To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Bradford Eugene Tice entitled "Missionaries and Other Stories." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of English, with a major in English.

_____
Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Allen Wier
_____

Amy Billone
_____

Christine Holmlund
_____

Acceptance for the Council:

_____Carolyn Hodges_____
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

[Original signatures on file with official student records.]

MISSIONARIES AND OTHER STORIES

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of English
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Bradford Eugene Tice
May 2009

Acknowledgments

The stories in this collection have appeared in the following publications, sometimes in slightly different forms: “Missionaries” in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Best American Short Stories 2008* (Houghton Mifflin); “The Art of Human Surveillance” in *The American Scholar*; “The Behavior of Sea Creatures” in *Alaska Quarterly Review*; “Murmurations” in *One Story*; and “Handling” in *FiveChapters.com.*

The author would like to give deepest thanks to Michael Knight, Allen Wier, Marilyn Kallet, and Art Smith for mentoring me in my creative endeavors (you all have been with me since the beginning), also to Christine Holmlund, John McManus, and Amy Billone for their guidance, to my agent, Jin Auh, as well as Jackie Ko, to Jeffrey DeShell and Elizabeth Sheffield, to Elizabeth Gilbert, who encouraged me to “learn us something new,” to my parents for their patience, faith, and unending love, and a special thanks to Chris Lynch, my partner, my inspiration, my love—you are the reason I have made this life a story.

Abstract

Bradford E. Tice's debut collection, *Missionaries and Other Stories*, is a series of stories that attempts to capture the restless spirit of modern America. The characters here are driven by a cause—on a mission to find meaning in a world that no longer makes sense to them. In the title story, two Mormon missionaries set their sights on two vastly different goals, one secular and one celestial, as they go door to door in search of answers to the questions of who they are and what they are made of. Other stories in the collection feature characters who seek understanding of such things as sexuality, old age, abandonment, fatherhood, disease, and what it means to be an American in this modern age. This collection attempts above all to turn a bright light on contemporary life and how it is lived today.

Contents

Introduction 1

Missionaries 20

The Art of Human Surveillance 43

Skin 71

How to Become an American Boy 106

The Behavior of Sea Creatures 128

Murmurations 157

Handling 185

Vita 235

Introduction

I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth.
I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad?
Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly
I can tell you the whole story.
~ "The Tell-Tale Heart," Edgar Allan Poe

I. The Tattling Heart

I have been studying and teaching the craft of writing for almost a decade now, and what strikes me as odd is that in all of that time I've never been asked the question what makes a short story a short story. I assume many students, and perhaps rightfully so, take that term to mean what its designation literally claims it to be—namely a plot with brevity. A short story is not a novel because it's not long enough. There is something to be said for this definition. Edgar Allan Poe claimed that any work of art should achieve its effect within one sitting. Yet surely there is something more to this distinction than duration alone. One of the most colorful and insightful comparisons I've read on the short story versus novel debate is a quote by the writer George Singleton, who claims, "A novel is a big old shaggy dog running around aimlessly, sniffing whatever it wants to sniff for however long it wants to sniff it. A short story is a small cur, backed into a corner, showing its teeth." A cur seems an apt metaphor to use in reference to the short story. It implies that language is a living breathing animal with its own instincts toward survival and preservation. It's a mixed breed of uncertain heritage,

a motley of origins. It implies a certain desperation—a beast with its teeth bared. Careful! That dog will tear your heart out.

I began reading short stories in high school—cutting my teeth on writers such as Jack London, Joseph Conrad, and Edgar Allan Poe. Sometimes on quiet nights, when I'm too wired to sleep, I'm maddened by the sound of my own heartbeat keeping me awake. I think then of Poe's story "The Tell-Tale Heart," and I have come over the years to consider this story another metaphor for what a short story is. As you read it, you hear more than just a narrative. There's something else—a rhythm or tattoo that distracts. It nags at you. The more you ignore it, the more that pulse insists, demanding something. It's then that you realize the implications of that sound. That heartbeat that won't give up the ghost…that is the story. The short story is a tale with a heart beating under the floorboards. The short story is an animal, its heart hammering in its chest, wanting beyond measure to survive.

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Tennessee, I remember being told in a seminar course on literary theory that the author was dead, and since at the time I wanted to be a writer, I found this proclamation to be somewhat disturbing. Suddenly I was the cur backed into that corner, fighting for its life. *Dead before my time!* What a way to go. I thought of Poe's heart, stilled in the flesh and yet still beating in the mind, and thought there had to be something we'd missed. After being told that I was dead, it was as if I was suddenly made a ghost, a specter of the literati and with a specter's ability to appear and disappear, walk through walls, phase between the solid and the intangible, I could trouble whatever space I wanted, appear as any form I chose. I could spook the living—be a reminder of what had come before, a memory distilled like the image of a

photograph emerging from the vat of a chemical wash. No longer would petty concerns or my multiple and frayed egos need get in the way of the task at hand—namely the construction of prose on the page. Arranging language into narrative—motivations and crisis, perspectives and atmospheres. Nor did writing need be a labor. Labor was for the living. The dead did something different. The dead rested in preparation for the next big step. They were inert; they decayed. They exerted no force that could affect change or manipulate the world. According to literary theorists, the author's stories were his tombstone, her wreath of mouldering flowers, or a child seated on the grass above a parents' grave—conversing but not expecting an answer back. However, growing up in the American South, a space long thought haunted by its history, I began to wonder about the exigency of the dead. What do the dead desire, and, if one is to believe those stories told around campfires on windy nights, why do they wander, solitary and bereft, through our lives even after their passing? What are they in search of? And if the author is truly dead, stiff and six feet under the ground of the text, how might they too haunt the spaces of the works they create?

Ever since Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author," which first appeared in the 1967 edition of the American journal *Aspen*, writers and critics alike have played a Where's Waldo game of locating the place of the author in his or her own work. According to Barthes, the consideration of the author's biographical, psychological, and sociological influences should never be brought into a discussion of a text. The intent of the author is meaningless in an analysis of what the art form is doing. The art form is autonomous. Once it leaves the painter's easel, the writer's laptop, the poet's journal, the sculpture's mold, it is a free agent. It has divorced itself entirely from the meager and

banal life of its creator. In a sense, this news is heartening. Even bracing. It means that the author's job is simply to breathe life into the husks of matter or the arrangements of words. Afterwards, the creation, the monster leaves to run amok or behave itself as it sees fit.

Apropos of monsters, in every creative writing class there is an ogre of a very particular temperament that rears its head whenever the question of style is brought into the classroom. This monster goes by many names, but many refer to it as authorial voice. It's a concept many students of creative writing fear, given the fact that the very idea of an authorial voice or style is abstract and mysterious. Yet forty or fifty years ago, students of writing were often told that if they wanted to write they should cultivate their own unique intonation—a voice that would serve as their calling card. One need only read a few paragraphs of a Hemingway piece in order to recognize his trademark of an understated style that speaks epics when the surface is scratched. Likewise, Nabokov's streams of meticulous, coiled and riddled diction are easily pegged in a lineup. The trick, as it were, was to make the cadence, style, or shape of one's writing a fingerprint that could be left on the page, indisputably the mark of one and only one individual, recognizable to anyone who was up for a little investigating.

Nowadays, this idea of the distinguished and distinguishing authorial voice has given way to the idea that authors may adopt a panopoly of voices and styles—that the author should instead learn to throw their voice across an array of social, political, sexual, linguistic and cultural strata. This idea too seems in keeping with Barthes' idea of the absent author—an author so mutable and multi-faced that he/she is no longer recognizable to the eye of the curious reader. He or she becomes "Everyman," and such

an author need not bother his art form with questions of agency and intent, but may simply abandon the babe to the wilderness. However, the irony here is that, as anyone familiar with myth and prophecy will tell, babes left to the wolves often return to wreak vengeance on their progenitors. Is this how the author is meant to die—at the hand of his own creation?

The idea that the author must of necessity be divorced from the page raises its own series of questions. What does the reader do when the ghost of Chekhov's alcoholic father comes stumbling into the room? Does one ignore it, believing fundamentally in the specter's lack of manners and breeding? While reading Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* are we to ignore Zelda, standing at our shoulder, tapping her foot and humming a jazz tune? According to Barthes, indeed we are! The dead are to be ignored, and we only encourage them when we acknowledge their presence in the room. After reading Barthes, I began to question what the role of the author really was. Was it true that the creator had no influence, no say, no ability to touch the work of art once it had gone out into the wide world, or was this simply the nightly hopes of literary atheists?

II. Atheists and Artisans

I have on occasion been accused of being, among other things, an atheist. However, truth be known, I was raised an agnostic in a Southern family and told that, should anyone ask, we were non-practicing Baptists. Add to that the fact that I was a homosexual being reared in the home of a liberal mother who enjoyed wild game hunting, a conservative father who built bluebird houses, and a paternal grandmother who

reconciled the debate on evolution by determining that white people came from God and black people came from monkeys, one can only imagine how particularly screwed I was in this debate. I asked myself (and the ghost of Barthes), how is one to erase such a past without also losing the very flavor of that ink? I didn't know, but if my gentle readers were willing to overlook such a sordid and colorful past, then why not let dead dogs lie so to speak?

Then I entered a creative writing workshop, turned in a story about foreskin reconstruction and the pansexual relationship of a homosexual couple, and learned how willing people are to kick a dead dog. The writing workshop is a strange place. Part social group, part classroom, it is a space where writers are meant to come together in order to share one another's work. Ideally it's meant to be a safe place where the author may test-run a story or poem on an audience of the author's peers, and (if one wishes to throw in an even larger dash of optimism) it's also a space where students come to the work as diagnosticians, poking and prodding the work until a clean bill of health may be issued. The diagnostician must at all times be of a certain professional caliber. They must be sterilized before being allowed into the room, cleaned of all cultural, political, religious, intellectual, or aesthetic influences and assumptions. They bring to the table only the tools at hand—tools of plot development, effective characterization, point-of-view. It's all meant to be so clinical. Some might balk at such an empirical view of what happens in the workshop space, but ideals are often sterile. During every workshop I have ever participated in, the author is not allowed to speak—and for good reason. The worries and interruptions of the author would only distract the professionals from their task, and in much the same way a family member may be led away from the bedside of a loved one

when the doctors arrive, the author too is pushed into the adjoining wings, a silent bystander to the diagnosis. Later, the professionals will return the patient to its guardian, a little worse for wear, but with a prescription of how the patient might mend. This is the ideal of the workshop. However, the world is not an ideal space, and students of the workshop are not always professional. Sometimes what gets in the way of a proper diagnosis of the text is self-interest, personal bias, moral objections, disagreements of aesthetics, and misinformed assumptions on the part of the reading audience. Even in the space of the workshop, where the author is, for the most part, gagged and bound, the author's influence does not go unnoticed.

If what Barthes argues is true, that the author's identity and ego are best stricken from the page, why then were so many of my fellow workshop members using my personal life to talk about the stories I wrote. *I enjoy the unique perspective that you've cultivated in this piece, but do you really want to be just another gay/Southern/irreligious/_____ (fill in blank) writer?* And there it was—despite my best efforts to commit hara-kiri, the ghostly influence of the author, my self, had danced out naked at the witching hour, vaguely seen, but witnessed all the same. Could this mean that I had failed as a writer? Despite my best intentions, there I was on the page. Despite the change of names, the twisting of genders and appearances, there was my insecurity, my need to say "excuse me" for no particular reason. There was my stubborn desire to always be right, my tendency toward chaos, fragmentation, self-destruction. My characters' hopes, ideals, shit-eating grins were the same as mine. Could this mean I hadn't died enough—had only gone unconscious or stunned or undead? Was I now a literary zombie shambling through the bracken of my own prose in search of

someone else's brain? No, it was nothing as mindless as that. In fact, mindfulness was the crime. I had failed to exorcise myself from the work—and the blood hounds of the workshop had found me out.

I have often hated that moment at public readings or literary seminars when the author is asked, "When did you decide to become a writer?" This question has many guises:

What drew you to writing?

Who or what influenced you as an emerging artist?

I can tell you really love words. How will you make a living?

Invariably the author, being a writer after all, will supply some witty and telling anecdote. *Well, I was sitting in my breakfast nook one morning. It was raining outside and fog obscured the far side of the yard. I was reading O'Connor's "Good Country People" when my dog, Bennington, went loping through the wet chokeberries, and I thought about the peacock feathers that adorned the walls of Flannery's former home and then said, thunderstruck, 'Of course! A gorilla!' After that, the story pretty much wrote itself.* Meanwhile, I'm in the audience thinking, "Yeah right!" or "Liar!" or "Gorillas in the mist. That's funny." There's something about this particular vision of the writer that feels rather self-involved, self-aggrandizing, and, dare I say, inauthentic. Why not instead talk about the hours spent listening to your Aunt Willa Dean, you trying to get pitch-perfect the quiet, cringing tone of her Southern drawl and failing to manage it? Why not talk about the entire day spent on one paragraph that was later whittled down to a sentence of exactly three words, "Look out, son!"? Why not talk about the year spent with a clever idea and a computer, pounding your head against the keyboard, thinking,

"Who am I kidding? I'm just an ideas man. I'm not a writer."? And then it came to me. These public readings aren't sessions of the arts in action. They're not necessarily meant to be instructive. They're resurrection machines—the only moment left for the author to touch his own work and say, "I was involved with this somehow. And that mattered at a time." I was left with this sad portrayal of the writer brought on stage to try and resuscitate herself, pounding on her sternum in the hopes of getting a pulse.

Now I see I had begun to think of the author as that beating heart secreted under the boards of Poe's classic story—a heart that tattled. Could the desires and longings of that heart ever stop their infernal beating, or was the author doomed to haunt the pages of the texts they erected, like the spirits of a mansion's former inhabitants who came to a bloody end? Perhaps, as Poe suggested, that drumbeat was part of the story as well. I'd like to think so. Now let me tell you why.

III. Skinned Alive

It was the autumn of 1995. I had just turned seventeen the summer before, and it was a time when I felt keenly aware of the weight of my own body. The leaves of the oaks out front of the public library had begun to turn, fading from the tired green of late summer to golds and crimsons. Already I could hear the clamor of winter caught up in the tops of the trees, like a flock of blackbirds waiting to descend upon the field. The traffic on Highway 64, which passed the library on its way into town, whipped the already fallen oak leaves into wild spirals. Lawrenceburg, a town of working to middle class families, predominantly white, Baptist with an also fairly large Amish population,

had been my family's home for more generations than I cared to research. We were a stubbornly close-knit clan, close in the way seeds inside a pomegranate are close—sticky and saccharine. At this point in my life, my sexuality had become a guilty negotiation. On weekends, my brother Brian had friends over, and I would often hang out with them, trying hard not to look at them stripped to the waist, their bodies so tanned by time at the lake that their nipples had gone from pink to a dried russet. The hair patterns emerging on their chests were like the birth of a Rorschach test. I can't begin to explain the moral conundrum faced during late night games of strip poker, innocent and permissible under the assumption that the object of the game is to humiliate rather than entice. I somehow managed to accomplish both.

As I was growing up, I knew there was something different about me. I shudder to begin a biography with such a heavy-handed and overused phrase, but it's true. Even before I had discovered such as thing as sexuality, I couldn't get around the fact. As my grandmother would have termed it (had she not loved me and refrained from such talk), I was sissified. A little funny. A little light on my feet. And this was true. I grew up with an innate sense that something wasn't quite right—I cringed at the thought of stringing a worm on a hook. I said "not me" to camouflage, rut scent, chiggers, and the bloody feast of the hunt. I had a love/hate relationship with mud. "Always with his nose in a book," my grandmother said. Not a good sign by her estimation.

On this particular day, I had come to the library for a book sale. The library shelves were overextended, bursting with a glut of words. The library was not very big, but for a small town it was more than adequate. Since I often had to wait for my parents to get off work after school, I had become a fixture here, the pale, freckled boy haunting

the aisles, thumbing through London's *Call of the Wild, Grimm's Fairy Tales, 1001 Nights,* Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird, Watership Downs.* As clichéd as it may sound, I will admit to a love of marbled edges, that new paper smell, the crack of binding glue. For that reason, you might expect me to call this place a safe haven, but ports in a storm are hard to spot. The library was also the site of my first lesson in humiliation. Months earlier, while thumbing through a copy of Burnett's *The Secret Garden,* I was approached by Keila Martin.

"Hey, do you know me?" she asked.

"No." I tried not to make eye contact hoping she'd get the point.

"Keila. I'm in your brother's grade." My twin brother was held back a year in the 3rd grade. Our mother told us it was because Brian needed improvement on his reading, but I think the school wanted to separate us for our own good.

"Hmm." I tried to bristle and appear "aloof," a word I had become fond of at the time.

"How come I never see you out at the Skate Rink?" I should mention that at this point I had already realized I was gay due to a dream I had had the summer before in which I rode "bitch" in the cab of one of my classmate's trucks. I woke up when he touched my leg. I remember I had an erection. As I recall, I think my first thought on waking was, "My God, how provincial." My second thought was, "I must be gay."

"Do you want to go out some time?" Keila asked.

I shook my head and tried to appear as engrossed in the book as possible.

"What's wrong with you? Why don't you ever go out with any girls in school?" By now I was panicking. Keila was beginning to raise her voice. Several of the gray-

haired librarians were looking our way. I felt trapped. Cornered in the young adult section, a place where I thought I was safe from such things.

I ended up giving her my phone number and then told my mother, should some girl call the house, to tell her I was not allowed to date. Keila tried for about a week, calling until my mother threatened to have our number changed. Eventually, Keila gave up on me, for which I was grateful. However, Keila had raised a good question that day. What was wrong with me? Keila Martin was attractive. More importantly she was loose. According to the high school rumor mill she had already "gotten into trouble" when she and her former boyfriend, Court, ran out of condoms and decided Keila's silk panties would work in a pinch. I was told by my friend Jason Helson this meant I was a shoo-in. More than anything though, I was afraid of being discovered, found out, and going out with Keila was too much of a risk. What if I was missing some basic knowledge that would expose me as a fraud? It sounds ridiculous, but these are the considerations you weigh when you wish not to be the school pariah—like some of the other kids in my high school who were less fortunate, who spoke too softly, whose wrists bent when they talked, who were essentially hopeless and unable to "pass." I certainly didn't want their existence. So I buried myself in books and tried to get through high school with as little angst as possible.

This strategy worked until the day in question. The day of the local library's bookfair. While searching the stacks I came across a copy of Edmund White's short story collection *Skinned Alive.* I still have this book. I'm looking at it now. It's the Knopf hard cover, 1995 edition. On the jacket is a photograph of a naked young man, bent at the waist with his hands on the floor, his leg drawn up toward his chest obscuring his

genitals. His head is down, so you do not see his face. His arms are flexed and his shoulders tensed. He appears more animal than human in this position. He looks in pain somehow, as if his skin were being burned from his body. Below this image is the title of the book, "Skinned Alive," and inside the dust jacket I read a reviewer describe Edmund White as "one of the most influential chroniclers of gay life." I stood looking at this cover, making sure the middle-aged mother standing next to me with a stroller couldn't see what I was holding. I felt both a tug of recognition and desire. I had to have this book. I ended up buying five other titles, all of which I do not recall, so that I could hide the book inside the stack. My hands trembled when I passed the books to the librarian in charge of the sale. I'm not sure what I feared—that she might come to White's collection and out me then and there. Scream "filth" and propel me bodily out of that quiet and wholesome space. She noted the price on the inside cover without even a second glance at the boy-made-animal, a creature I could not take my eyes off of. After I had paid, I stuffed the book into my backpack and practically ran out the door.

Looking back on this moment in my life, I ask myself, "How could something so innocuous, so nonthreatening as a book cause me such terror?" Surely, in part, it was my fear that possession of such a book would act as evidence of my covert life. But I think it was also something else. When I escaped from the library into that bright afternoon, I held a new life in my hands. A life to which I had never had access, of which I had heard only rumors while passing jocks in the hallways of my high school. It's been years since I read the stories from that collection, yet there is one line from the first story "Pyrography" that is indelibly burned into my memory. "[Howard] could picture Danny's naked body twisting and turning that one hot night as he moaned in his sleep,

goaded by mosquitoes." The stories are remarkable for the way they try to make sense of lives lived on the border—the maneuvers of homosexual intimacy, the longing of youth, a silent kind of desperation that can live underneath the skin. It would perhaps still be hyperbole to say that this book saved my life, but I remember what I felt while reading those stories—like I too was being skinned alive, and what was being peeled away were old skins: social expectations, hetero-normative coding, shame. And I wonder, years later, if that skinless boy, a book pressed to his chest as something inside him was knocked loose, can ever be exorcized from the pages of my own work. Personally, I doubt it. I see him in every word. In the gestures of every character to whom I've given skin. This boy, stripped down and vulgar, simply refuses to die.

IV. The Curator's Obsession

I have often wondered why, at the end of the twentieth century, it was decided that the author had to die. I'm sure it has something to do with this idea that only in death will the author's true genius be recognized, and so perhaps Barthes' pseudo-death was the loophole decided upon by all. I can certainly understand the desire. I always wanted to be able to say that I come from a long line of literary artists—to look back over the generations and point to where my obsession with words germinated, to untangle the exact splicing of the genes. Wouldn't it be assuaging to look back at one's past and see starving artists standing in a bread line of succession, culminating in the writer who sits here now, writing to you—oh, gentle reader? I envy the legitimization of those fortunate souls who can look back on the past and know this is what history, biology, social

conditioning, etc. has meant for them to do. Unfortunately, I know of no writers in my past. I don't even know of any oral storytellers who have carried the histories of my family like a lover's trinket tucked into the brim of their hats. No, I do not come from a long line of wordsmiths. I do, however, come from a long line of collectors.

Along the top shelf of my grandmother's kitchen, which ran nearly the circumference of that room, was kept her collection of salt and pepper shakers—most of which had been gathered from local yard sales and thrift stores. I often thought of them as Noah's cargo, unloaded and paired on the ledges of Ararat and there abandoned, the spice in their bellies the last on earth. That's what they seemed to me, a person who had already fallen in love with the idea of something gathered and kept. I collected everything as a child—leaves, rocks and geodes, shells, flowers, arrowheads, fossils. When I was ten, I had a box of birds' feathers I kept in my room until my well-meaning but misinformed aunt told me there were probably lice stowed away in the feathers' vanes. There is no way to describe the emptiness I felt when I dumped those varicolored quills out in the field behind my house and watched as the wind spun them away. I remember days spent in cemeteries and parks with my uncle's metal detector—waiting for the tone of something precious under the topsoil to reveal itself. On the dresser of my room, I lined up canning jars with holes pierced in the lids, and into these vessels was poured praying mantises, toads, cicadas, lightning bugs, the threaded cocoon of some silent thing. I collected books and photographs. In the third grade I spent every free moment in the classroom copying down word by word the entries of the classroom encyclopedias until my teacher at the time, Mrs. Glass, decided I was distracted and took away my World Book privileges. I had gotten to "Artichoke."

Even into adolescence, that time of humid preoccupations, I carried this obsession. The summer when I accepted the fact that I was gay coincided, oddly enough, with the discovery that my grandmother's attic contained a box of my uncle's old *Hustler* magazines. On weekends, I would convince my parents to let me stay over with my grandparents, and in the middle of the night, the house asleep around me, I would creep upstairs and steal pictures of men. With my grandmother's sewing shears, I cut out the women from around the men's stiff cocks, until I had them perfectly excised from the mess of sex. The men, alone now with only a stray lacquered nail or teased tendril left at the edges to suggest what had been cut away, were put in a scrap book that I hid above one of the ceiling tiles in my basement room at home. They stayed there until, during a fit of anxiety about being caught with these strange lovers, I snuck the book into the woods in back of our house, dug a hole in the earth, and burned the entire book. I have difficulty describing the hollowed out feeling of that moment as well.

Looking back on this habit of mine all these years later, surrounded by my shelves of books, movies, art prints, and the pair of salt and pepper shakers I took after my grandmother's passing, I can't help but think that this was the beginning of my writing life. This gathering. The hoarding of the world. Is that not the goal of every writer? To gather to him or her the detritus and detail, the texture and hue, the cadence and tone of what surrounds the writer? Students often begin writing courses convinced that they are not creative, and that their minds do not work that way. That creativity is an unassailable fortress they are barred from, and I must admit, I too have dislocated a shoulder hurling myself at those walls. To combat this anxiety, creative writing instructors often begin their classes with that classic axiom, "Write what you know." I have never been fond of

this advice. Although by no means bad advice, I find it to be somewhat obvious. Of course we write what we know. Every character we create has the gem of our consciousness embedded within them. Every setting we render on the page has the texture and look of somewhere we've lived, walked, breathed. It's inevitable. The ghost will not be banished from its haunts. Therefore, I begin my classes by telling students, armed as they are with what they know, to be curious about their world. Perhaps a better axiom would be *Know more!!*

I often stress to my students that research is one of the fundamentals of good writing—and writers should be collectors. Living curators of what Ezra Pound called "the news that stays new" and what Marianne Moore was after when she mentioned those "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." Students of writing should go out and learn more about octopi behavior, aerodynamics, pulse jet engines, advanced particle physics, French Huguenots, the patterned eggs of various nightjar species, Borneo. They should read broadly and voraciously—newspapers, comic books, almanacs, field guides, personal ads, the list of ingredients on a box of butter. Students in my composition and creative writing classes often ask me why they need to "bother" learning where Iraq is or what the names of trees are outside the classroom window, to which I answer simply, "Because you *can.*"

In my own writing life, I have often put words upon paper in order to keep something—the forlorn look of a pair of Mormon missionaries cycling through my neighborhood at dusk, the sound of plastic blowing in the windows of an unfinished house, the scent of fresh paint, the warmth of a lover's skin. I have collected and coveted it all. This is the service the artist does for each of us, gathering the mud and miracles.

The writer, Jean Rhys, once said, “Listen to me. All of writing is a huge lake. There are great rivers that feed the lake, like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. And there are mere trickles, like Jean Rhys. All that matters is feeding the lake. I don’t matter. The lake matters. You must keep feeding the lake.” We shape words to teach ourselves about who we are. Every piece that emerges from a workshop is our story, and I want my students to appreciate writing and textile machines and human anatomy and darts for that reason. I want them to understand that what they do matters, not only for me or for themselves, but to everyone. That to write is to make new, make sense, make love, make known, make matter the self and the world.

Allow me a moment to collect myself. When I think back over those stories I read that fall, I think about the person I became—the author I became. I’ve spent the last thirty years collecting myself—like tin soldiers arranged in formation on a high shelf—the shy boy who read *The Odyssey* on the banks of a river, the adolescent who found sex in the crawl space of his grandmother’s attic. There’s a line in a song by Elton John that mentions “a man who sells potions in a traveling show.” For some reason, I have always been haunted by this lyric, because I have come to think of the artist as this man. A man who has spent a lifetime collecting species of mushrooms, weeds, roots for his tinctures—tasting each one, both the poisons and the tonics. This is how I have collected myself, and I have always written what I think I know. Perhaps that is the ultimate irony and paradox of the writing life. We can’t not write what we know, but what we know is so much more than can be tallied in the count of our own personal experiences. What we know is the story and how we always manage to write ourselves into it. I realize I have written myself into every story I’ve ever penned in an effort to outline and illustrate that

thing we call the self, the soul, the human condition. Every story is a piece of that collection.

I've been told once or twice I can be arrogant—that I think I know a lot. I like to call it something else though—something more akin to the word "faith" or "grace," an essential belief that we'll figure it out in the end if we just keep at it. Till then the author will continue to bump and bang through the night of his or her story—

Which brings us back to the dead. They may know something, but they're not talking. Knowing something to tell has always been the problem of the artist, the living, the storytelling animal, and we're still kicking.

Missionaries

Joseph watched Case undress on the bluff overlooking the still surface of the rock quarry. Case removed his shirt, then his shoes and socks. He planted his feet on the weathered rock at the edge and leaned over to peer into the water below. The sun was directly overhead, and a breeze riffled through the sycamores lining the old factory road. Case's chest was a white-marble tone, and the line on his arms where his tan began made him look like a painting someone had only half finished. He removed his watch and tossed it onto the pile. It landed with a click, striking the plastic LDS tag upon which his name was spelled out in white letters. Joseph sat behind him in the dirt of the road, next to the two bikes and a parked van, studying Case's outline against the blue sky.

"Not only does the Mormon Church offer salvation," Case was saying, "but in addition to your salvation package, you receive a principality in the kingdom of God." He smiled over his shoulder, then pulled his belt out of its loops and tossed it onto the pile. "Which sure beats the living arrangements you have now, Claude."

Claude was sitting on the bumper of the van, its back doors thrown open to reveal a stained mattress and sheets, across which was scattered several water-stained romance novels. His face was framed by wiry gray hair that extended down his jaw and collected under his chin, and he was trying to roll a joint on the frayed knee of his corduroys. The reek of mildew and sweat coming from the van was overpowering, and Joseph, who was sitting in front of Claude, wondered how long he could hold his breath.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Case continued. “You’ve got a nice thing going here, living in your van. No neighbors to bother you, only one key to worry about, nice view. But it’s not what God’s got planned for you, Claude. Elder Joseph, what does God have planned for Claude here?”

Case turned to Joseph, who’d just picked a dandelion from the grass and was holding it against his nose to combat the odor. Joseph didn’t answer immediately, and Case gave him a look and coaxed him with his hands. “He has a condo set aside for you in heaven, Claude,” Joseph finally answered.

“That’s right Claude. Have you ever been inside a condo?” Claude looked at Case as if he were crazy. Case just smiled and scratched at the hair under his arms.

Case and Joseph, both nineteen, their birthdays within a month of each other, had arrived a little over an hour earlier, walking their bikes down the stretch of railroad bisecting Ijams Nature Center until they found the overgrown access road that led to the abandoned marble plant and the adjacent quarry. Case had learned about the place from a college student in the Fort, where he and Joseph had been handing out tracts. They’d found Claude’s van parked beneath the kudzu-choked mill, nearly fifty feet above the water in the quarry.

Claude was stretched across the mattress in the back of his van reading a romance novel called *Gentle Rogue.* The cover depicted a man and a woman, scantily clad, swooning across the rigging of a ship. Joseph was wary of the old man, but Case saw only opportunity.

“Morning,” Case had called with genuine enthusiasm.

Claude dropped the paperback onto his chest, looking at the two over the spine with obvious distrust. “The quarry’s over there, if that’s what you came for,” he mumbled.

“Well, we did come for a swim, but that’s not all,” Case said. “We’re here to help you, sir.”

It amazed Joseph how effortlessly Case was able to sell the Church. He envied Case’s confidence, his ability to grab people. Case had been out in the field for nearly a year now, and by the time Joseph arrived three months ago, Case had already baptized fifteen converts, which put him well on his way to becoming district leader in the Knoxville branch. Case believed what Elder Robert back at mission headquarters had told him the day he arrived: “As long as the convert puts out his cigarette on the way down to the water, he is worthy.”

Case shielded his eyes against the sun and turned toward the quarry. The water was a grayish-blue, which reminded Joseph of Great Salt Lake. He pictured his mother standing ankle-deep in it, head haloed by brine flies, talking about the wonders of God. “A sea in the middle of the waste,” she’d said. “That’s what you have to be in this life, Joseph. Balm in the desert.”

“Hey, Claude. You ever jump from here?” Case ran a hand through his hair, cleared his throat, and spat off the side of the rock. Joseph noticed that the skin along Case’s midriff had pimpled.

Claude ignored Case, concentrating on his efforts with the joint. Joseph rose to his feet and edged out toward the quarry. He put his hand on Case’s shoulder. “I don’t think

you should be jumping into there," he said. "It's against the rules to swim, you know. Plus no telling what's down there."

Case grunted and shook off Joseph's hand. "You're such a lamb, Joseph. Christ, my mother has more backbone than you."

Joseph lowered his eyes and shrugged. He never liked it when Case swore. "I'm just saying you're an idiot, that's all."

"Won't deny that." Case undid the button on his slacks and dropped them, and his briefs, to his ankles. He pulled his feet out, then kicked both garments over with the others. One of the first things Case had done upon arriving in Knoxville was replace his temple garment with Fruit of the Loom underwear. Joseph thought of this as Case turned to him and grinned. For the past few months Joseph hadn't been able to look at Case without being reminded of what wasn't under the other boy's clothes.

Case looked over his shoulder at Claude, and Joseph followed his gaze, trying not to let his eyes rest too long on Case's naked body. Claude had finished rolling the joint and was passing it in and out of his lips. Case yelled, "You know God doesn't like you to use drugs to combat loneliness."

A smile wavered at the corner of Claude's lips. "You want to hit it?" he asked.

"Well, it seems like the only Christian thing to do." Case walked over, light-stepping over the gravel and the broken glass. As he approached, Claude moved around to the front of the van.

"Where you going, Claude? Ow, shoot!" Case raised his foot, regarded it for a second, and extracted a thorn from his heel.

“Need a light,” Claude yelled from the front of the van. A few seconds later he came back, lighting the joint with the van’s cigarette lighter.

“You’re a sad man, Claude. It’s divine intervention we came when we did. Isn’t it, Joseph?” Case kept his back to Joseph as he took a hit.

“Yeah, Case.” Joseph noticed the muscles of Case’s back tense, as he wondered if Case could feel him watching. Case passed the joint back to Claude and the old man extended it toward Joseph, who shook his head and focused on a puddle filled with water and gasoline in the road beside the van, around which hovered tiny violet butterflies.

“You’ll have to forgive Joseph. He lacks social grace.” Case looked over his shoulder, blowing smoke into the air and beckoning Joseph with his finger.

Joseph hesitated. Then he walked over, took the joint from Claude’s hand, and brought it to his lips. He tried to inhale as little as possible. The wind picked up, and the rusted girders of the mill groaned audibly under their cover of vines. Case shivered and wrapped his arms around his chest.

“You going to walk around naked all day?” Claude asked. “You haven’t exactly walked into Eden.”

“Does it bother you, Claude?”

“Not really. You’re not going to tell me about how man was made in the image of God and we shouldn’t be afraid of our nakedness, are you?”

Case smirked and shook his head. “No, I can see you’re the kind of man who doesn’t appreciate a lot of smoke and mirrors. Let’s face it, Claude. You’re hell bound, and I doubt anything can save you.”

“At least you’re honest.”

“I try, Claude. Now.” Case slammed the palm of his hand against Joseph’s chest. “Let’s do this.”

“Do what?” Joseph asked, rubbing his chest.

“Strip.” Case began pulling at Joseph’s shirt.

Joseph watched as one button snapped off and went sailing into the grass. He pulled away and stood staring at Case.

“Come on, Joe. We’re a team. We’re going to the river together.”

“It’s not a river, it’s—”

“Whatever. You know I wouldn’t make you do anything I wouldn’t do.” Case extended his arm. His palm looked soft to Joseph, like an infant’s. “I’ll even hold your hand.”

Joseph felt the blood rise in his neck. “I don’t need to hold your hand.”

Claude began to giggle, which sent the van bouncing. Joseph noticed that his teeth were broken and jagged.

“Don’t do it, boy,” Claude said. “Your friend’s crazy.”

“All right,” Case said. “Let’s go take a leap.”

Joseph straightened his shoulders, but as they approached the cliff, he felt his stomach kink. As he inched up to the edge and peeked over, Case came up behind him and swatted the back of his pants. Joseph jumped and clutched Case’s arm.

“Don’t worry,” Case said. “I was just going to suggest you take those off. You don’t want to walk around wet, do you?”

Joseph let go of Case and began to remove his shirt and pants. Case picked up several rocks from the cliff and spun them into the air above the quarry. He turned to look

at Joseph, flipping a flat stone over on his palm as he spoke. “You keeping your temple garment on?”

“It’ll dry.”

Case shrugged and hurled the stone away. “Suit yourself. You first.”

“Why do I have to go first?”

“Because I said so.” Case turned and walked a few paces behind Joseph. “I’ll be right after you.”

Joseph heard Claude yell from across the road, “Belly-flop, boys.”

A dull ringing started up in Joseph’s ear, and it seemed to him that the rest of the world got strangely quiet, that even the insects stopped whatever rituals they were engaged in. It was as if the world had turned to watch him, wondering what he intended to do next. He wondered briefly if God were watching and thought about Salt Lake and his parents. “Never be led from the path,” his father had always said. “Even angels have been known to trip.” Joseph decided he couldn’t do it, the very thought of the fall made his guts churn. But a moment later the weight of Case’s body slammed into his back, sending them both over the edge of the bluff.

Joseph felt as if he left his heart still beating on that limestone outcrop and it was now looking down as the two boys descended like angels. Case’s arm was locked around Joseph’s waist, and Joseph was more conscious of this pressure than anything else. The air rushed by, the landscape blurred, and then they hit water, which Joseph swore didn’t give an inch. They dropped below the surface and suddenly Case’s arm was gone. Bright washes of light danced on the surface above as Joseph struggled to orient himself. His side where he hit throbbed.

He surfaced a second later, gasping for air. Case emerged a few feet away from him and howled, the sound echoing around the walls of the quarry. The burning sensation in Joseph's side became a searing pain, and he began thrashing. Case swam over and snaked an arm under Joseph's, holding him above the water. "Sorry, man. I just thought you needed some inspiration up there."

Joseph tried to catch his breath. "You okay, Joe?" Case patted Joseph's chest and held him up so that they were both afloat.

"I can't breathe," Joseph said.

Case pulled Joseph toward him and spoke into his ear. "Just keep trying," he said. "It'll get easier." Joseph allowed his back to relax against the firm surface of Case's chest, their legs entangled under the water. "You did good, Joe. I'm proud of you. We should call it a day after this. To celebrate."

"What are we celebrating?" Joseph said, wheezing and coughing.

"Well, obviously somebody up there loves us."

*****

Joseph lay sprawled on the bed with an ice pack pressed against the side of his chest. The swelling had gone down, but a dark-purple bruise ran from under his right arm to below his waist. He winced as he tried to move, shifting his weight on the mound of pillows under him. He eyed Case, who was on the other side of the room crouched in front of the open door of the refrigerator. He emerged with a tub of butter and a butter knife and came and stood by the bed. "Here, put some butter on the bruise," he said. "It'll help reduce the swelling."

"What?" Joseph looked at Case dubiously.

“Trust me. It works.”

Joseph took the tub and knife from Case. He opened the lid and smeared the butter gingerly on his discolored skin. He cringed at the cold.

Case and Joseph’s studio apartment was in the partitioned attic of an old Victorian on Fifth Street. In the three months they’d lived there, clumps of dust had curled into the corners of the linoleum floors. The ceiling sloped at odd angles, and at night the wind whimpered around the eaves, sometimes keeping Joseph awake.

Joseph studied the few stars he could see through the window. He usually tried not to think about his parents until after Case had drifted off into sleep. He was an only child, and his mother hadn’t wanted him to go on the mission. His father, however, insisted it would be a growing experience and would get him out of an awkward phase. Joseph stared at the butter smeared down his side. Some of it was still curled from where the knife had cut it. He thought about the Family Home Evenings he’d spent with his parents. He could hear his father’s slow baritone relating the story of Daniel in the lions’ den. Afterwards, he’d sat between his father’s legs and watched as he carved sleeping lions from bars of Dial soap. He’d loved the way the soap curled around the edge of his father’s pocketknife, as if the world were bending to his will.

He blinked and tried to turn his head without moving his lower body. “Case, what did you do with your parents on Family Home Evenings?”

Case snorted. “My mother would turn off the TV and make me and my sisters read the Book of Mormon. God, Monday’s were frigging boring.”

“What about your dad?”

Case ran a finger through the mess on Joseph's chest and brought his finger to his mouth. "Did I ever tell you my dad is a physicist?" he asked. "He took me to his research facility once for Family Day, when I was ten. He worked with supercolliders at Stanford. We went in 1993, just a few years before someone in his department won the Nobel Prize for discovering the tau lepton, or something like that. That's what my dad does. He uses these machines to throw particles and atoms at each other to try and see what they're made of."

"Sounds interesting."

"That kind of stuff always excited my dad. He'd come home talking about how he hurled a helium atom at a whatever particle and something remarkable happened. It was all Greek to me, and that's all he could talk about. Quarks, mesons, dark matter—scientist stuff. It was like some secret code. How's your side feeling?"

"I can't feel the lower half of my body. Or the upper half."

Case laughed. He took a swat at the dust clots on the floor. "So what does your father do for a living, Joe?"

"He sells insurance for an indemnity company."

"That sounds really ordinary."

"Sorry."

Case nudged Joseph's shoulder. "Scoot over. And give me a pillow. We've got an early day tomorrow." He carried the tub of butter and the knife back to the refrigerator.

"Where are we going?" Joseph asked, sliding toward the wall.

"North Knoxville. Mechanicsville. Elder Robert says the families out that way are lower income. Poor people are more pliable."

Case pulled his undershirt over his head and jerked down his pants. He dropped both on the floor and switched off the overhead light. Once his eyes had adjusted to the dark, Joseph looked over at Case, who was lying on his back with his arms behind his pillow, staring at the ceiling. Case's shoulder seemed to radiate heat.

"Hey Case," Joseph said.

"What?"

"How come you never call your parents on our P days?"

Case sighed. "I don't have anything in particular to tell them. Once I make district leader, I'll call home to let them know. Shouldn't be too much longer. I've brought in more baptisms than anyone else. My dad made AP of the San Francisco mission when he was out in the field, before he went off to college."

The boys stopped talking, and Joseph listened as a listless summer rain passed over the roof, the drops pattering against the window above them.

"I can't sleep, Joe," Case said. "I'm too worked up. Will you make friends with the wall?"

"Sure," Joseph answered, turning over onto his side, facing away from Case. The white surface of the wall was inches from his eyes, and he began to trace patterns in the swirls of paint as the bed began to bounce. The space behind Joseph's back was like an itch he couldn't reach. The vagueness of it excited him. He listened to the rain in the gutters and the muffled noises that drifted over from Case's side of the mattress. He closed his eyes and tried to picture what it was like when two atoms collided—the slow implosion before the effect, then boom. Light and noise and rubble.

*****

The next morning, the rain had passed to the east, and the wet lawns grew steamy as Case and Joseph pedaled into North Knoxville. Joseph's clothes clung to his body, and sweat ran down his forehead into his eyes. Each revolution of the pedals hurt his side. He tried to ignore it, keeping his eyes on Case's back ahead of him. As they headed into Mechanicsville, Joseph saw that most of the houses they passed were white or sickly green clapboard and leaning at precarious angles, seemingly held up by telephone lines. Some were boarded up and wrapped in yellow police tape.

Case had ripped a street map out of the phone book. They would start on the east end and work their way west, ending up at the edge of the industrial park. Case leaned into a curve and came to a stop in front of a house nearly swallowed by dogwoods. Panting, Joseph came to rest beside him. Case propped his bike against a low wrought-iron fence and slung his backpack off his shoulder. He unzipped the side pouch and took out a tattered copy of the Book of Mormon. "Let me do the talking while we're here," he said. He looked at Joseph, who nodded.

Case's hair was wet on the sides and clung to his face. He swabbed his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt. "All right, then. Let's do this."

Joseph leaned his bike beside Case's and followed after him. Old tires lined the walkway, and from their centers swelled fistfuls of geraniums, marigolds, and some flowers he didn't recognize. Their scent hovered around him like the perfume his mother wore on Sundays when she attended chapel.

Case stood holding the screen door open against his hip and knocked loudly, breaking the quietness of the morning. Joseph felt the muscles of his neck tense. This was the part of the job he hated—standing at a door unsure what lay behind it. "Do you think

anyone's home?" he asked, just as the door swung open to the end of a chain. The face of the elderly black woman framed by the door seemed surprised it didn't open all the way.

"Hello, ma'am. My name is Case Riseler, and I was wondering if I might have a moment of your time today."

"I don't have any money to give you," said the woman. She was wearing a blue bathrobe with two huge pockets on the sides, and her gray hair was cut close to her head.

"We're not looking for money, ma'am. We'd like to talk to you about the Church of Latter-Day Saints. It'll take no more than fifteen minutes of your time." Case took half a step closer to the threshold and smiled. Somehow he made it seem as if he'd already been invited in. Or at least it seemed that way to Joseph.

The woman hesitated and looked behind her into the house. She mumbled softly, "The house isn't really clean. And I don't have much time for religion anymore."

"That's all right, ma'am. We're not here to pressure you. But could we at least step inside for a moment? Maybe cool down a bit? Plus, Elder Joseph here needs to use your restroom, if you don't mind. Isn't that right, Elder Joseph?"

"Yes, ma'am," Joseph said. "I need to use your restroom."

The woman stared hard at them for a moment. "You don't look old enough to be elders." The two boys didn't respond. "House is a mess," she said again.

"It'll just take a moment. Scout's honor." Case held up two fingers and put his other hand over his heart.

The old woman began to fish inside the pockets of her robe, then stopped and stared at the two boys. Joseph wondered if she remembered what she was doing. Then

she reached up, unlatched the chain, and swung open the door. “All right. But just for a minute.”

The interior of the house was dark. Rays of light stole in through the curtained windows, highlighting the traffic of dust. The place smelled of polyester. Behind the woman was what at one time might have been a living room. Joseph could make out a couch and table on the far wall, but the couch was covered with heaps of clothes, newspapers, and assorted gimcracks. Every available inch of the table was overrun with curios—porcelain clowns and angels, boys with straw hats and fishing poles, animal figurines. The old woman turned and hobbled through the snarl, down a path that angled to the right into an equally overrun kitchen. Case turned and whispered to Joseph. “Jesus Christ, this woman’s a loon. Look at this place.”

Joseph nodded and fell into step behind Case as they trailed the woman into the kitchen. She seated herself at the kitchen table, upon which rested a tower of salt and pepper shakers, stacked plastic cups, and canned food. Lines of ants stalked across the yellowed linoleum floor, which sagged in several places. Case took a seat beside the woman at the table, balancing the Book of Mormon on his thigh. He smiled and looked around. “Seems cozy. Joseph, why don’t you go find the restroom, while me and Mrs.—I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Ida Marsh,” the old woman answered.

“Ida. That’s lovely. Where’s your bathroom?”

Ida raised a gnarled finger and pointed to a door at the back of the kitchen next to the stove. “Through there and to the left. Down at the end of the hall.”

Case looked at Joseph. “You heard the woman, Joseph. In the back there.” He made a scooting motion with his hands.

As Joseph headed into the dim hallway, he heard Case start his spiel. “Ida, have you ever wondered what God has planned for you…”

Knowing Case would need time to work on Ida, Joseph dawdled. He stopped to peer into each room he passed, half expecting to find some stale corpse in a canopy bed. He remembered reading something vaguely similar in a story for high school English. What he found instead were two more rooms packed with useless stuff, no longer even useable, the doors only opening halfway. In the middle of the hall, Joseph stopped in front of a picture taken in what appeared to be the 1970s and wiped a layer of dust from the glass. A younger version of Ida was leaned up against a blue Pontiac Firebird. Her hair was tied up in a bandanna and a man stood behind her with his arm draped around her waist. His head rested on her shoulder. Beside them was a young man, nearly Joseph’s age, wearing an Army uniform. Joseph wondered who the two men were.

He found the bathroom at the end of the hallway. In the corners of the room, dust-colored mushrooms had sprung up in clusters between the tiles. He stood in front of the mirror and thought about Ida in the kitchen with Case. Then he thought about his own mother, dusting her collection of cut-crystal angels in the living room, where the light from the windows could catch them. He wondered if she could ever end up like Ida—alone, with the house slowly filling in around her. The possibility felt very real. He pictured his mother’s wrist as she went to open a door, her veins visible under her skin, as if they were wrapped in the thin pages of a Bible. He waited a few more minutes, then headed back toward the kitchen.

“I don’t have any way to get down to the mission,” Ida was saying.

“That’s all right,” Case said. “We can send an elder down here to pick you up and take you to the church to be baptized.”

“They’d do that for me?”

She said it without emotion, yet the tone of her voice put Joseph at the edge of tears—he felt just as he had on the tarmac of the airport in Salt Lake, when his mother pressed a silver dollar and a gilt-edged copy of the Book of Mormon into his hand. The book was to keep him on the path. The dollar was for luck, she started to say; his father finished explaining when it was clear she could not. He’d spent it accidentally at an airport kiosk when the plane touched down in Knoxville, on a magazine and a bag of saltwater taffy. He’d reached into his pocket and pulled out all the bills and change he could grasp. When the cashier lifted the coin from the counter, he was too embarrassed to ask for it back. He told himself it didn’t matter. Yet he could still hear the weight of that coin as it was dropped into a coin drawer among its lesser brothers.

“Of course,” Case said. “I’d see to it myself.”

Ida’s hands picked at the threads of her robe. She appeared to be weighing her options. “Well maybe I should start back to church. Once Stuart gets back from the war, he’ll want to go.”

“Who’s Stuart?” Case asked, swiping at the grime that had appeared on his pants leg.

“He’s my son. He’s over in Vietnam right now.”

Case glanced up at Joseph, who was standing behind Ida. He rolled his eyes and grinned.

“Maybe Stuart could be a deacon in the church when he gets back,” Ida said.

Case turned toward her. “Maybe.”

“Case, we should probably tell Ida how some Mormons feel about blacks in the priesthood,” Joseph said. “I think she should know.”

Ida turned and looked at him as if she didn’t understand what he was saying. Case glared and made a cutting gesture with his hands.

“I mean, the Church officially allowed blacks into the priesthood in 1978, but still…” Joseph’s voice trailed off, and he dropped his eyes.

Ida turned back to Case. “What’s he saying?” She shuffled her feet.

“Don’t pay any attention to him,” Case said. “He’s talking about the Mormon Church, not the Church of Latter-Day Saints. So if I send a car around on Thursday, will you be here?”

She looked at the corner of the room and grunted. Then she nodded slowly. “I’ll be here.”

Case stood up. “All right, then. We’ll send a car around on Thursday. We’ll let ourselves out, if you don’t mind.”

Case motioned with his book for Joseph to follow. As they crossed the yard, he said, “What was that all about? Why did you tell her about the blacks-in-the-priesthood thing?”

Joseph kicked at the head of a marigold. “I don’t know. I felt sorry for her.”

“Jesus Christ, Joe. It’s not like we were robbing her.” Case pointed at Joseph’s face. “You just thank God she was soft in the head, because if you’d ruined that conversion, I would have skinned your scrawny hide.”

“Don’t you feel bad at all?” Joseph asked.

“Why should I, Joe? Grow a frigging backbone. We’re here to do a job. We’re here to bring people to the Lord.”

It’s like a game to you, Joseph thought. It doesn’t mean anything.

“Don’t you want to make AP?” Case said, as if he’d heard Joseph’s thought. “Don’t you want to make our parents proud? That’s what we’re here to do, Joe.”

Everything felt off-kilter to Joseph. Who did Case think he was, bartering with salvation as if it were currency? “This just isn’t what I thought I’d be doing here?”

Case sighed and shook his head. When he spoke, his voice was quiet but hard. “If there was one thing I learned from my father, it’s that the way to make it is by force of will. It’s what people respond to. Otherwise, you end up a statistic, like Ida there.” He pointed toward the house.

Joseph didn’t say anything, and Case stepped toward him until he was uncomfortably close. “Listen to me, Joe. The ends always justify the means.” He stared hard into Joseph’s face and then punched him on the arm. “Come on, don’t look like that. We got a lot more houses to get through. I promise we’ll do whatever you want tomorrow. Just you and me. But right now, I need you to focus.”

*****

Joseph sat on the carpeted floor of the girl’s living room, picking at the matted spots around him. A chronicle of accidents, he thought, his eyes following the lines of stains, wondering if he could determine where they came from. He was seated Indian-style in front of a blue La-Z-Boy. Case and the girl were seated on the couch. Joseph thought she was a little older than they were, but not by much. She was what Case called

a goth kid, dressed all in black, with scuffed combat boots peeking out from under the hem of the layered, gauzy skirts of her dress. She was wearing thick coats of lipstick and eyeliner, and the purple-black color made her look bruised. She and Case were smoking cigarettes, flicking their ashes into the ashtray between them. Case was selling salvation. The girl was listening with a strange expression, a half-smirk. She picked at the fabric of her skirts.

"So do you live here alone?" Case asked. He had his arm slung over the back of the couch.

"Just me," she answered, smoke streaming from her nostrils.

A stereo on a low table was playing a CD of some band Joseph wasn't familiar with—a soft, brooding music that he didn't particularly like. Several shelves of books lined the walls, and he tried to focus on the titles. The only ones he could see clearly were a collection of Lovecraft stories and Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*.

"So you guys are Mormons?" the girl asked. "How many wives do you all get?" She looked at Case from under her eyelids.

"Most Mormons don't follow the polygamy thing anymore," he said. "It's only the really devout and unconventional sects." He scratched at his hairless cheek, looking bored. It was the same routine he used with all younger people, pretending that he wasn't really that interested in what he was doing, that he was cool with just hanging out.

"That's unfortunate. Polygamy was the one thing that made you guys interesting."

Case gave the girl a mock-hurt look. "You don't find me interesting?"

"I haven't decided yet."

Joseph was growing restless. He didn't like being in the girl's house. It smelled of stale incense. Candles were tiered throughout the room, the wax puddled around their bases in stiff globs. "It's getting dark, Case. Shouldn't we be going?"

Case turned toward Joseph, but his expression was vacant. Joseph began to feel that he could be heard only vaguely and not seen at all.

"I can take you back to your apartment," the girl said. "I'm still waiting to see if you can convert me, though."

"So what's it going to take?" Case asked.

The girl smiled, and her teeth flashed in the half-light. She flicked her cigarette over the ashtray, but a stray fleck of ash landed on her lap. Case leaned forward and pinched it from the fabric. "Thank you," she said.

"Don't mention it."

"You're getting warmer."

Case's eyebrows darted up. "What do you mean?"

"Never mind. So how did you two get placed together?" She turned toward Joseph as if to include him in the conversation, but he ignored her.

"Luck of the draw. I'd say it was a pretty good match, though. We get along really well. Isn't that right, Elder Joe?"

Joseph nodded, but kept his eyes down. "We get along okay."

The girl snickered and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Why do you call each other Elder?"

"It's an address of respect."

"Should I call you 'Elder'?" She stubbed out her cigarette.

"You can call me whatever you want. Speaking of which, I never got your name."

"Margo."

"Nice to meet you, Margo. So what's it going to take to get you into the Church?"

"I have reservations," she said, a smile playing across her lips. "I'm not a stranger to sin. Impure thoughts and all that."

Joseph's lungs felt swollen, and he wondered if he'd injured himself seriously when he fell into the quarry.

"Well, we all have those," Case said. "Nothing to be ashamed of. I don't think God splits hairs over salvation."

Joseph could see Case's erection press against his pants, and he felt himself stiffen. He pulled at the legs of his slacks and hoped no one would notice his condition.

"That's good to know," she said, then paused a moment. "Do you want to come to the bedroom with me?"

Case smiled and stubbed out his own cigarette. He stood up quickly. "Yeah, let's go." Then he looked down at Joseph. "You can find something to do, can't you, Joe?"

"My side's really starting to hurt again," Joseph said, but Case's attention was focused on the front of Margo's dress, on the dark velvet pulled snug around her small breasts.

"I have some Advil and other stuff in the cabinet above the stove," Margo said. "You're welcome to it. We won't be long." She rested her hand briefly on Joseph's head and walked slowly toward the kitchen, looking back at Case as she entered the short hallway that led to the bedroom.

Case squatted beside Joseph, who leaned forward and crossed his arms over his lap, afraid Case would notice his erection. “I owe you one for this, Joe,” Case said. “Anything you want. I swear.”

Joseph watched as Case followed Margo into the bedroom in back. He heard the squeak of the door closing. For a few moments, he remained seated, listening to the faint hum that seemed to come from the walls. He rose to his feet and tiptoed to the kitchen and stood in the center of it for a moment, not knowing what to do next. The silence was choking. Then he turned and headed down the hallway toward the sliver of light seeping from a crack in the bedroom door.

He pressed his eye to the crack and saw Case sitting at the edge of a bed, Margo standing in front of him. Case had stripped to his underwear and was slowly unzipping the back of Margo’s dress. It slid off her body and crumpled onto the floor. Case reached for the clasp of her bra, and she pulled the straps from her shoulders. Case bit his lower lip as he hooked his fingers under the elastic band of Margo’s panties and pulled.

Joseph stood watching Case’s hands move up and down the girl’s belly and between her breasts. He thought about all the doors he and Case had passed through over the past few months, and of what Case had told him about the kind of force he needed to be in the world. Joseph reached for the doorknob, but his hand paused above it. In the metal, he thought he sensed a vibration, the movement of particles. He knew if he went any further he would set something off, some part of himself he didn’t wish to recognize. Case pressed his lips against the white of Margo’s stomach, and Joseph heard a sigh escape her lips. She tangled her fingers into Case’s hair.

Joseph forced himself to turn away. He pressed a hand against his bruise as if he were trying to contain it, the throb of the thing. His loneliness at that instant made him gasp. The weight of everything he could never touch for fear of devastation was immense. He pictured his mother and father, growing accustomed to his absence. Somehow everything they'd given him wasn't enough for this mission. At every door, the bell rang and he could hear the people inside, their laughter and shouts arrested, shuffling, deciding if it was worth the trouble. He wanted to be worth their trouble.

His back to the door, he decided then that he was going to be different. He was going to be what Case wanted—a force to be reckoned with. With his faith, he would be unstoppable, blessed, a god on this earth, and the world would bend to him. He would take all the Claudes and Idas and Margos and shelter them from lions. Cleanse them of their sins and fears. Then Case would have no choice but to recognize his greatness.

Walking to the end of the hallway by the kitchen, he seated himself against the wall. He sat there quietly, waiting for Case to emerge.

The Art of Human Surveillance

The trouble starts when my wife, Charli, gets a call from Win's teacher, informing her that Win won't stop kissing other boys on the playground. Win's teacher says this is something best handled on the home front, but I know she wants to pass off the problem, and who can blame her. She had made herself clear—Win was not in trouble. Yes, the kissing had become a problem. No, this was not the first incident. When my wife hangs up the phone, she laughs in that way which reveals her confusion, and then hiccups. Since the second trimester, her body has encoded itself in this way—pressure and air. I ask what's wrong and she gives me the news.

"Are you sure she said *boys*?"

"Yes, Warren. Boys."

"But he's only ten years old."

"Well, looks like he's starting early." My wife's smile is a secret. She's standing in the breeze from the kitchen window. I can see that Charli's bangs have curled into tight ringlets in the heat, and the skin at the base of her neck is flushed. It's late October—Indian summer, and the light of the season suits her. I take my hands out of the suds-stuffed sink, where I've been "trying to do my part," a new program my wife has instituted in lieu of an anniversary gift.

I'm still struggling to get my head around what my wife's just told me. The grade school Win attends is pastureland for liberals who want their kids to enjoy the exclusivity

they gave up. Charli had insisted. “What they’re doing at West Hutton is reinventing education. They encourage students to find their own potential.”

“Warren. Don’t panic. This is nothing to panic about.” Charli rests her hands on the peak of her distended stomach, where I picture our second child, a girl, chortling—tiny bubbles rising through the amniotic fluid. Charli dumps herself into a chair.

“It’s that school’s fault. This is what happens when you abandon structure and discipline.”

Charli’s eyes take on a dark gleam, a warning sign, and they go blunt as a shark’s snout. “I knew I’d have to go this alone,” she says under her breath, but loud enough for me to hear. “Let’s just talk to Win. Can we do that?”

“If this is the best that school can do, they’re not getting any more money from us.” This is the wrong thing to say, but I stand my ground, dripping soapy water onto the linoleum. I knew the school was going to be trouble when Win brought home his first report card, which had grades, but to subjects that were vague and alien. Cordiality: B-; Coherence: C; Good will: Needs improvement; and my personal favorite, Risk: A+.

Charli knits her fingers together. “It’s actually quite common for young boys and girls to experiment with members of their own sex. It’s just practice. This may mean nothing.”

“He should be beating up kids his age, not necking with them.”

“Warren, please.” Charli stands up slowly, pulling at the hem of her stiff, peach-colored maternity shirt, and I’m again struck by how calm she can remain in any situation. Everything balanced. Not a note out of place—and sometimes, in certain situations, this is absolutely infuriating. My wife went back to work when Win turned

four, another decision I did not support, employed as a lawyer for one of the top law firms in the state. She deals with civil liberties cases, meaning she often fails to understand the concepts of guilt and blame. Since her return, she has convinced her partners to institute a daycare center for the company. She intends to be back to work three weeks after Mia is born.

"Okay," I say. "Where is he?"

Charli takes my arm at the wrist and starts massaging it. "Promise me you won't get crazy. Just once pretend that you're not the son of a four-star admiral."

"That's pretty low, even for a lawyer."

"Promise me."

"Whatever."

Charli's fingers dig into my pulse.

"I promise."

When Win was seven, his three goldfish—HMS Nautilus, Seawolf, and U-boat—died in the ick plague of '05. He demanded Charli and I drive him to his grandfather's, where they could be given a proper naval burial. This is also not the first time Charli and I have been contacted by the school for Win's behavior. Last year, he'd dared a classmate to snort salt. I thought that proved his classmate's idiocy rather than Win's delinquency. In the afternoon art period, when asked to draw a picture that included his fellow classmates, Win drew a landscape in which the entire class met some terrible end—some in the bellies of beasts, some strangled by jungle vines, others cooked by natives. In his defense, he included himself in the slaughter, and the tigers devouring the Thomas twins were wonderfully rendered. Less than a month ago, he was sent to the hospital to have his

stomach pumped after overdosing on Flintstone vitamins. When asked, he said he was trying to see how yellow he could make his pee. It was pretty damn yellow. I love my son for these things. Even told him in secret what I thought about those tigers.

After Win was born, I moved my family out of Birmingham, to the outskirts of the city's suburbs. We live now in a gated community—Lakeside Banks, which makes no sense, because the nearest body of water that could reasonably be termed a lake is forty-five minutes away. The house is a Colonial that stands at attention among others of its ilk, bivouacked in the basin of two hills. At the time, I worked as a real-estate agent. Still do, in fact. I scouted, appraised, financed, and sealed the deal. Over the next two years, I spent every weekend adding accessories—a Tahitian-themed patio and an above-ground pool. Sundials and a grape arbor. I even put in an herb garden just under the kitchen window, which is now tended by the neighborhood gardener, Barry, a sixteen-year-old who drives in from the other side of the city every other weekday. Ten years ago I bought this house because it was the kind of place where I wanted to raise a family—the front looking out on a neighborhood of ticking sprinklers and houses with unlocked doors, the back giving way to brier-snarled pastures. It was perfect.

Charli walks out of the kitchen yelling Win's name up the stairs, and I'm left standing in that same house, the kitchen done in what my wife calls English countryside. Everything is heather purple. He was born six pounds, nine ounces. His hand gripped the tip of my finger when I held him. Kissing boys! I find myself wondering if I should have expected this, prepared for it—like the possibility of syringes in his dresser drawer, clipped pictures of porn secreted between the pages of his Hardy Boys collection. This may have been partially my fault. I encouraged him to read. I can hear Win's sneakers

pounding overhead, and I panic. I try to think back to the child-rearing books I read when we were sure Charli was pregnant. All I can dredge up are the symptoms for colic and the importance of nipple sterilization.

My wife reenters the kitchen, and Win is right on her heels. He takes a running slide across the kitchen floor. Gustav, our St. Bernard, comes around the corner like a furry tank and pounces as Charli's voice rises above the din.

"Win, can you stop for a second? We need to talk to you."

Win stops, takes a seat cross-legged on the floor. Gustav nudges around him, his tail sweeping the top of Win's head. Win jabs him in the side with his elbow, and Gustav grunts in acknowledgement of the gesture, flops down behind Win, who leans back into the cushion of fur and muscle. Our son scratches a knee threaded with thin, white scars, and proceeds to appear bored.

He looks every inch the classic American boy. Blond hair, blue eyes. I'm talking Tom Sawyer covered in white paint, Dennis with his slingshot. The truth is, I don't think of myself as a very good parent. There's a part of me that never wants to touch my son. I was raised a military brat on bases from New Mexico to South Carolina. I have no sense of stability, although I crave it like my wife now craves pimento. My father spoke over my head, dictating his commands to me through my mother: "The boy needs to be washed, Margaret." When Win was six and took black permanent marker to the walls of the kitchen, instead of popping him one, Charli went out and bought frames, took the backs out, and hung them over what was now termed our son's first efforts at artistic expression.

My wife decides to take a similar approach now. “Sweetie. You know your teacher called me today?” She smiles around every word.

Win wrinkles his nose. “You mean Mrs. Milk Carton? She smells like dumpster milk.”

“Mrs. Molkinson says you’ve been kissing boys on the playground. Is this true?”

“Not all of them.” Win raises a hand and begins counting on his fingers. “Just Tyler and Jesse and Clint. They’re my best friends.”

“Why are you kissing them?” I ask. My voice has a “tone” to it. I know because my wife says, “Bring it down a notch, Warren.”

I cross my arms. There’s a moment when no one says anything. Charli presses her lips together till they nearly disappear. I can’t help it. It’s not that I think this is anything serious, but you never know. The world is a cruel place, and sometimes it’s important to follow well-worn paths. I tell myself, it’s for his own good. His protection.

“Why are you kissing boys?” I repeat, trying to mimic my former “tone” to the last register.

Win looks confused. “Because they’re my friends.”

“Aren’t there any girls that you’re friends with?” I ask.

“Tyler doesn’t care. He lets me do it.”

At this point, I’ve had enough. My voice rises and Win jumps. “Look, just don’t do it anymore. Boys do not kiss other boys. Period.”

“Warren, please.”

“No. This is nonsense.” I point a finger at Win. “Just stop it. Do you understand?”

Win looks from one of us to the other. He scratches under the camouflage handkerchief he has tied around his head, one corner of which hangs down over his left eye. On his arm are the last flaky remains of a stick-on tattoo that Win's grandfather gave him on his last visit. The skull's still there, but the crossbones are long gone.

Win looks down at the floor and says under his breath, "What's the big deal? It's not like we use tongue."

With that, something inside me is cut down to a size barely large enough to see. I stare at Win. I had convinced myself that Win could never surprise me. When he was six, there came the period when he picked up everything without question—lizards, cigarette butts, petrified bubblegum, pennies, mushrooms, old bones Gustav brought into the yard, grass spiders. He would come in from outside with his pockets stuffed with gravel. Kids were like that. No surprises. Now he knew what people did with tongues, and he was only ten. What more could he pick up? What had he picked up already?

"Can I go?" Win asks.

My wife answers before I'm able. "Sure, honey." Charli moves to touch his hair, but Win ducks under her arm. "Your father and I need to talk anyway."

Win stands up in a rush to be gone, but then pauses. "Are you going to talk about me when I leave?"

"Of course not. Everything's all right."

Win looks at me, questioning, and I send him off with a wave of my hand. He puts his fingers to his lips and whistles piercingly, a trick I taught him, causing Gustav to bound up and after him. The screen door slams behind them.

“Well, that went well,” Charli says after Win exits. “But then again, he’ll need something to talk about during therapy.”

“It’s better this way,” I say. “The world isn’t always as understanding as you.”

“You mean ‘us.’” Charli has a way of correcting people that makes it obvious how she earns a living.

Through the window over the sink, I see Win jump over Gustav’s back, coming down in a tumble. He’s in pursuit of the gardener, Barry, who beckons him forward with garden shears. Barry’s one of those guys whose abuses—unwashed hair, fair skin long marred and reddened by the sun, the nicotine stains around his teeth—will not carry well into middle age. For now he’s what Charli has unoriginally called a “heartbreaker.” Win has a wooden sword, which he brandishes over his head, and I see him mouth what I think is the word ‘Charge!’ Barry makes as if to defend himself with the garden shears, but he goes down under the weight of Gustav.

“Don’t work yourself into a state about this, Warren. Everything will be fine.”

I nod as Charli presses her cheek against my shoulder, rubbing off the stress of that day on my shirt. She asks, “What are you thinking about?”

I’m going over tactics, stratagems of attack, ways to root out the infidels. I’m wondering how old your son has to be before it’s socially acceptable to take him to a strip club. Should I explain to him how sex works, where babies come from, or does he already know?

But I don’t tell her this. “I’m thinking I need to spend more time with my son.”

“Good idea. You’re not going to do anything stupid are you?”

“No,” I say.

What's one little lie in the total account of a marriage?

*****

I begin to spy on Win. It's easier than it looks on television and in the movies. Anticipation is the ticket. Knowing where the mark is headed before he does. There are certain rules to follow. Techniques. Never trail too close. Be aware of others. Stay downwind of dogs. Adopting ninja-like moves often ends in a twisted ankle. Those are the basics.

I do reconnaissance work at the dinner table. "So, how is school?" I ask.

"Fine," Win says.

"You haven't kissed anyone in the last few days, have you?"

"No."

Charli gives me a withering look over a slice of veal piccata. She knows my game and isn't amused. She mouths the words "Grow up" at me from across the table.

"That's great, little man."

"Don't call me that, please."

"Don't call you what? Little man? What's wrong with that?"

Win's face goes red, as if I've caught him in something embarrassing. "I don't like it." And with that, he picks up his plate, slides off his chair, and heads for the kitchen. Charli yells after him. "Be sure to put your plate in the sink, and be back before dark if you're going out to play." Win answers her with, "Roger, mom."

Since Win's revelation, there has been one thing I have wanted to curb. His freedom. I don't want our house to seem like a Russian gulag, but of late, I've noticed the license we give Win. The families in Lakewood Banks, who are all parents and under

forty, like to think of themselves as unburdened. That is one of the selling points my company highlights in the brochure. No one locks their doors. If Win cuts his leg on something, he's just as likely to stop at a neighbor's for a Band-Aid as he is to come home. The streets, which sometimes do not see a car for hours on end, are well-lit—all the way up to the unfinished houses at the complex's summit. Construction of those houses had been started over a year ago by a contracting firm in the city and then abandoned after the company went bankrupt and was accused of fraud. Through that silence, Win wanders, disappearing for hours in the woods behind the hill, playing on the swing sets of whatever family he is closest to. Oddly, being one of the oldest kids in the neighborhood by a good four or five years, he tends to roam alone. Mostly, he follows Barry around, helping him carry his tools and laying bricks around the borders of dahlias.

"You know we should really pay more attention to where Win goes," I tell my wife.

"That never bothered you before."

"All I'm saying is Win could benefit from a little more structure in his life."

"Oh, poppycock. Do you really think keeping Win under lock and key is going to change anything? And yes, I said 'poppycock.'"

I glare at her from the other end of the table. "You know if your veal were half as salty as your humor, this meal might not be half bad."

"Salt is bad for the baby," Charli says, raising her half-glass of Chardonnay. Charli had read years ago in an article in *Newsweek* that half a glass of wine at dinner during the extent of the pregnancy was actually good for the baby. She had adopted these words of wisdom to the letter.

Even though I hate to admit it, Charli's right. I learn more about Win in his element. The first few days, I take off early from work. I leave the car in the garage of one of Jenowith, Jenowith and Spitz's properties just half a mile down the road and follow Win when he comes in from school. It's possible to hear the bus trundling down the blacktop from a mile off, and I wait for it behind a tool shed at the Gibson's house. As it slows at the curb of the community road, sunlight arcs off the yellow paint and chrome, and a handful of children race down the steps after the gasp of the door's mechanism releases them. They scatter. I keep a safe distance from Win. On a day-to-day basis, Win mostly explores, and I begin to remember my own youth when every corner, hidey-hole, and shaded place grew pregnant with mystery and novelty. Win knows the neighborhood, the network of drainage tunnels. I watch him slink through these ditches, ducking his head under the corrugated steel, only to emerge on the far side with wet shoes and cobwebs in his hair. He knows what to pull in the field to bring up wild onions—how to use the stalks to bring up chicken-chokers from the dirt. He knows what to poke—holes, dead birds, dirt dauber nests. What to tug—milkweed pods, grapevines, burs. I can't recall teaching him any of this, but it's as if my memories, coded into genes, neurons, DNA loops, had passed on to him—as if he walked the world not as a stranger, but as an old friend.

The thing that I'm most disturbed with is Win's own efforts at surveillance. He tails the younger kids in the neighborhood, picking them off silently with his AK-47 from the lengthening shadows. He's certainly not kissing any of *them*. I've even caught him peering greedily through shaded curtains, over patio decks, into the interiors of our neighbors' homes. Watching them eat, breathe, live.

Gradually, I realize I'm green with something. I want to think it's nostalgia, but truth be known, it's probably closer to resentment. After a week of this, I realize how little of my son's education has come from me. He knows more about his place—this neighborhood—than I can imagine. It's a knowledge all his own. He comes home with it grimed under the nails of his fingers. The scent of it in his hair, on his clothes, and, until now, I never suspected a thing.

*****

Most days, Win follows Barry. I'm usually too far away to hear their conversations, but today I'm lucky. From the cover of Dink Thompson's storage shed, I watch them rig a trellis to the back of Dink's house. Dink's wife recently left him—taking herself, the kids, and her fervor for roses with her—so I have no idea why this chore continues, but it's not my job to wonder such things.

Win sits cross-legged in the grass. He has the tools they need spread out in front of him—hammer, screwdriver, posthole digger. Barry's positioning the trellis against the house, trying to center it between and under the two upstairs windows. He takes a pencil from behind his ear and makes a mark. Barry is shirtless. He wears a cap turned backwards, and tufts of his hair stick out from under the edges. A half-assed version of a moustache rests atop his upper lip. Truth is I don't know much about Barry, except that he doesn't live in Lakewood, but you can tell that by looking at him. He has a cocky, pissant way about him.

Barry turns and asks for the hole digger, and Win picks it up and takes it to him. I notice Win has Barry's shirt draped around his neck.

"Thank you, little man."

Win returns to his place in the grass and sits with his elbows on his knees, watching Barry dig.

"You know what I think? Roses are a real bitch." Barry looks over at Win, who nods in complicity, but looks around to see who's listening all the same. "I don't like anything that has to be taught how to grow. You know how to grow. Right, little man?"

Win nods but looks unsure of himself. Barry winks and answers for him. "I bet you do." He laughs in a way that's fake and high-pitched—as if he's high on something. Barry inserts the bottom of the trellis into the hole he's just dug. He holds it against the house, looking up, and then repositions the splayed limbs. "Hand me the hammer, will you?"

Win takes the hammer to Barry and stands beside him with his shoulder to the side of the house. He leans there and looks up at Barry's work.

"So what's new with you, little man? Whip anybody's ass yet?"

"No," Win says.

"Made kissy face with any young ladies? I bet you're a real Casanova."

Win wrinkles his nose in answer.

"No? Can't blame you there. I would have pegged you as a top dog for sure though. You got time. Don't worry about it. Walk before you run, as they say. Just remember the clitoris."

"What's that?" Win asks.

Barry raps on the side of the house with the hammer. "Hell if I know. That's what my mother told me when I was your age. Odds are she was drunk." Barry reaches out and tousles Win's hair, but hard and rough, nearly sending Win to the ground. Win grabs his

wrist and pushes it away, but he's smiling. "Come to think of it, forget the clitoris. It's not that important. Just point it south and look for a warm spot."

"I bet I could whip your ass," Win says, the last word coming out bold and yet hesitant at the same time.

Without answering the challenge, Barry bends and grabs Win just below the knees. Win yelps as Barry swings him up and places him across his shoulders. Win struggles. He even lashes at Barry's back with Barry's own shirt, but you can tell he's tickled pink. Barry carries him over to a shady spot and drops the two of them on the lawn. Win tumbles and rolls, picking up grass stains I know Charli's going to love. Barry takes out a cigarette and lights it as Win lays back with his arms behind his head, his eyes never leaving Barry for a second. Watching them, I'm not sure if I should think of Barry as a role model or a bad influence. I can't help wondering what Win thinks about as he stares at Barry. Does he wonder what high school's like? Does he hope that one day he'll be able to speak with the kind of security and ease Barry has cultivated? When he'll get hair on his chest and face and underarms?

I try to ascertain where Win's eyes rest, but it's anybody's guess.

After a moment of silence, Win points up at Barry's cigarette. "Can I do that?"

Barry closes his eyes and shakes his head. "No, little man. You don't want these."

"Why not?"

"They'll stunt your growth." Barry takes Win's arm and circles his bicep with thumb and forefinger, offering it up for Win to see. Then he makes a bicep himself for comparison. "And you got a lot of growing to do before you can whip me. You don't want any handicaps."

Barry finishes his cigarette and tosses the butt into the grass. “Time to go fertilize,” he says, heading back toward the array of tools. Win grabs the cigarette butt and places it in his pocket before following. Then they load the tools onto their shoulders, Barry taking most of them and giving Win the little stuff. The two of them disappear around the corner of Dink’s house.

I watch them until they disappear, letting my muscles unknot in the process. I get the sense that I’ve witnessed something intimate and complex. It isn’t the crudeness of the conversation. Nothing like that at all. It has to do with Win and the way he holds his breath around Barry. I know that is something I was never meant to see and, if Win knew, would never forgive. It’s a feeling that lasts for a second and then is gone. He’s my son, for Christ’s sake. If anyone gets to talk to him about clitorises, it should be me, although the thought of that makes me crave a stiff drink.

Barry could be the best thing for Win—but then again, I can’t help but think of Win’s face, his expression one of utter devotion. Definitely a bad influence. I ponder the matter in the dimness of Dink’s workshop, while a wasp buzzes irritably against the timbers above my head.

*****

Two days later, I catch Win pilfering food. I had noticed the day before that he was taking more fruit than normal—an apple in each pocket of his oversized jeans, an orange from the white bowl on the kitchen table. Win hates fruit, which has to be one of God’s greatest ironies, but I saw it with my own eyes while peeking through the posts of the banister. The next evening at dinner, I see a pork chop glide under the table, and just

when I'm about to let him know that I don't want to have to tell him again about feeding Gustav from his plate, the chop disappears into the pouch of his hooded pullover.

He's smooth. Through the rest of dinner, he sits composed as the warm meat no doubt soaks into the cotton. What's more, three stewed potatoes get wrapped in a napkin and join the chop, all while Win is having a conversation with Charli about science class.

"So you say she had a fetal pig in a jar?" Charli asks. She has a bemused expression, her chin resting on her hand, her half glass of wine held aloft and lightly tapping her cheek.

"No, it hadn't been born yet," Win says.

"That's what fetal means."

"Oh. It was awesome. She had it in this jar of pinkish, blood water, and its mouth was open like this." This is when Win, his mouth hung open like some zombie in a B-movie, his mother's complete attention upon his face, slips the potatoes under the table. Smooth. Perfect. In another life, he could have been a guttersnipe on the streets of London, lifting farthings from the pockets of the lawful.

Win continues, but on a different track. "Is that what my baby sister looks like?" He's that good.

Charli sniggers into her wineglass and then wipes her chin with the back of her hand. "Of course not. Your sister is very peaceful. Want to feel?" Charli takes Win's hand and places it over her stomach and leaves it there, and I can see Win, like me, is wondering what this is supposed to prove. Like a good son, he waits a few beats before he asks if he can be excused.

Charli says okay and lets him go as she begins gathering up dishes from the table. I wait exactly a minute and then I follow Win out into the autumn twilight. The night is warm, and there's a harvest moon that's rising—huge and claret. From where I'm standing on the back patio, I can see Win's shadow running ahead of him on the street, his hands gripped in the front of his pullover, his pockets bouncing with hidden bounty. I hear Gustav whine and scratch at the door behind me, and I realize Win didn't take him out. Before me the night is massive and familiar, and as I step into it, skirting the pools of light in favor of the deeper shadows, I mimic my son's quiet footfalls down Indian trails, past dangers too monstrous to imagine.

I follow Win to one of the unfinished houses on the hill—the last one on the street, a good three hundred yards from the curious eye of any window. The night, thankfully, is anything but quiet. The leaves clinging to the trees rustle—their sound building in the upper air. The house appears to breathe—the plastic stapled to the windows has long since torn loose, and the sheets waving in the wind make the place look eerie.

From farther down the hill, I see Win turn just before entering the open door. I duck down as Win seems to test the air, peering about into the darkness, which is lit by an almost underwater luminescence. Satisfied, he turns, pulls the plastic aside, and goes on in. I crawl the rest of the way up the hill, the front of my shirt soaked to the skin. When I approach the front of the house, I hear what sounds like conversation coming from inside. I pause, listening to the voices, and one is definitely not Win's. I raise up on my haunches and light-step it, doubled over, to what would have been the living room window. There's

a mound of loose gravel shining in the moonlight, and as I crouch down between it and the glassless window, I peer in around the sheet of plastic, steeling myself for anything.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust, but inside I see Win sitting on the bare wood floor. He takes out what I imagine is the food he stole, and hands it over to someone stretched out on the floor in front of him.

"Aww, little man. You did good," the shadowy figure says, and I place the voice. Slowly, I begin to make out his features—the white of the forearm bracing his head, the bulkiness of his coat. He's lying on a sleeping bag, and there are other odd shapes strewn about him—a backpack, a radio with its rabbit ears glinting, a white T-shirt wadded and crumpled on the floor like the remains of a murdered ghost.

"You got anything else?" Barry raises up and flicks something in his hand, and suddenly there's a tiny light seeping from between his fingers. Barry lights a cigarette as Win digs into his pockets. He produces a can of Sprite, an orange, and a half-eaten bag of Rollos before the light disappears.

"Is that good?" Win asks.

"I think it hits four of the major food groups, which does me just fine," Barry says. "Anyone see you come out here?"

Win shakes his head. "Nope, I'm a ninja guardian." He says this with such solemnity it's hard not to let him break my heart. Barry's grin is white in the dark.

"What are your parents doing?"

"I don't know."

There's a pause as Barry finishes his cigarette. Then there's the sound of Barry's teeth clicking against the bone of the pork chop. I hear the air escape from the can of

soda. And through it all, I watch Win as Win watches Barry. My son sits rigid, as if something were barely contained beneath his skin—anticipation, excitement, the thrill of secrecy.

"You learn anything in school today, little man?" Barry asks as he leans back on his elbows, peeling an orange in his hands. I catch the smell of it on the breeze that traverses the place.

"No. The teacher brought in a fetal pig. But it was stupid."

"You cut it open? Dissect it?"

"No." There's something hung up in Win's voice, as if what he were going to say were caught on thorns and nettles. "The kids made fun of me because I wouldn't come up to the table to look at it. They said I was faggy."

"Well, why wouldn't you go up to it? It's just a pig."

Win doesn't answer, and Barry begins feeding himself orange slices.

"My Mom's pregnant. So I guess she's got a fetal Mia inside of her."

"I guess she does. Is she all swole up?"

"Yeah. She's mega-fat. She can block the whole TV."

Barry whistles, the sound almost natural in the darkened house, like a bird that's nested in the eaves. "Little man, you don't know how swell you got it. I'd kill for a TV right now. You ever see that old show *The Fugitive*?" Win shakes his head. "It was a show from the sixties. It got rerun a lot when I was your age. It had this guy in it named Richard Kimble, who is accused of killing his wife. But he didn't do it. He was framed or some bullshit. And in the beginning he's being taken by train to his death. The opening

voice over, it says, ‘Fate moves its huge hand,’ and there’s this train wreck and Kimble’s handcuffs are severed and boom. He’s running.”

Win scoots closer to Barry, his crossed legs nearly touching Barry’s thigh.

“What happened to him,” Win asks.

“He just keeps running. That’s how I’m going to be. I’m leaving soon.” Barry kicks Win lightly with the tip of his shoe.

“I’m coming with you,” Win says, and there’s something in his voice that startles me, and Barry too, I think, because he goes quiet for a second. It’s as if the decision behind Win’s voice is so much older than his years. As if it were only right that he should go.

“You don’t want to go with me,” Barry says.

“Yes, I do. Please.”

“Who’s going to help your mom out, take care of your sister and all that shit?”

“I don’t know.”

Barry lights another cigarette and takes a long drag off it. The ember burns bright for an instance, lighting the small space between the two of them.

“You want to know a secret, little man? I lied to you when I told you my mom took off. I’m sorry I did that. Truth is, she’s dead.”

Win’s question is faint, whispered for their ears only, but I hear it too. “How’d she die?”

“When I found her, she was blue. In the bathtub. Apparently, those public service announcements were right. Drugs do kill. Anyway, I didn’t stick around. I figured the

neighbors would find her. That's what makes me a fugitive. You have to have something horrible to run from, or your heart's not in it. What do you got to run from, little man?"

Suddenly, I remember Win's description of that pink-bloody water with the failure inside, and I know, without knowing how I know, that he's thinking of the same thing. "I'm not scared of anything." Win's voice is fierce and petulant.

"Except baby pigs?"

Win doesn't answer.

"That's okay, little man. Dead things in water creep me out too."

Barry stretches, putting his arms behind his neck. He lays out across the sleeping bag, arching his back as if the position were painful. He finishes his cigarette in silence.

"Well, it's about time for me to be sleeping. And you better be getting back. We don't want your parents to come looking for you."

"Can I stay a little longer?"

"What you going to do, watch me sleep?"

"I'll lie down too. I won't say anything."

Barry shifts onto his side, and there's a moment when I think he's losing patience with Win, but then I hear him snort. He leans toward Win. "You don't want me to get caught, do you? Then you wouldn't be my little partner in crime anymore."

What happens next isn't perfectly clear, seeing as it is dark and the floating plastic makes strange shadows on the walls, but I know Win leans forward swiftly, almost darting, and I hear what sounds like his lips connecting with something in the dark, but softly, confidentially, in a way that seems impossible, given the abandon and acuteness of his movements. Then like that, it's over. My boy has stolen a kiss.

When Barry speaks, his tone is hushed, as if the room has suddenly been filled with eyes—the spirits of all the families who would never call this place a home.

"What was that, little man?"

"I was just kissing you goodnight. Is that okay?"

"I forget how young you are sometimes," Barry says.

There's a moment when all I hear is the scuttle of dead leaves across the floor of the living room, then Win asks, "You won't tell anyone will you?"

"That's usually my question, little man. You don't have to worry about me." There's a tentativeness to Barry's voice, as if he senses that he's on dangerous ground.

"Okay. Goodnight," Win says. He jumps up and his steps suddenly echo through the ribs of the house. He sails through the plastic covering the front door before I even have time to piss myself, but my concern is needless. Win hits the ground running, and he's pushing himself as fast as he can go. When he hits the asphalt, his sneakers create a steady tempo through the lights that stay on for safety, and then he's gone.

I sit down in the grass with my back to the foundation, and wait for something—I'm not quite sure what. I hear Barry turning over on the floor inside, bedding down for the night. He coughs a few times, and then he's still. But I wonder if he can sleep. If his heart is hammering in his chest the way it's hammering in mine.

*****

I'm not proud of what happens next, but it happens all the same. After that night when I hear Win kiss the gardener, I call Child Services. They show up the next day with the police in tow. They find Barry's stuff in the abandoned house. They had found Barry's mother, dead of an overdose, two weeks prior. They had been searching for Barry

ever since, but there were no employment records, since his pay at Lakewood was under the table, and no one in his neighborhood seemed to care much about Barry's comings and goings. When they stopped seeing him, they probably thought he'd had enough of his mother's shit and took off.

The police lead Barry away from his hideout in handcuffs. Apparently he had resisted. It's a Saturday, and the entire neighborhood is at home. They come out in bunches onto their lawns to watch as one of the cops puts Barry in the back of the patrol car. Another cop goes through Barry's backpack, placing each item on the car's trunk. They take out several changes of clothes, a small radio, a jacket, a couple of ragged magazines, an empty cigarette pack, and some orange rinds.

I scan the street for Win, trying to see if he is anywhere about—if he is watching. I ask Charli, who is standing beside me in her yellow robe, her hands pulling at the sash, if she knows where he is. "The last place I saw him was out back with Gustav." I walk to the edge of the street to get a better view of things. One of the cops eyes me as if I'm going to do something stupid, like try to bust someone out of a squad car.

Just when I begin to think Win has missed the whole thing, just as the patrol car is pulling away with Barry in it, I see him. He's standing on the side of the hill watching from above. Gustav is curled around his feet, his tongue dipping in the dirt. Win is holding his wooden sword. I raise my hand over my head and call out to him, and his gaze shifts from the departing car to me. There's this moment when the two of us are looking right at each other, but Win makes no gesture. He yells nothing back. My hand drops to my side, and I see Win turn and head toward the unfinished house—Barry's house. As he moves through the high grass, he slashes at it with the sword.

Charli comes up behind me and presses her stomach against the small of my back. “Go talk to him,” she says. “He thought a lot of Barry, you know.”

I find Win on the hill in front of the unfinished house, in an empty dishwasher box that he’s somehow uprighted with him inside. I walk up and stand beside the box, but Win doesn’t acknowledge my presence. He’s sawing one of the cardboard flaps with his sword.

“What’re you doing?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

“I came to talk to you, little man. Your mother’s worried about you.”

“I can’t hear you,” Win says. “You’re outside the fort.”

I stand by for a second, confounded by this unforeseen obstacle. “Can I come in?”

Win shrugs his shoulders, sits down, and proceeds to pick burs out of his socks.

“I’d really like to see the inside of your fort.”

Win sighs and then gets back up. He pushes on the box until it crashes to its side. “Get in,” he says. So, I get down on my hands and knees and crawl into the box. The air inside is hot, and the box is filled with the scent of Win’s sweat and body heat. “Help me raise the draw bridge,” Win instructs, and he crawls to the bottom and begins to push. I help him and we both tumble over as the box rights itself with us inside. It’s a tight fit with Win practically in my lap, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

“This is a nice fort. Where’d you get it?”

“Mrs. Warner.”

“Oh,” I say, not sure how to proceed. I decide the best route is a direct route. “So, I guess you saw them take Barry away?”

Win nods, but keeps his head down. He picks a bur from his sock and tosses it into my lap. I continue. “Your mother mentioned that the two of you were sort of friends.” Win doesn’t give an inch. “You know it’s not your fault.” After I’ve said it, I realize how ridiculous I sound, like the star of some Lifetime movie taking on the role of reason and good judgment.

“Why did they take him away?”

“Win, he’s sixteen. He’s not old enough to be out on his own. Not just yet, anyway. Not till he’s eighteen, which can’t be too long.”

“He could have stayed with us. I could have taken care of him.”

“I know, but that’s not how things work.”

“Will he come and see me?”

“I don’t know. I doubt it. I’m sorry.” Win scrunches his nose up, and I can tell he’s fighting back something. I realize how hard it must be for him, trying to understand what has happened. What it is that he’s feeling. There is so much of my son’s life that I have no part in—that is unreachable, as if it *were* a fortress barred against me. I realize he will never tell me about what happened that night in the house, about what he was thinking as he watched Barry eat what he had taken for him. And at that moment Win looks up, and I try to catch a glimpse of myself in that face—in the architecture of his features, the pallor of his skin, his eyes, the streaks of sweat descending out of his mop of hair. I can’t find it, the legacy of myself, and I don’t know if that is cause to weep or rejoice.

“You really liked him, didn’t you?” I ask.

Win looks right through me, his eyes focusing on a scene far away, and I imagine what he is seeing—Win and Barry running through swamp water up to their ankles, the hounds baying in the distance, the smoke of a lone house approaching. There's a harmonica playing. Light from a fire dances in the corner of a room.

"I'm not going to kiss any more boys, Dad. I promise."

"Oh, really? That's good. Why'd you decide that?"

"Because I kissed Barry, and they took him away."

I trace the roots of Win's fears, and I realize the legacy I have left him with is this—the dangers of a kiss. The way it sets things in motion. Its destructive potential. Its furious insistence. Its cold, hard, impervious intimacy. He will always, in this devastated world, be trying to perfect that simplest of acts, and there is nothing I, or anyone else, can do to protect him from this.

So I lie to him. I grip his tiny knee in my palm. "It wasn't your fault Barry got sent away, Win. He just got a crappy deal this time around. That's all."

Win's eyes go wide at my touch. His neck goes scarlet at the collar, and suddenly it's as if we shake something off, as if the seriousness of the conversation had gone too deep, touched something sheepish and nervous in us both.

Win raps a knuckle against the cardboard above his head, filling the silence of the tiny space. "You want to play siege?" Win asks. His eyes are suddenly brighter, charged with the impishness that I'm accustomed to.

"Sure. How do we play?"

Win crawls over me to the side of the box that's facing the slope of the hill. He places his hands onto the cardboard. "Help me push the box on its side," Win says. We

push until the box turns over, then I lay back with my feet hanging out of the top. Win kneels beside me and leans over my stomach, his hands again splayed out on the cardboard. “Now we push it down the hill.”

“With us inside?”

“Yeah.”

“Does your mother know you do this?”

Win gives me a look, and without waiting for an answer, I nod and brace my back against the box, sensing the steep descent on the other side. “Are you ready?” Win asks.

“Not really.”

“Count of three. One, Two, Three.”

We push together, and the box starts to tumble. Win flips over my chest with me following after, and it’s all I can do not to crush Win in the mad tumult. I land on my wrist the wrong way and I hear a pop. My body keeps crashing, thudding into the ground. There’s a ringing in my ears, an avalanche descending through my head, and through it all, Win is tossed around, slamming into me, our heads butting, teeth jarring, and I’m trying desperately to protect him, to shield him from the sheer weight of myself.

All the while, Win is laughing, enjoying the risk.

The box is coming apart. I see sky, then grass, then ground. Small rocks have found their way inside and are spinning about our heads. The violence of the world is all around us—like celestial bodies pulled by the mass of one another, slammed like pinballs into detritus and dust. I feel it choking me—filling my mouth and nose. I feel it scrape away skin, nick my ears. My muscles bunch and knot from the effort, trying to control this fool’s rush. My arms snake out, grab for my son, and I have him. I pull Win to my

chest and all of a sudden there’s balance—the two of us held in one reckless arc. And we keep it, this equilibrium—this poise, spinning one with the other, Win cradled in my arms, until the broken world loses momentum. Until the sky stops being the ground—until our faces cease to be moons, and everything, I mean everything, comes to rest.

Skin

It was three days after Lox died that Ben mentioned foreskin reconstruction in the middle of Nordstrom. Sebastian felt his scrotum pull up, not from the mention of foreskin but as a result of the salesgirl who was measuring his inseam, her hand traveling up the inside of his calf, touching but not touching him. She held the tape crisply between her two fingers, mumbled something under her breath and stood up, pulling a pad and a stub of pencil from the pocket of her blouse.

"What was that?" Sebastian asked, although he'd heard his friend just fine.

"I've decided to re-grow my foreskin," Ben said.

Sebastian was standing in an alcove of bright light. Mirrors on three sides held a replica of his image, the baby fat having never quite shrunk from around his cheekbones, his copper-colored hair limp against his forehead. Before him a dwarfed forest of metal racks and suits had grown to the level of the customers' chests, all of whom wandered through the store fingering apparel, trying to be inconspicuous as they studied the tags.

Ben grinned, delighted by the thought that the salesgirl was listening. Sebastian saw him trying to gauge her reaction, to see if he'd shocked her sensibilities, but she continued with her measurements. Sebastian was sure this annoyed Ben, and he silently applauded her. Ben was slouched in a lounge chair studying the two of them. He was practically lying down, about to spill into a puddle on the floor. He ran a hand through his hair, which tangled into loose dark curls around his fingers. Neither of them offered Ben

any amusement. He looked at his watch as the salesgirl plucked at the shoulder of the dress jacket Sebastian was wearing.

"How's it feel?" she asked.

Sebastian rotated his shoulders in the suit and regarded his reflection. The suit looked ridiculous over his T-shirt, like an ermine cape draped over the shoulders of a lackluster magician, but he marveled at how the blazer made his shoulders look broader, more solid. He wanted to say he felt safe under the thick fabric. Like it was something he could hide in, but instead he said, "I'm not sure yet."

"Wear it for a while. See if it grows on you." The salesgirl didn't even crack a smile. She dusted the back of the suit with her lacquered hand. "Let me go grab a pair of trousers from the back."

"How much longer is this going to take?" Ben asked once the salesgirl had disappeared.

Sebastian shrugged, the suit moving with him. A perfect fit.

Ben arched an eyebrow in Sebastian's direction. "I can't believe Robert's buying you a suit to attend a dog's funeral," he said, shaking his head at the floor.

"Lox was family. Besides, Robert thought it was time I owned a suit."

Robert was Sebastian's boyfriend. Or life partner. He was never sure what they should call themselves. They had lived together for four years. They shared a Tuscan villa on a cul-de-sac off Cherry Creek with a stucco exterior and concrete tile roofing. Inside, custom black marble countertops, Persian rugs, and thick books with gold and silver lettering on the spines made the house seem rooted to Sebastian. In truth, it was Robert's house. Robert was a surgeon. Sebastian had been seventeen the night they met,

although he had told Robert he was nineteen. Robert had said he was thirty-five. He would be forty-seven next July. Despite the lies that had locked them together, Sebastian thought they were happy. He liked the fact that Robert was older. The skin that pinched around Robert's eyes when he smiled, and Robert's dark hair threaded with gray, Sebastian took as signs of experience, an unfaltering step. They were the marks of someone who picked up the paper from the drive every morning. Someone who arrived on time, paid their bills, provided. There had been no tragedies on Robert's watch, until Lox had off and died.

Sebastian did not consider himself an animal-lover, but Lox's passing had been severe. Lox, a Chow-Akita mix, had been huge and white, like a lumbering snow bank. It had been the wheezing that had awakened them. The dog's chest rose and fell in fits. His eyes were large and white as they rolled back to look at Robert, who had taken the dog's snout between his two hands and blown air into the dog's nostrils. Sebastian had stood by watching, vaguely repulsed by the string of saliva that dangled like spun sugar from the corner of Robert's mouth. Lox had not made it to the vet. When the interior of the car had gone quiet, it had been a sort of relief to Sebastian, but then the tears had rolled big and preposterous down Robert's face—the weight of Lox draped across his lap.

"He didn't make it," Robert had said.

Over the past few days, Robert had made all the arrangements—getting the headstone, finding a suitable plot. Sebastian had offered to help. "Leave everything to me," Robert had said.

"You're too busy to do all this alone." Sebastian had put the pressure of both his palms against the back of Robert's neck. "You have patients and crap."

“You want to help? Go buy a suit. You’ll need one for the funeral.” Robert had taken out his wallet and handed over his credit card, his hand ruffling Sebastian’s hair and pulling him close. “You’ll look cute in a suit. Like little Lord Fauntleroy.”

Sebastian grimaced and glanced at the racks of suit jackets arranged by color and size around them, hung like prize pelts. Sebastian looked at Ben, who had pulled up his shirt to scratch at the thin trail of hair on his stomach.

“Robert says I’ll need the suit when I graduate,” Sebastian said. “When I get a real job.” Sebastian was a student at UC Denver. He was majoring in psychology. When he read for his classes, he tabbed each chapter with brightly colored stickers. He highlighted sentences, took copious notes, and couldn’t muster an ounce of passion for any of it. “But I feel like I have a real job. My work at the bookstore is important.”

“Used bookstore. Don’t forget used.” Ben had little care for anything cast off, so Sebastian’s job working evenings at the Dead Letter Bookstore on Colfax was particularly amusing to him.

“Well, not all of us can get by on philosophy courses and an on-call banquet server’s salary,” Sebastian said.

“Some of us weren’t lucky enough to find a gold-fingered daddy to pay for our education. Face it, you’re a kept woman.” Ben bit at a hangnail and spat. “Honestly, I’m jealous.”

“I am not a kept woman, goddamit. I have a job. They pay me money.”

Ben laughed and kicked playfully at Sebastian’s legs, although he was seated too far away to reach them. He always knew where to jab when it came to Sebastian, like a boxer who’s felt out his opponent’s vulnerabilities. Sebastian had known Ben longer than

anyone else in his life. Sebastian's father had decided Denver was as good a place as any for a life without aim. Ben and Sebastian had been in the same class in Front Range Elementary. When they were both sixteen, shortly before Sebastian met Robert, they had come out to each other, both having had no clue growing up of their shared sexuality. Ben often joked about this. "If we had only known, playing He-man would have been so much different."

"So back to me," Ben said. "I think a foreskin will make me look more sophisticated—European. What do you think?"

The salesgirl returned with several pairs of slacks and Sebastian retreated to the changing stall. As he was pulling his legs through the first pair, Ben entered and leaned his back against the stall door.

"So seriously," Ben said. "In all honesty, what do you think?"

"You know I get tired of explaining you as the flake to all our friends," Sebastian said. "You pick up fads like you pick up tricks. The day you follow through with anything is the day I'll deliver a litter of puppies."

"First of all, since when have you had friends?" Ben had a point there. "Second of all, puppies? This is different. I went to a NORM meeting with that guy I was dating. It was eye-opening."

"What's NORM?"

"The National Organization for Restoring Men. There's a chapter that meets at the Denver Health Center. Anyway, there are a lot of good reasons to have a foreskin."

"But everyone gets circumcised. It's cleaner." Sebastian felt the need to defend his own unhooded member—defenseless as it was.

Ben held up a finger and then pointed at Sebastian. “That, my friend, is a fallacy sent out by the medical profession to sustain a very lucrative form of butchery. It took thousands of years of evolution to perfect the human body, and we go and start hacking stuff off. If you removed your eyelid, would your eye be cleaner?” Ben said this as if he were reading from a brochure.

Robert always said animals have the eyes of God, but Sebastian doubted this. He remembered when Lox first came to them, before he was fixed, the way Lox would gracelessly mount things—furniture, piles of laundry, low bushes, guests. Sebastian had always wondered if he was half-blind, searching out any shape that even slightly approximated a mate. The memory of his bright red member sliding out of its sheath of fur still disgusted Sebastian. It was horrible the way it was hidden inside of the thing, as if nature knew when to be ashamed. Sebastian was convinced this tendency in nature was also the reason his father’s shoulders hunched into his neck, the reason his eyes always cast about his feet. The world knows when to be mortified. He had not seen his father in three years, but he knew certain things to be true.

“It’s a barbaric practice that should have been abandoned years ago,” he said. “Circumcision denudes, it desensitizes, disables, disfigures, it disrupts circulation.” Ben was counting off on his fingers.

“All right, all right. Get off your soap box, Miss Anita. So how are you planning on re-growing a foreskin? Compost and loving care?” Sebastian pulled at the waist of his pants, trying to decide if they fit. It was the store’s smallest size. They were a little big, his waist not quite filling them out.

"I'm going to stretch the skin on the shaft of my penis." Ben shut one eye and mimicked the act of shooting a rubber band. "Human skin expands under duress over a period of time. So, slowly, I have to stretch the remaining skin over the head of my dick. No big deal."

There was a knock on the door to the stall. The salesgirl's voice on the other side was firmly pitched. "Is everything okay in there?"

"Yeah, everything's fine. I think I'm going to go with the twenty-eights."

"If you want I can start ringing things up while you're changing." Sebastian passed Robert's credit card under the door to the stall. "I'll be right back, Mr. Nachman."

"How long does it take to stretch skin?" Sebastian asked after he was sure the salesgirl had gone. While they were house-training Lox, Sebastian had often, when angry, pulled the dog around by the bunched skin at the nape of his neck, dragging him out of the house to walk him. Robert caught him doing this one day and was livid. "Don't pull him along by the scruff of the neck. It hurts him."

"What are you talking about? That's how people pick up puppies."

"How would you like it if I hauled you around like that?"

"That depends. Are we talking foreplay here?"

Ben tapped his thumb against the ball of his elbow, keeping time with the Muzak version of John Lennon's 'Instant Karma.' He shrugged. "Anywhere from six months to two years, depending on how rigorous you are with the routine."

"You'll never get through a year of this."

"You lack faith, little grasshopper. Not this time. It requires no effort. I'm actually stretching it right now."

“Really?”

“I’ve been at it for four months now. At first you use O-rings, those black rubber rings you see in hardware and automotive shops, to hold the skin up. First aid tape to force the skin up over the glans.” Ben hunched down and covered his head with his arms to demonstrate.

Sebastian couldn’t help looking over at Ben’s crotch. Nothing appeared unusual, but then again it wasn’t something Sebastian normally paid attention to. He tried to imagine what it would look like, but all he could think of were those multi-knotted locks of hair you see in movies about Celts.

Ben pushed away from the door, pitching himself toward Sebastian. He took the unbuttoned halves of the jacket and brought them together over Sebastian’s chest, pushing the black button through the slit of the jacket’s eyehole. He stood back and gave Sebastian an appraising look, his fingers beneath his chin. “We may make a man of you yet.” He tugged at the extra length encircling Sebastian’s waist. “You’ll need to fill this out though.” The knuckle of Ben’s hand drew a line across the bottom of Sebastian’s belly, causing him to jerk back as if he’d been goosed.

“Cut that out,” Sebastian said.

Ben turned and opened the door of the changing stall and the brighter lights of the store came spilling in. “You look good. Robert will be thrilled.”

There was no way of knowing how old Lox had been when he died. Sebastian and Robert had purchased Lox’s headstone from an ex-gem prospector in Aurora. His house and workshop were crowded with the broken-egg shards of old finds, the interiors lit with polished quartz, gypsum, and many other minerals with funny names—microcline,

leucite, brazilianite. He had given them a tour. “People who don’t have pets think it’s easier to deal with the passing of a dog or cat, but grief’s grief,” he had said. “That’s why I stick with rocks.” Robert had nodded, his eyes set sparkling by the case-lights of the man’s displays.

“There never seems to be any relief,” Robert had said. Sebastian had wanted to touch him, but wasn’t sure if he should—there with a stranger present. He wanted to say, *snap out of it! You’re a surgeon! You’re a grown man! You’re not supposed to act this way!* The sky had been red and clear over the Rockies, which made Sebastian think of blood—the blood that welled in the cavity of the chest, pushed relentlessly through veins, dripped onto the stainless steel tables and antiseptic floors of hospitals. *You should handle this better,* he thought. *It was just a dog.* But these thoughts made him feel guilty—inadequate to the pitch of Robert’s pain, like there was some part of his heart that had never quite flourished.

Outside the stall, the customers continued to graze. Ben and Sebastian sat down in the leather chairs. They saw the salesgirl approaching, a couple of belts looped over her arm. Outside the store, in the general mutter of the mall, there was the tinkle of Christmas bells. Green and gold ribbon left over from the holidays coiled around the white-wood handrails of the barricades overlooking the mall’s first level.

“Just wait,” Ben said. “A year from now, I’ll be a whole man, while you’re still a wounded victim.”

“As always.”

The salesgirl smiled as she approached, Robert's credit card already extended. "Everything went through okay, Mr. Nachman. Just sign here." Sebastian stood and took the pen. He signed Robert's name.

"Thank you so much," Sebastian said. "You've been a big help." The salesgirl was staring at him as if she expected something. Hush money, he thought. Then he remembered he was still wearing the blazer and slacks.

"Oh, right." He began pulling his arms out of the jacket and the salesgirl moved behind him to help him out of the tight garment.

"So how did the jacket end up feeling?" she asked him.

"Great. It felt great," Sebastian said. "Like a second skin."

****

As Sebastian drove home, the city of Denver grew large along the skirt of the prairie. The mountains cast shadows behind him as the sun, even at this early hour, slipped behind the backs of the Flatirons. He imagined himself adrift in all that empty space—no destination ahead of him, no harbor or sweeping light on the water. The thought made him shiver, although he liked thinking of the ocean here. When he was young, his father had dragged him from one end of the country to the other. Never staying anywhere for more than a few months, until they had settled here. His favorite place had been Maine—Ketch Harbor. For some reason the place had taken hold of him. He had loved the booming selvage of the coastline—threaded with lighthouses, ships, rocky tidal flats, and tiny seaside towns. It was the cruel insistence of the ocean that he had loved, forever hurling itself at the land's edge. This was what he later imagined love

to be—a force that could whittle you down to your barest defenses, take you broken and sanded, and give you back to yourself again and again.

The traffic along Highway 36 was thick. Cars crowded around him in tight knots, like beads slowly moved along the bar of an abacus. It was along this same stretch of highway that Robert and Sebastian had found Lox. Sebastian had been with Robert for two weeks at the time. They were driving back from a hike in the mountains. It was April and blackened drifts of snow lay like victims of drive-bys on the side of the road. Robert had spotted Lox trudging along the freeway beside the concrete Jersey walls, his back to the eastbound traffic. Upon seeing him, Robert had turned on his hazard lights, pulled as far as he could toward the left-hand shoulder, and rolled down his window.

"What are you doing?" Sebastian had asked. Drivers laid down on their horns as they passed, their cars inching past Sebastian's window to avoid collisions in the lane next to them.

"Don't you see that dog? He's going to get hit."

"Haven't you ever heard of natural selection?" Robert was already climbing out the window of their Range Rover, folding his body in half like a jackknife. Sebastian leaned over and called out after him. "Isn't there somebody we could call?"

Twenty feet in front of the truck, Lox had stopped and turned. As Robert approached, Lox's tail began to wag and he approached Robert nose down and eyes upraised as if offering himself up to fate. Robert stayed close to the Jersey wall. He reached out to grab the dog, but Lox shied away toward oncoming traffic. He was nearly hit by a speeding Volvo. After that, Robert approached more slowly. Lox had padded

over to the outstretched arm, sniffed briefly, and had allowed Robert to rest a hand on the matted fur along the side of his face.

As Sebastian passed the spot where it had happened, he could still picture Robert in his scrubs, the wind from the traffic tugging wildly at the string-tie looped into a bow at his waist. He realized that in all the years they had had Lox, it was not Lox who Sebastian loved so much, but rather it was the memory of that day—Robert showing Sebastian for the first time how capable he could be.

Sebastian's father had not been capable. He came from old Polish stock, and it seemed failure was their line's one talent. By trade, Sebastian's father was a confidence man. Unfortunately, his face, gaunt and pocked with scars from years of poor diet and drinking, was a face no one would trust. His mother had died in a car accident when he was two. Drinking had been involved in that as well. His father made a living, if you could call it that, by filling aluminum cans with glue so they'd fetch more. What money they made his father would waste at bars. Much of Sebastian's youth was spent dozing in booths, watching under the table as his father massaged open the legs of some woman. There was always some woman. Never for very long. His father would coax them into badger games, getting them to fuck some married guy so that Sebastian's father could extort them. These affairs inevitably ended with his father beaten, or the woman gone, or the marks admitting everything to their dowdy, suburban wives. Never in money, as Sebastian could remember. When he was ten, his father settled in Denver. His father's girlfriend at the time, the woman who would eventually become Sebastian's step-mother, was getting disability from the government for an accident at a canning factory that had

left her hip shattered, and his father, after years of exhausting everything, had finally exhausted himself.

Sebastian took the exit toward Colorado Boulevard. The street lights were just beginning to switch on. The night he met Robert, he had left his father's house with a garbage bag of clothes tossed over his shoulder. He had plans to meet Ben at Charlie's. He had a fake ID his step-mother had made for him, knowing he would use it to leave and happy to see him go. He had taken a seat at the bar, dropping his bag next to his stool. Ben wasn't there yet.

When Robert approached he was all teeth, wearing a black turtleneck under a gray sweater and wool, pin-stripped trousers with leather wingtips. He appeared to be everything Sebastian was not. "You seem like you could use a friend." The line was smarmy enough to be charming.

Later, when they left together, they met Ben outside the bar. His hair was gelled and he was wearing a black pullover with an alligator stitched over his heart. Sebastian made the introductions. Then the three of them stood silently for a moment in the glow of the neon sign.

"So where you off to?" Ben had asked.

"We're off to have a nightcap," Sebastian said, hitting the last word with two strong stresses.

Ben had turned to Robert. "Well, take care of our little Sebastian here, or I'll have to hunt you down."

Robert had taken off work, and he and Sebastian ended up spending the week together, Sebastian waking every morning to the sun streaming through the windows,

warming the layers of white sheets. “You make me feel young again,” Robert had said. “That sounds lame, doesn’t it?” Sebastian answered by kissing the clef of Robert’s chin. “Well, it’s true. I haven’t felt this way in a while.” When he had finally got around to calling his friend, Ben had scoffed. “Novice,” he’d said. He wondered sometimes if his father ever thought of him, wondered where he’d ended up. He doubted it.

As he pulled up to their house in Cherry Creek, the windows were reflecting the sun. Behind it, the night rose purple and cool, the first stars beginning to emerge. He pulled into the driveway, cut the engine and sat for a moment with his thoughts. He was not looking forward to the funeral, he knew that, but he would do it for Robert’s sake. There was nothing he would not do for Robert, he thought. It bothered him to think that people, Robert’s family and friends, saw him as little better than his father, as a con man who had ingratiated himself past the threshold, like the evil and undead you see in movies, who lack power until invited in. He hated the thought that their relationship might be seen as a swindle. A heist of Robert’s possessions—his property, his reputation, his name. He watched the lights come on inside, Robert’s shadow passing on the walls. There was nothing he could do to combat this image of them—not now. So instead he eased open the door of the truck and headed up the paved drive, toward the warm lights. He turned his key in the lock with a particular kind of care and let the light of those rooms wash over him.

*****

Sebastian turned his gaze to the Rockies rising off the horizon at sharp angles. It was late afternoon, and the faintest tone of violet had begun to settle over the edge of the peaks. It was a gorgeous view, just as the Blue Spruce Pet Cemetery’s website had

assured. *Because they were our best friends, give them the rest of family.* Sebastian couldn't help feeling ridiculous. He ran his finger along the inside of his suit collar. Despite the chilliness, Sebastian felt perspiration trickle down his chest on the inside of his shirt.

Robert nudged him. "Stop fidgeting. This is a solemn occasion."

The ceremony, if you could call it that, was already over. Robert, Sebastian, and two maintenance men in blue jumpsuits had comprised the audience. The casket, which was larger than Sebastian had expected, was hauled out of the trailer at the edge of the cemetery. The maintenance men had dug the hole, dropped in the box, and filled it back up again as Robert and Sebastian looked on, both of them somewhat at a loss as to what was expected. Afterwards, the employees left, giving Robert and Sebastian "time alone with the deceased." Robert had remained stoic throughout, and for Sebastian's part, despite his best efforts, he couldn't seem to muster the appropriate feelings.

Sebastian turned amid the grid of marble headstones and monuments. He caught a whiff of the freshly turned earth. It was the perfect day for a funeral. The sky was a drained blue, with a thin shawl of clouds draped over the shoulders of the mountains to the west. When the wind blew, the few remaining leaves of the cottonwood trees rattled like tin.

Robert stood with his gloved hands held together behind his back. His jaw was set and his coat whipped about him. Sebastian tugged sharply on his tie, wondering when it would be appropriate to leave. The multiple layers of clothing made his skin itch, and he scratched at a wool sock with his shoe. Robert looked around as if to orient himself, then

sat down on a rise of blue fescue. He pulled his coat about him and looked off to his right, toward the nimbus of the peaks.

"You okay?" Sebastian asked.

"It's strange, not having him around anymore. Every day when I came home, I'd hear his feet clicking on the linoleum before he came running up. Now the house sounds so quiet. Not even a whimper from under the bed. I hate it."

"You know these things happen. I guess he was old when we found him." Sebastian kicked at the clods of dirt. The black granite headstone, which cost Robert four hundred and fifty dollars, glinted—its embossed surface graced with Lox's name and the dates of his life with them. It was all very elegant and muted.

Robert gazed toward the horizon, where the light had gone from violet to a raw magenta cooling on slate. "You know, I realized the other day that I'm now the same age as my father was when he died," Robert said. "I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"I don't think you have anything to worry about. You run like six miles on the treadmill every other day. If a heart attack's going to get you, it'll have to catch you first." Sebastian half-heartedly laughed, but Robert seemed not to notice.

"Tell that to Jim Fixx."

"Who?"

"Never mind. Before your time." Robert swabbed at the dust on his shoes with his hand. "Jesus, this is stupid. I've been made maudlin by a dog's death. I loved Lox, but fuck. What the hell is wrong with me?" Robert rubbed at his eyes with his sleeve and tried to smile. "The sunsets out here are so ruthless," Robert said. "Not like on the East Coast. Not like in Providence. My dad used to take me and my sisters to Conimicut Point

Beach and we would watch the sun come up, which is so classic 1950s shit now that I think about it. But we would. We'd build sandcastles and chase gulls with sticks. Here, it's not the same."

"Must be the altitude," Sebastian said. He thought back to the nights in Maine, when he was young. His father wouldn't come home some nights and Sebastian, only seven at the time, would wander down to the breakers off the point. He was always frightened in their apartment alone, with the voices behind the walls often seeming to be talking about him, aware that he was by himself. The beach had been less frightening. Nothing moved. Any noise was masked by the crash of the waves. It had been achingly cold, so cold that Sebastian's teeth had clacked together until he had to bite the sleeve of his coat to keep them from shattering, but the nights there had seemed impenetrable. There, he could witness things that were absolute. The stars that glittered. The ocean that was darker than the horizon. Two years ago he had returned to a similar beach with Robert, to Rhode Island and Robert's family. Robert's mother had looked him over like a jeweler assessing the value of cubic zirconia. Later, behind the closed door of the dining room, he'd heard Robert and his mother arguing. "You're a fool, Robert, if you think that boy, and he is nothing more than a boy, is after anything but your money. Have you lost all sense?" Robert had said little back. Sebastian knew. He had listened for a while before stealing out of the house and down to the beach—the ocean crowded with a flock of gulls that bobbed on the water like a squadron of destroyers. That's where Robert found him later when he was ready to leave.

Sebastian moved over and took a seat next to Robert. He was careful not to sit on a grave. “We’re supposed to meet Ben on New Year’s Eve at Charlie’s. I told him you’d probably be late, since you’re on call.”

“Sounds great,” Robert said, but his voice was a thousand miles away. Suddenly, he turned and studied Sebastian’s face. “How is Ben anyway?”

“You know Ben. Same as always. Trying to kick up some new interest in his life.”

“Sounds familiar.” Robert smiled, his lips curling over the stubble of hairs at the corner of his mouth that he had missed while shaving.

“I am nothing like Ben.” Sebastian’s voice was firm with his conviction. “You should have heard him at the department store yesterday. He has a new thing. Foreskin reconstruction.” Sebastian snorted. “Idiot.” Robert’s profile, with its strong jaw and church-steeple nose, was silhouetted. “Robert, what’s wrong?”

Robert pulled at the coarse blades of dead grass between his legs and hurled them away. He watched them fall; then moved his right hand to Sebastian’s thigh. “Nothing really. I’ve just been thinking a lot lately.” He paused briefly, as if he were composing his thoughts. “Do you ever wonder what would have happened if we hadn’t met?”

“I guess I would have gone to live with Ben. That was our plan, anyway.”

“Were you ever attracted to Ben?”

“What? No. He’s my best friend. We’re more like brothers. I don’t think of him in that way.” Sebastian ripped loose a blade of grass and pulled it across the line of his lips. He blew against it, producing a weak note.

“Did he?”

“Think of me in that way? I don’t know. I doubt it. What does it matter? I ended up with you.”

“You know, some people would say I took advantage of a desperate seventeen-year-old boy, who had no home and no family. Some people would say it was pretty shitty what I did.”

“Well, I never have. Besides, for the first month you thought I was nineteen.”

“I had my suspicions.” Sebastian secured Robert’s hand to his thigh by placing his over it. He gave it what he hoped was an assuring squeeze. Robert continued mowing the dried vegetation with his free hand, and each stem gave with a sound like rope snapping. “Sometimes, I don’t know if I’m trying to be your father or your lover.”

“Why can’t you be both?”

Robert winced and then pulled his features into a tight smile. Sebastian regretted the comment the moment it escaped his lips, but he knew it was true. There was a part of him that needed at least the shadow of that role filled. He thought of Ben. What kind of life could they have had together? Certainly not a life with any kind of polish.

“You know you don’t have to worry about Ben, don’t you? We’re just friends. That’s all. Always have been.”

“I know that.” Robert pulled his hand out from under Sebastian’s and wrapped his arms around his knees. When he continued, his tone was cool and professional. “When I woke up this morning, I lay in bed for half a second pissed off that I would have to get up and walk Lox on my day off. Then I remembered. Isn’t that so Sally Field? Pathetic.”

Sebastian rubbed the back of Robert's arm. As night moved in, the temperature continued to drop and Robert shook as he continued. "In four years, I'll be fifty years old. You'll be twenty-five."

"Robert, I don't care about that. Why don't we go home? It's getting cold."

"That house is too damn still."

"I like a still house. It means it's settled. Permanent."

"Nothing's permanent."

"That's fucking poet talk." Sebastian tried to take it all in, the distance spread out around him, the mountains rising like a wall before the future. Both of them were silent for several minutes, and in that time, Sebastian's eyes acclimated to the dimming light.

"You know I care for you, Sebastian. I do. I'm just not sure anymore what you see in me."

"Christ, Robert. You are maudlin today."

"It's a funeral. We have our roles to play." He ripped another weed from the ground and the root gave with a dull snap. He spoke slowly, as if measuring the heft of each word. "You know, I wouldn't mind? If you were to think of Ben as more than just a friend. He's a good guy."

Sebastian's brow furrowed. "What do you mean, 'more than just friends?'"

"I mean as your lover, I don't want to ever have to see you go. As your father, I think it would be good if you hung out with people your own age. Boys will be boys, you know. It'd be stupid to think you'll be satisfied with me forever, and it's not like we don't have options. You know Frank and Terry, who I work with. Even they've made

arrangements in their relationship. You don't ask too many questions, everybody's happy." Robert mumbled, his normal baritone gone awkward, nearly cracking.

Sebastian got to his feet, kicking at more dirt clumps, the sediment raining into the dry grass. He walked over to the dark tombstone and felt the letters of Lox's name.

"I don't know why you wasted money on this tombstone," Sebastian said. "In life, it would have been something for Lox to piss on." He kept his back to Robert.

"Please don't be angry." Sebastian heard Robert stand and approach him. He wanted more than anything for Robert to take him by the shoulders, to curl his arms around him as he sometimes did, but Robert made no move to touch him. Sebastian knew they would go home soon, that they would open the doors and see the proof of their lives together—the bed they shared, the corner of the couch they gathered in, their individual toothbrushes, alarm clocks, underwear drawers. But he also understood that there were things that had to be got through in life, and this was one of them. He thought he could almost hear Lox panting under the soil. When Sebastian didn't answer, Robert continued. "I can live with the piss, as long as you're there when I get home. I don't want to start over again."

"Did you get that off a brochure for colostomy bags?" Sebastian instantly regretted the remark, but he didn't apologize.

Robert paused before answering. "Actually, I think you mean a catheter."

Sebastian turned. It was now full twilight, and Robert's eyes were large and empty. Sebastian tried to envision the future, redrawing the lines on Robert's face deeper and more set, the structure of it sagging. Robert's face moved, but it was hard to tell if he was smiling or sneering. Sebastian leaned in and kissed him.

"Why do you have to make everything a movie-of-the-week?"

"Just consider it," Robert said.

In the distance, a coyote yelped and barked. Robert brushed off his coat and headed back toward the parking lot. Sebastian watched as he exited the cemetery, the gate swinging back into place behind him, Robert's hands shoved into the pockets of his coat. He looked towering, impenetrable to Sebastian, like a moving column of basalt. Sebastian watched and waited until he was out of sight before following after.

*****

The bar was in full effect. Sebastian looked around the smoky room at its inhabitants, watching as they negotiated the space. The lesbians had commandeered the two pool tables, while the men leaned against one another along the bar, placing hands in each others' back pockets. Overhead, red Christmas lights were stapled to the ceiling, and the muted television screens bolted into the corners were showing a soft-core porn in which Santa's little helpers kept oiling themselves up and gyrating on worktables. Ben came back from the bar with a beer and a glass of liquor and set the glass in front of Sebastian. Ben took a seat and sucked at his bottle.

Sebastian never cared much for the bar scene, having practically grown up in that thick atmosphere. He disliked the smoke, the way the place seemed to swallow his voice. He came out tonight mostly for Ben, to keep him company. Robert had often asked him, and with increasing frequency of late, if he ever got the urge to go out—if he felt like he had missed the opportunity to sow his oats. He looked around at the gadflies and alcoholics. They were the same faces he remembered from his childhood—a different location, different proclivities certainly, but essentially the same. He thought the fields, as

they were, hardly looked fallow. He thought of Robert in the years before they met, how tedious it would have been, plowing this same patch of dirt. He had often tried to picture Robert's past lovers, had often tried to get him to point them out, but Robert refused.

"Ben, do you ever wonder what it will be like twenty years from now?"

"Jesus, dude. You really know how to bring in a New Year. Drink your vodka."

"Sorry."

"You've been about as pleasant as a rattlesnake with a burr shoved up its ass tonight. When's Robert getting here?" It was retro night at Charlie's, as well as New Year's Eve, and Ben was wearing his yellow iron-on decal T-shirt with the wrinkled face of Scott Baio posed across the front. The thing had to be several decades old.

"He's on rounds at the hospital. He'll be here before twelve." Sebastian tore at the label on Ben's bottle of Becks, confetti-ing the table with the moist paper. He sighed and blew the remnants of the shredded label onto the floor.

"Do you ever wonder what would have happened if I'd never met Robert?"

"Yeah, you would've been asking fifty for a rim job under an overpass on 225."

Sebastian stirred his drink with the straw, causing several cubes of ice to spill out in the process. The sea of people around their table crested and fell.

"You'll be happy to know that I've now graduated to the Tugger," Ben stated with aplomb. "Or the PUD, as the company calls it. Penile Uncircumcising Device. It's only a matter of time, now."

"Time until what?"

"Until I'm whole again. Scarless and with a greater sense of sensation." Ben made several orgasmic whimpering noises.

“You’re drunk,” Sebastian informed him. Ben flipped Sebastian off. “You need to pace yourself. You’ve had four beers in the last hour. Not that I’m counting.” A few tables over two guys kept glancing over at them. Sebastian ignored them, although he could feel them watching. “So how does this Tugger thing work?” he asked.

“I’m glad you asked that, Jim.” Ben donned the slicked voice of a salesman. “It’s a device that has this funnel-shaped chamber that fits over the glans of the penis and is worn inside the developing foreskin. You attach it with surgical tape. By the way, I was hoping Robert could hook me up with some of that. A second cylinder-shaped chamber extends beyond the penis to provide the weight. To keep it stretched, of course.”

“Sounds comfy.” Sebastian pushed himself up in his seat so he could look at Ben’s crotch. Everything seemed per usual. “How come it’s not noticeable?”

“It hangs down the inside of your pants.”

Ben’s eyes had gone lazy. They slid over the room as if greased. Sebastian tried to picture Ben naked with a tiny dumbbell hanging from the tip of his cock. He thought how ludicrous it all was, this attention to a rather ignoble organ, the constant buffing of the body, making it shine. Earlier that day, he had caught Robert in front of the bathroom mirror pinching the sliver of fat around his midsection between thumb and forefinger. When Robert noticed him in the doorway, he had been embarrassed, like a teenager caught masturbating. “Gravity’s a bitch. The biggest bull dyke of them all,” he had said. Sebastian had come up behind him and circled his waist with his arms, pressing himself into his back. “Maybe I’ll have Steven suck out the fat next time I go into the hospital,” Robert said. “What do you think?”

Sebastian had patted Robert's stomach and kissed the back of his neck. "While you're at it, ask him for some courage too."

Sebastian was beginning to feel the rush of the vodka, the thick air of the bar making him feel slick. "I'll believe it when I see it."

"You're such a cynic. When it's done, you'll be the first person I'll show. Until then, you'll just have to live with the suspense."

"Well I won't hold my breath."

"You know you want to see it. Don't lie."

Sebastian and Ben were both silent as the waiter approached their table. Ben waved him off with his newly opened beer. As the waiter moved away, Sebastian held up his glass. "A toast. To Lox and your foreskin. May both of their second comings be better than the first."

"Hear, hear," Ben said, raising his bottle to Sebastian's glass. Ben took a swig of his beer and then moved his free hand to his lap to adjust himself.

Forty-five minutes later Robert arrived. He had changed into jeans and a white T-shirt, his coat folded over his arm. His entrance reminded Sebastian of Marlon Brando as Johnny Strabler in *The Wild One,* the wayward type with a heart of gold. The movie was one of Robert's favorites. The look harkened back to a time Sebastian had never known, and one that now seemed tame, domesticated, much like Robert, who would never risk a knife fight, wrists tied by a strip of leather, the incisions sloppy and proletarian. Sebastian waved and Robert came over to join them. He sat down next to Sebastian and sighed.

"Happy New Year. Everyone made his resolution yet?"

He looked over at Sebastian, who smiled and shook his head. Ben slammed the base of his beer on the table. “Yes, I’m reconstituting my foreskin.”

“Mazal-tov.”

“He’s stretching it as we speak,” Sebastian said, leaning into Robert’s shoulder.

“Really?”

Ben went through the explanation of the procedure again. “Well, sounds great. Probably a smart idea to forego surgery. Something like that would cost close to thirty thousand.”

“Yeah, and that’s twenty-nine thousand more than I have. Speaking of what I have, where the hell is that waiter?” Ben pushed himself up on the table and nearly tipped it over. Robert grabbed and steadied the careening bottles and glassware. Ben searched the faces in the room, which was quickly filling.

Robert interrupted his search with a question. “So where is the guy who got you into this? Eliot? Was that his name?”

“Stuart. Yeah, we broke up,” Ben said. “It was a mutual decision. Me, Stuart, and the boyfriend he failed to mention felt it was for the best.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I’m not. He wasn’t really my type. He’s circumcised, you know.”

“So are you, you retard,” Sebastian said. Ben ignored him, again searching the room for the waiter. Sebastian turned his attention to Robert. “So how was work?”

“Another day, another tumor. We removed one today from the breast of a twenty-seven-year-old. Can you believe that?”

Robert picked up Sebastian's vodka tonic and took a drink. The bags under his eyes were darker, which gave them a bruised appearance. He pointed a finger at Ben. "You need to settle down with someone instead of just hooking up. Maybe your problem is you're looking too far afield."

"His problem is he thinks a flap of skin is going to cover some hole in his life," Sebastian said.

"My problem," Ben said, "is that I can't seem to find a slick young thing with a beer in his pocket who's happy to see me."

"I didn't realize you were a size queen," Sebastian said.

"Well, I sort of have to be. Otherwise, they feel inferior." Ben winked across at them, though Sebastian couldn't tell which of them he was winking at. Robert rubbed shoulders with Sebastian. The lines around Robert's mouth were deep and permanent. Sebastian reached out and traced his finger along one of the deeper grooves.

"Something wrong?" Robert asked.

Robert reached out and ran his hand through Sebastian's hair, massaging the back of his skull, while Ben tumbled off of his stool, using the table for balance. He gave the crowd around the table a hungry stare, leaning toward the mass of bodies, the veins in his neck going taut.

"Fuck it. I'm going to the bar. I don't want to be without a drink for New Year's. Sebastian, Robert, you want anything?"

Robert shook his head and took another swallow of Sebastian's drink. "Get us another vodka tonic," Sebastian said. Ben nodded and disappeared into the pack. After he was gone, Sebastian turned to Robert.

“I’m sorry for what I said the other day about the colostomy bag. That was out of line.”

“Understandable. You know, sometimes I think the only reason you’re with me is to spite your father.” There was a smile playing over Robert’s face. He rubbed at his eye as if he was buffing a shoe, and Sebastian couldn’t help thinking he was still handsome. Sebastian wanted to reach under the table and tug Robert’s body closer. “I went and saw him once,” Robert said. “I got your address off your driver’s license and I went out there. To the trailer park where you lived. I met your father. I told him where you were. That you were with me. It’s not like I wanted to ask for his blessing or anything. I just didn’t want any complications.” Robert swallowed and Sebastian watched the muscles of his neck work spastically downward. “I gave him a check for five thousand dollars. A check for you. Your step-mom was angry.”

“She’s always been angry,” Sebastian said. He put his hand over Robert’s and felt the blood beat fast under his skin. This doesn’t matter, he thought. It doesn’t change anything. How could it change anything?

“She said they would go to the police. That it was statutory rape. But I left. The check was sitting on the counter in the kitchen and I got in my car and drove back home.” Robert spun the drink they were sharing, the strobes above them lighting the glass in different colors—red to gold, blue to green. Robert didn’t take his eyes off the glass when he spoke. “There’re a lot of reasons you should hate me.”

Sebastian felt as if the ground were slipping out from under him, as if he were standing at the edge of an ocean, the waves pulling the sand out from beneath him. For the first time, he thought about what it would mean to end this thing, to cease breathing in

the space of their relationship, as Lox had done. In a way it would be a relief, he thought. Sebastian thought he could handle what time would do to him, but it was what it would do to both of them that he couldn't stand.

"I'm probably more like my father than I care to think," Sebastian said. "From my father, I got the ability to cut ties. Hopeless codependence. The ability to fuck up anything. Maybe they're only small parts, but they're there."

"Small parts can be important." People's voices blended into a kind of static around them. On the stage on the far side of the room, a drag queen in a blue wig and dress emerged from behind a silver lamé curtain. She began lip-syncing the words to a Cyndi Lauper song.

"Do you ever miss him?" Robert asked.

"I could never rely on my father. It's why I left. Down the lights, cue the strings."

"I was so afraid they were going to come after us."

"But he didn't. That's answer enough. And you didn't push me out."

As the New Year approached, people coupled up in preparation for zero hour, choosing their infatuations out of the throng. The minutes ticked by in the bar, and everywhere there was the frantic planning, the need to make right and remember, all participants knowing that any resolutions could be later broken, as they often were. Sebastian searched his mind for something he wanted to change in his life, for some heading that would send him skimming to some unknown shore, but he could find nothing. Nothing at all. The ocean seemed calm as glass around him. There was nothing in its depths. He was sure of it. Nothing.

“What are you thinking about?” Robert asked, but Sebastian felt the question was too much to handle. Too intimate. He didn’t know. The room around him surged and buckled as capacity hit its peak, and the mass of people seemed like a metaphor for something. Everyone grasping at belt loops and in-seams, some of them sinking into the thick of it and disappearing, hopefully to be salvaged by someone.

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Listen. I’m sorry. Lox’s death sort of got to me. I’m surrounded by death every day, but it always seemed like something I went to. Not something that came to me. I know you think of me as the strong one, but I don’t want to start over.”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“I just think we should be prepared to talk about things. To be honest.” Robert swatted at the air as if he were warding off something. “We just can’t be afraid, you know.”

Sebastian leaned into Robert’s side. “I’m not afraid,” he said, forcing himself to believe it.

He closed his eyes and listened to the music and the crowd, which seemed to blend together in the back of his mind, each answering the other in the pulse of blood and bass-line. Somewhere in the multitude he heard Ben’s voice above the others, talking about skin and bereavement. He opened his eyes and turned his head.

Ben stood several feet from the table, a beer and a glass in either hand, talking to a lanky-haired blond boy with an oily forehead. “Well, you know, the average male loses twenty-five percent of his penile length as a result of circumcision. I’m not saying I plan

on recovering all of that. I'd be happy with, say, ten percent. What did you say your name was?"

Robert jerked his head toward Ben. "How much has he had to drink, anyway?" he asked, putting his arm around Sebastian's shoulders.

"Enough," Sebastian said.

The blond boy kept breaking eye contact with Ben to stare across the room, but every time he edged away Ben placed a finger on his chest. Ben was beginning to fume. "They just lop it off, like it isn't even important. But it is important." About that time, Ben made a jerking motion with his hips and something bullet-shaped and metallic fell out of his pants leg and clattered onto the floor. It lay there glinting under the red lights like a blade exposed in some Hollywood thriller. The blond boy stared at it in confusion, his mouth agape. Ben followed the boy's gaze to the floor.

"Shit, I lost my penis stretcher."

Robert snorted and rubbed his eyes with his free hand. He leaned into Sebastian's ear, his lips tickling the hairs along the whorl of skin. "I think someone needs to be rescued."

"I thought that was your job."

"I'm too old for this shit."

Sebastian picked up his drink and finished it in a swallow, the half-melted ice chilling his throat. Everyone in the room had begun the countdown for the New Year. "I'll be back," Sebastian said.

Sebastian grabbed Ben by the shoulder as he bent to retrieve his Tugger. The blond disappeared into the smoke. Sebastian guided Ben toward the lavatory, and as they

entered the empty room the bar erupted at the close of the year. Ben had his beer and a glass in one hand, both tilted dangerously. Sebastian tried to take them, but he lost the bottle and it dropped to the floor with a crash—liquid and glass drenching their shoes.

Ben giggled. “You made a mess, Sebastian.” His voice was thick; his eyelids set at half-mast. “I have to put my Tugger back on.”

He fumbled with the stainless steel device and yanked at his zipper, then dropped the Tugger to the floor where it lay in the expanding puddle. Ben just looked at it as if he were seeing it for the first time, and the expression that crossed his face then was a mystery. Sebastian wasn’t sure if he was going to weep or vomit.

“Here, let me.” Sebastian bent and recovered the instrument, marveling at the weight, which was more substantial than he had expected. He held the object in his left hand and with the other undid the button on Ben’s pants. Ben wasn’t wearing underwear and the sight of the flaccid penis, the tip encircled by a strip of transparent tape, was not what Sebastian had expected. A thin lip of skin came down and half-covered the head of Ben’s cock, which made it look shy and introverted. It didn’t fit Ben’s personality, and for some reason, Sebastian had thought it would.

Over Ben’s shoulder, Sebastian saw the bathroom door open halfway, and in the space stood Robert. He made no move to enter, but watched them from the sill, one arm propping open the door. Music and cheers rushed in from the bar, but Ben seemed not to notice. Sebastian raised the Tugger to where Robert could see it, its metal cold against his palm. Robert nodded, his expression unreadable.

“What do I do?” Sebastian asked.

Ben pointed toward his exposed crotch and mumbled. “Pull the loose skin over the smaller of the funnels. It should hold with the tape.”

Sebastian stepped closer to Ben and took hold of his penis. He pulled gently on the hood of skin partially covering the head and tugged it over the funnel. He pressed the adhesive side of the tape over the edge where the skin met with steel. The cylinder acted as a sort of helmet, and Ben’s new skin hugged the metal. Sebastian let go of both penis and Tugger, and they dropped, the one swinging from the other.

Sebastian looked up at Ben and smiled. “There, all better.”

“Thanks, doc.” Ben grinned and slid his member, Tugger attached, back down the leg of his jeans. He pulled his pants together and zipped them up. Behind the door, the noise had subsided to a dull roar, and the song “Aulde Lang Syne” played on the stereo.

“We should get back out there,” Ben said. “Robert’s probably wondering what we’re doing. He’ll be mad at us.”

Sebastian met Robert’s gaze, and the corners of Robert’s lips twitched, as if he might laugh. He scratched at his lower lip. “He doesn’t have anything to be mad about,” Sebastian said.

Ben’s shoulders jerked as he tried to keep his balance, while his face took on a serious expression. “I like Robert. He’s a nice guy. Looks out for people.” Sebastian nodded and kicked some of the larger pieces of glass toward the trash can. “Maybe that should be our resolutions,” Ben said. “To look out for each other.”

Robert hitched his thumb in Ben’s direction and mouthed what Sebastian assumed to be the word, ‘Help.’ Sebastian shook his head and waved him on. Robert smiled, signed ‘okay,’ and held the door until it closed.

Ben appeared oblivious to all of this. He turned in the direction of the door as it shut, but had to catch himself on one of the stalls. “I predict driving will not be in my immediate future this New Year,” Ben said, his voice fading.

Sebastian walked to his side and took his arm. “Don’t worry. Robert and I will take you home.”

Ben rested his chin on his chest as if his string had been cut. “Just don’t drop me.” Sebastian leaned Ben against him and re-buttoned the top of his pants. Outside, the pulse of the music picked back up. The song was one he recognized, one of Robert’s favorites—“Roxanne” by The Police. Sebastian raised his head and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He thought he could almost recognize the man he would become, the years stacking up behind him. He felt himself float out of his body, out of his skin. He watched the two of them—young men finding it difficult to stand, the gravity and pull of each of them working on the other. It was time to go.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” Sebastian said. “Robert’s waiting for us.”

Ben raised his head and kissed Sebastian lightly on the neck, but then wiped it off with the back of his hand. They steadied each other in front of the mirror and it was hard to tell who was holding who up, but neither of them fell. Sebastian guided Ben out of the restroom and into the press of people. Across the room he could see Robert waiting, but separating the two of them was the crowd. It surged against him and Ben, pressing them to the walls. Sebastian readied himself for what he would have to do, searching for breaks in the swell. Sebastian waded out. His arms kept Ben close. He could hear Ben mumbling into his shoulder, low and slurred. “Just wait till you see it,” he was saying. “Wait till it’s

done.” Sebastian pushed, his shoulder digging out a way. Robert stood ahead of them, patient. Ben whispered in his arms. “Everything will change.”

How to Become an American Boy

GOAL ONE: Realize a sense of fraternity.

The psychiatrist will not talk to you during sessions. Questions only, and then you speak. Those are the rules. She will sit, back straight, in a green leather chair-- the gold studs along the arms and sides winking at you as you drone on. Recline in a posture of defeat in a similar chair across from her, like a wilted legume, somewhat disappointed that the chair is not a couch. The psychiatrist will remind you of Mary Poppins after a particularly trying night of umbrella transportation. A certain wind-blown style will take up her hair, a smudge of mascara will accentuate the crow's feet around her eyes. She will ask you to begin, as usual, and the whole of your life will move in to drown you. During these episodes, without knowing why, you will be very conscious of your genitals.

You are eighteen years old, having just graduated from high school. Your mother thinks that therapy will give you a sense of your place in the world, and will encourage you to hold nothing back. She will suggest, think of yourself as an open book. You will not be able to picture this without seeing the *Hustler* magazines your father keeps under the sink in the bathroom. Attempt to think of something else. The hothouse orchids your mother is fond of buying at the local supermarket, for instance. Find yourself still vaguely discomforted.

Tell your psychiatrist you are a homosexual, a fag, queer, pufter, ass pirate, and that it was definitely your mother's fault. She will raise a smoke-thin eyebrow and ask you why this is. Act confused and say there must have been something in the water. Be extremely impressed by your wit and charm, and pretend not to notice the slight tightening of your psychiatrist's face.

Smile. Try to change the subject. Focus your attention on the comfortable line of degrees on the wall, or the spider fern hanging like a nightmare in the window. Struggle to think of anything besides genitals. You will find this difficult. Like not thinking of pink elephants.

On the desk will be a series of photographs of children, propped up with velvet and cardboard. Ask her about her kids while trying not to think of her genitals. Recall a caesarean birth you witnessed on the surgery channel late one night. Picture melons splitting open, pink elephants giving birth, the movie *Alien.*

Ignoring the query concerning her kids, she will say, *You seem agitated. Does this subject bother you?*

Tell her you love kids. Always have.

Harbor many resentments, like the fact that when you tell her about your life, and it feels like your insides are being squeezed through your mother's spaghetti strainer, she will show no emotion. No concern. She will be professional. She will not interrupt you. Tell yourself, she is incapable of understanding your complexity. However, you will continue because your parents are taking out a second mortgage on their house to pay for these sessions—and because it's Sunday, and if you weren't here you'd be in church or at your Aunt Noreen's place babysitting her kids because she's laid up in bed after faking a

fall in the local K-Mart. *For a nest egg*, she says. There isn't much to do in a small town, so all things considered, you're better off where you are.

The therapist will pull down on the tight, salmon-tinted front of her suit jacket, which isn't her color and makes her look bloodless and poached. She will ask, *When did you first know you were attracted to men?* Pause and gape at the ceiling, pretending to be deep in consideration, despite the fact you've known the answer to this question since you were eight years old. Tell her, you blame your friend Mark's older brother, who wore a pink shirt, on purpose. She will say, *You seem to blame a lot of people for your sexuality. Could it be that it's no one's fault?* Look flustered, and then nod sagely. Say, *That's definitely a possibility.*

SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE ONE:

Out behind the tool shed-- where your best friend Mark's father maintains a safe haven of metal drill bits, sawdust, and dirty magazines-- you're being held hostage. Mark's older brother has you held to his chest, a hand over your mouth. You will be able to smell the residue of soap on his thick fingers. His knees to both sides of you will assert a slight pressure to your body. He will whisper softly into your ear, *No biting, or I'll snap your neck.*

You are eight years old. In front of the shed and to the right will stretch the snipped lawn of Mark's backyard. There will be what suffices for a fort set up in the mimosa tree at the property line, before the fields of corn that roll out to a small airport where single-engine crop-dusters are lifted onto the arms of the wind. The fort will

consist of a platform of boards about three paces across with a rope tied to an adjoining branch. It's a broken arm waiting to happen.

On any other day, the lawn would be adrift with gung ho, young male aggression, and dandelion seeds. The three of you-- Mark, your brother Shawn, and yourself—would play war with plastic guns and unripe persimmons as grenades. One man holds the fort while the others try to take it by siege. You'd feel like you'd earned your scars, which amount to a skinned knee and a yellowing bruise on your neck caused by a particularly nasty grenade.

Today is different though. Mark's older brother, who is just a year from graduating high school, will decide to enlist. Think of him as a Navy S.E.A.L, his muscular arms parting the jungle tangle of tiger lilies and bearded irises. Unbeknownst to your compatriots, he will grab you as you head for the line of persimmon trees to reload on ammunition. You will struggle fruitlessly against the iron bars of his arms, and for reasons nameless, you will be very aware of his touch on your skin. Feel something like a charge run up your back.

The others will not yet have noticed that you're missing, but you know it is simply a matter of time. You can hear their shouts above the hum of cicadas and the rattle of the air conditioning unit in back of the house. Try to gain a tactical advantage. Think about what you know of the enemy. Fact one, the enemy is prone to wearing pink Hawaiian shirts. You mentioned it just last week to Mark as you watched his brother climb into the family Plymouth. Here's how the conversation went.

Your brother's wearing pink, Mark, you taunted.

He responded with, *Yeah, but my mother says it's okay for a guy to wear pink if it's a Hawaiian shirt. That's the only time. Otherwise, you're a fag.*

You didn't ask what a fag was.

You don't know what a fag is, do you?

Your brother, as usual, saved you. *It's when a guy stops liking girls and starts liking guys. And then if he doesn't get himself straightened out in time, his dick shrivels up and falls off. Then he becomes a girl.*

For a week now, you'd spent a good deal of time looking at men's crotches. Monitoring their convexity versus concavity. Several people have mentioned it, and your father has begun to look at you funny over the morning paper. The results of your study are inconclusive.

Try not to think of your failures. Concentrate on the problem at hand—namely, the hand over your mouth. Fact two, Mark's brother is really strong. You come against this fact every time you struggle to escape, his body like a steel trap. Fact three, he sleeps with a knife under his pillow. You remember Mark telling you this, the very idea engendering a feeling of admiration in both of you. *Why?* you asked.

Just in case someone breaks in while we're sleeping, Mark said. *My brother's a bad ass.*

Fact four, you're fairly confident that Mark's brother has genitals.

Weigh the information that you have—pink, pecs, knife, penis. It's not a lot by way of escape plans, but the repetition of "p" sounds is nice and it's all you have to go on. Suddenly, the yard will go quiet and in the hush you will hear the organic swell of your captor's lungs behind you. Mark and Shawn will have sensed that something is

amiss, like sailors sensing a drop in the barometric pressure. Shawn will wonder aloud where you've gotten off to. It's only a matter of time before you are rescued.

Come suddenly to the realization you don't want to be liberated. Your mind will grow frantic and irrational. You will begin to cook up wild schemes in which you switch sides, turncoat. Imagine you and Mark's brother sitting beside a campfire in the jungles, laughing at each others' farts. You and Mark's brother hard-pressed against each other in a bunker, enemy fire raining down around you. Think of holding his knife for him. Think of his scent lodged in your throat like a stubborn pill. Brand yourself forever a traitor.

Mark and Shawn will have fanned out in a search party. You will be able to hear them getting closer. Mark's brother will rise and squat on his haunches, ready to run. He has you in his arms and he's not letting go.

Later, when this is all over, ask your mother to buy you a pink shirt. Then when her back is turned, steal a steak knife from the drawer in the kitchen. Sleep with it under your pillow.

GOAL TWO: Get a girlfriend…or two.

Your psychiatrist chews on a Bic pen, rotating it between her teeth as she listens. The pearly enamel flirts with you while you talk. In your seat, grow quiet and fidget. Begin to notice how the skin of your thighs sweats and sticks to the green leather. Think of jungles in Cambodia.

What did you think about what Mark said… about fags? On the last word, she will hook the fingers of her hands into politically sanctioned quotes.

I thought he was full of shit. Be proud of the way your vocabulary has expanded.

She will say something like, *How did this make you feel?* or *Have you ever been called a fag?*

Nod your head and keep your face as open-ended as a horoscope. Say, *It's nothing new,* in a seasoned manner. Then try and divert attention away from yourself. Say, you think it always bothered your brother more than you. That you were called a fag in school, that is.

Why do you think that is?

Think about this question for a second. Come up with an answer. *I guess he resented the fact that his brother was a pussy.* Hook your fingers around the last word. *He always said I needed a girlfriend.*

She will repeat the question from above. Shrug your shoulders and look put upon. Say, *It definitely confounds the enemy, don't you think?*

SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE TWO:

Fast forward eight years. The war is over, and what has grown in its place is a cold arms race. You are sixteen years old. You have a bedroom in the basement of your parents' house that smells musty when it rains. You have a stereo, a collection of wildflowers pressed under sheets of plastic in a photo album, and a bed with silk sheets that you took from the closet upstairs, which were never used after your parents married. You are aware of certain ironies.

In high school, choose your clique carefully. Weigh all options. Consider how you feel about sports cups, horticulture, bodily mutilation. Opt for the edgier circle of friends. The ones who smoke weed in bathrooms, who look like a fan club for Satan and apathy, who consider bisexuality a viable option for girls. Make friends with two females named Columbia and Magenta, who will have sacrificed their Christian names for the sake of image, taking on the personas of characters from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Columbia will be a born-again pagan, with a diamond chip through her nose and blue-purple black hair. Magenta will possess an air of mystery, her hair lightning frazzled, raven black, her nose hooked like a dangerous femme fatale. On weekends, you will gather in the dens of their homes to plan school massacres and to bitch about your other classmates who just don't get you. Columbia and Magenta's parents, ex-bikers and hippies, will make you cookies and disappear respectfully when the girls decide to roll a joint, drop some acid, dye their hair.

If you don't count what you do to yourself, you're still a virgin. At night when you lie awake, it will be next to impossible to think of anything besides genitals, or to keep from touching your own. Try to have sex dreams involving your two girlfriends. Fail miserably. Magenta will be replaced by her leather-clad, Hell's Angels father whose right forearm will bear a sine-curve muscle and a tattoo of a devil giving the finger. Find this mildly disconcerting. Random images of chrome and grease will float through your mind.

This will be an awkward time in your life. Your various body parts will often be swollen, a stainless steel spike driven through an eyebrow, an ear lobe, a nipple-- like a vampire hunter's mishap. During geometry class, while classmates are proving theorems

on the perfect conical shape of your teacher's breasts, feel the blood throb around these punctures. Think this is the pain you must endure to be "dope." This is what your girlfriend, Columbia, will have said before impaling your ear with a safety pin, two cubes of ice for anesthesia. Your other girlfriend, Magenta, will say you look like Billy Corgan, which is also "dope."

Give yourself over to these girls. Allow yourself to be reinvented. Tell them, you are their clay and must be molded. A life-size Ken doll in the middle of a life crisis. Columbia will dress you in corduroy pants that are too big and in flannel shirts that grow heavy when it rains. Magenta will dye your hair Smurf blue, star silver, magenta. They will compare you to pictures of Kurt Cobain and Eddie Vedder in dope music magazines, and nod their heads in approval.

Your mother will begin giving you worried looks, pinch her lips together, and try to be supportive. She will give you condoms, and say things like, *For god's sake, you don't want to get trapped in this nowhere town.* She will try to reach you. You will have quiet, tension-soaked talks about the hazards of drug use in the car on the way to your grandparents. You will see a thin glaze of fear develop over your mother's eyes, and this will terrify, confuse, and sadden you. Make you feel like you are four again, hiding in her shirt tails from Uncle Robert, who plans on grabbing you and rubbing his stubble against your baby-smooth face. Out the windows, there will be rolling hills cast in late afternoon light, pastures of puddles, women bending over in gardens to pluck weeds from the dirt. It will all make you feel like a square peg nailed through an ear lobe. Your mother will say something like, *I just want to know who my son is* or *Please, don't shut me out.*

This is the most important part. You must push her away. The car will smell of sunlight and a coconut air freshener. Don't let this make you nostalgic, taking you back to family vacations to Florida or to fishing trips in July. Steel yourself. Give her the cold shoulder, the evil eye, the *You can't understand me that easily* face. Make her feel like a round hole in a square peg. This is for her own good. Consider how many ways you will hurt her in this life. This will be a mere paper cut, a slight sting in comparison.

GOAL THREE: Find a male role model.

The sessions will sometimes frustrate you. Your psychiatrist will chalk up everything—your over-treated hair, your clothes, your acerbic glower—to cries for attention and emotional displacement. She will say things like, *As long as people are outraged by your looks, they will overlook your sexuality.* Begin to think she is a quack, a nut job, a bitch. Stare at her degrees on the wall and wonder if they are forged. Point to the pictures of her kids and say, *That one, with the blond hair and the Snoopy shirt. He's going to turn out to be a homo.* Make yourself sound like an expert on the subject.

She will laugh in that way that makes you feel like wax paper. Her eyes will sparkle for a moment, and she will bring her hand to her mouth and regard you over her fingers. Then she will say, *You're a piece of work. Definitely one of my more entertaining patients.* Love her for this.

Then, with a smile still hovering at the corners of her lips, she will ask if you have ever had a sexual encounter with another man. She knows how much she is charging, and

will not mince words. Envision space aliens that vaguely resemble genitals before answering. Then say, *Maybe once.*

SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE THREE:

Over an extended conversation at the local Pizza Hut, using pizza toppings as metaphors, tell your friends Columbia and Magenta that you are gay. The associations may go something like this—sardines = vaginas, sausages = penises, the bottle of crushed pepper = spiciness of a sexual rather than gastronomic nature. Explain to the girls which toppings interest you. Tell them you've never really cared for sardines, but sausage has been a personal favorite since you were a little boy. Columbia will be arrested mid-bite with a slice of pizza, mushrooms and fish corpses dangling by threads of mozzarella. Magenta will raise an eyebrow, but then continue eating, apparently unfazed. Ask them if they are surprised. Magenta will say something like *We kinda knew. We were just waiting for you to tell us.* Columbia will nod agreement and huff around a mouthful of cheese and greasy dough. *It's pretty obvious, dude. For Christ sake, you're wearing fish-nets.*

Take a moment to look down at yourself. You're wearing a leather jacket, a black corset with garters, netted hoses, and five inch high heels you spent the better part of the afternoon learning how to walk in. In the distorted reflection from the napkin holder, you see a face you hardly recognize. Above each eye will be a palette of eyeliner and shadow, your mouth a crushed rose wilted on the vine. Wonder why you're always the last to know things. Remind yourself to look for the tattoo on your forehead later.

Columbia and Magenta will be in full costume. The former will be in a top hat and vested suit smothered in gold sequins. The latter will be in a French maid's uniform with her hair primped and teased like male pheasant feathers during mating season. Begin to notice the attention you are getting from the other customers. They will cut eyes at you and giggle, shaking their heads into the buffet bar. Become self-conscious and brazen in equal proportions.

As the three of you get up to pay your tab, leave a tip for the waiter and blow kisses to the crowd. They will pretend not to notice. Outside, you will all climb into Columbia's station wagon, borrowed from her mother, and drive the forty miles to the neighboring town, where every Saturday at midnight there is a live showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show.* In a backpack, Magenta will have packed a couple of decks of playing cards, water pistols, Scots toilet paper, several boxes of Minute Rice, and an assortment of other odd items. These are the things you will need to fit into the crowd.

At the theater, you will feel as if you have entered another world. The movie will play on a forty foot wide screen, while below it, on a stage beleaguered with red velvet and confetti, a group of actors will act out the events taking place on screen. At particular points in the movie, there will be tasks for the audience to perform. It is vital that you not miss a cue, for the uninitiated are often singled out, a needle of spotlight pinning you to your seat like a butterfly to the board. Be ready. Don't miss your moment.

When the crowd uses squirt guns to simulate rain, think of it as a baptism. The throwing of the rice will be the closest you will ever come to a wedding of your own. You will get a paper cut from an ill-thrown queen of hearts during the "I'm Coming Home" number, but it will hardly matter. You will feel as if you have been reborn into a

kingdom of sexual autonomy and decadence. You will flounder in a sea of rhinestones, face paint, feather boas, and silk lingerie. The woman standing next to you in the aisle will grab you and kiss you hard during the orgy scene in the pool, and it will be like permission. Everyone in the theater will be celebrating their genitals. Feel redeemed, feel naughty, feel saved.

During the show, fall in love with the actor pantomiming Frank-n-Furter. Watch as he struts the length of the stage, lip syncing Tim Curry's lyrics, his thighs in fish nets will be like sculpted Greek torsos. A noticeable bulge will be bobbing in the silk pouch of his panties. He will mouth the words of every song for you. His eyes will be like dark lodestones. Feel your bones splinter into iron filaments. Be conventional and go weak at the knees.

Afterwards, when the credits have rolled and the light from the projector has ceased its magic, follow Columbia and Magenta onto the stage where the cast will hold an after hours party. There will be champagne in plastic glasses, the smell of clove cigarettes and make-up, and a strong heat rising from the floor lights. Drink several glasses of the champagne and stumble in your heels. You will find the guy who played Frank-n-Furter standing beside the bowl of bean dip in back of the stage. You will just be drunk enough to start up a conversation. Tell him something inappropriate and vaguely humiliating, such as *You were like an angel up there* or *You were so sexy, I could hardly stand it.* He will smile, somewhat drunk himself. He will lean into your ear, placing a hand lightly on your chest, and say something appropriate like *Thank you* or *You're very cute when you're fawning.* Blush like a little girl as his hand slithers down your side.

He will offer to take you backstage behind the velvet. Say yes, but grow nervous, as if there were a pinball machine being played in your stomach. Behind the curtains, comment on something idiotic. A wind machine or a stuffed owl. Frank, without responding, will place both hands on your hips and draw you close to his chest. Be prepared-- the black lace will be scratchy. As he begins to kiss you, notice the sweat on his lips, letting the sounds of exchange and laughter from behind the curtain fade into the background—just like in the movies when eyes meet and a love song comes on. Worry briefly if you're doing everything correctly. Wonder when you're supposed to breathe.

Hours later, Columbia will drop you off at your parents' house. Everyone will be asleep. You will stand on the porch and watch as the headlights of the car disappear into the night. Inhale deeply so that you may catch the ghost of Frank's scent on your lips. In the distance, there will be heat lightning and the rumble of something building. Feel electric. Feel reckless and driven, the blood vessels under your skin like whips, the hair on your head standing on end.

GOAL FOUR: Be stoic in the face of disaster.

Your therapist will ask you to talk about your family. Try to divert her. Tell her your grandmother was distant and an unapologetic racist. Tell her you find horses to be mildly erotic animals. See if she bites.

She will say, *I want to talk about your family now. Tell me about the day you told your mother you were gay.*

Your heart will sound like an accordion being played badly at a funeral. Throw up a wall, an ocean, an abyss around you. Nail shut what doors you can. Ask her why she feels this is important.

She will respond with, *To be frank, I'm beginning to wonder what the need is for your being here. You seem like a healthy teenage boy.*

Say, *Looks can be deceiving.* Tell her you're a mess, a wreck, a debunked product. Tell her you think constantly of genitals. Want more than anything for her to think that you are special.

She will give you a level look. Her skin will not twitch an inch. *That's why I want to talk about your family. There's obviously not a problem with your extra curricular activities. But I need to know how your family relationships fit into you.*

Wonder at this turn of phrase.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE FOUR:

The night of the live show, you will lie in bed after arriving home wide awake until morning. Perhaps you masturbate to the memory of Frank's presence leaned up against you, like a Victoria Secret model gone rough around the edges. In the early hours of morning, a late spring storm will pass above the house. The wind will be deep and guttural around the eaves, the house groaning under the weight of clouds. This will be like an epiphany. The earth shook. The sky was rent. You will decide it is time to tell your mother everything, with obvious omissions.

You will already be tired of the constant self-awareness. The fear that at any moment some Freudian slip might expose you. That you'll be seated at the kitchen table, parents and sibling surrounding you, and ask your mother to please pass you the butter and a queer of corn. Remind yourself of how conscious you've become of how to hold your hands, your posture. You are always mindful of the rules. Earring in the left ear. Don't lisp. Don't order virgin drinks with umbrellas in mixed company. Pink is not an acceptable hair color for men. You will feel constantly exhausted and aroused, and you will somehow know that only one of these feelings is customary.

The next morning, you will head upstairs with purpose. You will find your mother sitting on a stool at the bar in the kitchen. She will be eating a grapefruit with a baby spoon. Go to the window of the front door and look outside. The world will be rain-washed, dew-spackled. In the yard, your father and brother will be passing a football back and forth over the still-wet grass. Your cocker spaniel, Beau, will run circles around your brother, caught up in the excitement. Find yourself thinking of Norman Rockwell paintings. Thanksgivings where your Uncle Robert hurls blobs of cranberry sauce at the striped referees on TV.

Your mother will comment on how late you got home. She will look at you as if suspecting something but will not voice her suspicions. You will expect everything unsaid between the two of you to roll like a scud of clouds over the oceans of her eyes. This is simply melodramatic drivel, and will not occur.

Tell her you have something important to say. Something that's difficult to articulate. She will immediately get wind of what's happening. She will calmly set down

her spoon and give you her attention. Expect this. She's a mother. She's been through this drill before.

You might find yourself picturing a picturesque vision of Americana—middle-class life, a solid marriage, two sons, a dog, blender in the kitchen, an expanse of backyard. Ask yourself, what the hell are you doing? Imagine you can already see the disappointment welling within her face. The grief of losing grandchildren before they've even been born. There will be a stillness in the air, like the quiet that gathers in summer evenings. Never a good sign. Open your mouth to speak, to form words, and feel them shrivel into dried husks and slither back down your esophagus.

Your mother will look at you in your speechless state and say, *That bad, huh?*

She will begin to make guesses. She will ask, are you on drugs?

Is Columbia pregnant?

Have you pierced something unmentionable?

Say no. Then she will look at you calm as cabbage, and ask if you're gay, and like that, a snap of fingers, a bolt from the blue, it will be over.

GOAL FIVE: Risk everything.

She will ask, *So what has your life been like since you came out?*

Tell her what she wants to hear, but is only partially true. Something vague like, *Peaches and cream. A sundae with a cherry on top. Cloud nine.*

Actually, it's been a seven and half as far as clouds go, but one can't expect miracles. She will smile, and talk about the progress you've made. She will even venture

to admit that her role in these proceedings has been minimal, and that she doesn't see as how further therapy is needed. While you're doing this, your psychiatrist will smile at you, her eyes glistening in their beds of coal-black mascara. The spider fern will turn in the breeze from the air conditioner, and the dust in the light from the window will settle on the varnished desk. She will respond with, *You're ready to grab the world by the balls, no pun intended,* or *I'm afraid you're perfectly unconventionally normal.*

Be prepared. At this moment, you may feel a loss so great it will half-life your heart. Think about how many skins you have shed in this room. So many, in fact, you may expect to look into the corners and see the shadows of them waving to you in a manner only children display-- with an excitement and zeal most leave behind.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE FIVE

After the news is delivered, after you've "come out," your mother will nod as if she expected as much. She will open her mouth to speak, and suddenly you will begin praying for a diversion. Anything to stop the questions that are coming. Hope for a satellite to dislodge from orbit and come crashing into your living room, or for a rift in space-time to open in the microwave. Instead, what you will get is your father bursting in at that moment, saying *You'll never believe what I heard from Cupcake next door.* He will tell the family about an F5 tornado that touched down in the neighboring county the night before. He will herd up the family, drive you like cattle into the Blazer, and steer toward the scene of catastrophe. This will be nothing out of the ordinary. Say your father has a strange fascination for tornadoes. Say he watches Discovery and the Weather

Channel avidly for any kind of special on “nature’s fury.” Convince yourself this is not a leap. Not a *deus ex machina*.

Your town is full of his type. Most of them stumbling day to day, working dead-end, factory jobs, trying to make ends meet. All of them in their off time developing strange hobbies and obsessions to make themselves feel interesting and worthy of note. Think of your cousin with his exotic, five thousand dollar saltwater aquarium. Or the eccentric on the other side of town you read about in the newspaper, who rigged together a transistor radio and an eight-track player in order to communicate with the home-world, somewhere in the vicinity of Orion’s belt buckle. For your father, it’s the chaos of weather that turns his crank. This will be old-hat in your neck of the woods. Tell yourself, these people are not crazy, they’re just bored. They want to believe they are special. Don’t find the heart to blame them.

Your mother will sit in the front seat with your father, silent as you have never seen her, answering questions put to her in monosyllables. Your father and brother will begin to joke, talking about the hazards of life in mobile homes. How tornadoes are God’s sly, yet firm way of saying, *Get that shit off my planet.* Try to ignore them. Concentrate on your mother. Briefly, wonder what she is thinking, then turn your attention to the windows and the passing landscape—the weeds on the roadside, the alternating fields of corn and cows, the birds perched upon power lines defying everything you know about gravity.

You will arrive at the site of devastation in the haze of late morning. The change will be obvious and profound. The path of the funnel is like the path you imagine Jack’s giant would have made. Your father will whistle softly under his breath as you drive by

ruined houses turned on their sides or scattered like McDonald's fast food wrappers on the sides of the Interstate. Cars will be stacked in pillars, the tatters of clothes fluttering in the trees like the skins of their former inhabitants. Thin sticks of people will wander through the wreckage, turning over plaster and splintered wood, looking for anything recognizable. A soap dish, a spatula, anything. The silence of the car will be palpable, everyone caught up in the awe wind sometimes makes.

Look at your mother's face reflected in the passenger mirror as she stares out the window. Her expression will be unreadable, and you will not be able to help yourself wondering if she can relate to these people who have seen their homes picked up, rearranged, and handed back to them like a broken puzzle. Find yourself thinking of her as slightly petty.

As you drive away from the footpaths of gods, the previous humor will return to your father and brother, a buffer to the storm. They will start swapping jokes again, as you withdraw into a corner of the car with your own thoughts gathered about you. Begin to think of when you will see Frank again, and when would be an appropriate time to tell him that you love him.

Then, your brother Shawn will crack a joke and the word "faggot" will drop like furniture from the sky. Your father will laugh. Your mother will stiffen.

She will turn and say, *Shawn, I don't want to hear you using such language in this family ever again. Do you understand?* Something to that effect.

Your mother's nostrils will flare, like the last sight a matador ever sees. Your father will giggle, smelling thunder, and respond with *He's just joking. Jesus!*

What will result will be a quiet kind of truce wherein no one will say anything. Turn your attention to something else. Something important which you've neglected, like the future. Think of the plans you've outlined with Columbia and Magenta, an escape route out of town on the day of graduation. Picture yourself driving on the only highway, toward a horizon that runs ahead of you forever. Columbia will have only one request, the only one she has ever had. She will want to drive to New Mexico and tool down Highway 666, smoke a joint, and let the past roll like road kill under the tires. Out the window will fly a feather boa, red feathers lined with silver, like a flag driven into the landscape of some alien world.

As a peace offering, your father will drive you all to an overlook where a cliff will drop away into green rolling valleys and frame houses built in lines straighter than the sex dreams of Jerry Falwell. Your family will line up at the side of the road, leaning on the metal barrier, and watch the world unfold below. Your mother will take your hand and squeeze it within hers. There will be wind in the tops of sycamores, swallows slicing the sky, swooping in close and then veering off. In no particular order, you will think of genitals, tornadoes, and the previous day. Maybe your mother will lean in and tell you this is where your father and she shared their first kiss. Maybe you will tell her of yours.

What will overtake you at this moment will be a realization that there isn't very much separating you from the people in those white, geometric houses. The zombies slouching their way through the next blue-light special, thinking if they only had a brain. You will look down and see yourself standing on a knife blade, balanced between your hopes for freedom and a whimpering need of warmth. Feel as American as apple pie, Graceland, Oprah on channel six, loud color—and know someday you will unpack an

attic full of junk and kitschy cast-offs onto your front lawn for a rummage sale. Strangers will wander through the maze of your life and think they know you. Spread out, it will all look like a map you remember from grade school--divided into territories, states, cities, homes-- a whole teeming nation of desires.

The Behavior of Sea Creatures

After my mother died of cancer, Granny Gen moved out of her house and came to stay with us. She said she couldn't live anymore with Grandpa, him constantly making a racket slamming doors and going up and down the stairs. She especially hated lying in bed at night, listening to him breathe around the wet pocket of phlegm hung at the back of his throat. "It was something awful," she said. Her decision surprised everyone, considering the fact that Grandpa had been dead for nearly eight years. "Lord alive, you'd think that man would allow me some peace after seventy-six years. It wasn't enough he kept me awake wheezing the last year he hung on, now he's got to ruin what little sleep my arthritis will allow me." So the spring ended with Granny dragging a shabby leather trunk across the road toward our house, leaving a rising column of dust in her wake.

On the day my mother was buried, me and my brother Shannon had the worst fight of our lives. It was at the funeral home. My mother had been laid out in a coffin with light-blue silk lining the inside. She was wearing a white dress that made her look fuller than she had in the hospital. Shannon and I were alone in the viewing room, standing beside banks of lilies and asters, which were my mother's favorite. I was trying hard not to look at my mother's face. She didn't look peaceful as I had expected, but like she was hollow inside and held together with wires. I was waiting for her to snap like a fiddle string when Shannon suddenly approached the coffin and began unbuttoning the front of Mother's dress. "What are you doing?" I stuttered.

“I want to see the scar,” my brother mumbled. He was having trouble getting the pearl buttons through their holes. Fumbling at the collar of the dress, his fingers looked meaty and swollen. “I wonder what a woman looks like with no breasts. I bet they scoop them out like ice cream.”

“Stop it, Shannon.” I tried to make my voice sound tough, like Shannon’s, but it broke mid-sentence.

“Fuck off, Ribbons. You ain’t got Mama here to protect you anymore.”

Before I even knew what was happening, the candelabrum from the table beside me was in my fist. The blow hit Shannon above his left eyebrow, the edge of the metal slicing through his skin. The candlelight wavered during the swing and then vanished in wisps of coiling smoke. Shannon stood stunned for a moment, wax curling down his face, and then his forehead opened like a flower.

It had taken both my father and Reverend Starks to pull Shannon off of me. Shannon was eighteen years old, four years my senior. It was not exactly a fair fight. In the background, I could hear Granny Gen yelling, “Go for the testicles, Rieland. It’s your only chance.” By the time it was over, my suit was covered in blood, some of it mine, and I was crying. Shannon’s forehead had to be sewn up. It took eighteen stitches, and the black threads made a crescent-shaped zigzag pattern that looked like a third eyebrow.

That night, Daddy whipped both of us with a willow cane from the backyard. He said if we ever embarrassed the family like that again, we’d both be laid up with Mother in the cemetery. I never told anyone what Shannon had been doing to Mother, and I don’t know if anyone noticed. If they had, nothing was said. It wouldn’t have mattered anyhow. Shannon had been doing shit like that for years.

For the next few months, I avoided Shannon, which was easy enough to do where we lived. Except for our house and Granny's old place, there was no one for miles in any direction. Just wide open space with a hell of a lot of cover. After Granny Gen came to live with us, I started hiding out in her old house. There, it was like the world forgot I existed. Like it never knew I was there.

*****

Our house stood at an angle from Granny Gen's property. On three sides were my father's fields, and behind them, the deep woods spun out around the lake. In the summers, the winds picked up, and the green body of the cornfield surged like an ocean. Lone crows rose and fell into the fields like flying fish, while the wind moved over the tassels of the stalks in slow-moving waves. I had never seen the ocean, yet my mother used to tell me about the movements of the Gulf down in Florida, the mass of everything stirred by unknown and invisible influences. Sometimes I wondered if this is why my mother stayed all those years, hundreds of miles from the waters she had learned to love. Perhaps the sound of the corn driven before the wind convinced her the Caribbean lay blue and teeming just outside her window, waiting for her like faith.

Center, Tennessee, so named because it lies in the middle of the county, rests nestled between Laurel Hill Lake and the thick pinewoods that run along the high ridges to the north. Spread along the red-chert roads are farms separated by fences and alternating fields of cotton, tobacco, and corn. Over the years, little has changed. Abandoned silos stand out against the sky like silver bullets, while kudzu wraps its arms around anything that will stand still long enough. My father's family has lived here for four generations, ever since my great-grandfather came over from Germany. It was the

only home any of us-- me, my father, or my older brother Shannon-- had ever known. My father was a farmer, and he owned every inch of land between Sugar Creek and the edge of Center Woods, which was not that much when it came right down to it, but it got us by.

Granny Gen's house had been falling apart ever since Grandpa's death. The paint on the ceiling was webbed with water stains and peeled in places, revealing the bare ribs of the boards underneath. Half the windows were broken and stuffed with cloth. Under the house, a family of opossums had made their den, and in the attic brown bats clung to the rafters. A colony of bees had built their hive in-between the laths of the walls, and you could hear them through the thin plywood. During the day, the bees poured out of the walls like flecked sunlight, while at night the bats moved out in swarms. This was probably the real reason Granny Gen decided to migrate. With so much life moving in, it must have been hard to believe the house was still hers. "The woods is coming into that house, and I'm too old to stop it. I had to get out of there before it took me over." But Father told a different story. "Rieland, I want you to help me look after your Granny Gen," he said. "I know it hasn't been long since your mother's funeral, but Granny Gen's mind is going. I need you to try and be there for her."

Granny was never like everyone else. As she put it, she was open to influences. The stories and histories that are etched onto our lives came to her like a secret language, and for her, everything had its tale to tell. The weather blew in over the fields, and broke into gibberish in the tops of the trees, and she stood there listening. Or that's how it seemed, at least. It was Granny Gen who taught me how to tell if winter were going to be harsh by looking at the fur on the woolly worms in the fall.

“If the fur is red, then it’ll be a mild winter,” she said. “But if the wool is black, you better buckle down for some cold.”

My father said Granny Gen listened to things she shouldn’t be listening to. Sometimes the world doesn’t whisper. Sometimes it screams. She supposedly saw spirits of people who had passed away. One summer when she was twelve, black widows had nested underneath the floorboards of her house, and they crawled through the chinks in the floor at night. Granny had known this was a bad sign, but she didn’t say anything. A week later, her father was dead. He was found in the barn with a shotgun in his right hand and a hole where his temple should be. No one ever really knew why.

I listened to her tell these stories while she sat under the oak behind our house, shelling peas or stringing beans. “It was awful. Simply awful. On the morning after we buried your great grandfather, I went out while it was still dark to milk the cow, and as I opened the doors of the barn there was my father. He had a hole as big as your fist through the back of his head, and the shotgun was clenched in his fingers. I just stood there, not knowing what to do. He turned to me with this sad expression, and brought his finger up to his lips to signal that I should be quiet. Do you know what he said to me, Rieland? He said, ‘Shhh! Hunting vermin.’ I never went into that barn again after that.”

Granny Gen told a lot of stories that summer, and I stayed up late into the evenings listening while fireflies hovered around her head. Looking at her then, her hair rising in thin wisps like smoke from a brush fire, I could almost believe what she was saying, that there really were things waiting and watching from the darkness. Then I remembered what my mother taught me. A way to see the world as chemical and

reasoned. That there were no such things as haunted houses and spirits, only haunted people.

*****

My mother left Center after high school and had gone down to Florida to study marine biology at the University of Miami. She specialized in octopus behavior, and planned on writing her dissertation on cephalopod pigment cells and their role in octopus defense. She came home over the summer to find a quiet place to write, but what she found instead was my father. She had been staying at her parents' house beside the railroad on the west end of town, writing at night and sleeping most of the day. I know this because she too told me stories, stories about the way the world worked, but different than the ones Granny Gen had to tell.

My mother was several years older than my father, and she remembered him as the lanky boy who sat watching her in church or during Mrs. Lambert's lectures on biology in high school. He was also the boy who watched her while she sunbathed naked beside the lake, as she did on occasion to get away from the stuffiness of her parents' home. There was a particular inlet that run upon a sandy bank, which my mother knew of and frequented because of its seclusion. What she didn't find out until later was that her hiding place was situated at the back edge of my father's family's land. My father always hid behind a line of sumacs, where he thought he was unseen, but my mother always spotted him. She had an eye for noticing things. At the time, she'd been mildly amused. She liked the idea of someone watching her as she swam.

When my mother returned to Center from college that year, she discovered that the lanky, walleyed boy she remembered had changed. "He still looked so child-like and

innocent that summer," she said. "But there was something different about him. He was more daring. Of course, I was different too. It didn't take me long to convince him to come out from behind the sumac."

Three months later, my mother was pregnant with Shannon. When she told my father, he immediately got down on one knee and asked her to marry him. In response she started kicking him and didn't let up until my father broke down crying. Another month and they were married, but with the understanding that my mother was only waiting long enough to have the baby and then return to finish her degree. Of course, this never happened, and I've often wondered what my mother thought about in the long nights as she listened to the wind. What it must have taken to convince her to stay.

*****

On the day Granny Gen moved in, Shannon took a can of lighter fluid from under the sink, sluiced down the rollout couch in the living room, and set a match to the soaked cushions. When Mother died, he said he thought he'd gotten rid of all the crazy women in his life. There was no love lost between Shannon and me. He had always resented the attention I received from Mother. So in response, he started setting fire to things. The first to go up was the dead apple tree in the backyard, then the old abandoned Hempstead place in the woods behind our house. He even tried to burn down the barn at one point, but my father caught him in the act.

Shannon and I had been engaged in a war of sorts ever since I could remember. No official declarations were ever issued from either side, but it was understood. Mother protected me most of the time, but even she couldn't be watchful at all hours of the night and day. When I was eight, my father took Shannon and me fishing at the lake. On my

brother's first cast, he let go of the release too soon, and hooked my left ear with a barbed bass jig. It had to be cut out and my ear never mended completely, and since then my brother had taken to calling me Ribbons. Shannon said it was an accident, but I knew better. This was the kind of relationship we had, a listing of scars. I felt I had evened the score on the ear with the candelabrum, but there were others. The shiny line on my left arm caused by a thrown hubcap, and the red strawberry on my right thigh that never healed after Shannon tied me to the back of the four-wheeler and dragged me through the field. My only triumph had been the nail of Shannon's pinkie toe that fell off and never grew back. I dropped a fifty-pound free-weight on it after a fight with him. That was how we related as brothers. No rules and no room for amnesty. Blood had already been drawn.

*****

On the day of their fourth wedding anniversary, my father had a saltwater tank installed in the living room, complete with living, blood-red coral and sand from the Gulf. My mother was six months pregnant with me when Daddy drove down to a hobbyist shop in Florida and bought an octopus for the tank. It was a Caribbean reef octopus, species *Octopus briareus*. My mother named it Legs. It had the coloration of cotton candy, and it moved along the bottom and sides of the tank like a blush. Octopi are normally nocturnal, and my mother watched it at night. As I got older, I watched with her, at first poised upon her lap, and then later at her side. The lights from the tank moved across her face in bright scribbles, making her both beautiful and strange at the same time. Every year, nearing the eve of their anniversary, Legs would die. This was not abnormal, as my mother later explained, a year being the normal life span of most adult octopi. So every year, my father made the same trip down to Florida, and every year I

watched as my parents' marriage was rejuvenated by an eight-legged sea god, an unlikely messenger of love.

My mother carried no illusions about the way life worked. She had taken her lessons from the ocean-- the way it could be stunning and deadly. When I was born, my mother began pouring her dreams into my ear like rainwater. Watching Legs navigate his crystal tank, she would tell me everything she knew of octopi. The way they could change color depending on their environment, going from lipstick pink to muddy brown. The magic with which they disappeared into clouds of ink. She even took him out of the tank at times and let his tentacles wrap around my arm. I always gasped at the sheer exhilaration of how it felt, like a hundred kisses crawling over my body. Standing there in the blue light from the tank, Legs cradled in-between our arms, she whispered into my ear, "One day, Rieland, you're going to live by the sea."

Once, when we were younger, Shannon made an effort to share in these nightly experiences with Legs, but my mother made it clear that such was not possible. He stood in the threshold of the kitchen doorway and watched the two of us, me with Legs cribbed in my arms and my mother reciting her lessons from heart.

"Mariners used to call octopi 'devilfish,' in the old days. They thought octopi were monsters that would pull sailors from their ships and drown them in the sea."

"Can they?" I asked.

"Of course not. That was simply ignorance. The only real monsters are people. Nothing else in nature is capable of cruelty."

I saw Shannon out of the corner of my eye try and edge his way into the living room. The movement alerted my mother to his presence. She turned to him. “What are you doing here? I thought you were helping your father with the threshing.”

Shannon stopped and began to kick at a dried clod of dirt caught in the threads of the carpet. He mumbled through the purr of the aquarium filter, “We finished early and Dad said I could go.”

“Stop smearing mud into the carpet, Shannon. Is it too much to ask that you not ruin what few comforts we have in this house?”

“Sorry.”

As my mother spoke, Legs moved up my arms and began to wrap himself around my neck. He pulled himself up my chest using his tentacles for leverage. In his wake, he left a wet trail of fluid staining the front of my shirt. The cold puckers of his tentacles sent violent shivers down my spine as they suctioned to my skin. “Mom!” I wheezed as Legs’ grip tightened.

My mother turned back to me and smiled. “Is he getting away from you? Here, let me take him.”

Shannon took another half step into the darkened room, edging into the undulating blue circle of light. “Can I hold him?”

My mother turned her back and began to pour Legs back into the tank. She did not look at Shannon when she answered. “Not right now, Shannon. He’s had enough excitement for one day. Maybe next time.”

Shannon dropped his outstretched arms to his side and wedged them into his pockets. “Why does Rieland get to hold him, and I don’t?” he demanded. Even then, Shannon had a backbone.

My mother seemed exasperated by the question and she slammed the lid of the tank, the sound of which seemed enormous in the stillness. “Shannon, stop being selfish. You always did think of nothing but yourself.” Her voice betrayed a long-growing frustration and resentment. “Why don’t you run out to the barn and see if your father needs any help putting up the machinery?”

Shannon retreated through the kitchen, a cold layer of frost forming over his eyes. Secretly, I think my mother resented Shannon for keeping her in Center. He was never before met with open hostility from my mother. In fact, she relegated all issues of discipline regarding Shannon to our father. From my mother, Shannon received nothing but a cold exclusion. I think our father noticed Shannon’s pain, and tried to protect him. That’s why, later, he allowed Shannon to get away with the things he did. It was a form of atonement of sorts. As a result, Shannon’s anger took shape in the small fires he tended and hedged, stoked with his hatred until they erupted in brilliant conflagrations that consumed everything in their paths.

*****

Granny Gen claimed she still saw Mother every so often, but only faintly. Not like Grandpa, who she said hung on like the smell of cat piss. “I usually see her standing beside that stinking tank, looking in at that monstrosity.” After her death, it became my job to feed Legs, so every evening I traveled through the woods to Ham Bottom Creek. There I rolled up my pants’ legs and stood in the glare the light made upon the chilly

water. I turned over round, flattened rocks along the bottom, looking for crawfish. Once I snared one big enough, I headed back to the house. I always found Legs hovering at the top of the tank, waiting for me as I unclasped the lid and held the crawfish over the water. Legs took the victim with a flick of his arm and then squeezed until there was an audible crack. It was an intimate and devastating love.

After the incident with the couch, Shannon disappeared for two days and returned home on the eve of his nineteenth birthday. That night, my father took him out behind the barn and gave him a stern talking to; saying that if anything like that happened again, Shannon would be out on his own. I had listened to the whole exchange from the loft of the barn. The moon had just risen huge and burning over the fields, and my father looked small and ineffectual under its light. Shannon nodded to everything my father said, but I could tell by the way he leaned arrogantly against the wheel of the tractor that nothing was really sinking in.

Like my mother and Granny Gen, I too had begun to notice things. When my mother died, I found a stack of her old biology books from college in the back of her closet. I read them at night when everyone else had gone to bed. I struggled over words like *germination, zooxanthellae,* and *spermatozoa*. I never really fully understood what they meant, but I was fascinated by the girth of the words as they filled my mouth. I became fascinated with the study of ecology, a branch of science which states that every living thing exists at the mercy of its environment. A fish couldn't live outside of water, just as a camel couldn't last in the Arctic. Everything had its place within the world. In the ecology section of the book, words like *community* and *niche*, survival of the fittest, jumped out at me from the page. My mother told me it was possible to understand any

living organism as long as you could observe it in its natural habitat, like the way we observed Legs in his tank, the waters of the Gulf replicated through salt tablets and pH levels. It was then that I began to think seriously about my place within the world, and I became possessed by an idea, the notion that you could encapsulate the world outside, and with patience, figure it all out.

From the well house out back, I started taking the Mason jars my mother had used for canning. I punched holes in all the lids. At first, I started simply, only taking things from around the house: fireflies, grasshoppers, toads, potato bugs, whatever I could find. I learned what each thing needed for survival through a combination of common sense and trial and error. Other than the few unforeseen accidents, I was able to create tiny pockets of the world, perfectly capable of containing and supporting life. Under a canopy of apple blossoms, the June bugs coupled on their torn beds of grass. The praying mantis I'd found in the garden deposited hundreds of thousands of silvery eggs onto a segment of stick, each one hardening beneath a coat of protective slime. I kept everything a couple of days before letting it go, making notes in a folder about coloration, feeding habits, and sex, if at all determinable.

Granny Gen said I was a regular zookeeper. After she vacated her house and the burned shell of the couch was moved to the front yard, Granny slept in my room and within a week the sheets smelled of camphor and mint. I didn't mind so much, except the snoring kept me up at night. However, when Granny Gen refused to sleep in a room containing innumerable jars of bugs and reptiles, I moved my collection, two jars at a time, across the road to her empty house.

On the day I entered my grandparents' old bedroom, I lined the jars along the baseboards and on the tables Granny Gen had left behind. She had taken very little with her when she left, and most of the furniture was still in its usual place. I sat on my grandparents' four-post bed and watched the jade sliver of a green snake as its forked tongue sensed the cold borders of its cage, and I thought that at any moment it was going to tell me what I wanted to know. It was going to tell me everything.

The house got hot in the summer, so I opened all the windows in the hopes that the breezes blowing in from the cornfield might find their way inside. Despite my efforts, I was salted with sweat. It ran down the sides of my chest as I wrote in my notebook. As afternoon progressed, the air began to cool, and I laid down in the bed and stared up at the ceiling. Stray honeybees stumbled in through the windows. They bounced around the ceiling as if they understood nothing about the limits of the world. In the walls beside the bed, I listened to their kin vibrate the air with their wings. I imagined the insides of the walls spongy with honey, teeming with life.

Lulled by the buzz, I drifted off to sleep. I dreamt of the oceans I'd studied in my mother's thick, glossy books. Schools of fish moving through pink coral beds in brilliant flashes of silver and bronze, while octopi turned through the water with their tentacles splayed into perfect stars. Overhead, the shadows of boats passed through the sunlight, making everything violet and dim. I drifted through it all, detached and removed, and watched as the great mysteries of the sea glided silently by. Sometimes my mother was there with me. Sometimes she wasn't.

I woke to the sound of a door slamming upstairs. Above my head, the tread of heavy boots moved across the floorboards. I sat and listened as the steps came down the

stairs and grew louder as they approached. They stopped right outside the door, and I could see under the crack the shadow of something moving on the other side. “Who’s there?” I asked, my voice huge in the heat. I closed my eyes and listened as the bees droned like machinery in the background. No one answered, and I exited through the window.

*****

Shannon wouldn’t say where he had stayed for the two days he had been gone after burning the couch, but he came back with some odd convictions. The day after the conversation with my father behind the barn, Shannon left the house at noon with a frog gigging spear, the cleaver from the kitchen, and a leather game-bag my father used for hunting quail. He disappeared into the woods until dusk. When he returned, I was sitting under the elm tree out front with a jar of blister beetles beside me, taking notes. I could see Shannon’s bag was full, and it gave off a muffled rattling noise as he walked by me and headed for the barn. Later, after Shannon disappeared into the house, I snuck out to the barn to see what was in the bag. Across the tops of the stalls, I found the bodies of five snakes. Their heads had been cut off, and blood dripped from the wounds onto the concrete floor in a quiet patter. Two of the carcasses had the stacked buttons of rattlesnakes, but the other three were a mixture of varying lengths and designs. I left them there and headed back for supper. I thought about telling Daddy what Shannon had left in the barn, but knowing that my father hated snakes more than the devil himself, I kept quiet instead, figuring my father would discover them the next morning.

If my father ever said anything to Shannon about the snakes, it did no good. He must have thought snake killer was a better profession than firebug. My mother once told

me that octopi were the most brilliant and brutal hunters of the sea. Due to their massive brain size, they were one of the most intelligent sea creatures, second only to the dolphin. Octopi had even been known to drop rocks into the shells of clams so they couldn't close, allowing them easy access to their prey. My brother Shannon was not this kind of killer. He was not calculating, but rather wasteful, like widespread pestilence or famine. Apparently, what he sought was extinction. Every day, Shannon left at the same time and returned as the sun's light melted back into the earth. Every day, the number of snakes thrown over the walls of the barn grew. The bodies writhed for hours from their reflexes, causing them to fall from the boards of the stalls. Eventually, Shannon took to nailing them to the walls of the barn.

Pretty soon there was no more room, so Shannon threw the rope-like bodies over the rafters. In the mornings, before he headed out on his hunts, he took my father's Bowie knife out to the barn and sat on an overturned bucket, skinning the hides off the snakes. He threw the fleshy insides in the ditch at the side of the road. It wasn't long before the buzzards descended in black clouds upon the grisly snake-flesh rotting in the weeds. Shannon took the hides and hung them back on the stalls where the bodies had been.

He claimed he had plans to sell the skins, but he never did, so the walls were soon filmed with glistening scales. After a while, the barn took on a rank coppery smell, and dried blood trailed into the drains of the concrete floors. The only mention of the snakes made in my presence came from Granny Gen at the dinner table. "So how many snakes are you expecting to pack into that barn out there, Shannon?" Shannon grunted at the question, and stuffed his cheeks with another mouthful of sour kraut. He then looked at Gen and shrugged. "Until there's none left," he replied.

“Fancy yourself Saint Patrick, do ya?” Granny asked.

“I like being at the top of the food chain.”

“Sounds like you don’t fancy the competition.” Granny huffed through her teeth and gave Shannon a sharp look, then returned her attention to her plate.

Shannon got the mention of the food chain from me. He had no real idea of how the world worked. He slaughtered indiscriminately, just like the angels in the old Biblical stories, only Shannon wasn’t as pretty. I didn’t particularly like what Shannon was doing. I had read enough to see that Shannon was causing a population crash in my ecosystem, and pretty soon the house was crawling with mice.

I started following Shannon on his hunts. I waited behind the well house until he headed into the corn, and then I trailed behind him at a safe distance. When he reached the woods, he began overturning logs and large stones and jabbing with his frog gig in dark crevices trying to flush something out. The first snake I saw him take was a rat snake. He shoved it down with the gig, pressing the prongs into the earth around its head until it was pinned to the ground. Then he took the cleaver from the belt loop on his jeans and brought it down on the snake’s head, severing it with a single swipe. He gathered all the snakes in this way.

I also learned that snakes were not the only things Shannon hunted. On one occasion, Shannon headed back toward the woods where the Hempstead place had been before it burned. All that was left was the stone foundation, behind which grew a thin thicket of trees filtering out toward Sugar Creek. Under the trees, violets crowded in the shade like nun’s faces looking up at the world from the forest floor.

On a blanket laid out over the violets, a young girl was picking the blue and purple flowers and tossing them into the creek. When she saw Shannon coming toward her through the shade, she jumped up to meet him, and they collided in a rough kiss. I watched them from behind the low wall of the foundation. Shannon lay on top of the girl and started running his hands up under her blouse, groping the small knobs of her breasts. Eventually Shannon started to unbutton the girl's jeans, pulling fiercely at the stiff denim. She stopped him, and giggled as she re-buttoned her jeans. "You know what I told you, Shannon Niedergesses. I don't plan to be dropping any babies anytime soon." Shannon's face took on an expression I had never seen before. His lip stuck out in a slight pout, and his eyes filled with a boyish petulance. "I'd be careful," he murmured.

The girl smiled, her coppery hair catching at the corners of her mouth. I watched in amazement as Shannon gently pulled the hair away and twisted it into thin ropes in-between his fingers. "My mother told me about boys like you, Shannon. You act all sweet and innocent, but you're really nothing but a lady killer."

Shannon smiled. "Cold-blooded," he whispered. Then he pulled off the girl's blouse, exposing everything underneath.

*****

Before she died, my mother explained that the top of Legs' tank had to be clamped at all times, because octopi are the greatest of nature's escape artists. This was the first lesson of my mother's I forgot, and two months after Granny Gen moved in, Legs disappeared. I searched everywhere. I imagined him, with colors altered to match the upholstery of the couch, moving so smoothly over the fabric he went unnoticed. I thought eventually he would show up in the bathtub or in the sink, but the weeks

stretched by into months without a trace. As time passed, the tank sat desolate by the wall. To make matters worse, Granny Gen's mind followed Legs to wherever he had gone. She became more and more insistent that she was seeing octopi everywhere.

The first instance occurred while Granny was hanging clothes on the line beside the house. Our shirts and pants were flapping in the breeze, and I watched from the window as Granny hurried to pin them down with the wooden pins. I had been keeping an eye on Granny ever since the conversation I had with my father. He worried that her condition was deteriorating. She repeated questions constantly, and she wandered away sometimes and ended up back at her old house. I always found her there, cussing out Grandpa, calling him an impotent son-of-a-bitch for leaving her alone with the woods perched at her doorstep, waiting to get in.

On the day she was hanging out the clothes, I saw her drop the basket in the middle of her task and run back toward the house. When I met her at the door, she told me that she had seen the octopus. "He was in the hole the woodpeckers drilled into the post of the clothesline. I saw him." I went out to the clothesline to investigate, but all I found was a silver-green tree frog perched at the lip of the hole. He scrutinized me with a lazy unfriendliness. I tried to show Granny, but she refused to go near the clothesline again. Over the next few weeks, Granny refused to take a bath, saying that Legs might be hidden down the drain, waiting until she filled the tub with water before he surfaced and attacked. It took me hours to talk her into bed at night, her eyes searching underneath the mattress for the cold tentacles.

Granny Gen eventually focused her fears on her old home, claiming Legs had taken it over. She claimed she saw him at night through the windows. He had grown huge

since his escape, feeding on opossums and mice in-between the walls, oozing like honey through the bee's comb. "It's waiting for us out there. Must've already gotten Grandpa, because I don't see him anymore."

My father's face took on a pained expression whenever Granny Gen started talking about Legs, as if he was confused about what to do next. Shannon wanted to get rid of her. "She's crazy. We should take her out to the barn and put her out of her misery." He received a backhand from my father for his efforts. "She's family," my father responded. "And you don't talk that way about family." I had never known my father to actually strike any of us. Shannon reared back and an expression of hurt passed over his face in a dark rush of blood. I couldn't help but smirk. Shannon glared at me, his eyes narrowing to thin slivers of glass, and then stalked off.

I looked over at my father, whose head was lowered. He made several swipes at the dirt gathered at the knees of his pants. "I shouldn't have done that," he said. "That's not how your mother would have handled it." He raised his eyes and looked at me, and for a second I thought he was going to saw something more, but then he simply turned and left the room.

That afternoon, I went to Granny's house to check on my collection. I went around back so Shannon wouldn't see me and entered the house through the screen door. The kitchen was overflowing with canned jars of vegetables and Tupperware containers. Every available inch of counter-space was taken up by junk. As I went through, I heard mice scatter through the jumble. When I entered Granny's old bedroom, I found there had been no need to avoid Shannon's detection. He had already found the place. All the jars lay scattered across the room, their jagged edges glinting in the light stealing in from

behind the curtains. Insects and tadpoles had been crushed underfoot, many no more than smears on the hardwood floor. All along the walls were nailed the head-less bodies of snakes. My green snake dangled from under the lampshade like a mock pull-string, its tail tied in a loop around the brass stem.

I looked around at the slaughter, and felt my hatred for Shannon rise up raw and new, blazing like fire through the dry stubble of a field. I walked into the room and listened to the bees, to everything they were saying, and then I knew something else was here. I looked again at the floor and noticed a trail of water that ran across the bedroom and out the door. It was as if a wet towel had been dragged through the dust. I followed it out and saw that it moved up the stairs onto the second floor. I stood listening, and over the hum of the bees, I heard a door slowly open and close up above.

As I ascended the steps, the sound of the bees dropped away and was replaced by a thick silence that was weighed down with the heat of the house. Upstairs was a hallway, and on the right-hand side was a room that did not appear to have ever been used for anything. The trail of water led to the door of a closet in back of the room, which I could see from the landing of the stairs. I didn't go any further, and I didn't call out to see who was there. I simply stood still and listened. I thought about my mother. About the day she came home from the hospital after the surgery. We had stood in the dark living room and watched Legs maneuver about the confines of his tank. My mother was wearing a light cotton nightgown, and her features looked frail and hollow in the glow from the aquarium. She had turned to me and unlaced the top of her nightgown, pulling down the front of it to reveal a long crescent-shaped gash that was held together with silver staples that glinted in the creases of her flesh. The skin around the wound was raw and slightly

purple. She took my hand and placed it on the gash, running my fingers over the mottled surface. I didn't know what to do. I was spellbound, locked somehow behind the glass of her eyes which drew in around me with an almost angry expression.

"Do you feel that, Rieland?" she asked. "This is what can happen to people when they give up their lives. They waste away from the inside. I want you to remember this, what I gave up for you." In the tank, Legs reached out with a tentacle and ran his puckered feet along the glass, as if he too wanted his turn to feel, to touch the space of an ever-expanding absence. In the dimness of the living room I noticed that my mother's chest was nearly the same color as Legs himself. The color of a fresh wound. Two months later, she was dead.

Now, as I stared into the dim room of Granny Gen's house, sweat ran down my face and into my eyes. I dug my fingers into the flaking paint of the newel post as the closet door gave a slight groan and then swung open. In the space behind the door, there was something gathered near to the floor. A bulbous head and intelligent, slatted eyes gazed out at me, while behind it, a figure stood in the gloom. A figure I could almost make out as something human and vaguely feminine. Suddenly, it seemed as if the oxygen in the air went to nothing. I took half a step forward, then my nerves broke, and I ran.

*****

The next day, Shannon found Granny Gen sitting in the bathtub. She was fully clothed with a butcher knife in her hand. She had left the water running for quite some time, and it was seeping over the top and cascading onto the floor. "What the hell are you doing?" he yelled. Granny Gen regarded Shannon from over the rim of the white

porcelain tub. She was scrunched up into a corner with her legs drawn up close to her chest. She held the knife balanced on her knees. “I’m waiting for that monstrosity to come up through the drain. Then I’m going to stab it. Thing’s getting too big for its britches.”

By then, my father and I had arrived on the scene. After a good half hour of argument, my father convinced my grandmother to give him the knife and get out of the tub. He wrapped a towel around her shoulders and tried as best he could to dry her hair. He pressed the back of his hand to Granny’s temple and discovered she was extremely feverish. “Shannon, go out to the barn and get the truck. I’m taking Granny to the hospital.” While Shannon went to the barn, I helped Daddy half-carry Granny Gen to the door. The whole time she ranted into my ear about monstrosities and ghosts. “Last night, I saw a black widow in my dreams. It was spinning something in that house.” After Shannon pulled up, my father and I placed Granny Gen in the front seat of the pickup, and Shannon jumped out and handed my father the keys. “I saw your mother and that thing in the old house, Rieland. They were both in the window last night.” Gen’s eyes were wild and frightened, and her fear was so convincing I looked over toward the far side of the road as my father jumped into the cab of the truck, but behind the broken windows I saw nothing but darkness.

My father left Shannon in charge and told the two of us to behave until he returned. Then he took off from the driveway, spinning gravel under his tires as he went. In the silence that followed, Shannon and I gazed at each other, sizing each other up. Then Shannon laughed. “Bunch of crazies in this family, Ribbons. A regular snake’s nest in this place.” With that, he spun around and headed out to the barn. I watched him go

until he disappeared inside, then I turned and went back into the house to clean up the water left pooled on the bathroom floor.

Later, as I was hanging out the bundle of wet towels I had used to mop up the water, it happened. I looked up as a cloud of bats veered in spirals through the air over the trees. I knew then something was wrong. It was far too early for the bats to be heading out. I left the clothes where they lay, and ran around to the front yard.

Across the road, smoke poured out of the windows of Granny Gen's. I could already see the flames climbing the walls like fast-growing creeper. As I ran toward the fire, Shannon stepped out the front door. He had a cigarette held between his lips, and in his hand was the gas canister from the barn. He began throwing gasoline onto the front door as I jumped the ditch and ran stumbling to the porch.

"Shannon, stop! What the hell are you doing?"

I grabbed Shannon by the crook of the elbow to stop him from flinging anymore of the gas. Inside, the rooms seemed to breathe. The wheezing sputter of air exiting dried wood escaped from the timbers. Shannon threw me off his arm and took a drag from the cigarette. "What does it look like? The house is upsetting Granny, so I'm burning it down."

"Sick mother-fucker! Give me that can, Shannon."

As Shannon turned back, he drew back his arm to continue lobbing the gasoline. I jumped up to intercept it, but somehow I ended up in front of the can and I was drenched in a golden stream of liquid. The gas formed a second skin over my body, a film of greasy fumes. I stood sputtering as the gasoline burned the inside of my nose and my eyes.

“You dumb son-of-a-bitch. The house is already burning. What the hell ya trying to do?”

“You’re going to help me put it out, Shannon.” I was already feeling light-headed from the smoke and exhaust, but I stood my ground in front of the house. Shannon laughed.

“You’ll do real good putting out a fire covered in gasoline. You’ll go up like a roman candle. Now move out the way.”

“No.” In the back of my head, I already knew this was pointless. The house was already burning from the inside and I could hear it giving itself up to the blaze. This was no longer about the house. It was about Shannon and me. Somehow I knew what Granny Gen had seen moving toward the house was this moment. I wasn’t going to be the one to back down this time. For once, the killer was going to be me.

“Get out of the way, Ribbons, or I’ll set you on fire.” My brother made as if to flick his cigarette at me. I refused to move. Along the side of the house, honey bees poured out of the walls in a windstorm of sparks. I stood staring into Shannon’s eyes, refusing to budge.

“I’ll do it,” Shannon warned, raising the butt over his head.

I smiled from the threshold of the door. “You think you’re that cold-blooded, then go ahead.” Shannon’s eyes glittered, and suddenly his right arm came up in a hook and caught me just under the jaw. I fell back into the house and Shannon grabbed the front of my shirt, turned to the side, and hurled me off the porch in one smooth motion, as if I were a bag of cotton. With the other hand, he tossed the cigarette to the base of the door and the flames bloomed and began to grow.

I lay there on the ground for what seemed like a lifetime, watching as the house was devoured from the inside out. Shannon came down the front steps, his boots bouncing off the wood, as the fire spread over the walls. He stood over me grinning. He made an affected “tssking” sound with his lips. “I don’t even know why you try, Ribbons.”

A choked sob left my lips as I laid in the dirt. I gasped for the air that had left my lungs at the moment of impact. It was then that Shannon’s face seemed to soften and his guard went down. He reached down to offer me his hand and I stared up into his face. “Come on,” he said. His features were framed against black smoke billowing into the air.

I don’t know how the stone found its way into my hand, but I hurled it at my brother’s face with all the strength I had. It hit him in the same place the candelabra had struck, above the right eye. The scar reopened and began to bead blood. Shannon reeled back, and I jumped up and headed for the shelter of the corn, knowing there was no one to pull Shannon off of me this time. The corn closed around me like a wave, and I felt sure I could hear, above the roar of the fire, Shannon’s feet pounding the ground behind me. Then another roar took its place as the wind wound through the heads of the green stalks, and this sound followed me into the trees at the edge of the woods, and left me when I collapsed there.

*****

I awoke later to the noise the wind was making in the tops of the trees. It was dark, and the smell of gasoline hung like a haze around me. It had soaked into the hairs of my arms, making them stiff as wicks. My skin had broken out in a rash, and I felt so

light-headed that I had trouble standing. When I got to my feet, I took a deep breath and doubled over vomiting into the underbrush.

After the nausea subsided, I looked around. I was having trouble remembering how I ended up in the woods. I remembered vaguely the house burning, and blood running down Shannon's face. I looked around, and could barely see anything. In the distance, a faint light glowed, and out of instinct I stumbled toward it.

In my head, there was nothing but noise. As I walked, I listened to the wind in the trees. At first, there was just the creaking of branches and the roar of the leaves, but then there was something else under the racket. It was like voices whispering, and I could almost make out what they were saying. Briars snagged at my clothes and caught in the flesh of my arm. I didn't feel anything. There was just a blunt throbbing throughout the limbs of my body, and above me, the stars seemed to unfocus, each of them growing larger and indistinct in the sky. I thought I heard someone call out my name, but when I turned to look, no one was there.

When I stumbled upon the light, I stood just beyond its reach. The light seeped from a lantern making a silver, half-dollar pool on the forest floor. In the spotlight there were two people twisting themselves together. It was Shannon and the girl. There was an ugly gash above Shannon's eyebrow, with fatty ointment smeared along the scab. Neither Shannon nor the girl had shirts on, and the girl was spread out on the raised bank of the creek. Around her, the heads of violets stood out against the white of her skin, the tiny flowers seeming strangely sinister in the artificial light, like faces sneering. Shannon cupped the girl's breasts in his hands and gently squeezed them, bringing his lips down onto the nipples.

I watched them, not saying a word. On the other side of the bright circle, above their bodies, a shape began to separate itself from the darkness. I recognized Granny Gen immediately, but she seemed somehow different. There was a solemn cast about her face, and I could hear her voice faintly above the roar in my head. *SHHHH! Hunting vermin.*

I looked back at Shannon and the girl heaving like oceans on top of one another. Shannon was struggling to pull off the girl's pants, and finally they gave way, and the white skin underneath flashed in the lantern light. The girl sighed as the denim peeled away, and there was a desperate eagerness about Shannon now. He tore at the buckle of his belt in near frenzy. The wind in the treetops picked up, and I watched as the girl spread herself through the green leaves of the violets. She took my brother into herself, and they writhed against each other, chest to chest. Their arms and legs tangled and suddenly it was like they were a new creature-- eight-legged and alien to this place, the sounds they were making no longer human.

I felt something change then, something nearly as imperceptible as a drop in the air temperature. I knew nothing would ever be the same after this. That even the best-kept worlds could be brought to chaos. The roar of the wind became a scream, a wave breaking, and Granny Gen stood smiling under the trees. Then my mother was there, just beyond the light so that I could barely make out her eyes in the dark. In her arms, she cradled an octopus as if it were an infant. She stared right through me, demanding as always, and as always, a lifetime beyond my reach.

My mother once told me that when an octopus loses its tentacle, it grows back again, magically restoring what had been lost. They were truly amazing creatures. I looked down at my skin lit up like a flare. The buzzing chorus of bees started up in my

ears, and I knew what they were saying. I had breached the door between our worlds, and walked on through. They were saying I was something different, something savage and cornered, desperately alive. Then moans of the wind and the Earth's copulating organisms reached a pitch, and subsided. I stood rooted for a moment, the breeze like a balm against the burning of my arms and face, and then I turned my back to the light.

Sliding back into the darkness, I had the idea that I could retrace my steps. Years ago, for whatever reasons, my mother made a decision—and the effects of that choice burned like a film of chemicals on her flesh, eating away at her. I couldn't help wondering what voices must have stayed her hand on the door, while outside the surge of the fields crested and became still. She should have lived like the creatures she studied, and left us to fend for ourselves. But she too, like all of us, was open to influences.

As I walked away, I thought I heard someone say my name, but I paid no attention. The sea of things seemed to drift, and the glowing eyes of predators began to circle and draw close. The pad of footfalls approached from behind me, but I was too afraid to look the killer in the eyes. I tried to run, but stumbled. Two arms snaked about my chest and caught me, pulled me back, and the tenderness in this act was terrifying, like some new and unknown species of love.

Murmurations

Jody and Maxine have been married for forty-seven years, and every morning for as long as Jody cares to remember, Maxine has set up her easel in the middle of the den and gazed out across the yard. There's not a curtain in the house, and the light in the mornings makes Jody's eyes ache. His wife, Maxine, says she needs the light to paint by, and since all she paints are bluebirds, she wants the windows open so she can watch. Out back is a manicured stretch of lawn that ends at a fencerow of iron posts and steel wire, behind which the green is taller and more thriving, interspersed with stalks of pokeberry and Jimson weed. At the top of every fence-post sits a birdhouse, each one painted red, from which bluebirds tumble. Feeders and birdbaths are spread out at intervals, filled with algae-ridden water or suet.

From the sink in the kitchen, Jody watches Maxine move her brush over the white canvas. From smears of paint, birds emerge perched on strands of barbed wire, or hover in midair above flourishing pastures. Paintings like these cover every wall of the house. Once a year in May, Maxine takes them all down, loads them into the van and drives to Wills Point, Texas to the annual Bluebird Festival, where she sells them for ridiculous sums.

Jody brings a handkerchief to his mouth to smother a cough, and Maxine pauses then continues dabbing at her palette. The two of them, both well over sixty, have lived in this house for over forty years, and every corner has accumulated some relic. The cherry wood desk, a wedding present from 1955, is now spotted with paint. The broken

rocking horse Jody's father built, in the Depression years, is propped against the fireplace. "They hold the dust," Maxine says.

The house sits at the side of Highway 11 going out of Peat Bog, Mississippi, behind a row of persimmon and cherry trees that stopped bearing fruit several summers ago. When their youngest child, April, left home in '83, Maxine stood at the window as her daughter's Accord pulled out onto the highway. Gravel from under her wheels clanged against the mailbox, and then she was gone. The next day, Maxine took to her paints with fervor. Jody remembers this. Recalls asking her, "Maxine, is there anything else you want to do?"

She had shaken her head. "I can't think of anything."

At the sink, Jody takes the Wednesday box of pills from the organizer in the cabinet. In his palm, they look like jellybeans. Yellow-green Vioxx for arthritis, blue Glynase for the diabetes, and flesh-tones for high blood pressure. After his last visit, Dr. Reynolds put him on corticosteroids for the pulmonary fibrosis, even though they only prolong the inevitable. As he bends to turn on the tap, a sharp pain centers on the small of his back, making his head swim. In his chest, air is nowhere to be found. He rubs at his throat, and the skin bunches under his fingers.

Despite the brushes, Maxine paints mostly with her hands. She says an artist's best tools are her hands—that contact with the canvas. After hours of work, her palms and fingers are caked in oils that leave rims of color around her cuticles and within the grooves of her skin. She doesn't notice it anymore. Neither does Jody. Over the past couple of years, the two of them have gone entire days without speaking, jumping when asked a question. Since Dr. Reynolds' prognosis, they've made efforts. Maxine asks Jody

questions about color. “Jody, what shade best denotes futility? Sienna and black or iron gray?”

Maxine’s brow creases, and she gnaws on the wooden handle of her brush. Lost in her art, she seems unreachable.

“Yellow.”

“Yellow? What’s so menacing about yellow?”

He thinks about this before answering. “It has something to do with what yellow expects of you. It demands you be happy, even if you can’t. And when you can’t be yellow, it doesn’t have the decency to be blue.”

“That may be the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard you say,” Maxine says. Jody agrees with her, but in the last few weeks he’s been trying to say something profound. It’s not that easy. Sixty-seven years of living, everything said and repeated at least once, nothing new.

Maxine moans from behind the canvas. “There they are again,” she says. From where Jody stands, her disembodied head floats above the top of the picture. A slash of eggshell blue shades the underside of her chin.

“There who are again?”

“The starlings. For about a week now, they’ve been trying to take over my boxes.”

Maxine’s lips turn down as she squints across the yard. From the window, Jody gazes out at the invaders. The starlings clash with the blues at the row of houses, driving them by sheer number away from the boxes. They seem to come from everywhere, their

scrawny bodies glowing with a faint violet iridescence, as if they were born from an oil slick.

"Aggressive little things, aren't they?" he says.

"A nuisance is what they are. A bunch of scavengers and disease-threats. They'll run the bluebirds out within the week."

"What do you plan to do about it?"

Maxine's shoulders slump in a way Jody finds endearing. "I don't know. We need to do something though."

"We? What can *we* do?"

Maxine doesn't respond. She's not one to be baited. Jody turns to the table behind him, its surface crowded with the disassembled innards of the hall telephone. For the better half of the morning, Jody has taken apart the pieces. He had meant to replace the hook switch, which had stopped working, but none of the pieces fit. His hands, shaky and stiffened by the work, refused to bend enough to grasp the tiny wheel and wires. You lose things in life, it's a simple fact. Jody remembers a time when his life was different—when he could do a simple thing, and the climate of his marriage was warmer. Jody was always faithful to Maxine, despite opportunities to the contrary. As an electrician, he was sent to the aid of numerous desperate women with blown fuses or faulty wiring. Years ago, Jody suspected Maxine had had an affair with some guy from Wills Point, at the Bluebird Festival, but he never found out for sure. He told himself, not for the first time, the secrets his wife kept were her own.

"Maybe you can reason with them. Explain your situation."

Maxine sighs and dust swirls around her. “You’re patronizing me.” She combines colors on her palette, mixing light blues with yellows, greens and sierra, and everything goes to a dull brown.

On the window ledge, the entering sunlight collides with Maxine’s “Bluebird of Happiness” figurine, her most treasured possession. It was given to her by their son, Chet, on Mother’s Day in 1986. Nothing more than blue glass blown into the vague form of a bird, but when the sun hits it just so, it shatters light and spins slivers of sapphire tint across the room. Every morning Maxine turns the blue glass so that the sunlight will strike it in a new way. Jody catches sight of his fist in the stark, blue-dazzled light as he goes to place the sequestered rows of meds back in the cabinet. Liver spots and flaking calcium deposits speckle his flesh, while the veins throb, vivid and aching, under his skin. He peers over at Maxine as she stands arrested, paintbrush lowered, the muscles of her arm hanging like sacks.

“I’ll get rid of the starlings,” he declares. Deep in his chest, a racking cough struggles to be released, but Jody tries to hide such things.

For several moments Maxine doesn’t say anything. She stands before the half-vacant canvas, cleaning the brush-heads with the hem of her shirt. “Jody, you know what the doctor said.”

“To hell with the doctor. I know my own body, and they’re just birds. I’ve dealt with worse.”

The starlings fly in and out of the birdhouses and gorge on the suet from the feeders. A collection of them splashes in the concrete baths, their feathers ruffled and shimmering. At the birdhouse on the far left, there’s a flash of pale blue as one of the

starlings pushes an egg out of the nest. Maxine cries out and clutches her lower lip with her hand. Jody opens the backdoor to a wave of heat. He lets out a hoarse yell through the yard, which is all he can muster, but it is hardly necessary. The starlings have already ascended in a madness of wings.

*****

Standing behind a chinaberry tree, gripping the handle of a broom, Jody wonders what got him here, eyeing the birdhouses between the branches. The instant he leaves his post, they'll return to lay claim to the boxes. The yard is quiet except for the panting of Jody's hound, Byron, who lies flaccid across the tops of Jody's shoes. His left foot tingles, but he lets sleeping dogs lie. The sun is already high above the roof, and he can feel a sunburn developing on his neck. In the late spring calm, the house behind him hums.

Jody ran the wiring in his home over forty years ago, after he had saved enough money to buy a house on the highway going out of town. He went to work daily, put in the hours and the circuits lighting the homes of other families, coming home to a house his wife had cleaned and a dinner she'd prepared. Little League, PTA, family bowling on Sundays, and then the kids graduated and moved to other states, and he and Maxine were left with what they were left with.

In '95, after Jody stopped working, he pulled out boxes of LPs from the attic. Bobby Darin. Bill Haley and the Comets. Compilations of 50s lounge music with their tinny percussion. Muddy Waters, who Maxine loved to dance to when she was young. The voices spun on the stereo, dragged out to be heard one more time. It took a day for Jody to tire of them, the voices now scratched and halting. Music was for the young.

After that, he read a book on fly fishing and the first couple chapters of John Jakes' *North and South*. He'd been asleep ever since.

Behind him, the screen door opens and slams shut. Maxine's black polyester pants glitter in the sunlight, as if they're threaded with silver. She stops behind him and her hand rises and touches her hair. "What are you doing still out here, Jody?"

"What does it look like?"

"Like you're trying to sweep the clouds out of the sky." The corners of Maxine's lips turn up and she moves her hand to her mouth to hide this.

"I'm getting rid of the birds, like you asked."

"You volunteered." Maxine pauses. "You can't stand out here forever."

Before he remembers not to, Jody grunts. The quick exhalation produces a fit of coughing. He's doubled over in the yard a good twenty seconds trying to breathe. Byron moves to the porch. Jody fights down yet another wave, calming his breathing by sheer force of will, and he catches the scent of clover. As a boy, Jody used to find four-leafs and press them into dictionaries and Bibles. A few years ago, he found one, thin as rice paper between the pages of Exodus. Since then, for all he knew, they'd gone extinct. When he looks up, Maxine's standing with her hand inches from his shoulder, but not touching it. Her concern quivers at the tips of her fingers, and Jody thinks, if there was any luck left, the earth would open and swallow him. He straightens up and waves away her hand.

"I'm fine."

She tucks her hand beneath her breast. "I called Doctor Reynolds to setup an appointment. It's Wednesday afternoon. Is that all right?"

Jody opens his arms, extends the broom skyward. “I have all the time in the world.”

Maxine looks out across the pasture, where the breeze whips across the heads of the high weeds, the mass of them moving like a sheet stretched on a line. Maxine cocks her head as if listening to something.

“What do you think they’re saying to each other?” she asks.

“Who?”

“The birds. Can’t you hear them?”

At first, he hears nothing. Then he becomes conscious of the electricity in the wires, the leaves overhead, and under and between all that are the birdsongs. They drift from out of the pasture, and Jody stands there as if he’d never heard these sounds before. They are soft, communicative sounds—chirps and titters piped out at intervals, some lasting longer than he could hold his breath. *Tzee, Tzee, Tzeeo. Wheep, Wheep.* Some almost made out a phrase. *Spring of the year.*

“I wonder if they understand each other.”

Jody takes a swing at the chinaberry tree with the handle end of the broom. A fistful of leaves tears away. They hang in the air a moment before dropping at his feet. “People are the only animals fool enough to mean something when they open their beaks.”

“Maybe so,” she says. Maxine runs her hands over the front of her pants, and starts to move back toward the house. “Don’t stay out here too long.”

Maxine disappears into the house and Jody’s left standing with the broom in the heat. He leans the length of it against the ground and props his chin on the wood like a

scarecrow—a bundle of moldy straw and weak limbs, stood out in the heat of the day. There's not a bird anywhere in sight, but he can hear them out there, hidden among the foliage.

*****

At the local Co-Op, Jody buys plastic owls and tin pie-pans on which the storeowner's wife has painted leering faces. Maxine and Jody have come here for years for garden supplies and materials for the bluebird boxes. There are shelves of feedstuffs and farming tools, insecticides and various other poisons, even homemade items like lawn-decorations that paddle with steel blades through the wind.

At home, Maxine is growing anxious. She sees less and less of the bluebirds. Before Jody left the house, Maxine had said her piece. "You can't possibly watch the yard all day, and your constant screaming is scaring away *all* the birds. Plus, all that yelling can't be good for your lungs."

Jody dumps the pie pans and the owls into a heap at the checkout counter. The owls look up at him with expressions of round-eyed surprise, as if they can't believe they've been caught so easily. He leans against the counter to catch his breath.

"How you doing today, guy? I see you're having problems with some of our aviary friends. What's the trouble? Blackbirds in your cherry trees?" The cashier is new, the nametag affixed to his red vest gives his name as Amos. His straw-colored hair is slightly cow-licked, and a thick blond mustache perches on his upper lip. A tattoo of an eagle is inked across the muscle of his right forearm. He has the look of a Vietnam vet, someone you don't quite know how to be comfortable around.

"Nice tattoo. Is that a soldier's emblem?"

Amos gives a short laugh. “Hell, no. You wouldn’t catch me within a hundred miles of a war zone. I’m a lover, not a fighter. Or I was before my wife left me. Now, I’m more of the solitary pervert-type with a chip on his shoulder.”

Jody wags his head approvingly, even though he really doesn’t appreciate the honesty. People are too open these days. “It’s how it goes sometimes,” Jody says. “Actually, I’m having trouble with starlings. They’re running out my wife’s bluebirds.”

“And I bet she wants you to get rid of them. That’s just like a woman, guy. Lure the birds in, and then expect you to clean up the shit they make. Am I right?”

Jody grins awkwardly, as if he’s unsure who the joke is on. He has always felt at a loss around people like Amos, who have a natural proficiency for bullshit. Amos shakes his head.

“A trial and tribulation, starlings. Nasty little birds. Did you know they’re not even native to America? It’s a fucked up story, really. A Yankee, named Eugene Scheiffelin, released a collection of them in Central Park. He decided that every bird mentioned in William Shakespeare’s writings deserved a place in America. So the crazy bastard imported about sixty of the devils. Before you knew it they were everywhere. Freeloaders is all they are.”

“Is that right?” Amos doesn’t look like a dilettante of ornithology, but you never know these days.

“I got to tell you though, guy. If you’re trying to get rid of starlings, you’re going about it the wrong way.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, them birds aren’t going to understand what to think about a bunch of noisy pie-pans and psychotic owls. If anything, it’ll just make them curious.” Amos scratches his crotch in an unselfconscious way, as if the two of them are old friends shooting the shit.

“What would you suggest then?” Jody asks.

“Well, guy. If it were me, I’d invest in either a high-grade poison or an air rifle. Of course the poison would be the most systematic way of doing things, but the rifle would be the most enjoyable. There’s nothing more exciting than popping those little bastards on the wing. POW, POW. POW, POW.” Amos begins taking out imaginary birds on the higher shelves of the store. “See, that’s the only course of action these kinds of birds respect.”

Amos keeps rubbing his ring finger as if it itches. A pale belt of raw, untanned skin circles just below his knuckle, where Jody imagines his wedding band once rested. “Well, I appreciate the advice, but I think I’ll try the noise-makers first. Seems more humane and all.”

“Suit yourself, but I’m telling you guy, you’ll be back. Trust me, you won’t be able to live with them.” Amos stuffs a paper bag with the pie pans and owls.

“Well, I’m not really into guns. There’s too many of them for me to shoot anyway.”

“A murmuration.”

“Excuse me?” Jody looks up briefly as Amos hands him the bag.

“A murmuration of starlings. That’s what they call a flock of them, a murmuration.”

“Fascinating. Well, thank you kindly.” Jody makes for the door, thinking maybe he has misjudged this character.

“No problem, guy. Hey, hold up.” Jody turns in the threshold of the automatic doors, their mechanism clicking repeatedly as he stands there. A hot wind from the parking lot moves through his legs and into the store, blowing bits of paper and receipts from the tabletops.

Amos is standing at the register, leaning over with his balled fists on the counter. They appear massive and roughened. His lips part, revealing a row of white teeth that clash oddly with the pale yellow of his mustache. “Say hello to the Missus for me.”

*****

Over breakfast a few days later, Maxine makes her next announcement. “The noisemakers and owls aren’t working, Jody. They’re just making things worse. All we have now is a bunch of noisy pans that scare the blues away, and a bunch of poop-coated owls. We’re going to have to do something else.”

“I’m taking care of it.”

Maxine lowers her cup of coffee to the table, the rim of the cup stained with the coral print of her lips. She rotates the cup on the tabletop and stares off at nothing.

“Maybe I could help you, Jody.” She goes to the stove and begins scrubbing the already immaculate surface with a moist sponge.

“What could you do that I’m not already doing? I said I’d take care of it, and I intend to.” Jody has begun hurrying through sentences in an effort to finish them without choking. He doesn’t like the way Maxine’s face clouds over when he does, like a tropical depression moving in, something dark and menacing. “I can do this.”

Maxine sighs and throws the sponge into the sink. It lands with a moist plop. She stares at it for a long time. “You have a doctor’s appointment tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

“Is he going to start you on oxygen therapy?”

“I don’t know. Probably.”

Maxine moves her hands through the white lengths of her hair. She curls the ends around her ears. She knows they won’t stay that way, but she’s persistent. “I want you to include me, Jody. With the starlings and all.”

“Whatever you want.”

Jody tears open a muffin and steam rises from the interior. Maxine is waiting for him to say something.

“You’re just telling me what you think I want to hear. Aren’t you?”

“I told you I’d get rid of the birds, and I will. Do you think I don’t give a shit?”

Maxine shrugs and turns toward the table. Blue flashes from the glass bird on the windowsill catch her in the face. “Sometimes.”

They continue to stare openly at each other, each of them on the brink of saying something either illuminating or profane. “Do whatever you want,” Jody says. Maxine nods and turns back toward the window.

“Do you know what you call a group of starlings?” Jody asks.

Maxine doesn’t say anything, just continues staring into the sunlight.

“A murmuration,” Jody answers.

She crosses her arms and hugs herself. “That’s lovely,” she says. Then she turns her head and smiles. Jody’s surprised at what this does to him. If pressed, he could not

name the emotion, but it is something akin to light-headedness, a tingling at the top of the scalp. He shifts in his seat, rubbing his hands on his legs, conscious of how sweaty his palms are. He pictures animals in headlights, birds veering past windshields at the last second, downed power lines dancing across blacktop. Anything jerked haltingly into life.

*****

Outside, at the other end of the lawn, starlings perch on the tufted ears of the glaring owls, which look so offended it's laughable. So Jody does. He begins to laugh, and it's a good minute before the fit of coughing catches up with him. Doubled over on one knee, hacking again into the clover, he feels foolish, like a boy with his first cigarette. For Jody, that was fifty-two years ago, next to the opened window of Mt. Zion Sunday School. He had been fifteen years old at the time, and he doesn't feel all that older now. By the time his fit subsides, the yard has gone still. On the fence and in the trees, all the birds are silent. They're watching, heads cocked to one side with their bills pointed toward him from across the yard.

As an electrician, if something went wrong all Jody had to do was trace back the wire along its path. The problem was right there. Somewhere on that circuit, something had gone awry. Life, Jody had found, didn't work that way. You put the energy of two people's lives together, you're lucky to get a spark, much less a charge. Jody understands this. He knows where it started to go wrong. Their first son moved out to attend college at Ole Miss, and the other two were not far behind. He could remember then what his wife looked like naked, and occasionally when they met in the bathroom or the bed he still ran his hands along the curves of her body.

In the summer of ’72, the phone began ringing. Jody picked it up, and a man’s voice asked for Maxine. This was nothing unusual, Maxine had just started painting bluebirds, and people would call her wanting one of her works. When Maxine picked up the phone, she listened for a few moments in silence, her expression unreadable. “I’m sorry, but we’re not interested.” When she hung up, Jody asked her who it had been. “Encyclopedia salesman. He calls here a lot during the day.”

At first, Jody didn’t think anything of it. Over the next few weeks though, the phone calls increased in regularity. After a while, whenever the phone rang, Maxine jumped to intercept it. He listened to her from the den, and always it was the same response. “We’re not interested.”

He woke some mornings and knew beyond doubt that Maxine had cheated on him, was cheating on him, but Jody really knew nothing about her or what was happening. She was a stranger, and Jody realized for the first time in his life that loving someone didn’t ensure you understood them. Maxine was painting, then. She had found joy in something completely beyond their lives together. Months earlier, she had attended the Bluebird Festival in Wills Point for the first time. That may have been where it happened.

That summer was meant to be special. July 27th was the eve of Jody and Maxine’s anniversary. The details and arrangements for their trip to Destin had already been set. It was to be a second honeymoon, just the jolt needed. Maxine answered the phone at 9:30 that night. Everything was packed. Her voice drifted down from the hallway and into the bedroom, where Jody sat trying to fix the broken strap on a sandal with electrical tape. Her tone when she answered contained a note of pleading. “I told you we’re not

interested. There's nothing you have that we want here. If this doesn't stop, I'll be forced to call the police." She paused and listened for what felt an eternity. When she answered the unheard solicitation her voice was as hard as blue steel. "Don't call here anymore. I've already told you where we stand."

When Maxine came to bed that night, her nightgown clung to her legs. Jody rolled over pretending to be asleep. With his back to her, he asked, "Who was that who called earlier?"

"Nobody. Wrong number."

"We've been getting a lot of those lately."

Maxine didn't say anything. He listened for several minutes to see if her breathing quickened.

"Jody, are you asleep?"

"No," he said.

"I feel like we're forgetting something. I've gone over the bags seven times already, but I can't help feeling that something is missing. Can you think of anything?"

She placed a hand on Jody's side and it rode there with the rise and fall of his ribs. Through the curtain-less windows, the moon rose within the arms of the trees out front. Jody thought for a moment, and then answered, "No." Maxine had ripped down the curtains a few months ago, leaving the windows exposed. Jody felt there wasn't much separating him from the world outside anymore, and the sensation was discomforting.

He fell asleep later to the sound of Maxine checking off the list in her head. "Bug spray, atlas, the cooler has sandwiches and cokes, tackle box, sunscreen, lawn chairs—"

That was the last of the phone calls. They took the trip to Destin, and Jody thought when the phone calls stopped, their lives would fall back into place and everything would be simple and calm again. But it never was. They were like a broken circuit, energy arcing into nothing. All Jody could hear on that trip to the beach, as gulls flitted through the slate-colored sky and the waves broke against the sand, was the sound of a telephone ringing in another room, and Maxine answering.

Thirty years had passed without so much as a complaint from either side, but for the first time in his life, Jody feels crippled under the weight of it all—smothered by the white noise of their life. Jody looks up at the parliament of birds arranged about the yard. He gasps for air. “What are you little shits looking at? Haven’t you ever seen a man die before?” The birds fan their wings and hop back and forth on their perches. Occasionally, one mimics the liquid *chur-lee* cry of a bluebird.

Jody wrenches a clump of grass from the ground and hurls it at the birds. They disappear in a dirty cloud.

*****

Due to road construction going on several miles toward town, the power is out in the house today. Jody can’t think without the electric hum. Every day for over forty years, he went to work in the crawl spaces of people’s attics, splicing wires and running them behind the walls, so that when the families came home to their dinners and their dry conversations about sprinkler systems and office parties, the light would be there for them. Years of sweltering summer days wedged under burning eaves, or working outside, running wire under houses in January, the tips of his fingers cracking from the cold. Jody used to tell Maxine his job was going to kill him someday.

Maxine is painting a scene of bluebirds fleeing from acrylic fields, a dark cloud in the distance, when Jody comes in from the garage, his hands streaked with grease that's more grit than oil. He pauses behind Maxine and watches as she shadows the leeward side of things, giving them depth. It's some of her best work.

At Jody's hip, the heavy weight of an oxygen tank pulls down on his belt loop. After his checkup last Wednesday, Doctor Reynolds decided it was needed. "Your lungs are becoming rigid, Mr. Simms. Difficulty in breathing is normal in a case such as this." Jody clears his throat to get Maxine's attention, but she either doesn't notice or ignores him.

"Maxine," Jody says. "Do you know what I did with all my old electrical equipment? I'm missing several spools of primary wire, my crimper pliers, and wire stripper."

Maxine's eyes narrow slightly before answering. "We got rid of that stuff years ago. I think it all went in the last yard sale. What do you need with it?"

"What about the generator I had?"

"Chet took it after his visit that Christmas three years ago. Jody, you know you can't be crawling all up and under the house. The power will come back on eventually."

"I know that," Jody says, more brusque than he intended. "Can't I keep anything in this house?"

"You're the one who told Chet he could have the generator. Remember?"

"No." Jody swipes at a grease stain on his shirt, but only manages to smear it farther across his chest. Maxine coos as if Jody's injured something small and reaches

toward the stain. She scratches at the tar with her nail, leaving a thin band of blue acrylic in its wake.

Jody looks up at her. “I don’t think you’re helping, Maxine.”

“Fiddlesticks,” Maxine says, bringing the offending hand to her face. “The shirt’s ruined.” Her eyes sparkle as she tries not to laugh. “We’re not much help for each other, are we?”

“Who needs help? This is art we’re making.” Jody can feel his humor rise, but he suppresses it, knowing what laughter often leads to now. He clears his throat, the mucus sputtering like an engine failing to turn over. He takes a yellowed handkerchief out of his pocket and spits into it. Maxine looks away, turns back to her canvas.

Jody searches the half-finished canvas for what she sees, the bare-ribs of black paint that have yet to be filled with the plumage of birds. Maxine picks up a brush in one hand and an empty baby food jar filled with milky water in the other. She makes a sweep of a thunderhead, then suddenly flings the water against the canvas and drives the butt end of the brush through the rust-colored breast of a bluebird. “There. *Bluebird with Punctured Aorta.* What do you think?”

Jody glances over at the ruined painting. Drops of blue, green, and gray drip onto the floor. “It was one of your better pieces, really.”

“I can’t do this anymore.”

“I don’t see why the hell not. It’s all you’ve ever loved.”

Maxine gives a derisive laugh and wipes at the water and paint spattered across the front of her shirt. “The bluebirds are gone, Jody.”

“They’ll come back,” he says, but Jody’s not sure he believes it.

“I miss them.”

Maxine leaves the easel and sits down at the table. She scratches at the paint caked into the creases of her hand. Blue powder sifts into the air and settles on the tabletop. She looks at Jody as if trying to weigh him. Her irises are as green as moss, and Jody realizes that if he ever knew this to be true, he had forgotten it long ago. Air labors in his lungs, caught in the shredded and congested passages.

Across the table, Maxine murmurs. “You don’t seem sick, Jody. Maybe Doctor Reynolds doesn’t know so much.”

Neither of them says anything. The water dripping from the canvas patters onto the linoleum, and Maxine, her blouse stained and wet, looks like a wire that’s worn through. She reminds Jody of Amos then, and for no reason at all, Jody pictures the two of them as lovers—Maxine young again, her skin smooth as rubbed wood, and Amos running a hand between her breasts with an inhuman patience. Amos’ straw-yellow hair twists in Maxine’s fingers. He paints the picture in his head, fills it with hue and texture, until it’s real in front of him—until he’s washed with it.

Suddenly, the power’s back. The interrupted light sizzles in the bulb filaments, the stove clicks to life. Maxine starts and stands up, as if she’s been caught at something. Jody shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

“I need to go to town to pick up some things. To get rid of the starlings. You need anything from the Co-Op?”

Maxine shakes her head, and as Jody moves past her on his way out the door, he catches the scent of her—powder and paint and Avon. Outside the air is thick, the sun’s heat pushes itself off of the earth. On the fence out back, the starlings line up like lean

Congressmen with kickbacks in their pockets. Jody closes his fist and shakes it at them. “I’ll be back, you bastards.” They don’t even ruffle a feather.

*****

The Co-Op is strangely quiet this Sunday. There are no trucks out front, and the aisles stand empty. Amos spots Jody the instant he comes in, and calls to him from a stand of fertilizer bags stacked into a squat pyramid on the floor. “Well, if it isn’t the fearless bird hunter. Come back for some heavier artillery, I see.”

From his back pocket, Amos pulls a crumpled packet of cigarettes and places one between his lips. He takes a book of matches from the inside of his vest, and Jody half expects him to strike the match across the several days of stubble sprouting from his face. Instead, he strikes it on the rough wood of the merchandise shelves and inhales deeply.

Amos pauses and motions with his cigarette to the canister velcroed at Jody’s waist. “This isn’t going to be a problem is it?” he asks while spewing forth a thick cloud of smoke.

“No. I’m fine.”

Blue curls fill the air, thinning out and disappearing as they rise. Amos eyes Jody through the haze. “Those starlings have done some work on you.” Amos’ laugh sounds enormous in the warehouse of the Co-Op, reverberating around the rafters and bouncing off the tin roof. It becomes a chorus rather than a single voice.

“Yeah, it’s a regular Hitchcock movie at my place.”

Amos laughs again and slaps the palms of his hands together. “You know what, guy? You’re alright. So I’m going to see what I can do for you.” He goes over to the front door, pulls from his pocket a string of keys attached to his belt loop, and locks the bolt.

He looks out cautiously into the parking lot and then turns the "Open" sign over. "Let's go out back," he says.

Jody follows Amos through the service halls in back of the Co-Op, where Amos throws open the heavy metal door to the employee parking lot. Several starlings on the lip of the dumpster take off in a startled burst. Amos draws his hands up in imaginary pistols and shoots the birds on the wing. "That's what I'm talking about. Some heavy fire-power." He claps Jody's shoulder and nearly sends him to the floor.

Amos heads to his truck parked beside the loading dock. It's an old beat-up Chevy Luv that had once been red, but is now a bashful pink. A pair of women's panties hang from the rear-view mirror. The door groans on its hinges as Amos swings it open, reaches in and pulls a rifle from the gun rack. "This here's what you need, cuz. A thirty-aught six. Guaranteed to blow those little buggers to birdseed."

The steel of the gun barrel looks cold, and at the tip of the sight, a sunburst of light winks excitedly. Amos hands the gun to Jody, who runs his hands along the supple stock. "Are you sure this is the right gun to be shooting starlings with?"

"Hey, guy. It's all I got."

Jody hands the gun back. "No, that's not my style."

Amos takes the gun, and passes it from his right hand to the left, and back again. "I hear you, guy. But think about this. I may be a lover and not a fighter, but I know there are certain things worth fighting for."

"Like what?"

Amos hesitates. He draws up close beside Jody with one eye closed, and he leans over and begins to talk in a rather serious manner. "Well, for starters, there's women.

Now, you take me for instance. Last time you came in here, I was single and hurting. My wife had left me for some lightweight, to put it gently. You know what I did?" Amos pauses and waits for Jody to respond. He nods for him to continue.

"Well, I took my ass down to this guy's house, kicked down the door while the two of them were inside, drug that guy out into the yard by his hair, and beat the living shit out of him. God's honor."

"That doesn't sound much like a lover," Jody says.

"That's what I'm talking about, guy. Sometimes you have to fight for your honor. This is not just birds we're talking about. Sometimes, you got to take the low road. You got to go with your gut."

Jody wants to say that his gut hasn't been reliable for years. It had become faulty like all the rest of the equipment, and most nights it kept him up with a slow burn. It's doing the same thing now. He tries to think about what Maxine would want him to do, what she has needed him to be, and then he makes his decision.

"I understand what you're saying, Amos. But I got to do this my way."

"Hell's bells. All right, we'll do this your way. Whatcha got in mind?"

"I have to work with what I know. I need some copper wire, electrical tape, a generator capable of 300 volts, and a breaker switch. Cutler-Hammer, if you got it."

Amos spins away with a mock dance of glee. He looks like a kid. "Damn, guy. You got some balls." He comes to a stop and exhales in a gush of air. Jody can smell the cigarette smoke from where he's standing. "All right then. I think we got what you need."

*****

In the backyard, Maxine and Jody sit behind a cover constructed of kitchen chairs with a green comforter thrown over them. Beside Jody in the grass is a circuit breaker with two lines of wire snaking out from each end and slithering around the cover. Halfway across the lawn, the wires meet a generator that's alive and buzzing in the grass like an enormous bumblebee. From there, the wires travel on to the fence and then back to the breaker next to Jody. As Jody has related to Maxine, he figures this set-up will allow him to send close to 240 volts of electricity through the fence. That, coupled with the grounding of the electricity by means of the metal fence-posts, ensures enough energy for the roast he's planning.

"Jody, are you sure you're okay?"

"If you're going to stay out here, you have to be quiet."

Maxine lowers her voice to a whisper. "You know the doctor wouldn't approve of this."

"The doctor can take a scalpel to his ass for all I care."

"Jody!"

"Shhhhhh!"

From behind the cover, Jody listens for the birds. It's hard to determine which ones are starlings. Starlings are mimic birds and can alter their cries. He knows what a bluebird sounds like, but there's no way to tell friend from foe without risking exposure, so Jody decides to fry them all and cut his losses.

"Maybe we could learn to live with the starlings. I feel awful about this."

"In what way?"

“Like I’m the accomplice to a mass murder. I’ve been reading up on these starlings since the bluebirds left. I thought I could figure out a way to get rid of them.”

“And what did you find out?”

“They’re prolific. They’ll be here long after you and I, and probably the rest of the human race, are gone.”

“Not if I have anything to do with it.”

In the sky above them, there’s not a cloud in sight. Tiny red ants move through the grass, and Jody notices one crawl into the interior of Maxine’s shirttail where it brushes against the ground.

Maxine sighs and the sound breaks something inside him. Jody looks at her, reclining in the grass, away from the wires and the energy coiled inside. Her hair, cut short and curled, reminds him of Lillian Gish. Her mouth in a constant state of petulance, her shoulders askew as she leans back upon her arms. Breath-taking.

Maybe he gave her a reason to cheat, Jody thinks. He can’t remember who burned out first, but he has a sinking suspicion, if there’s fault to be found, it wasn’t all hers. Jody never made any efforts to discover more than what he knew about the telephone salesman. The wrong number. He looks up at the blue expanse expectantly, but there’s not even two wisps to rub together for a spark. It’s then he realizes Amos was right. There are some things worth fighting for. He has spent these years waiting for some sign, the lightning bolt that would jolt the two of them back to life, when what he should have been doing was grabbing the wires, regardless of consequence.

“I think you’ve let this become an obsession, Jody. It can’t be good for you.” Maxine leans toward him so that her blouse dips down low, revealing the upper edges of

her breasts. The skin looks rough and leathery, riddled with dark splotches. He reaches over and touches her—takes the ant that has crawled up through her shirt between forefinger and thumb, without harming it, and lowers it to the ground. Maxine looks at him in surprise, her eyes wet and brilliant. Jody tries to imagine what she sees; a broken man without hope of repair. “Why’ve you stayed with me all these years, Maxine? I haven’t exactly been the easiest man to live with.”

Maxine pushes away from him with a rough grunt. “Christ, Jody. I can’t understand you anymore.” She moves as if to leave, but he catches her arm.

“Do you think we could have been happier?”

Maxine doesn’t immediately answer. The squat box of the breaker is laid out between them, and the screws glint in the casing. Maxine’s mouth is turned down. She opens her mouth to speak, and pauses as if she’s considering what to say. It’s then that Jody realizes he doesn’t want her to answer, but she does.

“When I was reading about the starlings, I found out why a flock of them is called a murmuration. It’s because it was once thought that starlings gossiped about things to come. Deaths perhaps, but not just deaths and horrible things, but—happenings. It’s why they won’t shut up.”

She spreads the folds of her dress about her, laying the material against the grass as if comparing colors.

“All of the birds in the blackbird and raven families have group names implying revelations. A murder of crows, a deceit of lapwings.”

As Maxine continues, Jody thinks back to Destin. It had rained the entire time they were there, the sky falling ceaselessly into the sea.

"A storytelling of rooks, an unkindness of ravens, a tiding of magpies."

Her voice trails off. Behind them, birds are carousing, and if Jody tries to picture it, he can see them hopping sideways across the fence and diving to the ground to pick up something shiny for their nests. He imagines them swooping down on the live wires laid out below them like worms.

On the highway, a siren starts up, its peals echoing through the trees. The starlings take up a cry that is vaguely similar. "Don't listen to me Jody. I'm talking nonsense now." She cocks her head toward the lot, shades her eyes with her hand, and for several minutes seems to eavesdrop on the wild world just on the other side. She smiles and asks, "Do you think they're talking badly of us?"

The starlings trill like a million phones ringing off the hook. If he times it right, Jody believes he can shock the world into silence. When he kisses her, she jumps from surprise. He runs his tongue into her mouth, and then she gives in and kisses him back. Jody doesn't know where to put his hands, when to stop for air. He realizes they must be some picture, witnessed with their every blemish and crack of skin, while starlings gossip in the branches above the world. Jody's hand falls to his side and lands upon something in the grass—the switch he had momentarily forgotten.

He pulls back and looks into Maxine's face, his other hand cradling the back of her neck. Maxine presses her thumb over Jody's lips. Behind them, the birds have grown raucous, telling rumors to one another, the endings to their stories always the same. Inevitably, the same. Jody draws breath to speak, to tell Maxine everything he has feared and loved for the last thirty years, but all he can feel rising is strangled up and caught. His blood rushes to his face, the tears collect in the corners of his eyes. His throat convulses.

Maxine hums under her breath. A curl of silver hair falls from behind her ear into her face. She takes her hand from Jody's cheek, reaches down and grips his hand on the switch, and in this gesture there is so much potential. The hairs on the back of Jody's neck stand up, as if they know what's about to happen.

"Ready or not, Jody," Maxine says.

He nods. "I'm ready."

Handling

Lee Garvis remembered the exact mile marker of the weigh station and rest stop, its trucks lined up like cigarette cartons behind a low concrete building—and he remembered the trails in the woods behind the place where men wandered into underbrush and found each other. What he had not remembered, forgot in fact, was to use a condom. He had recalled the half-dollar Trojan in the folds of his wallet as he was leaving, the woods around him loud with bird calls, the trails wet from a rain the night before—his footprints rising up from the spongy mud underfoot like a rising memory of his passing through. He had cussed himself. Kicked at the wild Indian Pink growing next to his parked truck. Not smart, he said to himself, as he pulled his weight into the cab of his Chevy.

He leaned out the truck window and caught the breeze from the river on his face, inhaled its suggestion of pinesap and river mud, noting how little the area had changed since last he'd seen it. The sight of his great aunt Helen's garden freshly tilled, the boathouse and dock, and the wide view of the Tennessee River were still familiar. The thick air of the place worked on the body like quick-drying amber, arresting momentum until you were encased in the gold of it, the Tennessee not seeming to budge an inch through the Alabama landscape.

As he rounded the corner of his great-aunt and uncle's house, which bedded itself into the rise of land overlooking the river, the wind beleaguered a rain of needles from

the trees above. He parked his truck next to Helen's sculpture garden and, stepping out into sunlight and the redolence of evergreens, arched his back to loosen the muscles that had tensed in the drive. Beside him twisted flutes of driftwood—cast as though the river had tried to mold their rigid natures into a state closer to its own—rose at odd angles. He ran a thumb along the grooves Helen had painstakingly chiseled and remembered watching her, years ago, as the wood chipped under a screwdriver's edge, becoming the delicate wrist of a young girl, a tendon at the back of a knee. The names for each came easily to him—Samson and Delilah, Lot's Wife, Jason and the Dragon, Behemoth. Lee scratched at the stubble on his face and put his weight against the trunk of Goliath, the wood up-ended and standing a good six inches above his head.

He told himself it would be fine. That he was okay. After all, he had been the man. The one on top. He remembered the guy—a ponytail pulled through the back of his cap, scar across his navel. The stranger hadn't demanded any protection. Now that it was over—done with again—Lee couldn't even recall the slightest tug of desire. He tried to put the matter out of his mind.

Lee spotted Troy and Helen a few yards from the dock sitting next to the prickly pear beds along the bank. Across the river, the flash of skeets against the blue sky was followed by the report of a rifle. The orange discs shattered before dropping into the river. Helen and Troy's neighbor, Curtis Rayfield, hollered from the opposite bank—his Labradors barking alongside him.

As Lee descended the slope, Helen shouted a greeting. "Boy, what the hell are you doing here? Troy said you weren't coming down for another week." Troy looked up from his labor on the trotlines.

Helen was seated upright in a hammock strung between two pines, swinging it with her feet. She was frail, but the kind of woman who could hide it, dressed in a yellow blouse that dipped at the neckline exposing an archipelago of liver spots. Her hair was wild and unkempt and her pale-gray eyes caught the light off the river in a way that made them look distracted, yet oddly arresting.

“I decided to come down early. Get settled in,” he said.

“Can’t wait to start nettling me, sure as the world. Well, come here.”

Lee embraced his great-aunt and allowed her to plant a red stain of lipstick on his cheek. “Nettle, my ass. I’m here for the sport and the women.” Lee fingered the dry wisps of his aunt’s hair, the tight curls of her perm having loosened and gone limp. “Speaking of which, where’s the gorgeous lady I remember?”

Helen pulled away, swatting at his hands. “You’re too young to remember any gorgeous lady that inhabited this body. And if you’re here for women, you picked the wrong county. Nothing but whores and Bible-thumpers this end of the river. You catch the clap or you catch the spirit. Take your pick.”

“I’m too slick for that.” Lee turned to face his great-uncle. “Troy. How’s the fishing?”

“Can’t complain. Putting food on the table.”

Troy was also getting on in years, but you could hardly tell by the looks of him. His hair, bone-white from decades in the sun, contrasted sharply with his skin. He was dressed for work in a faded denim shirt with the sleeves ripped out at the shoulders, exposing hard sinewy muscles. The picnic table was covered with the wooden racks and line Troy used for his fishing. Troy was stringing his trotlines with dead honeybees. Troy

was the kind of man quick to point out a slack, untidy line. Lee remembered the first time he had ever heard about the rest stop on Highway 72, driving to Iron City with Troy when he was twelve. Troy had pointed to the thicket of sycamores and red oaks to the right of the roadway. “See those woods there? They’re inhabited by a strange species of bird. Faggot-grouse. See there’s one now.” Lee had followed his uncle’s finger toward a man in green flannel and ripped jeans, his head intent on the ground in front of him. For some reason, this memory comforted him, as if it excluded him from that place.

“If I’d known you were coming, I would’ve had something cooked,” Helen said. “I’ll go get something started. Hope you like catfish and okra, because that’s all we got.”

“Like it? Hell, you raised me on it.”

Helen turned to ascend the rise toward the house and Lee noticed how she measured her steps on the climb, unsure of gravity. He considered asking if she needed help. More likely than not he’d be cussed for his concern. During the recession of the eighties, when Lee’s father was laid off of three jobs in two years and his mother worked third shift in Corinth on the machines at the Frito Lay factory, Lee spent his summers with Helen. He was eight the first year. At the time, his mother claimed it was to get him out of her hair, but Lee now knew there were other reasons. Those years, defeat hung loose on his father like a hand-me-down coat, and his mother had wanted to spare him such things.

Helen had been in her early fifties at the time. The smoke from her Salem curled into her hair, which still had veins of black coal amidst the gray. “Here’s the rules,” she had said. “No crying or complaining, or we lock you in the well house. No swearing unless you know what the fuck the words mean. Otherwise, you’re on your own. You can

swim in the river, but watch out for moccasins and leeches. I don't know which are worse." She had taken one look at the expression on his face and laughed. Her teeth were neat rows of dulled pearls. "We're going to have to find you a sense of humor." That was Helen, the tight pull of her humor getting mixed up with Lee's memories of fishing at the Shoal, following Troy out to the dams, combing the banks with his aunt for driftwood and other valuables washed ashore. He felt he owed this place something, and that was perhaps why he was here.

Lee watched his aunt's slow progress. Once she was out of earshot, he turned to Troy. "How is she?"

Troy pulled a handful of honeybees from the paper bag in his lap. "Comes and goes," Troy replied. "Some days, she's fine. Others, she has trouble remembering. Forgets names real easy. Doctor thinks it's advancing, but it's hard to tell how quickly."

Lee sat in the vacated hammock and rocked himself on the balls of his feet. The wind off the river turned cool and whined through the treetops. Troy speared the bees with the hooks aligned along the racks, running the metal down through the length of their bodies so it emerged at the tails. It was Troy who had taught him how to clean the fish they caught. "Lip to asshole is how you cut them. Careful of the spines and whiskers. They'll stick you if you don't watch." Lee's eyes lingered on the yard where Helen's wooden figures sat marooned.

He watched his great-uncle go down the line, stringing bait with a speed and deftness almost superhuman. Suddenly, Troy swore and pulled back his hand. A pinprick of blood beaded at the tip of Troy's ring finger, the last finger on his right hand—his pinkie left in the rice paddies of Korea. Several of Troy's fingers were capped with

blackened Band-Aids. He reached into his pocket and pulled out another bandage. He let the paper fall to the ground where it caught in the spines of the prickly pears.

"What happened to your fingers, Troy?"

"Hooks."

"You're slipping."

Troy grunted in response. They sat in silence as light sifted through the trees and set the river aflame. The afternoon was crowded with rifle reports and the buzz of speedboats. Troy finished with the Band-Aid and picked up where he left off, his palms dusted with pollen and the loose foil of insect wings. "How you holding up?" Lee asked, softer than he intended.

"Fine."

"That's good." Lee rubbed at his thighs. "Well, I guess I better get up there and see if Helen needs any help. That's what I'm here for, right?" He paused, but then tipped his feet forward and rose. As he walked away, Troy called out to him.

"Yeah?" Lee answered.

Troy reached up and scratched his nose. Lee noticed the skin around the Band-Aids was moist and white as fish bellies. He looked at the racks of exposed hooks beside his uncle and shivered. All those barbs turned outwards and seemingly waiting for something, like deadly question marks.

"Thanks for coming," Troy said, returning to his lines.

*****

Lee piddled around the kitchen trying to help his aunt with supper, picking up vegetables from the counter and then laying them down again. He willed himself to put

the events of earlier that day out of his head. It didn't matter, he told himself. Finally, he grabbed a beer from the fridge, settled on a barstool and began spinning lances of okra between his fingers. He watched Helen take a tub of Crisco and ladle hunks of white grease into a skillet.

"You found you a job yet? Your mother was telling me you graduated at the top of your class."

"No, ma'am. Still looking."

"Well, you're not going to find work down here looking after my forgetful ass."

"I'm holding out for management."

"Management, shit. You found you a girl yet?"

"No, ma'am. Still looking."

"I was sorry to hear about you and Donna. You need you a good woman. Light a fire under you."

"One thing at a time." Four months ago in December, Lee finished a degree in drafting at a trade school in Hohenwald and came back to his hometown in search of a job. After two months of hunting, Lee learned the job market in Minor Hill had long dried up.

Then Lee got the phone call from Troy down in Alabama. Helen had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's after losing her way in a local Rite Aid. She was found by a stock boy in the cosmetics isle painting her fingernails with lipstick. She couldn't tell anyone her name or who her people were. Her doctor had prescribed meds, but they only delayed the inevitable. Troy and Helen didn't have much money saved up; certainly not enough for Troy to stop working his trotlines or to hire a nurse, and when he was out on

the river, there was nobody to look after Helen. Troy didn't fancy the idea of a male nurse taking care of his wife, had told Lee as much when he called, even if they were blood, but Lee was the only one in the family with time on his hands. "Lord, I wish Helen had adopted kids," Lee's mother said before he left. "It broke your aunt's heart when the doctors told her she was barren. Bad news seems the only news this family gets."

"I can't get over you being here, Lee." Helen scooted around the kitchen, removing dishes from cupboards. She poured flour into a mixing bowl and cracked an egg into another. "Of course, I wish it were under different circumstances. I told Troy I didn't need any help. If I wander off and drown in the river it's my own damn fault. Probably better than I deserve."

"Troy had his reservations as I understand. Haven't changed your minds?"

Helen hands fluttered about her. "I'm glad it's you. I don't like the idea of strangers in my house."

Lee watched his aunt take fillets of catfish and dip them into the raw egg. As she worked, Helen hummed a song that seemed familiar to Lee, although he couldn't place it.

"What the hell did I do with the salt? Troy must have run off with it." Helen opened and slammed several cabinet doors before Lee pointed to the salt shaker beside the dish of butter on the counter.

"It's right there, Helen. Where you put it."

"Well, shit. If it had been a snake, it would have bit me." She turned to him and smirked. "The question is, was that the Alzheimer's or just plain forgetfulness?"

Lee scratched the back of his neck and said nothing.

Helen picked up the shaker and began waving it over the fillets. “Everyone around here has become so damn serious. Doctors especially, talking about brain tangles and plaques and neuro-transformers.”

Lee had to admit, the idea of coming to his aunt’s rescue made him feel heroic, although he knew it also had something to do with his need to get away from routine—going out everyday to look for a job that wasn’t there and getting drunk every night with old friends from high school. What he had expected to find down here was a wreck, but as far as Lee could tell, Helen was easily treading the waters of this thing. He was left wondering what was expected of him.

“Lee, will you get some ice out of the freezer?”

Lee pushed himself away from the bar. When he opened the ice box, amid the Ziploc bags of frozen vegetables and meat, he found an empty mayonnaise jar with its label peeled, and inside, a baby cottonmouth coiled and frozen.

“Helen! What the hell is this?” Lee asked, taking out the chilled jar and shaking it, the frozen snake ringing against the sides.

His aunt laughed. “That’s my pet, Aristophanes.”

“Do you treat all your pets this way?”

Helen turned and began dropping pieces of chopped okra into the flour. “I’ve hated snakes since I was sixteen. A couple mornings ago, I found Aristophanes poking around my azaleas. He was so tiny, I didn’t have the heart to kill him, but I can’t abide snakes near my home. So, I got him into the jar there and stuck him in the freezer.”

“You’re a strange old bird,” Lee replied.

“That’s what the doctors say. Say I’ll be getting stranger too. I doubt you’ll be able to tell a difference.” She smiled, a smudge of flour dotting the side of her nose. “It’s a Greek name, you know. Aristophanes. I thought it was appropriate seeing as mine and Troy’s names are such a coincidence.”

Lee’s brow furrowed and he opened his mouth to ask a question, but nothing surfaced. Seeing this, Helen continued. “Don’t they teach you anything in school anymore? Helen and Troy. Helen of Troy. The face that launched a thousand ships.”

Lee shook his head. “I went to a trade school. Remember?”

Helen took a spatula and turned the fish, the oil in the pan sizzling and popping. “Daddy read me those stories when I was little,” she said.

Lee gave up trying to find something to do and went to look around the house. The front rooms, which included the kitchen and the sitting room, got most of the light. The rest of the house, built into the hillside, remained cavernous and dark. Lee had summered here every year until he was eighteen. Once he started school, his trips had become infrequent. Little had changed though. There were still the haphazard arrays of old soda bottles, arrowheads, mussel shells—all the rummage Helen collected from the river. In the corners of the living room stood more of the driftwood carvings. Helen had made quite a name for herself in Morgan County with her sculptures of religious scenes—Nativities, Gethsemanes, the fiery near-demise of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Moses stood in the corner with a length of snake held over his head. Lee had found the serpent years ago. Helen had sent him to the river’s edge and he brought back seven sticks before she agreed on one. She had carefully examined each, turning them over in her hands before rejecting and eventually accepting the one she wanted. “Now,

this one," she said, holding up the twisted wood that looked as if it had been wrung in the hands of a sinner. "This one's a serpent."

From the hallway leading to the back bedrooms came the purr of the aquarium, which rinsed the surrounding walls in a sickly luminescence. The thing needed cleaning. It smelled rank, the glass layered with a thin film of algae. Behind the green curtain vague shadows of fish darted about in unison. When his cousin, Sal, used to visit from North Carolina, where his father worked as an air force captain, the aquarium had been their favorite distraction. Sal, who was older than Lee by seven years, had sat tapping the glass with his younger cousin beside him. They watched the schools shoot like storms of silver through the plastic reefs. "Their brains aren't much bigger than your dick," his cousin had said. They sat in the hallway with their legs touching, the hair on Sal's leg tickling his own, making Lee sweaty and nervous. Lee had known they were not supposed to stress the fish, that Helen would wear them out if she knew, but he had said nothing to his cousin.

Helen's voice came to him from the kitchen. "It's ready, Paris."

"Lee."

"What?"

"I'm not Paris, Aunt Helen. It's me, Lee. Paris is a city in France."

"I know who you are, boy. Now come in here and get your catfish before it remembers it's supposed to be in the river."

*****

Lee put his things in the guest bedroom, the same room he had occupied in his youth, and for the first couple of days he watched his aunt like a dark sky in summer.

Coming down, he had half expected to find his aunt's eyes milked of all recognition, but she remained the same aunt he remembered—somewhat forgetful, but nothing to write home about. He felt disappointed, having pictured the two of them sitting on the dock, him telling her stories, filling in the pocked corners of her mind. With him underfoot, Helen became frustrated. "For God's sake, where do you think you are? The Smithsonian? I can't turn around without you ogling me. Get out of here. I'll call you if I need anything."

Later that same night, Lee parked his pickup in behind the roadside public restrooms, out of sight of the highway. When he opened his truck door and jumped down, gravel crunched under the soles of his boots and he could hear the hum of the telephone wires. He looked around at the cars in the lot, some empty, some inhabited with men he avoided making eye contact with. He grabbed his back pocket, making certain of his wallet before heading into the adjacent woods.

He waited for his eyes to adjust and then followed some well-worn paths through the snarl of briars and sumac that grew all around. He could hear the pitch of frogs hidden in the trees, and somewhere off to his left a small creek babbled. It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for. He spotted them among the trees—vague, shadowy silhouettes. Some of the men hid what they were doing behind stands of brush, the clamor of what they were engaged in like the calls of strange beasts. Others were more flagrant, wanting him to watch. The trails made a circuit through the area, winding in and out of the trees. He was nearly down to the creek when he spotted the man.

The man was alone, leaned up against a sycamore, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. Lee couldn't see the man's features, but he was tall, wearing a shirt that was

open down the front, a camouflage hat with a fish hook glinting on the bill. Lee stared the man down as he passed, nodding his head slightly. He heard the man leave his spot by the tree and follow him off the path into the thick, concealing woods.

Lee found a small clearing littered with condom wrappers where ferns fingered the bottoms of his jeans. In the weak starlight, Lee was able to see that the man was older than he had thought. He had brassy bleached hair that emerged in tufts from under his cap. His hands, when he took them out of his pockets, were large and chapped.

“Hey,” the guy said.

“This work for you?” Lee indicated the small break in the trees where they were standing.

“Yeah.” The guy came closer, letting his shirt drop to the ground. “You got any rubbers?”

“No,” he said.

“That’s okay. Just don’t come inside me.”

The man unbuckled the front of his jeans and dropped them to the ground, his legs two thin matchsticks. He turned his back to Lee and bent over, grabbing the trunk of a small tree in front of him. Lee undid his own pants and spit into his palm.

Once Lee was inside him, the man began breathing sharp and fast. Lee ran his hands along the other’s spine, noting each hard knob of bone. Lee pushed harder and the guy began to moan, the white space of the guy’s thin back like a canvas he could fill with design. The man’s sweat was on his arm and Lee rubbed it against his shirt, not liking the feel of it.

Afterwards, he left without saying anything, only looking back once to see the man struggling with his jeans while swatting at the ferns in search of his shirt. He left feeling hollowed out. Around him the night was huge and alien, and he thought for a moment about what it would be like to be alone in the world—so alone as to half expect to meet your own image on some road, looking right at you in expectation. It was always like this afterwards. The need in him slacked and everything he knew pushed back. He liked the sensation of numbness, the calm. It was a moment in which he could almost convince himself that he would never come back, never need this again. But he knew that thing inside him was already picking up the scent of his escape, loping after him in the dark.

When he came in, Helen and Troy were curled on the couch watching Leno. “You have fun tonight?” Helen asked. Lee nodded and collapsed into a wicker chair in front of the TV. Troy had his arm slung over the back of the couch, his hand lightly touching Helen’s shoulder.

“Where’d you go?”

“The Slough.”

Troy looked over at Lee. “You see Curtis’s girl there? She’s waitressing now. ”

“I don’t think so.”

Lee watched the two of them—Helen fitted into Troy’s side as if they were two pieces of the same machine. Sixty-eight years they had been together—impossible to imagine, he thought. Outside in the distance, he could hear the approach of thunder—the low rumble seeming to slide over the house. He felt strangely tense. Equipped. The glass

in the windows rattled. He heard the rain come over, heavy and loud, as he knew it would.

*****

Weeks passed without event. The summer lost its initial luster, the green going dull around the edges. Lee sat on the docks and watched skims of pollen drift by, which were the only signs that the river moved at all. By the middle of June, he had yet to notice any condition in his aunt other than arthritis. She went to the doctor regularly and tried to convince everyone she was fine by telling long stories about the past. Throughout all of this, Aristophanes sat in the freezer. Lee thought eventually the serpent would become unremarkable, like so many things in life, but every time he went for ice or chicken liver to fish with, there he sat in his frost-patterned glass, coiled into a tangle that was almost archaic, like some design from a coat-of-arms or family crest.

“Helen, why the hell don’t you get rid of this thing?” Lee took the jar and shook it in his aunt’s direction.

“I like having him around.” Helen was seated at the CB table in the den, turning the dials through static in search of Troy out on the water.

Lee put the snake back in the freezer and shut it. He imagined the interior going dark. “That thing gives me the willies.”

Helen continued to ride channels on the CB, so Lee poured himself a cup of coffee. “This is Sitting Duck calling Worthless-Piece-of-Ass. Come in Piece-of-Ass.”

Lee took a seat across from Helen. Outside, the shadow of the cedar shielded the sitting room from the day’s heat, but beyond its reach the yard parched in the Alabama sunlight. Not a good day for fishing, Lee thought, searching his brain for some

alternative. He thought about the rest stop and that old desire stiffened inside him. Lee tried to ignore it.

"This is Piece-of-Ass."

Helen's lips stretched into a smirk. "Troy. How's the fishing going?"

"It's going. What do you want?"

Helen's smirk drooped for a moment. "Can't a wife check in on her husband every once in a while?" The CB crackled and whined. Helen's head cocked to one side, her eyes searching for Troy in the distance. "What do you want for lunch, Troy?"

"Hell, I don't know."

"Fish it is then. I'll see you this afternoon."

"Will do."

After Troy clicked off, Helen laid down the mic. On the river, a paddling of mallards bobbed around the dock, their heads going under periodically in search of rations. The only male, his feathers like greased metal, kept nipping at the females. Growing up, Lee had wondered why it was the males who were most colorful—iridescent almost. Helen said it was so they could show their asses, a trait common to men irregardless of species.

"Lee, you little shit, do you remember the time you chucked a rock at that duck and killed it?"

"I didn't kill it."

"Might as well have. It was paralyzed on its right side. All it did for the next five hours was flap around in a circle. Pitiful sight." Helen propped her chin on her hand, the

skin of her wrist waxy in the light from outside. “Snapping turtles got it. Once it wore itself out, they came up from the bottom and drug it under.”

Lee smiled into his coffee. “Troy wore *me* out for that one. I don’t think I’ve picked up a rock since.”

“You deserved it.”

“You should talk. Or do I need to drag your pet out of the freezer again?”

“I’ll have you know, in my younger days I was a saint among animals. Hell, I was a goddamn snake charmer.”

“I didn’t think you liked snakes.”

“I don’t.” With her fingernail Helen scratched at the tablecloth. “I never told you much about your great grand-daddy. He was a schoolmaster in this area in the 30s. The Depression had everyone over a barrel. For a week one time, we ate nothing but greens Mama picked wild. Gave your grandmother and me the shits. Daddy taught everything, all grades, in a one-room school house. He loved literature. Especially the epic stories. Heroes, maidens, vengeful gods. He was a religious man, crazy religious, but it wasn’t the message he cared for. He loved…” Here Helen paused, searching for the word she wanted. “The bigness of the thing—the spirit that fills you, as you’ve probably heard people say. Thought it made him a bigger man. Every Sunday, he took us down to that church off Bumpass Creek. You know which one I’m talking about?”

“Yeah, in the hollow there. Aren’t they serpent handlers?”

“Yes, sir. They were. Not anymore. But I remember the first time Daddy put a serpent into my arms. Led me to the front of the church before God and everybody. Then

Daddy bent down and pulled a copperhead from this box, as careless as if it were yarn, and held it out to me. I don't think I was much older than fourteen."

"What did you do?"

"I took it. Mama nearly died when she saw me, but she never went against Daddy. Snakes never bothered me. Many in the congregation, including my Daddy, were bit. One person even died. But I just held them. They'd wrap around my wrist, nose through my sleeves, but they never struck. They're warm, you know."

"What?"

"The snakes. They're warm to the touch. That was a surprise. I had expected them to be cold." Helen pushed back her seat. "Anyway, I need to get lunch started. Can't sit here yammering all day. Would you go out back and get a tomato from the garden?" She shuffled into the kitchen, her movements slow, and Lee could hear the banging of pans. He tried to picture Helen as a young girl, her hair in braids, socks falling down around her ankles, all elbows and knees. He tried to put a serpent into the hand of that girl, just like Moses wielding the living staff, but he couldn't.

"So what happened to your Daddy?" Lee yelled.

"He left eventually. Just up and disappeared. I'm sure he had big ideas. Thought that since he could turn the head of some loose woman, he was some kinda man…Mama nearly died. Who knows what happened to him. All these years I've thought that one day I'd turn over a stone and there he'd be."

"I doubt you'd recognize him now."

"Some things you don't forget."

*****

Toward the end of August, Lee was awakened in the middle of the night by Troy. He rose from sleep as if he were coming up out of deep water, his weariness wetting him and weighing him down. He tried to focus on the outline of his uncle's face.

"Troy, what's wrong?"

"Helen's gone." Troy said, a hint of desperation creeping into his voice. "I woke up and she wasn't in bed and she's not in the house. We have to find her before she hurts herself. Hurry!"

Troy darted out of the room. Feeling around on the floor for his shoes, Lee felt lopsided, his head tilting, and twice he had to use the floor as leverage. Troy returned with a set of flashlights and handed one to Lee. He flipped the switch to make sure it worked and then followed Troy outside.

"Helen!" Troy yelled. He clutched Lee's arm, getting his attention.

"You head down the bank to the left and I'll take the right." Before Lee could respond, Troy was off. Lee moved to the left yelling Helen's name, trying to navigate the landscape.

Helen had taken a turn for the worse in July after a spell of bladder infections. Some days she was sharp as tackle, recalling childhood transgressions even Lee couldn't remember committing. Other days her eyes were tar pits in which most things remained stuck. However, nothing like this had happened before. Lee had slowly begun to take over the duties of the house—charring the dinners and keeping an eye on Helen as she began to slip in and out of her states. A nurse at Stoneybrook had given him tips: make sure she eats, poor nutrition would make her listless and agitated; secure the throw rugs in the bathroom to prevent spills; give her encouragement and support, but be firm about

boundaries. On mornings when she woke confused, following after Troy like a child as he prepared to leave, Lee stepped in and brushed her hair, made her take her pills, covered her when she was careless with the robe, and laid out clothes for her. He made her open her mouth so he could put in her teeth, the false pearls slipping over her naked gums. He told Helen what he was doing at each step. Troy left of a morning with his head down, careful to shut the blinds as he left.

Lee had seen this night coming, yet he still felt unprepared for it. As he stumbled among the trees, every shadow took on a human shape. Once his eyes acclimated to the dark he noticed something moving across the muddy banks of the river. Lee headed toward the figure, and as he drew near he recognized his aunt. He aimed the flashlight in her direction and saw her go rigid.

“Helen, are you all right? Are you hur--”

Lee’s words were thrown from his face by the slap Helen’s hand delivered to his cheek. Lee was sent wheeling and Helen drew back in the mud like a bog cat.

“Cocksucker!” she spat.

“Helen?”

“You stay away from me. I told Mama I wasn’t letting you back in, and I meant it.” The flashlight, which was sent spinning by the blow to Lee’s head, embedded itself in the mud with the light’s beam angled up so that it caught the underside of Helen’s face. Her hands shook, and her voice hissed through her throat.

“Helen, I don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s me, Lee.” Lee held up his palms as a show of defenselessness. Helen backed further into the river, wetting her

nightgown so that it clung to her. Lee noticed how small she was, her legs nothing more than dried cane. The mud sucking at her feet threatened to topple her.

"How dare you come back now?" Helen screamed. Lee could no longer see his aunt's face. He turned his head and yelled.

"Troy! She's over here!"

Troy had already heard the racket and came crashing through the trees. Breathless and relieved, he took Helen in his arms. She fell into them crying. "Troy! Troy, where did you go? I couldn't find you." Troy made soft shushing sounds, and started leading her back toward the house.

Lee tried to follow, but Helen rounded on him. "No! Don't let him come, Troy. Fucker's not getting into my house. He left me and my sisters to starve." Helen's nightgown, torn and wet at the hem, hung from her bones, and the skin of her legs was striped with scratches and cuts. When she stepped into the light, he noticed she was barefoot and her footsteps left traces of blood in the muck, bright and ludicrous. But her eyes, Lee thought, rabid and cruel, were the worst of all.

"Helen, it's me. It's Lee."

Helen turned her back to him. Lee looked to Troy for help, unable even to speak, but Troy simply motioned for him to hang back and turned Helen toward the house. As they disappeared into the trees, Lee was left alone on the river, standing in a puddle of light surrounded by the dark. He could hear motion—the slap of water, wind, the screech of an owl downstream—and he felt a quiver run down his spine. The owl's cry was like a woman grieving, the loneliest sound he had ever heard. He looked around, trying to discern some landmark or familiar sight, but he didn't recognize a thing.

*****

Lee was pointed home toward Minor Hill, away from the river, when he turned into the rest stop. He searched the lot for Highway Patrol offices, but seeing none, pulled his truck into the gravel. There were only a handful of vehicles—mostly semis, a few trucks. The afternoon had been a scorcher, and as evening approached, the day's heat was just now beginning to lift itself off the earth. Lee cut the engine and sat in the sudden quiet. Under the hood the engine ticked. The edge of the woods throbbed with the sound of locusts, and the late afternoon light angling through the treetops cast long, twisted shadows into the wood. Lee looked around. Several of the semis' interior lights flashed on and off—a signal that the trucks' occupants were willing for a friend. Lee watched as their silhouettes focused—the need in them flaring briefly before sputtering back out. He ignored them.

The day had been too hot. Lee knew the woods would be deserted. So when Lee eased open the truck door and jumped out, he headed toward the concrete restrooms in back of the rest stop, their entrances guarded by the dull hum of Coke machines. The fluorescent lamps attached above the doors had switched on, already attracting life—swarms of gnats seemingly born from the glass tubes' heat. A luna moth, large as Lee's fist, beat itself against the wedge of lighted concrete. He stopped and listened to the ping of the moth's body against the frosted glass, the interiors of the truck cabs continuing to light on and off like fireflies.

For a moment he thought of turning around, getting back into his truck and leaving. He even shifted the weight of his feet in that direction. Then he remembered the house, and imagined pulling up outside as the windows winked on low to the ground—

making the place look like a bunker built against something horrible that could happen. He pictured Helen and Troy inside—not living, but used up. Nothing more than mannequins someone placed in the spots where life used to take place.

Lee reached for the handle of the rest room door. Inside, the smell of piss and disinfectant were strong. The only sound was the noise of a broken urinal continuously cycling. The floor around the drains was wet and streaked with mud from outside. Lee made a walk through, checking each stall, but they were empty. Nothing there but the memory of requests—graffiti penned or carved into the lime green wood.

The silence of the place bothered him. He recalled the first time he had been to the rest stop. It had been September, the leaves still clinging to the trees. He was seventeen then, and he had driven down from Minor Hill petrified. Shaking like a girl the entire way. He remembered the close smell of the concrete, the room's dim fixtures filled with the shadows of dead bugs. He remembered the man in the stall, the way the man looked at him, motioning him inside.

The man had spit on his cock before sticking it in him, and the pain of it had made Lee's eyes water. But then, afterwards, there had been what Lee could only describe as release. That feeling stayed with him for a while. But only for a while. That was the first and last time he had ever taken it from a man. He preferred to stand.

Lee heard someone approaching from outside and turned in time to see a young man about his age enter the bathroom. The young man nodded when he saw Lee. "Hey, what's going on?"

"Not much." Lee spoke into his shoulder, barely above a mumble.

The young man was not attractive. He had bad posture and his face seemed prone to oily eruptions of acne, but he walked with a kind of entitlement. He came further into the room, then paused and seemed to squint. “Hey, is your name Lee?”

Lee’s heart took a dive for his bowels. He shook his head and tried to walk past the guy, but the young man grabbed the sleeve of his shirt.

“Yeah, you’re Lee Garvis. You remember me? Caleb Warren. We went to high school together. Yeah, you were on the football team. Dated that girl. What’s-her-name? Donna.”

“Excuse me.” Lee tried to push past, but Caleb stepped in front of him so that he was between Lee and the door. He did remember Caleb—a redneck from Deerfield whose laughter had always been a little too hysterical. The whole Warren clan had a reputation of bad blood—their eyes seeming to carry the genetic precursors to their later, fated incarcerations.

“Hold on. No need to bolt. I ain’t going to tell anybody you were here. You are *here,* right?”

Lee shook his head, even though he knew that did nothing to save him.

“Well, I’d ask what you’ve been up to, but I guess I already know.” Caleb’s shoulders jerked spastically, the skin of his face clinching at the flinty chips of his eyes. He moved his hand from Lee’s arm to his chest, and Lee was sure Caleb would hear the knocking going on inside.

“You’re in my way,” he said.

Caleb’s hand darted to the front of Lee’s jeans causing Lee to jerk back, startled, his jeans unbuttoned in the process. Caleb stood at arm’s length as Lee glared at him, the

light from the partially closed door casting Caleb's face in shadow, making it hard to see the expression on his face. "Last I heard you were practically married. Couldn't get it up with her, I bet. Why don't you let me give it a try?"

Caleb stepped forward and grabbed Lee's crotch, his knees already bending. Lee shoved and Caleb collapsed onto the slick floor as Lee shot out of the bathroom. He raced toward his truck with his head down, forgetting to button his jeans until he was nearly halfway across the lot. He heard Caleb yelling from the restroom. "Hey, man. What's your problem?" But he didn't look back. Didn't even turn his head to see if the men in the trucks were watching. His tires screeched as he pulled onto the highway. Ahead of him was nothing but darkness. He remembered to switch on the truck's lights and their beams pushed back against what was ahead of him.

*****

After Helen's flight, several shards of glass were removed from her feet, and while they were bound, she laid in bed and read magazines—*McCall's* and *Southern Living*. Once she was able to hobble about, Helen took to sitting at the CB table during the day, framed in squares of mid-morning light, conversing on the citizens' band. It was Helen's new obsession of late, and she spent hours on the radio, chatting with truckers, boaters, anyone who would listen. She even had a new handle: Wanderer. A bit of her old humor Lee recognized but didn't really appreciate. What struck Lee was how she was a different person every time she turned it on, at times flirting with some junior cop, at others, openly cringing at the raw banter of the truckers on Highway 72.

That night on the river had changed all of them. Although he had not mentioned it, Lee felt Troy should have defended him somehow. But he had turned and walked off

with Helen, leaving Lee stranded, wondering if it were safe to return. In Lee's mind, Troy had abandoned him, and for Troy's part, he seemed to always look sideways at Lee now. Taking stock and measurement of the young man, but for what, Lee couldn't say. It was as if Helen's sickness had become contagious, and they were losing each other—the madness spilling over to wet each of them in its turn. Helen even pulled Lee aside one night. "You know, Troy told me about what happened that night on the river. What I said to you. I'm sorry for that. Disease or no, that was wrong." Helen paused, her hands nestled under her ribs. "I hope you won't hold it against me."

"Don't worry about it. You were out of your head."

Helen rubbed her eyes. "Out of my head," she repeated. "That's a way to put it."

On her good days, when she grew tired of the CB, Helen continued her sculpting in the yard, and the sound of her chisel tapping and splitting the wood would draw Lee, and Troy when he was home, out into the yard to keep an eye on her. They pulled up lawn chairs and watched as shapes began to form under Helen's hand. Troy had taken Helen's chip knives, but she made do with the adzes and chisels she had left, her hands guiding the tools. Wood chips rained into her hair and onto her bandaged feet. She balanced the adze and mallet in her fists, searching for the form under the weather-rubbed wood. She was working on a new piece: Ganymede: The Waterbearer.

"My sign, of course," she told them.

"The face looks kinda fruity if you ask me," Troy said. He took a sip of his Coors and then spit it into the grass. "Beer's hot."

"Ganymede was the most beautiful boy in Greece. So beautiful, the gods themselves took him up into heaven and made him immortal."

“Still sounds kinda faggoty,” Lee said, and he smiled to hear Troy laugh beside him.

“What do you all know about it? Nothing about nothing.”

Helen was working on the neck, at the spot just below the Adam’s apple where the skin dipped into the collar. She took her time on the thin bones and curves, often stopping and stepping back with the handle of her chisel resting on her lips. The day was cooler than most, but still warm. They were weeks away from autumn when the river shrank like an earthworm in the sun. To Lee’s right, tiny jeweled hummingbirds flitted back and forth between Helen’s feeder and the branches of the cedar. He could hear the vibration of their wings distinctly from where he sat.

“You been anywhere recently, Lee?” Troy looked over at Lee and took a swig of his beer, grimacing as the lukewarm liquid hit his throat.

“Say what?”

“Where you been going? I noticed you was out a few nights this week.”

“Oh, nowhere really. Just driving around. To the Slough a few nights.”

“I hear you,” Troy said. He unbuttoned the top three buttons on his sleeve-less shirt and scratched at his chest. He leaned across the arm of his chair toward Lee and lowered his voice. “I’d appreciate it though if you told me when you were going out. So I know to keep an extra eye open.”

Lee glanced at Helen, who was hammering at the wood in order to make a plain for the chest. “Sure. You’re right. That was stupid of me.”

Troy nodded and returned to his beer. After a few minutes, Helen cocked her head at the work she had done and grunted. “I’m having trouble seeing this thing,” she said.

Helen looked around as if trying to get her bearings. She turned slowly toward the river, swatting at the deerflies that buzzed at her ears. She stood gazing at the water as if it were going to bring something to her. Then she turned toward Lee and Troy and began to snap her fingers, pointing her arm at them.

"Lee, come over here and be my model."

"What?"

"I need a model. I can't find the shape to this piece of shit." She took a swing at the wood with her hammer and the sound it made was dull and hollow.

"What do you want me to do?" Lee asked.

"Stand over there next to the cedar." Helen pointed where she wanted him. Lee walked over and stood with his hands in his pockets, feeling self-conscious under Helen's scrutiny. "Turn about a hair to your left," Helen said.

"How long am I going to have to stand here?"

"Hush up. It won't kill you. This is for art."

"For art, huh?"

"Just do it, Lee," Troy said with a finality Lee had not heard since he was a child. The sunlight Lee was now standing in made his back begin to sweat.

"Take your shirt off," Helen said.

"What? I'm not taking my shirt off. I'll blister."

"I can't use you as a model if you're all covered up. Take it off." Lee reached up and pulled his shirt over his head, his stomach pimpling in the breeze. Helen began to work, and as Lee felt the sunburn rise up along his spine, the rough lines of a torso began to rise from under the surface of the wood, like a drowned man slowly rising from deep

water. Lee had always been astonished by the way such detail could come from such blunt instruments.

"Keep still," Helen said.

"It's a good thing I'm so beholden to you," Lee said, swabbing at his slick back with his shirt. Lee shifted under the scrutiny of his aunt's gaze, the way she ran her eyes up and down his body, searching out the grain and curve of his chest. It unnerved him in a way—her seeming to know him right down to the story of his skin. He was afraid of what she might read there, on his flesh—those nights in the dark, the touch of men, the anger that welled in him deep as the river. But if she could decipher any of this, she made no sign.

Troy sat still as a stump just watching them—so still a dragonfly alighted on the nub of his index finger, its wings going up and down in a mechanized rhythm. Helen continued to gouge at the half-made boy, occasionally raising her eyes toward Lee. This went on for fifteen or twenty minutes, until suddenly Helen set down her tools and walked over to where Lee was standing. She reached out and placed her hands on either side of his chest, causing Lee to jump and pull back. "Hold on," she said, her voice throaty and strange. "I have to place you."

She began to shift Lee's body—forcing his right shoulder back with the pressure of her palm, arranging the position of his arms and the tilt of his head. She even loosened the stress in his shoulders with the ball of her fist. She worked her way around Lee, and Lee stood as still as he could. Even when Helen's movements seemed to change intent, he did not move. Her hands became lighter on his skin, running over it with a patience

and care. She ran the tips of her fingers around the slant of his chest, tracing the nipples, foraging into the patch of hair above his sternum.

"What are you doing, Helen?" Lee asked.

"Finding your shape." The sides of Helen's lips quivered and her eyes were wet and glassy. Then Helen's finger lifted somewhat, so that it was only her nail that was touching him, and she moved her finger downward along his stomach, following the thin line of hair to his navel. The muscles in his stomach clench; his shoulders jerked. He stepped back.

"I think that's enough art for one day." Helen turned toward Troy, who was now standing, his beer poised in midair. Lee snatched his shirt from the grass and put it on, trying hard not to look at anyone. Troy hesitated, confusion running into his face. "Helen, come inside. Leave the boy alone." Troy took a few steps forward and extended his hand. Helen recoiled from it, backing away until Lee had to retreat further into the yard. His arm fell to his side and a look crossed Troy's face that Lee had never seen before.

"Helen?" Troy said. When she didn't answer, Troy walked over to her side and took her arm. He pulled her gently toward the house. For a moment, it seemed like she would break from him, but then she began to move.

She moved slowly, looking down at herself as if she were marveling at the ingenuity of her own creation. Helen dusted her shirt with her free hand, wood shavings spinning off of her. She began singing a nursery rhyme, her voice low-pitched, but oddly tuneful. *Leaves are falling. The leaves are falling down. All over Paris and all over town.*

Lee was left in the yard, no longer wanting to follow. He took a deep breath. He had not realized that he was trembling. The face of Helen's sculpture was turned away

from him, and he went over to it so that it stared back at him. It was not his face, but the frame was his—the broad, declining shoulders and tapered waist. It discomforted him the way the statue twinned him—his body measured and meted out. It was as if she had created him again, and Lee couldn't help thinking of the way Helen's slap on the riverbank had seemed to unmake him—sent him spinning out of himself.

Later that same day, Troy pulled Lee aside after dinner. He motioned for Lee to follow him. "Come on. We need to do something." Troy took Lee to the front door of the house and pulled a brown paper bag from his pocket. "Been meaning to do this." He dumped the contents of the bag on the table next to the door. Lee looked down at the screws and sliding locks that lay there. As they worked they talked in whispers. Helen was in the living room watching daytime talk shows, their work lauded by the raucous sound of laughter or jeering. After the lock had been screwed into the frame, Lee nudged the bolt at the end of the chain into its groove. "You know," Lee said. "She's going to be able to open this."

"I know. I'm hoping when she's in a state she'll have trouble with it. The noise should wake one of us."

Lee nodded. "Might work."

"Listen, I need you to be careful around your aunt," Troy said. "She can be difficult in the best of times. You understand me?"

"Yeah, I understand."

"It's probably not a good idea for you to be too familiar around her either." Lee caught Troy's eye briefly before Troy looked away. "Just be careful. Helen's not always going to know you as you."

“Hell, I know that feeling.” Lee laughed, but the sound seemed rheumatic. Troy nodded and then moved off. Lee watched him go, Troy’s steps short and slow, his boots barely lifting from the floor, as if he was unsure of what he was walking toward—the landscape before him indefinable in line or perspective.

*****

Outside Helen’s window, a drizzle beaded the glass, and a blue, somber light reflected from the varnished surfaces of the cherry-wood furniture, Helen’s wedding gift from Troy’s people. The room smelled like the river, a mixture of mold, earth, and decay. Helen was seated on the lip of the bed with the bureau mirror behind her and to her left. She sat so still, it was difficult to tell if she were real, like a wax figure in a House of Horrors. She looked nothing like the aunt Lee remembered, the disease having stripped from her the most innocuous traces of her face. Her eyes had lost all vestige of humor or intent; the skin of her cheeks slack. Even her posture seemed curled and withdrawn, as if, having lost all sense of who she was, Helen was pulling in what was left.

Over the last few months, Lee had learned to recognize the different kinds of silence—the hush of stilled activity, the silence of nothing to say, and that other kind of quiet that settles on something gone wrong. It was the latter he had to listen for, and it was this kind of silence that brought him to the door of his aunt’s bedroom, peering in on her like she was a child up to no good. Despite the dimness of her bedroom, Lee could still discern Helen’s features, and he could tell by Helen’s expression that something was amiss. The room revealed nothing. The bed, centered against the far wall, was tiered with pillows, one on top of another, the fronts embroidered with designs of flowers and birds. Lee entered the room warily, crossing the threshold as if on a dare, but Helen didn’t

acknowledge his presence. The quilt on which she sat was one Lee recalled his grandmother making. The pattern—Drunkard's Path.

"What you up to?" Lee's voice sounded large in the room. Helen's shoulders hunched and her knees were pulled up under her chin. She didn't answer at first but then she pointed toward the floor and said, "I finally caught them."

Lee shifted his attention to where an overturned Kay King shoebox rested. He approached the bed and lowered himself onto the quilt, the springs creaking under him. Helen ran her hand back and forth over the quilt in a slow rhythm, but her eyes never left the box. He thought of the texture of his life of late—the way the air of this place pressed close about him. Growing up, he had felt this same compression in church on Sundays, his throat hung up around the bones of the preacher's words—the bloodied wages of sin, the salt stains on the deserts outside of Gomorrah. In the winters, his mother jerked beside him in the pew, sweaty and exalted. In the summers, Helen sat rigid and calm, as if she believed one must hold down firmly on salvation and devotion. Any movement and it could be lost. He could not recall her ever being that still—except now, years later in this darkened room. He felt like he was drowning, suffocating in that same thick air.

"Helen?" Lee said.

She turned her head at the sound of her name. At first, nothing registered. Her eyes were the shallowest slicks of water on a paved highway. Then something took.

"Lee. Lee, look." She again extended her arm in the direction of the shoebox. "I caught the niggers."

Lee thought he misheard. "Excuse me?"

“They’re tiny, but persistent. They’re only yay big.” She indicated a length with her fingers. “They came in while I was dressing. I asked them to leave, but they wouldn’t.” Lee put his hand on his aunt’s arm. Her muscles felt like water underneath her skin. Helen’s voice dropped to a whisper. “They even tried to climb up my leg. They’re fresh.”

Lee looked back at the box. He almost expected it to move. “You shouldn’t use that word, Helen.” Her brow furrowed. “Nevermind. Helen, there’s nothing under there.”

“Mama always said, ‘Be polite,’ but those boys tax a girl’s patience.”

Lee got up and approached the box. He reached for it, but Helen was up in an instant. She seized his arm. From under her breath came a sound Lee could only describe as a whimper. He shook her off, her nails leaving hatch marks on his skin.

“You crazy?” Helen asked. “Don’t let them out. Just leave them under there.”

“Why?”

“You’ll have to get rid of them,” Helen said. “Take them out back. Use the hammer. That seems most humane.” Lee nodded. He pulled her to her feet and turned her away from the box.

“Whatever you say, Helen.”

“Where’s Troy?”

“He’s out on the river. Why don’t you go into the kitchen and see if you can get him on the CB?”

Helen rubbed the tip of her nose.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Lee said, “and you can tell me one of your stories about how much of a rat bastard I was as a child.”

Helen stared at him, her face vacant. He wanted nothing more than to shout his name, to see if sheer volume alone could make something stick. He wanted to sit and tell her story after story of his youth, their history, but he knew somehow the stories wouldn't be his life.

"You *were* a rat bastard." Helen grinned, her gums naked and toothless. Lee blinked and then laughed, the sound rushing out of him. He wondered where her teeth had run off to.

"I have to piss," Helen announced, reaching up to stroke Lee's hair. "I'll meet you in the kitchen, Paris."

"My name's Lee."

She turned without answer and headed down the hallway, her bare feet slapping the stone floor. Lee stood still until he heard the whine of the CB start up. There was a click as Helen pressed the speaker button, and Lee heard her voice as it touched the snarls of frequency. "This is Wanderer coming out of…my place, I suppose. What's the handle on that end?" What came were many names—Little Worm, Bear Cub, Roger Dodger—and Helen picked from them. "Little Worm? I hope that isn't descriptive." Helen chortled and then coughed.

"No ma'am. It's ironic."

Lee turned and caught sight of himself in Helen's bureau mirror. Over the back was slung the length of a slip. The mirror was an antique, so old it had dulled. In its reflection, Lee thought he hardly looked real. He didn't appear the kind of person who could scrub trails of diarrhea from the carpet, or grow used to the sight of his aunt naked—her skin slack, skin tags gathered like a crop of mushrooms at the small of her

back. Lee tipped his head toward the silhouette in the glass, and the stranger in front of him nodded back. He took a step forward and as he did so his foot struck the box on the floor. He kicked and it flipped in the air, coming down several feet away. On the rug where the box had rested was a pair of black high heel shoes. The long heels scuffed, the buckles tarnished. Lee bent, picked them up, and then couldn't think what to do with them. He retrieved the box and laid the pair inside.

In the kitchen, Helen sat in front of the CB, the tiny box picking voices out of the roiling November skies. Outside the window, the remaining leaves dropped into the river, making battalions of tiny ships. The dam upriver had curtailed the waters in recent months and the river had pulled back from its banks until the dock walked out into nothing but mud, trash, and the skeletons of wrecked trees.

Helen gripped each knob of the CB between thumb and forefinger, often confusing the radio dial for the volume dial—the voices behind the noise often raging for a moment and then lying still. "Hello, is anyone there?" Lee watched her from across the table. Shadows from the window mottled her face, transforming her expression. Lee looked at the clock on the wall. It was 3:30. Troy would be home in a matter of hours, he thought.

"I'm here." It was a woman's voice.

Helen's face beamed. "Hey, honey. What's your name?"

There was a pause. Then the voice came again. "Promise not to laugh. Right now it's Lady Peddler."

"Oh, girl. That's lovely."

“It’s alright. This is my first time on. I work for Mary Kay cosmetics. My husband got me the radio for company. The crowd on here’s kind of rough, but most of the guys are sweet underneath.” From the sound of her voice, Lee pictured a woman in her late forties. She would be portly, he thought, with a broad face and bright cheeks that made her look friendly, like someone you could count on in a crisis. But ultimately she would be unimportant. Powerless before the juggernaut of time, and she knew this. It gave her voice a kind of desperate hilarity.

“It’s a funny thing these radios,” Helen said. “They’re like those meetings people have. What do you call them? Séances. Have you ever been to a séance?” Helen pulled the microphone toward her, enclosing her body around it.

“No, Ma’am. I’m a Christian.”

“I was one of those once.”

Lee sat watching his aunt, wondering how a word like séance got through the murk, but his name got mixed up with foreign cities. It angered him sometimes. Made him speak too curt, or jerk her up from chairs. But this wasn’t often. He thought about what it meant to care for someone—what that demanded.

Lee was eighteen when Helen found him in the boathouse with a rope around his neck. He had looped the thing over the rafters and stood perched on a two-by-four between two sawhorses. He had left no note. He had stood there, the blue and white fibers scratchy against his neck, his blood hot in his hands. He had counted the change in his pocket—thirty-two cents. He had told his God that he was fucking off, and then he had asked Him to push.

When Helen found him, she climbed up and took the rope away. She pulled him off the now harmless edge and led him to the house. He did not resist. He did not speak. She took him to his bed where he stayed, her beside him stroking his neck, her fingers cool where the rope had been. He wouldn't answer her questions. "Whatever it is," she had said. "You just have to hold it." They never spoke of the incident after that.

On the CB the woman laughed. "Careful, ma'am. My husband says whatever you say on these things is said forever. It's radio waves. They go on and on." The women's voice was distorted for a moment by the whine and crackle of interference. When her voice returned, it was muted, as if coming from a great distance. "…maybe they'll find you."

Helen leaned forward and tried to steady the signal. She nudged the dial to the right and static rushed in. She turned the dial the other way. Lee watched his aunt, her face childlike and hooded, like a doll's whose eyes lift as you lift them. He stood and pulled her toward him, his arms encircling her roughly, the CB left on a station of interference. He heard her gasp, a sound like steam escaping metal, and he knew that she had loved him like a son.

"She's gone," Helen said. "I don't think I can get her back."

*****

"Why the fuck weren't you watching her?"

Troy and Lee stood in the rain. Troy was bellowing. It was late January and the rain came down mixed with ice. Pellets covered the yellow grass like spilled sugar. In the pines, crows cowered under the cold and wind, invisible in the trees, their voices the only evidence of their attendance. Lee felt the tiny pellets strike the back of his neck. He

shivered. Troy was standing in front of him, staring at him as if he would like nothing more than to gut him and jettison his remains on the river.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t notice her standing there. I had turned the stove eye on to start dinner and the next thing I knew she was screaming. You’re right, I should have been paying more attention.”

“That’s right. What the hell were you fucking thinking?”

From the window, Helen watched them, her right hand holding a wet dishrag against her forearm where the eye of the stove had left a seared half-moon burn. Lee again felt that sick, sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. The same feeling he had when he realized what he had done—shoved his aunt’s hands away from him, harder than he had meant. She had stumbled back, caught herself on the stove, the stove eye as red as he imagined hell would be. Troy had come in from the river to find Helen wailing uncontrollably, unable to speak. He had been yelling ever since, lowering his voice to ask Helen what happened, but then flying back into a rage when it became obvious that Helen had regressed beyond answering.

“How many times can I say I’m sorry?” Lee heard his voice crack, but he gripped that part of himself, forcing his feelings back down as if he meant to smother them. “I don’t know how it happened.”

If anyone had asked Lee what went through his head when he shoved Helen, he would have said, “Nothing,” and it would have been the truth. There had been no emotion in the act. Just reaction. Instinct.

“I don’t give a shit about your sorrys.” Troy was so close to him now Lee couldn’t make his eyes focus.

“What do you want me to say? I didn’t do anything.” Now Lee was screaming.

“You were supposed to be watching her. Always watching. Is that so hard to understand?” Troy’s voice was becoming tight and hoarse. Lee could feel him shaking he was so close.

“Hey, back the fuck up.” Lee pointed a finger toward Troy’s chest, but Troy knocked it away, stepping closer.

“No, you listen, cocksucker—”

Lee was the first to throw a punch. It connected weakly with the side of Troy’s neck, but he stumbled back. Troy stood stunned for half a second before he lunged at his nephew. Lee turned, his side taking the better part of Troy’s weight, but his feet lost traction and they both went down. Lee’s forehead struck one of the serrated scales of Helen’s Behemoth, and he felt the blood run down his forehead. Lee began swinging upward, blindly, unconscious and uncaring of what he hit. Troy pressed Lee into the mud, his hands fumbling as Lee swung with every ounce of his strength. He tried to communicate pain with each swing, to deliver it, but Lee felt his chest readying to give, crack, and out would spill all of it—the cuss, the guilt, the frenzy, the knot of snakes wrenched and wrung around his vital organs.

Troy, failing to stop the assault, spun and collapsed wheezing into the mud. Lee continued to swing, his arms shadow-boxing the cold face of the sky. Then he let them fall and he curled his fingers into the wet mud. Wet and choking, the blood pounded in his neck and face—hot salt ran into his ears. He felt Troy take him by the shoulder and pull him into a sitting position. Lee struggled, but Troy’s arms were iron, and he held Lee against him.

“Stop.” Troy said. “Stop!”

As if given permission, Lee went limp in every muscle. Through the blur of blood and tears, Lee saw Helen over Troy’s shoulder, still at the window. The rain was coming down harder now, and colder. She was staring at the two of them, wetted and nameless, and he stared back until she turned and disappeared. When Troy’s grip relaxed, Lee jumped up, his feet seeming to move of their own volition, sprinting across the yard to his truck. His tires squealed as he pulled onto the highway, Troy like a marionette in the rearview.

He was able to stop the bleeding with a wad of napkins he found in the glove box, but the gash running up into his hairline was ugly and crusted. The mud on his coat became dried in the heat of the cab. By the time he reached the rest station it had stopped sleeting. To the east, a blue ribbon of sky slithered under gray cloudbanks. He wandered into the woods like a half-formed man, the clay still wet, running. He saw no one, but he knew they were there, the men brought out even in this weather, sweating in thick camouflage, their coats heavy and wet, all of them unable to bridge the winter without some form of warmth. They were always there. He took a spot among the trees.

From where Lee stood, he could see brief flashes of color. The woods beside the highway had lost its close intimacy. Without the green to shade them, men clawed for attention amidst the brittle wires of briars and cockleburs. Lee caught glimpses of them. Above him, the trees groaned as they scraped at the steel of the sky, while crows, like uniformed officers of the law, made racket as if to alert the world to what was happening here. He pressed his back against a tree, its trunk so twisted by poison ivy vines that it looked as if it were being strangled.

Lee waited for over an hour for someone to approach. Occasionally, men in Day-Glo orange and camouflage would amble by and meet his gaze, each one trying to keep the attitude of nonchalance, as if they were Sunday strollers out to get their morning constitution. No one approached him. He couldn't blame them—mud-spattered, blood oozing from the gash in his head. In this place, there was a tendency to avoid obvious signs of violence and disuse, and he was too frayed. Worn to the last thread. Lee fingered the hairy rope of the poison ivy. The image of his aunt's face wilting after the accident was still in his thoughts, and he tried to force down his throat the hard stone of that memory. Sometimes he envied his aunt her illness—the loss of demons, old bones, guilt and shame as if she had loaded all that cargo into a boat, sailed them to the river's deepest point and dumped it all in. He thought of that day in the boathouse—the rope looped up toward heaven and gravity wanting him down. Did she even remember?

Lee pulled at the vine under his hand and the thin cables attaching it to the tree trunk gave with a succession of snaps. Even if Lee had not built up immunity to the vine's poison long ago, pulling them off trees with Troy when he was younger, he knew their venom had long since dried in the winter air. They were lifeless now, as harmless as they were ever going to be.

Lee noticed someone approaching from the highway and he stood up straight, squaring his shoulders. He couldn't see the man's face, which was hidden in the hood of the sweatshirt he was wearing. As he approached, Lee slid his hands down to the crook of his legs and rubbed himself through his jeans. It wasn't until the man was nearly upon him that he raised his head. Lee saw too late that it was Caleb.

"Well, swivel shits. You just can't get enough of these woods." Caleb grinned.

Lee turned his head and looked off down the trail. He watched a contingent of cedar waxwings fighting over a juniper as Caleb walked up and took a place at his shoulder.

"You look awful by the way. You go mudding without your truck? Last time I saw you, you had your tail tucked behind your ass. Why'd you'd run off?"

Lee shifted his weight away from Caleb. The young man tapped lightly at Lee's boot with the toe of his sneaker. He chuckled under his breath. "You don't like me very much, do you? That's okay. You know I lied just now. That wasn't the last time I saw you. The last time was at Stoneybrook. I work as an RN there. You were there with some old woman." Lee jumped when he felt Caleb's hand on his thigh. He saw it knead the muscle of his leg. "She acted kinda soft-headed. Yelled a lot. She your kin or something? Or you working your way into an inheritance?"

Lee knocked Caleb's hand away and tried to move off down the trail, but Caleb reached out and caught the back of his jeans. "Hey now," Caleb said. "No need to be rude." He felt Caleb press himself against him, Caleb's other arm reaching around to grab at his cock. His breath was hot against Lee's neck. Lee spun and shoved with both arms sending Caleb staggering back.

"Get the fuck away from me."

"Calm down." Caleb raised his hands. "Don't get all huffy."

Lee stood in the trail breathing hard. He could feel the winter air burn in his chest. "We ain't friends," he said.

“Friends?” Caleb’s eyes glittered like dirty gems. “Nobody’s ever met a friend here. I just want to suck your dick.” Caleb stepped forward, the smell of chemicals strong around him, and Lee balled his hands into fists.

“Fuck off.”

Caleb reached out and jerked at the front of Lee’s jeans. Lee shoved back, but this time Caleb had a firmer grip. Lee jabbed at Caleb’s side. The wind went out of him with a grunt as Caleb snaked an arm around Lee’s neck and they began to grapple, hugging each other until their limbs popped. Lee struggled to free himself, continuing to jab at Caleb. He felt his fists connect with Caleb’s side and arms, cringing at the meaty sound of their contact. They fell to the ground. Lee became a flurry of blows as Caleb scratched at his neck, yanking at the zipper of Lee’s jeans. Caleb spoke into his ear. “Is this what you want? We can do this too.”

They twisted in the dirt of the trail until Lee was able to grab Caleb’s hand and wrench it away from him. Lee twisted the arm he held and heard Caleb cry out, his back arching under him. Lee used his knees to brace himself, shoving Caleb’s face into the dirt. Lee stared down at him wanting to kill, to press Caleb until the earth swallowed them both, all memory of them erased. Caleb’s lips were grained with dirt. With his free hand, Lee pulled down Caleb’s sweatpants, exposing him.

Caleb didn’t struggle. “Come on. Do it,” he said.

When he finished, Lee lay on Caleb’s back. There was no noise. He sat up, but Caleb didn’t stir. Caleb’s teeth were still gritted. He breathed through his nose. Eyes shut. But Lee sensed the eyes of the other men. They were out there in the cold, watching. He felt elevated under their stares. Powerful. But this feeling too began to drain from him.

He stood and buttoned himself. He nudged Caleb with the tip of his boot. “Don’t bother me no more,” Lee said, but it was as if he were speaking to the men around him rather than to Caleb. Lee turned without waiting for a response and headed down the path toward the highway. He didn’t bother looking back.

*****

Not until months later, while the spring smoldered in the hedges, would Lee begin to think he could piece it all together. He sat on the river, his feet dangling over the side of the dock. The sound of the wake against the supports soothed him. Through the boards he sat upon, light banded the water’s surface, and the shadows of fish moved like submarines. Along the banks, the roots of trees fingered the river and he watched as snakes and rock-backed turtles climbed up to sun themselves in the new spring weather. Lee sat shirtless under the sun, Aristophanes cradled in his lap—the jar so wet and beaded with condensation that the tiny serpent was little more than a dark suggestion behind the glass. Lee had found him earlier that day, while cleaning out the freezer. At first, he had been unable to place what it was he was holding, having forgotten Helen’s pet in the succession of time, and then the memory rushed in.

To his right on the bank, Helen and Troy lay together in the hammock. Troy held Helen in the crook of his arm and hummed softly as the net swayed, its cords grinding against the bark of the pines it was strung between. Inside the house, a thousand things waited to be done, and Lee wanted to put them off. In all honesty, he wanted to put them down, but he knew he wouldn’t. After the fight, after Lee had returned to the house, Troy had tried to explain. “Some fucking life,” he had said. Lee had nodded.

Lee looked over at his aunt and uncle, both of them lying facing one another as if they were trying to sew together a space that was only theirs. “What happened to your pinkie finger?” Helen asked. “It’s nearly gone.”

Troy held up his hand and splayed his fingers, the last finger on his right hand a nub. “You know what happened to it. I lost it in the war. Shot off. Didn’t even realize it had happened until the lieutenant pointed it out.”

Helen stared at the missing finger. “My Daddy lost his thumb. Sure enough. Cut it off when he got bit by the cottonmouth. Did you know that?”

“Yes, ma’am. You’ve told me many times.”

“Where’s Daddy?”

“I imagine he’s long dead, although I can’t swear to it.”

“Good.”

Lee unscrewed the lid of the jar. Inside, Aristophanes lay coiled into a Gordian knot, his head tucked under a hardened fold of scale. Lee upended the jar onto his palm, and the intimate puzzle of those coils dropped into his hand. He rubbed at ice crystals that had formed on the pet, taking them off with the heat of his finger.

“Ida wants me to get her a dress at White’s. We can’t afford,” Helen said. “What’s say you help us out? A dress for a dress.” Helen pulled at the neck of her house coat but Troy stayed her hand.

“Well work something out.” Troy answered. He paused and in that moment Lee heard all the things that could have been said. “We always do.”

“Since Daddy left, it’s been real hard.” Helen ran the back of her fingers down the side of Troy’s chest. “Mamma planted thrift.”

“You know in a sick way,” Troy said, “I like this. It’s like getting to know you all over again. Not many men have those kinds of chances.”

Helen made no answer. Lee lay back and stretched himself on the warm boards. He placed Aristophanes on his chest—a weird and frightening comfort in the heat. He waited as the serpent warmed, as his great-aunt and uncle navigated uncharted waters in their marriage. The scar over his right eye had mended, but the stitched skin still itched. After their fight, Lee and Troy demanded nothing of each other. When Troy came in from the water in the afternoons, Lee asked about the fishing, and Troy inquired of Helen’s state, and that was all. There was just the quiet uneasiness of men terrified at how far they could be driven. Lee had not returned to the rest stop in all that time.

“It’s nice here,” Helen said. Lee heard a fish jump on the river and the cry of a hawk in the clean-swept sky. “We should get married here.”

“We should. I’d marry you today.”

“Oh, I don’t have a dress.” Helen ran her hand over the matted threads of the housecoat she was wearing and grimaced. “Besides, you still have a wife.”

“That I do.” There was a moment of quiet between them.

“You are going to leave her aren’t you? Paris?”

Troy pulled her toward him and kissed her forehead. “For you, anything.”

Helen smiled. “I have a lovely dress. It’s white with these tiny violet flowers.”

“I remember that dress. You were wearing it the day I met you. I remember thinking that dress could barely contain something so wild. That the world wanted you naked sitting there and that dress just wasn’t cut for such a tall order. Do you remember that day?”

Helen's forehead lined with thought. "I take you," she said, "to be my husband. To have and to hold from this day forward."

"Amen," Troy said.

Lee turned his head away. His eyes ran to the river which glistened like a skin of scales. It was impossible not to be drawn to it, its slow progress to a space infinitely broader. Lee cradled Aristophanes between his palms. The number of times he had cast line into the water here was more than he cared to count. He thought of all the things he had dragged from that river, all the life pulled gasping and breathless from below. Yet sometimes the lure went under and never surfaced, snagged on something that refused to be hauled up, refused to be caught.

"Don't bother me no more," he thought. That was the last thing he had said to Caleb. He said it now under his breath. But he knew that Caleb would always be bothering him. He had left the woods that day feeling big, but the mountain only peaks the once and then you have to walk yourself back down. Lee's dream of life had ended as those dreams often do—the seed spent in the dirt. There's a sermon here, he thought. In some ways he envied Caleb—wished with every ounce of himself that he could take who and what it was he yearned for. That he could bed down that animal greed.

On the far side of the river, a speedboat whipped its way out of an inlet, pushing waves toward either bank. From the stern of the diminishing boat, someone let out a whoop which echoed on the bluffs, living it up. The wake licked at Lee's legs. He held up Aristophanes in his palm, the warmed scales gone loose and malleable. He unwounded the thing, tried to imagine those tiny muscles thrashing back to life. The mouth opening

like a purse lined in white silk. The tiny fangs pumping poison into his wrist. Two pinpricks of blood and then the certainty of that thing.

He stood up on the dock and in his right hand he clutched the serpent. He saw Helen rise up on her elbow looking his way. They stared at each other for a moment and then Helen raised her hand and waved. Lee waved back, the limp serpent waving as well. Then, in a swift, clean motion, he dove into the river. The warm water enveloped him, air bubbles tickling his sides as he swam out and deeper, past the light from above into the shaded waters below. He saw silt drift before him, the length of Aristophanes oscillating in his fist. When he reached the bottom, there was nothing but mud which rose in thick clouds. He dug his hand into the bottom muck, pushing the tiny serpent deep into the belly of the river, and then let it go.

He floated there, his lungs beginning to ache. Above him, he could see the shafts of light piercing the skin of the river. He considered staying here, letting the river bed him down, his body touched by the fins of catfish, the world above fading like the light that couldn't pierce deep enough. They'd never find him, he thought. They'd forget his name. His face. He wondered if she'd even care. If she could even move to save him as she had once done. They had never mentioned that day. Not once since. And why would they. There was nothing to be said, only something to be done.

He sat at the bottom of the river, currents confusing his hair, his lungs searing. He let his feet root themselves in the mud. He felt the cold earth sift and rise around him, blinded by the thick of all that debris and silt, what everything came to here. He knew this too could be a kind of doing. A kind of holding.

But he wouldn't do that. Too much line tugged at him, demanded he ascend. He pushed himself upward with his arms—toward the air he ached for. He looked up and saw in that approaching surface the future and realized the future wasn't all that hard to read. He saw before him the time when they would abandon Helen, the shell of her left to a bed that was not her own. State-paid nurses hovering about her like white flies. He saw the time when she would waste and starve, no longer remembering how to nourish herself, and he saw the ending of that. He saw Troy disappear onto the river, drifting. Heard the stories from kin who had seen him, but never recently. Saw them shake their heads. Look into their hands. Over the static, the conversations would continue whether he listened or not, and as for himself, he saw only the things he would have to put down. The serpent, the living wood stripped of its miracle and set to rest. He saw those woods and knew that he'd always been walking them, always would be, one way or another. He was already living in that tomorrow, and he saw the glinting and barbed look of it, but even that could be held if he were careful. Very careful. And it was into this world, this future that he surfaced.

Vita

Bradford Tice was born in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee. He graduated from Lawrence County High School in 1996 before receiving his B.A. in English with a minor in film studies from the University of Tennessee. In 2004 he received his M.A. in English with a concentration in poetry from the University of Colorado. This dissertation fulfills the requirements for his Ph.D. in English with a concentration in fiction writing, which he received in May 2009.

Bradford Tice's poetry and fiction have appeared in such periodicals as *The Atlantic Monthly, North American Review, The American Scholar, Alaska Quarterly Review, Mississippi Review, One Story, Crab Orchard Review,* as well as in *Best American Short Stories 2008*.