

UNTITLED FICTION PROJECT

A Written Creative Work submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree

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Master of Fine Arts

In

Creative Writing

by

Steven Edward Wilson

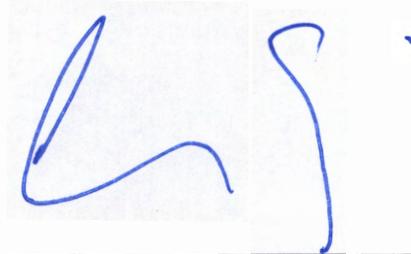
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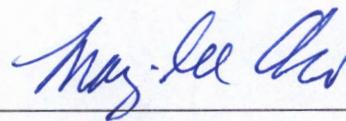
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read Untitled Fiction Project by Steven Edward Wilson, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.



Chanan Tigay,
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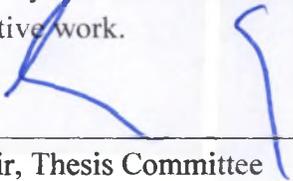
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Assistant Professor

UNTITLED FICTION PROJECT

Steven Edward Wilson
San Francisco, California
2019

This Written Creative Work consists of a collection of short stories.

I certify that the Annotation is a correct representation of the content of this written creative work.



Chair, Thesis Committee

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Date

PREFACE AND/OR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Caroline

That was the summer my father re-married, at an evangelical church in a strip mall on the other side of town. He and his new bride stood there, pleasantly shell-shocked, blankly regarding each other while their hands clasped together, shaking. They made vows beneath an enormous wood panel cross in a room full of aluminum chairs, and when they were done, she was my step-mother. She had eyes that were both afraid and hopeful, and she seemed committed beyond all things to creating a separate world for the two of them. My father wore a pale blue suit and they sang devotionals for each other, the whole thing memorialized by an unmanned video camera blinking mutely in the background.

Before the ceremony, my friend Tim and I messed around on the band's drum set, pounding away, not sure how to make it work. Tim cracked jokes, forgetting the punch line, as he often did, but laughing anyway at the memory of it. When he was four, he choked on his own vomit under anesthesia, and it made him a little off. Like sometimes one of the kids would say something, and he'd make a joke, but it would be a minute later, after we'd moved on to something else. It was usually funny, though, if you remembered what he was talking about.

He also had a young kid's need for affection way after other kids grew out of it, which accounts for why he rested his head on my shoulder during the ceremony, while I watched my father singing, feeling as though he were behind a pane. Tim's mother ran her fingers through his hair or held his hand, which was still a blanket of welts from

where I had held it down in an ant hill in his front yard, watching a nest of red-brown bodies, pincers and articulated legs, swarm over his fingers. At one point, the new couple was singing in harmony, and she turned to the empty seat beside her, as if to whisper a remark, but then looked away, embarrassed, as if she had been caught sleepwalking. I don't know why I was watching her other than that I kept expecting her to be someone else.

After the wedding, my dad played catch with me in the backyard, our house nearly packed up and ready to move. I don't remember if we said anything, only that the throwing was seamless and automatic. We willed the ball back and forth across the disheveled lawn, moving as on a wire in the space between us. I don't think we dropped it once.

For a long time, it seemed, the house had belonged to only the two of us. He'd get home after work, and we'd cook dinner together, bumping shoulders in the kitchen, usually trying to reconstruct one of mom's favorites, like hot dog hash, which was cut up hot dogs and shredded potatoes held together with Velveeta. Which is to say that my mom had a knack for making the best of things until she didn't. When she was gone we followed the blueprint she'd laid out for us, except it never was exactly the same. This was one way that my mother still vibrated at the edge of things, in the space between what once was and what we did now. Every difference was a ghost of my mother.

The day after the wedding, my dad and his new wife Karen dropped me at Tim's, where I'd stay while they were on their honeymoon. Packing that morning, my dad punched my shoulder and kidded me about how bad my packing was, but he had the wild, tight smile of a man marooned, pushing his raft out toward a boat spotted on the horizon. Karen transferred clothes from her still-unpacked suitcases into a smaller one for the trip. "I'll bet you and Tim will drive Caroline up a wall," she said, winking at me, and I stirred with the reflexes of happiness. But when she tousled my hair on the way out the door — easily, naturally — I startled, and she withdrew her hand, squeezing me on the shoulder as we walked outside.

Karen brought a gift basket of cheese and summer sausages as a thank you, and swung it before her as she waited for Tim's mother to open the door. It was a hot day, the plastic wrapping on the food beaded with moisture. The range of color was flattened by the heat. I knocked on the screen door, but the sound was thin, so I pressed the doorbell, looking in through the foyer to the darkened living room where no one sat. Then I stepped back to give the door room to open, and my father put his hands on my shoulders as if presenting me, but also as if holding on.

I heard Tim before I saw him, his sneakers slapping on the floor, and he opened the door wide, jumping off the single step. When his mother followed, she squinted against the sun.

Karen thrust the basket before her, the meats and cheeses wobbling in their divots, and it hung between them, Tim's mother still blinking and adjusting to the light.

“A little thank you for keeping Brian for us,” Karen said.

Tim’s mom looked at my father, and then the basket, inspecting it as if puzzled. She was in the same red terry cloth shorts she’d once worn every weekend, lying in the backyard with my mother.

“Yes, thanks Caroline,” my father said. “Really appreciate it.” His words hung and then seemed to capsize under some invisible weight. He’d been dressed by Karen in a crisp blue shirt, and he looked suddenly like a boy made up for a photo.

“It’s no trouble,” Caroline said, taking the basket. Her eyebrows arched, and she looked at me, the corners of her mouth turned up. I laughed, though I wasn’t sure why. Karen looked at me, confused.

“Sorry if it’s not the kind of thing you like,” Karen said. “I never know what to get.”

Caroline ran her fingernail over the plastic wrapping, tracing the shapes beneath. “These are my favorites, actually.” She smiled at Karen encouragingly. “Where’d you two decide to go?”

“Just to the lake.” Freed of the basket, she circled her arms around my father’s stomach. She was done up in a pink summer dress, hair and makeup for a special occasion, and she enclosed him in her relentless newness. My father still had his hands on my shoulders, and I could feel her arms pass behind my back, the weight of her against his side.

“Can’t leave Brian for too long,” he said, to either or both of them.

“It’ll be lovely,” Karen said. “Maybe we’ll do a second when Brian’s a little older.”

“The lake is lovely,” Caroline said, that look of amusement still at the corners of her mouth, though her eyes had gone flat.

Weekends at that cabin by the lake, my mother and Tim’s had sat at the end of the pier, drinking wine coolers. Their ease formed a kind of membrane that separated them from us. At sundown, their laughs tripped across the surface of the lake, and it was a sound that wasn’t our mothers exactly, but something different and lighter and more reckless. Tim and I would crawl up the ladder from the water to sit between them, drying in the cooling air while the fireflies and mosquitoes materialized. But we couldn’t touch it - they became again the mothers we knew, and soon enough they’d tell us to scram, and we’d dive back into the darkening water, feeling it close over our heads.

Now Tim pulled on his mother’s arm. “Can Brian and I go and play?”

My dad still hung on to my shoulders. Tim’s mother didn’t move.

“Yeah, we should go,” my father said. He smiled at Tim’s mom. “Keep ‘em out of trouble.”

“You know I can’t do that,” she said, smiling while she squinted against the light. He nodded, and let go of my shoulders, patting them one last time. I looked up at his face, which seemed to ease with letting go, though he tried not to show me. “Good break for both of us,” he said, and I nodded before Karen leaned down and wrapped me up in a hug. Then he took her hand and they started walking out to the truck. The day was still and overbright. My eyes stung with the gleam of light from the truck’s metal bumper. Karen laughed, my father hoisting her into the cab. Then he closed the door and ran

around the front to his seat, giving me one last wave. I waved back. As he pulled away, Tim's mom put her hand on my shoulder, and I looked up to see that same half smile, as if we shared some sad inside joke, and it seemed like the first time she'd touched me.

Tim and I spent the afternoon in the back yard, shinning up the gnarled tree and playing catch and wrestling. My house was there, just beyond the fence, but seemed shut away and locked, like some inaccessible memory. I watched Tim's mother through the sliding patio door, as she moved through the house, cleaning, and then later sat at the kitchen table, hunched over a magazine. Her legs were crossed at the knee, her foot bobbing. She was eating a green apple. She waved it in one hand while she read and held it in her teeth while she flipped each page, taking another bite as she pulled it from her mouth.

Always before, she'd moved at the edges, a collection of warmths and passing touches, teasing us about girls or getting into trouble with our friends. We were only ten, and hardly knew what she was talking about, but I think she was eager for us to have secrets she could share in. Sometimes, when I was over there playing, I would come out of Tim's room to find her standing still outside the door, staring at her fingertips, or carrying a load of towels, and she would see me and act as if I had interrupted her in the middle of some task. But the essential strangeness of adults is a vast category into which all varieties of private separateness can be tossed and disregarded. It never occurred to me to wonder what she did.

Now I kept watching as she bit the apple and turned each page. She didn't seem to notice. Tim yelled at me to pay attention, throwing a dribbling grounder that rolled easily into my mitt. I looked back again and saw her looking out at me, and she put the apple core on her head and made me laugh.

Those days, my body rose when it wanted and slept when it wanted. I would be sitting in my chair, thinking, and wake an hour or two later, the sun going down, the light in the room grown muddy and translucent and gold-flecked as lake water. At night, I would lie in bed, and my body would not sleep, and I would listen to my father's footsteps and washing, the curling of his body into his bed, or the rocking of his recliner in the office, where he kept a dog-eared book on fishing flies that he pored over and over. He had bought the book, I think now, as a way of finding something we could do together, but while I showed no patience for the fussy practice of tying hair and line and feather to make the flies, he had become entirely absorbed. He talked about it obsessively for a week, hoping I would return his enthusiasm, and then made no further mention of it, losing himself in silent absorption. On the counter in the kitchen he made a rig for making flies, half-wound specimens surrounding it, unfinished, some essential disorder wound into a knot or loop. He had stopped working on them when he started seeing Karen regularly, but had never removed the rig.

The first night at Tim's, I woke sweating in my sheets. Tim was passed out, drooling on his hand, legs sticking out from the sheets bunched up around him. The air was woolen and musky. There was light in the hallway from the living room.

There, Tim's mother was sitting in her armchair in the small cone of light from her reading lamp. Her head was turned toward the window, which at night offered only the dim reflection of the room she was sitting in. Her fingers tapped on the book in her lap, and she seemed to be working out some kind of puzzle, holding it in the physical space of the reflected room. When her eyes met mine in the window, she did not seem surprised or embarrassed.

"Couldn't sleep?" she said.

I nodded, stepping into the room.

"A/C's out," she said. "I'll have to get someone out here tomorrow."

She stood herself up, stretching her neck from one side to the other, taking her time, as if we were a couple long acquainted. She had turned off the cable, but not the TV, so that it sat there, humming and black.

She looked at me, and that look returned, as if she were still working out the problem in her head. Then she seemed to make up her mind, and she fished in her purse and nodded toward the door.

"Come on," she said. "It's too hot in here."

"What about Tim?"

She mimed him sleeping, hand crushed under his cheek. The TV hummed.

“Let’s go,” she said, nodding toward the door. “We’ll be back in no time.”

The first breaths from the car’s air vents were warm and mildewed, but soon turned cool, marking the edges of my skin. She pressed in the cigarette lighter, sticking a cigarette in her mouth and combing her hands through her hair. Goosebumps grew on her neck. The console lit everything in blue. She placed her hand behind my headrest and backed into the street.

“Your mom and I used to sneak out like this,” she said, driving with one hand and rolling down the window with the other, letting the warm, humid air from outside mix with the cold. When the lighter pinged out, she pressed its bright red coil to the tip of her cigarette, driving with her elbows.

“We’d head up to the store for beers. Sit in the car and smoke. Felt like we were getting away with something.”

I thought of Tim sleeping alone in his room. I thought of the groan of bedsprings as my mother, fallen asleep again in my bed, rose and made her way back out to the hallway. A white, astringent ball of jealousy bloomed in my stomach.

“I know,” she said. “Leaving Tim behind like that. But it was all separate.”

I gummed the tips of my fingers. Outside, the street and grass were the same orange-grey.

She lifted up her sleeve and pointed to a small, round burn scar, almost star-shaped, on her upper arm. Its surface was pitted with shadows, the skin around it smooth and blue in the light.

“She did that.”

I reached out and touched the scar, tacky and plastic beneath my finger. “Why?”

She laughed under her breath. “Blood brothers.”

She looked at me, but I didn’t understand.

“We had kids young. When we went out it felt like some secret version of ourselves.

Didn’t belong to anyone else. Their initiation, I guess.”

By now we had reached the main road, overhung by trees made copper by the streetlights.

“That place had always felt separate. If I’d returned to bed to find my body still in it, I wouldn’t have been surprised. Did it with our cigarettes. Looked each other in the eye and did it.”

I pictured the two of them, arms linked around each other, cigarettes suspended, their shoulders tensing, eyes watering as the bright red flame touched their skin. I didn’t know what to make of what she’d said. Each of them conjuring some ghost from the other.

“Didn’t feel like a dream after that.”

Caroline raked the ends of her fingernails over her thigh, then smoothed the edge of her shorts.

“Brian, I keep going out like this. Thinking I’ll find her – like she’s hiding. Do you ever feel like that?”

I looked out at the sky burned orange by the light of the city, how shadowless it was, every edge filled in. I watched the blue light framing the edges of my fingers. Sometimes,

when I woke at night, I would watch the shadows move on my wall, and they seemed like a doorway through which any lost thing could return.

“Tim might wake up,” I said. “We should go home.”

The next day I took Tim to the woods. Woods is perhaps an overstatement - just an area of overgrowth at the edge of the neighborhood. We walked the red clay trails, lined with thick walls of brambles and honeysuckle. Prehensile vines stretched from the bushes, bristling with hairs, each one holding a single pod, like a snake caught in the act of reaching. These vines were everywhere, but I've never known what they were called. Sometimes I'd dream of them, spilling from the bush in hordes, filling my nostrils and throat. Tim sliced at them with a stick, cutting them back.

There were trails we knew and trails we didn't, and we lost time walking through clay and dust, the air still, cicadas chattering in the trees. At one point, Tim knelt down by the carcass of a squirrel, half of its face eaten away to the skull. He inspected it, the way he sometimes did, with a total absorption that was a form of tenderness and horror. Tim still had a child's face, soft and open, but in the last year the area around his eyes had grown fatless and feral. He ran his finger along the edge of its fur and then the orbit of the bone surrounding its missing eye, scattering a craze of nits into the air. There was something delicate in his touch that made my stomach sick.

At last, we came to a culvert where a storm tunnel spilled out its contents in a black slick, the remains of a recent series of thunderstorms that seemed to come out of

nowhere, leaving the streets greased and clotted with debris. We clambered down the culvert's white-hot side into the base, and nosed among the clots of newspaper and whitewashed soda cups. The fat, live electric wire buzz of crickets filled the air. Tim found an old walkman, bleached to pink, and pressed the buttons, a tinny sound leaking from the eroded headphones.

The walls of the culvert were so bright your eyes could not take them in, and my gaze came to rest again and again at the entrance to the tunnel, black and graffiti-covered and cool. There it lay under a patch of kudzu and thorns, guarded by a rusted grate long fallen open, and I moved toward it without telling Tim where I was going. When I crouched inside, the air was cool, and the smell was concrete powder and lake water and a sweetness like the underside of a log. Before me, the visible tunnel terminated into a darkness that expanded in all directions.

“What are you doing?” Tim said. “You’ll fall in.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” I said.

My hands moved over a slurry of orange and brown as I worked my way farther in. The light became a grey that wasn’t grey at all, but light and dark swarming like dust in sunlight. When I reached the spot where the light faded altogether, I heard Tim grunt and crawl in behind me.

There was this documentary we watched once about free divers who go down 100, 150 feet without oxygen. They hold their breath and close their eyes and after a certain point, the ocean does the work for them. It carries them down. Now I could feel the sweat

cool on Tim's skin as we made our way in to a space that seemed to fold out from itself. I could feel Tim's mouth go dry, the slickness rise on his skin, the bitterness at the back of his throat. There's something about being together in the dark that makes you not separate at all. There was nothing but the sound of our breath, the slow whitewash of water reflecting from the concrete walls. It formed a kind of rhythm, the cold of my hands against the concrete floor, the warmth of my body as we crawled, the rise and fall of our breath, and we traveled that way without saying a word.

The darkness reminded me, more than anything, of my backyard on summer days, the sky blind with heat. A heat in the grass that was like blackness. Everything radiating while my mother mowed the lawn, the engine's open roar its own darkness. The thick mat of whitened clippings days later when I finally emptied the bag, ripe and decomposed and sharp as fresh grass.

I don't know how far we went before he grabbed my foot and said we shouldn't go any farther.

"We'll get lost," he said. And the way he said it, like it might be true, made my skin grow hot.

There was a thing I used to do, back before, which was to crawl in the warm space behind the couch while my mother did chores. She worked and sang — nothing pretty or complete. Just catches, really - bits of song surfacing and subsiding. She'd come and sit on the sofa, but never gave away she knew I was there. We would sit, both of us, in the still summer afternoon, her magazine pages rustling, the couch sighing and releasing

under her weight. Sometimes I'd fall asleep, waking to the waving drone of the vacuum cleaner, the soft contraction of the building's frame in the waning afternoon.

Now I watched the dark move in and out, the shape of some possible thing beneath its surface. I watched and waited. Down the length of the tube before us, a sound whispered and grew, a swelling hush.

"It's not safe to be down here," Tim said. And then the water was on us.

It came from the darkness in a roar that quickly became silence. It touched my fingertips and traveled over my arms and back and covered my legs. It filled my mouth and wet my hair and stung my eyes and filled all possible space. My body struck Tim's, and my hands beat at walls that offered no purchase, and my face stung with debris. I waited to breathe and my body wanted and wanted, but there was no relief. In my mouth was the taste of silt and algae.

Then the water lowered as quickly as it had risen. The rush moved on behind us, and again there was sound. I coughed and sucked in air, and I listened for Tim, but I heard nothing. I yelled his name, and it skipped and reverberated from the walls, but there was no answer. Then, shadowed against the dim light from the entrance, I saw his body slumped behind me, piled like wet newsprint against the floor.

I crawled over to him. I placed my hand on his shoulder, and I felt the coldness of his wet clothes. He didn't move. I said his name again, but he didn't answer. Then I lowered my ear to his mouth to listen for his breath. I placed my hand on his chest. I waited to feel nothing.

Instead, his chest expanded against my hand, and then his breath warmed my cheek. I realized I hadn't been breathing and let out a sharp breath.

Tim bit my ear between his teeth, and I screamed and he threw me back, and he pinned my shoulders beneath his knees. He pressed his hand against my chin and held my head against the concrete floor. I couldn't see him in the darkness, could only feel his weight and smell the thickness of his breath. His cold arms shook.

"You killed us," he said. He pressed my head back against the hard floor. My ear sang with pain. Water fell from his face onto mine. Did I taste the salt of blood fall from his lips?

His fingers pressed against my cheekbones, and my face felt bruised and warm. I tried to turn my head, but he held it in place. I felt his gaze crack through me, and I let out a long, low moan.

"OK," he said at last, and his voice was not approving or afraid. Then he rose and let me go.

When we arrived back home, Tim's mother was sitting alone in the living room.

"What have you been doing?" she asked, more amused than concerned. She came and knelt before Tim and traced her fingers along the dried blood on his arm, holding his wrist in her hand. I watched with complete absorption, the way her fingers acknowledged the fact of his injury, the way he brightened, proud of her touch, and I waited for her to turn to me, but I was not bleeding, and I had no wounds for her to trace.

She looked at me for an answer. “We fell in a puddle in the woods,” I said, and she didn’t believe me, but Tim nodded his agreement, looking at me and then at the floor.

She brightened, recognizing some shared agreement she did not want to disturb, a loyalty that pleased her, and she didn’t ask me to say any more. She squeezed my shoulder, then kissed Tim on the forehead. “Let’s get you out of those clothes.”

She stripped us bare and sent us to the shower, where we took turns pushing each other out of the thin stream of hot water, the plastic shower liner sticking to our legs. We ate dinner in our pajamas, next to each other at the kitchen table, kicking each other and splattering spaghetti sauce. Caroline laughed, watching us with her leg folded beneath her on the seat of her chair, and the laugh came from some private relief, and the privateness of it made me want to make that laughter over and over again.

After dinner, Tim and I ran around his room, jumping from his bed and rolling on my mattress like paratroopers. We got into a kind of mania, sucking wind and stumbling over each other and laughing, and for a moment I outpaced myself, and it was as it always had been, playing together, without any of the rest of it.

When we were done, we lay down beside each other in his bed. He jumped up and turned out the light, and I was relieved to have him next to me. But soon his breath became heavy and his body grew cool and inert, and I rolled onto my mattress and fell asleep.

When I woke, it was dark and the house had cooled. I pulled my blanket over my head and lay feeling the way my breath wetted the fabric. Then I heard the rumble of the sliding back door.

Downstairs in the kitchen, the door was still open. Caroline was standing out past the broken patio, by the fence that divided our yards. It had begun to rain, and the mist beaded on her hair and shoulders. She was in her nightgown, smoking a cigarette and holding herself around the waist, the elbow of her smoking arm perched on the arm that belted her. Her breath shuddered in the cold. She worked her jaw in slow circles, looking across the fence into my yard, at the dead spot where she and my mother had lain out on sunny days. An enormous elm canopied half the yard, but left this patch where they would drink sun tea and talk while Tim and I played or climbed the elm, my mother yelling at us not to fall on her. Tim and I would lie out on the limbs and let our arms and legs dangle while they talked, the air still and warm. Sometimes my father would join them, and their voices chattered and circled around nothing, laughter growing from some hidden, mysterious thing beneath what they were saying. The gentle flirtation of my parents with Tim's mother, the way they made their family available to her. The three of them in the backyard, the grass beneath their lounge chairs long turned brown.

Now I walked toward Caroline, my feet sinking into the soft ground. Soon my father would return with his bride, and the three of us would move on. Across the fence, my home was dark and locked away. Only the back porch light lit the spot where the chairs had once sat.

One evening the summer before, my mom sat with me in that spot in our yard, when I was supposed to be getting ready for bed. She held me in her lap, with my back against her, her body soft, her breath sweet and yeasty with wine coolers. She didn't say anything, but just held me there, and her hands felt different, tentative, not at all like the mother I knew, but like a girl who dreamed of being a mother, talking to the child she could only imagine. I squirmed in her arms, not liking the way that her closeness suggested the possibility of letting go. But I didn't understand. She held me on that chair in the back yard, and her hands were timid and uncertain, and she tried to introduce me to the part of her that was not my mother, to give me all of her, but she didn't know the words. She said it by the unsureness of her hands.

When I reached Caroline, the rain had begun to darken the shoulders of her robe. There were dark circles under her eyes, the edge of her slip was frayed, and I watched these things as intently as later I might watch a strap fall from a shoulder or the rising of a skirt. She did not turn as she closed her hand around mine. We stood and watched the rain fall on the new-grown grass, the yard already strange and forgetful. Her hand was surprising, soft and cold from the rain. But it was not weak, and it was not a mystery. We knew each other already.

Ted

1.

They were drunk. Carol was married, but had been eyeing Francis since he joined the department. The company took the support staff to a winery as a thank you, and when the time came for toasts, she went on too long about him, cheeks burning. Afterwards, she took him by the hand into the woods and slipped off her underwear, grabbing a gnarled oak. They were going at it pretty good when Ted from accounting appeared, rumbling up the hill, his moon face slack-jawed. His eyes widened with bewilderment and jealousy at this hidden world he'd never experienced. He pointed at them, mute, Francis's pants still around his ankles. When he turned to run back down the hill, Carol panicked and brained him with a rock. When it struck, the sound had a hideous softness. Ted pooled on the ground, something white and pulpous and braided with dark ribbons emerging from his head like hidden oil.

"I don't —" she said. "I don't think I touched him." She stood over him, bewildered, but quivering with a kind of triumph Francis didn't think he could name.

"Keep the rock," he said. "We should go." He stood, trying to catch his breath, scenting the air for a sign of doom he was surprised to find he could not locate. It was late spring. Bees trembled in the warming grass and the wind carried the scent of lavender from the hills.

2.

Ted's only friend, Samantha, was sick the day of the wine trip. It wasn't until the next day, when he did not bring her the cruller they customarily shared, that she thought to call his house. But he was prone to taking days off to work, refurbishing antique, forgotten instruments, hurdy-gurdies and zithers. She had sat there by his side in the contented silence of his room while his hands planed necks and ran resin over bows. When his phone rang and rang, she was not alarmed, but thought of its clamor echoing through his darkened home, the fading notes like a chorus of bells, like harmonics of strings.

3.

The supply closet the next day, 10:15 in the morning. The room was filled with a carbon scent of bond paper and toner that made everything seem blank and crisp and new.

"Can you believe we did that?" Carol asked in an urgent whisper, legs wrapped around Francis's hips.

"No," he said, equally dumbfounded by her nakedness before him, their sudden intimacy. He touched her lips with his fingers; the tips hung over the openness of her mouth. He trembled in the excitement of their double secret.

"Do you think they'll catch us?" she asked, pressing herself against him.

He shook his head, but looked away. He wanted to wrap the dark cocoon of this moment around them, to stretch it out until it became the very definition of time.

Dear God, he thought, what price awaits us for such unexpected sweetness?

4.

Ted's body was found by the winery owner's hound, Beauregard, who had a sinus infection and big, drooping rheumy eyes. The dog scented the ground while the vineyard owner paused on a walk to urinate behind a nearby tree. The dog sniffed the body and stood at stiff attention. When the owner approached, he nudged the body gently with the toe of his boot.

"How'd this happen, old boy?" he said to his beloved dog. "How does this kind of thing happen?"

The dog sniffed wetly, bemused. The grass had begun to yellow along the outline of the body. He was giddy with the smell of wildflower and ripeness. *Who knows why people do the things they do?*

5.

The vineyard owner's wife had died a year to the day before he found Ted's body. She used to trace butterflies on his back in the morning after they woke.

"I need to go," he'd say.

“Give me a minute,” she’d reply. “They need more time to wake up.” Her fingernails tracing delicate curves. The sunlight baking the covers.

6.

Samantha was away at the beach, where she often came to be alone. The surf had been high and it filled the sand with debris. Seaweed rotted in piles. Sand fleas clouded the dunes. To avoid the smell, Samantha continued out until the water struck her knees. Her dress soaked, her feet settling into the sand. Under the fog, the water was opaque, the surf too rough for standing. She spent the morning staggering, unsure of her footing, feeling this was right, though she did not know why.

7.

Samantha had pined for Ted ever since they shared a drunken kiss at the holiday party two years before. Ted, too, counted that kiss among the most exciting moments of his life, but he awoke the next morning bathed in shame. Feeling he had betrayed their friendship, he treated Samantha with a meticulous professionalism, which she mistook for lack of interest. When, late at night, she permitted herself to fantasize of their being together, her skin flushed with embarrassment. That night, while Samantha slept, Ted floated near her. He tuned the clock in the hallway, drew the viola Samantha had played in high school from the closet and loosened the strings, allowing the neck to relax for re-working.

8.

Carol left that night for a run at 9 in the evening. She had been training for a marathon. She thought she would go to Francis's apartment, but she did not remember what his building looked like, and ran in circles under high rises, none of which looked familiar.

She found herself by the train tracks, and ran along them, the rails receding into the darkness. She felt light and dizzy, as if she might tumble from the ground into the darkened sky. The track bed was made of smooth stones that clacked and tinkled as she leapt over them, each step light and effortless. She slipped one in her pocket. Finding its weight comforting, she added two more.

9.

Carol returned after midnight, sweating, the glow from the nighttime lights -- their dim oranges, the reds and pale greens -- somehow still on her skin.

Her husband pulled her to him, smelling her hair, which did not seem like hers. He found himself unusually aroused. When they were finished making love, he felt guilty, as if he had done some disservice to the woman who for years had filled his bed. For her part, without the weight of the past, his skin was sterile, his smell inert. She found the contours of his cheek unappealing now that they had become unfamiliar. When he fell

asleep, she covered his face with her pillow, but then took it back, curling up beside him like a foal.

10.

People wore black armbands around the office. There was a poster with Ted's picture and handwritten tributes. "How could that have happened?" his coworkers asked. "And so close to where we were?" The thrill and terror of it rattled their bones. They chewed doughnuts by the water cooler, powdered sugar raining down on their blackened shoes. "Why Ted?" they said. "What hole opened and chose him and not us?"

11.

When the detective came to conduct his interviews, a nervous thrill ran through the office. "They must know something," Robert from procurement told Francis, a cooling mug of coffee in his hand. He exuded a hardly-contained excitement. "I can't wait to get in there. It's like we're in Law and Order."

The detective called them in, one by one. Francis was surprised to find himself unafraid. He wondered if he had dreamed the whole thing — the death, the affair. Nothing before had seemed so immediate and impossible.

"I don't envy them," he told Robert. "Needing to prepare explanations. What explanation will convince us that death won't come for us?"

Robert took a sip of his tepid coffee and tapped his pencil on his desk. "Like we're in an episode of CSI," he said, his eyes wide.

12.

"I have to confess," Carol said to Detective Mickelson, and his eyes widened only slightly. "This is the most exciting thing that's happened here in some time." She was noticing the way the detective's shirt clung to his chest in the overwarm room.

"Sad, of course," she added.

It was late in the day. He stared at a point in the middle distance behind her shoulder. The same day that his wife had lost her job and that his daughter broke her leg roller skating with her youth group, his house had been visited by an infestation of red-winged blackbirds. They filled the cypress trees, chasing each other in arcs from the heights to their base. The trees were filled to overflowing, the branches dripping and blackened with their weight. Even at night the restless birds chattered and chased each other and crashed against the windows and the walls. Animal control said it was outside of their jurisdiction. The red markings on their wings were beautiful. He did not know what to make of their arrival. The sleeplessness reminded him of his daughter's first year, when he seemed removed entirely from time, and tried in vain to remember himself. His wife spent her days in her bathrobe in the yard, watching the mass swoop over and around her, a cup of steaming tea cooling in her upturned palm, tracing their movements with a single outstretched finger.

“Anything else I can tell you?” Carol asked. “Like I said, I was more than a little tipsy.”

“What? No,” he said. “That will do.”

13.

That night, Carol and Francis met at a seedy hotel. He waited for her in the sordid room, the air conditioner shuddering. Pink neon shone on the curtains. The worn red carpet had a stain in the shape of Massachusetts, and there was a watercolor of a small boy floating a toy sailboat on a pond. He had never been in a place like this before. When he opened the door, she was standing in an overcoat, her eyes gleaming and mischievous. When he took her hand, it felt light and insubstantial. The coat’s pockets were bulging.

“What’s in the jacket?” he asked, but she didn’t answer, pulling him onto the bed on top of her. She found his weight, pinning her to the bed, reassuring.

14.

Sometimes, when Carol achieved orgasm, she remembered the moment when Ted cracked open and something larval leaked out like an offering. The intensity of her orgasm would redouble. At his moment of climax, Francis saw Ted’s face, pale and round, but he wished it away. The way his mouth hung slack at one end disturbed him.

15.

After the hotel, Francis returned home to find Ted's ghost stretched out in his leather La-Z-Boy, eating a plate of bar-b-que ribs. The sauce stained the neck of his gingham bib. In front of him was a chess board, fully set.

"It's late," Ted said, dabbing at his chin with the bib.

"Too late," Francis said, in a way meant to convey remorse, though he could not summon it.

"Nonsense. Never too late for friends," Ted said. He waved at the seat in front of him, reaching out a sauce-smearred hand to grab the King's knight.

16.

The day after the detective's interview, Samantha drew a grid on a clean sheet of paper, on one side the names of her co-workers, on the other categories of suspicion: jealousies, slights to be paid back. A dispute over a cubicle, expenses not reimbursed. None of it made sense. She threw away the paper and left the house.

Outside, the world had been replaced with another slightly askew, familiar and impossible, where Ted was no longer, yet remained close. She went to the coffee shop where they met some Saturdays, half expecting she might see him there. She tried again to review the facts, to find the reason for Ted's disappearance. She chewed over the possibilities, trying to find purchase. She drained her glass in one long drink, the heat almost too much to bear. The drink scoured her throat. Her stomach filled with a comforting pain. She liked that she could pinpoint its location.

17.

The vineyard owner visited his wife's grave with his daughter, a mother of two. She chewed at the edges of her nails. "I need money," she said, and he put his arm around her, thinking she had said she needed mommy. Perhaps she had. Since her mother had died, she had begun talking without noticing, a long litany of fears and desires that poured out whenever they felt like it.

"Of all the days," he said, thinking of Ted's body, and the coldness of his wife's space in the bed, which he still could not sleep on.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing."

She had stopped going to work because she could not make her body go, and the rent was now three months past due.

18.

Carol stared at the wall. It was white and flat. Then all at once she closed her eyes and thrust her fist through it. There was no impact. She knew that this was possible – that atoms could line up just so and things that were material became immaterial. She felt her arm straight out in front of her, passed through the wall, which remained unbroken. Her hand throbbed with pain, but it felt like a memory of pain, or something that had happened to someone else. Her real arm remained unscathed, beyond the wall in some adjacent world. She breathed and punched the wall again.

19.

Carol took a backpack with her the next day when she left for work. She walked and picked up one stone after another, filling the pack until her back strained, until her bones groaned and rooted to the ground.

20.

Samantha let herself into Ted's house, surprised to find it not cordoned off. In his bedroom were a barrel organ and dulcimer under repair, the parts still arranged in a tray by each one. She picked up a piece and then set it back.

Watching Ted those afternoons when they worked on repairs together, she had been entranced by his hands – their strength and gentleness. He worked the tensions of his instruments, applying just the right amount of force — not enough to harm the instrument, but enough to be effective. A gear out of place, a neck warped by moisture and time. He could set anything to balance. People brought Ted their old instruments, not to have them perfected, but, as with all lost, loved things, to have them restored. It took great strength, a comforting strength, she thought, to apply just the right amount of pressure, to retain the essential error that made the instrument its own.

She pulled back the sheets on his neatly-made bed and crawled under them, curling on her side. She closed her eyes, but could not sleep, listening to the hums and buzzes of the house, the way the sounds came and went, how a single tone could make the whole dissonant or harmonious.

21.

An hour after she left, Mickleson entered. He combed through Ted's files, searched his mail. He inspected the half-assembled instruments, none of them looking familiar. "Strange hobby," he said out loud. At home, he did crossword puzzles – a hold-over from his days doing stake-outs. "Time for a bit of detective work," he'd say to his wife, pulling out the Sunday paper. She'd groan.

Picking up a book on the bedside table, a picture fluttered out, of Samantha sitting on a pier, legs dangling over the transparent water, ice cream dribbled down her shirt, a scoop melting on her lap. On her face, the classic, "fuck you for taking this picture" look. Laughter, though, behind it. It was almost a love poem, Mickleson thought, that look.

Right now, his wife was probably sitting, smiling at the contagion of birds circling overhead, their chattering like some primordial code. He lay on Ted's bed and closed his eyes. He was so tired. When he woke, the sunset was on the window shades, turning them a deep russet red.

22.

Ted had gone to the famous lake that summer because there was a conference nearby on refurbishing antiques. Samantha had happened to be there for a solo vacation. They ran into each other outside of his hotel and spent the afternoon together. He discovered her affinity for pistachio ice cream. "You're full of mysteries," he said, and

she laughed. They walked together to the pier, where teenagers were jumping into the frigid water. "What if we joined them?" he said, and she looked at him, genuinely surprised. He kept staring at the hair that hung around her neck, wanting to brush it back. And then, the moment before he laughed nervously and changed the subject, she said, "I only swim in the nude."

23.

The moment Ted's soul passed from his body, Samantha stirred from her fevered nap, and called for her childhood cat, who she thought had run across her chest. She worried the cat, long dead, would be lost forever. In New York, a man, entranced, followed a dancing scatter of leaves into an alley, but, feeling a sudden foreboding, turned back to the main street. Halfway across the world, a child woke from dreaming and screamed and screamed, but her body was frozen. It made no sound.

24.

The grass where Ted's body had fallen grew brittle and tan. The earth beneath it tittered with worms and beetles. Overhead, stars passed once and then again, rotating into place, like the pieces of a mechanical toy. Beauregard returned here day after day, following the scent of decay wound into the ground. "I wish you'd leave it alone," the winery owner would say to the dog, as if there were any way of forgetting, of ignoring the signs of what had once been, of being drawn back, again and again, to its richness.

25.

Carol walked the neighborhood after dinner, the sky an anodyne purple. The backpack rattled on her back. Beside a flower bed, she found a track of gravel. She placed one piece in her mouth, and then another, her tongue aroused by their jagged edges, the taste of metal and dirt, the way they numbed her tongue. She rolled them in her mouth like candies and swallowed.

26.

Samantha noticed the practiced space between Carol and Francis when they spoke in the office, the way they no longer mingled flirtatiously by the water cooler. The way Francis still followed her with his eyes as she left, their desks always empty at the same time.

27.

Night after night, Francis played chess with Ted's ghost, always winning. Always. *I should let him win*, he would think. *I should let him have this one.*

28.

One time when Carol was a girl, she picked a flower from the sidewalk. It was purple with golden edges. She told herself she picked it because it was beautiful. But

later she realized she had taken it because it was brazen. It had no place growing in the concrete like that. She stuffed it in a book and placed it at the side of her bed, where it dried and preserved. She peeked at it from time to time, picking up the fragile petals gingerly with a corner of her pinky. Then it sat forgotten, folded into the abandoned book on her childhood bookshelf. One day when she was a teenager, she hurled the book at her mother during an argument. The flower fluttered out, disintegrating into dust as the book hurtled through the air.

29.

When Detective Mickleson was a boy, he was offered a ride home by a stranger who locked the doors and drove him around town for an hour. Mickleson kept his hand on the door handle the entire time, ready to jump, but never did. The whole thing seemed a trapdoor he'd unexpectedly sprung. When the man (really a boy, now that he thinks of it – light blond stubble, long hair, a cheap car a kid would own) dropped him at a corner near his home and sped away, Mickleson didn't think to memorize the license plate. All he could say about the car later was that it was brown.

For a while, they drove through the woods near his home, the leaves above dark green, the monotony of tree trunks speeding past like a film on loop. The car was meticulously clean. He did not know how the bond with his old life could be broken so easily. He kept seeing his father in the trees, in the shadow space that repeated, trunk after trunk, stretching from the road into that room of mirrors where nothing was ever

new again, in which you could be forever lost, unable to return to the place where you once lived.

30.

On several occasions, Francis's mother took him to pagan ceremonies in the woods. The congregants wore robes and antlered crowns and danced with bells around their ankles. The forest was soft and wet, the air filled with mist. Strapped to his mother's chest, his breath bloomed in the fall cool. Warmth and cold, his mother's ruddy face close, with its familiar veins and mother smell. The torch light blurred as she spun and spun, lifting up and dancing. She held her hand against his back to keep him from falling, from spinning free and flying off into the wolf-filled night.

31.

Carol's throat swelled. Her tonsils grew, coated in white. All day, she placed the ragged stones in her mouth and swallowed. She swallowed again and again. She squirmed in the novelty of her disloyal, transforming body, the way it became foreign and extraordinary, like a lover who does something entirely unexpected, hurtful even, and becomes again new, desirable, capable of inciting passion.

32.

Francis visited the used bookstore and picked up a chess tutorial, which he left pointedly around the house when he was gone.

33.

Preparing to see Francis again, Carol sat in front of the mirror. She whitened her face. She covered her lips in bright red lipstick. When she reached for the earrings, the ones she wore that day to the vineyard, she realized one was missing.

34.

Ted moved his knight, simultaneously threatening Francis's rook and queen — Francis must choose which to lose. Ted could hardly contain his excitement. He looked ready to burst into laughter, shifting back and forth on his seat, sitting on his hands.

“Why don't you turn her in?” Ted said. “You didn't do anything. You were just a bystander.”

Francis stared at the board before him. He sighed and took the threatening knight with his bishop. “You didn't protect it,” Francis said.

“She would turn you in,” Ted said.

“I know.”

Ted smiled knowingly. “Sometimes you have to make a sacrifice.” He moved his queen and called out “Checkmate.”

35.

Francis took Ted's queen.

“Oh, ha!” Ted laughed. “Guess I didn't protect that one either.”

36.

Samantha drove herself to the vineyard. She drank wine at the tasting bar. She talked to the vineyard owner, whose face was ruddy and soft and detached. At last she revealed why she was there. The two of them walked up through chaparral and dried growth to the spot where Ted had died. Beauregard nosed ahead of them, gumming at mushrooms.

“Your boyfriend?” the winery owner said.

“Something like that.”

She nudged the leaves away with her toe, looked under neighboring bushes for some clue. There was still a discolored patch where Ted’s body had lain. But the ground offered nothing. Finally, she propped herself against a neighboring tree and began to sob. Through the refracted screen of her tears, she thought she saw a glitter of light on the ground, but when she bent over, she found nothing.

37.

When Carol had grabbed the tree that day at the vineyard and Francis took her by the waist, his hands were rougher than she thought they would be. Both he and herself were a surprise. In the middle, she thought of her husband, of an afternoon when they were younger – her straddling him under a tree on a summer afternoon, wanting this to be proof of something about them, about who they were to each other. But even at the time

it did not feel like proof. It felt like something they were doing. It was a relief now to break everything that had been so scrupulously preserved. Some part of her that had never been in the world had now reshaped it. When Ted appeared, and it acted, she felt sorrow, but a dream sorrow, separate.

38.

The week before, Ted had set the hurdy-gurdy's wheel in motion, producing a low, ragged tone. "People stop noticing after a while," he said, "but the drone's always there, beneath the notes." Samantha closed her eyes and listened as it grew louder and vibrated in her chest, the bottom seeming to drop out of the room. "That's what I like about it. That darkness always threatening to swallow everything up." He said this to her, their legs almost touching on the bench.

"It seems hungry," she said.

"Don't worry. I won't let it get you."

39.

Detective Mickelson walked with the vineyard owner and his daughter through the grove where Ted had died. The daughter was pale; she clutched herself for warmth in the middle of the day.

"Must be satisfying, solving mysteries," the vineyard owner said.

The detective frowned and mumbled something the daughter couldn't hear. She smiled. She liked this detective. They both knew what answers did for you.

When she saw the glint of the diamond beneath the blackened mushrooms, she felt a knot loosen in her stomach, the way it would when her mother plaited her hair at the end of a long day.

“Wonder what to make of this?” she said, and when the detective saw it his face hollowed, as if already disappointed, and she felt not alone.

40.

A thing was outside its time, but you still knew how to fix it. You fiddled at it, trying to put it back in place, but nothing worked. Sometimes you needed a catastrophic fix. You broke the neck. You crushed the bridge. Once it was broken, it all became easy.

41.

Carol visited Ted’s desk. Flowers, new and wilted, crowded the desk. Photos, mostly with Ted in the background, were posted with scotch tape. She tried to remember what he looked like, but could remember nothing concrete. The one picture in which he was featured, front and center, was with Samantha, the two of them sitting at the end of a pier, the sparkling blue of a lake behind them. Their shoulders almost touching, but not quite. Just above the picture, next to a handwritten note, was a single diamond earring.

42.

In one room, a butterfly made from paperclips. In another, the frayed ends of copper wire arranged into a floral bouquet. Samantha walked her apartment and found her bookshelves straightened, the spotty wifi network working again. Propped on the corner of her couch was the viola she had not played since her college years. She screamed and covered her mouth.

43.

Ted had moved his bishop idiotically to the center of the board, where Francis could take it with any of three pieces. He could make no sense of it.

“What are you trying to teach me?” Francis yelled at Ted, out of frustration.

“Teach you?” Ted said. “I didn’t pick this game. You think the ghost gets to pick how you’re haunted?”

44.

“You wanted to meet?” Carol was standing outside Samantha’s door. Her cheeks were sunken, her face swollen. Still, she had the shimmering insubstantiality of an angel or ghost, Samantha thought. As if she had been shorn of all earthly detriments.

Samantha stared back blankly, her face pale. Behind her, spread out on her white pine dining room table, was a Ouija board.

Carol raised an eyebrow. Samantha grabbed her by the hand, pulling her out the door.

“Come with me.”

45.

“The point is,” Ted said. “I’m not haunting *you*. We’re all haunting each other.” He was driving Francis’s car, screeching around a turn. When Samantha had touched Carol’s hand, Ted had felt a pull, lightly insistent. He had turned to Francis. “Time to go.”

Francis gripped the door handle, his body rigid.

“You know, one of us could still lose his life here,” he said.

“Like I’m supposed to feel sorry for *you*?” Ted replied.

46.

When Carol had dreamt of the field, the terrain was pregnant, breathing. Now it was dormant. Dry grass and motionless leaves. It made her dizzy.

“So we just wait here?” she asked Samantha.

“You think I know what’s going on?”

Carol’s eyes traveled over the spot where Ted had lain. She walked and knelt beside it. She reached her hand into the dirt, cupped it and placed it in her mouth, pungent, metal, rich. The dirt dribbled from the corners of her mouth.

“Cut that out,” Samantha said.

“Sorry.”

47.

Ted and Francis climbed from the parking lot, picking their way up a hill covered with eucalyptus leaves. When Ted walked into the clearing, a cluster of bats flew from the trees and circled overhead.

“Ah,” he said. “Dramatic.”

48.

Samantha ran immediately to him.

“I can’t touch you,” she said. Her fingers traveling along the outline of where his cheek should be. She kept her eyes away from the long cleft along his skull, its jagged outline.

He shook his head. “No.”

49.

Carol watched the two of them. Ted looked from Samantha to Carol.

Mickleton stepped from the shadows. “I’ll bet you’re wondering why I called this meeting,” he said.

50.

Francis did not know entirely why he ran and grabbed the detective. "You're as dumb as I thought," Mickleson said, struggling with the young man, who, it turned out, was stronger than he thought.

51.

Carol could have run away. She knew in fact that she had already escaped all that could bind her if she was willing to pay the price. But instead she ran across the clearing to where Ted and Samantha stood. She reached her hand out toward the man she had killed. When she touched him, she felt herself empty. When Ted entered her body, Carol felt sodden, rooted, with all the weight of guilt and consequence. It filled her with relief.

52.

Ted nodded Carol's unfamiliar head. He placed this new hand on Samantha's cheek. When he pressed his lips against hers, he felt her breath soften.

"Wow," Samantha said.

"Wow," Ted said.

"Wow," said Carol.

53.

Like taking off your life jacket. Releasing. Your body suddenly buoyant on its own. Though not as buoyant as you might have thought. Your natural place some space below the surface, the light above you bent as through marbled glass.

54.

Always that moment. Always present. Always lost.

55.

Beyond the clearing, the wind grew loud. Beauregard snuffled in his sleep, swatted his paw at some invisible quarry, then lay softly breathing by the vineyard owner's side.

56.

At last Carol could not hold him. Ted felt himself released, at last able to move. Carol slackened and fell at Samantha's feet. Mickleson and Francis ran to her at the same time. When Francis bent over to resuscitate her, she opened her eyes. "You're a sweet boy," she said, placing her hands on his cheeks. Then to the detective, "You can take me now."

57.

Samantha stayed behind as the two men walked Carol down the hill. Above, the moon was as if fixed in glass. She waited. She closed her eyes. Nothing moved. She knew that Ted was there no longer, but she waited still. Then the wind stirred the leaves and she went on.

58.

When Detective Mickleson went home, he found the blackbirds on his roof, all staring toward the sunrise in the East. His wife was in the backyard, and he sat next to her.

“Frankie is at her friend’s house,” she said.

“Good,” he said, and took her hand.

The birds were silhouetted against the reddening sky. Mickleson and his wife watched them together. One by one, they climbed away toward the horizon and the growing light. Then all at once, they turned and swarmed around them, a latticework of blackened wings blotting out all that could be seen. In the dark, their beating wings, their faint heartbeats circled. Then they loosened and cracked. Red light leaked between their wings. They flew past and dispersed and were gone. As if they had never come. The yard did not even contain the echo of their screams.

Ohio

I don't know the story; it's told to me by your second wife. It's after your second funeral, at your mother's house, where you would bring my sister and me for summers and holidays. The attendees at the first funeral knew you only as a blank and genial man fighting a terrible disease. But here, I'm surrounded by family and childhood friends -- the people who knew who you were before your mind began to fade. They tell the stories that I will never get to ask you about, that fill the great blankness of all you did not tell me when I was a child.

She tells the story to your childhood best friend, smiling at him conspiratorially as she displays it before me. She means it as a kind of ownership, as if there is a version of you that precedes me and can never be mine. But of course she's wrong. All of it is mine. So I make all the details my own.

It's June and you're hitchhiking on a two-lane highway in Ohio. Stalks of grass peek out from wooden farm fences. Haze rises from the blacktop under a sky filled with fat, derelict clouds. The drone of crickets has the edge of a bandsaw. Every swig from the soda bottle you filled with water is sweet relief. All of it alone - not a car in sight. All of it a dream, and so all times at once. There are no shadows anywhere on the road.

You're twenty when it happens, she says, the man from the pictures, all sideburns and challenging stares. But I don't know that man, so in my version your hair's cut close and your glasses are square and you're smiling and whistling as you walk, some bright

and edgeless Beach Boys tune. You skip your steps. You kick stones down the dusty, grass-strewn strip at the side of the roadway. You're wearing Velcro shoes and a Mickey Mouse t-shirt tucked into pleated shorts. I put these things there — the things that I remember — because you carried them inside you, coiled tight like a fern in the first light of the morning: to marry and carry children on your shoulders, to grow old early and die and leave behind you a rift of unknowing.

From behind, the hum of a Ford Fairlane vibrates the air, violent as a furnace. Headlights shimmer in the haze. You stop and stick out your thumb, shoveling a last handful of peanuts into your mouth. The car pulls closer and slows, only half of it fitting on the narrow shoulder.

The woman behind the wheel is wearing a tan, short-sleeved dress with purple dots or flowers, and her hair is wind-blown and streaked with grey. In the back seat, there is a children's book and a baseball glove. When you get on the road she offers you a butterscotch candy, and you start to tell her about where you're from and where you're going, to prove that you're a person. She accepts this like payment that wasn't necessary, with a shrug. There are razor nicks on her legs and her fingers are yellow and her face is lined and dry. But when the wind moves her hair and reveals the curve of her neck, you think if she treats you like a son, it'll kill you.

You're not far down the road when the woman says it's late and asks if you'd like to have some dinner. You nod with gratitude. Her house, when you get there, is still and

warm. Flecks of dust float without moving. There's a half-empty bowl of cat food, but you don't see the animal anywhere. She makes a dinner of spaghetti and salad and wine from a bottle she digs from the cupboard. Reddening sunlight leaks in from the windows. When she turns on the light overhead, the room does not grow brighter.

In the movies you've seen, she'd be lonely. She'd be a ghost rising up from the open landscape and pulling you into her self-haunting. But that isn't how this is working. You're part of a game she's playing with herself. When you ask about her son, she smiles in a way that says that you do not need to know her that well.

When we get to the part that your second wife relays with a prurient gleam, the part where the woman takes you by the hand and pulls you gently down the hallway to her room, your body vibrates with surprise and anticipation. You pause at the edge of her doorway, feeling the ache of an object waiting to be known.

I listen to the story in the house where you grew up, where my sister and I listened to the murmur of your siblings at the table in the next room, recounting a past that seemed entirely foreign. I fill in the details until their weight dissolves the boundary between that day and this, and you can feel my watchfulness like a premonition.

You look for something in the woman's eye, but the source of the feeling isn't there. She kisses you on the cheek. You walk through the doorway to her room. Then you are covered again in the cloak of your own private separateness, and you are gone.

Esprit de Corps

The house for the exorcism of children is filled with terrible sounds, but the sights are nothing unusual. The setting is clinical, like an average urban hospital. The walls are white washed, the hallways clean. For all the languid moans, the black laughter, the throats straining to let out a voice not their own, what gets you is there are teddy bears painted on the walls, toys in the hallway. Nurses carry trays of vibrant jello in tiny little cups.

I live here in the bodies of children. Now a young girl. Now an eight-year-old boy with red hair and freckles. In the mirror is a face. It is sunken and worn. It always surprises me, how much it feels like mine but is not mine. I reach my fingers – their fingers – to their faces to comfort them, but it only makes things worse. I see the flame of fear buried in these eyes that seem my own. I look away and try to bury my shame.

When I am strong, the body belongs to me. I pour out through every sinew and crackling terminal of nerves. The body shouts, and it is me shouting. It jumps, and I feel my weight fly free. I smile. I laugh. But the face is still haunted in the mirror.

When the doctors administer their cures, I turn thin and featureless in a place that is not a place, where time has no meaning. I leave and I come back. I find another body. I begin it all again. But here. It is always here.

The first time, I woke up in a brown haired twelve-year-old girl. It was raining and dark and I yelped, feeling the rain on my face as if for the first time. It was the first way the parents knew something was wrong, because I laid her body down in the gutter and let the black runoff roll over me, howling with laughter, arms and legs flailing like a cockroach: Alive, alive, alive! The mother's eyes grew wide. Later they bathed me and wrapped me in warm towels, and even though I knew it was not for me, I howled again, my voice a bellows of gratitude. I jumped right up and kissed them on the lips. They brought me to the house the next day.

Is there a reason I do not leave? Why I do not fly off to that promised somewhere we are all supposed to go? Sometimes I see the others being wheeled down the halls, and I'll say to them, confidentially, as we pass, "What is the meaning of this?" And we laugh and laugh at this private joke between us.

Newbies arrive all the time, fresh from the outside, faces manic and happy. Some leave as quickly as they arrive. The doctors unhinge them from their borrowed bodies and send them on their way, never to return. While the rest of us remain, finding ourselves again and again in children who came here for relief, who thought they were free. Is it something the doctors do to the bodies, some imperfect intervention? Their hands are sure, but how crudely must they understand what they are dealing with, what frailty of the body allows this. All I know is there are always more of us. Gathering here, stressing the rafters.

Among the occupiers, we maintain a certain esprit de corps. Someone gives the signal and we all bay in unison, giving it all we've got. Just to hear the windows trembling, just to feel that invisible power. Sometimes we call out Marco Polo as we're wheeled down the hallways, searching for each other, blind.

Here is the source of every good practical joke here: the staff are never quite sure who they're dealing with. I was always a good mimic. My sisters would gather around, and I would savage our drunken uncle, the stuttering schoolteacher, the risible monotone of our schoolmate, obliterated by her father's death. "More! More!" they would shout, and I would oblige, only years later feeling the shame of my cruelty. Now it is a talent that helps pass the time. I match my host's intonations, the timing of his pleading gaze, her grasping at their arms for comfort. And when the nurses are convinced, when they cannot help themselves and have reached out to smooth the sweat-caked hair on my brow, I will grab their buttocks or whisper in their ears that they are no different than I, that they will be driven from the body they think is their own. Then I laugh and let my voice grow wild, thrilling to the terror shaking on their skin.

But not always. Sometimes I stay quiet and feel the softness of their hands, their breath on my cheek. I sit there, still, afraid of breaking the spell.

Do I sound self-pitying? Perhaps I am. But do I not have the right? Me, stuck here, lost, and what's more always the bad guy. Ultimately, am I not a person like any other? I'm asking. I don't know.

I feel terribly for the children. It is too much to share your body with another soul. I feel the strain of our shared space. I rub elbows with their pain and confusion and fright. *What kind of place is this?* I always wonder. *Where children must endure this.* But my real sympathies are with the occupiers. One time, they're wheeling me down the hall, arms strapped to the chair, and I have had enough of being the interloper, of having no home of my own. As we pass by this maybe ten-year-old kid, I lean over and whisper into his quivering face, "You and I are the same. We thought we were whole, but we are broken, and you will never feel whole again." And the kid just nods with a kind of grim understanding and I make it another five feet before he bursts into tears. Was that wrong? Was it cruel? Yes, I admit it. But it was true.

When the doctors lay their hands on this body that is mine and is not mine and administer their treatments, sometimes I flail and scream. I hold on and struggle. Other times I feel cool relief, like fingers applying a salve, and it is a comfort to let go.

Except one time I'm in the late stages of treatment, barely hanging on, the din of the doctors' instruments reaching a crescendo. I can feel myself slipping out of the pale, wasted body of a red-haired boy into that dim, empty place between places where time stands still. The doctors have me pinned down. Their hot breath covers me like a cloud. And then a loose strap, a misplaced syringe, a window left ajar. And just like that I'm straddling the window frame with my bare foot in the grass, the tingle of a fall wind blowing up my gown, slashing the syringe with my best swashbuckler smile while the orderlies look on, unsure what to do. Then my other leg's flying over, and I'm stepping

back onto the grass with my thin boy limbs as the high alarm bells clatter in the field. I'm running for the fence, trying to make it, laughing with high echoing abandon, sodden leaves under my feet, the smell of wood fires in the air, the sky a blue so pure it's almost black. Cold wind in my lungs and this tiny body thrumming in the late fall air, with the wind blowing the hair back from my head. I do not know what is out there, beyond the borders of this place, but I run. I run for my life. And as I feel the ignorant meat of the orderlies' arms wrap around my legs, I fall on the brittle grass laughing, my eyes watering and sides shaking, hanging on to it, hanging on to whatever life this is, screaming to the white coats piling on top of me, like it's a joke, "What kind of God would plan this?"

Meredith1

The thing that disoriented Jason the most wasn't that he had a seven-year-old daughter, or the incredibly poor timing of meeting her now, with so little time left, but that she looked so much like him. And not just in her features, though her eyes gave him the unsettling feeling of seeing his reflection move of its own accord. She stared back at him across the table with the same look of placid acceptance — of almost disregard for him — that had angered any number of his past girlfriends. She pursed her lips together the same way he did, knew as he did the importance of precision. When he'd told her it was noon, she'd corrected him, and told him it was 11:58. Even the waitress who seated them, who seemed at first to sense something off about him being with her, eased after only a few steps, seeing a deep-rooted similarity that satisfied her. He was sitting across from some part of himself, and the effect was unnerving. There, in that booth, another soul had taken part of him for herself.

The girl, Meredith, put her head down and took a long drink from her milkshake. Meredith was his grandmother's name. He couldn't remember if he had told her mother that when they were together, and it was troubling either way — either because she had chosen to mark this girl with this connection to him, or because she had marked her without knowing. Now, this girl named Meredith looked up from her drink and took him in without self-awareness or apology.

He tried to think of a question that would help them — that would explain what they were doing here, and what they were to do with each other now.

“How’s the milkshake?” he said.

“Good,” she said. She drummed her feet against the booth and placed her finger over the end of her straw, lifting it up and letting the contents dribble into the glass. She sucked a dot of milkshake from her fingertip and looked out the window.

“I saw they use real ice cream,” he said. “I always like when they do that. None of this milkshake in a box shit.”

She looked at him and then off behind him, to the jukebox.

“Sorry,” he said. “That was a bad word. I don’t know what difference it makes, or why some of these words are OK and some aren’t, and grownups can say them but kids can’t. But I think let’s just be safe and don’t, OK?”

“Mom says bad words are just words,” she said.

He nodded. “Right. Of course.” An older couple came in with what looked like their grandson and the hostess gave the kid a paper menu and crayons. Should he have asked for crayons? The grandson looked pretty happy about them. Too late now, probably.

“You like hiking? I thought we’d go hiking. Maybe over at the point? I like to get out and get some fresh air. Seems like people spend all their time indoors these days.”

She shrugged, taking another drink from her milkshake. "OK. I like hiking."

"You do?"

"Mom likes to take me when I'm not in school."

The server returned with two burgers and fries, smiling at him with either encouragement or pity. Meredith picked up a bright green slice of pickle and folded it in half, then popped it in her mouth. She chewed it over slowly.

"You don't want to put those on the burger?"

"I like them separate."

"I like to pile up everything on my burger. Fries too." He stacked the toppings and fries on his burger, then pressed the bun on top, waving his hand to display his creation. "People act like you can't put fries on a burger, but I mean, they end up in the same place, right?"

She laughed but didn't follow suit. "Mommy says it's OK to eat the veggies first."

"Of course. Yeah, of course it is. I wasn't trying to say you can't do it that way. Pickles are good on a burger is all I'm saying."

She picked up a slice of tomato and started nibbling around the outside. Then she took a long drink from the milkshake.

"Mommy says you live in someone else's house."

“I guess that’s right. But they’ve been gone a long time.”

“Are they coming back?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Why are you living in someone else’s house?”

“I want to learn more about them. For my job.”

“Why don’t you get a different job and get your own house? That’s what mommy did.”

“Did she?”

“When I grow up, I’m going to be a veterinarian. Mom takes me over to help at the animal shelter sometimes. I could probably do it for a job already, but no one ever thinks you can do anything when you’re a kid. But you can do whatever you want. You just have to have willpower.”

“Is that something your mom says?”

“She says you can do anything with enough willpower. And chocolate.”

“I’ll bet you have plenty of that. Willpower that is.”

She looked at him in a noncommittal way, like this was one of those things grownups said that you didn’t need to bother responding to because it was a request for something

you couldn't give them. It was disconcerting how children stopped talking whenever they were done, and considered that everything was over, even if something was still pending, even if there was something more to say.

Feeling his self-assurance slipping away, he decided to launch into a lecture. He picked up a ketchup bottle.

"I'm going to try to teach you something. Because I think you're a smart kid. It's about this bottle."

She looked at the bottle, legs still moving against the booth, bottom lip stuck out.

"You have to think about things. About where they come from and what went into them. Because if you don't think about things, and you just take them for granted, your life, other people's lives, the whole world can get tangled up in stuff that's not important."

He held the bottle out between his hands, parallel to the table.

"There were probably a couple hundred people invested their lives in getting this bottle here. Whole factories full of people smashing tomatoes in giant metal vats. Big conveyor belts with bottle after bottle. Lives, whole lives, that just ended up part of a big pointless machine to feed fat lonely people who probably get up every day and do something equally pointless. You get what I'm saying?"

She looked at the bottle and up at him.

“Mom said you’d be weird.”

2

That morning, Jason had woken up with his back hurting, curled up in the abandoned compound on the California coast that was now his home. The grey-blue light from the window hung over him. He stretched out on his back and waited for the urge to move, though it took some time. The last remnants of his dreams held on, and he was not yet in the world. He stood up slowly, opening and closing his hands in the cold. Bent-backed, balanced on one leg and then the other, he pulled on his pants and shoes. He pulled an apple from his pack and stood against the wall in the early light, the apple’s juice cold and sweet in the wet, unwelcoming morning. On the far side of the room, Thad and Emma lay in dark lumps on their mattresses.

The details of the compound had become familiar: its pooling shadows and dry pine smell and everlasting cold. On the ceiling, there was a dark patch in the shape of a dog, and there was a fireplace that they lit most nights.

The place had once belonged to a transpersonal psychology commune, their pictures on the walls of the library where he slept, left there through some combination of neglect and a kind of code of honor among the ghost hunters and teenaged make-out artists who visited the place. A muscular, wind-tanned man with white hair and laughing eyes. A chorus of women, young and old, singing around the fire pit that now lay ruined and graffiti’d in the courtyard. The children, laughing and clear-eyed, running on the bluffs,

picking starfish from the tide pools, or dangling radishes from their muddy hands, eyes gleaming.

One day, they drowned themselves in the sea. Every last one of them. Jason always pictured them holding hands.

Jason bent over and picked up the journal that lay by his cot, which he had read as he fell asleep. He and Thad and Emma had carted them in by the box-load. On the pages, charts, instructions, lines superimposed on the terrain. There was talk of the coming gateway. Heaven. Oneness. There was no trace of remorse.

He threw the journal in his backpack and walked outside, through the weed-strewn courtyard, past the barracks and the dining hall. The fire pit where the commune members had run circles in woolen robes and drunk whiskey while the children danced and flashed their hands over the flames.

The cool light of morning just coming over the mountains to the east silvered the tips of the beach grass on either side of the trail as he walked toward the forest of twisted manzanita and madrone, fir and lodgepole pine that framed the compound. He shivered as he walked, but there was a membrane drawn between him and his body. The wind shuffled the grass in the growing light, the pinks and greens of sunrise spilled over the clouds, and every visible thing gained its meaning by pointing to something that lay beyond it. Beneath the surface of the sea at the end of the compound, a congregation of

shipwrecks, the drowned bodies of the commune members, the doorway to another world.

The wind made trails in the waving grass, where the commune's children had once run between the rising stalks. In the early winter, after the last fogless days of indian summer, they ran goose pimpled and naked through the sandy breaks in the grass, the cold like a second skin, unnoticed until later, as they melted into their parents' laps by the fire in the main hall. The children moved so close to the ground. They knew the hidden places of crabs and limpets, anemone and starfish. They walked a hidden terrain, punctuated by secret tracks, precious shells and driftwood finds, caverns in the rock small enough they could only fit a child's body. They were close enough to the sand on the beach to see its striated colors and textures, stones in miniature. They were the first to notice the lights dancing in the tide pools, the sounds coming from the caverns in the bluff, to see the lambent firefly glow in the darkness at the tops of the trees.

Weeks before, Jason had arrived at the compound with Thad and Emma in a rust-orange pickup. They rattled down the steep, rutted road from the highway, Emma sitting in the bed of the truck, leaned against her backpack, boots crossed one over the other. Thad, with his wild red hair, was chewing on a piece of grass, which was an affectation, like many of his others, that they'd learned to put up with.

Below them, three squat buildings: a barracks, dining hall, and library. The land between the buildings was overgrown with tan grass that edged into a flat plain that ended at the sea. When they reached the base of the hill, the buildings were sodden and worn. The courtyard, blackened with soot, gathered sound like an empty glass — the whistle of wind, the rush of the waves — and turned it to a hollow drone.

Years ago, Jason had been here with Meredith's mother, Mary, on a lark from the farm they both were working for the summer, two of a group of college kids out to get their hands dirty. Mary kept brushing her hair from her face, watching him in their new togetherness. When he caught her, she smirked and walked ahead, putting more distance between him and the part of her he'd seen. They peered through the windows, half hoping to catch shadows moving, but saw only empty beds and unused tables.

"This it?" Thad said. Jason looked around him, every detail different from his memory, but indisputably true. The road longer than he remembered. A copse of small trees in the flat where before there had been only grass.

"This is it."

They made their way to the barracks, whose door stood open, letting a wedge of light into the dark room. There, on the cots, were the commune's abandoned mattresses, blooming with mold. They covered their faces and walked outside.

They laughed, though, when they entered the library. Light filtered through the uncracked windows. The floors were planed and flat. The air was clean and clear and

filled with the toasted sauna smell of dry wood. There was a small stage at one end, and bookshelves built around the exterior. In the middle was a row of handmade tables, the joints perfectly aligned. The room had the airy lightness of a retreat. They half expected someone to greet them.

“Home sweet home,” Emma said.

Now Jason entered the blue-lighted woods, where two birds called like a see saw rising and falling. His feet rustled through damp-blackened piles of debris as he gathered branches in the dim and waking woods. He needed long ones - six, seven feet, hardwoods not yet covered in moss or gone soft, and smaller ones, wet and pliable. The first three he lashed together into a sled, and then he lumped more on top, dragging them in piles to the beach below the bluff, to the spot marked in the journal he carried with him. On the following pages, sketches: strange semi-circular gates with sticks arrayed like a mess of teeth, interlocking nests of wood, latticeworks. Next to them instructions in a precise hand, dimensions noted, steps in order. The notes of an engineer.

Several of the structures stood already where Jason and the others had reconstructed them, near piles of wood that could be ruins. He sat in the cool sand and took twine from his bag and got to work on a new monument as the light turned the grey sea green. His feet sank in the sand, the beach quiet and empty. He worked the wood into position, folding over and under, forming a nest around a dark hole. Weaving the sticks made his

fingers bleed. The wind and fog worked their way into his knuckles and made them soft and easily abraded. He sucked the blood from the smooth pink lacerations and continued working, watching the darkened wood bend into shape, the light growing on the water.

He wondered if, when the time came, the commune members had to hold each other down. Their breath steaming as they stood in the frigid water, the soft meringue of foam on its surface. Singing to give themselves courage. Even the children, they must have held them down. Where did they find the strength?

Down the beach, a pack of ravens was hounding a wounded sea bird, pecking at its wing and tail. Its belly was matted and patched with wet sand. The bird only had a few feet to go to reach the water, but they were wearing it down. Jason threw a shell at one of the ravens, who flapped and retreated, but the circle persisted, closing in.

He imagined Meredith, the daughter he'd just met, looking over the construction with curiosity, reaching out to grab the woven sticks.

“Are you building a fort?” she said.

“I’m opening the gates of heaven,” he said, and then laughed. You saw a man on the street building his tinfoil monuments and you kept your distance. And yet here he was.

The ravens closed in on the bird again and he dropped his work and ran at them. They flapped a modest retreat, but came back to rest on the sand, waiting for him to move on.

“Go on,” he said to the bird, but it sat there, its sides fluttering with the effort to breathe. When he picked it up, its feathers were slick and cool. It had the frailty of a sick thing enclosed, ready to ooze out, tacky and ripe in his hands. He placed it in the water, where it floated disinterestedly, making no effort to swim to safety. Then he picked it up and walked out to where the waves hit his waist, making his stomach tighten with cold. Again, he let the bird go, but it did nothing. The fog was breaking, the sky behind it depthless and pink and white. “Move,” he said. “Move.” It enraged him, the way it seemed to have given up. He wrapped his hands tight around the bird, and he plunged it beneath the surface, holding it there, where it barely moved. “What’s wrong with you?” he said. Thin bubbles rose from its mouth and feathers. He held it down, feeling it grow smaller within his hands. The water growing light in the rising sun. The songs the people had sung. The warmth of their hands, pulling each other down. He felt himself grow light as the bird’s movements grew smaller still.

Then the bird shuddered and stretched beneath the water. Its wings swam and flailed beneath the surface, its eyes wide with panic. It broke free from his hands, and its face turned toward the air and its body crested and rose from the surface. For a moment, it floated before him, its white wings fluttering. Then it rose into the brightening sky and was gone.

After lunch, Jason and Meredith drove up the coast to the spot he'd picked for their hike, the slope of the seaside hills growing more severe. Above them, cattle clung to the steep hillside, patiently chewing, while below, the road fell away to sand-blown cliffs and the endless rush of the Pacific Ocean. Breakers rolled in long, unbroken sets, their rushing sound muffled by the roar of wind and rattle of the truck as they drove. He never got used to it, the way the land ended abruptly and plunged toward the sea, the stubbornness with which they confronted each other.

Now he was holding her hand. The stairs to the bluff were steep and the rope handrail had been broken and useless in one section. He was surprised at how instinctively his hand reached out for hers, holding her steady. And that felt fine -- like something any adult would do for a child. But then she didn't let go when they got to the next section and the handrail was restored. And he didn't make her, though he wasn't sure why. He kept telling himself that kids will hold on to anyone who will help them, trying to focus on the iceplant that littered the hillside or the surf below, and not the warm sweaty hand in his palm or the casual way she accepted this state of affairs, like nothing else could make more sense.

"So you're in third grade?" he asked.

"Second. I'm in Ms. Pritchett's class."

"Big kid on campus."

"There are three grades above me."

He kept expecting her to be chewing gum. Every time he glanced at her, he thought he'd catch her, mid-bubble. It bothered him that he couldn't wipe away this idea of her, and expect only to see her as she actually was. Instead, he found himself surprised each time to find her, mouth empty, beside him. Maybe kids didn't chew gum anymore.

“What's your favorite part of school?”

“This year we get to pick a drink for snack. There's something wrong with the refrigerator, so the orange juice always comes out like a slushy.”

Her face brightened, and he felt a sudden relief. “I think I remember the same thing. Refrigerator technology must not have improved much.”

“I hope they never fix it,” she said.

The compound was hidden just over the bluff behind them. He could have taken her anywhere, but he brought her here, to the spot where he liked to hike and perch over the perfect semi-circle of sand that framed the water like a gateway. She looked back behind him, and he had the sudden urge to cover her eyes.

“How far is it?”

“Not far.”

“Can you carry me?”

“You're way too big for that.”

She sat down on the ground.

“I want to be a backpack,” she said, drawing in the sand with her finger.

“I’m sorry?”

“I said, ‘I want to be a backpack.’”

As they approached the top of the stairs, Meredith was still hanging on his back, her arms wrapped around his neck, her legs around his waist. She bounced up and down when he mounted each step.

“Giddyup!” she said, if he paused too long to rest at the top of a step, kicking him with her dangling legs.

“Anyone ever tell you you’re bossy?”

She giggled. “Giddyup, giddyup, giddyup!”

He smiled and kept trekking up the last few stairs.

At the top, he put her down. He stretched his back while she ran, arms stretched out like an airplane. She had her eyes closed, her tongue stuck out as she ran.

“Stay back from the edge. I don’t want you to fall.”

“I could just fly to the bottom.”

“Let’s not test that out.”

She laughed. “I could flyyyyyyy all the way home.”

He sat down near the edge of the cliff while she ran circles on the bluff. From here he could see the structures he’d raised just this morning on the beach, their comforting geometry. Nearby, the water was deep blue.

“Come sit with me,” he called to her.

She circled in close, did a tiny loop next to him and plopped down cross-legged. He pulled out two granola bars and handed one to her. She split the wrapper all the way down and took the bar out whole, like cleaning a fish.

“I like to come here,” he said. “You can notice lots of things if you just sit and watch. Like the ocean is lots of different colors, not just blue, and you can see the patterns from where the light hits it. Sometimes you can see the boats way out in the water. And if you sit quietly and just watch you can start to understand how big it is, how old it is. And you start to feel small and big all at once.”

She nodded, looking for something in the waves. She was taking it seriously, waiting for something to happen.

“Did your mom tell you why I didn’t come to see you before?”

She nodded her head.

“I didn’t know about you – that’s one thing.”

She looked up at him and he opened his mouth to explain further, but he couldn’t get a grasp on what he wanted to say, so he pointed out at the water.

“Listen, you ever heard of explorers?” he said.

“Like Christopher Columbus? He discovered America.”

“Yeah.”

“And then he gave everyone smallpox. That’s what Mom says.”

“Right, but the point is some people come to a place like this and they think, what a pretty picture, and then they go home and that’s all they need, right? They’re happy where they are, and the rest of the world is just like an interesting picture on the wall.”

She bounced her knees and didn’t say anything.

“But other people look out there at the ocean, and they need to know what’s on the other side of it. Does that make sense?”

She paused, thinking it over, and then nodded her head. Then she jumped up and started to run again, with her arms outstretched.

“You do it too!” she said.

“No thanks.” She continued in a circle, closing in on him.

“You do it toooooo!” She swooped in close and back out again. He watched her running, moving away from him down the trail, swooping back and forth. Then he stood up and began to run after her, his arms spread out. The wind was coming up over the bluff. The sun was hot on his skin. He ran with his arms out, chasing her toward the crest of the trail, watching her flying back and forth to the top of the next rise and over.

Then he heard her screaming.

He ran to the crest, where he saw her stopped in the middle of the trail. She turned around and grabbed him around the middle, burying her face in his side. In front of them, the carcass of a dog – maybe some kind of shepherd – was rotting. The back end, from the stomach to the tail, had been torn open by a pair of turkey vultures, who were diligently pulling at the entrails, tugging meat free from the skin. Strips of intestine and organ pooled out beside the dog. The work was hard, and the vultures pulled out pieces in jagged bursts. They were workmanlike and casual, pulling and eating. Pick pick pick.

The smell was sweet and sharp and awful. The dog’s face was pointed back up the hill, its fat black tongue hanging out of the side of its mouth. Its flesh hung slack from its ribs. Its eyes were milky and flat in a way that was worse than empty, because they did not suggest even the capacity to contain anything.

He stood and watched the vultures while the girl burrowed into his side. He placed his hand on her shoulder, but it felt unconnected to her. He looked at the birds, searching for some sign that they were on the opposite sides of something profound, that the body of

the dog was more than a body – that it had housed something that now was gone. But the vultures did not acknowledge him or care. They simply continued to pick, eyes focused on their task, ignorant that they were even making a display.

The girl was sobbing into his side.

“Shh,” he said, watching the dog even as he turned them away. She held on tight as they turned around, not looking where they were going, but trusting him. He didn’t say anything. His arm, now wrapped around her back, seemed far away, the gesture formal, like an usher at a wedding leading an elderly family member. He knew he should comfort her, that he should tell her something that would explain, that would acknowledge her fear and revulsion and help her understand. But he couldn’t. He walked with her in silence toward the stairs.

Back up

I suppose it wasn't fair to tell him I was a cop. There he was, the boy, pulled up in the median of crowded, four lane Roosevelt. The little jaywalker made it halfway before the traffic got too heavy, and now he was stranded like an ibex before a crocodile-strained river. Nine, maybe ten – thinned out but not yet teenaged and awkward, he still had the little kid dignity that comes from never asking who you are or why you do the things you do. He had black hair and worn out jeans and a red canvas backpack hanging from his shoulder, and I was stopped in the lane beside the median before I knew it, a kind of script rolling out in my head.

“Hey kid, you lost?” I asked, and he regarded me with practiced wariness, keeping himself to the other side of the median, where I couldn't grab him, doing what he'd been taught to do when confronted by a stranger. The car behind me honked, and I reached my hand out and gave the driver a weary “go around” wave, and he gave me the finger before he pulled off. Then I hung out the window, holding my arm out in an open-palmed shrug.

“You don't need to worry about me,” I said, “I'm a police officer.” And though they were just words, they sounded right when I said it. They felt true. Everything fit the part: the brown sedan I'd nearly run into the ground; my spreading belly; the moustache that I'd been porting around for the six months since I gave up on being anybody I could recognize. It was all part of the same joke: the car, the moustache. Sometimes, everything in your life's a laugh riot.

I waved him over.

“For real, kid,” I said. “Come on over. What, you gonna set up camp here for the night?”

He shook his head, looking at me and then past me to the traffic. There was a nonstop flow of cars going forty plus between him and home.

“You really a cop?”

“I’m not anything else.”

“You got a badge?” he asked.

“Off duty,” I said. I reached around and unlocked the back door. “Jump in. I’ll get you where you’re going.”

A line of cars had backed up behind me, merging one by one into the adjacent lane.

“Come on, we’re gonna block up half the city. Let me earn some overtime.”

He seemed to pull inside of himself, deciding. And then he reached out and pulled the handle and swung the backpack in front of him into the back seat.

I met his gaze in the rearview. “Buckle up.” I pulled out a roll of lifesavers and peeled back the wax, offering the roll over my shoulder. When he reached up to grab the candy, I got a kind of buzzy feeling in my teeth – like this would be a problem if it were really happening. But when you’re going for laughs, the gags have to keep getting bigger.

He popped the candy in his mouth, clicking against his teeth like a marimba. Then he smiled and I almost laughed out loud, heady with the thrill of a plan just taking off. I eased the car into drive.

“Which way to home base?”

“Left up here on Madison,” he said, hugging the bag against his chest.

“You got it,” I said, and started the car in motion. Movement always makes things seem like they’ll work out OK.

“How’d you get stuck out here?” I asked.

“Where’s your walkie-talkie?” he said. He waved at the empty space in the console where the car stereo had been, before I’d ripped it out and chucked it in the corner of the garage. At the time, it seemed like just the kind of decisive action I needed. People are always trying to get a piece of your mind – whether it’s the songs or the ads. Your thoughts should be your own, not a place for someone else to set up shop. But I’d driven around all day with a tune stuck in my head anyway. I couldn’t get it out.

“You mean the CB?” I said, pulling a green lifesaver from the roll for myself, pulling back the wrapper, delicate as cuticle skin. “Been broke for weeks. Headquarters finally approved a replacement, but said it’ll take four days. Can you believe that?”

The kid nodded, to show he didn’t.

“That’s working for the government,” I said. “That, right in a nutshell.”

“What if you need to call for backup?” he said, one hand in his pocket, fingering something.

“What, for picking up little kids by the side of the road?” I smiled and he smiled back.

“That was Madison,” the kid said, as I rolled through the intersection, feeling loose from the motion, the open possibility of the day. I rolled the candy around in my mouth, its sweet sharpness coating the roof. The buzzy feeling spread over my chest and hands.

“You ever think about how a place isn’t just one place?” I asked him. “Go back far enough, and this road we’re driving on, it was what, a clearing, a forest? Maybe even an ocean? Sometimes I’ll drive around in like a movie in my head, thinking of what this place might have been like – covered in jungle plants, dinosaurs stomping around.”

Or how about this? That time is like those dioramas in museums, each moment of your past like a box filled with relics, frozen and roped off and inaccessible. It sits there, ready for you to study, but you can’t get back in it, no matter how hard you try.

Like, picture this one: there’s a man in a car with a normal, functioning radio, playing a tune his son has been whistling for days, non-stop. The son hasn’t been able to stop, walking around the way kids do, repeating the same thing over and over. It’s a sunny day right after a rain, and the air is sweet and clean. The boy sits there, lively and life-giving

in the back seat. He has bright black eyes. The man is clean-shaven and happy and has no idea how easily he can fuck up and this time can be locked away forever.

“Are you going to turn up here?” the boy said. The light from the window cut across his face. His eyes were blue and brown, the color of sky and dirt. The slickness on the side of his face, which I had taken for acne, was a scar from a burn. Outside, thicknesses of vines coiled over the lampposts and pavement. The buzzing of fist-sized insects clotted the air.

I saw in his eyes that he was afraid, and I felt sorry for him, though I didn't want to stop just yet. Or I couldn't. I wanted the boy to stay in that backseat, to re-create a certain tableau.

“What happened to your face?” I said. He placed his hand against his cheek to cover it. The ends of his fingers trembled. He held his backpack against himself.

“My mom will want me home,” he said. “I was supposed to go with my brother.”

“Don't worry,” I said. “It's just for a little while, OK? Just a game is all. Just a game.”

Greyhound

The man that you were when you left San Francisco thinks the pregnant teen won't join the party, but already there's a new you settling in, and you're surprised to feel a kind of dark excitement as she wraps her fingers around the neck of the bottle of Jack Daniels and takes a deep swig. The bus is cool, the windows dark. You've only just settled into motion, clearing the delta and heading out into the valley, but already this space is separate, subject to its own laws.

The girl is seated across the aisle, leaned back comfortably against her chair. She's lanky as a mantis, her eyebrows pale as duckling down. Blue veins snake beneath her skin where laugh lines should be. But her face is full and her belly rises like a hummock from the swamp. She wipes her mouth and sighs with innocent contentment, smacking her tongue against the roof of her mouth, and this seems like a kind of possibility. Because freedom is a pregnant woman drinking. Anything is permitted.

She offers the bottle to your neighbor, who takes it back with an appreciative nod. "That's how you do it," he almost whispers. He nudges you with his elbow and makes a low whistle.

Outside, the light of day has been replaced by the lifeless fluorescence of highway exits, Taco Bells and Motel 6s like a kind of déjà vu. Your tongue burns from the whiskey. Borders are losing their edges.

“What takes you to Salt Lake?” you ask the girl.

“Headed home,” she says, looking down at her belly.

“Good to go home,” you say.

She shrugs. “Thought I’d escaped, but—” She laughs a private laugh. Her face flushes with the liquor.

“How about you?” she asks.

“Business,” you say.

“Everything’s business,” says your neighbor, tucking the whiskey back into a paper bag on the floor in front of him. He’s got spare salt-and-pepper stubble and dyed black hair and skin like an aged cheese. He slides down the window and lights an unfiltered Lucky Strike, puffing out of the side of his mouth.

“Whatcha think?” he says, sliding a cigarette out of the pack toward you. There’s a No Smoking sign on the glass not half a foot from his face, but you take it anyway, even though it’s been years. He offers one to the girl, but she waves it off, pointing to her stomach.

He shrugs, leaning in to give you a light. You draw in the smoke and your head goes light, the nicotine hitting right away. The smoke feels like being young, and then like steel wool, and then you’re doubled over coughing when the bus driver gets on the

intercom: “You two smoke again and I’ll put you out on the side of the road—and nobody will give me a hard time about it either.”

You think about swallowing the cigarette to hide the evidence. But your neighbor makes the international sign for jerking off and throws his cigarette out the window, so you do the same. You both snicker like high schoolers. He claps you on the back, and it’s like he’s your best friend in the world.

A little while later, the bottle’s going around again and he’s telling you and the girl about his ex-wife. “Like matches and kerosene falling in love,” he says. “No good for anybody.” One time they were blitzed and stole a hearse just for laughs and made it all of three blocks before they realized there was a body in the back. Damn thing was so fresh it was letting out its last wind, something half way between a moan and a sigh of relief. “Thing was,” he continues, “when we took the hearse it was parked in front of one of those adult theaters with the peepshows you can see for a quarter a pop. Never figured a guy would leave a dead body like that just to go play with himself. Meter hadn’t even been paid—didn’t let a quarter go to waste!”

You’re laughing and then you’re coughing, and he’s clapping you on the back. The bouncing, sleeping heads of the passengers up front pop up to look back in annoyance, like prairie dogs reconnoitering. Their noses in the air, sniffing around with the authority of the wounded, make you all explode with laughter all over again.

When you first woke up this morning, you didn't remember who you were. Your newly constructed apartment was whitewashed of any particulars. You drifted in its blankness, its acceptance of all potentialities. The sunlight cast a sharp trapezoid on the smooth, white carpet. When the sensation of forgetting faded, you felt the twinge of being set back in shape, the muscles of your back and jaw tightening.

You rose and went for a run by the water, the shock of your weight against concrete vibrating in your hipbones. The tide was high. The bay lapped at its borders. Your body breathed while the growing light turned the dark, indifferent waters light and hollow.

At work, you sat in your office and watched fat clouds drift over the bay, shadows large as city blocks traveling over the water. The scale of all that space made you feel something like nostalgia, something like grief. How large the world is. How far out of reach. You drifted away from yourself into the space beyond the glass, the silent vortices of air, the ragged white caps of the waves. The person in this room made a mistake somewhere, but you're not sure how to unwind it. You're like the discarded carapace of some living thing that has flown off, leaving you to wonder why you've got all the pieces but you cannot move.

The pills come out in Reno. Tiny red capsules in a Ziploc bag your neighbor pulls out of his pocket. He drops four in your palm and wanders off to take a leak. You stand in

the cold at midnight, washing two down with more Jack Daniels. The girl digs in your palm, picking up a capsule. She holds it in front of her face, inspecting it, taps it against her lips. The neighbor's cough echoes from the alley. She frowns and places it back in your palm.

“How long you got?” you ask, waving at her belly.

“Life,” she says. “Life without parole.” You laugh, but she doesn't join you.

She's standing in her short sleeves, though it's cold enough to see her breath. When you ask her if she's warm enough, she doesn't answer. Her teeth gleam in the orange light of the streetlamp, and the reflected light is brittle.

She places her palm against the arc of her belly and tells you it's a girl, smiling suddenly and without reservation, as overtaken by it.

“I wasn't going to find out,” she says. “My mom said it should be a surprise. But I think we already got the surprise part covered.” The smile becomes work, and it drops slowly, as if her cheeks can't hold the weight. She tells you that, at first, she didn't want to know anything, that even as she began to show and her stomach became curved and unfamiliar, she was fascinated with the changes in her own body, but not with anything that came after. She wanted to pretend that the pregnancy was all there was, that the change would be contained within her body, and one day the change would end. But eventually, she felt like she needed to get ready, to prepare herself for the particulars, and

that's when she went down to find out if it was a boy or a girl, and she called her mother and told her she was going to come home.

"I knew she was a girl, though," she says, stubbing the ground with her toe. "I knew the whole time. I just didn't like to think about it, because that would make her more like me." She looks at the ground, letting her hair hang over her face. "That's the thing that bugs me most about going home. That I'm taking her with me. I feel like I'm crash landing with a passenger on board."

She starts to lift the bottle to her lips, and again you feel a perverse excitement, like looking out over land burned to charred flatness, open and waiting. "I know I shouldn't drink," she says. "But it makes it feel like something can still happen."

That's when you tell her about your dog. For months, you've been putting up signs about your lost dog, all around your neighborhood and several more neighborhoods besides. People call with leads and you talk to them about what they saw. But you don't have a dog. Or you haven't for a long time. The picture on the sign is of a dog you had when you were a kid. It ran away and you never saw it again.

The whole thing's an inside joke with your sister, who died last year, which is the worst kind of inside joke. The two of you used to play with the dog in the small wood at the end of your block, the dog nosing his way into the cracks of the granite outcroppings. He'd send squirrels packing. You'd chase them pointlessly with your sticks. Your sister was five years older, tall, her face sharp with experience while you were still soft with

baby fat. In late autumn, the sky was white and flat, the two of you red-nosed, wiping snot with the backs of your hands. The dog was the only warm thing among you. Your parents left the two of you for afternoons that were long enough to make you feel alone and subject to your own, invented rules. You'd pack yourselves into one of the granite overhangs. The dog's breath would steam as he lay against you, keeping you warm. The dry leaves smelled like smoke.

When the two of you were grown, your sister would recall the way you looked for the dog after he ran away. Everywhere you went, watching with a little kid's need and optimism. You'd pick out anything that even resembled a dog: Is that him? Is that? Like he was a master of disguise. The two of you laughed, remembering it, and it turned into a game between you. Pointing at anything from terriers to Great Danes—is that him? What about that? It was funny, but one time last year your sister was drunk, and she was talking about some new plan she had to try to straighten herself out, and not believing it. "Maybe if you'd found that dog . . ." she said, but didn't finish the thought, her eyes suddenly flat, like she'd figured out that sometimes you're set down a path and there's no way to turn back. You tell the girl that people call all the time with leads, and sometimes you check them out. You go to the places they tell you. You wait to see if he shows up.

You tell her how today you forgot to stop the answering machine after listening to one of the tips, and the single message you had saved from your sister was suddenly playing in the room. How her voice was thin, not like you remembered, and it shocked you because both the recording and your memory were wrong—neither had preserved

her. The space of that forgetting filled your apartment. Your neighbors were playing dance music, the bass thudding through the walls like someone trying to get in, like the police at the door, needing to respond to some emergency that you caused or are unable to handle. You tell her that the pounding filled you with relief.

Not long afterward, you're all on board with your noses pressed against the glass, and you're watching the yellow lane lines glowing in the headlights. With the pills, your head is larger than it was, and more can fit inside it, and that makes everything louder and quieter at the same time, as close as your own self but somehow out of reach. Beyond the headlights, the grey moonscape of the Nevada desert recedes into blackness. Your neighbor is laughing, his face red and heedless. The pregnant girl has her head pressed between you, her smile the living ghost of some version of herself, probably no more than a few months old, that was still young and could feel happiness mixed with nothing else. You're laughing too, but when you crane your neck up, there are so many stars your stomach turns with the fear of the space between them.

You start to tell them about the lake. How back in the Pleistocene it was the great Lake Bonneville, 32,000 square miles of surface and 1000 feet deep – covered half of Utah and parts of Nevada and Idaho besides. Back when there were woolly mammoths and saber-toothed tigers and Neanderthals in pelts hunting in the never-ending cold. God knows what was at the base of it. How the whole damn thing was held in by a mountain

pass that gave way under the impossible weight of all that water. How a wall of water four hundred feet high carved the earth like a plow, and left behind this inland sea where water comes but never leaves except by turning to vapor. How the salt left behind is so thick it burns. How sometimes you picture yourself riding the crest of that flood, hanging on to its edge till it swallows you up whole, like the great tide of history obliterating your solitary life, carrying you to—

“Sir, you need to keep it down for the folks trying to rest.” The scolding basset hound eyes of the bus driver are watching you in the darkened windshield.

The neighbor jerks off and rolls his eyes. “Someone’s got detention,” he says.

“I like that,” the girl says, referring to your monologue. “Back then nobody was tied down to anything. Nobody had a home to go home to.”

“How’s that a good thing?” says the neighbor. She shrugs as a tractor-trailer comes the other way on the highway, its headlights filling the bus with a total and painful light.

You arrive at the lake at dawn. The mirrored surface of the water spreads to the horizon, purple and black, as the bus slides past scarified salt flats and blanched rock piles on its way to the city. Your neighbor disappeared to the bathroom some time ago, and you’ve taken his place, resting your head against the cool glass. The sight of all that

water seems to dampen sound. You feel suddenly attuned; the bones of your skull vibrate at attention. You sit, cocooned, the bus between you and all that sky.

Something clangs ominously, and the bus comes slowly to a halt, billowing smoke from the engine. The driver disappears to the back of the bus, and then calls dispatch. His protests grow louder, but give way to a sigh, and after a minute he orders you all off. The three of you disembark, the wind picking up as you step off the last step, the land so flat there's nothing to hold you in. You smile at the groggy nine-to-fivers, who huddle and complain in the early light. You count three who give you the finger.

"Got a reprieve," the girl says.

"Let's smoke," says your neighbor. You follow him to a cluster of boulders near the water, where his matches gutter in the wind, the two of you with your hands cupped around his, your knees all touching.

After the confines of the bus, the room of the sky is overwhelming, and you feel yourself diffusing in all that space. You tell them that you can't imagine how you'd pack yourself back inside, and the girl motions to the bus and says you should burn it, that no one deserves to go anywhere that bus would take them. You all laugh. She chews on the ends of her fingers, her knees bouncing as she looks out over the length of the water. Her body leans forward as if she were long shipwrecked, the act of waiting worn into her frame, watching for a ship to signal her rescue from the unreliable distance. She kicks off her shoes and digs her feet into the sand. The black surface of the lake is a gaping hole,

and your muscles tense with the desire to grab her hand and jump, to feel the nauseating flush of heat and emptiness as you pause in mid-air before falling, the space below you endlessly yielding.

In the end, it's easier than you'd expect: just lit matches and cracked windows and no one around to stop you. The bus is empty, the bus driver distracted by passengers complaining in the dark. You lean up on your tiptoes against the side of the bus and watch, listening to the clicks and rattles of the bus settling. The wind has quieted, and the stillness makes time expand. At first, there's nothing. Then there's the warm flicker of one spot catching, then another. When the shadows in the bus start to dance, you walk back through the rocks to where your friends are waiting. You take off your shoes and then your socks, and by the time you're back to the others you're naked down to your boxers.

"Who's going in?" you say, and soon they're tripping along behind you, the girl down to her underwear, the neighbor stumbling over the jeans around his legs. He's all pale white limbs and dirty briefs. Her face is flush and bright. As you approach the water, the smell of sulfur and the thick cloud of brine flies should make you retch, but it seems like something ancient returning, and you're filled with a sudden lightness. The three of you wade out on the shallow grade, a hundred yards to where the water hits your chest, and you float on the saturated waters, watching the shore. When you first lie back, the

cold water makes your breath quick and ragged. The burn of salt against the skin feels like being sheared clean, down to the powdery, unblemished freshness of a newborn.

By then, your friends have noticed the flames. "You did it," the girl says, not quite believing, and laughs, clapping her hand over her mouth. The neighbor shakes his head and lies back in the water, limbs spread like a starfish, his pale skin wavering under the glassy surface. He lets out a long slow whistle and starts to paddle away from shore.

The bus burns patiently, in stages, an orange flame growing in its belly, then purple and black spreading along its outline. Around it, the other passengers point and shout or stand silent and unmoving, petrified as the bones in the rock beneath you. The fire colors their faces. One man runs for the luggage compartment to grab whatever he has below, but he's held back by the driver and another, taller man you don't remember seeing before. His shouts carry across the water.

You nod out toward the neighbor and lie back, the girl following. Your hands move through water, pushing you outward. The feel of it slips through your fingers. Overhead, a flock of birds flies, following the path wound from birth into their hollow bones.

When the fire reaches the gas tank, a thundering whomp carries across the surface of the water. The two of you stop and watch as a wall of flame rises into the brightening sky. The heat of it covers your face. The passengers hide behind brush and rocks, yelling. Their faces are twisted with awe. They are skinned down to nothing, holy as anything

reborn. A few look at the water, eyes sweeping across the endlessness of the lake, and it is as if the fear is not of burning but of being left here, held in the mouth of this place, cut off from all hope of home.

You float in the smooth blackness of the lake as the bus burns with a new intensity, orange-purple flames reaching out across the surface, matching the colors of the breaking dawn. The light of the fire floats on the girl's eyes. Her belly rises next to you like a desert island. You tell her that the water is filled with tiny brine shrimp, and she asks, if it came down to it, if you could open your mouth and feast like a whale, filtering. You tell her it seems like the most natural thing in the world.

Behind you, the neighbor has moved far out from shore. His hands rise together and fall back into the lake as he strokes. He splashes and spouts water from his mouth. You start to lean back to follow, but the girl yelps and grabs your hand. "She's kicking," she says, placing your palm against her stomach. "I can feel her." Her eyes are full of surprise and terror and joy, and for the first time you hear the sirens. Faint and far away, at first they are just the suggestion of something to come, a reminder of a dim and forgotten truth: that the work of the world is to shape all things from formlessness, to mold them into the container of who they are. The girl has your hand pressed against her. You can feel every quiver of motion transmitted along her belly. Eyes wide, barely breathing, she's so quiet the space inside her has become vast and silent and still, a sanctuary of expectation.

The sound of the sirens grows, and it no longer seems outside you. It is the yawning scream of space collapsing, the possible decaying to the real. It breaches the shell that separates you from the world, and your body seems suddenly fragile, sensitive and awake. Your ears fill with the roar and crack of the fire. Your heart kicks in your chest. Red and blue lights flash on the road, approaching, pulling behind them the dark event horizon beyond which all potentials disappear. The girl smiles and waits, the edges of her eyes pulled back in giddiness and worry.

You feel the need to drift again into the space of your surroundings, but the ends of your nerves are raw and receptive. The smell of smoke is acrid and close. And it works a kind of limiting magic, drawing you into yourself, drawing me suddenly here to this place.

“Wait for it,” she says, her eyes pale and expectant and uncertain. “Wait till you feel it.”

The sirens rise from shore. Smoke darkens the sky like ink in water. She holds my hand against the warmth of her belly. We press the edges of ourselves against the next unfolding moment. I stand under a sky that has no need to remember or forget, because it is time itself. The water recedes in every direction, mirroring the sky. Its edges spill from the ends of the earth. I quiet my heart, my breath. And I wait. To feel it, when it comes – when it announces its arrival, the tiny, red-blooded thing, waiting there in the deep red blackness.

St. Francis

He came to a spot where a large flock of birds of various kinds had come together. When God's saint saw them, he quickly ran to the spot and greeted them as if they were endowed with reason.... 'Oh birds, my brothers and sisters, you have a great obligation to praise your Creator, who clothed you in feathers and gave you wings to fly with.' The birds showed their joy. They began to stretch their necks, extend their wings, open their beaks. Yet none of them moved from the spot until the man of God made the sign of the cross and gave them permission to leave; then they all flew away together. His companions waiting on the road saw all these things.

Saint Bonaventure, Life of St. Francis.

When you're with a herd of elephants, you're not alone at all; you're in a highly charged atmosphere, shimmering with presence and feeling.

Don Ross, The elephant as a person

Margaret,

I'm telling you, the elephants will mess with your mind. Hides ruddy at sunset, moving across the plains like frigates on the ocean – your experience at the zoo is no comparison, I'll tell you that. Feels holy just walking among them. But you get near these

big-eared behemoths and start talking to them about the *Lord*, and they are not having it. Not for one minute.

Not, I know, that that would stop you. But I tell you, it's difficult sometimes, Margaret, and I wonder why I'm out here, even as I know that it is all that I can do.

Now, in the Bible itself, elephants are mentioned only in the apocrypha of Maccabees – drugged with frankincense and wine in preparation for battle. And I can tell you that, even stone sober, I've seen a look in an elephant's eye that verges on a kind of violent madness. I've seen them trample crops and flatten people's only homes. When they bray afterwards, shooting water in the sky with their trunks, it seems like sadistic hysteria. I've been tempted on many an occasion, sweaty and dust-ridden and exhausted from sharing God's word, to write them off as irredeemable. But I know well the Saint's exhortation not to exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity. Every creature can see the light. What was it they said in that book? That when they're sick, elephants lie on their backs and throw grass to the sky like a prayer.

Was it Dan who read on that street corner those years ago? Dan with his ridiculous reading voice – like he wanted to be a BBC broadcaster, even though he's from Myrtle Beach. "Preach the Gospel at all times," he said, with his impossibly rounded, fake baritone, "and if necessary use words." But it struck me, the circle of you at the corner imploring all of us to see the divine light in all things. Even the Sun and Moon, as the Saint said in his writings. Even the wind rushing past my aching bones.

Was it the light that Saul saw on the road to Damascus? No. But I was weary, tired of harming those I loved by locking myself away. And I knew it was one of two things: carry this husk I'd built about me all those years and become calcified, or tear it off completely, and let whatever meager love remained spill out on every living thing. The latter an exquisite, unending torture, but perhaps the only way to survive. It spoke to me, the absoluteness of what you all demanded. That, and the gentle firmness of your grey eyes at that first meeting. That unmerciful kindness. Like being embraced in stone.

But the elephants, my dear one. I walk among them and they do not listen, unwilling to recognize any power greater than themselves. They see only their unparalleled size and measure themselves by whatever yardstick puts them at the top of the pyramid, as we all do. The other day, I stood waist deep in the drinking hole, hoping to channel the power of a baptism, and I called to them an old time spiritual, that we might all praise the glory of their Creator. And the smallest one, a mere babe, sat back on his haunches and expelled a boulder-sized scat while I spoke, looking at me dead in the eye the whole while. Then he filled his trunk and doused me from head to toe, nearly choking me with the volume of the water. I fell backward in the muck while they all trembled with irrepressible glee.

I remember that last night before I left. We did not make love in the usual fashion, my body being unwilling. But it did not matter. You read out loud to me by the fire, my head buried between your salted, quivering thighs. The story of the wolf of Gubbio – how our patron turned him from the wickedness of devouring the village flocks, not by the

whip or by his own wits, but through the word of the Lord. The story being a kind of aphrodisiac, or maybe the sex act a way of reaching for holiness. Your green and gold macaw keeping sentry over us with its depthless black eyes, tongue trilling in its mouth.

I'm writing to you from a tent perched in sand that is red and grey and black. The moon is a thin slice, like a bitemark on your wrinkled neck. You might think I mock you when I say that the leatheriness of the pachyderms' skin endears them to me, despite everything. You'll think I mock your age. But I do not value youth anymore – only the reassuring lines of your experience. My cot is hard, but durable. It is the absence of your back against my broken, newborn body that keeps me sleepless.

Just yesterday, Margaret, I walked among those grey-skinned beasts, carrying with me the holy Scripture. I read to them from the gospel of Matthew: "Suffer the little children." For if they are mad or cruel, it is a child's madness, a child's cruelty – a kind of dangerous innocence. And my heart rose as the largest one – the one I think their leader – raised his tusks to the sky in what I took for tribute. There was an almost imperceptible shiver along the length of the pachyderm's skin. But when he turned his head, his eyes were filled with the twinkle of condescending laughter. He brayed like a trumpet, and my heart fell.

How long have I struggled with these same demons – this world demarcated only by my own ambitions and longings? Why do I remain, when the gentle succor of your arms awaits me? How long must I walk among these beasts so that we might both be

sanctified? The stars have tracked a dizzying circle tonight. The moon has sunk below the horizon. I don't know, Margaret. I don't know.

From Letters of the St. Francis Society, correspondence of Bart G. Smiley, Savannah chapter

Der BlitzenKinder

13th March, on patrol outside the village of ----- . A clear day. The sky the color of a limpid pool, or to pick a more personal reference, the eyes of my first love, Ingrid, whose slight limp had attracted the other boys' scorn, but which for me had birthed an enduring fascination.

The end of winter had been cruel. Separated from our regiment after the battle at N-----, nearly half our men lost, we wandered, scavenging food where we could, and sheltering ourselves wherever we might be hidden. An endless rain soaked our clothes and worked its way beneath our flesh until it seemed we might never be warm. Hiking for days, our legs moving automatically, having forgotten what it was to rest. But as of yet, no enemy contact. It seemed a kind of terrible holiday.

But then this day. Clouds scattering for the first time. The sky that nostalgic blue. And as we rounded the dirt road outside the empty village, on the hillsides, a sudden flush of lavender. Unbelievable – a carpet of it, as if freshly painted. The snatch of color rustling in the silky breeze, suddenly and impossibly warm.

Porkie, the cook, began to sing a pub song, popular in the days before we shipped out, and the joy of it was as shocking as that rash of deep purple on the hillside. Porkie so named because had the face of a satisfied sow – a cheering look – and always found an abandoned porker or two when we passed a farm or village, with which we supplemented our meager rations. Indeed, one trailed behind him now, a grey and pink Tamworth,

unusually fat. The pig waddled at the end of a leash Porkie had constructed for this purpose, nuzzling at acorns and grubs as we marched. We joined in the chorus like peach-faced boys first feeling our oats.

Scrawny Jasper with his surprising baritone. William, the platoon's prankster, with his nasally off-pitch tenor. The sow waddling among the grass.

Mounting the lavender-strewn hillside, we paused, and I gave the signal to rest. We laid our packs down, and the men sat beside them, our bodies torpid after so much marching. Soon I should have ordered us on, but instead, I ordered a ration of whiskey. disbursed, which the men heartily consumed, raising a toast to me that I said was better directed to all of us. Our spirits further lifted, we lay against that hillside, finding figures in the clouds like boys. Porkie led another round of singing, cradling his arms about the neck of the sow and feeding it bits of his whiskey, the pig's face taking on a look of bemused contentment.

As is common, the release of relentless tension brought on a kind of exhaustion, and I closed my eyes, the sharp seductive smell of lavender sending me into oblivion. In my dream, I saw nothing, feeling only the arms of my grandfather lofting me in the air, and hearing his laughter as he stopped my fall.

I was awakened from this sleep by the drone of far-off aircraft, which in my half-conscious state reminded me of the dozy droning of bees when, as a boy, I would lie among the summer flowers. But as William pushed at my shoulder, I roused and turned

to see three aircraft fast approaching, realizing with sudden dread that it was too late to retreat. My stomach churned with self-reproach. I motioned for the men to stay low.

A monstrous roaring overhead. The earth itself seeming to quiver. The pig strained terribly at its leash, Porkie holding him fast. Several of the men cried out, despite their training.

Moments later, however, the planes passed overhead, harmlessly continuing in their path, seemingly unaware that we were even there. Neither gunfire nor bombing greeted us. Only the receding buzz of the aircraft, which filled me with a sudden joy – not, strangely, that I might live, but that the day’s kindness had not been withdrawn.

It was then that William shook me again. Following the track of his finger, I was confronted with a bewildering sight. Trembling in the aircrafts’ wake, delicate as dandelion spores, were dozens of small black forms. They spread against the deep blue of the sky’s inverted dome, spreading over the field and falling towards us. A dim sound could be heard among them, like the drone of fleas. Smallish dots, trailing behind them long tendrils that bloomed one by one into the shape of petals. As the figures descended, we saw that the petals were parachutes, though ill-deployed, some miniature payload suspended.

“What are they?” one of the men shouted.

“Leaflets,” another man said. “Propaganda.”

But they were not that. Leaflets did not wail the way these payloads did, nor did they fall as quickly. And who was here in this empty field to read propaganda? I raised my hand and prepared to yell out retreat. But I was arrested in my motion as the figures came closer, their shape becoming clearer. I paused, my hand still raised, overcome by the nauseating unreality of a dream.

“Babies,” William muttered under his breath.

“Dear God,” I exhaled. As the forms grew close, it could be seen that they were infants, legs swaddled, only their arms free, clenched in various gestures of fright. They hung suspended from half-open parachutes, arresting their fall only partially. They moved with dangerous speed toward the ground. That horrible wailing was their cry, terrified as they fell.

“Bastards!” said Porkie, looking aloft with alarm. The pig beside him looking equally horrified. “Bastards!” he sputtered, his fists clenched to whiteness. He spat on the ground.

Recognizing the forms, the men began to rise, holding their arms out toward the plummeting babes, moving beneath them as boys playing some schoolyard game.

“Catch them!” yelled Brutus, a freckled, red-haired boy from the northlands. “We have to catch them!”

“There are too many!” yelled Sergeant Cedrick, running frantically between two of the falling forms, trying to gauge which would strike first. Startled, he had drawn his service revolver involuntarily, and Quentin wrested it from his hands before he could discharge it.

By now, all the men had risen. The wind picked up, and the descending babies scattered this way and that. The platoon ran, crazed, in the open field, picking one baby and chasing it through its altered trajectories, or rushing from one to the other. I stood and tracked what appeared to be a falling black-haired boy, moving beneath the descending body. The men’s shouts filled the field, mixed with the endless wailing of the children.

Perhaps I should have been afraid. But instead I felt a kind of elation. After all these months of unspeakable atrocity. The shame ever widening the chasm between the war and the world I had known before. I suspected that I could never stand clean before my loved ones again, that whatever they had loved had been lost. Or worse, that I had never been that man they loved – within me all that time the horror that I had become.

How much, I realized, I had waited for such a chance. For some deed that could redeem the acts I had carried out in the name of the War. I watched that black-haired child, my feet tracking its movements. And I felt light - as when I was a child, and we played badminton, the birdie floating lightly over the fresh mown lawn. Rolling on the cool ground, greening my white shorts, the sky rolling up and over. It was a shared lightness, among the corps of us, the men’s faces drawn between concentration and joy.

The dark-haired boy drew closer. I waited to offer him rescue. But as he made his final approach, a sudden gust blew him skyward again and east, twenty, thirty feet. My heart hollowed. I scrambled across the ground, cutting the distance by one-quarter, one-half. But as I neared, my foot caught in a divot, and I pitched headlong into the grass, my chin clattering against the ground. I raised myself to my elbows, only to watch helplessly as the boy continued his descent unabated, my good friend William altering his course to step in in my stead. A shower of babes fell around me.

What happened next I can hardly relate. For as the babes drew closer, it became apparent that they were not babies at all, but mere *dolls* – some horrid simulacrum meant to draw us out, or perhaps only to mock us. Those small, infernal forms approaching. That moment of horrible recognition, the blackness painted on their porcelain eyes, the thinly grimaced mouths.

I yelled, but the sound was swallowed whole as the first babe detonated, a bitter, incinerating bloom. And then the rest in succession, the timeless peace of that day somehow twisting itself into an endless horror. My brothers like some grotesque caricature, rushing about, glad-faced, waiting to catch their own dooms.

The horrible, rending movement of the air. The clarifying heat.

Dear God. Porkie among the first to go.

“Four People in a Box Underground”
Transcript. Episode 29.

K: Ow.

M: Excuse me.

S: I think it's my turn.

K: That's right. You were next for leg extension.

E: Yes, of course, that's right. Sarah's next.

K: Then I can straighten my arm.

E: That's right, Ken. There's room in the upper left. Marcus will have to adjust.

M: Give me a minute and I can start to make the adjustments. Standard protocol?

E: Sarah, do you want standard or counter-clock?

M: Counter-clock. I need to rotate my leg into the space.

E: Hear that, Marcus?

M: How could I not hear? I'm right next to her.

E: C'mon Marcus. You know the drill. We need you to acknowledge.

M: OK, I fucking acknowledge.

E: No need to get pissy. Clear communication has premium importance here.

M: [inaudible]

E: Marcus?

M: I get that. Sorry. I just – you get where I'm coming from.

E: It's a tough situation.

M: Exactly.

K: I can't feel my shoulder anymore. So if you guys could hurry up.

E: OK, Ken, I'm starting counter-clock in 3...2...1...

S: Extending leg.

E: Ken, you should be able to shrug your shoulder for thirty seconds starting . . . now.

Then I'm going to reach my arm into quadrant 3.

M: Is it true it's the #1 show?

K: Ahhhh, that feels good.

E: Tracy says it's a very popular show.

M: But #1, that would be remarkable.

E: Who can speak for the public's taste?

K: I feel like I haven't moved my shoulder in a month. I'm a new man.

S: You're making me jealous, Ken.

K: Your turn soon enough, Sar. And don't forget you've got your leg straightened.

S: Small blessings.

K: I'd kill to have a straight leg, personally. I'd trade an hour of shoulder rotations for just fifteen minutes with a perfectly straight leg.

S: The burdens of the tall man.

S: Leg extended. Setting position.

K, E, M: SETTING POSITION.

S: Jesus – ow! – God, I hate this part. It burns when my leg wakes up.

M: I mean, how many people would that be?

S: These days, the market's so fragmented. Who can tell?

M: Tens of millions? Hundreds of millions?

K: A lot, guys. Let's just say it's a lot. And let's not forget the possibility that Tracy's blowing smoke up our asses.

E: She is a producer after all.

S: She's so nice though.

K: That's her job, to be nice.

E: And while she's out wandering the sunny earth, being nice, our job to be stuck in a box talking about her and whether she's lying about the number of people watching us.

E: OK, Ken, I'm going to need you to stop shoulder rotations. And Sarah, Marcus, something's off. My face is pressed up against the glass. Can I get you to wiggle back just a little?

M: But why lie? She'd probably rather we thought the audience was small. It would make us more relaxed. More candid.

E: I can't even begin to imagine feeling relaxed.

K: How long do you think it can last?

E: [Grunting]

K: If it really is #1?

S: God, who knows?

E: Thanks, everybody. My face is off the glass. [Sighs] That's a relief. Who wants people watching your face flattened like that? It's just embarrassing.

K: It can't last very long, can it?

S: How can they even see? It's so dark.

E: Like I said: no accounting for the public's taste.

K: How long have we even been here?

M: As an aside, can anyone reach the juice packs?

S: Tracy's been here what – how many times, Ken?

K: Last I remember was eighteen. And she's been here a couple times since then.

E: Couple as in two or as in three?

K: Two. Couple means two.

E: Could be three. I've heard it used as three.

K: What kind of people do you hang out with, Elaine? And who raised them?

E: I could have sworn it was three.

M: The juice packs, guys?

S: And we estimated she checks in at least once every three days.

K: Right.

S: Two months, then?

K: No...

S: I think so.

K: Wow. High five everybody!

S: Hilarious, Ken.

M: Seriously, guys. I'm parched.

S: Yeah, hold on – can you rotate just maybe fifteen degrees more?

M: Yes, I think so.

S: [grunting]

S: Just a little more . . .

S: OK, I think I've got one. Ken, I'll need you to kind of grab it with your teeth there and swing it –

K: Yeah, I know the drill

E: That's why we love you, Ken. You're a real pro.

K: OK, reach your fingers over in 4...3...2...1... [inarticulate grunting] There!

M: Thanks, guys.

M: Two months feels short, actually.

E: Couldn't be longer, right? They wouldn't keep us down here that long. Is that even legal?

S: I'm kind of thirsty now, too.

K: Guys?

E: Yeah.

K: I have a question. I admit, I'm embarrassed.

S: Shoot, Ken. We've grown close.

K: No pun intended.

M: I thought we agreed no puns.

K: I can't even acknowledge the possibility of the pun?

M: No.

K: How do we win again?

Last Days of Summer

It was the end of summer, but the fog had rolled in and it was wet and cold. Mary was smoking a cigarette next to Jason in the meadow where they had been camping. There was a sheen of moisture on the grass even in the middle of the day, and Jason was glad for the blanket they sat on next to each other. The coal of her cigarette burned bright orange against the muted backdrop of the forest at the edge of the clearing and the woolen grey of the foggy sky. He was enjoying the heat of her next to him as she smoked, the way in this cold their heat was another way of touching each other. He kept rocking gently back and forth while he was sitting, feeling the heat grow closer, then feeling the cool air come between them as he moved away.

They were both wearing the same sweatshirts they had been wearing the whole weekend, and hers had smudges of ash along the sagging shelf above her breasts. The coals of her poorly rolled cigarettes kept falling off there, where she would flick them off with a quick exclamation of “fuckshit!” which was what came out when she was surprised, and which was one of the things he loved. The never-ending dropping of hot coals was a thing like their sweatshirts that they never thought of bothering to change.

She had just been gone – run up to her parents’ house up the coast to try to sneak in and grab some of her stuff without them noticing. Said she might even try to grab a night’s sleep in her old bed – they’d never know. It would serve them right, she said, to have her there without knowing it, to wake up to rumpled sheets and half her stuff

missing. And she loved that bed, with its perfect divot where she could curl into herself. It felt like home like nothing else in that house did. Her nest. She tried climbing in the back window they always left open, but it shook loose and came down hard on her hand and crushed two fingers on the right. She screamed and her parents came out and they ended up yelling at each other before her parents took her to the hospital, and she snuck out as soon as the doctor fixed her up, and came back with a splint on her right hand but without any of her stuff. She had spent most of the weekend quiet, rolling cigarettes and saying she should quit and then rolling some more. The splint only made the roll on her cigarettes shittier and looser, and didn't stop her from smoking with her right hand, so that he was afraid the gauze would catch on fire.

He kept looking at the scratch on her shoulder from where she'd pulled him down abruptly on the trail near the work cabins the week before, kissing him suddenly. She'd undone his belt, and he'd started to smile, but this time was different from the others -- her face was humorless and open and fragile -- and he quickly stopped. Once they got going he had pushed her against a root and drew blood. She screamed, and he thought she was going to cut the whole thing off right there, but instead she grabbed him around the neck harder, and pushed her hips against him with a greater urgency, like the pain was part of something she wanted to know. Afterwards he lay there still while she watched his face, and he knew he couldn't ask her what she was thinking. Eventually, she put her hand on his cheek, gave him a half smile, and said, "The ground's cold. We should get up." She didn't talk about it after.

He was going to ask her to come with him to New Mexico, to White Sands. Summer at the farm was ending in a few days, and there'd be a new crop of workers to replace them. They hadn't really talked about what would happen after that, and she generally avoided conversations about their relationship, preferring to refer to their time together as how long they'd been fucking. He'd never been there -- to White Sands -- but one of the guys on the road said the sand was pure white -- cool and soft like powder. There was a different kind of energy there, he said. At night, the sand glowed white, and the hum of the far off highway was like a Vedic chant. "Shit can get real weird there," the guy had said, nodding as if this was all anyone could hope for, and more.

It seemed like a good idea, him and Mary there together. Better than being apart. And he figured that was what kept people together, and was all the reason he needed to ask her to join him, but he also knew he couldn't always trust his instincts, and once he got going things had a tendency to get away from him. So instead he was plucking grass, piling it up in his hand and then dropping it down again. He kept looking around the meadow and up to the adjacent bluff, and then at the blonde hair tucked in behind her ear and down to her shoulder until she noticed, and then off at the meadow again. He wondered how tall he could make the pile of grass by the side of the blanket. Sometimes between drags she would look at him, and he would look back with a polite half-smile before she gave up and went back to smoking.

"God, you're a pussy," she said at last, exhaling and tapping her ash into the grass.

“I’m sorry?” He looked up at her, trying to look innocent, which mainly just made him look bug eyed.

“You’ve been staring at me like you’ve got something to say for like half an hour now. Unless you’re brain damaged or something.”

He just stared at her.

“God. Jesus. Put yourself out of your misery already. You breaking up with me or something? Because you don’t really need to. We’re both going our separate ways in a couple days. We’re not even technically dating.”

“We’re camping together.”

“That’s not dating. It’s just screwing in a different location.”

He sighed, trying to determine whether to move forward.

“Are you trying to convince me that we’re dating so that you can break up with me? That’s fucked up.”

“No –”

“That’s really fucked up.”

“I’m not breaking up with you!”

“That’s good. Because you can’t. Because, like I said, we’re not even dating.”

“Got it.”

He got silent again, and she took another drag from her cigarette.

“So?” she said at last.

“So what?” he said.

She raised her eyebrows at him like she was waiting for a slow-witted child to speak.

He paused for a moment.

“Maybe you could come with me,” he said. “After this.”

She gave him a skeptical look, bouncing her leg and taking a long, ragged draw on the cigarette.

“To White Sands. New Mexico,” he said.

She laughed then. “Shit,” she said, blowing out smoke, “Let’s go for a walk.” She stubbed her cigarette out in the wet grass.

On the trail to the beach she wasn’t saying anything, and his question was still sitting out there, unanswered. Or maybe it was an answer that she hadn’t said anything yet, but if so he wasn’t sure which it was. She was walking right next to him. Her fingers fidgeting with an invisible cigarette, brushing against him sometimes. Her eyes locked on the path ahead.

“What’s in White Sands?” she said at last.

“Sand,” he said.

She looked over then, rolled her eyes, cracking a smile.

“A shitload of sand. All you could ever want.”

Her eyes were back on the trail.

“Kid I met said it’s something else, all that sand in one place.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.” She hip-checked him into the brush at the side of the trail.

“Jesus. Get mean, don’t ya?”

She kissed him suddenly and then kissed him harder, and it was like a question and the space of that question was forever and he had no idea what it was, and then she pulled back and said “Ok.”

“Ok?”

“I’ll come with you.”

She seemed about to say something else, but then broke into a smile at the goofy look on his face and said, “Let’s go,” nodding toward the beach. Her eyes were wet. She

leaned against him and he kissed her, and her smoky breath tasted good, even though it tasted terrible, because it was hers.

“Let’s do it,” she said, more to herself than to him.

“Sure, yeah. Just need bus fare to New Mexico.”

She looked up with a tight smile.

“What?”

“Nothing. Later. White Sands!”

“White Sands!”

Her face was still tight behind her smile, but she took off running down the trail as he started again to speak, so he let it drop and followed behind, shouting while she laughed. When he caught up, he scooped her up like a baby, her arms around his neck. “You’re my prisoner now,” he said. “I’m going to take you and sacrifice you to the sea.” She squealed and wriggled in his arms.

The sun broke through the fog, a pale disk like the moon. He put her down and pulled her by the hand toward the beach, getting there seeming like the next step, the need to get there growing more urgent. His head was buzzing from the excitement, everything crisp and electric, the leaves on the brush by the side of the trail resplendent in

the breaking light. He started walking faster. Branches were snapping against them as they walked, pressing ahead.

“Why the rush?” she laughed, but all he knew was that he was spilling into the future laid out for them. So he kept going, pulling her behind, the two of them laughing. At least he thought she was laughing. His breath was echoing in the space opening up before them. They crossed the creek, him lifting her over and her asking if a girl could stop for a smoke before he pulled her behind him past the estuary and onto the sand.

On the beach, the waves were medium sized rollers. The wind was steady on shore, and he felt a tingle along the length of his skin as they approached the water. The surface was slate and white and turbulent green. He turned around and grabbed her and felt that warmth again, of the two of them together, and it was like there was a single pool of warm light between them, and he said, “I’m glad you’re coming with me,” and she smiled, with the patient disbelieving eyes of someone enjoying a child’s exuberance she can’t match. She put her head against his, and the close smell of her skin was like some kind of code that said this was their life to share together.

“Let’s go,” he said, nodding at the waves. “Start this thing off fresh.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” she said, laughing. This time, he was sure she was laughing. “It’s freezing in there.”

He took off his shirt, and it was like shedding a skin, getting lighter. The wind was whipping now, and he could feel it like a river of energy all around him – him and Mary like islands in that wind, with their own bright light.

“It’s mind over matter, right?” And he smiled at her with the pressure of that light inside him, and she smiled back with that same skepticism masked over with her desire to hold it back from him.

“Let’s just sit here awhile, babe. We can talk.”

But he didn’t want to talk. He wanted to go meet whatever was pulling him – them – forward. The day had broken open, sunlight painting the water.

“Aw, c’mon. We can talk afterward. Let’s get out there,” he said.

“Why?”

“I don’t know – it just seems right.”

“Honey, I don’t want to go out there,” showing him her splint. “I can’t go out there. Let’s sit a minute.” Her smile still there, plastered and stretched over a face strained with the need to hold him.

“It’ll survive.”

“No, it won’t.” She grabbed his hand.

He looked at her, recognizing she was saying no, but feeling no disappointment. He just felt the pressure of the light.

“No problem,” he said, smiling. “I’ll go myself. For both of us.” He patted her hand gently between his own and let go.

And then before she could say anything he was running to the waves and he jumped through the first set of breakers. The water was icy and clean and he felt it like a sheet of glass on his back. He let out a long whoop and turned around to wave at Mary, who yelled, “Come back! You’ll freeze to death!” She was smiling like it was all a joke, but her brow was knitted. He dove under the water and started swimming in quick strokes, with his breath half knocked out by the cold, but he didn’t care. He just wanted to keep going. He kept pulling with his arms, feeling the heat inside him push out the cold of the waves, and he pulled and pulled until he was past the breakers. He let out another long whoop, waving back at shore, where Mary stood with her arms crossed, not saying anything. And then he took a breath and dove under water until his lungs burned and the water wrapped around him, cold, like a jacket pressed on every pore, while that pressure inside him pushed back, and he felt a great expectation growing inside him, a recognition of something coming, and the expectation felt good, like it was direction, like it was guidance and insight.

And then it happened. First, his hand went numb. Then his arms went electric with heat, like the nerves of his skin were rivers of light, like they were circuits spilling

out energy, connecting him to the water. Like he was information and his cells could tell the water directly who he was and what he meant and the water understood completely. Then he got an erection. Then his head pulled open and the cold black water was filling it up, like a vessel that could contain all that cold, could wrap it up and swallow it whole. And at the same time, the light of his body was entering the ocean. The water poured down through him, filling him out, and while it poured, he emptied until there was nothing but light. He felt like he was going to come and vomit, and he split open there in the water, spilling out all at once – his mind self loose and free in that water temple, screaming in all that light, all that light, all that light.

When he came back on shore, his feet were unsteady on the sand, the light still burning behind his eyes, making the sand grey and overexposed – refracted and orange and light at the edges. He wanted to bring it to her, what he had found out in the waves. He wanted to bring it and collapse against her and rest, the two of them, on the sand. It would feel good to rest. He would hand it over and they would hold it, the two of them. He churned his tired legs through the sand, so he could find her and they could carry it together. But she was gone.

That's the way he would tell it later – how he would remember it even. He went out into the water seeking something and he found it. Sometimes he'd get going and start telling himself about revelation and sacrifice. But there was something else. Before it

happened, he had looked back at Mary. She was sitting on the beach, arms around her knees, looking out, not even at him anymore, but at the ocean, flat and endless and unrelenting in front of her. She was small and weightless on the sand. And clear as his hands treading water beneath the surface he saw something – not a memory, because it had never happened, and so not even some kind of clairvoyance. He saw her in her old bed at her parents' house after sneaking in, curled up in the dark while her parents slept, unaware, in the next room. He saw her room, dressed up for guests, sanitized as a hotel room, and her body curled up tight in the small familiar space of her bed. And he started swimming back through the slate green chop. His body pushing back with growing purpose, his shoulders burning, catching surf in his mouth on the up-breaths. When it hit him, he was swimming like mad for shore.