of her shampoo. She would kiss him back. Then they would go to the hospital.

*

Oscar lay perfectly still on a deck chair, looking strait up at the aqua sky. Beside him a glass of Magi's limonada and a small bowl of coconut candy. He was alive. Very much alive, and wounded. He walked, he talked. But it all took effort. He felt heavy, like everything—his tongue, his legs—dragged behind him, like he was constantly pushing through a strong wind. He needed rest and therapy, but decided against going back to Colorado. His children were furious about it but also glad to be exonerated. Mexico was a long ways, after all, and with Dad being unreasonable, Uncle Doug could deal with it for now. Denver had just posted -9 degrees. The doctors in Mexico seemed competent, drugs cheap and available without a prescription.

Soon after coming home from the hospital, Oscar hired Magi as a live-in nurse, even though this meant she had to quit at The Holiday Inn and probably couldn't go back. But Oscar promised Magi her full salary and more. She accepted and hugged Oscar where he lay on his queen bed with the green sheets. Then she went home and told her sons she soon wouldn't be living there, that they would have to find other arrangements. She didn't tell any of her friends, but went to church and prayed her brains out. *Let this be, let this be*, she prayed. *Please let it be.*

In the morning Oscar woke up thinking about his ex-wife, Sharon. She married him right out of high school and never even wondered why until 40 years later. Fair enough, he thought. He hadn't thought about it much either. Forty years of mostly loyal togetherness. Love, friendship, whatever you want to call it. Now that we know love is a chemical reaction, why did we ever think it would be different than strawberry jam? Expiration dates notwithstanding, no one can tell when things go bad. You have to wait until the stink, long after things begin to rot at the microscopic level. He remembered driving down a mountain road, Sharon in the passenger seat wearing a dress and crossing her legs. No music. Only the tactile buzz of the road. Two kids wrestling in the back. He reached over the seat and grabbed a leg like he was grabbing a handrail. "Settle down," he said. He tried to strike the right tone, looked over at Sharon for approval. "I'm not taking a car of monkeys to Grandma's house," he said. "Am I?" Sharon smiled in just the right way. An affirmation of what they were building, together, every second down the highway. They knew what they were doing, and what they needed to do. Even after she left, it

still felt like they knew what they were doing. It wasn't until later, when he opened her sock drawer and everything was still there, wool and cotton and ancient nylon—that's when he finally broke down.

From his spot on the deck chair Oscar could turn his head and see through the patio door, straight through the back room and into the kitchen. Now he looked and saw the hairy orange curtains blowing. Now he looked again and saw Magi pulling a bowl of ceviche from the refrigerator. He looked again and saw Doug enter the frame, take the bowl and set it down on the counter, then kiss Magi while holding her ass in his hands, and Oscar couldn't move. Couldn't speak, couldn't curse. After a minute he couldn't even feel angry except with himself for being a wretched walrus in a deck chair who needed a nurse.

That's when Lulu came outside, her claws ticking on the concrete. She didn't seem to notice Oscar until she was right in front of his face. She stopped and sniffed the air, then sneezed twice. Oscar didn't bother to wipe the droplets off his arms. He reached out with wobbly hands and steered her head so they were facing each other.

"Tell me something," Oscar said. He said it in a low whisper, like he didn't want anyone else to hear. "Do you trust me?"

The dog's ears went up. She started to pull away but Oscar gripped her collar and yanked her in. "Why don't you trust me, you bitch?" he said. The back of his mouth tasted metallic and something burned in the pit of his throat. Lulu looked away. Oscar leaned off the chair and the weight of his body forced the dog onto the

ground. "Tell me something," Oscar said. Both he and the dog panted heavily. He tilted even further over the edge of the chair and kissed Lulu on the head and smelled her dog-scent, a stale mildew like clothes out on the line too long in cloudy weather.

The weeks started to pass and Doug and Oscar didn't talk much. Once when they were reading on the patio and Doug got up to leave, Oscar said, "You know you're a second stringer."

Doug didn't ask what he meant.

Magi came every morning at 8:00. She waited on Oscar, monitored his medication, helped him get dressed, took him down to the beach with his umbrella, made sure his book was right-side up. In the evenings she wiped the sweat off his face and stood ready to assist at dinner, although he hated being spoon-fed. Sometimes he dictated letters to her. He held her left hand while she wrote with her right, calling out to Doug for help on English spelling.

Give me some cake, Doug. I'm sick of cheap dog food and moldy tortillas. Look at me I'm starting to show rib. Pretty soon people will be kicking me because they think I'm a stray.

Doug grew increasingly unnerved by Lulu's missives. More and more it felt like the dog was upset about something, by turns sounding demanding, agitated, sullen.

*What about me? I'll never have pups. And whose fault is that? Never have pups.
Never have pups.*

On the beach Lulu became more aggressive. She barked at a fruit vendor and started taking dumps on the hard sand near the water instead of the grass in the backyard. She got a slight mange around her neck, and cut her tongue on a broken bottle, and avoided Oscar more than usual. She often positioned herself to the left of Oscar, where brain damage made it harder to be seen.

I don't know, Doug. I used to worry about him. Now I just think he wants to be unhappy.

Oscar walked with a cane but fell trying to get out of bed in the morning without it. He dropped glasses and yelled at whoever was near. He talked forever about the time he and Doug flew to New Orleans to watch the Broncos and Cowboys in the Super Bowl. It was the first Super Bowl in a domed stadium. Roger Staubach threw a 45-yard pass to Butch Johnson, the Cowboys won 27-10 and humiliated opposing quarterback Craig Morton, who Staubach had beat out for the starting job in Dallas back in '71. Doug remembered none of this, but Oscar talked like it was just last year.

He's a snake. He always thought he deserved better than you. He tries to control you.

Doug waited for the right time to tell Oscar about Magi, not that Oscar didn't already know. But he was determined to take Magi back to Colorado come June, whether Oscar liked it or not.

One morning Doug woke to the sound of Lulu's voice stomping through his head. She squinted at him from her spot on the floor. *Augustine was right. Maybe I should bite. Let them out let them down. Pieces falling all around. Yes sir yes sir three bags full. Full of what of what for sure.* He jumped out of bed and trembled through a shower. When Magi arrived he asked her to sing while she cooked breakfast—she had listened to the radio all day at the hotel and knew the words to the popular boleros and rancheros.

"Si la perra esta amarrada, aunque ladre todo el dia," Magi sang high and clear, bouncing and swaying through the kitchen like an accordion player. She fried up beans and chorizo, liquefied instant oats, milk and sugar in a blender. Lulu repaired to the patio.

This became the morning routine until several days later, over the screaming pitch of the blender, Oscar shouted out.

"She's took a chunk out!" he said.

And she had. Right off the meaty palm of his left hand, the hand that barely moved. Magi wrapped the chunk in a paper towel and held the hand in a bowl of warm water and iodine. Oscar swore up and down he would murder the dog. Lulu on a spit, in a trash compacter, in a shark tank.

When Doug had grabbed Lulu by the collar she nipped at him. But she didn't growl and the house was silent. Doug could hear Oscar moaning and the sound of

Magi wringing out a wet towel. He went into his bedroom and closed the door, then sat down on the floor with his dog.

Lulu. Girl, he thought. Good girl. Nice girl. What happened.

The only things in the room were a twin bed, a nightstand and an expensive suitcase. A tabula rasa measured by the silence of its two occupants.

Lulu, speak. Speak. Come on now. He willed and willed. This is the hour, he said. I need to hear your voice. He thought his way toward her. With devotion, with fervor, he waited for the words to come.

Lulu looked away. She licked her chops.

“Is that it?” Doug asked. “Is that all?” He wondered at the hot mix of shame and sorrow rushing to his face. He walked Lulu to the front door.

“Stupid dog,” he said and pushed her onto the steps, her collar in his hand. “Run off.” He closed the door halfway and watched her traipse down to the street.

He knew she would make her way toward the main road, past the gate. Maybe the guards would tease her, think she was mutt and give her a kick. She would bite back. Or run onto the highway and get splayed out by bus. Either way the youngest guard, the one who didn't shave, would get stuck with the job of taking her behind the brick wall and shooting her in the head. A mercy killing. Just one shot. Clean and painless and without a word.

MARINE BIOLOGY

In the days before children, my parents came into town and took us to dinner. It was my 31st birthday and we went to a Czech place called Vlad's and I ordered chicken dumplings. Jenny got the vegetarian lasagna.

I walked out of the restaurant and saw a kid trying to transfer a piece of gum from his shoe to his mouth.

"That's why we don't have children," Jenny said.

I could see my mom literally biting her tongue. The fact that I was over 30 and without child was not lost on her.

"No," Jenny said. "Not because they're dirty. Because we would flip out. We'd squirt hand-sanitizer in their mouth or something. Ruin them."

"What good could possibly come from eating shoe gum?" I said.

"Kids need germs," said Jenny. "They're saying that now. Could help with allergies. And asthma."

"That's right," said my mom. "I read it in *Reader's Digest*."

"Who are *they*?" I asked.

Jenny calls *Reader's Digest* the thinking man's tabloid. We get it for the jokes.

My father pulled up in a blue minivan. The door opened automatically, revealing a yellow Labrador.

"Move, Ben," my dad shouted, and the dog flopped into the back. Hair flew off him. Jenny and I sat on the middle bench seat and leaned towards the heating vents.

It was September in San Diego. That night it dropped into the high 60's.

After the restaurant we stopped at a hardware store and got five gallons of white paint, my parents' present to me but more of a present to Jenny. We were going to paint the house.

Then, on the way home, we ran over a possum.

"Idiot animal," my dad cursed, but only because of his secret humanity.

"Possums carry many diseases," said my mom in her *Reader's Digest* voice.

That night we started to paint. My dad and I rolled the walls while the women brushed the edges. Jenny insisted on buying the most expensive paintbrush at the store. Real horsehair. "When it comes to something you're going to see everyday, it's worth it," she said. My dad went along because it was Jenny. She has a steady hand and an eye for color. We were only painting it white because my dad couldn't stomach the thought of anything else. "If I lived in a house with yellow walls, I'd kill myself," he said.

Jenny wanted to paint a couple of walls red after they left. "How long have we been together and nothing but white?" she asked. She said this while my parents were asleep. I wanted to paint the kitchen orange. She was right, it was a great feeling. We had a condo about a thousand feet from the ocean, but kind of a hole—no dishwasher, no storage, leaky everything, phantom smells, a carpet so nasty we ripped it out and didn't replace it. This was why we could afford it. Jenny hated it but I was full of promises before I stopped working. And I have always wanted to live near the sea.

My parents left on Sunday afternoon. Back to their Arizona desert town with its sinfully green golf courses and ubiquitous *carne asada*. Though retired, my mom still liked to be home on Mondays. Her weekday routine: take a bath every night at 8:00, wake up at 5:00 in the morning and walk to the high school nearby, about a mile. Come home, eat a grilled cheese sandwich and read the paper. Give the last bite to the dog, then turn on the radio and listen to talk on the AM while tidying the house. By the time my dad rolled out of bed at 7:00 she was bored and up for anything. Even when we were growing up, nothing could change this—not homework, not puking, not even an accidental knife wound (“Wrap a towel around it, if it’s still bleeding in the morning I’ll take you to the ER”).

When they left I was watching something about car chases and drinking a Hawaiian Punch. My mom took a deep breath and said, “Well.” I walked down to the edge of the driveway where my dad loaded the car.

“You drink that stuff warm?” he asked, pointing to my can.

I swigged some more and smacked my lips.

“You’ve got some real nerve,” he said. He gripped my shoulders. “I thought I raised you better than that.”

This was a game we played. He patted my cheek and motioned for me to follow him to the car.

“We’ve got one more present for you before we go,” he said. He held the handle on the sliding door. Paint flecks dotted his hair and arms. His crow’s-feet were deeper than I remembered.

“Happy birthday,” he said and opened the door. Out jumped Ben, and I was confused.

“He’s yours. Again,” Dad said.

Technically, Ben the dog belonged to me, he being a present for my sixteenth birthday, part reward and part calculated burden, a responsibility. Back then, we loved him. He pulled us around the neighborhood on our skates. He knew my brother’s paper route by heart. We took him on long backpacking trips and figured out how to make him howl by getting down on the floor and humming in his ear. And, he may have saved my life on graduation night at Lake Orjuelo, the only night I ever drank myself into blacking out. When I woke up on the beach the next morning Ben was sitting on top of me.

But it was almost twelve years since I fled home and left Ben at behind. He’d become, I thought, my parent’s dog. Big and hairy and clumsy, he was always breaking things and making the house smell like a thrift store.

Now he was finally boomeranging back and I tried to protest, but my mom shut me down. We stood in a circle around Ben, in the kitchen, a bag of dog food on the counter with a sheet of paper taped to it that said CARING FOR BEN.

“It’s his health,” she said.

She was talking about my father, of course—short, bald, stocky, a walking heart attack. Already on his third angioplasty. When the word came out of his mouth—angioplasty—it sounded like the name of a small sea creature. *In May, the tide pools are full of bright purple angioplasties.*

“He’s old,” I said, talking about Ben. “Why bring him here just to die?”

“He’s not dying anytime soon,” my mom said. “And you make just about as much money as we do now.” When she said this I detected a hint of spleen. She didn’t know I had, at that time, no clients, and hadn’t had one in months.

I looked at Jenny and just knew she was peeving inside. She got mad when I hid things from my parents. Also, it was anybody’s guess whether she was more uninterested in dogs or children. But then she said to my mom, “Okay, Lorraine. How about this: if I get pregnant, you take the dog back?”

“Deal,” said my mom.

It was a strange moment.

That night, Ben knocked over the candy bowl on the coffee table and ate about 50 Skittles, then slept on the couch while Jenny and I had unprotected sex.

I got lucky, really. I got an MBA, just like everybody else. Big ideas swelled my little head, and somehow I struck a chord with the boss. I got promoted, then again and again. Pretty soon my little head turned into a giant one. People hated me, really. Employees hated me, I should say. For some reason I just sat right with the bigs. I convinced them they needed to pay me a lot of money. Then I ditched them

and became a consultant. I read everything: Drucker, Covey, Robinson. I ate it up, the twelve steps to this and that, the seven secrets of something, the five keys to successful fill-in-the-blank. I developed my shtick. I wrote a book. I was a guru of management. I became Ernest D. Sullivan (my friends still called me Dan, my middle name) and threw myself at the world until it granted me an audience. My book, *Opening Doors to Achievement: The Three Ds*, was a minor sensation and still sells a few thousand copies a year, mostly in Thailand and India. Dialogue, Diversion, and Dependability. That got me started. I landed big contracts with companies no one's heard of—a silver mine and a muffin factory.

And it was just me. I was their “outside consultant.” They handed me a badge and I walked around with a clipboard, talking to employees. Because I was from outside I could ask them anything I wanted: *What's the worst thing about working here? What do you smell while you're on the job? Does your boss value your opinion?* With this kind of information I could work wonders, create scandalous reports with wild and sweeping recommendations like *Install an oven in the break room and assign a secretary to bake fresh cookies daily* or *Supervisors should sit down with employees monthly and solicit their views on the direction of the company.* They almost never followed my advice, or if they did it didn't last very long. But it looked good on the surface. Made it seem like the “they” were listening. Everyone seemed to understand this but the charade was a helpful one, I think, like Mardi Gras—a time to dance around and get it all out of your system before getting back to the grind.

I wasn't even 30 years old. And I got paid.

Life fact: You can make a lot of money, live by the ocean, wear loose-fitting clothes, be a non-smoker, dabble in yoga, and still have a low sperm count.

At first, getting pregnant was some kind of terrible joke. *Then we could give the dog back to my parents! Well, it was going to happen eventually so why not now? We need a new hobby.* The whole thing rather exhilarating. We had an excuse to seduce, and each intimate congress was like a walk to the edge of an unguarded cliff face, like the feel of riding a rollercoaster uphill: at the bottom of the jerking and the clacking is the knowledge that at any moment the bottom is going to drop out and then it's all momentum with nothing to stop you but time and friction. We bought a stack of pregnancy tests and kept them proudly on the counter in the bathroom where every few nights we would gather around the toilet and giggle while Jenny shook the stick and feigned horrible, world-shattering disappointment when the results read negative. We even started to tease each other about being infertile.

But it turned out the joke was on me. After a few months we visited a doctor, who demanded my prostatic fluid and before long reported that I was a weak link on Team Procreate.

That was what it took to turn a half-hearted gag into a full-time obsession. Infertility is, clinically, the failure to conceive after a year of unprotected intercourse. The doctor's diagnosis, coupled with my unemployed-ness, was a

gauntlet thrown down. I stopped drinking coffee, stopped eating Mexican food, gave up Junior Mints, fast food breakfast sandwiches, olives, pickles and beer. I started taking supplements of zinc (numbers), and selenium (speed!). I threw in some ginseng and saw palmetto just for good measure. I started exercising, lost ten pounds, made sure my genitals weren't malformed, and instituted a strict three-day waiting period between . . . emissions. Love was to be made in the mornings or afternoons, when sperm levels were highest. I even started exercising my pubococcygeus—"your pee-pee muscle" said the doctor.

I took to running barefoot on the beach, which made me feel like a macho man, a very interesting dude, or a warrior from some handsomely roguish tribe. Back in our condo I often felt lousy, surrounded by projects and not enough courage to take them on, not enough money to pay someone else to do it. Not restless. Not depressed. But that feeling my dad must have got when he saw my mom dump an entire chicken breast in the garbage because I had just picked at it for an hour. Something was wasted. Not necessarily the chicken. My business was dead, and I realized, finally, that I didn't want it to live again. Yes, the economy was diving and jobs, especially for flashy consultants, disappearing, but even that didn't seem to matter very much. I just couldn't get up for the traveling, the tedious inquisition and subsequent spin-doctoring. Bottom line: I was done. I wanted to get pregnant. In less than seven months I would turn thirty and be officially declared infertile. I wasn't sure what was on the other side of such a label. Pain, certainly. Embarrassment. Maybe a cute little orphan from China or Guatemala with big dark

eyes imploring me to face my failures as a father and a piece of biology. Or just weak smiles and looks of buried resentment, masked with pity, from Jenny, or my mother. Or both.

Jenny was a recruiter for a downtown bank and sometimes she worked from home on Fridays. On these days we started at Moonlight in Encinitas and ran all the way to the estuary where Highway 1 practically drops below sea level for a straight quarter mile between just before Solano Beach. On sunny days we might push all the way to the retaining wall in Del Mar. When we did that Ben would lag way behind and eventually lay down in the sand, tongue sliding out the side of his mouth.

One Friday, after a jog, we walked across the highway to BeeCee's Bakery and got coffee and ice water. I got two jelly doughnuts—raspberry—and gave one to Ben. Part of the fun in feeding Ben junk food was getting Jenny to scold me.

"That's cruel," she said when I gave him the doughnut. "You're a barbarian. Besides, I thought you weren't eating sugar."

"Cruel is eating it in front of his face," I said. To which she said, "Touché," and grabbed the doughnut out of my hand. I expected her to give it back but she didn't. She ate it.

We sat at a table outside and watched people come and go at the thrift shop next door. Most of its clientele were younger than us, looking for vintage shirts and pristine David Bowie records.

The shop window always had a bunch of fliers taped on the inside. Lots of ads promoting odd books or local performances. My favorite read, *Over 250 books and videos about sex that won't insult your intelligence*. "Too late," I told Jenny. "I'm insulted." We decided that we would each order a book from the window. Jenny decided on *SCHOLARLY BOOKLET PROVES JESUS NEVER EXISTED!* I chose *ANARCHIST COOKBOOK available again! \$22*.

The fliers instructed us to order at the counter, so we went inside. Wandering around, I saw a long blue duffel bag on the floor by the shoes. It was an old spear gun. Some traces of rust along the shaft but otherwise in good shape. On the inside of the bag was the name ADAMS written in bold permanent marker and a series of annotations below it, in smaller writing so the letters were thick and smushed together. Somebody had written dates and the names of fish. Things like *6/28 - 6 lb. rockfish. 4/14/79 - three corbina, medium spiny lobster. 4/28 - sheepshead, 25 lbs. 7/12/82 - lots of leopard sharks, fishing horrible. Lost large sea bass. giant? mackerel bait. 9/23/82 - 17 lb. Halibut!*

"This has historical value," I said.

I bought the spear gun, maintaining eye contact with Jenny as I handed the cashier a twenty—both of us smiling, but her smile a little less genuine than mine.

For Easter we visited my parents. Ben came along as well. He was starting to go deaf and this was making him even clumsier than before. Within five minutes he had broken a cabinet door and knocked over two flowerpots.

Jenny complained about how dry her hands were and on Sunday the skin broke on her left middle knuckle. My mom made her put beeswax on it and we sat on the porch drinking fresh orange juice and staring at the dim purple outline of the dry hills over the collective roofline of the subdivision. Mom noted to Jenny that pregnancy can make your skin crack and itch, which made Jenny just shake her head and stop complaining about her skin.

We passed around sections of the *LA Times* and really didn't say anything until my father woke up and joined us around noon, walking out with his hair a-swirl and a cinnamon roll in his hand. He hiked up his flannel pants and sat down in a plastic deck chair.

"You got any clients yet?" he asked.

"Nope, just weighing my options," I said.

"Still getting offers?" he asked.

"Yeah, I am. A company in Guadalajara called me last week," I said. "Of course, all I understood was 'Hello, Mister Sullivan.'"

"How's cardio rehab?" Jenny asked. My father folded his arms and frowned as if he was hesitant, but the truth was he couldn't have been happier to answer when Jenny was asking the questions.

"A part of the heart dies, but the rest keeps on working," he said.

"What does that mean?" Jenny asked, but right then my mom came out of the house with a tray of tuna sandwiches.

"Your son bought a spear gun the other day," she said.

Dad grabbed a sandwich, tore off the crust and threw it over the fence.

“Are you going to use it?” he asked.

“Thinking about it,” I said.

“Don’t we still have Grandpa’s spear?” he asked.

“No, got rid of it,” said my mom.

My grandpa was a fisherman. By the time I was around he was too old for diving, so we stayed on the shore and dug up sand crabs for him to bait his hooks with. He let us reel in the line, and made us hold the chum bucket while he gutted the catch. We used to catch little two-foot leopard sharks all the time and, despite our pleas, he always made us throw them back.

“I went diving with him when I was young,” my mom said. “He’d grab a couple shells off the beach before he went in the water. Then when he was down there, he would pull them out and click them together. Fish are curious, he said. They hear that, they come to investigate.”

“Dumb,” my dad said. “Fish are dumb.”

“I like to think otherwise,” Jenny said. “How about impulsive?”

“So we take advantage of dumb fish,” my father said. “What’s the big deal?”

“Dad said it all came down to vibrations, or the lack of them,” my mom continued. “Grab your weight and sink like a statue.”

My dad jumped out of his chair, his eyes wide.

“Wait,” he said.

He ran inside and came out a couple minutes later with a shallow cardboard box and a sprinkling of yellow sawdust on his shoulders. Ben sniffed the box frantically.

“Have you been in the attic?” my mom asked, irritated.

He put the box on the patio table. It had been sealed shut with heavy packing tape but the heat in the attic caused the tape to peel back and the box to shrivel somewhat. He tore the lid off and lifted out what looked like a prop from an old sci-fi set. There were hoses coming out of a square-ish rubber bag. Attached horizontally on the bottom of the bag were two black cylinders about the size of oat cartons.

“That’s scary,” Jenny said. “Is it for the future? Intergalactic nature walks?”

“Italian commando. Frogmen,” my dad said. He was breathing heavy. “World War II.”

“It’s a re-breather,” my mom said. She laid a single finger on it, like it might turn to dust on contact. “Dad got it on the way home from Europe. I think he said he bought it off a Royal Navy officer.”

“Who pulled it off of Mussolini’s guy,” said my father.

I had heard of something like a re-breather, with tanks that recycle oxygen and absorb carbon dioxide. No air bubbles are released.

“It’s like that guy in Glendale who had the swastika banner,” Jenny said.

“Remember? That thing was like twenty feet long.”

“This is probably rare,” I said.

“No,” said my father. “Maybe. But you should take it. Take it. Sell it. Use it. Now there’s an idea.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” I said.

My mom pushed the box toward me.

“Get it out of here. You get a kick out of that kind of stuff. Show it to your friends,” she said. “Pawn it.”

“No way,” Jenny said. “This is a tool for assassins.” She pulled me in and rapped my ribs.

So we took the re-breather home with us and left it in the trunk of the car.

I got a job at a T-shirt store near the beach. It was June and still no babies. No fertilized eggs. Mostly, we stopped talking about it. I tried not caring, which didn’t work. I was completely opposed to the idea of my old life and convinced that I wouldn’t understand the future until I became a father. This wasn’t really something I could talk about, even with Jenny. She was more patient. Maybe even indifferent. She came from a large family and, contrary to conventional wisdom, the experience made her very ambivalent about raising new humans. She liked to remind me of how half her siblings were rather dreadful to be around—moochers, drama queens, burglars and even felons—and the other half about as interesting as gobs of mayonnaise. I disagreed with that last part. Her brother Smoky was very pleasant to talk to when he was taking his medication, and always made me laugh with his wry

observations about hospitals and Marilyn Monroe impressions. He also played a mean fantasy baseball.

Jenny just assumed it was just a matter of time before I got my head on straight. I may have even lied to her a few times about various things. Like how many business calls I made on a given day. Or how many hours I browsed the Internet for products and tips. I felt like I'd done everything possible. I was starting to feel desperate, like I was ready for a shaman and some ritual sacrifice. I needed a fertility god, I told her. Not surprisingly, there were literally hundreds to choose from. Jenny said she would pray to all of them if it meant I would stop worrying.

At Smitty and Sons Surf Company we sold breezy souvenirs to tourists and local art to wealthy people. Sometimes I took Ben to work and left him tied up outside. I rode my bike and wore a friendship bracelet and tried not to sound like a poser when talking to customers.

My boss, Eddie, had dreadlocks and hung out in the parking lot all day with real surfers. At lunch he went and got burritos for everyone from Ramon's, always coming back with a Styrofoam cup full of pickled jalapenos and carrots that he plucked at in between bites. I could feel the sweat under my eyes just smelling the stuff, but Eddie never seemed to flinch when stuffing a whole hot pepper into his clam.

One day a man came in with his grown daughter.

"Something to remember us by," he said to his daughter as they pulled shirts off the racks. They bought twelve in all.

“Do you gift wrap?” the man asked and dumped the shirts on the counter.

“We’re out of wrapping paper,” I said. “And tape.”

“Alright, then could you at least fold them?” he asked.

He wore a leather biker’s cap and a burgundy scarf, and it wasn’t until I looked him over up close that I noticed he was dressed in a tuxedo minus the jacket—the scarf covered the bowtie and obscured the cumber bun. He had one gold earring. His daughter was tall and plump and showed a lot of leg.

“My daughter’s getting married today. My new son-in-law plays the calliope,” the man said. “What do you think about that?”

I couldn’t speak.

“It’s like the organ,” the daughter said. “But my husband says it makes the organ sound like a fog horn.”

“I thought it was a television show for kids,” I said finally.

“Ha!” shouted the man. “Zippity-doo-dah—you hear that Reggie? A kid’s show! I knew it wasn’t a real instrument.”

Reggie slapped her daddy on the shoulder and went into the photo gallery to pout. I worked the cash register.

“She’s only 23,” the man said as he pulled out his wallet. “These are for his family. Big family, with a couple cousins thrown in there. How old are you, chief?”

“Thirty-one,” I said. I struggled to fold the shirts and get them all neatly into bags. I must have sounded kind of miserable about it because he said, “Thirty-one?” in a

kind of incredulous way. He looked around and waved his hands like he was beside himself.

He said, "The thirties are a golden age, chieftain. An age of civility, nobility, and gentlemanly pursuits."

I swiped his credit card.

He kept going, "You'll probably shit bricks on your birthday. Say, 'I'm fat and bald,' and all that. But the twenties is kids' stuff. Unless you're a ball thrower, of course. Then you gotta get in and get out. But this is prime time, baby. Primo. You got kids?"

I tried to be nonchalant, but the "no" that came out of my mouth must have been coated in snuffles because Reggie's dad stepped forward solemnly. It was like a curtain closed and opened again, turning the man's tux into a minister's cloth and his demeanor from amused to ardent.

"I'm fifty-one, brother," he said, his arm extended. "I never thought I'd get to this point." He gestured back to where his daughter held up a shamelessly gorgeous photo of a sunset with one hand and scratched her ankle with the other. I could tell that this man was waiting for me to look him in the face, to acknowledge that something real had passed between us. I wasn't really sure what that might be, but I met his bloodshot eyes. I offered him a pen to sign with and he shook my hand.

His signature was all over the receipt. An ink bomb. I'm not sure he could even write, but he seemed to be getting on through a sheer voltage of personality. He looked at me square, and intoned "Life goes and kicks you, you just kick it right

back, you hear?" I expected a crowd to cheer. How could he get away with saying something so obscenely affirmative? Before he left he grabbed my elbow and said, "Godspeed," a word I had maybe heard about but never actually heard anyone say. I saw them drive off on a motorcycle, with Reggie on the back holding six bags in each hand.

That night, I started doing some research on in vitro fertilization.

But before I could get too far, my dad died. He went in for bypass surgery and, as he himself had predicted, albeit in his flat, half-humorous way, died on the operating table.

The last time I talked to him was the day before he went in. The day my anarchist cookbook arrived. Four months late and there wasn't a single damn recipe inside.

I told my dad this and he laughed.

"Anarchists don't cook, dummy," he said. "At least not with recipes."

"That sounds pretty hopeless," I said. "There's no love in that."

"I want to tell you about love, then," he said. "It's got no recipe. Every time you try to whip it up, it turns out kind of mushy."

"Isn't the greatest love of all the one you have for your kids?" I asked.

"It's hard to tell your kids this," he said. "But really, the greatest love never shows up. All you've got is what's in front of you, which is usually your kids."

"You sound like a fortune teller," I said.

“Tell Jenny hello,” he said.

That was it.

He didn’t talk about surgery. And I didn’t tell him I was working at a surf shop and trying, innocently, to call down the souls of my unborn children. I’m not sure if we ever talked about it, which I guess I regret.

The next day his heart stopped as they were sewing him up. I drove to the funeral with Ben in the front seat. Somewhere around El Centro I got bored and tired so I got the rebreather out of the trunk and strapped it on. Its bulk forced me up against the steering wheel. One man motioned for me to roll down my window and asked, “Is that a bomb?” I took it off.

Jenny flew out because she had to work, but she drove back with us.

“Am I going to lose you?” I said at one point.

The Beach Boys played on the stereo. Our Honda was only three years old but on that return trip, somewhere around Needles, right when I asked that question, the air conditioner gave out. And even though it was the dead of winter, we ended up having to roll the windows down. By the time we got to the coast, our arms and faces were red with chill and we’d sung ourselves hoarse.

It was a cool August. We painted the kitchen orange. Ben lost most of his hearing and started to look old. We bought large quantities of peanut butter and cream cheese to hide his blood pressure medicine in.

One day I got to the back of the paper and noticed something on the tide chart. An asterisk. With a footnote. *Lowest tide of the year coupled with warm temperatures and high water visibility make this a rare day for tidepoolers and skindivers.* Projected time: 2:34 a.m.

I still sold shirts.

That night I didn't go to bed. Ben and I ate an entire berry pie and looked at a book with pictures of fish. I put everything in the car: my spear gun, wetsuit, fins, facemask, a rope with a couple old dive weights tied on the end, and a buoy I bought new that afternoon along with a dive light. It all fit in Jenny's enormous laundry bag.

Down at Fletcher's Cove there were people everywhere. An extra dose of teenagers and bonfires, but also families with kids, guys carrying surfboards and talking on cell phones, elderly couples, and fishermen. I could already see a few buoys out behind the last swells.

And strangest of all: the water. Folded into the crest of each falling wave was a line of electric blue light.

I couldn't look away. Ben curled up on my feet and started to snooze.

"Red tide," said a voice in the dark. It was my boss, Eddie, leaning on his board and dripping wet.

"It happens," he said, "with a certain type of plankton. Some kind of voodoo, huh?"

He pointed at my bag. "I didn't know you speared," he said. "Sullivan, you've got us all fooled." He hefted my bag and walked toward the water, saying, "Come on." I hadn't spoken a word.

Eddie helped me into my wetsuit and rigged my buoy so that the float line was attached to my spear gun.

"That way, if you drop it, or it gets yanked out of your hand, you don't lose it," he said. He showed me how to hold the dive light and the spear gun in one hand.

"Do you have a knife?" he asked. I didn't. "That's a problem," he said. He reached into his sock. "You cannot dive without a knife," he said. He gave me his, wrapping its Velcro strap just above my ankle. He looked in the bag one more time and pulled out the re-breather.

"Sullivan, you're like *Senor Misterioso*," he said.

"I don't think it works," I said.

"I would say not," Eddie said. "But you should wear it anyway. Might as well do it up right. What is this, an antique?"

"Family heirloom," I said.

"Yeah, well, you need a little extra weight," he said.

He worked carefully to secure the re-breather, tucking the mouthpiece neatly behind the shoulder strap so it wouldn't get in the way. He did it like it was the most natural thing in the world.

By now I was starting to feel very anxious. There were plenty of people out in the water, but I had rarely been swimming in the ocean at night. Its unknown depths seemed endless in the dark. Ben circled around me, unnerved by my transformation.

“Stay, Ben,” I said and threw the laundry bag up onto dry sand. He went and stood by the bag, watching Eddie and me wade into the surf.

“I think I’ll swim out with you,” Eddie said. He had his shirt off. I felt like a boy scout chasing a merit badge, uninitiated and unprepared. Foolish. I completed the one ritual I was sure of: to spit in my mask and rub it around, then rinse it in the seawater.

“Thank you,” I said to Eddie. I pulled the mask over my eyes and we jumped through a curling wave, coming out on the other side.

My third attempt.

I grab the weights off the buoy and immediately begin to descend. I look up and see Eddie, eyes wide open, his hair waving like kelp in the shifting currents. In an instant he is gone in the shimmering dark. I start to panic, close my eyes. Open them.

It only takes me about five seconds to touch bottom. We aren’t out very far. Maybe eight meters deep. I try to absorb the impact in my knees. The water is warm with cold currents. My flashlight creates a kind of stage where creatures enter on one side and exit back into darkness on the other. A school of silver fish with yellow-tipped fins hovers on the edge visibility. I see two small sharks. A stingray swims

into the light and turns right towards me, then ascends and is gone. A bright orange fish hurries behind some coral shaped like broken antlers. The pressure in my lungs starts to build. I carefully slip out Eddie's diving knife and tap it on the barrel of my gun. Movement on the right. A small sheepshead with a thick band of pink around his middle. I point my spear in his direction, moving the light along with it and revealing a large grouper. It is oddly still. I aim and fire. My light skews upwards from the recoil and I can't see if I hit. There's the sound of water moving. A small commotion. Fish fleeing. My throat starting to burn. Dizziness. I kick off towards the surface, thinking *don't breathe, don't breathe*.