

THE BLUE VALIANT

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By

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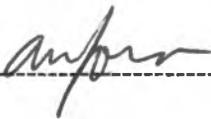
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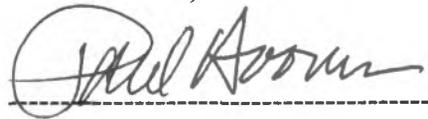
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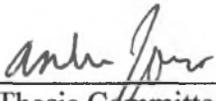
Paul Hoover, Professor

THE BLUE VALIANT

Patricia Elizabeth Creedy
San Francisco, California
2018

This is the story of my brother's short life. He was an alcoholic and he was in a fight in a bar in broad day light, took a blow to the head and never woke up. It is also the story of our childhood and living with the loss of our mother and the disintegration that followed in our family.

I certify that the story that follows is a correct representation of the content of The Blue Valiant.



Chair, Thesis Committee

12/12/18

Date

PREFACE AND/OR ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I want to thank my brothers Bob, David and James, and my sister Mary. I didn't realize until so much later that I was a part of something, not an orphan like I always thought but rather I was and am embedded in an entity made of us, attached in unseen ways and that no distance could pull us apart, even when we wanted nothing more than to get away from each other. This book is just my take on events, I am sure there are at least four different interpretations of our childhood, as memory is so dreamlike but we continually confuse it with truth. I especially want to thank my brother David for being the one to hold it all.

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More

They didn't know but they wanted more. They pretended to bang the ends of their forks on the table, sawed their knobby silver knives against the wrinkled silver edge of the TV dinner trays. They were hungry. They wanted more mass, more volume, more heat. They turned the broken knob on the TV, yanking the wrench that served as a channel changer from each other, cranking it till their ears ached with fear and the coming silence with the return of their father, tires crunching up the driveway. They wanted music on the radio, more of it, not droning gray news. They wanted guitar solos, yowling lyrics of the pain they couldn't name. They wanted muscles in their skinny arms. They had tiny rodent bones, easily digested by reptiles, they wanted hard white skeletal mass. They were five wolves, pups whose fur was much too soft, they were a thieving animal body, taking all they didn't have, fruit from the fields, food from the stores, cars from the street.

When it was cold, they fought over their father's army blanket of itchy green wool. When it was really cold, when the rain fell and they were soaked from splashing home through all the growing puddles, the middle one would crawl onto the couch, curling under the blanket with the oldest or the youngest, whoever was cold enough to receive him without attack.

When they fought, they fought with dirt clods and dishtowels wetted at the end, with vacuum hoses, with angry yanks they pulled down the mattress from each other's bed, toppling them to the toy strewn floor, crumbs flying like sugary

dust. They grabbed at whatever was nearest and would cause the most harm, a favorite doll, a transistor radio, a wobbly bookshelf, they wanted it all to crash and be loudly destroyed.

And when their dad came home, BuckaFlaps, the middle brother named him, they sometimes got the belt. They never saw each other's injuries, except the two girls, changing at night into their flannel nightgowns, pink rosettes brushing over their reddened skin. He never drew blood, just red welts that looked like stencils across their backs, red shapes of hidden meaning trailing across the back of their tiny legs. They didn't understand the something on the other side of the pain, the welting stain. They thought there was a message Buckaflap was trying to send them, awakening them into his world, laced with the red disappointment he drew with each breath, on their raised skin, tattooing his anger, man anger, anger like a building falling, its dry cloudy dust rushing out into the air with each blow.

And when their father was gone, they wanted to be like him, to master the power they saw in an invisible halo, threatening its light around the outline of his body. They hunted scattering animals in the fields of their back yard. They walked single file through the tall bright green grass of spring, They found tiny birds, stole new chicks in the middle of the night from the neighboring farms, the younger ones trailing sleepy and silent through the blackened streets. Sometimes their father was too tired to ask where the new animals came from. They relied on his defeat.

But there were times when they were a body at rest, summer mornings when he was gone and they had enough cereal and milk and there were cartoons on one of the few channels on their black and white TV. In those moments they let the oldest one be the father, the benevolent man boss who was willing to take them in, to give them this momentary peace. Those warm mornings they let themselves be worn out. They breathed quietly, their skinny rib cages barely rising with the tiny movement. They were silent then, not wanting, not grasping, just children watching cartoons, tracing the design in the carpet, no thoughts just light.

Archipelago

They existed after her death like a group of tiny furry islands, as though they were continental fragments, they were what was left floating in the original shadow of the mass of land they came from, broken off from their mother when she died, her physique the center, the missing volcanic hot spot, the atoll detonated, protective goggles handed out for the witnessing of the jellyfish cloud that leaves nothing behind, no buildings, no trees, no insects, all rats and beasts particulated in the heavy heaving air, lacquered lagoons inverted and tossed into the sky, thrown angrily back down to earth, ever changed handfuls of liquid hot matter, altered in their landing.

Their remaining shape stayed rooted under water, its darkened edges like a penciled tracing of what used to be, bones of destroyed land, their watery base an archeology viewed from above, a scattered skeletal frame still able to discern the proof of her original mountain. They knew they were of her. They pulled in close in the ragged reformation that followed. Each child a lonely nameless island in their faraway sea, their tectonic displacement shifting further and further apart as the years went by, a widening separateness evolving from any adjacent continent, isolation the air they breathed best.

When they were small the questions they held about her remained on the strange trees of their new world like shiny island leaves. They knew the answers they wanted were not possible and to ask was to invite the dark. Their father was the captain of their shipwreck working hard to steer the course, lost in the

remaining light, trying to rebuild their world in its original shape because he knew no other, could image no other, without her. He didn't realize he was the ship while they had become a land, origin of her land, that they now existed as a body, a diffuse country of hidden channels, links of blood, conduits of mother born necessity he didn't possess, couldn't comprehend even if he wanted to.

He gathered life things he remembered, making a diorama of their old life, inserting a woman at the base of their tiny village, into their island out cropping while they watched and waited to see what or who was going to be dropped into their still life next, and who would stay, all pity and order, vacuuming the dead cells and hair from the bare wood floors.

They resided in this papery structure, one of unspoken air, the daily lid of silence belying the jagged newly formed land they were becoming, where arriving animals frequently died quickly. They were the island chain, the memory of her in their bodies, laced tiny islands existing in a jet stream, air flowing over the non-mountain crater, the origin and the echo of their mother. Their collective memory could cause the wind to rise, quickly pulling in a blinding fog hiding their torturous cliffs, one child peak calling to another in the craterous ring of fire.

Her children guarded the imperceptible, the imagined shape of her body, her face, the color of her hair, like four tiny white haired warriors, the middle boy's hair dark brown just like her, fearful that if they didn't remain vigilant she would disappear, no word for the absence slammed into in their bones, loss thrown into the fragmented ecology of their sunbaked bodies, the broken mantle of her

where they wanted to reside no longer existing, her memory felt like a necessary land, the sea washing up to its shore, only to inevitably roll back, leaving them without her still and always, stomping forth on their tiny land.

They stayed close in the beginning, children adrift, a ball of churning legs and arms, matted hair and bloodied knees, their loyalty to their roiling form the only thing that mattered, their father a grown up to be appeased and avoided, his reach unpredictable and often painful. They could see no map of their shared history with him even though everyone told them he was their father, he an essential part of their history, they could not even perceive him as anything other than an object father, a grown up, their grown up, meant to do certain things. They had no filter to comprehend the cellular connection, embodied beneath their dirty fingernails, in the angle of their high foreheads and long legs, their minds not ready, their bodies mere chrysalis' folded in shiny waiting, unable to know the pain that held their father captive, blinded, a primate batting at anything and everything at the entrance to his cave.

They learned to look innocent, experts of the deadpan face, no eye contact, just keep moving. Each of their lonely island currents touching without words below the sea, the slender land bridges between them eroding in the night dreams they once shared as children, glinting grains trickling undetected, slipping away incrementally night after night, moving their aftermath lives into silvery memory flattened like wings of a dead sea bird, a gull maybe, the hot sun

unfettered and burning, just getting on with the monstrous, each new moment
enormous as space.

Animals

Their father loved animals, once building a rabbit hutch in their abandoned back yard, a sub-divided fallow field, growing tall green weeds in the springtime. He placed perfectly measured hooks on the wood frames doors lined with small gauge chicken wire to keep the rabbits enclosed, but small enough that their padded feet did not get stuck. The hutch had a slanted roof and looked Japanese in its simplicity. It sat empty a year later after a dog or some other night animal got into the hutch, killing all five of the rabbits, one for each of them. The Sunday morning their father found the carnage he warned them as they watched cartoons not to go outside and vanished out the back door. They did not bother to get up from their bellies, only looked at each other and then back at the screen. It was one of the few times he tried to keep the small violences of their childhood from them.

They never could talk their father into a dog, the solid no resounding from him a constant, like a cough. He only allowed caged pets, snakes, turtles and many fish. The two girls used to try to catch the fish they kept in the living room sleeping when they walked by the tank on the way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. They held hands and scuttled quickly on the cold wood floor, trying to reach the bathroom before the unnamed beings of the dark grabbed their feet or the edge of their nightgowns. The fish tank was a landmark, a beacon taking

them to safety. The fish wide-eyed and always moving in the darkened house, their algae covered tank lit up like a lone gas station appearing in the dark.

None of them knew until much later about the dogs their father and mother raised in the early years of their marriage. They felt betrayed and then sad for their father, placing the discovery into the tomb of unspoken things, things whispered about out of his earshot, a secret to be shared with the others like a somber gift, like a small but important find at an archeological dig that frequently yielded nothing.

Their father held the memories of their mother and of his life with her before they were born, deep in his body, unwilling or unable to share her with them. The wall of grief he built a solid untouchable place, yet its carefully built geometry was still a little porous, allowing some movement, some memory to travel across its lattice like a floating seed. He could still feel the current of fresh pain, its far off threat lurking, an air raid siren coming through his lungs, souring his belly when he had to talk about her. He froze her and the pain she left in him like a stone, like an imbedded object, a bullet, a splinter of glass stuck in place, scar tissue fusing and blurring over the truth of his loss.

Their father sometimes varied his one syllable answers about getting a dog from no to nope, or a mere silent shake of his Bryll creamed head, the only hint of vanity or grooming in an otherwise bland bar soap hygiene routine, lava the hand soap at the bathroom sink, rough and smeared with gray shades of a life

that needed another agent to get through it all, to get down to the raw skin underneath the mess.

They knew not to argue when he said no, but to retreat, a regrouping necessary, seeking another angle to get what they wanted. Even the middle boy, who came to earth with a different type of mind, one wired with risk and thug-like curiosity, and unafraid of pain understood the need to retreat at no. He usually chose to circumvent their father and to do what he couldn't help but do, and frequently got caught. Don't ask and apologize later a well-worn strategy.

They eventually tricked their father into their first dog, Ramsey. The youngest brother, who became their father's teenaged helper, the little wife the others called him, going to the grocery store when he could drive, filling the Volkswagen with gas, and keeping an eye on the girls, tattling to their father when the oldest got home late or locking her out so she had to climb through a window, rather than wake their father.

The youngest brother, who now had a certain status with Buckaflap, told him he had been asked to dog sit a pup for a week and would that be ok? One week turned into two and by then their father was in love, smiling freely at the dog and scratching his ears, talking to him in a sweet voice they had never heard. When asked the youngest brother freely admitted the scheme.

Lupoi's

They moved like nut colored otters sliding in and out of the clear chlorinated water of the neighborhood pool, one with the other children in summer, doing things like other children, children with a father and mother and cupboards full of food in bright cellophane packages soon to be filling their bellies. They were simply children then, at the pool in draping wet shorts and tiny bikinis, too large or too small, a one piece covering what their parents knew and feared, dormant like a bulb in their earth. They were children splashing and yelling, trying for a greater mass as they jumped into the pool, dripping clear ribbons of water onto the hot concrete.

The youngest brother was silent most of the time, he frequently sat unmoving for long periods of time watching TV on the couch while the two older brothers discussed the merits of certain cars or movies or parts of girl's bodies, the youngest brother suddenly erupting with some odd solid fact, on point to whatever their argument was. This usually stunned the two older brothers into a momentary silence, hopefully followed by fits of laughter instead of a punch in the arm, knuckle to the bone, always a direct hit. These outbursts came forth from the vent in his psyche, the watcher he knew he was, burdened and occasionally liberated by human speech, his silence unknown in its origins maybe but a necessity, his way of being, like his eye color or height. He was quiet at school during recess before he became the candy king, then later often

got in trouble for talking too much in class, again the eruptions of comic spot on facts or clever puns sending the class into gales of laughter, leaving the teacher steaming at her bad luck to have one of the siblings in her class.

The youngest brother was large, square from the back, his stomach becoming smooth and pale, hanging down like a giant fruit fed on a sugary midnight formula found inside the many yellow and orange candy wrappers, lying like forgotten leaves under his bed, their contents quickly swallowed. The endless need for more candy a desire spreading itself silently, fueled each afternoon as they filed into Lupoi's Market, walking slowly, leisurely like they imagined adults might do. In the store they spread out like a spill. The two girls sometimes leaning their small bodies on the slanted cool glass of the meat case, looking and pointing at the chicken feet or the giant cow tongue laying like a corpse between inch high ruffles of green plastic.

The youngest brother wore gigantic clothes, his tee shirts and jackets hanging on his towering frame. He had the strange ability to disappear in plain site. In a group he was able to fade and morph into an energy the mind had trouble holding onto. He used this ability to his advantage, that and playing the clown, many thought he was simple, a lost boy from that poor family, left to fend for himself in the wake of his mother's tragic death. He could feel the pity like a fine mist and it made him want to take more and harder.

They were all thieves, the two older brothers more inclined to bigger stakes, robbing houses and stores and stealing cars, but the youngest brother was the best candy thief in the family. He looked like just another awkward blond boy

with glasses trying to not be seen, slick and silent as he filled his pockets with loot. He was the candy king at school, kids running up to him wanting to buy long ropes of gum, Sweetarts and Hot Tamales, whatever he had that day. He was a dealer of his first addiction, candy and being wanted by the crowd.

The girls weren't expected to steal candy, they just had to be quiet and distracting to grown ups if need be. They learned how to steal later on when their brother became less generous and wanted to charge them for his product. The girls pointed with disgust at the thick fat rim circling the New York steaks, gasping at the impossible height of the filet mignons, which they called mig-nons, sure they would never cook all the way through, imagining the bloody thing landing on one of their plates, raw and dead looking on the inside. They were horrified at the idea of having have to mutely attempt to eat the hunk of steak, their tiny stomachs yearning for only for sugar at every opportunity, candy their currency, their comfort, their first escape.

It is unclear who discovered Lupoi's as their cache of candied revenue. The oldest brother claimed he found it but the youngest brother, with the growing soft belly hanging over the top of his jeans perfected the technique. There were two entrances to Lupoi's even though it was a small market. The candy isle was near the back entrance, the rows of candy spread out like an accordion, like a flexed wing of a giant tropical bird, tidy and intricate with color. The Lifesavers and gum and breath mints were at the top of the strata, followed by the bigger chocolate bars, the Snickers, the Milky Ways, the Butterfingers. Then there were the rows of the smaller penny candies, Fireballs, Pez and Sweetarts, Butter Mints

and salt-water taffy, its opaque pastel wrappers quieter to the touch in their waxy paper.

There was a mirror high up in one of the corners of the store, a fixed eyeball to watch for shoplifters. The youngest brother discovered it early on and was usually careful to avoid its eye as he filled his pockets. The girls never saw him steal anything, even though they wanted to, but they witnessed with greedy eyes the pile of loot he pulled out from the invisible bulk of his clothing when they got home.

While the two sisters were looking blandly at the pineapple tower in the little produce section, wondering how sharp the leaves really might be, daring each other to touch one of the tips, Mr. Lupoi's son came over to them and grabbed them both by their little stick arms and walked them briskly to the front of the store where they saw the youngest brother standing wedged into a corner near the cash register. The middle brother had bolted out the back door as he already had a probation officer so it was understood by all of them that he couldn't get into any more trouble with the police.

On the counter by the cash register was a large pile of candy and gum. The girls were impressed with this particular haul and forgot for a brief moment that they were in big trouble, their eyes widening at the array. As they were looking at the candy they looked at their brother for some kind of a sign as to what to do next, a police car pulled up and two officers got out of the patrol car and headed briskly into the store. Their brother's face was closed down, no flicker of recognition in his eyes to tell them what to do next.

The three of them were taken to the police station in the back of the police car, the two girls sitting close to each other, their legs touching. They were all silent, the girls watching their brother carefully, who did not utter a word. The policemen forgetting themselves made a few jokes about their brother's proficiency as a shoplifter and then scolded them the rest of the way to the police station. When they got to the station the policemen in the car took the youngest brother into a room and closed the door. The two girls were left sitting on a long shiny oak bench, their legs swinging back and forth, not touching the floor, they tried to see if they could touch the back of the wall with their shoes if they swung their legs hard enough.

Night Birds

The middle brother was the one who put the live cat in their neighbor's mailbox, cruelly squeezing the poor animal into the oversized white painted mailbox, just to scare the neighbors when they went to get the mail a few hours later, no other reason, no grudge, just an impulse that had to be followed, burning in his brain. In the silence of the summer morning, mothers were slowly stirring in their robes, too soon in the day to look out the window into the stillness, the unchanging green life they found themselves in for another stultifying day. No one saw him struggling with a cat and a mailbox. Rural life and the invisibility of children something he capitalized on, sometimes very capable of delayed gratification.

The night they stole the baby ducks became a shared story of their childhood, all of them owning it. It became funny and sweet, a harmless antic of their childhood. In hind site it was a crime so small in the measure of those to come. The middle boy had discovered some baby ducks in his bored wanderings down the hot asphalt roads, stick in hand, slicing the air as he swung at buckeyes, which mostly thudded into the dirt, no fight in them.

They lived near the end of the suburban limits, the full summer trees leaning over the roads, hiding the older houses, there long before the land was subdivided. Their road doubled back on itself, forking into newer cul de sacs where the trees thinned into young nothings. The other fork turned towards

town, following a tiny creek, occasional hand hewn wooden or cement bridges leading the way to the houses hidden in the trees. In summer the fruit trees fed the pack of children living in the neighborhood. Peaches and nectarines and sour small apples, and pomegranates, their passion and their favorite, staining their fingernails and skin, and staining their clothes with the blood dark seeds, juicy nests of seeds orderly and gleaming once you got through the thick yellowed skin.

It was on one of those summer days of boredom, a day pushing against a longing for some unnamed thing, an anything to happen, life hidden and untouchable in the hot yellow sky. The middle brother had the idea to liberate some baby ducklings he found when wandering by someone's yard. Hard to imagine why he let the two girls come along that night. Years later none of them left living were able to recall the logic he must have had to let them tag along. Maybe he thought if he got caught with the little sisters the punishment would be diluted, or that he could blame them in some way. They were thrilled and promised to be quiet.

After crawling under a fence and opening the duckling's pen, the middle brother scooped up an armload of ducklings and backed out of the pen. Then he whispered to them to run. They made it to out of the yard and onto the road, walking only in the middle, the yellow line a place of safety from the dark edges on either side of the narrow asphalt, all of them tired and happily whispering about the baby ducklings the middle brother held hidden in the fabric of his coat. As they got closer to their house, the indistinct fear of their father catching them

began to rise up, ballooning into a hovering shape of fear as they finally reached their gravel driveway, each step a small crunch of alarm and the last hurdle to getting back into bed without Buckaflap waking up. The middle brother shushed them, a long bent finger to his lips, the nail bed large and square like a stamp, a trim line of blackened grease ever present under his nails.

They crawled into their beds, the girls fast asleep in their clothes immediately while the middle boy secured the ducklings in the barn that served as their garage, holding everything unwanted but still tugging at their father, the unfinished sorting of his old life, before their mother died, her wedding dress stuffed into an old suitcase with a faux alligator pattern, the paper edge of it beginning to peel at the corners, later damaged in the fire.

In the morning there was no explosion from him, though they waited for it, no rant from their father threatening his substantial belt to quell the disorder, just silence as he sat in his chair reading the paper, the ducklings in the barn making small chirping sounds in their make shift pen. It wasn't until later that morning when the phone rang, another rarity, the owner of the ducklings on the line, that the familiar rant from their father began.

Coyote

The middle brother liked to play tricks and he liked risk, even though the information he amassed in almost every waking moment of his young life told him he might want to do otherwise. Consequences didn't seem to have the right enzyme to cross into his brain. He came with a strange skill set from another era. He was adept at hotwiring cars and motorcycles and breaking into houses and stores, and he was an excellent car mechanic, able to make most engines go, his first car a light blue Valiant with a push button transmission that he bought for a hundred dollars, or maybe it was 'given' to him. It was his pride and joy, its gleaming potential visible only to him in the dented fenders he covered in Bondo. His careful layering representing the high hopes for a fresh paint job and a vision only he could see.

He was a natural thief and a trickster, a coyote who would only come in from the cold when no one was around, restless under the roof of his alleged home, the night air and other shaded matters his true home. The middle brother manifested the pain and brokenness of their family. His life symbolizing the wreckage they all felt, as though it was his job to carry it, to carry the rest of them through his actions, the chaos he made a container created for the rest of them to be free, as though that were ever possible for any of them.

He liked to figure out how to get around any obstacle, because it was there. He was drawn to the door that was closed, the challenge and the contents behind it his if he could get to them. What 'it' was almost beside the point. He didn't harm things out of anger usually, except for the teacher and the dog and the laxative,

but more because he saw a way in and couldn't resist trying, a sort of because I can kind of attitude, the rush of the action the goal, the afterwards never sticking to his skin.

He tormented his two little sisters, especially the older one. She was reliable to take the bait every time, crying out in surprise like it was the first infraction from him, never getting wise to him like the younger one did. He liked to hide the older sister's small plastic glasses, watching her search frantically, until in utter frustration she finally decided to tell their dad, an offense in and of its self. The glasses miraculously turned up in the silverware drawer a few minutes later, lying next to the butter knives, where she had looked several times before. She grabbed the glasses and put them on, yelling his name with an accusing wail.

They had a toy mold given to all of them one Christmas that made plastic bugs when you heated up a chemical goop called, *Creepy Crawlers*. The middle brother took command of it and made dozens of floppy multicolored spiders and other bugs with it. He occasionally hid one of the spiders in the square of mashed potatoes in the older sister's TV dinner. Their father hissing a, 'Cut it out both of you,' when it was discovered, dangling on the sister's fork. Their father glared at them both and continued chewing his mouth full of Salisbury steak from the entrée triangle of his aluminum TV dinner tray. In that moment they both knew to stay silent, the middle brother's shoulders moving up and down with the silent laughter of winning.

In eighth grade there was a disagreement with a teacher, which was pretty regular at this point. It might have involved a call to their father, or a threat of

expulsion, which did happen later, but in this situation the middle brother was mad and wanted revenge. The teacher in question must not have taught a full day and always brought his dog to work. He left it in the car with the window open just enough for the dog to have circulating air but closed just enough so no pesky children's greasy fingers could get their hands in and harm the dog. He parked underneath a tree, in a shady parking spot all the other teachers begrudgingly left open for him because of the dog. This was years before animal rights and no body really thought anything of the dog waiting in the car, except that maybe the teacher was a little obsessive about his dog and probably lonely.

The middle brother obtained some a box of laxatives, how he knew about them was kind of a mystery, maybe he saw an ad on TV, or maybe their father had it in their medicine cabinet at one time or another for obvious reasons. The middle brother fed the dog a box of chocolate flavored laxatives as soon as the teacher arrived at school, cutting class to wait for his arrival. It is unclear whether he got caught or not, but the prank was immediately a legend among the four other siblings, only talked about out of earshot of their father.

Camping

The middle brother had asthma as a small boy, apparently all the brothers did but his was the worst, requiring frequent trips to the emergency room for bubbling treatments of medicated air. In a rare mention of their mother, their father told them that the air was too damp by the ocean and was one of the reasons why they, their dead mother and their father, him conceivably a different person then, kind and able to speak and confer with someone in a thoughtful manner, decided to move to the suburbs, into the dry hills and hot summers away from the moist grip of the ocean.

If they went to a lake or a stream on one of their father's educational nature outings, the middle brother was always late coming out to the car, hoping to be left behind as their father always threatened to do if anyone was late. But, their father never left him behind for these excursions. If they were told not to go in the water or get wet, he fell in or in some way came back to their Volkswagen van soaking wet and muddy, his shoes ruined or a jacket missing or torn, surprised as anyone at the turn of events.

Their father loved camping, and later got into backpacking, a much-hated activity by of all of them. How could carrying a giant heavy pack walking up hill remotely be considered fun? He joined the Mt. Diablo Hiking Club and took them on weekend camping trips up Mount Diablo, a twenty-minute drive from their house, the only peak in the area, a strange looking mountain dividing the central valley on one side and the bay on the other.

These weekend trips were practice runs for the later trips to the sierras, to the high country with thinner air and speckled granite. Several times on these forays into the mountains the middle brother could not breathe, the thin air collapsing his lungs, still prone to asthmatic episodes in the right conditions, oxygen sliding into all the wrong places, leaving him gasping enough to have to wake their dad in the middle of the night. The nearest hospital was at least an hour away. Their father, seeing the middle brother's actual distress, woke the oldest brother, who had been forced to come, and told him he was going to drive the middle brother to a lower elevation where he might be able to breathe. He assured the oldest that he would be back as soon as he could, and he was in charge. The rest of them were awake, listening to their dad whisper, something they had never heard him do before.

Their father and the middle brother returned in the early morning, the four of them still in their sleeping bags curved like larvae on the slippery tent floor. The sun had yet to rise high enough to make the tent a hot square of stale air. It was still cold inside, the walls of the tent moist with condensation. They all hoped that their father would say they were going home, cancelling the trip as he sometimes did since the middle brother couldn't breathe. They lay silent in the tent as they heard the loud zipper of the tent door open.

Sometimes when he woke them he did so almost sweetly, a gentle nudge of the arm, saying "It's time to get up," but this morning he was all business and they knew as a body not to argue, all arms inside for the ride. They crawled out of their sleeping bags and came out of the tent one by one, clothed in strange

mixtures of space pajamas and winter coats, hair bent and pointed, standing around the wet wooden picnic table. Their father started to make breakfast, lighting the green Coleman stove, barking at the youngest brother to get the Cream of Wheat and his coffee from their supplies in the back of the car, which was always some incarnation of a VW bus, their father's chosen vehicle large enough to fit them all.

They were always hungry and ever hopeful for food other than what was on offer, especially camping food. Their dinner the night before had been a rubbery freeze-dried stroganoff and hard green apples for dessert. They wanted bacon and eggs, lots of strips of bacon, maybe four or five pieces each, and mounds of scrambled eggs, fully cooked, thick toast and soft butter amply slathered over with sweet jelly, not marmalade or clotty Empress strawberry 'preserves' that came in a large can with a sticky lid you had to pry open with a knife. The rest of the campsite was waking up and they could smell the breakfasts that they were sure only families with mothers might eat, secret understandings, access to a world they knew nothing about, their food lust fueled by the simple greed of not having.

Number Five

The youngest girl was born a white haired baby with bright blue eyes. Her hair was soft and fine like dandelion fluff. When she got older she and her sister would have heated arguments about who was blondest. Their grandmother often dressed them in matching outfits and took them downtown on the bus to the Emporium to get professional photos taken. Afterwards they went to Woolworths and had lunch at the counter. Their grandmother bought them hard plastic dolls in flimsy cardboard boxes, sometimes throwing in an outfit or baby bottles that emptied when you tilted them, simulating feeding a real baby, when she had extra money.

There are a several photos remaining from these trips, the two girls smiling in their various identical dresses, their little bodies slumped into each other, bangs cut high on their foreheads to last longer, their hair clean and brushed vigorously by their grandmother's claw like hand, into a shiny curler shaped wave.

It was decided that the youngest girl would go to live with their grandmother after their mother died. She was a six week old swaddling of pink skin, looking just like all of them did when they infants, with her square forehead and no discernable eyebrows and solid circular cheeks, a certain hint in the width between the eyes and the bridge of the nose foretelling of her genetic connection to all of them.

Their grandmother was the obvious choice as she had been a foster mother to hundreds children during the war she reminded their father. She had a plaque on the wall of her bedroom, the only thing on the wall in her cloister like bedroom. Their grandmother was English and had been a governess in China, priding herself on never having eaten Chinese food. She believed in schedules and that spoiling a child was the modern menace that must be avoided at all costs.

The youngest girl came back to live with the rest of them when it was time for her to start school. She and the oldest girl got a new bunk bed set and later inherited a record player and a stack of 45's from one of the brothers. They spent long Sunday afternoons listening to *Never On a Sunday*, pretending to be in boarding school, or on a ship far out at sea, throwing things around the room in imaginary storms. Falling into fits of laughter as they tossed around bigger and bigger things, knocking books off their bookshelves and throwing stuffed animals high into the air in the imaginary gales of wind.

The younger sister once swallowed an ice cube when they were laughing. She became serious immediately, the older girl still laughing until she saw her sister lying on her little twin bed. She stretched her body out in a straight line, her hands at her sides. She ordered the older one to cover her with a blanket. She needed to be warm if there was any hope of melting the ice cube before it harmed her. She yelled at the older girl that it wasn't funny and she could die when her sister pantomimed tucking her in with a pilly blanket and humming.

The youngest somehow equated swallowing an ice cube with any number of life threatening childhood beliefs, like if you swallowed a hair it would wind around your intestines and kill you, or if you swallowed a watermelon seed it would grow a melon in your stomach and kill you with its inevitable size. Swallowing rubber bands was also very dangerous, depending on their size.

The youngest girl was quiet like the youngest boy. She watched and waited, learning quickly to navigate their churning sibling body with silence and circumvention. She was smarter than all of them, out witting them all, except maybe the oldest brother. She had no trouble in school and just did not get upset or wail dramatically. She learned early on to hold her world inside, pragmatic and ever realistic in her piloting of their family. She knew they had no mother and that they had no money, the social workers and the afternoons spent waiting for their father's paycheck to come in the mail not lost on her. She also knew in her wordless quiet that her birth probably killed their mother. The others never said this to her, never blamed her once, but she knew it. Maybe it was like knowing you had a lurking genetic disorder, a timetable ticking for an event, blameless and cataclysmic, even as the sun still moves across the sky, nothing would ever be right again.

The youngest girl loved horses, really loved them, in that way that some young girls do. She had a subscription to American Quarter Horse from their grandmother, who seemed to think that having a magazine subscription was an essential part of being a child. She had a collection of realistic plastic horses that she placed on the windowsill of their bedroom window, once or twice even

stealing a new one for her collection, and not getting caught. This success was impressive to the rest of them.

She once found an ad in the local paper for a horse for maybe a hundred or a hundred and fifty dollars, board in a stable in exchange for labor, cleaning the stalls and shoveling horse poop. It really was an incredible deal and she thought their father just might go for it. She talked about it excitedly for days, finally getting up the nerve to ask him. She walked down the hallway from their bedroom to the living room where their father sat watching TV. The older sister waited in their bedroom, listening from the doorway. There was some murmuring and the sound of the TV and then the youngest girl's muffled voice. A loud car commercial blocked the soft answer coming from their father's mouth but the older girl could picture it, having seen the pinched smile and fake kindly tone of his no many times.

The younger sister came back into their bedroom, her body a block of swirling rage and disappointment. She threw herself onto her lower bunk. She yelled at her older sister to shut up and did something she never did and cried herself to sleep that night.

Buckaflap

Their father was probably very tired of children, their complaints, their spills, their clumsy unskilled ways. He worked in Berkeley for the university and left for work early in the morning and when he got home it was easy to imagine that he was not in the mood to feed five kids and govern the many dramas that occurred while he was at work. It was a good night if he didn't have to take one of them to the emergency room or pick one of them up from the police station, or go to yet another parent teacher conference at their school.

He was an electronic technician for the cyclotron on campus, something to do with soldering parts together and making circuit breakers. None of them could really figure it out and weren't really interested, work being a grown up thing that most grown ups complained about but there was some correlation between it and food and freedom.

Inside their father was a tiny kernel, like the occasional flare of bum tooth or an erupting invisible sliver burrowed deep in his skin that burned its self into an unreachable ray of resentment. He worked with scientists and other really smart people and he wanted to be one of them, felt he was in fact one of them. He had stacks of Scientific American magazines on the bamboo coffee table next to his big green chair. Even in their deepest boredom most of the siblings could not find anything worth looking at in those magazines, even the bright graphic pictures of hugely enlarged atoms and replicas of cold viruses that looked like science fiction worlds were dead on the page as soon as they read what they

really were. They felt tricked by the colors and bright detailing of the pictures, which falsely promised some make believe action.

Their father had fought in the Second World War and could have gone to college when he got home on the GI bill. He was an only child so it is blurry as to why this didn't happen. Maybe he got married to their mother right when he came home, there is no one left to ask and any questions they did ask about the war were shut down by him immediately, the same sudden violent twist as with any questions about their mother. The two topics were taboo, understood in their collective child body as danger zones, contaminated areas off limits, a sure fire way to wake the beast of his anger and get the belt for extraneous reasons.

Their father went to work for the phone company after he got back from the war and he and their mother started trying to have a family. The story goes that their father and mother had no luck getting pregnant for five long years, even going to doctors to figure it out and then wham, the babies started rolling out in to their lives and onto every available surface.

They raised German Shepard dogs in the mean time, their backyard one hard compressed surface, the cakey dirt dusty and dark brown, not a living thing around except for a few trees along the back yard fence. The dogs destroyed the ground with their padding around and digging, chasing each other and running at squirrels and Blue Jays and the occasional bicycle rolling by.

At some point he got a better job at the University and they moved to the suburbs, away from the damp coastal air, which routinely flared up the middle

brother's asthma. They set up house in Indian Valley, a newish subdivision in Walnut Creek with five babies all a year or two apart. This was well before disposal diapers and mounds of dirty diapers routinely soaked in the toilet or hung on the line, dripping onto the flattened bare dirt of the dog run.

When their mother died one afternoon, six weeks after the last baby was born, another girl, she had complained of not feeling well. She was resting on the couch when a blood clot nestled somewhere in her body got loose and flew like a rocket through her pumping vessels into her lungs where it landed like a giant space ship onto a small bird, smashing all its delicate bones, time moving fast and thorough through her body, the impact so absolute that there was little intervening space in her to register any consciousness of leaving, no capacity of time or space to comprehend this quick ending. Did she think of them as she left her body, catapulted into golden elsewhere? When their father came back into the living room with her tea it was painstakingly clear, she was gone.

The immediate afterwards is pretty unreachable. Their grandmother came out to help with the children and soon afterwards, when the funeral and the helpful women of the neighborhood receded, there are scant memories of a stepmother, her tenure brief. Her name was Charlene and they remembered her as strict and unkind, even with her own brood of four children. It was obvious what was trying to be accomplished. Then there was another move, along with the quick disappearance of said stepmother and her passel of children.

The youngest girl, an infant, was taken to live with their grandmother right after their mother died, their father's mother, and the rest of the children stayed together and the housekeepers began. Some would stay for a long time, maybe even a year or two, some arrived, unpacked their things and made dinner and quit the same day, they father having to reload the Volkswagen with their few belonging and take the spooked housekeeper back to the bus station.

Pocket Money of Others

Often the older girl was at the Stanton house playing with Laura Stanton when it was dinnertime. She was permitted to stay in the girl's room while they ate. Maybe they never asked her if she wanted to have dinner, or maybe she told them she already had dinner, her pity radar well installed. So while they had their dinner she sat on the end of Laura Stanton's neat twin bed, her legs dangling over the end. Swinging her legs back and forth she looked around the bedroom that was strangely dulled without Laura's presence. It was still light outside and time seemed to stand still as the family ate in the other room. It was quiet out there except for a fork or knife occasionally scraping a plate. The only voice she could make out was the father's and then the mother's murmuring back.

Dinnertime at her house was fast and loud, the TV dinners they frequently ate placed on top of the boxes they came in, the waxy cardboard flattened to serve as a placemat, smeary plastic glasses of Kool-Aid positioned next to each box. When their father did cook everyone ate quickly in an attempt to get seconds, the little girls never able to compete with the wolfen older brothers in getting the last of the meatloaf, which was over cooked ground beef mixed with tiny green capers, period. The older girl hated the tang of the capers, deft as she moved them around in her mouth and out onto a napkin, saving the meat in her mouth.

The sister stood up and wandered around Laura's room, touching the things on her dresser, looking in the tiny drawers of her jewelry box. Getting bolder she

began opening the dresser drawers, looking at her rows of socks and neatly folded tee-shirts, so different from her own drawers where she hurriedly threw in her clean clothes when she had them. In one of the drawers she discovered a pile of quarters and a few dollar bills in a small box. Reflex made her look up and around the empty room, tiptoeing to the door and looking out into the hallway where she heard the father's voice. Then she came back and took a few quarters and put them in her pockets, leaving the dollars in the box. She jumped back onto the bed and resumed swinging her legs until Laura was done with dinner. Heading home at dusk she squeezed her fingers around the coins as she skipped up her driveway. They became more hers as she got closer to her house.

Sometime that summer Mr. Stanton decided to peak in on the older sister as she waited and saw her taking money out of his daughter's drawer. Maybe Laura complained about her money going missing, maybe he had a hunch. She had tried to mix it up, not stealing money every time she waited but the pull was too strong, her ability to get her hands on money pretty much non-existent. He did not confront her in the act but came up to her after the family had finished dinner and they were all watching Animal Kingdom in their den, the two girls sitting side by side on the plaid couch. His head appeared in the doorway looking at her. She felt panic as he asked to speak with her, as it was extremely rarely that grown ups talked directly to children, and fathers even less than mothers. His tone was veiled and smarmy as he talked to her in the hallway. He wanted to know if she knew what stealing was, did she know it was wrong and not what good people do, ending with it might be best if she didn't come over for a while,

good night then. She walked down their driveway quickly like a low-bellied stray cat, crossing the road, looking at the neighboring houses as she fled for home. Did they all know what she did, would he call her father and tell him, mulling over the probability she opened the screened back door and slid into her room.

Barn

They moved into an old farmhouse with a faded white barn at the end of a gravel drive. They moved there sometime in that first summer after their mother died on the couch in their other house. The half-acre they acquired all that remained of someone's farm life. The rocky gravel driveway was filled with tiny rivulets of rainwater in the rainy months, their muddy footprints rerouting the water into murky boot shaped pools as they ran for shelter or for sport, the goal often to hit every puddle they could on the way to the backdoor.

The backyard fences of the neighboring houses bordered their square of weed-covered land. There was a vacant lot behind the barn, full of high wet grass in the springtime, soaking their legs and sneakers as they traversed the field, hands gliding across the tops of the weeds, wading through like bright green water. An old willow tree sat on one edge of the lot, its thin long branches uninteresting to them as they made poor weapons and were inedible so therefore of no value, disappearing into mere landscape of their daily outdoor dramas.

At the other corner of the vacant lot was a tall wooden fence that hid a pool, the crown jewel of childhood value, freedom and relief in the cool bright blue water, an almost religious quenching in the long hot summer. The mother in the house with the pool would let them swim there sometimes, but would rarely let even the two younger sisters inside her house, fearing their wild would get on the furniture or into her children. The little girl who lived behind the fence with

the pool was cunning and needy, her sister and brother much older than her doing shining things in high school and college, stepping past her in the bathroom, slamming their bedroom doors as she trailed after them in the hall, telling them some small awfulness she had learned about someone in the neighborhood, usually one of the three brothers living in the house with the barn.

The needy girl with the pool ate any candy and cookies that came her way with tiny rodent bites, meticulously sucking hard candy until it was wafer thin, flaunting what was left with her open mouth to the two sisters when they played with her, the older sister watching the needy girl open her mouth with closed eyes, wanting to snatch the shiny translucency out of her mouth and throw it on the ground or pop it into her own hungry mouth. Hungry in the hollowed belly sense, hungry from being fed a steady diet of cereal and Instant Breakfast mixed with powered milk, boxed Tuna Casserole or Hamburger Helper for dinner, any ice cream or cookies that their father brought home quickly vanishing into the middle brother's possession the moment their father brought them into the kitchen, always faster and unseen by the rest of them.

The contents of the barn consisted of randomly scattered mounds of cardboard boxes and stray tools and bulging brown paper bags of old school papers and cast off clothes abandoned there like small encampments. Then there were their bicycles, of strictly delineated ownership, the younger ones knowing never to even attempt to ride the oldest brother's green ten speed under the

threat of being tortured on the living room carpet, not being allowed to move until he said so. Anything they no longer wanted was tossed in the barn, forgotten to the mice and spiders. Sometimes one of them would get the urge to rummage in the boxes and bags, hoping for treasure, forgotten money or a trace of their mother in a book or a photo, anything that could bring her closer.

The back of the barn had a high window, a square of midday light shadowing through the dimness of the barn, occasional errant brown birds flying in and quickly flying back out. It was pretty easy to climb up the exposed wood frame to reach the rafters, which made a perfect seat to look out over the back yard and the neighboring houses. This was often the middle brother's roost. He would sit there, sometimes boldly smoking a cigarette when their father was gone, sometimes just sitting, not moving or talking, a quiet state that was unusual and felt dangerous to the younger siblings who left him alone, trying to stay out of his line of site as they walked past the barn.

The barn burned down one summer. Burned down always seems to imply that whatever caught fire literally burned to the ground, no structure left, only smoking black charcoal chunks, but what it really meant was that the remaining building was now a half charred skeleton, any walls left partially standing, the ceiling caved in and gaping, the roof now lost to the sky framed in singed edges. It meant uninhabitable but still unfinished, a wooden corpse demanding the evidence be vanquished, its useless remains in need of a burial.

The two little sisters were attending the summer program at their elementary school that morning, making potholders for an imaginary mother out of strange loops of stretchy fabric. Their bellies full from the free meal provided, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a carton of cold real milk. After the program ended for the day they went to the Stanton's house and were having a snack (more food) around the shiny polished wood dining room table when the phone rang. The middle brother was there at the table with them, which was a little strange but not too strange as he often roamed the neighborhood with the two Stanton boys. They formed an edgy, snake mean body, their groupthink capable of many a neighborhood theft or infraction. Their younger sister Laura Stanton was a little wily too. She wished she could steal and break windows and fight the other girls at school. She wanted anything to happen outside the small scope of school and baths and inside voices.

Mrs. Stanton was a soft warm woman, her life force a rolling spool unraveling fully out to her children. The thread from her dimming and circumventing under tables and chairs when her husband came home, the atmosphere changing like a switch plate over to his male orbit. She was one of the few mothers in the neighborhood who allowed them to play with her children and actually let them into her house. She called them by name, smiling and looked directly at them.

The older girl and Laura Stanton would sometimes play car, sitting in the giant old green Chevrolet kept in the garage, a treasured possession of the Stanton girl's father. The steering wheel was huge and pastel green with knuckled grips and wide like a shield, their little arms stretched out straight as they pretended

to drive, yelling at imaginary children in the back seat and surviving horrible accidents, swearing quietly at other drivers so the mother could not hear the insults and end the game if they couldn't be nice.

What happened that day after the phone call about the barn fire or who even called to tell them about the fire is a blank. There was the eerie sense that day in their comingled sibling body that the middle brother could easily have done this, immediately followed by the ill fitting but comforting fact that he was with them when they found out so how could that be true. They chose to believe that he was not guilty in this particular incident, the physical evidence of him at the table with them the resting point of their desired truth.

Their father pulled up the driveway in the Volkswagen van, quickly getting out and pulling each child to him, hugging one and then moving onto the next one, counting them with his touch. Not much else is clear of that day, his strange tenderness out of character and never spoken of again but was remembered by all of them, a strange artifact and the smallest glimmer of softness.

Stanley House

Life after in the days following the barn fire is pretty much forgotten. The crucial conversations that must have taken place that night are unknowable. Did they all sleep in the farmhouse that night, the smell of wet burned wood and smoke in the curtains, lingering in the furniture? It was decided that the girls, they were always referred to as a single unit, were to go stay with their grandmother in the city for the time being. She lived in a cold spotless apartment on Spruce St., in the Richmond district, an existence of early mornings for no reason and bedtime in what seemed like broad daylight.

They used to like going to stay with their grandmother when they were little girls, it was quiet and predictable, there was a certain sense of order and safety they could not possibly have articulated their need for that was in the smell of the clean sheets and Yardley's lavender soap their grandma loved. They were safe there from the relentless pecking order of their brothers, where there was no winning and they were the bottom of the heap. At their grandmother's house there was better food and more of it, even though their grandmother was English and boiled meat instead of cooking it, it was still coming forth regularly, hot food and someone else preparing it and cleaning up the mess afterwards. The no money litany not crowing out of their grandmother's wrinkled lips when they asked for more.

Their grandmother liked to make bread pudding, pretending she was making it for them as her puritan ways were a well adhered to habit that allowed for no signs of pleasure or want. She washed her clothes in the bathtub even after she moved to an apartment on the level part of Spruce Street that had a washer and drier in the basement. She had survived both wars and couldn't help it. She tried a few times to approach the washing machine in the basement, She touched the cold white lid, looking inside then up at the dials and couldn't comprehend the language of its choices. What was permanent press, what was delicate? She put the lid down carefully with the edge of her palm and walked away, making a sweeping dismissive gesture with her hand as she went for the stairs, basket of dirty clothes in hand.

She made the bread pudding with the soft airy raisin bread from the super market like it was a big treat. The stacked bread slices, even after sitting in the oven for what seemed like hours came out soggy and damp, the delicious smell of cinnamon a betrayal, the milky liquid often tepid in the middle. As they watched her make it in the afternoon the older girl tried will their grandma from pouring in so much milk, begging her silently in her head to stop. She was shocked to see what real bread pudding looked like years later in a café, solid and dry like a piece of tall cake.

They lost the house after the fire, their father let it go into foreclosure, and they moved into a two-bedroom apartment along a busy industrial road in another suburban town. The barn fire was the last straw for their father who it

turned out was behind on the mortgage in a significant way already. In some kind of financial arithmetic the fire was the sum of the equation, the other side of the equal sign to let everything drop away, falling into the charred weeds near the collapsed barn, the unopened bank statements that had continued to gather, landing like thin white leaves, the red writing in the small cellophane window disappearing, settling like a stone into a creek bed, falling forgotten into a silent silty pile on the table next to their father's green chair.

The middle brother never made it to high school and was sent away to Hannah Boys Center after the fire, a thinly veiled name for reform school, for *troubled boys* it said in the beige brochure with a drawing of a group of boys looking grateful on the front cover. The oldest brother, who was already in high school and had grown tall and lean and handsomely blond, had to share a room with their father in the cramped two-bedroom apartment. He put up a nubby beige bedspread in an attempt to separate the space from his father who was growing larger and larger, his body cartoon firm and round in the middle like the Michelin Man. The youngest brother and the girls shared the other bedroom, a set of bunk beds and a small twin bed filling the tiny bedroom. They would often fight, massively, violently, pulling the mattresses off each other's beds, throwing the wad of bedclothes into a heap, screaming insults and sweating into exhaustion onto the mixed up heaps on the floor.

They never knew for sure whether the middle brother started the fire that day. He might have been playing with firecrackers with the Stanton boy, launching M-80s or some other illegal and thus valuable kind of contraband, the obtaining of it alone giving him a strange self worth. Regardless of the truth of who did it, there was a seismic shift and reformation of their family after the fire.

Their father had routinely threatened all of them, especially the two older boys, that he should just send them all to foster care. This threat was usually pulled out when he had to get one of them out of juvenile hall or the police had called wanting to question them about a robbery of a store or the theft of a car. Admittedly the middle brother had learned how to hot wire a car in middle school and couldn't help himself sometimes. He would occasional hotwire the oldest brother's motorcycle if he saw it parked somewhere in town if he had some where to be.

With the threat of being sent to foster care long ago lodged in their heads, all of them wondered if this was that moment. The girls were relieved for once to be put on the Greyhound Bus to their grandmother's house, whispering in bed to each other in their grandmother's tidy bedroom where she had placed a cot next to her twin bed. The girls took turns sleeping in the hard twin bed or in the cot, a canvas and metal design with the cold bars of the sides ever present and numbing their legs and arms when they turned over. When they stayed with their grandmother, she slept on the couch, insisting on calling it the *chesterfield*, which they guessed was English for couch. They wondered out loud if they were

going home at all. They practiced scenarios, looking for holes in their ideas or worse, plausibility.

They wished they could just be sent to boarding school, like out of a Shirley Temple movie. Their grandmother mentioned boarding school a lot when they were younger, as some kind of proper place where rich people sent their children to be educated the right way, probably with lots of discipline and shame. Every time she walked by the Irish Store, at the foot of Spruce and Geary before they started up the steep hill to her apartment, she paused to look in the dusty window. The store never appeared to be open and the window display consisted of cardboard Irish dancers and a tarnished silver tea set. There was a display for the Irish Sweepstakes, listing the dates and winnings in tiny black print. Their extremely practical grandmother bought a ticket there regularly, describing what she would do with her winnings with a bright eyed look that might have been desire, they rarely saw it in her face and could not be sure.

The middle brother never lived at the Stanley House apartments. There was no space there for him, no bedroom, no bed, only the couch in the living room, which frequently held a pile of laundry waiting to be folded taking up half of the couch. The pile often functioned as an armrest or pillow for one of them when they watched TV, the piled when it finally got folded looked dirty again and useless.

Latch Keys

They were latch key children long before the term was needed. They got themselves dressed in the morning, sometimes pulling wrinkled clothes off the floor and heading to the kitchen, ever hopeful something good to eat might have manifested in the middle of the night. They usually made themselves a breakfast of instant breakfast with powdered milk or cereal if there was any. Often they just went to school, not hungry enough to bother. By midmorning they were always surprised when their bellies throbbed with a hunger that made them nauseous. They were on the school lunch program, so they knew they would eat lunch. They stood in line with the other kids, laughing and sliding the metal trays along the rail, their free lunch secret safe. They walked home on their own, roaming and fighting until their father came home, having learned to wait wordlessly, watching for what kind of dinner would manifest from their father, exhausted and at best silent when he came home, falling into his big green chair which made sliding sounds and exhaled with his body's landing.

Walnut Heights, the small elementary school a few blocks down the road was a pivotal landmark in their child lives. They spent many hours in school and after, its familiar grounds an extension of their world. They played there after school and on the weekends. They rode their bikes where they shouldn't, the middle brother riding his bike down the small set of stairs repeatedly, trying to pop a wheelie while doing so without much success. They roamed the empty halls, and climbed on the jungle gym. In the spring there were softball games in

the evening with an ice cooler full of Craigmont sodas from Safeway, and in the summer there was summer camp, one open classroom with art supplies and breakfast and snacks, reason enough to go.

Behind the first section of classes were two small court yards with gray weathered wood planters filled with tiny trees that never seemed to grow. These squares of asphalt were empty of playing children during recess as their only function was to punish children or to help teachers with some risky construction paper art project that required some kind of spraying or fumes. The oldest girl often spent recesses there in the second squared off plot. Her second grade teacher, Mrs. Hickman, pretty and stylish, sighing as she sentenced her to another recess in the quad.

When the oldest girl was in third grade there was a girl in her class who was diabetic. Her name was Rebecca and she and the oldest girl became fast friends, assigned to sit next to each other at the beginning of the school year. Rebecca had a little sister the same age as the youngest sister and Rebecca's family seamlessly folded her and her little sister into their family. Both girls often spent the weekend with Rebecca's family. They had a large paneled rec room and a record player and they listened to Herb Alpert and played a complicated game with pillows and crazy dancing and trying to not touch the floor. At night they had *gute*, which meant to eat in some foreign language. The purpose of this was to help Rebecca avoid low blood sugar in the middle of the night, but the father made it a game and sang silly songs and sometimes talked in funny voices.

Rebecca's parents had made an agreement with Rebecca's teacher and in a drawer at the back of the classroom was a box of sugar cubes for her for to eat when she felt that 'funny' feeling, of an impending low blood sugar. One afternoon after school the oldest girl was walking along the back wall of classrooms on her way home. She habitually checked the classroom doors as she roamed, something she saw her brothers do. This time she got lucky and noticed that the door to her classroom was unlocked. She was stalling that afternoon, knowing she hadn't done the laundry like her father had asked her. She knew she wasn't going to rush home and do it. That time had passed, vaporizing into its own inertia, the imaginary time of action now frozen someplace away from her body. The wrath of her father was a storm system that was being predicted and you just got through it. Like weather, there was also the remote possibility the meteorologists got it wrong, weather being weather and by definition able to change its mind or magically disappear without notice. He might just not notice, collapsing into his chair to watch the news. She snuck into the classroom and made a beeline for the drawer at the back of the classroom and ate all Rebecca's sugar cubes in the pink and white C&H box. Her father remembered about the laundry and made her skip TV to do it.

LETTERS

April 10

My darling,

I just wanted you to get some mail in our new home and I have been thinking how wonderful you are and how very much I love you. Since I can't tell you this minute that I love you more than anyone else in the world you'll have to wait until Monday.

All my love always,

Muriel

P.S. Gee, I love you xxx

Dear Mrs. Crane,

I'm sorry it has been so long since I've written you. Bobby is walking and climbing everywhere so it is hard to take my eyes off of him. Robert just got him a little wooden bench so he can climb up and help me cook and wash the dishes. He loves to turn the faucet back and forth. He gets confused when I rinse the plates and try to put them in the dish rack, he cries because he thinks our game is over.

Robert is trying to get on at PG&E but for now is still working nights at the phone company until he gets an interview. Hope to visit soon,

Best, Muriel

Dear Mrs. Crane,

Hello, hope you are feeling better. The baby is almost due and Robert has been building and painting like a mad man. I hope it is a boy so they can share the room Robert is toiling over! I have a pile of good boys clothes from Bobby who is talking nonstop and making complicated battles at sea in the bathroom sink at bath time.

Sincerely, Muriel

Dear Mrs. Crane,

Baby David is here! He arrived a few weeks ago with a head of dark hair like mine. Bobby doesn't know what to make of him just yet, he thinks he is boring and sleeps too much, both things I am grateful for! It is good that Robert works nights so he can help when he wakes up but keeping the children quiet in the morning is difficult, especially when it is rainy and we can't go out to the park. I look forward to hearing from you,

Best, Muriel

Dear Mrs. Crane,

Thank you for the rocking horse. David can barely reach the footholds but he can get it going pretty fast, he ducks his head down like a racecar driver, holding on and laughing. James watches him, holding onto the couch wiggling back and forth along with him. I had to take David to Dr. White twice last month for his asthma. I will be glad for the warmer weather to dry things up so he can breathe at night and we can sleep!

Yours, Muriel

Dear Mrs. Crane,

I just got back from the doctor and it looks like we are going to have another baby! I am thrilled and a little nervous, as two is such a handful! Bobby is a sweet little man and helps with David so much, they are inseparable. He knows what David wants before I do and translates his baby talk for me. Robert has an interview with UC Berkeley next week. It would be the day shift, hooray! Cross your fingers.

Best, Muriel

Dear Mrs. Crane,

It's been a while I am sad to say, I hope you can forgive me. I appreciate your letters so much, they make my 'mother's' life so much brighter. Robert got the job at the cyclotron at UC Berkeley so he is commuting into to Berkeley every day. Luckily he leaves early before the traffic and gets off at three before the other commuters get started at 4 or 5. He is driving the old Volkswagen bus so I hope it holds up!

We went camping a few weeks ago and slept in our tent in the redwoods. We took the playpen and the boys did fine, Betty and Kate came out for the day and we had a fine picnic while the boys slept.

I hope this letter finds you well,

Fondly, Muriel

Dear Mrs. Crane,

We have been in the thick of it over here. Baby James was crawling in the living room and Robert must have not seen him and tripped and fell and broke his ankle. Then a week later James bit Robert's toe, which was a juicy looking toy sticking out of his cast. There was a lot of ruckus and poor little James didn't know what he did wrong!

I am surrounded by my men who are all cranky at the moment. Robert will get the cast off in a few weeks so he is off work and at home, not really able to help out much with his foot in a cast. I relish naptime and adhere to it strictly!

Best, Muriel

Dear Mrs. Crane,

We had a scare with baby James who had to stay in the hospital for two nights with pneumonia! The damp weather here is not kind to my boys I'm afraid. He is home now and doing much better, running and wrestling with Bobby who is sweet with him and sometimes lets him win a round or two

Fondly, Muriel

Dear Mrs. Crane,

It was so nice to see you last week! The boys just love you. What a pleasure to have you visit our little pre-school! I hope the trip wasn't too tiring. I'm feeling pretty well this time, the pregnancy is flying by, as I'm so busy with the boys.

Maybe this one will be a girl.

Thank you as always for your wise words, I don't think you know how much you help me. See you at the next Christening!

Fondly, Muriel

Dear Mrs. Crane,

Well Patricia has broken the spell of baby boys! She has greenish eyes and absolutely no hair! I think she looks like Bobby. I'm not sure what to do with a girl baby but we will try! Thank you for your lovely card and flowers, it was so kind of you to think of me after all these babies.

Best, Muriel

Dear Mrs. Crane,

Thank you for coming to Patricia's Christening. The day was so nice and I have to admit that I love dressing a girl. The booties you gave her are so dear, wait until you see her wearing them in the professional photos, fancy! The boys ate too much cake and Molly was fussing at each spill. She and Alec came over early and stayed late, she was a big help really. Thank you again for everything.

Fondly, Muriel

Dear Mrs. Crane,

I am trying to get this letter off to you, as it has been too long. Baby Mary is allowing me to write to you, for the moment, she is on the dining room table right next to me, tied in a pink ribbon, in a rare moment of quiet. Her hair is sparse and looks like pure white fuzz and her eyes are her father's blue. The new neighborhood is lovely and the weather is so different, much better for David's asthma. School will be out in a few weeks and the wild boys will need distraction. I think it is time for swimming lessons and there is a local pool club so that is hopefully the plan.

Fondly, Muriel

Chimera

The brain has always been a strange place for those who study it. And memory is one of its strangest tenants. The memories in the brain seem to whirl continually, folding and sifting from brain stem to hippocampus and back, antlike in their activity, categorizing incoming reality, constantly decoding what is essential to keep, stacking the amassing fragments like sandbags on a levee, tagging and labeling the various events, shelved in a dusty indecipherable order like an evidence room in a police basement.

It is believed that the brain stores all our moments, kept in silence; the feel of the wind on that certain day of disappointment, the image of someone's hair, an arch of the eyebrows, a place is found for any and all such furtive details, memory's classification system quirky in the daylight and other worldly in its moments of unexplainable synchronicity, when a face, the angle of the light, the shape of a hand, all for a moment feeling oddly like a missing part of us, a place we've been before, an infant amnesia momentarily deciphered, its meaning necessary to finish the task of being, facts, so called, entangled in the sheets of memory, like a mother of infant twins who must paint one fingernail of baby A in the first few days to tell the two apart until knowing kicks in.

Children's brains are even trickier then, the smoother surface has less cavernously lodged surface area, fewer context clues have made their way in to help translate, precious few landmarks are tucked up into the gray blind alleys that will develop later to aid the child brain in understanding the world they find

themselves in. The brain of a child is filling, swiftly and imperceptibly, like a fast tide coming in, the gray matter soaking up life in its curling shore of gray clay.

In the storied reckonings continually received, the naturally anxious consciousness yearns for closure, a period placed at the end of all those free-floating fragments. The brain is motivated by a primitive need to know what comes next. Like some vestige of days on the savannah or deep in the forest, both prey and preyed upon. If a task is interrupted the brain will remember and want to do anything to finish it, the undone task much more clearly remembered than any completed, filed away as memory. The brain continues to push and rev even if it is begged to stop by the sleepless cries of the psyche.

This need for completion of every synaptic firing tossed out, every loose filament floundering in the landscape of the brain may be why the siblings held the memory of their mother with a kind of feral sacredness that they did not have the language to articulate. They felt compelled in their conjoined sibling body, their mass of arms and legs, to hold close the idea of her, their sacred deity, her memory a negative space of violent interruption, a place of no longer. They gripped her essence tight, a hallowed necessity. They were her biggest unfinished task and she theirs, the moment of her death the point of interference, the point of possible dissolution of each one of them, fragmented, soft shelled and in need of protection, of hands and touch and more time with her to finish the task of them.

Memory is a swelter, a chimeral ray that will tell its victim anything, tells the eyes, who abide quite simply, that what they see as they flip the image and signal an 'incoming' to the optic nerve, synapsing with the rest of the brain.

Consciousness is the restless agent, the twitchy manager spinning all it can reach, needing ownership of all images and drama, convinced that what is remembered is absolute fact, not lore, or gut or fear, not a roiling in a sky that never was there in the first place. Memory a fact checker, the life it interprets as a documentary, a filmic arbiter of truth, as though truth were not a rare and esoteric topic annoying and intangible, its definition shy like a wolf. In the end the truth that matters is how it feels.

Hanna Boys Center

The middle brother left a cigar box behind from Emil's Villa, the rib place their dad liked to go to on payday. A large gray haired hostess named Grace saved the boxes for them and he and his siblings took turns getting a fresh empty cigar box that smelled plantlike, both sweet and bitter. A chrome cash register sat on top of the glass display case filled with miniature ceramic and metal pigs, breath mints and rows of cigars in open colorfully embossed cardboard cigar boxes with gold paper edges. The shiny small bands around the brown leafy bodies of the cigars made them look partially clothed.

Inside the cigar box were old letters from his father and his grandmother written to him when he was sent to Hanna Boy's Center. There were also a few photos, some carefully torn out newspaper clippings, one for a slingshot and one for a tiny motorized bike. There was also a rosary slipping around in the bottom of the box. There was a faded pamphlet from Hanna Boys Center, the boys home he attended for several years after the barn burned down.

His siblings called it what it was to them, a reform school, but never in front of the middle brother as it made him start his tirade about how unfair it all was. On the cover of the pamphlet was a black and white drawing of the layout of the center, depicting a serene and orderly valley nestled in the low hills of Sonoma County. The buildings are rudimentary single story boxes with tiny squares of windows that look like teeth. There are two minute stick figures walking with a dog down the road. In the foreground of the drawing there is a boy sitting in the

shade of a tree, also with a dog. There are neatly farmed fields in the background and tall thin cypress trees and dark curling bushes near the school and the gymnasium.

Dogs were not allowed at Hanna Boys Center.

Dedicated...

With grateful appreciation to the many thousands of Westerners of good will who by their sacrifices have built and are maintaining Hanna Center as a haven for neglected boys of all races and creeds.

Hanna Center came into being in the mid-1940's, when more and more youngsters, most of them products of broken homes, were left without adult guidance and care so necessary to all children.

The effort is made to reach out for the bewildered boy who has faced problems beyond the capacity of his young mind and heart...and to give him the care and affection and direction, which will make his life a credit to his God and his country.

The next page of the brochure is a full page drawing of just the head of a young blond boy. He is looking skyward, open faced, searching, his mouth slightly open, his eyes large and saccharine. His is a gaze that says he is grateful

for the help offered from Hanna Boys Center. The boy is wearing a white shirt collar, the rest of his shirt and body disappearing into the immense black space of the rest of the page.

The forgotten boy-the boy who had no home or for one reason or another could not live in his home-was the inspiration for the founding of our little "town."

"The 'boys' town' of the West" Sonoma California (707) 996-6767

On the next page there are pictures of some famous men of the day, taken with residents of the Center. It isn't clear whether the men themselves were once residents or if they are just benefactors, posing for some routine publicity shots of giving back. Ernie Ford is playing the piano and looking up kindly at a young boy in an over sized suit jacket sitting on the piano. Jimmy Durante is smiling for the camera with two boys looking on. Durante has a piece of paper in his hand and is wearing a large dark hat tilted off to one side of his head. His hand and exposed arm is thick with veins and hair and he wears a black wristwatch. One of the boys in the photo with him is brown skinned. There is a picture of Willie Mays who is smiling at the camera, in his Giant's uniform while a boy in a plaid shirt holds a bat ready to swing. The boy is grinning widely at Willie Mays. Placed in the middle of the photos is a drawing of a section of a map of California, the bay area is in focus with an emblem for Hanna Boys Center and a small

circular drawing of three boys, of varying ages, smiling. They appear to be in casual shirts, ready for the day at Hanna Boys Center.

Dear David, Aug. 7 1969

We all miss you and are looking forward to seeing you on the first Sunday of September. I have given grandmother your address so that she and the girls can write to you. Your rat is doing fine. I released the pigeons and so far they have not come back.

Please write and let me know what to bring when I come up. Also what kind of picnic lunch. Do they have a radio club? No news on the house yet. I will have something definite by Sunday this week.

Dad and the boys

Send all their love,

Dad

Their father was already considering making plans for change, before the barn caught on fire. The idea to send the middle brother to Hanna Boy's Center was already being formed. He had been arrested too many times and missed so much school that social services had made the call and decided to place him there. The fire made the decision clearer, even though no one ever proved that

he did it. The middle brother was guilty of everything by that time, and it wasn't an unreasonable assumption to make about him.

The girls were sent to their grandmother's house in San Francisco while their father tried to sort everything out. The idea of walking away from the mortgage had been slowly surfacing, at first in small disappearing flickers and then with more and longer landings, the notion of selling the house creating a spaciousness in his body. There was a current forming in his brain, a familiar default setting since losing his wife, to just screw everything, letting more and more givens fall away. Giving the house back to the bank began to make perfect sense to him. The fire seemed an ideal collision of blamelessness, the right moment to walk away from the burden of the house and the nosy neighbors trying manage his children and him. He wanted to disappear into a new place where no one knew him, to rest just for a little while.

Dear David,

Aug 15

1969

I miss you very much. I am sorry that I have not written sooner.

We have sold the house and moved to an apartment in Concord. It took about twenty trips in the car to move everything. The new address is

1801 Monument Blvd

Apt. C-7

Concord Calif.

We have two bedrooms, a large living room, a small fenced patio. Also, there is a small swimming pool.

Your older brother will be going to Ygnacio Valley high school. The girls will be going to Fair Oaks school with Bittsey.

I will bring your radio kit, 50' of wire, also a radio, and watermellon when we come up to see you the first Sunday in September.

Grandma's address is

784 Spruce St.

San Francisco, Calif. 94118

For a few days there were three pigeons in the coop but I left the door open and did not feed them and now they have left.

There have been several big grass fires on Mt. Diablo and the hills along the freeway.

Please let me know what the rules are regarding your making phone calls to me. I do not have a phone at the apartment but there are coin phones that you could call me on if I know the exact time you would call.

With love from everyone,

Dad

Also in the cigar box were some old photos. They were square and some of them had old timey white scalloped borders around the picture edge. Two of the pictures are of birds in the sky, nothing else. There is another picture of four birds on the roof of their old house, the chimney and the TV antenna are in the corner of the frame. At first glance the photos of the birds look like accidental photos, as though taken by a heedless child, inexperienced with the workings of a camera.

The birds in the photos were the middle brother's pigeons that he kept and trained in a pigeon coop in the back yard. Someone took pictures of the pigeons and sent them to him. It most likely was the youngest sister who sent the photos, outraged at their father for just letting the pigeons go, heartlessly cutting off their food and leaving them to fend for themselves. She could only bear so much slipping away of everything in their lives. They had lost so much already. The pigeons seemed a pointless cruelty, even as part of her knew there was no other way. Whoever bought their house would probably hate pigeons and tear down their coop. Sending the middle brother the pictures of his pigeons was her way of telling him he still mattered, that he was still a part of their family, at least always part of their child tribe, the melded body of the five of them and he was never going to be expelled out into the dark even if he was sent away by their father, and the social workers and the police.

In the box there is a picture of the next-door neighbor's fence surrounded by trees. They all had scaled that fence at least one a day, deftly balancing the toes

of their shoes on the tiny lip of horizontal wood slates to hoist themselves over. They went over the fence to play with the Troutners, a family with three children who lived on the other side of the fence or they were taking a short cut to the streets and fields behind the Troutner's house. The fence was a thoroughfare in their child world, the picture evoking a simpler time when even trouble was easier to get through, just scale the fence and run down the street into the tall grass.

The last photo in the box is of the girls. They are small, maybe eight and nine. It is summer and they are in shorts. They are standing in the backyard near the giant black cherry tree. Their father's little house where he slept at night when they were older, a mother-in-law's cottage, is in the edge of the picture. The roof is white and over exposed on the sunny day. The youngest girl is looking down, putting her hair behind her ear.

Their last summer in the house on Walnut Blvd was one of long heat filled days, the dream like torpor of time erupting into a stark close up with the barn fire and the equally sudden fallout afterwards, swift and unassailable. Buckaflap had spoken.

The middle brother was the guilty son, his the body, the life that was sacrificed, manifesting the painful collapse of their family after their mother's death. He was the catalyst, the holder of their saga, the scribe merely transmitting the shape of pain that held them all together, symbiotic, like slow killing moss on a tree, or scaly hitchhiking creatures spreading out further and

further on the body of a large blind fish, unable to see or change anything. Maybe their mother was sorry, for making him the carrier of all that befell their family. Maybe he knew it was what he had to do from the very moment of his birth, that it all was set in motion, descent of dust and men and ships and war, and crying mothers losing so many children.

Dear David,

I am sorry to see you go. We are staying at grandma's. Maybe we'll visit you sometime. Scholl will open soon, hope you have many friends.

Love, your sister, age 10 1/2

Dear David,

We go home on Wed. to the apartment. We've gone babysitting a lot with grandma. How are you? I'm fine. What have you been doing lately.

Love

M. Your sister age 9 1/2

P.S. (Write Back Please!)

The letters from the girls were the hardest to read, their letters always sent together. They were still so young, just harmless little girls. They drew carefully ruled lines to make their words behave on the page, clumsy and misspelled with their little kid hands. An unnamed anger and sadness welled up in him after reading them, making him irritable, acting out at dinner or picking a fight with someone before bed. He remembered when the girls would play school at the dining room table, copying words they couldn't understand from the encyclopedia. They called to him as he walked by, "Does this say something, is this a word?" He usually kept going, spelling swear words to them and laughing on his way out the door.

They were a background for him, an essential given in his memory of his childhood, their blond heads forgotten even as they were seen. He teased the oldest girl relentlessly just to get a rise out of her but knew that he could count on her to not say anything important to any grown ups, especially their father. She helped him out once when he ran away from the house on Santa Lucia Street, a small flat roofed three-bedroom house in a subdivision across from a shopping mall.

He caught up with her as she walked home from school and asked her to get him some food and a sleeping bag from their house. They both knew she would do it, even though she risked the wrath of Buckaflap and whined and told him she didn't want to do it. She went home and looked quickly for food that wouldn't be missed and pulled a sleeping bag out of the camping closet, fairly sure their father wouldn't even know it was gone. She walked to the end of the

subdivision to the small farmer's field and the creek bed near by where all the teens in the neighborhood smoked and hung out. As she gave him the things he asked for he said thanks and called her raticia, the nick name he gave her an insult to show her he was still the big brother who could mess with her head. She flipped him off and walked back home.

Dear David,
1969

Sept. 2,

I will be up to see you on Sunday. I will be bringing everyone. Do you want a radio that plugs into the wall outlet or one that works off battery?

I have not written because I did too much getting moved from our house and I have been ill.

When does school start for you?

I gave you the wrong address for our apartment. The correct address is

1810 Monument Blvd. Apt. C-7

Concord, Calif. 94520

Love Dad

P.S. One dollar for you. Dad

Their father decided some where along the way that the middle brother liked radios but really he was the one who liked them. The middle brother might have feigned interest in the rare moments of cooperation and peace between them, a thin circling thread opening up above both their heads, silvery and invisible, fragile as tracing paper. He might have scoffed when he read of the offer of a radio but he would take it, he would take anything anyone would give him. He had few possessions at Hanna Boys Center and couldn't afford to be picky due to a grudge with Buckaflap. There was always the possibility of selling the radio or trading it for something with one of the other boys at the home.

Reading letters from Buckaflap was an exercise in irritation. The middle brother did not care that his father felt ill from moving, he deserved it. He felt no compassion for their father who just decided to give up their house with its fruit trees and secret spaces, its well-worn wooden floors, every grain and pattern innately known to all of them. The last straw in the letter, a close second after the fact that his father didn't even manage to send the right address of the new apartment where there was no room for him, was the single dollar bill that he included in the letter. Even their old English grandmother gave them a five-dollar bill for their birthdays, slipped inside a glittery card from Walgreens, signed in her spidery script.

A single dollar could mean a lot of things, its interpretation fluid and polarizing at the same time. It could be a slap in the face, meant to insult the person, here, you have little or no value, I am tossing this to you, you are an after

thought like this crumpled bill and deserve nothing more. Or it could be more of a passive-aggressive move, to indicate how selfless the impoverished giver was but he managed to part with a dollar while wearing his hair shirt, size extra large. Either way, the middle brother boiled, spending it as quickly as he could at the Hanna Boys Center's small general store.

Dear David,

Hi! I hope things are going well for you. When we met last time I told you that next time I saw you I would introduce you to your new social worker. Your new social worker is Mrs. Carla Gato. Mrs. Gato and I and I will be coming up to see you on Tuesday November 18th.

See you then.

Sincerely

Mr. Papo

The middle brother could not remember how many times he had been arrested. He tried to keep track at first, but after a while they all slipped into a blurry trail of processings and the inevitable phone call to Buckaflap. When his

father arrived at the police station or juvenile hall to pick him up he was usually clipped and surly with the officers, which the middle brother liked, secretly enjoying the haranguing insults from Buckaflap to whatever unfortunate officer was on duty. But once they were in the car, Buckaflap launched into one of two tirades. There was the tirade of what a mess he was making of his life and how he would never amount to anything if he kept this up. Or, he chose a stony angry silence, his wrath a three dimensional poisonous gas pushing all the usable air out of the car. Sometimes Buckaflap left the middle brother in juvenile hall overnight if he could, or waited until the last possible moment to pick him up. Juvenile hall did not want to hold on to any of their clients any longer than they had to.

Mr. Papo was the social worker assigned to the middle brother due to all his police interactions and countless arrests. He would come over to their house every other week and sit on the couch asking awkward questions and ignoring the middle brother's monosyllabic answers. He wore light colored cotton men's shirts rolled up at the elbow, sometimes with a tie or a colorless sweater. At first the girls stayed and watched but quickly learned that Mr. Papo was a nosey man who could get their brother in serious trouble or even possibly get them all sent away. They slipped into their bedroom when he arrived then, or snuck off the back porch and played jail, pretending they were in jail or going to court with an inept social worker.

Mrs. Gato, the next social worker stayed with them for a long time, following their family long after the middle brother went to Hanna Boys Center. He didn't mind her as much. She was sharper than Mr. Papo but in a good way. She got food stamps for them and free school lunches. She was a huge woman who filled much of the couch, often surrounded by laundry. She would ask them why they didn't just fold the laundry, didn't they see it? Why didn't they help out around the apartment, did they think they were special? She was funny and she did things for them so she earned her right to harass them. They wanted to be good when she was around. After many years of trying to help them she quit. It is not clear if she quit them or if she retired.

Police Report

The police reports were three page carbon copies, the kind that had an inky back page that would make a copy of the witness's statement if they pressed hard enough with the pen. They smelled faintly like the dittos from grade school, passed out by teachers, sometimes still warm and with that slightly sweet smell.

The generic police report had several blanks to be filled in at the top and then a large blank space on the bottom half of the page for the witness statement. One of the spaces was for the type of complaint being investigated. The witness report for the incident regarding the middle brother that night in the bar said Attempted Murder. In each of the five or six reports from the suspects in the bar that afternoon the complaint box was filled with the same the same two words, Attempted Murder, the words popping into the brain like a hot stray spark from a match or a drop of painful liquid, burning more as you tried to rub it out.

The middle brother and his friend John were drinking in a bar in Oakland and playing pool. They were both chronically under employed. It was late afternoon, still light out it said in one of the reports. John was small and wiry and was quick to run his mouth, especially when he was with the middle brother who was over six feet tall and not afraid of a little altercation when necessary. It could be said that sometimes they enjoyed a good bar fight, it got them riled up and gave a focus to the failure they tried not to feel about their lives, lingering just below the surface, needing lots of alcohol to stay put. Neither of them had finished high

school and although the middle brother was a good mechanic he had trouble with bosses and getting up in the morning. They enjoyed blaming someone else for their half-baked sure-fire plans, frequently birthed on a barstool. They had been friends for a long time, creating schemes, legal and not so legal, trying to get ahead, on their terms.

They were drinking at their local bar when a guy with a long ponytail and a white Giant's tee shirt bumped John in the gut with his pool stick. Words immediately flew, especially from John's fiery Terrier like mouth, his base line demeanor short fused and ready to erupt at a moment's notice. The words sailed high in the stale bar air, hitting the ceiling like startled birds. Then the guy in the Giants shirt threw a punch at the middle brother who was moving to standing and heading towards him, fist cocked. John continued to yell and insult the guy with the ponytail and his friends, confident that the middle brother could handle the situation. The middle brother fell back from the first punch and hit his head on some kind of sharp object, maybe the edge or foot of the pool table as he went down. He hit the floor of the bar, able to see the blackened indoor outdoor carpeting beneath the pool table, filmy with dust and cigarette ashes, the dried scales of spilled drinks, hardened like tiny frozen lakes on the carpet.

The middle brother got up from the floor rubbing the back of his head. He pulled his hand away and looked at it to see if there was any blood. There wasn't. At this point the bartender threw them out of the bar. They stood outside, continuing the argument on the street, until the police came and took everyone's statements and dispersed them into the late afternoon.

John and the middle brother went back to their house and watched TV. They had been living in a condemned house owned by an elderly woman. They had conned her into letting them live there while they 'restored' it for her. They promised to bring it up to code for her. The house was up on thick blocks of wood to replace the rotten foundation. The middle brother assured the woman he knew how to do foundation work. He went as far as to get the house up on the wood blocks but somehow he and John had gone through the money the owner gave them without getting to the foundation to do the repairs.

The middle brother kept saying he had a headache and then threw up a few times. They decided to go to the hospital to get him checked out. They headed to Highland hospital to the emergency room, expecting to wait for several hours but were taken in immediately. The middle brother sat down on the gurney as the nurse took his vital signs. John sat in the orange plastic chair next to the door, watching the nurse, silent.

The middle brother said he was starting to have trouble seeing out of one eye and then suddenly hunched over and passed out on the gurney. John had to help the nurse catch him so the middle brother didn't fall to the floor. A code blue was called and he was rushed to surgery as they thought he must have a brain bleed from the blow to the head.

He never regained consciousness. He was in surgery for several hours. His friend John was kicked out of the triage room and sent back to the waiting room. He sat down and watched TV, not seeing or understanding anything on the screen. His heart was hammering in his chest. The fight kept replaying in torn

bits of time in his head, sometimes focusing on the guy with the pool stick as he threw the first punch, his long black hair pulled back into a ponytail held in place in neatly spaced intervals with black hair ties, the kind women wore when they worked out, or cleaned house, utilitarian, no nonsense black ties that did not slip, just did their job of keeping the hair where it should be. Sometimes the flashback was the middle brother falling, again and again like a skipping film reel, his body disappearing behind the pool table as it fell. The image of the middle brother beginning to fall off the gurney as he lost consciousness was the worst fragment of all. He was suddenly lifeless and huge in the tiny room, a silent large amphibian attempting to slip off the gurney and back into the sea, with only gravity in play, every other bodily function gone to another frequency, the middle brother now unknowable. From the small orange chair where John sat that night he must have known that everything changed for both of them, John's mouth the cause of all of it.

He desperately wanted to find the guys who did this to his friend but he was powerless without the middle brother. Alone he'd get his ass beat for sure. He was a tiny yappy dog without his front man. John stood up suddenly and left the waiting room to go tell the middle brother's sister who lived near by and who sometimes slept with him. She would know what to do. She would call everyone to come.

Waiting for the Future

After the surgery the middle brother was put on a ventilator, a thick plastic tube ran down his throat carefully placed in his lungs, breathing for him in measured tones, the air being forced out of his lungs on the exhale, his breath sometimes making a small whooshing sound, sometimes sounding like a sigh that startled them with its human-ness and then they would look over at him, hoping this was the TV moment when he would wake up and life could return to itself, the messy middle brother narrowly escaping another close call.

The parking lot of Highland Hospital was beat down. Fast food litter laced the chain link fence, tossed cigarette butts and thick raised oil spots bellied the few empty parking places. The entrance to the hospital was highly secured, two security guards flanked each set of large glass doors outside, then two more in the lobby, one standing just inside the door and one sitting at some kind of ledger behind a thick window of plexi-glass. The guard's stiff demeanor told each visitor he knew who was lying and about to cause trouble. He did not greet people who approached his window, instead raised his head up and a little to the side with no eye contact, suspicion like tiny invisible bees buzzing above his head.

After many hours of surgery the middle brother was moved to the intensive care unit of Highland, one of the best ICU's in the state for trauma. This kind of statistic meant to be comforting for those once removed, listening on the other

end of the phone, hearing, not living the harrowing details couched in medical jargon just learned, their sick loved ones providing a crash course in hospital speak.

The breathing tube from the ventilator was taped in place at the corner of the middle brother's mouth. It looked like a giant clown straw hanging out of his mouth, or a strange Middle Eastern smoking pipe, but none of the siblings could go there and make the obvious joke the middle brother might have appreciated, or at least have flipped them off in acknowledgement with his bend middle finger.

His head was thickly bandaged with white frothy gauze, his head shaved beneath it. When the siblings were allowed in to see him, taking turns in fifteen-minute increments, two at a time, they always checked for blood on the bandages then quickly looked away and back to scanning his impassable face and landing always back on his eyes, which remained shut. His body lay still in the bed in a deep sleep, or something resembling sleep. The hospital gown dwarfed on his giant body, dark chest hair popping out the top of the scalloped edge of the hospital gown touching his neck, *Highland Hospital* printed at evenly spaced intervals on the faded fabric. In one of his hands was an IV taped down and dated in someone's tiny handwriting, clear liquid going somewhere into his stilled frame, hydrating and lubricating his body in hopes of pleasing the brain into waking up.

The middle brother's brain, once a closed system like some kind of futuristic perfectly functioning ecosphere had been violated more than once. The impact

when he fell to the floor in the nameless bar the first insult, the swiftness of the fall, his weight and height and gravity all amounting to a rupture in its ecosystem, the boney skull designed to avoid such insults, but only up to a point, velocity and angle and impact a physiological physics culminating in a bleeding vessel in the closed world of his brain. His skull was a good one, large and thick, the fused over suture lines like fossilized riverbeds, evidence of his birth, the squeeze so tight his infant head was born soft and pliant, movable bones fusing quickly in the first weeks of his life.

The second violation was the surgery late that first night. The surgeons carefully and skillfully cutting into the middle brother's skull, their many years of grueling training humbling and irritating in its constant reminder, a litany to all who enter into the brain that they must be careful, any slip or uncertain touch reminding them of their insignificance in the spheres of the brain, how little the strange domain they were entering with their knives and their scalpels was understood, and how quickly irreparable damage could be done to its blind allies which gave away little, withholding information that many a surgeon took personally as they studied harder, worked harder, to breach the wall of the brain.

A stay in the intensive care unit is an elite invitation. To be allowed to stay there is evaluated every morning by a team of doctors and nurses, making their decision like a secret society, a cluster of white coats and hospital scrubs scanning the medical record to determine who would be staying for another

twenty-four hours and who was stable enough to go else where, the machine encircled beds of the ICU in demand always, gunshot wounds and car crashes and other daily life threatening trauma clamoring to be let in, to be given a bed in the unit.

The next two weeks at Highland evolved into a routine, the siblings visits an invisible pattern forming as they stayed as close to the middle brother's sleeping body as their worlds would allow them. There were children to be fed by this time and jobs to go to, bills to pay. So they came in shifts, the oldest brother visiting every day, watching and waiting for the middle brother to return to his body. They grew accustomed to the security guards gruffness and the occasional drama in the lobby as families cried and fought and blamed each other, a physical incantation for the fear and love they held in their bodies, erupting like some geyser only just discovered, baffling and wild as it made its presence known, raw and substantial on the cold tiled floors of the waiting room.

They even got used to the horrible and unchanging vision of the middle brother lying silently in the hospital bed that moved in various tilts, inflating like clockwork to pad the weight of his inert body, his giant limbs bent like the fallen wings of a bird of prey, stilled in the bed. His head remained bandaged, traces of new hair growing where it had been shaved for the surgery emerging beneath the bandage. The ventilator remained, humming and whirring next to his bed, the tube down his throat and the constant noise a reminder of what was needed to keep him alive in that bed, waiting for change, anything at all to be the turn in the road.

After a few stable days the doctors told them that the middle brother needed a tracheostomy, they needed to cut a hole in his throat for a more permanent placement of the ventilator tube keeping him alive. The doctors presented it to them like an option, a decision they had to make as his family, consent a formality that felt like falling for the unlucky sibling who was at the bedside that day and had to make the call.

He got the tracheostomy and now they could see his whole face, his mouth that remained closed, his beard growing, the encroaching stubble a battle that kept on happening while his brain was on silent was baffling. Someone was shaving him, an unseen nurse or nurse's aide was touching his mute skin, washing his face, his body, turning him every few hours to prevent bedsores. They spoke to him as they cared for him, talked to him when they did the medical things they needed to do.

The plan was to let the middle brother stabilize, to allow his body to try to heal from the insult they called it and the surgery. The doctors talked about swelling a lot. The swelling in his brain was a problem even after they released the tension of the bleed in his head. The swelling was a part of his unresponsiveness and only time would tell if there would ever be any change in his condition. The swelling became a force, an unseen enemy that moved slowly, giving little ground in the land of his brain.

So they waited at Highland for almost two weeks and the middle brother slowly 'stabilized', according to the ICU team. His ventilator settings were stable, he didn't have a fever and his blood work looked fine. He was just still on life

support, in a coma, needing constant nursing care around the clock and could do nothing for himself. The word stable taking on a new meaning in the sanitized hospital room of the ICU, stable like a boulder poised on a cliff, stable like waiting for the wind to make up its mind where to land its offshore hurricane swirl, picking up houses and trees as it came to roost, waiting for the rain and its inevitable flooding,

The team decided he was ready to go to a skilled nursing facility. The siblings were afraid of leaving the safety of Highland Hospital and the ICU. The idea of a nursing home did not foster hope in any of their minds. It meant decay and neglect filtered through an ever-present smell of urine. The Highland doctors had done everything they could for him but to the siblings he looked the same as when he arrived, a giant sleeping man with a head bandaged in miles of gauze, surrounded by machines and people and oblivious to it all. The longer he was unresponsive, the bleaker his prospects were for waking up. Even the siblings could sense that but would never say it. They were torn between giving him time for a miracle and freeing him from his broken body.

When the doctors decided he was ready to leave the ICU they did not mince words with the siblings. The attending physician summarized it in a bedside meeting with them, "He has sustained a massive assault to his brain and the information gathered from the scans and tests and various evaluations has led us believe there are very few options. He will probably never wake up and the longer he is asleep the worse the likelihood of any kind of survival off of life support." He paused and looked at the siblings and then to somewhere over their

heads, "The options are to take him off life support now or to wait another few months and reevaluate then, at which time I honestly don't think there will be any significant change but you are free to wait a while if that is what the family needs to do."

There was a meeting with the Highland social worker, the siblings leery and battle scarred from the Mr. Papo's and the Mrs. Gatos' of their childhood who wanted to help, who were paid to help and who somehow always got it wrong. All four siblings were at the meeting, presenting a united hostile front. Their father was dead by this time so they were it, the unit, the ball of genetic hints and clues, hands and fingers spooky in their echoing identical shape, jaw lines and brows so similar as to be unseen. The similarities blew forth into shaky consciousness with their repetition, molded from the original connecting mass, unbroken even as the damage lay at their feet, they were called together, for him, silent as cells begging to cross the membrane of their bigger body.

The middle brother was to be moved to Fairmont, a small skilled nursing facility in Hayward. He would be moved by ambulance the next day if they were ok with the plan. They were, in theory, but the suddenness of the move felt like being thrown out of the safety of the ICU. The youngest brother did not want to wait six months but he kept silent. At the time he didn't understand that the ventilator was keeping him alive, he thought if the middle brother could just be given a break from all the technology, maybe he would wake up on his own.

He could not stop thinking about the last thing he said to the middle brother who was blowing him off once again to go drink in the bar with John, "You'd rather drink than help us," he'd said.

Even though the middle brother did 'live' in that bar the youngest brother could not bear the idea of that being the last thing he had said to the middle brother. He dove down deep into the guilt hole, lined with dark wet tears, scratchy eyed sadness, self inflicted arrows of judgment, never sated, a thin line of logic fighting in the space where sleep might come. He just wanted the middle brother to wake up, to be alive and going to the bar everyday if that was the price for him to come back. He didn't want to wait, he wanted him free, sure that he would open his eyes if he just had some unfettered space.

They had decided to give him six months, a solid chunk of time, a more than generous chunk of time for the invisible swelling to morph and dissipate, to help make the path known to him, and to them. They knew any sort of time line was arbitrary, the long end of a hunch and an obligation to his body and to their sibling body, unspeakably harmed, the answer already in their lungs, waiting to be the last breath.

Fairmont

One of the respiratory therapists at Fairmont that treated the middle brother owned a Dodge Valiant. It was white and had been fully restored. The tires had chrome rims with red at the edges, baby moons they were called. The body of the car was smooth and immaculate and pointy in all the right places. The sisters could see the push button transmission on the column as they peered into the car windows, hands against the glass to prevent the glare, examining the interior of the car in disbelief and awe. The car felt like a good omen to them, its exact message never coming clear, but the connection to the middle brother seemed unmistakable.

The middle brother's first car was a light blue Valiant, the older model with the sloped window in the back. It was actually his car, not one of the many he stole just to steal them, the strange enjoyment he found in moving someone's car from place to place, taking a ride like some kind of cruel chess game, his move launching a threat to their sanity that made him laugh out loud when he pictured them finding, or not finding their car where they were sure they had left it.

He bought the Valiant for one hundred dollars from an anonymous acquaintance, someone from his subterranean world of cars and dark garages and drinking places, those who gathered and talked of elaborate plans and great ideas routinely formulated on a bar stool in the middle of the day. The middle brother's Valiant had a thin chrome line around the sloped back window and along the sides of the body of the car, creating a slight ridge in the curve of the

doors. It was a husk of a car really. The vinyl seats deflated and split in many places, the body dinged and scraped almost completely, rust feathering out from beneath the car, silently creeping over the sharp edges of the rear fenders where the tiny red back up lights still shone in the dark.

Its interior, though ripped and worn was red. There was a huge red steering wheel laced with chrome circles and a push button transmission on the column that he pointed out repeatedly with a child like excitement to any one he showed the car to. It was as though he had a brand new Cadillac, the enormity of actually owning something an intangible that he was finally part of.

The two sisters reunited during the months spent at Highland. The old comfort and ease of being together dormant for no particular reason plumped itself back to life in the filtered hospital air. They had a way of talking and gesturing that was their own sub language, nothing elaborate or forcefully created, rather a natural out cropping, laced with the years of their childhood, spent close as twins in a house of boys.

When the middle brother was moved to Fairmont the girls arranged their schedules to visit him together every week. They usually met in the parking lot, gathering courage from each other as they headed into to see the sleeping middle brother, his dark hair growing in, starting to cover the large C shaped incision on the side of his head. It was a fairly decent nursing home, their gauge being the lack of urine smell when they walked into the lobby. The staff there

were often preoccupied, walking briskly, disappearing into rooms, speaking to them only when they asked them a question.

They always called first and arrived at about eleven am. That way the morning care was done and the mistakes of the night before were righted, messes cleaned up and beds changed. One week they arrived earlier for some forgotten reason and didn't call ahead. The nurses appeared irritated and even a little nervous when they saw the sisters, scolding them for not calling first. When they went into the middle brother's room, he was uncovered, his hospital gown hiked up around his waist and his diaper looked heavy with urine. His face was unshaved and his fingernails were long and claw like. They looked for his nurse and told her they would come back when she had cleaned him up. Shaken, they headed to the cafeteria to wait. For once they were silent as they walked down the covered hallway to the cafeteria. They desperately needed the illusion that he was in a good place, that he was somewhere that was taking good care of his inert body, one of the limbs on their branch, not just a drunk who fought in bars, giving away his precious life, felled onto a grimy floor and the under side of a pool table.

They learned a lot about nursing home life and called ahead religiously after that day. Some days he looked more cared for than others. They could tell when who ever had him as a patient on a particular day either did or didn't have the time or inclination to really wash his skin, now slightly sallow and waxy. They could see if the caretaker took the time to shave him and his cut nails. The staff left the mark of their compassion like a signature in the caring for his body.

The sisters found each other again at Fairmont, standing on each side of the middle brother's bed, occasionally holding his stiff hand or touching his hair, they talked. They rambled through their childhood, through the events leading up to the accident, blasting and condemning John, whom they decided was the one who didn't deserve his own life. They submerged themselves into the bond they had always had as sisters, one that allowed for love and humor, uncertainty and loneliness. They wordlessly understood the shared sense of having endured a childhood of constant uncertainty and scarcity, finding an early safety in each other, loyalty, envy, love and anger, all melded into their sister skin, beginning in the bunk-beds of their childhood, a safety and an acceptance of each other, solid when almost nothing else was.

They talked a lot about the bar fight and John and the unknown man who punched the middle brother. They needed to find a place to put the anguish of waiting for what they knew was the end of his life and they wanted justice, they wanted the guy who did it to pay, to be arrested and brought to trial. If they couldn't find him then they wanted John, his head on a platter still not an even exchange for their brother's now useless life.

Being of the TV generation of the seventies the sisters decided to sleuth a little on their own, shows like *Hawaii Five O* and *One Adam 12* giving them imaginary skills they thought they could use to find the nameless man with the long ponytail who punched the middle brother. They went to the bar where the fight happened, harmless and small in the early afternoon light. They talked to the

bartender who replied in small grunts of sounds to all their questions, his face impassive, his eyes landing on their faces only when absolutely necessary, even after they told him that the middle brother was now languishing in a hospital bed on a ventilator after a fight in his bar. This approach did not get the result they wanted, the opposite occurred, the bartender may have sensed guilt by proxy or the possibility of trouble with the police at the very least. He became busy with the ice machine, ducking his head below the bar while they stood there. After taking a quick and disappointing walk around the pool table, the sisters left, squinting back out in the sun. They were flattened at the dead end they touched, the first of many to come.

The older sister suggested they go to the middle brother's house, she wanted to see where he lived, she wanted to see if she could feel the thread of his disappearing life by being among his things, hoping to find the missing pieces to his fallen life by standing in his kitchen. She was sure there was a clue in his dresser drawers or in kitchen cupboards.

The younger sister had remained close to the middle brother, they spoke on the phone regularly and she sometimes hung out with him and John, watching them drink and play cards. She slept with John sometimes while disliking him for being who he was, a mouthy little man who did not think the rules of adult life applied to him, that the world owed him something for being born. She could not contort him into a nice man she could love no matter how many tries she gave him.

The younger sister tried to warn the older one, to prepare her for how the middle brother lived, for what he was now, a man almost erased, existing under the radar. He and John lived in the condemned house of an old woman they had convinced to let them live in her house while 'remodeling' it. The money she gave them was gone and they had little to show for it. The house was up on large square blocks of wood stacked like Lincoln Logs, a makeshift stairway of cinder blocks and slates of wood led to the front door.

Inside, the house was barren, there were minimal leftover furnishings all with the greasy patina of old sweat, the deflated contours of time passing. The kitchen was a large square room, an empty space where a kitchen table might be, shiny wood cabinets of knotty pine lined the two far walls. The older sister opened the refrigerator, like an after thought, a gesture of familiarity, of idle curiosity and permission. She expected beer, lots of it, but found only old condiments and not much else. She wondered out loud where was his beer. The younger girl told her he had given it up a long time ago, now he drank vodka, said it was quicker.

They went to see the police detective assigned to the middle brother's case. His name was Detective Paniagua and he was dressed in typical cop desk job attire, a short sleeve dress shirt, polyester sports coat over the back of his chair, and black slacks and black pleather shoes. When he came out to meet them he did not offer any condolences for the middle brother or offer to shake their hand.

Instead he told them that he probably couldn't be much help to them as the D.A. frowned on bar fights, shrugging his shoulders in the resulting silence.

The sisters, stunned by his bluntness still hoped the detective might be an ally if they could let him see how brutally wounded the middle brother was. They asked him a litany of naïve questions, had he talked to John, had they found the man with the ponytail, did they question the people who worked at the bar, had they brought anyone in? Detective Paniagua, held up his hands and started talking over them, "The department is doing everything they can but your brother was in a bar fight and the DA frowns on bar room brawls, so..."

The detective looked at them beneath scratchy black eye brows, the corners of his mouth curled and pinched, judgment coming off his face, folding his fleshy cheeks into two pear shaped jowls.

The girls were deflated once again in their efforts to find justice for the middle brother, calling the cranky detective Detective pantywaist as they walked to their car. They were out of their element with the police and the criminal justice system, stepping into the land of Perps and DA's who were all powerful, their mere frown putting a stop to an investigation of a possible murder deemed not important, because drunken incidents occurred all too often, violence wicked with the flame of alcohol burning hot and fast, jumping any kind of boundary thrown in its path, until it burned its self and everything around it down to the blackened ground.

The oldest girl called an acquaintance who was a lawyer and he too offered little hope for the middle brother due to the 'nature of the crime.' They began to

see that justice truly was bought and paid for and they didn't have the funds to be in the game. The older girl took to saying that if the middle brother were a Kennedy, the man with the ponytail would be arrested and on trial. They reluctantly gave up their efforts to find someone to take responsibility for the harm done to the middle brother, his death on pause, waiting for the rest of his siblings to catch up to him.

Hospice

The middle brother re-emerged, looking more like himself without all the tubes and machines attached to him. His body still most of the time, an occasional shudder of breath or the jerky repetitive movement he made with his shoulders or the grinding of his teeth, the stray movements lost signals emitting from deep within his broken brain.

The Hospice room was small, just his bed and two chairs, a nurse looking in on him from time to time on the first day. There was a quiet in the room, the light and the voices of those who came and went softer. The air in the room held a revered finality, the last part of the inert doing for the middle brother, a small honored waiting held in the sparse room, his imminent death transfixing the physical space, the noise and the battle of his body nearly gone, the spin of the globe pushing his life energy elsewhere, creating a small necessary stillness, a suspended state of allowing, a state of no resistance, its current seeping into those who were near, those consenting to be part of the humble, holy, horrible moment, when the arc of the heart driven light lifts, energy leaving yet another human, the body shed, unknowingly gifted in its very occurrence, the mystery that is consciousness a wild pony running away, cold air pushing out its nostrils in a cloud of white as it runs up a canyon and out of reach, for now.

When six months passed and the middle brother's condition was unchanged they knew it was time to have a family meeting with the Fairmont social worker.

The time they had allotted themselves to wait for the middle brother to return, for him to give them even the smallest sign, was over. In the beginning of the waiting period six months felt far away, a vague point in someone else's future. The burden of visiting him, showing up week after week, bringing their loyalty into the hospital room, their false cheer and pretend conversations with him lodged with a bleakness and a sense of bodily panic they hid from in their waking hours. To wait for him was a push to some forever that had no reward, the only point of movement the time they allotted and his borrowed breath, pushed into him and pulled out by the humming machine at the side of his bed.

It was the oldest brother who started the conversation with the rest of them. By this time their visits to him were a part of their lives, the passage of time the only thing changing. The six-month mark was both a relief and a giving up that none of them wanted once it arrived. They were scared to let him go and scared to keep him in his crumpled body, afraid to see that he was dead already, and afraid to see him linger if they were wrong. And they were angry that they had to be the ones to make the choice-less last choice for him.

The four siblings gathered around a large table in a Fairmont conference room, weary and resigned, no one speaking as they waited for the social worker to come in. When the social worker arrived she began to speak carefully, avoiding words like die or death, skirting them like dark holes she had to maneuver to keep her own life safe. She asked each of the siblings around the table to speak, to voice what they wanted for the middle brother who no longer

formed words, it was a hearing on whether a tree was allowed to fall or a bird shot from the sky can drop, no logic, the mind unable to cobble the fit of dying, the husk of their brother lying in the other wing of the nursing home still and always waiting.

Each sibling voted to take the middle brother off life support, their unanimity a last act of love making it hard for them to breath, their own lungs pink and capable, the colors in the day suddenly more vivid, the blues and greens, outlines not usually visible, darkening the day that still went on, cars on the freeway, a honking in the distance not stopping as they decided to stop him.

The social worker quickly ended the meeting as she felt their painful resolve, giving them the details they would need to proceed. They gathered outside the conference room after the meeting and made a plan between themselves to sit with the middle brother until he passed. The oldest girl took the first night, the oldest brother the second, the youngest brother the night after that. They didn't know how long it would take but they cleared their calendars one last time for the middle brother, taking their turn to show up and sit with him.

The middle brother died the second day. The oldest brother arriving exactly at eight am to relieve his sister who had spent a sleepless night watching the middle brother through longer and longer moments of stillness interrupted by small frantic bucking movements from his inert body. The oldest brother was a tall man, slightly ducking his head as he entered the room out of habit and the muscle memory of grazing his head many a time on irregular doorways.

A nurse came in shortly after eight that morning, her body only slightly swirling the air in the tiny room. Her energy a minimal presence, She looked at the middle brother, a giant grounded crane occasionally lurching in his captivity, then she looked at the oldest brother who dissolved into tears as he felt her glance. She made a quiet humming noise in the back of her throat and guided him without touching him to sit in the chair.

They sat together in the room that morning with the middle brother, the nurse occasionally adjusting something for the middle brother, setting free a twisted blanket, putting chap-stick on his craggy lips. The oldest brother sat silently in the chair, his mind a whirring wheel of fragments of memories of the middle brother. His life a country in their sibling globe, his arms and legs the territories within, city states and smooth fields, blood the rivers feeding their earth, ground forced mountains a protoplasm of sameness, their essence in its dirt, lifted in the rain, marked in the dawn, indelible in their bones extending with the identical shape in their finger tips.

He died the morning of the second day off the ventilator. The oldest brother sat motionless in the hard plastic chair next to his bed, watching as the oxygen failed to push its way through the middle brother's body any longer. The color of his skin cooling into the dark blue surface of a ruddy alpine lake, the coming cold rippling the surface as it landed, its season now here, taking the color from his skin, a leaf off the tree, falling.

The Gun

The idea of getting a gun swan into the oldest brother's consciousness for the first time at Highland hospital, when every visit to see the middle brother was a shock to his own body, seeing the middle brother bandaged and silent, the ventilator there like an unwanted guest, humming its veracity, unaffected by the torrent of disbelief of those coming and going, shock silencing them as they stood at his bedside.

The oldest brother was an outlier in their family, putting himself through Berkeley and learning to fly airplanes when he was only eighteen. He turned some imaginary luminous corner in his teen years into straight life and the middle brother did not follow him. The oldest brother started to work for money instead of stealing it from the tidy houses in their neighborhood or robbing the local businesses. He had his own business as an electrical engineer, morphing into a tall confident man in a sports jacket with a solid handshake and a clear gaze. He worked hard to escape the memories of hamburger helper bought with food stamps and the searing eyes of the grown ups boxing him into their prediction of failure, its stink coming off his body, blurring the air of their gaze.

He truly believed, before the accident, that hard work was the only necessity in the equation for success and he was going to be a part of its calculus, his childhood crimes relegated to the back country, a craggy territory in two dimensional relief against his orchestrated life now, two children and a wife and a house in the suburbs, his desire for safety and escape sated in the three

bedroom floor plan and two car garage that held his wife's Mazda 280Z with a license plate that said 'Elegance is Everything.' He lived in a planned subdivision in Fremont, all of the circular streets named after kinds of wine. He lived on Merlot Street, which he pronounced Mer-lot Street.

The oldest brother went to see the DA about the middle brother's case. Maybe he thought reason and logic would prevail, man to man, he and the DA discussing the case and clearing up what seemed so clear to the oldest brother, his brother was in a vegetative state due to a blow to the head from a guy with a long black ponytail, whose name and whereabouts the police knew from the police report that the man with the long ponytail filled out himself. Bring him in and prosecute him, done.

But the DA did not share his point of view. He lived in the world of the law, he spoke its language and knew the twists and turns of due process. The DA said there was not enough evidence, "He's not dead," he told the oldest brother.

The oldest brother bought a .38 revolver and a box of bullets from a gun store in San Jose. There was a ten day waiting period and a background check, which he passed easily as his crimes from childhood were sealed and in his adult life he was a law abiding citizen. He had experience with BB guns as a kid, shooting them with the middle brother at birds and cans and occasionally each other, always aiming for the butt or lower extremities. He once stole a gun he found in a house he had broken into. It was a .22 black revolver. At the time he just wanted

to possess it, to feel what a gun felt like in his hands, the weight and cool metal silent, its abilities hidden in the barrel, the trigger, the blast forcing its inevitable damage into the unsuspecting air. He kept the gun for three days, carefully hiding it from the middle brother. Then he took it apart and buried the parts in several different places on Shell Ridge, the hilly land at the edge of the neighborhood where they played as children.

The oldest brother drove by the bar where the accident took place many times, sometimes going inside looking for the man with the long ponytail, the gun in his car, needing only his decision. The eldest brother waited for a sitting of the man who got to walk freely, eating and sleeping, fighting and drinking while the middle brother lay silenced in a hospital bed.

The injustice of his life, the unfairness of his brother's injury hurt his engineer brain, trained in logic and problem solving. There was no linear progression, no solution to be found if he just did things in the right order. Any formula he tried to apply did not fit the destroyed body of his brother now perpetually in a hospital gown, insect limbs stiff with disuse and the inertia of his brain. He could not find a way to hold the damage he saw day after day, the echo of his brother loud in his brain. He had always tried to help the middle brother, who often did not want it, their relationship bumpy, the middle brother calling the oldest brother a goody goody with his big job and his house in the suburbs, a bitterness forming with each of the oldest brother's successes.

When the DA said there wasn't enough evidence, that the middle brother wasn't dead, something dark shifted in the oldest brother. He fell back into his primitive brain, back into the boy from Walnut Blvd. fearless and hungry, the boy who would do anything, steal, destroy that which harmed him, and take anything and everything because no one cared about him or his siblings. A cold power sloughing off into his hands from the things he stole, the harm he inflicted. The idea of the gun blossomed there, vining its way into his every waking moment. He felt himself becoming justified, righteous in his mission.

In the beginning he drove to the bar when he couldn't stand how he felt, his children snug in their beds, the rage and sorrow building in his limbs, the blackness of his thoughts a pain he could not bear. He sometimes drove there several times a week in those six months, walking in circles around the pool table, wanting something to manifest and change in the pilly green felt, something to lift the bone deep ache of his brother's stopped life.

Following the law was a cruel joke, a useless map to somewhere nonexistent, a point off the horizon with wooden ships and sepia sails falling off the edge, a dragon's tail with a Poseidon tip coaxing and repelling those who look too long. The law's protection was meant for other people, those other more deserving people who had two parents and warm houses and hot food. The oldest brother had spent his entire life struggling, sure that the world had something he did not, laboring under the weight of forced entry into that other world he thought he could master if only he did what they did.

He put himself through college and did well, he flew airplanes and paid his taxes and made money, lots of it for awhile, yet he knew in the muted, inaudible region of his forgotten island, his origin volcanically joined, linked forever just below the surface with the rest of his sibling tribe, that he would always be with them, the boy looking in the windows of those who had more.

It was a bright morning outside, clocks moving their arms forward, digital numbers flipping the seconds forward. It was the middle of the workweek and his brother was dead, had in fact just died that very moment. He stepped out of the hospice room and looked out without seeing the hospital's sad landscaping. The uniform green hedges that never grew and never died, Poinsettia trees with their thin branches and wane red leaf like flowers lining the sidewalk. He did not know what to do, panic rising in his body, his existence without his brother a waterline quickly vanishing, his eyes breathing tears, the salty beads a white burning roar of the indelible image of his brother's changing color, his mother's soft smile floating and falling as it disappeared with the middle brother, drifting in a river swollen with leaving, pulling his life to its known edge, nothing left to grasp on its bare muddy banks. Cars rolling by on the freeway, voices in the air fuzzed and incomprehensible, he was alone.

He called everyone, unprepared for the pain of having to repeat the unreal words to each of them, the pain of having to feel them crumble as they received the news of the middle brother's death, physically inevitable, predicted absolutely but traumatizing in its formal arrival. They were stunned on the other

end of the phone, the youngest girl sobbing as soon as she heard the oldest brother's voice.

The middle brother's death was a severing, a vital something torn away from them, one of their own gone, a limb of their tribe no longer standing, his nameless island slipping back into the sea, folded into the cloudy bottom of the ocean floor in its soundless arrival.

The youngest brother was silent on the phone, receding back into the filmy safety of his habitual cave of silence. He was not able to speak, his muteness mistaken for indifference by some, by those who did not know the power of silence or of its cunning hold, gripping its captives in a web of all things unspoken, so hard too breach, while the remaining feelings gather in the body, bulging with the increasing pressure. He was captive, to the practice of silence and its dark companion, food, chips and soda and more the balm their father had taught them long ago.

They were all relieved in a confusing way. It was a best of the worst-case scenario that he had died so quickly. It made them feel like they made the right decision for him, their unspoken fear that he would languish for weeks or even longer by their hand unbearable to imagine. It was also a stark and undeniable physical truth of the profound harm that had been done to him that night in the bar. He probably would have died at Highland months ago if they had made the choice then. He was dead then and he was dead now, six months later, the man with the ponytail a murderer to them.

They knew they had done everything they could for him, from the very first moment, showing up and looking out for him, protecting him, a respect and love naturally coming forth from all of them as solid and as total as any 'real' family anywhere. They were present for him, not looking in from some window but in the room with him, of him, every step of the way. They had become the real family in the window, they had enough love and compassion and sustenance for all of them, they were there and they had done it right.

EPILOGUE

They were a formed whole all along, remaining so even when they scattered later on. The reminder of their shared past carrying a charge that was hard to sustain as it both pulled them and repelled them, the magnet of memory repolarizing the years they had spent together with their father.

They were a raw beautiful aggregate, a combine found in a hot yellow field, a rare quartz vein discovered in the plain sandstone hills, fossils in their arms and legs placed by their mother and father, and parts further on in time and place, England and Ireland and all parts north, cold and matter of fact, but a total none the less, a completion that held its form, shedding silent tears when his part of them slipped away.

It is true that the first few years after their mother's death they lived in a kind of moonscape, populated by strangers who wanted to help, two-dimensional figures inhabiting their days, washing clothes and cooking loveless food, their father swallowed into the grief-blackened earth of her death. Their child minds told them that it must be their fault, just by being born they were tainted and had caused her to leave them. A child's merciless self centered logic the only response to a tragedy they had no words for, leaving them to live a life they had no way of knowing was not in their control, a fairy tale cruelty bestowed on their tiny bodies, no spell to be broken or journey to return from, just their left over lives, the smudge of their mother's dark eyed glance on their foreheads.

The five of them were born into a smoldering landscape then, the youngest girl the one closest to the fire line, her birth the arrival of a fault line of cells and air and flesh and its falling blood, her mother gone in an instant just weeks after

she was born while the living trees erupted green and brilliant in the charred hillsides later on.

They grew up and some of them grew apart, joking about the food stamps and the awful freeze-dried camping food when they got together. They laughed a lot, joking a habit of deflection, a shield each one of them learned to wield from their very first encounters with the world. Levity a weapon that kept them safe and far from the truth of the grief they were born into, staining their breath, making jokes teaching them how to run away in plain site, how to hide behind the diluting pain of words, laughter their safety, making some of them oddities perhaps, but they didn't have to feel any of it with the protection of their flippancy, a wavery shell they pulled long ago from their island sea.

The four of them were now the last of their shrinking chain of islands, time and weather the final determination of what stays anyway, of what is remembered, the present the only moment not a memory, fused with filmy laced perceptions, the small matter of their lives a layer in the turning earth, a speck, the old pain of their childhood a chronic burning sensation that none of them could ever really get rid of, the safety of the returning winds the relief they sought to wait it out.