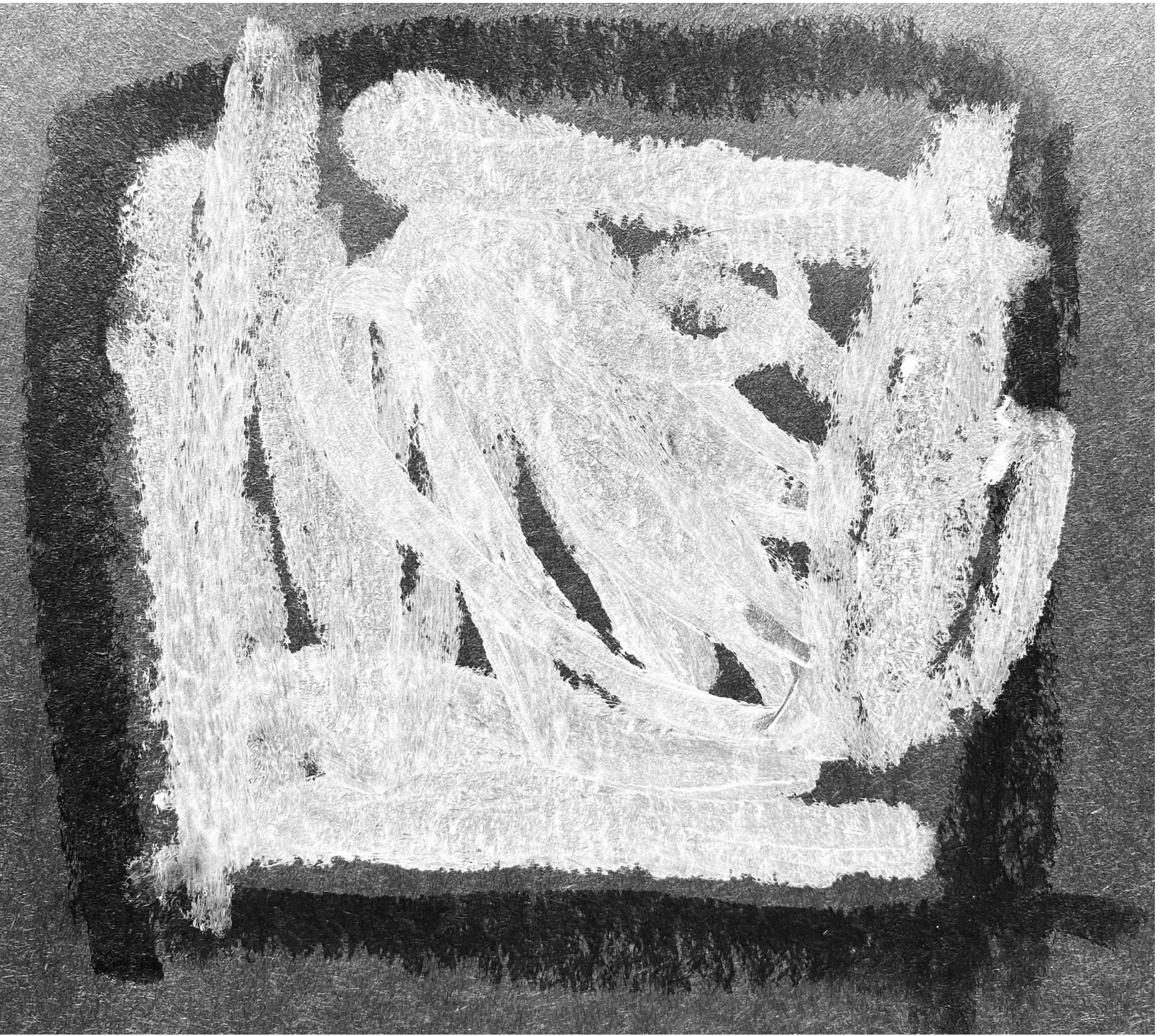


INTEGRALS



a voiceHOUSE experience

*A life between death, between joy and grief, between good and evil,
between truth and lies, born helpless and with little to hold us
together amidst such an awful mystery besides our creaturely ways.
Yet somehow, we persist.*

MIGHT AS WELL
SKELLIG
HAIKU
PARADOX OF QUANTITY
I HAD BEEN TO A CHURCH
GREAT PLAINS
HOW WE FIND EACHOTHER
MIXTURE
PYRAMIDION
STRUCK
HANGOVER
SUBTITLE
ENTROPY
IMMACULATE
MAIN STREET
GRAVEDIGGER
CONTRACTUAL
AMEN
LIES
TWENTY-FOUR HOURS
CAERULEUS
DECIBEL
FOLJ STJARNONA
COMBUSTIBLE
ONE OF THE DISAPPEARED
GROWN UP
PAPER OR PLASTIC
OBSCURED
IMPENETRABLE QUEBECS
PLANS
106 DEGREES FARENHEIT
ROCKS, WATERS
CONGRATULATIONS
RENTAL PROPERTY
VENUS, HER SULFPHUR RAIN
PLAYGROUND
TEHOM

MIGHT AS WELL

And it's a small room and the pillow is flattened and it's dark and an icy blast is beating up against the worn clapboard siding and the wind it's blowing in through the windows because the weatherstrips are worn down and the screens are full of holes so it's cold it's freezing cold in the room even with the blankets layered on the bed and there's more snow in the forecast tomorrow because it's February, the middle of winter in the middle of nowhere, it makes me gulp to think of how far it is to go, to go until spring, to go until parole ends, how far away the way out is of this attic room on the third floor of a cheap rooming house in a small town off the edge of the lake, as in Lake Michigan, as in lake effect storms, as in more snow tomorrow and a blizzard last weekend with fourteen inches on the ground and the darkness in the room is cut by a blue light, the light from my alarm clock, it's the caustic light of numbers reading 4:13 AM and the alarm is set for 6:15 AM so there are only two more hours until I'll be forced out of bed but already I'm forced to bear the weight of the day ahead with its icy water in the communal bathroom with my hands in the sink then on my face and the bar of soap and my razor then the scraping against the windshield of my car and the shovel in my trunk to dig out the tires to fight the mound of snow the plows leave piled up next to my car, before dawn scraping and digging on the street because there's no garage for me to park in there's no cover for any of the cars for the boarders who live in the rooming house there's only street parking and the plows come through and push the snow up against our unlucky cars on the street so I'll be balancing on frozen asphalt with the shovel and the windshield scraper and it won't matter whether or not I wear my boots because my pants will be wet and my feet will be uncomfortable driving to work and when I make it to work I'll park and then I'll walk to the entrance and scan my badge then I'll scan my badge again at the lockers where I'll take off my boots and put on the gown and the beard net and the goggles and the hair cover and the white booties and I'll scrub my hands and slide on a pair of latex gloves too small for my fingers and I'll spray IPA on the gloves and wipe

them together and I'll hate the smell of the IPA on the latex and my goggles will fog up and a face mask will be pressed against my mouth but the smell will come through regardless and underneath everything my pants will be wet, the day ahead, and so I think that'll be the moment I'll decide, before I break for lunch and eat my bag of potato chips and drink my Coca Cola in the hollow cafeteria at the table by myself before another set of latex gloves before I finish out the shift and I clock out, that's when I'll decide I might as well drive into the night towards the ledge at Walker's Point, instead of heading back to the boarding house, I'll decide I might as well, because what's the use of another Tuesday in February assembling widgets in a Class 8 manufacturing cleanroom wearing latex gloves and a face mask with my eyes squinting at engineering drawings through the condensation in the goggles with the fans in the room drowning out your thoughts and my toes cold and wet underneath me, what's the use, I might as well choke out my last exhalations like clouds of breath with my latex gloves on the steering wheel pointed towards the end of the night because what's the use with another parole check-in at the end of the month with my paystub and my proof of employment and the blankets piled up on my bed and the uncomfortable pillow in the darkness with only the blue light and the numbers changing every minute everything counting down towards nothing running away from everything because there's no use in any of it so I might as well because there's no way home there's no way out no way back, not since I made that one mistake I'll never redeem, what's the use, I'll finish this shift for good, I might as well, I'll clock out, I might as well because it's nothing but anxiety, anxious, worries about whether or not the doorbell camera will malfunction and whether or not the package was delivered and whether or not the store will honor an expired receipt and whether or not the shipping department might have mixed up the slips with the order number and whether or not the discount code was properly applied, I worry and click and buy and wait and worry, I'll worry the dress won't be the right size because I fluctuate between brands, usually I'm a 12 but sometimes I'm a 10 and it's impossible to remember or keep track of what size I am at what store so I'll have to buy two or three sizes of the same dress and return the dresses which don't fit, and I'll wear the dress that fits once and stuff it into my closet before I start worrying about whether or not I'll receive confirmation of the reimbursement, whether or not the shipping

department scans the label, whether or not the barcode on the label is smudged, whether or not the money is transferred back onto my credit card, I won't ever wear the dress again I'll just worry and wait and then I'll shop for more dresses or shoes or purses or whatever catches my eye, and once I find something that catches my eye I'll click and start worrying about the package coming on time, what if the doorbell camera doesn't turn ON to record the third-party delivery driver who places the cardboard box on the porch, and if the camera doesn't work when the delivery driver comes it certainly will fail when the box is stolen off the porch by whoever steals packages from neighborhoods like this one, I'll worry about the thieves who come from the city out to the suburbs to steal merchandise off of our porches after the merchandise is delivered because the thieves figure it must be expensive, it must be valuable, because we're rich out here in the suburbs and we have nice merchandise delivered via overnight air to our front porches and our security doorbell cameras are prone to malfunction and regardless the thieves will cover up their faces with masks because they know the cameras are ON so I'll worry about that, that's all I'll ever do, it's all I do, so I might as well, I think, because what's the point of living like this, worried, with my husband yelling at me to stop worrying, screaming at me, I'll leave him to his boat and his vacations and his cigars on the back porch, I'll make it clean and painless, in the bathroom, in the tub, and he'll find a pool of blood and he won't have to yell or scream anymore, he won't have to use his health insurance to pay for my medication, he'll be free of me and my worry, he can go on enjoying his life, he can remarry and find a woman who is a size 4 at some stores or a size 2 at others and they can have dinner together in peace and quiet and he won't have to force himself to stay late at the office because he can't stand the thought of being at home at the dinner table listening to her explain all her worries to him, maybe they'll even have children, she'll give him a son and a daughter and they'll buy a new SUV with car seats and television monitors in the headrests, I might as well go ahead and do it, in the tub, clean and painless and that will be the end of it, he'll be rid of me and I'll be rid of my worries, maybe he'll feel sorry for a little while but he'll get over it, he'll move on, the hassle will be over, he'll figure I was insecure and wrapped up in my own world like it was a choice, like I wanted to worry, like I wanted to be anxious and paralyzed by fear, like I wanted to live the way I did,

he'll think it was all a choice and the last choice I made was the best one because it was the one that relieved him of his burden, me, and he'll end up with the house and the boat and a new woman and two beautiful children, he'll find his successes after I drown in a pool of blood and nothing will really change, he'll go on in this world of makeup advertisements and miniature vacuums you can't live without, he'll find a new woman who doesn't worry, whose dresses fit, who doesn't watch the doorbell camera, and they'll have children then go on into a happy retirement where they can sit around a dining room table at the club with the other couples complaining in March about finding pine needles in the rug left over from Christmas so that's it enough is enough and yesterday we bought a fake tree and we found it on sale, at a discount, chuckling, I'll cut my wrists in the bathtub, I might as well, and the peace which has come from thinking this way, how I feel now, since I've read this Buddhist pocketbook, especially because I read a page in the pocketbook which read 'if you see a flower without seeing the sunshine, the earth, the rain, the time it took to grow from a seed to the petals, if you don't see those elements in the flower then you've been fooled,' because you've been taken in by the outward appearance of the flower and you mistake it as a flower, an entity, separate from those processes and factors that went into its existence, so you have to look beyond the flower, that's what the pocketbook says, and furthermore if you look at a person, instead of a flower, you ought to consider the person's background and their upbringing and their suffering and the culture surrounding them and the historical processes they are embedded in so that you can truly see that person, so as not to mistake that person for a separate self, because none of us is separate from the processes and factors that went into creating us, but instead of helping me smile the pocketbook depressed me, because when I glance up at the woman behind the cash register at the liquor store each morning I see her father beating up her mother and her husband beating up her children and I see revenge and I see the vitriolic, beady eyes of a thousand years of scared, lonely animals and I see the economic disparity of modern America of tax brackets and furtive bank accounts and I see politicians who don't give a damn and I see a bus driver who looks at her in his rear view mirror with lascivious thoughts in locker rooms and soldiers raping teenage orphans whose thin, caramel arms were blown off in the aftermath and I see a darkness everywhere, a light switched off

hidden under childhood blankets thanks to nightmares from television screens a vampire a werewolf a horseman and there are tears in her whimpering eyelashes but nobody cares and no one will help her, nobody ever helped her, a world without decency or sympathy, and it's the reason why she married the first man who paid her any attention, why he married the first woman who would tolerate his brutality, she birthed a fidgety child after chain smoking cigarettes through her pregnancy, she watched television and turned the volume up when the boy would cry in the bedroom, the darkness of the bedroom and the tears and I see it all, I see her little boy grown up, shy, short in stature, confused by the world, afraid of his father, unloved by his mother, desperate for attention because he is a scared boy who nobody ever paid any attention to and because he is desperate he'll find solace in a bottle and he'll drink and drink and drink until he can't remember or feel or care, a terrible mistake will find him in the drunken sadness so what will it ever amount to but another lifetime of regret, more darkness, so after I finished reading the page about flowers in the Buddhist pocketbook and I took a drink and I couldn't see any other way out of the darkness, so I might as well, tying a knot in a rope and fixing the rope around my neck and going over to Dan's garage late at night and throwing the rope over one of the rafters, because the flower is not a flower, it's an ocean of pain depthless and violent and it stretches out in every direction from the east to the south to the west to the north so how can anyone smile how can anyone think anything in this world is worth all the pain and the sadness, and I'd hate to do it to Dan because he's my uncle but I trust him to find me and cut me down and call my sister and console her, I trust Dan so he has to be the one to find me, he has to be the one to do it, and it won't be a mess to clean up, with a noose and a rope and I'll fix it so I can stand up on a chair and let the chair go out from underneath me, because I might as well, flowers choking on engine exhaust, it's the only logical thing to do, to gamble that whatever waits for on the other side has to be better than what we've made over here, has to be better than liquor store clerks with gray hair and furrowed brows and purple veins on her arm like tubes of poison, what's the point, I might as well because I can't go on drinking and handing over my money to this web of misery, contributing to this parade of sorrow, how can I in good conscience go on when there's no other way out, there's no hope, there's only more

hangovers and more pints of vodka and more looks of disapproval, unloved, I might as well free myself from this demon inside of me these demons inside all of us who control the world who chuckle at the idea of a benevolent God, a God who cares about us and brings light to the darkness, I might as well, and if there's only more darkness then nothing would have changed but maybe there's something beyond the darkness but you can only reach it when you say your final goodbyes, so I might as well find out if things get any better on the other side, and if anyone misses me maybe they'll read the pocketbook and understand why I might have done what I did, they'll understand why.

SKELLIG

I used to see mesas in my dreams like islands up in the sky out in the distance, I'd look up in my dreams from whatever was happening and out there above the horizon I would see mesas in burnt orange and copper and crimson up in the sky with patina traces and turquoise accents blemished into the rock, outlines of mesas with the strata exposed and whenever I'd look up to find the mesas I would know I was dreaming, because the mesas up there with the clouds would only appear in my dreams, mesas like mantles seated on crags of rock and the crags of rock would jut up from the ground out in the distance so the whole scene felt like an impressionist painting and inspired I'd look out at the looming structures and dreaming I would take in their vast breadth and yearn for a view from the tops of those mesas, to be seated intrepid on a ledge with dreamscapes like wild infinity below my feet dreamscapes containing the contents of my mind or the universal mind or the collective unconscious whatever it is where dreams come from whatever substrate allows for dreaming, a dream, a personal experience of deep sleep hallucination, to be up there on the mesa, I would yearn for their immense vistas, to find myself awestruck up on the skerries and holms among the clouds with my palms on the rock and my eyes closed but no matter how much I yearned I'd never make it up to the mesas in my dreams since the dreams would end and I would wake up only to remember the mesas, there had been mesas in my dreams, I would wake up with memories of jagged silhouettes and wish I'd been able to climb my way up into the forbidden heights but I had awoken, awake only to consider a few questions, I'd wake up to briefly consider my dreams and the mesas in my dreams and why the mesas were in my dreams and what the mesas

might represent if there were psychological or emotional reasons behind them and how they had come to be there and what put the mesas in my dreams or even questions like could you close your eyes in a dream, because why would you need to blink without a physical body without a biological need so regardless of my plans or designs there would be no moment for me up on the rocky islands with my eyes closed, but then my day would be in front of me and I'd be up on my feet from whatever couch I was sleeping on and there would be a job or a class or some commitment to hurry off to and the mesas would disappear and my yearning for their immense vistas would disappear and I wouldn't consider the mesas in my dreams or anything regarding dreams for that matter as I'd race my way through whatever it was I had to do until the day was over and I'd be back on whatever couch I was sleeping on, back to cover myself up with a blanket with my shoes off and my nose in a book with a lamplight glowing and the mesas wouldn't be on my mind so I would forget to remind myself to watch out for the mesas in my dreams, I'd forget to make a plan to climb up to the Martian plateaus and look out so I would fall asleep on the couch sometimes with the lamplight still glowing and I would dream of mesas, there would be mesas in my dreams, buttes and flat plates of rock up in the sky above wherever I was above whatever was happening in my dreams but I would glance up and notice the outcroppings of rock, the spectral formations, and yearn to go up there, up the elevations, I'd think to myself in my dream that I've seen those mesas before in other dreams on other nights and I'd remember I made plans to climb up to those mesas and buttes and plateaus, I would yearn to make my way and wend up secret trails and see the world of my dreams from up on those lookout vantages but the dream would end, I never found a way up and I never made it to the mesas in my dreams because I had woken up and the day would be in front of me and I'd forget about my dreams because of the demands of whatever had to be done whether it was a job or a class whatever obligation I had whatever my schedule or routine demanded and the mesas of my dreams would fade out of my thoughts and eventually over time there were no longer any mesas in my dreams, I wouldn't look up and out at the horizon into the sky and as time passed as the days passed and the nights passed the mesas disappeared but one day after many days and nights had passed over the course of years then decades I remembered the mesas in my dreams from when I would sleep on whatever couch I was sleeping on I remembered I

had seen mesas up in the sky and then I realized what had put the mesas up there with the clouds, I suddenly knew why there had been mesas in my dreams and I knew what the mesas represented and I understood exactly why my dreams of yesterday had been full of impossible mesas and their immense vistas and even though I had never made it up to the mesas in my dreams I felt a deep satisfaction now because in a way I had made it up, so after I remembered the mesas and understood them for what they were and who I was and who I had been since I first saw the mesas in my dreams I fell into a deep, peaceful sleep.

HAIKU

It was a little boy asleep against my shoulder and I could feel his breath against my ear and later in the day it was a crow alone in a naked maple tree up near the top branches posted like a sentinel in a rainy March afternoon, its feathers a stark black against the dismal gray of the sky, a lonesome March crow in a naked rain cloud tree, and when I saw the crow I thought of the little boy screaming in the night alone in his crib, alone and crying in the darkness, and I had heard him crying so I moved out from the bed and glanced at the numbers on the clock then coughed and walked into his room where I picked him up from the crib and set him on my shoulder and began to pace around until the little boy fell asleep with his chin touching my neck and I could feel his breath against my ear as I walked back and forth in his bedroom next to his crib, I walked back and forth as quietly as I could manage with his breath against my ear with the creaking floor and he calmed down as I rocked him in rhythm with my footsteps of a gentle pace as my shoulders would shift from one side to the other and my hips moved with my shoulders with my footsteps so the little boy calmed down, he was crying and alone in his crib at night until I picked him up out of the crib to set him against my shoulder and began to walk back and forth in the room, and once he was calm I slowed myself down so my footsteps became even more quiet and then with his head tilted to one side, towards me, he began to breathe and I could feel his breath against my ear so I continued to walk and listen to his breathing and it occurred to me he was alive, the little boy was alive and here with me in the dark room, on my shoulder, he was breathing against my ear asleep on my shoulder and I realized he was alive, slowly moving from side to side and listening to his breath and somewhere out of the rhythm of moving

him and his breathing a singular thought came to me, this boy is alive, he's alive and so am I and we're together here in this dark room after midnight and nothing else matters, there's nothing else to think about or concentrate on except for his breath, and the little boy was calm so he continued breathing against my ear and eventually as I came back into time and realized how long I had been quietly walking with him on my shoulder I put the little boy back into his crib and shut the door to his room holding my breath then I walked down the hallway to my room, I didn't think about anything except the boy and how he had been alone and crying and I had woken up to take hold of him and rock him back to sleep until his breathing became deep and pulsing like the blood in his veins like the blood in my veins in a rhythm and alive with life, I didn't think about the rest of the night or how much time I had left until the alarm clock rang out against the dawn or what I had to do to prepare breakfast for the boy and change him into his clothes and pack his milk and his snacks for the babysitter, I didn't think about anything ahead of me, I didn't think about the crow in the tree and how it would remind me of the little boy, how it would remind me of the darkness of night and what it meant to be alone, but alive, and why any life that shined out from the darkness made the darkness good, made the darkness worthy somehow, I didn't think about how the crow would remind me of the little boy breathing against my ear, and how I would think about his breath against my ear while he fell asleep on my shoulder and how I would decide even though we might feel lonely and might seem utterly alone we were never truly alone, and the darkness that made us feel alone was somehow the thing that proved we weren't, because the little boy had me and I had the little boy, walking back to my room I didn't think about anything ahead of me like that, there was nothing ahead of me except my door and the glow from the alarm clock, a warmth on my neck, the sound of the boy breathing, there was nothing ahead of me and there was nothing behind me, either, I didn't think about anything behind me, behind us, behind the little boy and I, I didn't think about the last couple of months and having to find the babysitter and having to take a leave of absence from work and having to pick out a casket, having to decide on the song at the end of the funeral service, having to choose her outfit, the flowers, all the decisions I had to make and the choices and how I felt like there was never a right choice, there was nothing to make right, there was only what was

meant to be, a world we couldn't control, a world that didn't care, a fate handed to us along the lonely road of our lifetime until that common fate which waits for each of us, and that's all there ever would be, all these choices we have to make, delusions, petty, because we're crows stranded in naked trees against a grey, dismal sky, alone, dressed in our black feathers, I didn't think about any of that, of anything behind us, the little boy and I, so instead as I walked back into my bedroom and fell under the sheets, as I closed my eyes, I could only feel his warm breath against my ear and the pulse of his breathing and the fact he was alive and I was alive and that's all there was to think about so it wasn't even a thought, it was a fact, it was a simple acknowledgment of what we were, together, alive, and he wasn't alone since I was there, and I wasn't alone since he was there, we had each other.

PARADOX OF QUANTITY

Olive eyes, a yellow green, a place of color and light, arrested by the shimmer of her eyes once I finally stopped and remembered to look at her, into her eyes, standing in front of me this whole time, her eyes are an olive color, a yellow green, and I forgot about whatever argument we were having or whatever point I was trying to get across because I noticed the color of her eyes, I forgot about whatever it was that had been concerning me when I remembered these are her eyes, her eyes are an olive color and ever since the first time we met her eyes mesmerized me, their color, because the color wasn't like the color of other eyes I had seen, I stopped the first time I met her and I forgot about everything else around me and I couldn't help but stare into her eyes, I fell in love with her eyes, we were surrounded by people in a mess of noise and lights but all of it disappeared and there were only her eyes, in the beginning it was her eyes that held me close to her, they brought me into her, they opened me up to the possibility a miracle rested inside of her, behind those eyes, their beautiful yellow green, a fathomless depth to her individual soul, complexities, dynamics, miraculous, and it made me forget about everything I hated in people, the miserable airport lines of people, masses of people of raw decay covered up in perfumes and flesh everywhere shuffled and huddled together, anonymous and slithering so how could you ever believe in love or salvation or redemption or meaning, how could any of it be anything, how could we mean anything to God even if there was a God, what could we

possibly be to Him, how could there be any hope to watch my daughter on her third birthday and help her blow out three candles spluttering in the glimmer of her eyes and how the glimmer would remind me of my wife, those eyes I fell in love with, those yellow green eyes, olive, how could you ever believe a pair of sparkling olive eyes would contain an impossible miracle like clouds emerging from an empty sky, it had been so much I hated in people before I met her, when I first stared into her eyes, her eyes were so different than my own eyes cast out onto the world in a cold gaze because I was tired and fed up and I couldn't stand people, I was young and I travelled for business before I met her, before I found her eyes, and I'd sit inside a terminal in Montreal and I didn't care if it was snowing out the windows of the airport bar, if there were flurries and the dusk had settled so the flurries glittered in powerful flood lights beaming from the terminal building out onto the tarmac, who cared when you were surrounded by people, a world full of people, full of greed and selfishness, I didn't care if it was snowing and glistening because I was young and I knew we were confined to our inner lives, even if it seemed like there was a larger world somehow we were entirely alone, somehow we couldn't love or be loved, somehow we are all hurt and sad and lost, desperately reaching up and out from some kind of abyss, entombed, groping out for contact among an anonymous mass of dead blackness, fallen into themselves, impenetrable, so far away yet somehow so close and crowding, crowded, more people, people seated next to me there at the bar in the airport in Montreal, ordering drinks, eating their hamburgers, talking about how pretty the snow looked, I was sick of people, I was tired of life, that's how I was before I found her olive eyes, I was in an airport thinking 'It's snowing in Montreal but who gives a damn' because here I am surrounded by people yet somehow I'm utterly alone, and the sad fact of my loneliness was I was content to be alone, to be by myself in the bar refusing to stare out the window like everyone watching the snow flurries, I was content to remain independent and untouched, because what was everyone, what were these people, who were they but lost, foolish, selfish, starving ghosts, consumers, consumed by worry, by fear, by lust, the consumers consumed by their own consumption, consuming for the sake of consumption, starving ghosts consuming more and more, more videos, more clicks, more clothes, more duty free, more soda cans, consuming and starving and consuming to the point in which their essential spirit or soul

or being or whatever it is no longer was, that magical thing which is supposed to be central to who we are had become tangential to the consumption, the consuming, so in essence we became tangential to the act of living, to our own life, an afterthought forgotten in the midst of the consuming, the consuming which is really a starving because nothing is ever satisfied, it continues on for its own sake, a terrible hunger, hungry ghosts, that's what I thought of people before I met her, before those olive eyes, the yellow green glimmering, right in front of me, when I first met her I forgot about people, about how I felt about them, about how I felt about myself, there were no airport lounges, there were no checkout lines, there were no leaves piled up in a gutter in a plug of inky sepias clogged against the steel grates, no sewers underneath, there were no arbiters, there were no inheritors to a dark land, there were no more idiotic anxieties like what will happen to the suburbs when all the trees die, there was no hyperreality and there was no postmodern divide and there were no more furtive cigarettes on the iron steps of a fire escape, there was nothing except her eyes glimmering the light from the sun back into my own eyes, this magic light which fills the world, unextinguishable, and a feeling inside of me like there was something beautiful and alive behind those eyes, a miracle inside of her, and I knew somehow the magic light inside of her was hiding everywhere, an intuition like the magic would grow if we cared for it and cared for each other and so we were married and had a child a baby girl and the miracle grew behind my daughter's eyes, the miracle spread out, I even felt the magic behind my own eyes, inside of myself, I could feel it and I loved her and our baby girl and I still do but there are moments I forget, like when I forgot, just now, in the midst of an argument, after the party ended and the guests had left and we had brought our daughter to bed, struggling to make a point, to win, to be right, I had forgotten all about her eyes until I glanced up and saw them and then I remembered what I had forgotten about the miracle, about the light, and nothing else matters anyways, her eyes are an olive color, a yellow green, and I've never seen the color anywhere else and whenever I see it, when I stop to look, I remember.

I HAD BEEN TO A CHURCH

I had been to a church when my brother had first called, or rather, my brother had called me and after our conversation I had decided

to find a church, I had asked for directions to a Catholic church since I was away on business, in France. It was a Sunday morning, I was tired, jetlagged, travelling because I had to perform an inspection of a new facility, but I had walked to a cathedral and sat down in the back while the mass was celebrated at the altar. The busboy at the hotel, he knocked on my door. He excused himself after he said there was a telephone call for me at the front desk. I put on my shoes, and I followed him down the hall, to the elevator, and then to the lobby. I don't know what was in my mind as I followed the busboy. I obviously didn't know who it was on the other end of the line. I doubt I gave it a thought. I suppose it could have been one of the directors at the facility, checking in or confirming something for the following day's inspection. It could have been my mother, our mother, my brother's and mine, since I had left her the name and the number of the hotel and told her to call me if there were any problems. I didn't have a wife, or a girlfriend. But I don't think I considered it. I simply followed the busboy to the lobby, then after the phone call, which I took at the desk, and it lasted only a few minutes, I asked the concierge where the nearest church was, specifying I had preferred a Catholic church and I hoped to make it there soon, immediately, and so he took out a piece of paper and wrote down some instructions and then he showed me a map and I followed his instructions against the map, as he pointed where the left turn was, the right turn, and so I thanked him and informed him I would be off and if there were any more phone calls to please take a message for me. So I had been to a church when my brother first called me, alone, in the back of a Flemish cathedral, adorned in stained glass, heavy with incense, my mind occupied by several of the words my brother had spoken to me during our phone call, there were certain phrases I had remembered, they kept replaying in my mind, in my brother's voice, and the priest was at the altar, there were readings from the scriptures, and hymns, in French, so I was mostly alone in the back of the cathedral with my brother's voice in my head, and it wasn't the usual thinking I did at the back of a Catholic church which usually consisted of stalemate moral thinking, about some decision to be made, a conscious choice, a conflict between the animal parts of my unconscious hunger, my thirst, my desires and designs formulated out of need, greed, fear, a lust or a blindness, between animal parts and angel parts, my conscience, an allegiance towards those who had gone before me like my mother and my

grandparents, a sense of their sacrifice, of needing to continue to participate in a greater sacrifice, to do what had been meant to be done on account of a greater good, not just an impetuous impulse, considering the implications and the impact and how the decisions we made rippled into the future and back towards the past, of having to live with those choices, answer to those choices. That was the usual thinking I did in the back of churches, because I only walked into Catholic churches when I was confronted with something unmanageable, something I felt like I needed help with, extra help, extraordinary help, to settle the struggle between my animal and angel halves. My usual thinking would take me along several different lines of thought, and sometimes I'd wonder as I looked out at the congregation, at the old women with the peace of grace in their eyes, I'd consider perhaps it is a man's burden to be torn up in these animal and angel battles because of a man's nature, and because a woman is naturally graceful, her essence is justice and community and harmony, since women are goddesses and can bear life forging miracles out from their own bodies, spirit out from the earth, it makes sense as to why it is a man's burden to struggle and wrestle with forces which seem so heavy and cosmic and external but probably only live inside of our own minds, the angel and animal halves, each a part of us, passed down from father to son, haunted by division. I often felt my animal half, infiltrated by it, drooling with a rapacious tongue and turning innocents into angles of legs and handfuls of hair and red marks, the devil inside of me, how my mind, my hindbrain, how it can transform a woman, a daughter, a friend, rendering them, a reduction, reduced, I'd wind up in a church and be forced to acknowledge these facts of my nature, my awful tendencies, and consider how it could happen, how a normal, well-adjusted, civilized, respectable person such as myself could manufacture such perverse imagery inside the private quarters of their head. Such were my usual back of the church thoughts, guilty thoughts, conflicted thoughts. But after the guilt and the shame, hopeful thoughts, thoughts like if anyone could be saved then everyone could be saved and I could be saved, if the awful woes of hell were true and real, then I wanted to avoid it, I wanted to be with the people I cared for like my mother and my brother and my friends, and maybe if I prayed and if I sat in the back of Catholic churches and said something like 'I want to be on the side of the good' in the secret prayers of my heart before walking up the aisle to

receive the body and blood, then somehow it would make the difference, somehow the angel half would beat out the animal half, and I wouldn't have to face ultimate torment, or an ultimate erasure, because at my age death becomes the primary fear, it looms, dying, especially for someone unmarried, with no children of his own, nobody to account for other than his mother and his brother, death becomes something to fear, I feared it as many do, as you do, our impossible death beds, our impossible last breaths, our impossible goodbyes, all those impossible finalities which, when you were young, were in fact impossible, since to be young in the youth of our days is to possess eternal life, and so in our youth we lived in life and its sunlight and since we'd hardly been born everything lasted forever, death was an abstraction, and on we go until something changes, it changes, the light, the quality of the light, the sunlight of our life it fades and there's a sadness to it, the black ending of the day is somehow inside the sunlight and you can see it and feel its cold darkness underneath the warmth, you feel it and you realize it's been present all along, this darkness inside the sunlight, and it scares you, you're startled, because you've never considered there might be a night, an inescapable night from which you can't run away from. I'm growing old, and though it will never happen to me, I imagine moments like a moment where you hear a song like 'Girl from the North Country' and you might be alone in a sterile, quiet room and you might have a few pictures on the nightstand and there might be a newspaper and a coat on a chair, a beige coat with a pipe in its pocket and a package of tobacco and some matches as well, stuffed into the pocket, and the song will be playing and tears will fill your eyes because it's the song you sang to your baby girl every night when she put her head into the place where your neck and your shoulder meet and slept and quieted down and loved you for your protection and warmth and for the quiet song you sang to her to send her off to her dreams and in that moment with the song playing from a radio while you're listening there will be a stream of tears in your eyes and on your cheeks because a hole will open up in your throat and your stomach, you'll dearly miss that little girl, you'll pine for her and you'll be hurt by how far away she is, how far away it all seems, her tiny nostrils and her soft skin, her arms wrapped around you, how could it be so far away, since that beauty and magic was just here and now it's gone and it seems impossible it happened in the first place, when your impossible

death beds turn into your impossible past lifetimes, an impossible youth, you might be cut to the ground in that moment to realize all the beauty is tragedy, disguised. There are thoughts of life and death in the back of churches for me. Thoughts of truth and beauty, darkness and evil. Broken hours, put back together, then shattered again. Usually, after the celebration of the eucharist has ended, when the priest and the altar servers have made their way to the back of the church, I have decided being alive is beautiful, being alive is worth the suffering and pain and loss, being alive is the only way to have it and even if it is tragic and sorrowful frankly that's about the best any one of us can do on our roads to Damascus. But no such thoughts occurred in my head, here in the Catholic church in France, a Sunday morning, my eyes shut, my knees bent to the kneelers, my shoulders slumped, I didn't think any of that, with my kneecaps on the pew, with the choir singing in Latin, the *kyrie eleison*, my thoughts are the words of my brother, in his voice, explaining the situation to me, in my head, explaining how the doctor had reviewed the pictures which were taken of the baby, the ultrasound images, it was a new technology so they couldn't be sure, and it wasn't a diagnosis, the doctor stressed that, this isn't a diagnosis, but after going through the pictures there was cause for concern. My brother and his wife are concerned. The doctor is concerned. That was one of the phrases that continued to repeat in my head at the back of the cathedral, they're concerned, even though it's not a diagnosis, they're concerned. Again and again in my brother's voice. I soon realized the mass was over and there were no longer any people left in their pews except for me, I remained, I remained kneeling, and I prayed, I tried to work my brother's words out of the way with my own words, words I knew well, which I had recited many times, I tried to force my brother's words to the side so I could make room for my prayers, my prayers for him, for his wife, for his child, unborn, in utero, a creature entirely dependent, suspended umbilical, for whom I was now concerned, gravely concerned, even though it wasn't a diagnosis, I still prayed for this unborn child hidden in the body of my brother's wife, I said prayers of health and hope for this baby, prayers for life, for a baby I had not met or known but somehow I possessed an intense connection to, I loved this unborn child, deeply, this person I had never met or seen, I knew there was something special about the baby, and I was so dearly excited for my brother and his wife,

I was overjoyed for them to be having a child, to be creating a family, it was obvious the two of them were in love and it made sense to me and I cherish my brother so I wanted the best for him, I wanted for him what he wanted for himself and he had expressed many times that he had wanted a family, children, and it made my mother happy to consider it as well, so her happiness was also tied up with this baby, this person none of us had ever met who none of us had seen yet somehow had changed us fundamentally, who had turned my brother into a father and his wife into a mother and me into an uncle and my mother into a grandmother, and now, we are concerned, there is a chance everything had been decided and the baby's future has already been tied off, a lifetime, tied off like a knot, and I'm praying in the church for the knot to be undone, for this child's lifetime to be freed open to run its course like a lifetime ought to be let go, to grow, and certainly if there was a God it was a God who prioritized life and growth and the building up of things, the undoing of knots, a God who hasn't decided anything, who allows us to surprise Him, who wants us to surprise Him, certainly if there is a God that's how He has to be, so I pray kneeling in the back of a cathedral and the sunlight galvanizes the stained glass so it is a sanctuary of colors and stone but my eyelids shut close for the concentrated saying of more prayers, the whispered words on the stillness of my tongue, alone in the church, praying, listening to my brother's voice, listening for reassurance though I knew none would come, that's how it all started, in a church, after a phone call from my brother. My niece was born three months later, and although an open-heart surgery was required only a few minutes after she was born, although she gave us all a scare, my niece came through and made it and blessed us with her life and turned my brother and his wife into a father and a mother, turned me into an uncle, turned my mother into a grandmother, my niece came through and somehow it felt like the prayers that day in the church worked, that the prayers had made a difference. She grew up, and my mother died, and my brother and his wife had more children, and I continued to perform inspections all over the world, and wherever I went I would bring my niece back a present, a little doll, or some candy, because I was her godfather and she was something very special to me, she was someone who was important to me, who still is, every day I think about her and I still pray for her, prayers of gratitude, thanksgiving, and even though the light in my days continues to

fade, the cold darkness makes itself known to me more and more, my fear of death has lessened, I'm not so afraid, because I know God has undone so many knots in my life, my blessings are beyond measure, so what is there to hold on to. It all started in a French cathedral, for me, the undoing of a knot, the opening up of a lifetime, and though I've never told my brother, I'll never tell anyone about it, I believe it, I believe there were prayers holding her together, holding us together, and the prayers were heard, simple prayers holding everything together, untangling the sadness and confusion, connecting all of us, moving us beyond ourselves, freeing us, to let go.

GREAT PLAINS

He said it, 'This is a world of death you've been born into,' and when he said it he said it in a gruff voice, in a quiet living room, and he said it while we were nearby him, seated in couches, in chairs, but when he said it he refused to make eye contact with us, he diverted his attention out at something, away, a wall or a painting on the wall, and his eyes were like gauze curtains and behind them ranged a windswept plain with a baleful storm front rolling across it and there were no horses or cattle or sheep or farms, there was land and an oncoming darkness and a silent motion. He said it matter of fact, his voice like shoe heels clapping against a city sidewalk, he said it and he diverted his gaze away from us and it was obvious he didn't care if we agreed with him or if we disputed his claim because it didn't matter what we thought, not to him at least. My father didn't respond, my father was quiet for a long time, and my mother she had been so worn down by the previous week and had cried so many tears and shouted so many angry shouts that there wasn't anything left in her to respond with except to stand up and walk out of the room and leave her coffee on the table with her head hung low and her hair cast down in a tangled blonde mess with her feet pointed towards her bedroom. She had heard enough and maybe she didn't hear him when he said it, it was all a dream, maybe, I remember her saying that, it had been like a bad dream, when it happened, when my brother's accident happened and for a long time, for years and years, she said it was like a dream and I would catch her in a trance and I knew it was the dream she was trapped in that I couldn't wake her up from. But I heard him say it, 'This is a world of death you've been born into' because I was young and I figured I was being addressed, he

was talking to me, because if the 'you' wasn't me, who could the 'you' be? I was only nine years old and I assumed he was talking to me so I watched him gaze out at something, away from us, not making eye contact, and I hated him for what he said in his gruff voice, for the thunderhead behind his eyes, his eyes like thin curtains, the silent motion, it scared me and it angered me and I never forgot what he said or how I felt about him from that moment forward. What I heard when he said 'This is a world of death you've been born into' was an awful hopelessness, that because everything alive will die, because everything you love will leave you, because everything you are will disappear, it meant nothing, none of it, it was worthless, and we were doomed to this fact and doomed to this awful hopelessness and any notions otherwise were useless and childish. For years and years whenever I saw him I remembered what he said the afternoon we were together in the living room and I avoided his eyes because I hated his cold truth, I hated the clouds and the empty landscape without any farmhouses or horses and the silent motion behind everything, I hated this old man with the gruff voice, the satisfaction in his knowing the terrible truth of life and reminding you, reminding me, of it. I hated him and I avoided him and I was afraid of him so I stayed away from him, I kept to myself or I clung near my mother whenever he was around, I didn't want to go near him or listen to his gruff voice. I hated the old man for years after that, for what he said after my kid brother had died from the accident, in the living room with my mother and father, in his gruff voice, after the funeral was over, after my brother had been covered up and lowered into the ground. I never spoke to anyone about it, and I don't know if my mother or my father even remembered what he had said, but it didn't matter because the old man directed it towards me, to alert me to the coldness of things, the silent motion behind things we can't escape, which destroys us. But what I sensed later on, once I grew older, after the old man himself had passed away, after I had seen something of life, what I sensed was that a beautiful secret had been contained within the old man's words, and that because the old man had been confronted with the totality of disappearance, many times over, people whom he loved, dead, he had to create for himself a world in which he was able, in his own way, to go on. I sensed he respected life to the utmost, and he had learned this respect through the blunt pain of loss, from what the old man had seen and known, and he said 'This is a world of death you've been

born into' in his gruff voice because when he was a little boy he had gone away to a work camp with his father during the Depression and his father had died in an accident and the little boy had to manage his way home to his mother and three brothers with a casket and a paycheck from the foreman, he said it because he knew friends who died in a war, he had watched them cough up blood and choke out whispers of last words that no one could hear, with their families across oceans, torn up by shrapnel, bleeding, he said it because his wife had battled cancer at a young age and lost unexpectedly and suddenly and there was nothing the doctors could do, there had never been anything that anyone could do, so that's why he said 'This is a world of death you've been born into' because he wanted to share a truth which he had paid dearly to learn, which he had been forced to learn, and he shared it with me, to be frank with me in his gruff voice because it was the only way he knew how. And walking downtown on the way to something or another, the other day, amidst a drove of tourists and businessmen and students and all sorts of folks, their shoes clapping against the sidewalk, I was reminded of the old man's voice, a voice like shoes clapping against the sidewalk, and I put a solid idea around what the old man had meant when he said 'This is a world of death you've been born into' and what I decided is the old man had meant that anything alive and living is a miracle, and we ought to love life and celebrate life, and when something dies or is destroyed we shouldn't be upset or confused or surprised, because it's meant to, because the dying of things which are alive is natural, the natural state of living things is death, so we ought to treat them with love and dignity and sincerity when they are alive. When he told me 'This is a world of death you've been born into' with his faraway gaze, his eyes like thin white curtains, the range of wilderness behind them and in front of you, alone, he didn't say it to scare me or frighten me or belittle what had happened to my brother, but to challenge me to wake up to the fact everything we have is so precious, and nothing is guaranteed. The old man had a stroke in his lawn, cutting down a tree, eighty-three years old, and he never spent a day of his life in the hospital and I remember his smile the last time I saw him, my grandfather, I remember he smiled at me, and underneath his worn down body, his decaying flesh and wrinkles, the sharp elbows and wrists of bone, the bald head, the purple veins, there was a shining light behind him and it seemed impossible such a light could belong to the same man who

had said to us, my father and I and my mother, after the funeral, in our living room, after my little brother's accident, in his gruff voice, 'This is a world of death you've been born into.' But there was a light underneath the old man and around the old man and I suspect the light had been with him all along, there had been a sunlight covering the wilderness and the hills and the silent motion behind his eyes, and what he had meant when he said 'This is a world of death you've been born into' to my father and my mother and me was that we ought to be grateful we had my little brother in the first place, that the boy had been alive at all, and any sadness over the fact we had lost him would be due to our own regrets over time misspent or lost, which was our fault, my brother had been around and alive and if we wanted more of him we should have made better use of the time we had since there are no guarantees, because each day we're afforded is a miracle. SO walking in the city, with the clap of feet against the sidewalk, I remembered the old man and I finally decided what he had meant when he said 'This is a world of death you've been born into,' and as it dawned on me I remembered the way the light shined from out of him and around him when we last saw each other, smiling, when I caught hold of the space behind his eyes which were like thin curtains and behind them the sun had taken over the sky and the land and the wind, so there was nothing but light.

HOW WE FIND EACHOTHER

Her life had been spent on the weatherside, hardened, distrustful of those on the lee, at least that's how I saw her with her head down and a cigarette at the end of her lips, hunched over on a curb in a parking lot outside a coffee shop, I saw her beat up and worn down but something inside of me said this woman might be your own daughter one day, as the woman had surely once been a daughter herself to a mother and a father, and if my little girl found herself worn down with a run of hard luck which put her on her backside in a parking lot on a Sunday morning with her head pointed at the ground at the butt-end of a cigarette then I hoped a stranger might see her and ask her if she was alright, for my daughter in her blonde ringlets and her slate eyes and her rosy cheeks to go from who she was now back at home with my wife and to slide all the way to where this woman was, it was unthinkable, impossible, and I assume this woman's parents, when they were at the hospital with their little girl, if they could somehow see into the future,

and see the woman now, they'd never believe it, because it was unthinkable, impossible, and so that's the kind of thinking which came to me and it stirred something in my heart so I parked the car and I opened the car door, that's how I found the woman and that's how she found me that Sunday morning as I dragged in another rip of smoke and exhaled it and paid no attention to her, because she wasn't a cop and she didn't look like a Christian so she was probably a woman out for a cup of coffee on a Sunday morning, she probably had a job and a family, the car was hers, the clothes on her back were hers, she didn't mind the sunlight on the black asphalt and didn't mind the birds chirping and probably woke up thinking to herself it was a good day to be alive, a great day to be alive, that's how she found me and how I found her on a crisp morning in April with the cherry blossoms in bloom under a Sunday sky, and I could tell before I walked up to her to ask her if she needed anything that she was going to ask me to lend her a couple of bucks so I had a few bucks ready, in my wallet, and I walked up towards her while a string of traffic signal lights bounced above an intersection nearby, the wind was whipping, her face was chapped and red, her cheeks and her chin and her nose were thickened with callous, her hair was everywhere, all sorts of colors like blonde and grey and brown and red, but her eyes were so calm and pointed and fixed underneath the hooded sweatshirt, they were motionless, and that's what I saw walking up to her ready to hand her a few bucks because I knew if I asked if she needed anything she would answer me that she could use a couple of bucks, that's how I found her and how she found me, and I watched her with a side-eye walking out of her car and I knew the woman had nothing to do with my problems or the mess I had made of things, the fact I had gotten kicked out of the halfway house last night, I had failed a drug test, I had used, again, relapsed, and now I had my earthly possessions here in this backpack next to me on the curb, zipped up, she had no right to be blamed for what I had done to myself, I knew that, but I couldn't help but feel a twinge of anger when I caught her in my peripheral vision with my eyes pointed downwards under my hooded sweatshirt, my black sweatshirt, my black boots, my black jeans, I couldn't help but feel her and her satisfaction with the morning and the wind and the blue sky and the birds, I couldn't help feel something like anger towards her, for not knowing what it might be like to be me sitting on the curb, come down off another run, broke, nowhere to go, nowhere to live, nobody

who believes in you, back to the streets, back to cooking up hits, back to jail probably, back to rehab maybe, always backwards, moving a step or two forwards then all the way back, like a game of chutes and ladders, she had no idea what that was like, she had no clue how helpless it made you feel, powerless, a junkie, a liar, a cheat, a thief, even though I never wanted to be those things, I never wanted to grow up and find myself down to a couple of cigarettes and a backpack full of underwear, down to nothing, almost thirty years of life and nothing to show for it except a few tattoos and some scars on my arms, she couldn't know, and how could I know anything about her or pretend to, that's how she found me and how I found her, and a few feet away I looked her way and I asked her 'Hey, are you alright?' and she responded but without looking back at me that she was alright but she could use a few bucks, this weatherside woman, beat down, hunched over on the curb with her cigarette and a backpack next to her, traveling between ugly lovers, from one bad situation to the next, hard luck and nothing but it, so I reached into my wallet and took out a handful of bills and I handed it to her, and she took the money and her expression didn't change her eyes didn't change nothing about her changed, she took the bills and held them in her hand and didn't bother to count them so with the wind kicking between us I asked her if she wouldn't like a cup of coffee, I was heading into the coffee shop for a cup and would she like one, and after I asked she said 'Sure' so I replied 'How do you take it' and that's when it happened, that's how I found her and how she found me, I finally looked up at her, I looked at her in the eyes, though I hadn't slept all night and the sky was bright and the wind tore right through me, I looked up at her and I squinted and said I took my coffee with cream and sugar, so she nodded like she understood what I had said and she went inside and in a few minutes came out with a coffee and handed it to me and I said 'Appreciate it' and she said 'You're welcome' and then she asked where I was heading, where was I going to, and I looked back at the coffee in my hands and then at the cigarette I had extinguished next to my boot and I told her I didn't know, I didn't know where I was headed, I sort of chuckled and told the truth for once because I said I had no clue, I had been kicked out of a halfway house and here I was on the curb, and I had no family who cared to speak with me anymore and I had no friends who weren't on junk and I didn't know what to do with myself, I sort of chuckled then I blurted everything out

before I could stop myself, talking to her, honestly, with the wind started blowing between us, and despite the blowing wind my words persisted, they hung there, and the woman nodded like she understood what I had said and asked if I wanted to go to a meeting, if I wanted to go to a meeting because her father had been sober for many years and went to meetings every day and lived in town, nearby, not far from the coffee shop, she explained it to me like that and she said he would take me to a meeting if I wanted to, if I wanted some help, and now her words hung there despite the wind blowing, that's how she found me and how I found her, the woman took a sip of the coffee I had bought her and handed to her and I didn't know what else to say because all I could think of was my daughter, I saw my baby girl's beautiful smile back home at our kitchen table with a coloring book and a pile of crayons then I saw her at a park the other weekend with her feet climbing up to the top of the slide, remembering only last spring I had to put her up on the slide and hold her hand, and now she was doing it on her own, she was becoming more independent and more of a person unto herself, watching her on the playground, and it pained my heart, secretly, it hurt to watch her because it was clear to me I was losing her to time, that she was becoming older and would continue to grow up and I'd lose her innocence and her childhood and her little kid smiles, though I felt like I'd spent the time well, I wanted to believe the time lost was well spent and appreciated, I wanted to believe it but my heart was pained and I couldn't believe it, I'll never believe it, it will always be guilt and sadness and a wish that I had spent the time better with her, my beauty, down the green slide then on her own two feet to run back and do it all over again, what could I do but walk away with a tear in my eye wishing I could have done more, my daughter, that's how I found her and how she found me, all I could think about was what did I have to lose, what could I possibly lose if I responded to this woman with yes, I'd like to go to a meeting, I'd like for her father to pick me up and take me to a meeting, what else did I have in front of me, what other options did I have, it'd be foolish to ignore her offer because it was like she was sent here for this reason to hand me a warm coffee and find me a meeting to go to and pick me back up onto my feet, and the wind blew between us and my lips were chapped and my skin was like cold, wet paper against my aching bones even though I was dry, because I was dry, because I was off the high and the comedown was here

and the itch was on, off and running, but maybe, maybe it didn't have to be that way, maybe there was a reason the woman was here and all I had to do was say yes, to push my lips together and say yes.

MIXTURE

It had dried into thick, brown and purple strings, and there was a metallic taste in the back of my mouth, above my throat, the dried brown blood, I woke up to find it dried onto my chin and my nose, in my nostrils, and my lips, I woke up to find more blood on my shirt but it was red and bright on the white collar, so I woke up to various colors of blood, in my teeth, on my hands, I woke up on the floor of my bedroom with a metallic taste in the back of my throat above my throat, and my lip was fat, my bottom lip, so I groaned and pushed myself up from the floor and walked to the bathroom mirror and wiped away what I could with my hands, with soap and water in the sink, then I blew my nose and I noticed the strings of purple and brown, out from my nostrils into my hands, then into the sink, but nothing hurt too badly so I blew again and there was more blood, so I wiped off my hands with more soap and water then I took off my shirt and my pants and turned the lever in the shower and I took off my underwear and socks and went past the plastic curtain into the tub, and the water was hot and it felt good to watch the water on the bottom of the tub mixing with browns and purples and reds, it immediately reminded me of being a child, painting at the kitchen table with my mother, her watercolors, she would change out the water cup with fresh water so you could switch from one color to another, the colors would blend together in the cup and it would turn to a milky color and she would come by without saying a word and change the water so you would have fresh water to continue painting, she was like a train whistle in the distance, she was that kind of a mother, she wasn't hardly noticeable or ever in the way but she was available when you needed her, she put my brother and my two sisters and me above anything else in the world, certainly above herself, and she recognized I was an artist from the beginning so she bought me watercolors and taught me some basics but mainly gave me the time and the space to learn, to explore, she saw something in me, and she would keep my water cup fresh and dump out the milky water so when I wanted to change to a new color the color would be bright and vibrant and wouldn't look soggy because of the old water cup,

like a train whistle in the distance, across town, past the trees and the neighborhood, on its tracks, and she would take us swimming in the summer and I remember the brick building, the façade with the gate and the carved stone letters which spelled TOWN POOL, it was ornate, gargoyles and floral patterns wrought into the stone, and I remember that's where my first fight was, at the swimming pool, outside the water but nearby in one of the grassy areas where families set out their towels and ate snacks, where mothers applied sunscreen, where teenagers flirted and girls decided on what kind of women they would be based on the attention the boys gave them, it happened there, my first fight, because a boy in my class had decided he didn't like the fact I was a good painter and had been selected to represent the school in a statewide contest with one of my works, the boy decided because I painted it meant I was soft and that I ought to be afraid of him and his taunts, but I wasn't soft, I was tough, and I was angry, so when he pushed me to the ground I stood up and I threw a right hook into the boy's jaw and put him on the ground, covering his face, crying, and I saw the blood on his mouth and his nose and he didn't say anything else to me about my painting, so as the water rolled down my face and I realized there were no more strings of brown or purple from my nose, there was the clear water and a memory from my childhood, but the metallic taste in the back of my throat lingered so I thought back to the night before, to the drinking, to the other students in the bar, to the argument I had gotten myself into, the prig who wanted to make some kind of a point about theory, about technique, who wanted to criticize my work, it was always a critic, a critic or a cynic or a skeptic, I couldn't stand them, there were so many of them at the school, they were so down on everything, they wanted to put everything down, tear everything apart, they couldn't paint so they critiqued, they put things down, and it wasn't the first time I had gotten drunk and ended up starting an argument, it wasn't the first time the bouncers had come to pull me out by the shoulders and throw me onto the street, face first, because I had caused a scene, been too noisy, been too disagreeable, and I thought to myself 'That's what had happened,' as the water fell over my hair and down my shoulders and I put my hands up to my face and pressed my fingers into my eyes, and the metallic taste stuck in the back of my mouth, the critics and cynics and skeptics, everywhere, tearing everything down, and it's that I'm overly optimistic, it's not that I shy away from the darkness, I more

than acknowledge chaos, confusion, sadness, I believe in the truth of those things absolutely, and when I started painting, seriously painting, I used to walk around our neighborhood and I would see so much sadness in the houses on the street, the two-flats overrun with children, with wash lines, with beat up cars parked on the curb, with fathers who drank too much, with harried women who wore their hair up in tight buns, what I could feel was a sadness, their sadness is what inspired me, so I wanted to paint the sadness into the houses, so I started with houses and then I noticed the sadness in other places, in places where you wouldn't expect it, there was so much sadness and the only thing that made sense to me as a young painter was to paint the sadness into my work, so that's what I did and that's what I still do, and that's what the critics and the cynics and the skeptics miss, what is most beautiful and true about us, about the world, involves the sadness, because whenever we find sadness or darkness then a space, an opportunity, for hope is also present, where there is loss, a chance for redemption, where there is tragedy, a miracle is waiting nearby, and it struck me as a young painter so I've carried it with me, it touched me, that always was as close as I could get to having a philosophy about life, I knew if there was anything good or beautiful we found in this mess it was on account of the sadness, so the water fell down my chest and my legs and ran clear at the bottom of the tub I thought back to my mother and the cup of clean water at the table with the paintbrushes resting inside of it, my first fight at the TOWN POOL, I knew I would have to paint today and it had to do with the metallic taste in the back of my mouth and all those things I had remembered and so I turned off the lever to the shower.

PYRAMIDION

Beads of moisture run down the shower door, like tears, and I hope she's asleep because earlier in the night she was upset. She didn't want me to leave her. I asked what was wrong, why didn't she want me to leave her bedroom, and she told me she was afraid of dying. She was afraid of being trapped inside a tomb, in the darkness. It all started in an exhibit hall, with an Egyptian sarcophagus. We had been to the museum earlier in the day. She tugged at my jacket as we walked past the coffin, and she wanted to know who was inside. Could the person see? Were they stuck? In the moment, looking down at her, there is terror in her eyes, a grave concern. It's a look on her face I've never seen before. So I pick her up and set her

against my hip as we make our way to a different exhibit hall in the museum. But it doesn't relieve her anxiety. I can't relax her. I couldn't do it. I wasn't able to do my job. There were more questions. How long had the person been trapped for? Were they with their mommy and daddy? Who brought them cereal for breakfast? Later, at home, after a bedtime routine of toothbrush and hairbrush and goodnight kisses, she filled up with tears and more questions. Will I die? Will you die? Will Mommy die? Four years old and she can already sense that awful unknown, that horizon of blackness in front of her, in front of all of us, our common mystery, and today is the day she's glanced up and noticed its permanence for the first time. Yes, I will die. So will Mommy. And so will she. Everyone dies. Everything alive has to die. But it's alright. We'll be together, Mommy and her and me, we'll be together after we die. My daughter's expression changes. She feels better. I tell her not to worry, again and again. I smile. There's nothing to worry about. Simply, I try to do my job. Because my job is to make her feel safe, feel loved. Even though I've told her something of a lie, I assure her there is a light in the darkness, I promise her we will all be together, then I kiss her forehead and close the door to her room. For now, she is four years old. For now, she'll sleep soundly. As I walk down the hallway from her room to the kitchen, I can't help but feel a kind of sadness. The sadness is from watching your untarnished darling forced to grow up, to work out the terror and the dread and confusion of life, to be confronted by it, a little girl, helpless. The sadness is because I wish I could protect her from it. I wish I had more control. I wish there was something more I could do. But there isn't. I'm as helpless as anyone, and so is she. I won't be able to do my job. My job is a farce. I feel a sadness because when you see your daughter burdened with something like death, a burden you've learned to live with, but she hasn't, and you realize her vulnerability in the face of such a burden, the size of the burden you've taken for granted, you've hidden away from, it breaks your heart. She's so precious to me, and so fragile. I felt a kind of sadness and the house is quiet so I decide to wash up. Beads of moisture on a shower door, after she's gone to bed, I watch them run down the glass, trailing off, colliding with one another, streaks, wakes. Beads on a shower door. I think to myself, naked, that's all we are. Tears running down a panel of frosted glass, then gone. Meaningless. Because none of it means anything. Purposeless. Because none of it has a

purpose. There's no soul. There's no heaven. There's no God. There's nothing at stake. We disappear. We are erased. We are alone. I watch the beads of water run down the shower door and my thoughts trail off. Tomorrow night, our four-year-old daughter will cry, worried about dying, and her mother will explain to her that our bodies will go back to the earth. We'll become flowers. Our daughter will ask if we'll all be together when we are flowers. She'll say to my wife, 'Daddy promised we would be together.' She'll ask if her flower will be next to our flowers. My wife will assure my daughter she'll never be alone, and we'll always be together. Her flower will grow next to mine, next to her mother's. I will listen and smile and wonder out loud with my daughter when the bees come to kiss our petals and collect pollen, will it be like they're tickling us? My daughter will laugh as I tickle her, and then I'll tuck her into the bedsheets and kiss her forehead and I'll walk down the hall, with a sadness, same as I've done tonight. Later on I'll be in the shower watching beads of water run down the shower door and I'll picture daffodils in a field, I'll picture my daughter with flowers in her hair, I'll picture something in front of us, a long way out, but something inevitable we'll have to face. Something that will destroy us. I'll feel hopeless. There's nothing I can do about it. There's nothing anybody can do. What I love and cherish will be wiped away and forgotten. I'll try to find a way out of the despair. I'll try to draw up some faith, to remind myself of the possibilities, how there's more to this than what meets the eye, but none of it will help. I'll hang my head in the shower as the beads fall down the frosted glass of the door. That's how it will happen. But tonight, for tonight, I'll rethink what I told my daughter, and I'll decide firmly it wasn't a lie. My trailing thoughts coalesce. It wasn't a lie you told your daughter. Nobody can claim anything with any certainty about what happens to us when we die. A question with no answers, right or wrong. So how can you lie about something unknown, unproven? And isn't it better to believe, to have a kind of faith in life, like what you told her? Maybe love will find a way. Maybe we'll be together. Isn't life full of miracles? Aren't there plenty of reasons to believe? You ought to have some faith, and you ought to pass the faith along to your daughter. That's part of your job, too. You did your job tonight. You have a job to do. And tonight you did the best you could. Tomorrow I'll hang my head and I won't

be so certain, but tonight I'll sleep and my daughter will sleep and my wife will sleep and we'll wake up to the sun, together.

STRUCK

I felt something pulling me towards it, violent, violent and complete, and it pulled me, because even though it was a thought, or an idea, or a vision, however you would describe it, it lived outside of my head, outside of me, and pulled me towards it. I could feel it pulling at me the night my son came home and told my wife what happened, my wife came to get me, she cried, my son was quiet, we talked for a while but then he told us he was tired, so later, with my son asleep in his room, and my wife was upstairs in our bed, I was sitting on the couch in the basement, when I left my wife it was late, and she had been crying some more in our bedroom, she was hurt, she was inconsolable, she was angry at me because I told her nothing could be done, that we couldn't report it to the school, we couldn't call the other boy's parents, we needed to teach our son to stand up for himself, because that's how it worked in this world. She was upstairs and worn down and lying on the bed and I told her there was nothing else to it, then I said I needed a drink so I left her, I told her to get some rest and I went down into the basement, down the stairs, and I reached for a beer out of the refrigerator and I sat on the couch, and that's when I stopped and took a sip from the beer and let myself fall completely into whatever it was that was pulling at me, pulling me towards it, so it wasn't long before I knew exactly what the thing was, this violent thing, violent and complete, and as I came to encounter its presence I realized there would be nothing for me to do but act on it. An inevitability was associated with it, this image, this idea, that it would have to happen, that it would happen, and the inevitability was certain and impossible to overcome because as I sat on the chair and turned the beer in my hand, as I examined it, as it confronted me, it was clear that whatever had sent this to me, whoever had sent it to me, had put it together in a complete and awful way, a way which ensured I wouldn't be able to resist it. It was stronger than an impulse, and more elegant. It was inspired. And as I sat on the couch and drank my beer I knew it would only be a couple of minutes until I reached for the phone to call my brother and tell him what happened to my son, to tell my brother the story, and then to release this thing that had been revealed to me, to my brother, to share it

with him, what I needed him to do. And even though what I would ask him to do would be violent and complete, to be carried out on my behalf, because I couldn't be associated with it, because it would be obvious if I was the one who did it, and I needed an alibi when this thing took shape, when this act of violence which was to be done on my behalf, on son's behalf, even though what I asked him to do was violent and complete, before I picked up the phone, I knew his answer. I would ask him to do something violent to somebody my brother had never met, to somebody who had nothing to do with my brother, and he would do it, without hesitation, he would tell me not to worry about anything, he would tell me through the receiver of the phone that he would take care of it, he would take all the necessary precautions, that he would wait a couple of months, maybe three months, so any potential connection between what happened to my son and what I had asked my brother to do would disappear. 'I'd give it three months,' my brother said to me. Before he said that, he would ask for the other boy's address. A description. And I would give my brother the address, and a description of the other boy, the other boy's name, his hair color, his height, what sorts of activities the other boy did, sports, where he hung out, because when I had been talking to my son earlier in the night I had made sure to ask for such details, like I knew it was coming, like I knew this violent, complete thing would find me and I would have to know these details in order to do my part, to do what was already inevitable, so I would answer my brother's questions quickly and in succession and then my brother would say alright, that's enough, I have what I need. He would tell me that he would let me know the date and time, he'd call me somewhere down the line, and he'd tell me when it would happen so I could make sure I was with other people, so that my son and I were with other people who could say they saw us, then, after that phone call, we would never talk about it again. My brother, he would say something like 'Consider it done' and that's when I would know it was done, my brother would do it, he would do it exactly like how I'd asked him to do it. That's how it happened. And I put the receiver down and I finished my beer and I shut off the lights in the basement, but I stopped at the top of the stairs, because I realized this violent, this violent and complete thing, it wasn't gone, it was with me, it hung around my shoulders and breathed the same air I was breathing, and I knew it always would, it would be with me, it would be a part of me. Even though it had

started somewhere outside of me, now it would become something inside of me. Because I had called my brother, because I had put this thing into motion, I had turned it into a reality, from a vision or an idea into reality, tangible, something the other boy would experience, something violent and complete, I would have to live with it, inside of me, forever. I stopped at the top step of the basement stairwell and I flipped the light switch and I decided that love can be violent, that love has to be violent, sometimes, and whatever I would have to live with would be alright, I would take it on, because I loved my son, I loved him more than any other person or thing in existence, and because I loved him so much, because I cherished his safety and his wellbeing and his happiness, because I was responsible for those things, it was up to me to make what had happened to him right. And even though I knew that's not how things worked, that nothing is made right, that nothing is squared off, that there's no justice, at least I would be able to do something violent and complete and know, at least in my own heart, I had done something I thought would compensate for the bruises on my son's body and his face. As I stood outside of the door to the basement, in the dark house, I wondered about my brother, and if the thing had begun to live inside of him, if the thing was a part of his breathing, a part of his walking around. And I knew it was, it would be. But my brother loved me. My brother had always been there for me, and he had always taken care of me, and he loved my son, so if there was ever anything I needed, if there was ever anything violent and complete, something which could never be spoken of again, after it was first spoken of, if I needed something like that done, then my brother was the only person I knew who would do it for me, on my behalf, and he'd live with it on his back and breathing his own air because he loved me, and he believed in love, so he believed in protecting the people you loved, the things you loved, even if it required something violent and complete, even if it meant guilt, if it meant having to look over your shoulder, if it meant sleepless nights, it didn't matter to my brother. Even if it meant, eventually, the other boy fell into a coma, hospitalized and on life support, with a full police investigation, with television reporters, even if it meant detectives and evidence, even if it meant blood on his own hands, it wouldn't matter to my brother. It wouldn't matter because my brother believed no blood was innocent, and the only blood that mattered was a blood between brothers. And that's why my brother,

after I called him that night, with a beer in my hand, in the basement, after the idea overtook me, violent and complete, three months later, did exactly what I asked him to do.

HANGOVER

There was an empty space next to him, between two yellow lines in the small parking lot, and as his hand dangled languid outside the driver's side door, a tired cigarette out a driver's side door on a Saturday morning, the first cigarette of the day. There was an empty space and his hangover said it was too bright, the sun, it was a burden, this brightness, and the cigarette wouldn't be enough to overcome the burden of the sun, winter had come to its end and spring was here so he'd better do something about it once the cigarette had finished, whether it was the blinds in the apartment, or his eyes, screwing his eyes together, whatever it was he had to do something about the brightness because his hangover said it was too much, he would have to retreat somehow, and his mind wandered back inside of his studio apartment, with the piles of dirty laundry, the dishes in the sink, the empty refrigerator, the cans of beer, the bottles of bourbon, he'd have to hide out among these things, a stack of listless magazines, they would be his companions, and he groaned to imagine it any further. There was an empty space next to him, between two yellow lines in the small parking lot, and as he closed his eyes he heard one of his neighbors in the building behind him, a radio, an open window, there was music playing and it was a love song, about someone lost in love, and he shook his head and knew he didn't want love, he had no need for love, and even if he did, who could love a thing like him, an almost dead thing, languid, dangling a cigarette out the open door, the first cigarette of the day, his head pounding, his face puffy, his stomach bloated, his body useless like a pool of fetid water, broken down, like a busted window, who could love him, 'Who could love you' he thought to himself, an unlovely creature, imagining pools of infected water and shattered glass, 'What could you possibly offer' he thought, unlovely, with nothing to offer, what good was love. There was an empty space next to him and he tried to stop picturing the women who would never love him, who could never love something like him, an unlovely creature, unlovely and torn, a thing unlovable, so instead his thoughts shifted, with the cigarette in his lips and his arm dangling, languid, his thoughts forming ideas like there's so much more truth in loss, in sorrow,

in what's forsaken, loneliness is a gift, isolation, because it's too much light in love, like the morning sunlight burdening him through the windshield, with his eyes closed, deciding the empty bottles and piles of trash and clothes were somehow important, they somehow connected him to something deeper and more beautiful than the blue sky of the day or the song on the radio. There was an empty space next to him, between two yellow lines in the small parking lot, and love was a ring of keys for locks that didn't exist. There was an empty space and his hangover said it was time for a drink, that the cigarette was finished, so he dragged in another inhalation of smoke and flicked the cigarette with a lazy flick into the empty space between the yellow lines and opened his eyes and stood up from the driver's seat with his feet on the asphalt to shut the door and walk past the cigarette butt and back to his apartment, the studio apartment in the basement of the building with its one window, its one chair, its one bed, its one toilet, its confusion and its emptiness and its coolness and its darkness, back into his room with his keys on the counter and his hands unscrewing the top of a bottle and his mouth opened for a brief pull, then another, a throttle, then another and another and after that he waited for a little while before he decided to head back outside for a cigarette. There was an empty space next to him, between two yellow lines in the small parking lot, a languid cigarette out a driver's side door on a Saturday morning in April, his second cigarette of the day, another tired cigarette, and he shut his eyes and smoked and hummed along to the music he heard coming from his neighbor's window with the smoke in his nostrils, exhaling slowly.

SUBTITLE

It was the anger that dialed the buttons on the phone and sent muffled echoes through the walls of the house into the closet of my bedroom. I knew it was the anger because of the quality of the echoes, the quakes and the thumps. She was stomping her feet at the teletype machine. The anger was stomping her feet. It turned her forehead red and wrinkled and it hid her chestnut brown eyes, it turned them nearly invisible, into black pointed dots, pupils, waiting, as the phone rang on the other end of the line, at some barroom, or some motel, wherever it was my father had holed himself up in. I'd listen to her wait for the teletype machine to work out his next message. It was an awful silence between the echoes. Then,

once he replied, through the operator assisting the conversation, and the words printed themselves up on the paper, I would wince as she groaned. It was the anger that groaned inside of her. She would punch the buttons, furious, and then it would start all over again. The stomping, the buttons, the silence of waiting, the paper on the machine, the groaning. Waves of echoes, and silence. My bedroom closet was next to the kitchen, and the countertop where the teletype machine rested was near the adjoining wall. I could hear everything. After a while it would stop, it would only be silence, and the anger would leave her in the hands of a lonely sadness, and she would cry softly, softly and overwhelmed by the silence, and that's when I would come out of my room to kiss her. I would sign to her that I loved her. I stopped asking what was wrong, once I was old enough to understand, which must have been when I was around seven or eight. I knew by then it was my father. It was my father who brought out the anger in her. It was my father who stayed out late, sometimes for days at a time, who drank too much and hit my mother and called his wife terrible names she couldn't hear, names she could only lip read. He'd grab her face and scream the names into her so she could see them. When I got older, after my mother was gone, I wondered what she thought about her life, in the secret of her heart, how she approached the world, how the voice in her head worked, since she had lost her hearing at such a young age, if there was any voice in her head, if there were only faint murmurs, impressions of words. I often think about my mother and how she experienced the world, what it was like to be in her shoes. I guessed how the emotions would fill up her inner world, like surges of heat, then frozen gales. When I was a girl, I learned about green tree pythons, how the snakes could 'see' both light and heat. I remembered back to a field trip our class had made to the zoo, the placard in front of the terrarium, the balled up reptile, its green and yellow scales, while I was thinking long and hard about my mother. Since my mother wouldn't have names for them, these things which filled up inside of her, she couldn't tame them, the emotions, the passions, and I thought that's why the anger would take control, why the passion would seize her. That's how she ended up with my father in the first place, probably. Passion overtook her. Falling in love must have been terrifying for her. And exciting. As I have filled my thoughts, over the years, about my mother and how things must have been for her, I have encountered a great pain, because I wanted nothing

more than to ask her directly, to talk to her, to understand what it was like to be her, to be a deaf woman, married to a wild man, a drunk, a woman who fought her whole life to convince people she wasn't a fool, proving she could make a place for herself, and for me, in the world. The older I get, the more I admire her. She proved people wrong her whole life, by going to college, by having a baby. She proved them wrong. With more and more years behind me, the more I want to sit on the floor with her, in between her legs, and have her rub my neck and my back. She liked to sit on the floor, so we would sit on the floor instead of at the table. She liked to be close to the ground. She would hold me next to her, close, sitting on our kitchen floor, and I would tell her about our day. When she held me on the floor, I think she could sense vibrations coming from me, touching her, then coming through the floor, vibrations from my voice when I spoke, because I spoke whenever I signed to her, for whatever reason. I cherish those memories, the two of us, together on the floor. She died when I was thirteen. It was a car crash. She changed lanes. The truck driver claimed he honked, he was in her blind spot, he claimed he beeped and honked and tried to warn her. Her car flipped over and that was how it ended. The police report indicated she had been driving too fast. She loved to drive fast. It might have been the anger driving her car that night on the way home from work. Something took hold of her and then it took her away from me. By then my father was completely out of the picture. I went to live with his sister, my aunt, because my mother had been an only child, like me, and her parents were both dead. My father didn't want anything to do with raising a child, he never had, but his sister must have felt guilty for her brother's sins, for having some of his blood in her veins, so she took me in for a few years, until I graduated high school and went off to college. I often think about her, my mother. I've tried to keep her close to me, her face, memories of her, like the two of us sitting on the floor in our tiny kitchen, patient, feeling vibrations.

ENTROPY

I know what she is thinking, standing in front of me, my sister, searching me over for answers. She figures I'm cracking up, or breaking down, or however she was thinking it, whatever the words were in her head or on her lips, in secret, across hushed phonelines, 'She's going crazy,' that's what my sister had fixed

in her head about me, a few months after our daddy had died, she was paying me a visit because she figured I was losing it on account on account of the shock, on account of being unmoored, whatever it was she had me figured out since there was plenty of evidence for her to point to, like how I hadn't left the house much, how I hadn't taken care of the garden out front, how I hadn't returned to my old job, how I hadn't cashed in any of the checks, any of the money left to me, how I hadn't eaten much since after the funeral, how I stopped bathing, how I hardly slept because all I could hear at night was that struggle in his last breaths, the choking and gasping, his purple face at the end with the hospice nurse, after the nurse had given him some more morphine, she told me it would be painless, but it didn't look painless, it looked awful and there was nothing I could do but watch him struggle and grope for air and then finally sigh out one last puff in his final goodbye. My sister figures I'm breaking down, or cracking up, whatever it is, because mine isn't a normal bereavement, because I can't cope with the fact our daddy is dead, and watching him at his deathbed in those final hours was too much, it was too disturbing, like a vision of hell, the gasping sounds and the color of his skin and the awful desperation in his bloodshot eyes, those chokes and wheezes, there was no peace in him, and now, I couldn't make sense of it. My sister figures I shouldn't have been there with daddy, and she wishes she would have been the one there at the end with the hospice nurse, but at the same time she knows I was always closer to him, I was his younger daughter, the girl who adored him, who thought he could never do wrong, and she was his older daughter, the girl who challenged his rules, who hated his restrictions and his advice and his simple fatherly ways of concern and cautiousness. She figures because I had been living with daddy and caring for him these past few years, after his first stroke, after I moved in with him even after the doctors recommended putting him in a facility, a professional setting, with a full-time nursing staff, even though the doctors were stern with their recommendations I never listened or considered any of that so I sold my condo and I quit my job to take on a part-time gig, something less stressful, more flexible, so I could spend time with daddy, take care of him, to make him feel comfortable, and since I had been living with him for a few years, since we had grown close, since I had spent my dinners with him and my mornings and listened to his stories and jokes and paged through photo

albums with pictures of my mother and memories from my childhood, now that he was gone there was a terrible hole in my life. She figures since daddy isn't around anymore, after everything I'd invested in him, after how he'd become the focal point of my life, that losing him had created a void, a dense emptiness, which overwhelmed me, which distorted my focus, which prevented me from carrying on and living my own life. That's what she figures, searching me over for answers, standing in front of me with her hands on her hips. I've fallen into a darkness I can't pull myself out from. 'She's cracking up.' That's what she tells her friends, what my sister tells her husband in the privacy of their bedroom. She probably uses words like traumatic, abject, empty. She strings her words together and figures I'm losing my mind and convinces whoever she's talking to of the same fact and then she figures if I'm not careful something bad will happen to me, that I'll do something foolish, like take my own life, or I'll languish, I'll become choked by my own grief, stifled, I'll wind up an old woman with no life of her own, nothing to show for herself, no husband, no children, because she never got over her daddy passing away. My sister has me all figured out. I can tell by the way she's searching me over for answers. Whenever she comes by, she makes her suggestions, she tells me what she thinks I ought to be doing, she takes offense to my reticence, my silence, the state of the garden, she thinks I'm losing it and now she'll end up being the one to take care of me, I'll become a burden to her and one day soon she'll have to find a doctor with recommendations for how to deal with me. I can see it in the way she searches over me with her eyes. She's worried for herself, but she pretends the worry is over me, over how I'm doing, but in truth her worry is an inward worry because all she wants is to sit in her bedroom with her husband and click away on her computer and live a comfortable, unbothered life with her son and her daughter, with pizza on Fridays, with a new car every three or four years, with vacations and retirement savings. The truth is, I've got her figured out. She wasn't meant to be the one sitting with daddy on his last night. She was the one who wouldn't have been able to handle it, who would've cracked up on account of his struggled breathing, the fear in his eyes, the desperation. She wouldn't have been able to walk through those final hours with daddy. She wouldn't have been able to work up the faith necessary to keep going, despite the fear, despite a vision of hell, a fate which waits for all of us,

our final hours in which we are helpless and alone and condemned to leave this life into a terrible unknown, cast out into forever. I've got her figured out, now, watching her looking over me, assessing how much of a risk I am, how much of a threat I present to her comfortability, if I'll be an inconvenience. Deciding on which words to string together when she gets home, whether I'm cracking up, or breaking down, or going sideways. She's looking me over figuring all these things and she wants me to give her some kind of assurance, some kind of indication that she doesn't have to worry, that I'll be alright, that she won't have to do anything with me, that she won't be held accountable. And that's the difference between her and daddy, between her and I, because at the end, confronted with the lonesome valley, the abyss, although he was pained, he was fighting, he never once looked at me for assurance, for help. He went into it, himself. And that's how I'll go into it, myself. I'll continue on, without much sleep, hardly bathing, forgetting about the bank checks and the garden, with the curtains drawn, in daddy's house, in the silence, in the perfect silence.

IMMACULATE

A vision, her skin and the shadow from the milky lamplight, her breasts and her torso, her naval, her arms pulled up over her head, her hair hanging down in curls past her shoulders, the shadows and the milky lamplight, her skin, smooth, tiny blonde hairs and birthmarks, her hips, tight, full, her breasts and her hair, that's how I remembered her in her bedroom, on her bed, the last time I had seen her, the shadows on her skin, her body in the lamplight, how there was a tightness in her skin but a softness to it, to her, it was after we had made love, after I had stood up and gazed down over her, at her curls, her torso, her hips, her cheeks and her eyelashes, she was on her bed, on top of the comforter with her hands behind her head, and she was beautiful. We were so young. I was so young. We had graduated high school, and the next day I was off to report for basic training because I had joined the military. In a month or two she would be off to college. How could I have known? When you're so young, you can't know. I couldn't have known. I wouldn't have believed it if you had told me. 'This girl, right now, underneath your eyes, will be the most beautiful thing you ever see in your entire life, and nothing you see from this night forward will be as beautiful.' You can't know something like that

as a young man. As a boy. I'm not sure what I could have done differently. Maybe I would have written her a letter from camp. I could've called. I could've tried to see her again. But I was young. I figured there would be other girls. There would be more breasts, shadows, lamplight. There were, but none of them were like her, laying on top of the comforter in the late spring, the early summer, in May, with its dandelion seeds like snowflakes scattered in the dusk. Not a single one compared to her. Maybe I could've stayed with her longer that night. My eyes looking upon her, on the bed, with the bones of her hips pressed tight against her skin, with her tiny moles and blonde hairs, her belly button, her knee bent, her toes pointed, the tightness and the softness. I suppose I could have stuck around, worked a job, forgotten about the Army. I could have asked her to be mine. I could have told her I loved her, and that she was beautiful. I can't remember if I told her she was beautiful or not. I certainly didn't tell her she was the most beautiful thing I would ever see in my entire life, because how could you know. Who would know a thing like that, at eighteen years old. Even though every eighteen-year-old kid knows everything. Well, I didn't know that. But I could've done something different. Maybe. Maybe not. I went away and spent time in the service and I lived a lifetime out until, by chance, by accident, by whatever it is that brings people together I bumped into an old friend, years later, and we talked about the people and the places from back where we grew up, and I found out the girl had been to the hospital, he had seen her a few times, she was gaunt, wasted away, her thighs had disappeared to bones. Her face was caved in, where her cheeks should have been. She had been starving herself, and then when she ate, she would vomit it back up. Anorexia. Bulimia. He told me she looked horrible, and that she had been to the hospital, she had been in and out, and finally, she had died, from heart issues, malnutrition, she was dead, a young woman in her thirties maybe, gone. That's what my old friend had to tell me. I'm glad I didn't see her. I'm glad I never saw her like that. We agreed what a shame it was, for a person to have to go that way, especially a winsome girl like her. We agreed, my friend and I, it was a damn shame for a beautiful girl like that to waste away. We shook hands for goodbye and I thought to myself how glad I was I never had to see her come to such an end, never had to see her like that, bones, a sunken body, a beautiful thing destroyed. I haven't seen my old friend since. I don't go home anymore. Home,

for me, isn't where I grew up. I'm an old man, retired, who made a new home for himself in a new place with a strange woman who none of the neighborhood girls would have approved of. Which is alright by me, and the strange woman has suited me well. She's a beautiful woman in her own ways. And I'm lucky to have her. But when I sip the iced tea she fixes for me on the porch of our house in May, in the early summer, the late spring, when the dandelion seeds are like snowflakes, when the dusk falls on you like a soft kiss, I think about her body, her skin and the shadow from the milky lamplight, how she bent one of her knees and pointed her toes, laying there on top of her bed, the softness of her, the tightness, her hair hanging down in curls past her shoulders, her eyelashes and her arms pulled up over her head, the shadows and the milky lamplight and her skin, I remember back to how she looked that night, and I fill myself with her, with that image of her underneath my eyes, because she is the most beautiful thing I ever saw in my entire life, and I'm an old man now and I can say something like that with a good deal of certainty.

MAIN STREET

A man at the parade was standing nearby, and with him was an even older man, an old man, bald and peering out of spectacles, holding the man's hand. They were at the parade, next to the road, on a patch of grass, and the older man was holding the man's hand, and there was a look inside the man, like he was bewildered by what he was seeing, the fire truck and the performers on stilts, the high school marching band and the gang of Boy Scouts, the clowns handing out candy. It's like he was a little boy, but inside a man's body. And the older man, he was holding his hand, and there was something about the older man's face, the way he stood next to the man, it was like he knew the parade was bewildering, a strange thing, and he wanted the man to know it was alright, that he was still safe, that he could simply watch these strange things pass by down the street. There were people clapping and cheering, there were children in red wagons, there were colors and flags and the sun was bright. There was a shirtless man out in his front lawn, watching his dog, waiting for the dog to shit so he could pick up the dog's shit and put it into a green plastic bag. I was watching all this. And as I watched the older man, I decided in my mind that he was treating the other man like a boy, he cared to him and made concessions for him like a father would, so he must be the

man's father, the father to the man whose hand he was holding. It must be his father. He's like a boy, inside of a man's body, and he is here with his father, the two of them, watching the parade. I noticed in the man's other hand, which wasn't holding onto his father, was a device, a Panasonic TR 5041, a portable television set with an antenna. Analog television. Radiowaves. The screen was black, and the device didn't seem to be turned on, but the man had it in his other hand and I noticed it. My attention drew back to the father because I happened also to be watching the parade with my son, with my boy, who was a boy inside of a boy's body. I had my son on top of my shoulders, and my own boy watched on as the fire truck and the performers on stilts passed by, and I squeezed my son's thighs and I had asked him 'Are you having fun?' and he didn't respond with anything, so I suppose he was bewildered by everything, too. But my son would become accustomed to it. He would grow up to yearn nostalgic for this wholesome Americana, for a fundraiser pancake breakfast, for telephone booths, for BARBERSHOP poles in red white and blue, fireworks and Little League Opening Day, horse racing homestretches and Coca Cola, diners serving eggs over-easy and sunny-side up. Graceful Americana like Memorial Day parades, like pocketknives and the Sadie Hawkins dance, Airstream trailers. He'd grow up and have a boy of his own and realize the only thing worth passing on was wholesome, graceful Americana, for God and Country. I'd tell my son the story of Buddy Curran handing cups of coffee to the train engineers at the station from a lunch cart and one day he'd tell the same story to his own son, driving over the railway tracks. I knew what I would pass on to my boy, my son on my shoulders, and he'd grow up and come to understand the secret importance behind a parade, as the police shut down traffic, when we all came together and cheered. It wouldn't seem dissonant, bewildering. It would make sense. My son would pull his own boy down the sidewalks, in a red wagon, and there would be a woman in tears over a lost credit card, screaming into her phone, veins popping out of her forehead and neck. One day, he wouldn't be bewildered by any of it. It would be customary. It would be comforting. But this man, with the older man holding his hand, his father, the boy, I didn't think the look of bewilderment would ever wash off from his face. I thought about the older man, the father, his boy, and how many times they might have been here, coming back year after year, to watch this parade pass by. I wondered if he knew, the father, all those years back, that nothing

would change for his son, the strangeness would never condense into familiarity. All those years back, could he have pictured himself, here, with a grown man, holding his hand, with nothing to pass on? I adjust the little boy on my shoulders. I point to a woman in sash, a red convertible, her hair dyed blonde, makeup caked onto her face. I tell my son to wave. 'Wave to her, partner! Can you wave? Here, watch me!'

GRAVEDIGGER

Connie woke up with Rita's arm stretched over his belly. He pushed her off, rolled to one side, then he moved his hand to his face. He rubbed at his eye sockets. He rubbed at the bridge of his nose. He reached back, behind his head, and noticed he had tied his hair into a bun, like a samurai. Connie, although he couldn't remember much from the last twelve hours, knew for certain he had blacked out from drinking liquor. And it had been a drunken lust that knocked on Rita's door, probably well after midnight. It had been a blind, stupid lust which had caused him to bring her into his bed, to share his liquor with her, to let her on top of him, inside of her, ferocious and sweaty and clumsy, their bodies fat and bouncing off each other. That's how it had been. He could guess by the smell, and by the samurai bun in his hair. He only tied his hair up like that when he was good and drunk on brown liquor. He tied his hair up like a samurai, because he enjoyed samurai movies and comics, and held onto a secret kind of faith that in a past life he had indeed roamed in Japan, a warrior. Connie knew it was ridiculous, but it didn't matter. Rita's husband would be by to get her. It was 5:30 AM. Her old man'd be by at 6:00AM looking for his breakfast. That's how it was with them. They were too poor, too drunk, too mean to get a divorce, so he played around with other women and she played around with other men and in the morning she cooked him breakfast and when the bills showed up for the electricity and water and gas, he took care of it. Everyone at Val's Trailer Park knew Rita and her husband fooled around and went out behind each other's back so nobody ever got too worked up about it. By now it was usual for her husband to come by Connie's door once or twice a month. Connie could taste the stale booze in his mouth. And Rita's lipstick. He looked down and there was nothing left of what had been there the previous night. 'Hey, Rita.

Your old man is going to be looking for you. You better head back.' That's what Connie said to her as he stood up from the bed and worked his way through his room, through his clothes. A pair of wool socks, he sniffed them. Underwear. His khaki shorts with the tear on the side, above the bottom seam of the leg. His orange shirt. He dressed himself and checked the window for his truck and his gear, his gas generator and his blowers and rakes, his lawnmowers, the cooler hung up into the rigging of the bed. It was all where he had left it. He groaned as he set himself onto the chair, to tie his shoes, to finish his morning preparations. His back hurt. His knees hurt. His neck hurt. His fingers were red and inflamed, swollen and arthritic. But he had no crew. He had no foreman. There was nobody but him. GIBBONS LANDSCAPING. It had always been him, and only him. Sure, there had been Tracy, and then Lina. For a couple months, both of them. Tracy ran off with a Marine. Lina had gotten pregnant. Nothing stuck, though, and both women told Connie he wasn't enough in all the right places, and too much in all the others. Not enough stability, but too much flirting. Not enough money, too much drinking. There were things you do for love. Then there were things you do for lust. Connie opened the door for Rita, who had reached for Connie's crotch on her way out but he slapped her hand away and chuckled. 'You ain't much of anything Connie, don't forget that!' she croaked. He chuckled some more. Her voice reminded him of his mother's, before he left home, after his father died, after his brother died, with the bank foreclosing on the land, with their futures uncertain. 'You ain't gone yet, Connie? You ain't never gonna amount to shit if you don't learn to wake up in the morning!' The morning hadn't broken open yet so the sky was still full of purple. Connie waited for Rita to clear out, then he lit a cigarette and locked the door to his trailer home. He stood there a second in the twilight. Then, he hobbled to the truck. There was an address on a piece of paper in his pocket. First there would be coffee, gasoline, more cigarettes, and then he would take out the address. He would wonder, unfolding the piece of paper, because it was strange how the job came about. A call had come in while he was out and a man's voice had left a quiet message on Connie's machine. It was strange because the voice didn't say who had recommended Connie for the job. All of Connie's business was word of mouth. He didn't advertise. He barely had an entry in the Yellow Pages. But the man on the answering machine hadn't mentioned how he heard about Connie.

The voice only disclosed an address, a phone number, a description of the work, and an offer to have the work complete. It didn't sound like much of anything, an old yard, a house that hadn't been lived in for years, overgrowth, vines, creepers, weeds. The man's voice explained he would be selling the house soon. A realtor was coming by. They might need a couple of trees planted, some hydrangeas. Stop by tomorrow morning, first thing. He'd be happy to pay at least a grand for the job, maybe more. Then the voice clicked, because the phone had hung up. Connie smoked his cigarette and sipped on his coffee and then stopped the truck, because he had arrived at the address, the same as the street and number written on the piece of paper in his pocket. Connie groaned and tried to massage a knot out of his neck. Then he took a good look at the house. It was the only house in the neighborhood with a fence, a broken-down fence painted red but most of the paint had chipped, the wood was badly worn, the nails were rusted, but the main structure of the fence held together and nobody could see anything inside the yard from the outside. It was a tall fence, a tall, worn down fence, and that's what Connie decided when he first saw it, gingerly limping out of his truck onto the driveway and towards the home. That's a tall, beat to hell fence. Before Connie knocked on the door, he shut his eyes. He took a sip of coffee from the Styrofoam cup. Shut your eyes, and disappear. No more Val's Court. No more Rita. No more cheap whiskey. No more aches. No more truck. No more worries. Then the door opened. When Connie opened his eyes he saw a man in a black suit, a man with a thin frame. The man's pantlegs were too high, and the man wore white socks which bore out a stark contrast against the man's shiny black shoes. The man stepped out of the house, closed the door, locked it, and told Connie he was glad Connie came. Did you listen to my message on the answering machine? Follow me to the back. It's right over here. My mother died. This was her home. She hadn't been around, though, for a number of years, because she was put into an institution. Dementia. She was dead now. The house was to be put up for sale. The yard needs to be completely cleared out. Take a good look. It's terrible, isn't it? But can you do it? How much will it cost? How long will it take? Can you start right away? Connie nodded, and the man offered his hand. Connie shook the man's hand and couldn't help but let his eyes fix on the pant legs, the white socks, and the shiny, black shoes. A thousand dollars. A day's work. The man hurried back into the house and Connie limped

back to his truck. A shovel. A pair of shears. The weed whacker. The chainsaw. Connie's morning amounted to dozens of brown bags, waste bags, stuffed full of branches and weeds and vines, overgrowth, debris, bits of plastic and trash. Connie went back to the truck, opened the creaky passenger door, and sat down. It was time for a break. His neck and forearms were covered in sweat. So was his forehead, his thighs and his back. Strands of hair fell down over his cheeks and his neck, but the bun at the top of his head was mostly intact. He took a handful of aspirin and ibuprofen, glugged them down with what was left of the coffee in the Styrofoam cup, and lit a cigarette. He felt better than he had in the morning, driving up to the house with the tall, worn down fence. There had been no sign of the man, the son of the dead mother whose pants were too short. Connie smoked the cigarette and closed his eyes. Everything disappeared for a little while until a bead of sweat rolled down from his brow to the tip of his nose. Connie opened his eyes, sighed, and tossed the cigarette into the street. The rest of the afternoon carried on. The shade fell on the yard and the work slowed down as the trash disappeared, the vines were clear, the grass was cut. Connie had picked up a few flowers and shrubs from a local nursery and planted them where he saw fit. Everything was done, but as he surveyed the property, checking his work, he noticed it near the back corner, a bush behind a sycamore tree. It had to go. He had missed it. He figured he would pack up, then make one last dig with his shovel to end the day. So Connie packed his gear into his truck, and when he opened the door, there was a white envelope on his seat. Inside the envelope Connie found a cluster of bills, hundred-dollar bills, ten of them. Connie looked around, down the street and back at the house, then he tucked the envelope behind the sun visor. Connie was damp and quiet as he walked back into the yard with a spade in his hand. He began to dig up the dead bush. He dug out the roots. On his last thrust into the earth, he heard a sound. A crack. Connie looked down into the hole after he had yanked up the mangled branches and roots, and then he saw the bones. There were bones in the hole. And the bones weren't animal bones. Connie had seen rabbit bones and dog bones, cattle bones and sheep bones. His old man used to let him hunt coyote along the fencelines, they'd follow them back to their dens, back when there was land and air and Connie could run home for dinner and wash up and listen to the radio when the plates were cleared from the table. These weren't animal bones. Connie

dug up some more dirt from the hole. He was careful with the blade of the shovel. That was a femur. That was a radius, and an ulna. And that was a skull. It was small. A baby's skull. The skull had a hole on the top of it, where it hadn't fused yet. Connie didn't know much about babies, but he remembered they had soft spots on their heads where the skull hadn't fused yet. This skeleton belonged to an infant, hardly born, if born at all. Connie diverted his eyes from the hole up to the windows of the house. The man with the short pants who intended to sell the house wasn't anywhere to be seen. Connie turned back, hesitating at first, then into the hole. It had been a long while since his old man taught him how to aim a rifle, how to line up the bead, how to hold your breath as you pulled the trigger. The big storms that used to roll down from the walls of hills like gunmetal waves into the valley. It had been a long time, an entire lifetime, from when those waves spilled onto his father's land, up until now, up until this moment with Connie standing above these bones forgotten to the ground. Connie stood above the hole with his hand on the shovel and he forgot about his aches and his arthritis and Rita back at the trailer park, he forgot about the samurai bun at the top of his head, the pack of cigarettes in his pocket, the half tank of gas in his truck. He shut his eyes.

CONTRACTUAL

There's a reason why it's called 'breezing' a horse, same as there's a reason why people describe cancer as 'eating' away its victims. She was a healthy, fulsome, blonde-haired woman when the doctors handed her the diagnosis. Her social calendar was teeming with kids' activities, board meetings, charity galas, Caribbean vacations. A steady career. A nice home. She had a life most people envied. But not at the end. After the tests were completed, after the scans were analyzed, after she woke up one morning with a sore leg and couldn't understand why, after her fate was sealed, what was there to be jealous of? If I remember, she had undergone a surgery, then it was chemotherapy, combination antibodies, holistic medicine, stringent dietary plans. Altogether it lasted a little over a year, maybe fourteen months. In the end, at her end, she was nothing more than a wooden body, fitted into a metal casket. A picture on a prayer card. Initially, when she was first diagnosed, she was optimistic. She was determined. She met the enemy with vigor. But it soon became clear no matter what resources

she was able to pull onto her side, however she mobilized, it wouldn't be enough. She was outmatched. She made no progress. And once she understood the truth of her situation, maybe three months before she died, her mind unwound, raw, and her heart became completely exposed. For her, to approach death, to find a way to reconcile this was the end of her life, she had no berth to settle into. Our last meeting, between her and I, was a visit I paid her while she was in the hospital, and that's when I saw it, the fear inside her, the inability to reconcile herself to what dying meant. I hadn't seen her in several months. In the beginning, after she first found out, we kept to our routine, but it didn't last long. She cancelled on me. She had to focus on other priorities. I told her she could call me whenever she wanted, and I didn't want to interfere, I didn't want to complicate things with her family, I didn't want to make anything harder for her than it already would be. We had been lovers for a couple of years. It was fun. Though I couldn't imagine being involved with her in the confines of a marriage, with all the activities, the things to keep up with, I would have never been able to keep up, or care, but as a lover, a clandestine lover at that, she was more than a good fit. After she told me she had cancer, I didn't know what to say. Our relationship was physical, based on our bodies, so I wasn't sure how cancer figured into what we had, what we represented to each other. When I entered her room, at the hospital, I recoiled. It was jarring to find her that way, with her hollow cheeks, her blonde hair replaced with a pale white scalp, her bony fingers, her yellow eyes, the smell of hospital disinfectant covering the smell of bodily fluids, of excrement, of puss. I didn't like the way I found her. I would have preferred her snapping her pearl earrings into her ear lobes, with the pin and the backing, the way she tilted her head, after she would pick them up off the nightstand or the desk or whatever furniture was next to the bed we had been in. I would have preferred that. I shouldn't have come, but she had asked me to. I couldn't say no to her. I couldn't tell her whatever we had was between our bodies, and there was nothing left of hers. She was being eaten alive. Connected to tubes, drool pocketing around the corners of her mouth. I pulled up a seat next to her and tried to smile. She went straight into things. She told me that she hoped I didn't feel bad for what we had done, that she hadn't told her husband, that she wanted it to stay between us, and whatever it had been between us, she enjoyed it, she didn't feel guilty or ashamed about

it, and now, with her life nearing its end, when she thought back to what happened in the secrecy of parking lots or motel rooms, she felt alive, she was glad she had been alive and lived that way and I had been there for her to help her be alive, to help her feel alive, so she didn't regret having done what she did with her body or with mine. She had been so honest, composed when she spoke to me. I was surprised. But then, after a moment, she began to cry. She began to sob. She cried and I tried to console her and I said something to the effect of don't give up, I told her not to give up, but after I said it her face changed. She demanded me to look at her, to take a good look at her, and her voice changed and the tears fell out from her eyes and she screamed at me to look at her, how could I insinuate something like that, for her to be hopeful, not to quit, in the state she was in, how she was being eaten alive, couldn't I see that she was being eaten alive, and now, the reality was she'd never see her kids grow up, she'd be stuffed into a metal rectangle and buried into the ground and no one would be there with her because where she was going you could only go it alone, screaming at me, asking if I understood, if I had ever considered what it might be like, how it might feel to go somewhere you could never come back from and you had to go it alone, and I told her I hadn't, and I was sorry, and she told me to fuck off with my sorry, to go to hell, because she knew I was no different than everybody else who came to see her, and I, like them, was glad it was her in the hospital bed and not me. I didn't know how to respond. I sat there with my hands in my pockets, silent. She asked me what I had to say for myself and I didn't have anything to say, so I said I was sorry, I apologized, again, I said I was sorry, and she scoffed at me and told me to fuck off with my sorry and leave, she told me to leave and never come back and so I stood up and set the chair back in its place and turned out from her room and I left where she was laying down and I didn't see her again until the wake, until my wife forced me along with our son, the three of us, to the funeral parlor, to pay our respects, to offer our condolences to her husband and her daughters, to express our sadness for their loss. I looked over her prayer card. It was a beautiful picture of her. It didn't look like the body in the casket, the thing which had been eaten away, had turned yellow, bald, volatile. My wife asked me, after the drive back home from the funeral parlor, while we were in the kitchen, why I was so quiet. She remarked that I was being quiet. I told her I felt bad

for him, her husband. I told my wife it could happen to anyone, how quickly it had happened to her. My wife agreed with me, it was terrifying how quickly it could happen. She said we ought to be nicer to each other, to think more about what we had, the two of us, to acknowledge how good our life was. Everything could change so quickly. I agreed with my wife. I smiled at her and I took her hand and I agreed that we should appreciate what we had, appreciate our life, our son, our jobs, our house, our marriage. I told my wife I was sorry. I said I was sorry for not being better to her, for not treating her the way I should. I meant it. I meant it when I said it to her and she thought I was overreacting, she insisted I was being too harsh on myself, because she didn't know the truth, the truth locked in a casket, buried, everything I had taken for granted, everything I had jeopardized, everything I could lose, in an instant.

AMEN

He woke up before the dawn broke so their room was still dark, a few birds were making their calls outside, and he could hear her breathing next to him, so he considered it and decided to wait, to stay awake, to listen to her sleep and wait for her, to watch her eyes open and whisper 'Good morning' then tell her he had been awake with her as she slept, what a beautiful thing she was as she slept, to watch her, it was beautiful to watch her asleep while the sun crept through the blinds, as the light began to fill up their bedroom and kiss her forehead then her lips, he wanted to say something like that, something sweet, heartfelt, as the birds sang outside in the darkness, he wanted her to feel beautiful and feel cherished and loved and smile to wake up to start her day with those feelings. It had been so long since she had smiled and felt that way, since they had started their morning together with a tender moment, he thought maybe it would help, it could help her, help stave off the negative thoughts, the sadness, and so in the black predawn with the birds he was hopeful maybe today would be a good day for her if he said something sweet, heartfelt to her as she woke, and if today went well maybe then it could build a kind of momentum, more days without the empty blankness she described to him, so eventually the sadness would dissipate and the bad thoughts would disappear and she would come back to him the way she was before everything had started to change for her, for him, for them. He didn't know the difference between prayer and hope so

in a way he prayed by the way he hoped for his plan to work, the sweet, heartfelt things he would say to her before he kissed her, first her forehead and then her lips, as the sun filled up their room, he hoped it would make a difference, she would feel something warm, from his kiss and his words, from the sun shining in through their room, and then maybe his kiss and his words would help keep away the depression, the thoughts of suicide, the self-mutilation, maybe today it would be enough so the good thoughts outweighed the bad ones, and then maybe a kind of momentum would build, and it would open up the insides of her, she had been so closed off so maybe if she opened up and the opening continued to grow bigger feelings like happiness or love could find their way into her, even though it would take time, it would take weeks and months, mornings and nights, it would be gradual, but it had to start somewhere like how the sadness had started somewhere, everything has a beginning, a place where you can point back to and say that's where it started, so he hoped today would be a kind of starting place for her, for him, for them, this morning. The birds sang outside the windows and his eyes were open, and he hoped it would work, his plan to watch her sleep, and his hope felt like a prayer because after the last few months, after the hospital, after the therapists and the medications, everything, he hadn't tried praying for her and so this was his prayer, the morning of his prayer for her, for her to leave the sadness, to feel his love, to believe life was worth the price of living, to believe a future existed with her and with him, maybe with children, with a house, with a dinner table, with laughter, it was out somewhere for them to find it and it was possible for them to reach it, together.

LIES

Her grandfather had told her after the balloon string escaped from her hand, after the balloon rose up past the trees and into the spaces above the buildings, above the roofs of the apartments, above the streetlights and the children playing stickball in the alleyways, her grandfather told her the balloon was going up to be with Mommy, it would be a present for Mommy, Mommy would see the balloon once it reached heaven so there was no reason to be sad about losing hold of the string because now the balloon would be a gift for her Mommy. Immediately the look on the little girl's face changed, the expressions on her, so young, so immune from social expectations, from self-awareness, she was nothing but who

she was, a four-year-old girl like that, and she changed faces in front of her grandfather from upset to delighted and asked her Pappy for another balloon, so she could let it go, since it would float up to heaven to be with Mommy, so then Mommy would have two balloons instead of one. She pointed to a cluster of balloons tied to a weight on one of the tables in the yard and asked for a pink balloon, her favorite color, a pink birthday balloon. She told her grandfather the pink balloon would be her special present for Mommy because Mommy was up in heaven where balloons floated and Mommy would know it was from her. So her grandfather handed her the string of the pink balloon and the little girl let the balloon go and watched it rise up past the trees and into the spaces above the buildings, above the roofs of the apartments, above the streetlights and the children playing stickball in the alleyways, it rose up and out of sight and the little girl was smiling because soon the balloon would be with her Mommy. The little girl's Pappy felt a tear form in his eye silently as he watched the little girl gazing at the balloon. The little girl's father, nearby, watched the tear in the old man's eye and the concentration on his daughter's face and didn't know what to make of it but he felt distrustful and skeptical and sensed even though she was a little girl she had somehow been cheated. But then, a few days later, coming home from the city, from an overnight job, in the rain, a storm which had lingered all day and all night and into the next morning, driving through the tunnel then out onto the gray northbound lanes, the little girl's father caught sight of a pink balloon hovering about six or seven feet off the pavement, and he was overwhelmed with the smell of rain on the warm asphalt, on the July asphalt, and the thick exhaust of humidity and garbage and diesel, he approached the balloon, a pink ball of latex hovering above the ground with the mist and the fumes, suspended and defiant against the cars, the trucks, with everyone on their way to work or an appointment, their most important lives, oblivious and rushing past it. He drove alongside everyone else and passed the balloon and checked his rearview mirror and it seemed to remain there, bobbing, bumping against traffic, a pink balloon same as the one the little girl had let go of into the sky during her birthday party, the gift for Mommy, up in heaven, up past the trees and into the spaces above the buildings, above the roofs of the apartments, above the streetlights and the children playing stickball in the alleyways, apart from it all, from everything and

everyone else. The little girl's father turned back to face a few more miles of road and even though he still felt distrustful and skeptical, he still felt as though he had been cheated, along with his daughter, he pulled his cap off from his head and grinned.

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS

The windows are foggy so you can't make out the faces in the booths, their faces are obscured, but the neon strings of lights along the eaves, the string of reds on top of the string of whites on top of the string of blues, the lights break through the rain and the thickness of the night so you can make out the lights from down the road and I did, I saw the glowing neons as I approached the diner, in my car with the windshield wipers squeaking, the all-night diner with the EASY ON EASY OFF billboard alongside the highway. She's behind the cash register, the same woman who is always at the diner to take your check and your money, with her colorful sweater and her dangling earrings, a wrinkled forehead, I walk in and see her, a woman who's worked at the diner forever, you see her every time you go, whose father died and left its care to her, she pulls out a menu from underneath the counter while I peer into a glass dish of peppermints and then she leads me to a booth. The waitresses come and go but they're all the same waitress with the same harried look, overtired, a black apron, a pad and a pen, a tray of plates and bowls, of meatloaf house specials and chicken noodle soup, buttered Greek toast, I see a few of them scattered about as I follow the woman, the hostess, the heiress, to a booth where she sets the menu down and smiles at me before she tells me to enjoy my meal and returns to the register. I can't remember any of the waitresses but I remember the woman, though I doubt the woman remembers me even though I'm certain the woman remembers every one of the waitresses over the last twenty or thirty years who have come and gone, scattered. She remembers Jeannie with the boyfriends. She remembers Terry with the unfair landlord. She remembers Nancy with the fake jewelry. At the booth, the smell of rain and asphalt is replaced with the smell of French fries, burnt coffee, and I look down at the menu but I don't open it. I stare at the cover, the thick cover with all the laminated pages behind it, the prices and the pictures of signature dishes, I don't need to open it. What's the sense to hesitate or fuss over a decision or bog myself down with considerations because I know exactly what the check will read when I hand it over to the woman

at the register, after the waitress takes out her pad and her pen and writes it down. EASY ON EASY OFF, OPEN ALL NITE. A paper placemat rests underneath the thick menu with printed advertisements from local businesses. A clink of silverware echoes against a ceramic mug, coffee and cream. A waitress stands next to the booth where I'm sitting and then she leaves with her secret thoughts and impressions and discriminations as well as the menu so there's only the paper placemat and a fork and a knife and a spoon on top of a folded napkin, a metal caddy with ketchup and hot sauce and salt and pepper and packets of syrup and jam. I can't smell the rain anymore and I pause within a deep breath to close my eyes for a moment to acknowledge the feeling, relaxed, because when the night began it was an endless field of possibility, so many different directions things could have gone but I'm satisfied waiting for my food, sipping at a chocolate milkshake because from that endless field of possibilities this is likely the best one, for me, for my mother, for my brother, for my girlfriend, this is the best any of us could have hoped for because it's late and I'm going to eat a hot meal and the money in my pocket will go to the woman behind the cash register and she'll smile at me when I drop the change and a few singles into the tip jar for the waitresses. I could be on that highway, underneath and surrounded by torrential downpours, a conveyor belt to hell. Instead I'm at the same booth where earlier in the day an old man read a surly newspaper and drank six cups of coffee. I could already be in the city, in an alley, at a club, something in my pocket, something up my nose. Instead I'm finishing a milkshake and I'm setting the fork and the knife across an empty plate ready for the check, ready to stand up and pay the woman behind the counter who will ask me if everything was alright and I'll tell her yes, it was more than alright. It was as good as it could have worked out, this night with its rain and scattered possibilities, fraught with possibility, one minute to the next, the same decision, the same choice, over and over, one choice to be made but so many different outcomes from that choice, unknown, like the thick darkness. Earlier I had to fight with the money in my pocket and the nagging pull from the bottom of my stomach, the base of my spine, down into the earth, outwards, ready to disperse, angry, lonely, scared, impatient, yet here I was at the counter closing my wallet with the woman at her register and the pictures of her father on the little alcove behind her, she wished me safe home and closed the drawer and reached for a

menu as another customer walked into the diner as I walked out, belly full, settled, back into the mist, glowing under the neons.

CAERULEUS

It was a blanket of thin clouds up like a sheet of fog so with the full moon behind the fog an exhausted light bled out from the sky, and the wash of light filled up the heavens, with the frozen vapors in the clouds reflecting the weary photons and scattering them across the atmosphere, a wash of bluish yellow, it was eerie and awful and I hated the look of it out the kitchen window at three o'clock in the morning, like a perverse sunrise, like dawn in the underworld. A moon like a pale sun, sickly, infecting everything, starless, up there in the window and a curse above the world at three o'clock in the morning, I saw it, how the window framed the sky and the moon, and I couldn't soon go back to sleep afterwards. The moon reflected a kind of light which proved life was too long, and that eternity was over in an instant. A kind of light that proved I was too old to fall in love ever again. Whatever love she had needed, I was unable to provide. And whatever love I could have provided, she did not want. I looked out the window at the moon and the blue yellow light and the sky full of sadness and I thought about her, I thought about where she might be, who she might be, who she might be with. I thought about her with my hand resting on the cheap formica countertop, looking out the window, and I'll think about her up the stairs, in my bedroom, under the sheets of my bed, I'll think about her and I'll remember the moon in the window and I'll decide I ought to try and fall back asleep but even so I'll lay awake in bed, thinking of her. But after a while I'll close my eyes and there will be a blue flame at the base of the stake, wood piled up and burning, a French lilac wilting in blue hues, its scent evaporated in the heat of a noonday summer, a river whose waters are higher than we've ever seen them, swollen with thunderclouds, bloated but moving quick and the eyes of my father are strange because I know he's afraid and there's no way to help what's going to happen, and blue swords, seven of them, piercing my heart, and hopscotch crisscross stones on the blacktops of elementary school laughter, numbers and a chalk drawing of clouds done to read SKY BLUE, a siege of blue herons, a playful nude like one of Magritte's cobalt blue lovers unshaven with her delicate fingertips, there will be all of those things and more but she won't be there, she won't be in my dreams, she won't be in

my bedroom at my side under the sheets, the fingertips won't be hers, she'll be somewhere else as I dream and the horrible light outside fills up the sky, reflecting off a thin layer of clouds, a moon like a curse uncompromising, and maybe she can see it too or maybe she can't but I'll finally be asleep and dreaming and wake up to the cold reality of my loneliness at daybreak with nobody to love, exiled from love, from her love, an old man sad and confused, no matter how much money he has, no matter the clothes or the cars or the watches or the vacations, it wouldn't change the fact she rejected me and left me to find a life for myself without her, a life without love, condemned. I woke up to myself and my wrinkled hands and my tired body with the daylight in the room and she wasn't there, she isn't here, and I wish she was, like I always do, I wake up alone and wish she was here but she isn't, and the moon is gone.

DECIBEL

She rested against a stuffed animal, a giraffe, propped up between her head and the window of the door, the glass, her head tilted sideways with her ear pressed against the stuffed animal and she fell asleep like that on our way back from the hospital after each of her rounds of chemotherapy. I would drive the three hours home and she would be exhausted and sleeping on one of her stuffed animals, either the giraffe or the snow leopard, with her eyes closed, and I would turn the music on the radio down almost to where it was silent so I could listen to her breathe. I listened to her breathe and I tried not to think about the children in the Pediatric Oncology floor, their faces, their bald, pointed heads. I listened to her breathe and I tried not to think about the other parents, the distressed and fatigued looks on their faces, the folders stuffed with research articles and brochures from drug companies. I listened to her breathe. She was my daughter. I was her father. She was asleep in the car, our ride home, three hours long, after an afternoon or a morning of chemotherapy. I kept a plastic bag inside of a small trash can at the floor, near her feet, where she would vomit. She would bring a stuffed animal, a puppy, or an elephant, and she would lean it against the window and use it as a pillow. I would be relieved once she was done vomiting, once she fell asleep, and then I would listen to her breathe. It might be raining, as we cut through the mountains, and she would sigh or coo and with the rain on the windshield and her

breath and the pattern of my life would resolve into a steady rhythm so I would find some kind of peace inside of me, a peace and a hope that we would make it out of this. I would pray, in a kind of way, for the cancer to retreat, for the medicine to work, for her hair to grow back, for playgrounds and birthday parties. I would listen and pray and I swore sometimes I felt like something could hear me, like what spoke into the secrecy of my silent heart might help, might hold us together. She was alive. Beathing. A breathing thing, alive. When we are alive, we're breathing things. Back when I was still a father, and she was still a daughter. But that's no longer the case. I lost her. I can't listen to her breathe. She has stopped breathing, being, a thing that breathes. She's gone. Her breath. Dead. She's not around anymore. So in the car, when I'm driving, now, I can't listen to her breathe. She's not breathing. So when I drive in the car, I can't hear anything except for silence, a terrible, drowning silence. I try to turn up the radio, roll down the windows, but nothing works, nothing can drown out the silence, nothing to quiet down the howling silence which is like a crashing wave inside of my head, because I know the howl of the silence is inside of me, it's in my head, other people don't hear silence, so the silence is like a thought inside my head, even though it isn't a thought except for it fills my head and can't be felt by anybody else. So I'm pulled over, with a police officer behind me, and it's the silence, my head is in my hands and the door is open, because of the silence. In the beginning, after her breathing stopped, her breath, it was more like a whisper, and the whispers were memories of her with her head on the elephant or the giraffe or the snow leopard or the puppy and she's sleeping peacefully. In the beginning the whispers would come like pages of a photo album, flashing images, as a baby wrapped up and asleep, a toddler in a Halloween costume, before the doctors, before the other children with their pointed bald heads, before the other parents in the hallways, when she was in the backyard running around with a handful of dandelions, when she rode on a carousel, when she painted rainbows at the kitchen table then cut them out to hand them to me. I haven't thrown away the tubs of acrylic colors in the cabinet, in the kitchen, with the construction paper and scissors and glue sticks. But that was in the beginning. Time has passed, years, years have gone by, and the whispers are gone, and I'll be driving with the silence and it will overcome me, like a wave of concrete howling to crash on me,

and I'll feel the silence and it's like I'm inside the little tubs, six of them strung together, the caps shut tight. It's a terrible scream, shut inside those little tubs of dried paint. It's a silent yell, a howl. Naked. Shrill. It deafens everything else, this feral crash of silence, inside of me. I can't hear her breath anymore, because it stopped, and now my mind is swollen up with this awful, silent scream. It will sound like the bins of her clothes in the basement. It will sound like an empty seesaw in the yard. The lifeless stuffed animals. A passenger seat with the seatbelt unbuckled. Now, with the lights flashing, with the police officer opening his door, I can't hear it, I can't see it, because all I have are these screaming images, thoughts, the howling silence inside of my head. There's nothing breathing anymore. There's no life. There's nothing. There's nobody. I'm not a father. She's not a daughter. There's no more car rides with the trashcan, the plastic bags. There's no more hope, no more prayers. There's only thoughts, or images, whatever they are they fill up the inside of my head and cry out in pain and I can't hear anything or see anything so I pulled over and shut my eyes and grip my ears with my hands and pull as hard as I can to force it to come out of me but it doesn't work and the car is parked while I sit in the seat with my eyes closed and I can't fight off the awful howling silence. In the beginning, people would ask me how I was doing. They would ask me if I was okay. They didn't know what else to say to me. It wasn't their fault. How are you? Are you doing alright? But they've stopped asking me. They don't ask anymore. It's been years. Some people know me and don't know about my daughter, how she used to breathe, how I used to listen to her breathe on our rides home from the hospital when I felt hope, when it was a chance she might pull through, a prayer, something in front of us. They look at me like I was anyone else. It's for the better. Because if they found out, if they asked me how I was doing, if they wanted to say something nice and ask 'How are you doing' like how they used to, I don't know if I could help from telling them about the screams, about the pain and agony, how it fills up in my head with a deafening silence which I can't drown out or escape or distract myself away from. Maybe now, because of how long it's been, how loud it's become, I'd tell them the truth. If the police officer asks me, if he says 'Sir, are you alright?' I'll tell him about the empty seesaw, the stuffed animals in her bedroom closet. I know he wouldn't want to know about any of that, and my answer

would scare him, and the police officer's mouth will make a funny shapes and he'd offer some kind of an awkward concern or a vague form of consolation before the handcuffs but I wouldn't be able to hear them because I can only hear the sound of emptiness, the screaming images. When people used to ask me how I was doing I would say what they wanted to hear, I was alright, I was getting by, I was doing as good as anyone could do. I would answer them politely and they'd say something nice, something encouraging, and I could hear them and their answers and I knew they couldn't do anything else and it was alright because I had her whispers, my daughter, these memories which held me together. If they asked now, I'd tell them the truth because all I hear is the sound of the empty screaming images, I'd tell them how I used to listen to her breathe in the car but now I can't, because she's gone, and nothing is able to drown out the horrible silence, the screams inside my head, the thoughts which aren't thoughts except for they are mine and only inside of me. I'd tell them the truth because the truth would make them understand why I have to do what I'm going to do.

FOLJ STJARNONA

It's the end of May but it's a cold damp mist in the air so it's the last bit of November you'll feel until the autumn returns, damp and dark and your cigarettes curl strangely as you smoke them because the moisture ruins their shape, though the taste is pleasing and the smoke glows in the black night, it glows and you watch as you slowly exhale out the smoke because something is comforting about smoke in the blackness of night, the sound of motorists down cobblestone streets and the lampposts with their swarms of mist, you almost believe a quaint country saying like 'All your demons are angels in disguise,' you almost believe it with the next cigarette glowing at the end of your nose with your eyes pointed down the bend, you taste the smoke and the damp mist and it will start to burn your tongue in the next few puffs but it doesn't right now, you inhale and watch another motorist rolls by, and a name, Estrella, escapes out from the sound of the fading engine, so you say it out loud, Estrella, her name, she tells you to save your rest, to lay down with her, and you want to, you want to find yourself in her arms, though you aren't one to be found in your past, they'll never find you there, yet you remember her name and you see her and you say her name out loud to yourself as the cigarette burns your tongue, in the cold damp mist, you whisper

her name to yourself as another car shoots through the narrow streets of the town, and her voice is sweet, pleading you to save your rest, to lay down, so you throw the cigarette to the curb and reach into your coat pocket for another, Estrella, she's five years away, five impossible years, further than the twinkling stars behind the ashen clouds, but she's so close, you can feel her, it's the last bit of November until the autumn and your coat is buttoned up, at the end of May, before the summer, the mist and the cold darkness is like a soft kiss before the summer dries everything up, before the mosquitoes and flies concern themselves with the midnight lampposts, and even with the cold, damp air there is a warmth in the mist, Estrella, with the next cigarette lit, the smoke glowing off the end of the filter, a car engine off in the distance, the dark, and I smile to think of her, Estrella, alone in the night with the smoke lingering in front of me, on the street, the puddles and the lattice iron work and the old stones, the sidewalk, save your rest, her lips, her black hair shining, splayed out across the sheets of our bed, pleading, and I can taste the smoke in my mouth, I can feel her lips, Estrella.

COMBUSTIBLE

My brain was on fire with anger, so I couldn't hear what she said, I don't even recall seeing her as I looked at her, I don't remember what her hair felt like as I grabbed it or the sound of her head against the glass window inside the car, I don't remember anything except a feeling like my brain was on fire, so there was nothing I could do when it happened, there was no way for me to stop it, it was over before I knew it had started, and when I realized she was slumped over, covered in blood, when I realized I was responsible for what had happened to her, the state she was in, it came as a shock, it shocked me to see her like that, unconscious, her neck hung over the seatbelt, her arms limp, I was scared because I had been the one who did it but I didn't remember anything except for this feeling of my brain being on fire. I look back now, I think back to it, and I wonder, what caused it, what caused my brain to catch fire? Maybe it was the weather, the overcast skies, the rainy weekends of late March. Maybe it was the miscues, the aborted beginnings, because we had forgotten the cooler with the drinks, then the kids' jackets, driving back and forth, leaving the house then coming back to the house then leaving the house again. Maybe it was the stress at work. I think back to the

afternoon when my brain caught fire and I search for clues, an explanation, a reason why it happened, something to attribute the episode to. Why my brain had caught fire. Why I lost control of myself, of my body, my hands grabbing her hair, jerking her head against the window. Why I lost consciousness, in the sense of being conscious of who I was and who she was and how I was supposed to treat her. I think back on the afternoon, when my brain caught fire, and I can't remember anything, I can't remember the look in her eyes as I took hold of her, how she reacted, if I said anything to her, if the kids protested or cried out, if she struggled against me and fought back, how long I held onto her before. I can't recall a single impression, the whole thing is obscured by a blankness until her head is slumped over, her neck hanging over the seatbelt, with blood splattered on the window and dripping out from her hair, with the car in DRIVE and my foot on the brake as raindrops pelted against the windshield. I had never been a capricious man, inconstant. Ours had not been a fiery love. Nothing for me, growing up or growing old, had been anything but deliberate, stolid. My passion hadn't wilted with my age because it had never bloomed in the first place. I made circumspect calculations. I took my time. I didn't rush into things. I wasn't a violent man. I was hardly a physical man. So I look back now, I think back to it, the afternoon when my brain caught fire, and I don't understand how it happened, why it happened, what took over, what caused me to grab her hair, to shove her head into the window. How could I not remember the sound of her skull against the glass, the thud it made, echoing inside the car with our children in the backseat? How could I not remember the look in her hazel eyes, the terror she must have felt? I think back to that afternoon and all I can remember is my brain felt like it was on fire, and I don't remember making the decision to reach for her, I don't remember having the choice in front of me of whether or not I should jerk her head against the passenger window. All I can remember is her neck and her head slumped down, her chest pressed against the seatbelt, and my daughter screaming from the back, terrified. My daughter screamed. I remember a scream, and then blood, and suddenly my wife not moving in her seat. Then the light in front of us turned to green. The light turned to green, a car horn blared, but I didn't move, and so the car behind us passed around us and continued beeping, but we hadn't moved, I didn't take my foot off the brake, because my brain had been on fire and like a flash I

could see again and think again and make impressions of the world around me so when I realized my wife was badly hurt and unconscious in the seat next to me our car remained idle and we all sat there at the intersection, with my daughter screaming, with more car horns passing us by, as the devastation set in. I was devastated. I had created this situation, this horrific thing, this woman slumped over next to me with her hair and her blood, this innocent girl screaming in the back seat, this car frozen at an intersection, this abomination. Even though I hadn't wanted it, I hadn't chosen it, I hadn't planned on it or considered it, I was responsible for it, because my brain had caught fire one rainy afternoon in March, and while it was on fire, my hand had taken hold of my wife's head, from off the steering wheel, it had grabbed her and jolted and sent her with a thud against the passenger window, hard enough to cause her to slump over in her seat, unconscious, bleeding, with cars passing us by, my daughter's screams in the backseat, and an entire world around us, surrounding us, oblivious to the fact it had completely changed.

ONE OF THE DISAPPEARED

Mostly what was on her mind were the shadows of a ceiling fan spinning against a yellow blue light, a dusky streetlamp light which crawled in from an open window, into a room, the black cast shadows of the blades spinning against the ceiling and the light from the corner of the room where a window is open and a street below is full of graffiti marks, empty cans and bottles, mostly that's what's on her mind as she sleeps alone on the street below atop a range of subway grates, venting warm air up onto the hungry sidewalks, plastic bags filled with more plastic, a tarpaulin, cardboard mattresses, a LAUNDRAMAT sign, and nearby there are esteemed congregations surrounding Reverend Holmes from Mt. Zion and the Elder Eugenia Moore from Mt. Pleasant and Mister Rodney Tucker from Mt. Joy, there's crucifixes and belltowers, souls being saved, 'Amens' and 'Halleluiahs' while she's on the street nearby asleep and when she wakes up mostly what will be on her mind will be the blades of a ceiling fan turning shadows against an electric blue light because it's approaching night time, and the lamplight has been shut off in the room and she's alone because the nurse has left her in a scribble of notes and the baby is gone, the baby is gone and she's in pain and she's been left to watch clockwise shadows in the heat of July with sweat on her upper lip and under

her arms and on her thighs, she'll wake up to the spinning fan blades and the sweat stuck to her body, the beige wallpaper peeling in various patches, and then, then there's a voice over an intercom, it's the voice who she'll have insane conversations with once the waking up is over, once she wakes up, as the pigeons scatter and the buses amble and stop, amble and stop, grumbling thunder, after the ceiling fan blades disappear against the humming electric blue light, it will be a voice, a voice like how the buildings wall in the streets, below the room with the open window, down below where lonely traffic signals switch at the intersections and street lamps up the block, a few porches with their front lights expecting fathers to return home from a late shift, and the LAUNDRAMAT is open 24 HOURS, it'll be the voice over the intercom and she'll hear it, she'll feel it channel the street upwards like walls of buildings and it won't leave her until after she falls asleep with the blankets wrapped around her and her plastic bags arranged and the cardboard underneath her, once she's asleep the voice over the intercom will stop and the humming subway underneath will hum underneath her with its warmth up from the steel grates, she'll be asleep once the sun rises, and the voice will disappear as the city streets disappear and the blankets and the plastic because she has no dreams, hers is only the pelagic sleep of goodbye, as the pigeons return, the baby is gone, as the buses start to grumble, the blank goodbye of sleep until she wakes up to watch the blades of the ceiling fan, to hear the voice over the intercom, she'll return back, into herself, without any sense of being asleep, without any notions of dreaming or not dreaming, because once she's awake the graffiti marks will bear messages, signs, signals for her to follow and the voice over the intercom will interpret the clues for her, and hers will be a movement and an action and a purpose, it will be something to uncover, a secret, where the baby is hidden, who took the baby, the voice over the intercom will promise to help her find the baby but she never will, because the baby is gone, the nurse is gone and she's alone in the room, alone with the spinning fan blades unable to break July's heat, a pile of forms, until the sun begins to rise, because the voice will die down as the pigeons return, as the buses amble, before she falls back asleep, sleeping a dreamless sleep of goodbye on the cardboard mattress wrapped up in blankets and surrounded by plastic, asleep as the tourists regard her with curious glances, a curiosity below the LAUNDRAMAT sign, her bags, the shape of her body above the

subway grates as the buses grumble along and the pigeons land to find food, she fell asleep until she woke up, and after she woke up it was mostly the shadows of the fan in the ceiling turning clockwise around and around as the night settles, rotating, that's what is mostly on her mind, and if she hasn't had anything to eat or drink and none of the folks from the congregations of Mt. Pleasant or Mt. Joy or Mt. Zion have handed her a few dollars, when the soup kitchen is too far away, she'll ignore the voice on the intercom and remain on her cardboard mattress above the subway grates and wrap herself in blankets and plastic, with the shadows and the electric blue light, until one of the shelter volunteers finds her to check up on her, to take her blood pressure and hand her some food and water, a toothbrush, who listens to her talk wildly in rabid strings about the voice on the intercom and her missing baby and the messages hidden between the graffiti on the lamp post and the graffiti on the billboard sign, the volunteer will listen to the silence of the boulevard, because the buses have stopped running and the porch lights have shut off one by one as fathers returned home from their late shifts, she'll explain how her baby is gone, how they took her baby, how they stole away her baby and she never knew if it was a boy or a girl but she always wished for a girl so it must have been a girl before the nurse left the room and shut off the lights and the ceiling fan spun against the electric blue light, how it was so hot in the room, how she couldn't sleep, how she waited all night for them to bring her baby back but her baby never came back because the baby was gone, it was taken from her, her little girl, her darling girl, her daughter, and the volunteer will continue to listen as the homeless woman explains the signs are everywhere, there are clues, she'll find her baby, the voice over the intercom knows where her baby is, how to find her little girl, her darling baby girl, and the volunteer will listen to the poor old woman covered in plastic stationed atop a pile of cardboard, the volunteer will listen as the subway trains hum underneath, and eventually the voice will quiet down and the boulevard will be empty of cars and mostly what she'll have before she falls asleep on the street next to the churches and the front porches will be the ceiling fan, the blades spinning, the shadows cast against a yellow blue light.

GROWN UP

Whoever grows up hoping to become an escort driver, babysitting WIDE LOADs, cross country and across state lines? That's what he was thinking to himself. What little kid wiping his nose on his sleeve glances up at the creek to dream of endless miles, flashing orange lights, heavy machinery and mobile homes, boats and wind turbines? Overwidth vehicles. Rest stop bathrooms. What boy tells his mother 'I want to be sitting at the edge of a motel bed in Des Moines with ten grams of amphetamine and a cigarette burning my fingers?' Mama, you died suddenly and before we had a chance to make up. On the edge of the bed he thought about Mama, with curlers in her hair, sweat on her upper lip, that morning when she held the broom in her hands after he had dropped out of high school, yelling at him and swinging, 'You ain't gone yet?' Poor Mama. He thought about his mother's disappointment. Because he had quit school, quit baseball. They said you were a bonnie lass before you were married, before a grisly man full of cigarettes and bourbon tossed you around the house, black and blue, broken ribs, before that same man turned you into a rattle snake, shaking your tail at whoever moved. You did your best, he thought. You tried to warn us. You were alone raising two boys and you made sure we knew that it didn't take much to become a lost cause. You made it the best you could. When you went to church, you prayed desperate because you had to, because of what you were up against, what we were up against. You didn't flirt with darkness just to see if you could wish back the light. No, he thought, yours was a tough sled, Mama. He was thinking about her at the edge of the bed, his Mama, and his brother Ray, how when she brought her boys to church Ray would learn the prayers and sing the songs while he would close his eyes and sleep. The Lord brought her a mean, drunk man. It was a tough sled. The Lord let you down, like everyone else who was supposed to love you. But I ain't have that excuse. He thought, it's not your fault, Mama, that one more failed drug test will send me packing, that I'll lose this job, I'll lose my license. He was thinking about urine in a plastic cup, about laboratory results. He had been here before, worked his way out of a jam, but he thought to himself, I ain't got any fight left in me. What's the use? To hell with it. I'll go back to Missouri. I'll check in for treatment. Like a last-ditch trip to the east, doctor's orders, a hapless patient, trekking out to the sea for fresh air and a miracle. But his wasn't a vision of miracles. He wasn't naïve about what he saw in front of himself. He had long forgotten about the

Sea of Galilee. He was thinking about another psych ward spin-dry. He was thinking, no showers in the bughouse. No shoelaces or cigarettes, three days locked up in a padded room. I'll sweat it out and start fresh. Another sober-living house. Another 'get well' job bagging groceries or pumping gas. Narcotics Anonymous Meetings. Sundays in the basement of Zion Church. Maybe I'd phone Ray, show him how I'm cleaned up. Show him I'm not a good-for-nothing sonovabitch. He was thinking about the routine he would settle into. He watched it play out. I'll go back to Missouri and clean up for five or six months and get myself pulled together. Then it'll happen. Another crazy woman. Another bad decision. Another and another and another, another mile, another exit. East, South, West, North. Another disappointment. Ray's wife won't allow Ray him have anything to do with me, he thought. She'll bark at Ray to hang up the phone. No more seeing Ray, or my nieces. I won't be welcome. That ain't home for you anymore, he thought. You ain't got no home. You ain't got anything. You're not welcome. He thought about how his life had been nothing but quitting, and how much easier the quitting got once you started. His Mama used to tell him, it doesn't take much to become a lost cause. He took another sip from the beer can between his knees. After he was done thinking about the future, he thought back to his days as boy. Who dreams of being a WIDE LOAD escort driver? What little kid, fishing at the spillway, with his bait and his lines, cranking the rod, envisions himself on a three-thousand-mile trip up into the backcountry of Maine in front of a trailer, pattering along, pupils dilated, smoking a cigarette and looking up at the rearview of his life in despair? I used to be a helluva a ballplayer. I was no lost cause. I could have done something with it. But I wasn't like Ray. He was the kind to make solemn promises to himself and stick to them. He memorized that book of prayers. He thought about his Mama, how she had tried her best, how she had tried to warn him. She told him to stay away from the pills, from the bottle. There's bad blood in your veins, she used to say. Bad blood runs all through this country. Mama warned him about the boys at night by the creek. He knew she was right. He thought to himself, Mama was right about all of it. When he last saw her, she looked at him with such disappointment. She didn't want to be right about any of it. She got no satisfaction from it. And he thought about what he said to her, he was high, and angry, and he didn't realize it then but he knew now she never wanted to be right. He took another sip

of beer, then turned his head. Everywhere he looked, through the windshield of the escort car, across the dirty motel room, everywhere he looked he saw a black spot at the edge of his field of vision he couldn't let go of, it lingered stubborn and wouldn't leave, a black spot in the periphery which followed him around, an ugliness, a kind of dread, something he couldn't shake, everywhere he looked, no matter what it was or where he was.

PAPER OR PLASTIC

He had become a tired old man, and that's what I saw of him when I looked up to find his hands shuffling bills at the grocery store, when we ran into each other, or rather when I spotted him, unexpectedly, I noticed a tired, old man at the checkout line with his ground beef on the conveyor belt, and his back was turned to me, and I thought to myself that looks like a tired old man, a man too old to fall in love, but I knew him somehow, and when I walked further along past the pharmacy and into the store I saw him from his side profile and realized it was my father, a tired old man, a man who once had a full chest and buttoned up his jacket in front of a mirror, who worked a table saw with precision, who once made love to my mother the night I was conceived, he had been a young man once but now I saw him as I walked into the store and I realized he had become a tired old man, his hair was grey, there were wrinkles all over him, he wore black Velcro shoes, he was nothing of what he had once been, he was too old to fall in love, alone, worn down, with so much of his life behind him, and I decided not to walk up to him, I decided to walk further into the store, down one of the aisles, and wait to make sure he had left, until he had paid for his ground beef and disappeared into the parking lot, because it didn't feel right to walk over to him and say 'Hello,' to my own father, this stranger who I knew, who I vaguely knew, an old man who had once been a young man, I decided it was too depressing, the whole thing, and then I wondered what he might think of me, if he were to see me in a grocery store, like a stranger he knew, if he caught sight of me, before he recognized me as his son, would he think to himself once he had been a young man like that, would he think to himself I used to fall in love with any girl that looked at me if they so much as batted an eye or whispered 'Good morning' on a lonesome sidewalk, I'd pine over her alone in insane elevators, trying to recall the shape of her hair, her eyes, her nose, her cherry lips, I'd conjure up an image

of my newly beloved and carry it with me like a precious object, I used to fall in love with every woman I met, all the women I fell in love with who couldn't love me back the way I wanted them to, the way I fell in love with them, every week it was a new woman, every day, I'd love them and they'd never find out so they'd never have the chance to tell me how they couldn't love me like how I wanted them to, but it didn't matter because I kept falling in love, until one day one of them paid me some attention, she decided she could love me the way I loved her, and we were married, and we had children, and I loved her every day I had her until one day she left me, she went to the hospital and never came home, so it was a terrible love left in my heart for her, and finally when the weight of the sadness lessened I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror and realized I was too old to fall in love, and any of the girls I met or the women I saw, they didn't make me feel the way I used to when I saw them, they didn't make me close my eyes and try to remember their teeth or their ankles, I simply forgot about them, I forget all about them, and it doesn't bother me they can't love me back because I could never love them in the first place, I'm an old man with my years behind me, with my life behind me, with a wife in a casket, with a daughter in a faraway city, with a son I hardly recognize anymore, and so I'm too old for love and I spend my afternoons hour after hour with an electric trimmer in my hands, sculpting the edges where the grass meets the driveway or the walkway, keeping the lines clean, and at night I'll sit out in the driveway with the engine running and listen to a ballgame in my car because there isn't anything else to do, I'll sip coffee and listen to the ballgame and the lines at the edges of the lawn will be trimmed up and precise because I'm too old for love, too old for anything else, and if I don't stay busy it's only sadness and memories like shadows inside of my heart that tear me up with emptiness because the woman I loved is gone for good.

OBSCURED

How could I be anything more to her? A customer. A transaction. A ten-dollar bill on the table, left behind, to rest with my fork and my knife and my ceramic mug of coffee and my plate, waiting to be scuttled away, piled onto a mountainous slope of dishes in a wash basin, into a kitchen of sweat and steam. How could she be anything more to me? She was too well schooled. The way she deftly set down my platter and my side dish. The way she poured my second

cup of coffee without asking if I wanted it. She wore freckles and wiped her hands imperceptibly against a towel tucked in front of her while the other customers talked about the weather and the news and their cars. Her pink pen, her message in cursive swirls, THANK YOU!!, at the bottom of the check, like I was the only customer she had ever written it to, with its tiny dots in the 'O' and the 'U' and eyelashes above the dots and a smiling half-circle underneath, two exclamation points, THANK YOU!! She knew who she was. Who I was. How could I be anything more? A man in a button-down shirt, from out of town, stopped because he was hungry, his face pointed out the window as she poured the coffee politely, embarrassed because here was a beautiful young woman he was never expecting to be near. But I wanted something more. I wanted to understand what she loved and what she dreamed about. What bothered her late at night when she couldn't sleep. What her brother's name was. I wanted to know if her father had loved her mother. I wanted to know where she drove to, with a car all to herself on a rainy Sunday afternoon in October because her mother is out visiting relatives. Where did she go? I wanted to know everything about her. I wanted to gaze into her eyes and study her nose and her chin and listen quietly as she explained herself to me. Explaining whether or not she believed in love, in God. I wanted so badly to know her. But how could I be anything more to her than what I was? Another shift, another night, another faceless patron. Another man from off the highway. What I wanted was the quiet stillness of a morning's light, under the sheets, listening to her. But it was better that way, it was better I couldn't be anything more to her, and she couldn't be anything more to me. I was nothing more than a customer, and she was nothing more than a waitress, and it was better that way. That's what I had decided, driving away from the diner, with my dinner finished, with the bill paid. Banners on the telephone poles which read WE SUPPORT OUR TROOPS. Signs for apple orchards. It was better I couldn't be anything more to her, or her to me. Because the moment she became something more, a lover, a dear friend, a regret I mourned over lost and far back in the memory of my years, it would end. The magic would disappear. It was better for her to be something magic, impossible. Because how could she be anything more than that? How could it be better? I couldn't be anything more to her. It wasn't meant to be anything more than a dinner in a diner served by a waitress whose face made me think about love and God and death and hope and dreams, and it

wasn't meant to be anything more, because how could it be? It's better that the questions aren't answered. It's better if the songs remain in your heart. I was satisfied, driving away. The perfect answers are silent. The perfect songs are unsung. We live in our own darkness, hiding in the shadows, twiddling our thumbs with furtive hands, glancing down when we're looked upon. We are doomed to it. We have to smile faintly with our polite answers. The food was delicious. Have a good evening. Pleasantries. A cough into our closed hand. Dreaming of what it might be like to break through, past the shadowlands of our own interior worlds. And even when we do break through, seemingly, even when we find someone to whisper quietly to, it isn't enough. It's never enough. We want something more. The people we love are never enough. The children we raise are never enough. The happiness we find is never enough. So there's always a lonely roadside diner and inside is a pretty young girl so when we sit eating our meal in silence it's with a secret thought in our heart maybe she's enough.

IMPENETRABLE QUEBECS

"There was something about the first time, when I first came here, to get sober, it was a relief, I was so relieved to be sober, a giant relief, and I had hope, even though there was fear, and anger, but I felt like I could do it, you know, like I could actually be sober, it was hope, but this time, it isn't, honestly, it isn't like that, it's different, I don't have that feeling of, it's so, there's so much, it's so much more, I remember the first time I felt so relieved, it was a relief to be sober, when I had stopped drinking, but this time, I don't feel that way, I feel sick, it feels like, there's so much, it's been a lifetime since I first tried to get sober, and my wife, my daughter, my career, there's so much, and I feel sick, I feel angry, you know, but, that's all I really have to say, I feel sick to my stomach, to be sober, I'm angry, and to be faced with, surrounded, by so much" so even after he finished speaking in front of the group, after he quieted down, even after he finished he didn't stop fidgeting with his hands, his black fingernails scratching and rubbing against his forearms and yanking at his hair with his beer gut hung over his belt hung over his stained boots in his blue uniform caked in axel grease and sweat from the garage with an embroidered patch FRED on his right breast pocket with his sleeves rolled up and the tears swollen like glass pebbles in his eyes, he was all nerves,

and after he finished speaking a silence followed him, a pause before it was the next person's turn, and in the silence grew thoughts and his thoughts weren't on the ding of a truck pulling up to the pump or his boss cursing him out or the musty barroom after work or a bathroom floor covered in vomit, while he dug his fingernails into his forearms, while his vision fogged, he didn't think about the other men in the room with him, he didn't think of what they might be thinking, he didn't think about any of that, instead his thoughts were on a little girl with blonde hair in a bed next to him, she had her hands folded underneath her like a pillow with her curls and her head turned to one side, on her stomach, and he could hear the sound of her breathing, he's watching her sleep, the sheet is pulled up against her shoulders and she's breathing and soon she'll wake up and look out to her father and smile then she'll whisper 'I think it's morning Daddy because the moon can't make this much light' and he'll nod his head and smile back at her then a clairvoyance will crystallize inside him, a clarity, a kind of prophetic wisdom, and he'll know this will be the most beautiful thing he'll ever see in his entire life, he'll know it without any uncertainty or doubt, this is the most beautiful moment of my entire life and the beauty of this moment is strong enough to erase the darknesses which had come before or will come after it, no matter how dark it might become, no matter how impossible it might seem, no matter how black the tears, this moment will wash my fears and doubts and anguish and dread and sadness out with a perfect clear light, he would be certain of the power of the moment, he would be certain it would protect him from the past and from the future and from the darkness, this light, this beauty, and his thoughts were in a memory of a moment with his daughter asleep then waking up next to him, a four-year-old girl, a bad dream from the night before, princess pajamas and the blood of strawberries, because when you cut strawberries for breakfast it's almost like they're bleeding, that's how she explained it, and he had brought her into his bedroom and let her sleep beside him because she was afraid so he tucked her in and told her it would be alright, everything was alright, there was nothing to be scared of, the strawberries weren't bleeding, even though her fear wasn't due to the strawberry blood like how she explained, it was because the bedroom was in a strange apartment and she wanted Mommy to be with Daddy, even though it confused her and scared her, it would be alright, everything would be alright,

Daddy would take care of her, and he was sober when he said it to her and he believed it and a genuine hope for the future lived inside him because the beauty of his darling girl lay right beside him, he knew this was exactly where he was meant to be, for the first time in a long time, he was supposed to be where he was, comforting his baby girl, sober, trying his best to set things right with his wife, so he could move back in, so things could get better, so they could be a family again, headed back to where he was supposed to be, and in the chair that night after he had finished speaking, with cloudy eyes, with his fingernails scratching at his forearms and digging into his scalp, in the silence he thought back to a moment long passed by with his daughter awoken to the morning deciding only the sun, and not the moon, could make such a light shine through the window the way her eyes saw it, in the silent room he remembered the moment and the feeling inside of him with her voice on his ears, a feeling of assurance, of comfort, and no matter what, this moment could fix any of the pain and heartache and misery he had ever experienced, or would ever experience, no matter how dark or terrible or hopeless it might seem, this moment would exist, living a life of its own, between them, him and his baby girl, her golden curls and the sunlight through the blinds, and in the silent room tears welled in his eyes and the next person at the table began to speak but he couldn't hear the words, he couldn't see the faces, he could only feel that moment with his little girl against all the other moments surrounding him, the hangovers, the smashed cars, the broken promises, the squandered paychecks, the barstools, the bottles, it was so much surrounding him from inside of the moment, the sunlight glowing in her curls and his little girl with her arms folded up like a pillow underneath her, weighed down on all sides with nowhere to go, surrounded, as another person spoke, as the silence broke and the thoughts in the room changed shape, he remained stationed.

PLANS

I told Clementine to meet me with the money, she was supposed to meet me back at our room on Asylum Avenue then I would head down to the old Rubber Works building off Trumbull, the condemned warehouse, I was going to head down there with the money and leave Clementine behind at the apartment, she would wait for me while I scored, because Max would be at the warehouse, where he ran his

set on Friday nights, out of the old, abandoned Rubber Works building, the cops didn't pay much attention to the building and Max didn't sell to lowlife junkies, he serviced a respectable clientele, so it was quiet, with good cover, you could score without any drama or hassle, and I was going to meet Max and score and then hightail it out of the abandoned warehouse with the vaulted ceilings and the shattered glass and get back to Clementine at our spot on Asylum Avenue with a fix, because it was Friday night and we didn't want any of that stomped on junk from the ghetto dealers who never made eye contact with you, who took your money with a snarl then nonchalantly dropped a baggie at your feet as they walked away, we didn't want any drama or hassle, so the money was coming and I was supposed to meet up with Max and score some clean dope and bring it back to Clementine so we could settle in for the night, since we had managed to find an apartment for the winter, we didn't have to sleep in a park or in a tarpaulin tent on a street meridian, we didn't have to watch our neighbors brush their teeth on afternoon sidewalks and spit into the gutter, we had a nice place that winter, it was cold but we had a room and a bed and Clementine had a red coat with a tie around the waist, we had blankets and a little kitchen with a stove we would turn on to warm up in the mornings, we had it made, and Clementine was supposed to meet me with the money after she had turned a trick or two, it was supposed to be fast, she usually worked quick, she was smart about it, and she didn't mind since we had run out of money between my paycheck and her government check, we didn't have much of a choice, but she told me she could turn a trick or two and make enough for us to pay Max for a baggie of clean dope, good dope, dope that hadn't been stepped on and cut, because Max always sold good product to a respectable clientele, at the old Rubber Works building with a scroll of graffiti above one of the doorways which read WELCOME TO HELL but it had to have been written by someone who had no idea what hell was like, and I always smiled to myself when I saw the graffiti because when I went to score from Max it usually meant things were on the up, things were good, so Clementine was supposed to meet me with the money, we were supposed to be good, it was a Friday night, it was February, piles of snow lined along the road and it was too cold to hang your clothes out of a window to dry, but we were going to get our fix, everything was set, that's how it was until Clementine never showed up, she didn't come back with the money, I waited and waited and waited

for her but she never came back to the apartment, so I went to the corner, I went down the Avenue, I checked in with Ricky and then went over to the Tap Room to check the barstools but she wasn't sitting at any of them, so I went back to the apartment and I should have been worried about Clementine because she was my girl and we had been running partners for a couple of years now but I knew I would be sick in a few hours so I had to score, I didn't have time to be concerned, it wasn't a luxury I had, plus I figured she was a smart girl and whatever trouble she found she was always able to yank herself free of it, she was my running partner, so there had to be a good reason for her not showing up at the apartment even though she said it wouldn't take long to turn a trick or two, eventually she would come back and explain it to me, but in the meantime I had to go scrounge up some money, even if it was only enough for a bag of stomped on dope from the ghetto, I needed to score, so I went out to find an unlocked car or something, anything, I left the apartment around midnight and I didn't have any plans other than I had to find some money then score, because Clementine hadn't come back, there was no sign of her but I wasn't worried, she'd be back eventually, so my neck was sweating under my collar as I hustled down the street while a steel wind blew drifts of snow from off the tops of the banks, my neck was sweating and my head was pointed downwards, and I had made it a few blocks, west, and when I passed the Convenience Mart that's when I heard a voice asking me where was I headed, 'Where are you going?', a man's voice, it stopped me because I hadn't expected to hear any voices and when I stopped I looked around because I didn't know where the question had come from, it was a strange voice but at the same time a familiar voice, it was unexpected but somehow I recognized it, so I looked around and I saw a man in a black coat wearing a scarf and a hat and leather gloves, and I couldn't see much of his face but I stopped and I looked at him and then he asked me again, where was I going, and I turned back to the sidewalk with my head down and went on walking because I didn't want any trouble, even though he wasn't a cop, he wasn't a gang member, he didn't sound drunk, he didn't sound angry, he didn't sound like he was looking for trouble, but I didn't know him and he didn't know me even though there was something familiar about his voice, so I ignored him and kept walking with the sweat on my neck and a general idea in my head I needed to find some money and score before I started feeling sick, and I took a few more steps until

I heard the voice again, 'Where are you going?', and I looked up and I still couldn't make out his face but the voice was familiar and it was cool, I didn't sense any trouble in the way he asked me, and I could usually sense trouble, so I stopped and peered at him with the steel wind blowing through my clothes and I shook my head and I rubbed my hands together and I asked him what business of his was it where I was headed, what did he care, was he the law, did he have a problem, and he stepped closer to me so I could make out his face a little better and he explained he wasn't the law, he wasn't looking for any trouble, he was a minister, Mother of Grace Ministries, and he had a shelter with some food and a warm room and I could spend the night at his shelter in the church if I wanted, if I wanted a place to stay, so I told him about my apartment and how I didn't live in some hobo camp with crazy women packing then unpacking their suitcases and muttering to themselves, how things were alright for me and how I had a job and how I had Clementine at my side, even though she hadn't shown up when she was supposed to and I didn't know for certain where she was, I didn't tell that to the minister, I just told him I had a girl and a place and a job and I was alright, I didn't need any handouts, but then he asked me where I was headed, why was I out so late if I had a place of my own and if things were good, and I told him I was out for a walk, if it was any of his business, I was out for a walk to clear my head, and he chuckled and he said the only time he ever occassioned to be out this late in this kind of weather was to score a fix, was to find himself a bag of cheap dope so he didn't get too sick, that was the reason for any of the walking he ever did in the middle of the night in February, it was walking towards a dealer, walking towards a car that wasn't his or an apartment that wasn't his so he could steal something to sell quick and then bring the money to the dope man, and his voice was so familiar, and he was calm, the way he explained it to me, and the way he said it made me believe him, how he used to be out on the street with the steel wind and the piles of snow on the road hustling around for a fix, I could tell he wasn't lying, so when he finished talking he told me I must be a better man than him, since I was only out for a walk to clear my mind before bed, and he stopped talking and rubbed his hands together and I could make out his eyes, I saw a clear blue in his eyes reflecting off a street lamp, I noticed a sparkle to them, there was a life in his eyes, and I didn't know anything about ministers or shelters and

I didn't care much for God or prayers but it was something about the man's voice and his eyes so instead of taking off walking down the street like I had planned, instead of going after another bag, another stolen car radio, going it alone into the night like I had been doing, I decided I'd tell him the truth.

106 DEGREES FARENHEIT

It was the kind of heat that bled the blue out of the sky, and he hadn't had the presence of mind to grab his wallet on his way out the door so he was broke when she threw him into the street, into the heat of the day under a white sky with a sun burning across the whiteness so it seemed to fill up all the space where the blue had been bled out, so the entire sky was like a sun, the sun was as big as the entire sky, and with a scowl on her face and her makeup smudged she had shouted at him calling him a bastard and an animal and threw him out, she said he was no different than his father, and he couldn't help but laugh, but he only laughed at her because his father, what he remembered of the man, was a menacing beer gut that swung out in front of the mean bastard like a wrecking ball, and he himself was skinny, he had a wiry frame and he didn't drink any beer he only drank his wine and snorted cocaine so he figured it was funny how she was wrong, he wasn't anything like his father, his father used to hit his mother with a belt when the poor woman got nervous and cried, he wasn't anything like his old man, so he chuckled and said 'I bid you adieu' and walked out of the trailer door, he heard her lock it behind him, but he realized he had forgot to grab his wallet so he was broke, he had nothing to his name as he left the trailer, no wallet, no cigarettes, but he was quickly and suddenly overcome by the humidity and the heat so even though usually he'd be fixing for a cigarette it was too hot for a cigarette, the sun filled the entire sky and there'd be no comfort in a smoke, so he groaned down the walkway then out onto the asphalt and past the rusted gate into the street, he favored his right side and went on with a limp on his left foot, a slight limp, and he found the road and kept going until he fixed up his mind to make the river, he'd make the river, limp and all, and he'd find a spot on the shoreline in the shade and rest in the cool current, he'd make like a trout and settle down into a shallow of pebbles in the riverbed, he'd take off his shoes and wade out in the cool water and spend the afternoon in the shade, with his shoes on the shore, and maybe his shirt too, maybe he'd wade out

and dive under the surface, it was an idea, he didn't need any money to enjoy the river, so he took off walking with a slight limp down the road, the road with the heat folded up onto it like slabs, and before long he became drowsy with the heat, piled on top of him, as sweat soaked under his collar and his arms, the heat pressed against his body first then onto his thoughts, quickly, a pressure like a fog with the blue bled out of the sky, it got so even his typical daydreams of his girl and her legs and her backside pointed up in an arch with her face peering back at him with her one arm reaching behind her spreading herself open, even his typical daydreams which would occupy his mind, they couldn't sustain, they couldn't generate any momentum, so his head was empty, full of heat, like his body, kicking dust clouds down the road, in the heat of a highway midday, and he had fixed plans to make it to the river, it was just up ahead, the Hudson, off the Purple Heart Highway, he intended to make it to the river down around Willow Bank and lie himself in the cool water under the shade and spend the afternoon unbothered, alone, like a fish waiting out the long hours when the bugs are asleep, but after a little while down the street, limping, with his head empty, he noticed a pool, an above-ground pool, in the backyard of a quiet house, so without any deliberation or pause, without considering the pool's owner or the law or a nosy neighbor, with the white sky on fire above him pressing down like the entire atmosphere had become filled up with the sun, a sky with the blue bled out of it, he limped up to a fence, climbed it, then made his way into the pool, the above-ground pool, with his clothes on, his eyes closed, his head resting on a ledge, cooling off, drowsy, then asleep, sleeping for a little while, then awake, a shout, a woman's voice shouting at him, and his eyes opened up to the white sky with the blue bled out of it, and a ghost moon hung up there above the treeline, there was a silent moon, almost full, painted up in the white sky, almost impossible to make out from the rest of the heat, from the rest of the sun which had washed out the sky, but it was hung up there and he saw it and he heard the woman's voice and he stood up with his clothes soaking wet, his pants and his white shirt clinging to his scrawny body, he stood up with his eyes fixed at the ghost moon and he realized he must have fallen asleep, but it wasn't down by the river, like how he had planned, he had stopped off in a backyard, a stranger's yard, and fallen asleep in the above-ground pool, and the woman's shouting demanded him to leave, demanded him to leave

before she called the police, so he pulled himself up out of the water with his clothes dripping wet and he limped back to the fence, he pulled himself up over the fence, and he walked out to the road and he couldn't hear the woman any more but he looked back and made out the moon from the rest of the whitewashed sky, and even though the day had grown longer it was still unbearable, heat surrounded him, slabs of heat suffocating him, but he smiled at the moon and was glad to be damp and wet and cool and he felt good because he had slept and he figured he could make his way back to the trailer and try to explain himself a little bit, he could tell his girl the story about falling asleep in the swimming pool and she might laugh and she might even take him back for the night, or at least he could get his wallet so that way he wouldn't be broke if he had to go back down the road again.

ROCKS , WATERS

I used to be a mountain. I used to wake up in the morning and fix the coffee in the pot and I'd walk out to the truck and I'd know what to do, I knew who I was. I was proud of it, the life I had made, the family around me, I had something and I was something, I knew how the world worked and how to work in it. I knew how file my taxes, I knew what builders to hire for a job, I knew a good deal from a bad one, I played softball on Thursday nights and the boys could rely on me to pick up a hit when things were on the line. I was a mountain. I was solid. I had my girls, I came home to them from the game and they were safe and we all said goodnight to each other with a kiss. I cooked burgers for them on a charcoal grill with coals and a grate, I cooked the burgers to their liking, but now, now there's a door with most of the paint chipped off of it, a purple door worn down and chipped to its steel face, it belongs to a home, the last house on the block before Malden Greenhouse, the building on the end of Waverly Street with trees and the bushes and the land running out back, where the landscapers park their trucks, it's a nursery, it's a place to buy supplies, plants, shrubs. At the front is a white building where the storefront is with the cash register, and in the back are three sheds, and one of the sheds has a broken window, the place where it happened, the place where we went, with the detective, we drove in his car and you were in a blanket, wrapped in your mother's arms, and I was next to you, you were in between your mother and me, and the car parked because you told the detective this is where

it happened, he told you to stay in the car, you didn't have to come out, we could stay in the car, but I opened my door after the detective opened his door and I walked over behind the shed with the detective, we walked together but nothing was said between us, I didn't say anything to him, he didn't say anything to me, I let him take pictures with a camera, I let him examine the dirt, he went about his work so I watched, I vaguely watched it happen in front of me. I didn't find anything remarkable about the brick wall of the shed, whitewashed, the dirt around the entrance, the gates, the grass and the patches of weeds, behind it was an open space with rows and rows of bushes and saplings, and the sprinkler was going, a sprinkler watered the plants, and I listened to the sprinkler, I watched the detective move around, he squatted down and was inspecting something, so I turned, I looked back to the car, I tried to look through to the backseat where you were with your mother but I couldn't see you through the tinted windows, so I listened to the sprinklers. Finally I asked the detective what I had been meaning to ask him, my voice broke open from my dry throat, I asked him what were the chances of finding who had done it to you, and he was squatted down, close to the ground, when he told me there was a good chance, even if nothing turned up from the fingerprints or the DNA they had collected, even if nothing came back from the databases, even if they were boys from out of town, because sometimes boys who went around looking for work from town to town would drink and get themselves into trouble, whoever did it might find trouble in another town, in another place, down the road, so they might be looking to make a deal, the detective assured me they'd do their best with fingerprints, with the DNA they had collected, it might take some time but there was a real chance, there was a good chance, let us worry about it for now, he said, the detective told me to not worry about it, and I couldn't help but laugh, because I used to be a mountain, I used to stand tall, proud, and now you were in the backseat of the detective's car, with your mother, wrapped in a blanket, shivering. I had been the one to worry about things and take care of things and now the detective is telling me not to worry, so I laughed because they should be the ones who were worried, whoever did this, whoever took your innocence from you, whoever did this, they have to pay, they have to be brought to justice, and I won't sleep until there's justice, until I see those boys hung up from the gallows, swinging, with their necks broke, with their insides spilling onto the dirt,

with their fingernails plucked out, with their tongues cut out from their heads, with their testicles removed, with the skin of their backs flayed off in awful lines of hate, I'm not going to sleep until I see it, until they've paid, since that's the only thing that can make it right. The detective stood up and he looked at me because I had only laughed as my eyes pushed together and my face tightened and tears ran down my cheek, I didn't say anything to him because I couldn't explain it to him, how I was feeling, because I'm not a mountain anymore, I'm collapsed, crumbled, because of what happened to you, I couldn't say anything, I could only choke out a laugh, because I used to be a mountain, and I wasn't a mountain anymore, and I didn't know what to believe if the detective would ever find the boys who did this to you, I didn't know if you'd pull through, and there were only tears running down my cheeks, the tears down my cheeks, running, while I laughed, because I used to be a mountain. What we once were. Because I used to be a river, I used to flow to where I was needed, I could provide comfort, I could take care of things, I could cook supper, I could help him with his checkbook, I knew what you needed for school, I was somebody at the church people came to for support and advice and I smiled brightly as the sun glimmered off me, I could feel a connection to the life around me, a shoreline and a purple dusk at the end of each day. I used to be a river, a mother, a wife, something I had always dreamed of, something I had always wanted to be a mother and a wife ever since I was a little girl, because I knew even then I wanted to see a daughter of my own point her toes out from the end of her legs with her knees bent, laying on a blanket at the beach, to watch my baby and think quietly to myself in the sweetness of my own private contemplations about how magical it was for her to develop into her own feminine ways, over a simple, elegant gesture, like her toes pointing, a daughter of my own, a river, flowing, I wanted so much to bring life into the world, sunlight glinting off the water. But then it happened, I used to be a river, and now, now there's a door with most of the paint chipped off of it, a purple door worn down and chipped to its steel face, it belongs to a home, the last on the block before Malden Greenhouse, the building on the end of Waverly Street with the trees and the bushes and the land running out back, where the landscapers park their trucks, it's a nursery, it's a place to buy garden supplies, saplings, and it's a white building where the storefront is with the cash register, and in the back are three

sheds and one of the sheds has a broken window, the place where it happened, the place where we went, with the detective, we drove in his car and you were in a blanket, wrapped in my arms, your father was next to me and the car parked and you told the detective this is where it happened, and he told you to stay in the car, you didn't have to come out, we could stay in the car, but your father opened the door and gave me a look so I didn't say anything to him, he had to go, he had to pretend he could do something, as if there something that could be done, but I knew, I could tell by the way you were shivering in my arms nothing could be done, nobody could do anything, what those boys took from you, your life, your innocence, without any courting or a word of promise, of love, and it could never come back. I didn't say anything in the car with you, I couldn't say what my arms and my fingers and my eyes might be able to, so I tried, I rubbed your shoulders, I kept you close to me, but you weren't next to me anymore, you were somewhere else, and the waters had run dry, what had once been free and running had nowhere to go. What could I do, I used to be a river but now I'm little more than a dried up arroyo, like a drought, a thousand years of sand and dust, dust was swirling in the dirt where we parked and silence filled the back of the detective's car and I didn't know if your eyes were open or closed, it didn't matter, you had left the place, you had disappeared, like me, how could I could bring you back, what would it take, I didn't know if your eyes were open or closed but I knew I was as helpless as you were, as you had been, an entire childhood stolen from you, every happy memory, when you learned to cook homemade pasta with grandma, standing up on the chair in the kitchen, your first piano recital, painting your watercolors at the table, you had been my flower, my lily, and you blossomed under my care, at my shores, but now it was gone, whatever I had been able to give you had dried up, I couldn't bring the rain, I couldn't bring the water back, not even the tears in my eyes, I had nothing inside of me, worse than an emptiness, I used to be a river.

CONGRATULATIONS

I looked at him through the transparent wall separating us, he was lying in a little plastic box, a transparent little box, and the monitors were beeping and my husband had his hand on my shoulder, and all I could think was that the little cart he was in, the plastic box, it was like a casket, and I was scared because once

the doctors wheeled him away he might be gone, I wouldn't see him again, we would have to dig him a tiny hole in the earth and put him under the ground and say goodbye, we'd send him into the darkness of forever, and my fingers were on the plastic wall and his eyes were closed, my beautiful boy, his eyes were closed and they might never open again, he'd never watch a baseball game, he'd never fall in love with a beautiful girl, he'd never watch the moon above a tree line, he'd never catch June bugs, his eyes were closed and they might never open up again, I'd never know if his eyes stayed blue as he grew up or if they would be green like mine or brown like my husband's, I'd never see his eyes sparkle again, and my husband had his hand on my shoulder but my husband didn't say anything, my husband was so quiet, he was scared and I was scared because we knew we might lose our beautiful boy, our dream was ending, and our boy was going off into the darkness, alone, without us, he was going to sleep while our dream was ending, and so after the funeral, after our boy left us with the doctors and never came back, it was so much sadness, all the sadness in my heart, it's all I had to love my husband with and eventually it wasn't enough, it was only sadness, it's all I could offer my husband, or anybody, it's all I could give anyone, no matter how much I tried, no matter what anyone said, it was only the sadness in my heart and the sadness was all I had to give, so when my sister told me she was pregnant, sadness was all I had, a heartbroke voice congratulating her, it's all I had when her baby was born, sadness, I couldn't bring my eyes to look on the child when I visited them, on either of them, my sister or her baby, because it was only sadness, I wanted to love that little girl, my niece, I wanted to be happy for my sister, but a space existed between me and everything else, everyone else, and in the space was the sadness, all the sadness in my heart had filled up the world and created a distance from me and everyone and everything else, and I wanted to be happy for my sister, I wanted to be happy for her husband because I knew that a daughter meant falling in love all over again, a second chance at falling in love, for him, for them a dream had begun, they had fallen in love with the little girl and I wanted to fall in love with her too but I couldn't because of all the sadness, all the distance between me and everything else, everyone else, so I left their house and drove back to my quiet apartment and I thought about my ex-husband, how the sadness had filled him up for a time, but how he managed to

move past it, how it didn't quite separate him with an impossible space from the rest of the world, like it had done with me, how it had filled up my heart and made it so it was all I had to give, I thought about my ex-husband and how he had told me he wanted to move on, he had told me he wanted to find a way to keep going, but I couldn't, because there's some distance you can't close, there's some things you can't outrun, and now he was out there, with another woman, while I was in the apartment, trying to close the distance, trying to outrun the sadness, alone, stuck inside the sadness like how my little boy was stuck inside a little plastic box with the transparent walls and the tubes running up his nose, into his tiny arms, my baby boy, his eyes closed, his blue eyes I'd only been able to catch sight of once or twice, I was sitting in my apartment and I could feel my husband's hand on my shoulder and we both knew it was going to be the last time we saw our little boy, our baby, our miracle, our dream was ending, sitting on a chair at my kitchen table, but then a feeling came over me like I had woken up out of a dream, I had my hands on my lap and I saw a glass of water on the table and I could hear a car going down the road, it was night time, and a car was driving down the road and the apartment was dark, I was sitting in the dark, alone, waking up out of a dream, and after I awoke, out there, low on the horizon, out there above the quiet ocean, with the rest of the sky stretching overhead and back to the west clear and blue and pristine, were clouds, clouds like snow covered hills, and in front of the clouds and the water was a shoreline of tiny footprints with the waves breaking, I was awake, and I could see a series of clouds out on the horizon that made it look like a stretch of snow hills were looming in the distance, eastward, that's what I could see, the waves faintly washing away the footprints, the sound of water rushing then retreating, wet sand sparkling, this mirage out to the east, past the open waters, at the seaside, brigantines and catboats and schooners out in the distance with names like Pink Lady and Shenandoah, retreating then rushing, tiny footsteps, the clouds were low on the horizon and you had to squint to see them above the double crested cormorants perched on the rocks, washed out remnants of an old jetty, scud pushed over them, foamy bits, and the grains of sand whipping about, you had to squint past the boats and the rocks and the birds and the sand to see them, the clouds out there on the horizon that made it seem like snow covered hills ranged on past the ocean, and you could hear the tide rushing

up and settling back while you squinted and looked, the sound of the water against the shore, erasing the small footprints, the faint markings.

RENTAL PROPERTY

A rupture occurred inside of him so it was different that morning, as he woke up, with the spiders tucked into the corners of the ceiling, the motel sheets thin and damp against his torso, it was July so the sound of crickets had marked the night, pressed up against the forest at the Countryside Motel, and it was different. A rupture had occurred inside him. A strong wind blew that morning, and from the window in the small room he had been watching the treetops from across a clearing in the forest where the motel and the pool had been built, he could see the trees because he had forgotten to pull the shades the night before, since he had checked in after midnight at the Countryside Motel, a woman handed him a key and he walked to his room and his body ached for sleep so after he locked the door he fell directly into the mattress with the thin sheets, he had forgotten to pull the shades, so the next morning, after the rupture occurred inside of him, when he looked out the window into the clearing he saw oaks and pines that danced and swayed, and in particular one tree, a white oak, it bobbed and ducked like a prizefighter, with most of its scaffold branches victim to lightning strikes over the years, a lean trunk naked until the top where its leaves and branches had condensed, an overgrown dandelion, he watched it wild and bouncing fore and aft. Grey sunlight streamed into the clearing, and through the window he watched this particular white oak in the gusts of wind. He noticed bands of grey up in the sky, the way clouds darken with rain before a storm, as he sat in bed, with the motel sheets damp and thin against his torso, so he watched the sky darken in bands of grey and the white oak sway as the rain began to pelt down on the empty parking lot next to the building. Whenever he would think back to this particular moment in his memory, a confused young man, a young man with no stop in him, no reason to stop, nothing on his mind except money, except go, except run, it was usually the wind he would remember, the wind and the white oak and the window he forgot to pull the shades against. He would remember it clearly, the storm coming in. As a boy, before he had grown up into a confused young man, he had been mystified by summer storms, the trees behind his house swaying against a dusky, purple sky, with

the lightning and the rain, he'd loved a storm in July. And at the Countryside Motel, when he woke up to the open window and the clearing and the wind, as the storm approached, he thought about what had happened the night before. A house, a closet with a lock he had torn off the wall. A toy chest full of dusty fast-food prizes. A box of toiletries. Towels. Videotapes. Gin and vodka and vermouth. A few porcelain figures. Puzzles. A tennis racket and a few balls. He thought about the closet and the feeling of a crowbar in his hand, the hard steel, the crickets and his car parked outside on a dark street. He had stopped, with his flashlight pointed into the closet, and he realized what he was doing. Like an island, about a half mile off the beach, rocky and covered in trees, with the fog burning up in the sun, appearing out of the mist like a miracle, something had been revealed to him as the electric light illuminated the contents of the closet so he clicked off his flashlight and left the house and drove a couple of hours north, away from the coast, until he pulled off the highway and found the Countryside Motel and checked in and fell asleep. When he thought back to that morning, how it was different, how something had ruptured inside of him, the thin sheets and his sweat, the musky smell of the room, he would decide it must have been like his conscience waking up inside him. When he was a boy, a good storm would put him at a window, watching the branches sway, and he'd sit like that for as long as the rain fell and the thunder boomed, he'd put his chin on the sill of the window and silently watch, and there'd be something quiet inside of him, like a prayer, a feeling of awe, and that morning in the Countryside Motel it reminded him of when he was a boy, before he had grown up into a confused young man, and it was different, because something had ruptured inside of him, and it had been a long while since he had thought back to his father's house, to the window sill, the July thunderstorms. He sat up in the bed with the sheets clinging to his body and the window was uncovered and he watched the wind and the grey skies darkening and the agitated shadows of tree branches and thought back to the night before, how he stopped, how he clicked off the flashlight and left and drove away abruptly with the gun on his dashboard, rattling about until finally he passed over a bridge across a river and threw the gun out into the darkness to sink into the water. There had been a rupture inside of him. It was different that morning, when he woke up, and whenever he remembered it he would decide that it must have been the board

games in the closet, the flashlight, the tennis rackets and the bottles of alcohol, it all added up into something that broke him open and brought things to a stop so that was it.

VENUS, HER SULFPHUR RAIN

We had run out of trash bags and that's when I knew I had lost you, because you were gone, you weren't around anymore, it was as simple as an empty trash can with no bag to set into it, there was no bag to replace it so I stood next to the trash can with a full bag in my hands, with the string tied, I had tied the string and I had opened up the pantry and I couldn't find any trash bags, I couldn't find, that's when I knew you were gone, you were never coming back, and the emptiness, in the wake of your departure you, there would be holes, I would stumble into these holes, and the trash can, I had stepped into the first of the holes, with more to come, because you were gone, you weren't around anymore, holes like music on Sunday mornings, holes like dinner table conversations, holes like laughter, there would be holes like, I can't imagine how many more I will step into, it will be nothing but holes this first year, the first year is difficult, that's what a friend had told me, the first year will be tough, the first year will be nothing but stepping into holes, and with the full trash bag next to me, my eyes looking through to the back of the pantry, I know you aren't here, you're gone, I know it without, I lost you to something you'll never come back from, if there was ever, you're gone, you're presence in my life was torn down like a carnival, and I don't know how it's possible, how could I have known that you would become someone I knew, someone I had known, a receding memory, a dulling feeling, how could I have known one day you would all but disappear, a stranger, because there would only be shrinking memories and feelings, you'll become a name, a word, vanishing further from sight, darkness, a space between stars, infinite, and I'm here, a planet, wandering, bewildered and alone and putting my foot into holes, holding onto a trash bag, with the string tied, and the trash can is empty and I can't find a bag to replace it, there's no more trash bags in the pantry, nothing to replace, and a sadness that floods my insides and moves out through my eyes, I'm crying, because you're gone, you're, the kiss of grace in my life, the kiss of love, the kiss I'll never feel again, and I'm only, only this hole, and it will be more holes, the first year will be tough, and I hear my friend's voice, he tells me that there

is something out there for me, there is a purpose to my life, however obscure, but I can't help but think, holding the red string in my fingers, that my friend can't possibly understand how much I lost, in you, when you, I lost you, my darling, you're gone, and I'm next to an empty trashcan and I'm crying and the pantry door is open and my foot is in a hole, I'm standing here in the kitchen, and you're not here, I'm wandering between, a newspaper rests on the counter, and a bowl of soup, and it's dark outside, it's dark, and I put the soup can in the trash and I decided the trash was full so I pulled up the bag and tied it and when I looked to find a new bag to set into the can I couldn't find one, it wasn't, you were gone, so I'm crying, because you're gone, because when the ground is nothing but holes there isn't anything to stand on, there's only sinking, falling, a sheer drop, one giant hole, I had fallen into myself, a sheer drop, warped by my own preoccupations, by petty concerns, crunched by the density of my private world, thoughts and worries and anxious tics, I had completely fallen into myself, interiorized, negativity, and I can't climb out, I'm a young woman who is supposed to have her life in front of her, but I can't get beyond, I can't reach outwards into anything because of a fear, I don't deserve it, it somehow isn't for me, I somehow knew that I wasn't, and soon it was only a television screen, a couch, a sense of dread, for weeks then months, and my family had tried, they tried their best but to no avail, because nothing worked, even though their advice and their concern didn't fall on deaf ears, I listened, I tried, I went to doctors, I found a therapist, I swallowed medications, I talked and talked, but nothing works, the walls stretch up and around me and there is no way out, one giant hole, I can't help but feel I deserve to be alone, afraid, in the bottom of a well, and I couldn't pin it down, how I had fallen, I went to the doctors, I tried, no major tragedy beset me, what was the reason for it, I can't find an explanation, a chemical imbalance, neurons and signals between, all I can see when I look upwards are the walls, stretching, and I feel lonely, I feel trapped, desperate, I'm sitting on the couch, watching television, with prickles all over my skin like electricity, like a nervous itch, an itch I cannot, I'm young, I have my life ahead of me, my sister said that to me, she told me I have a purpose, you have your whole life ahead of you, I just need to find it, I just need to, but all I can feel are the walls, all I can think about is how I'll never escape, I'm stranded down here, stuck at

the bottom, I've tried everything I can think of, I've tried to do what everyone suggested, but I'm stuck, I'm trapped down here and there's no one to help me, there's no one else to climb down and rescue me, because if I could ask for something, I've never found love, I've never found someone to be scared of losing, me losing him, him losing me, but the only way to meet someone is to move outside of myself, even though I can't, I need someone to come in, first, before I can go out, and if I could somehow, but I can't, to start dating, and if I want to start dating I need to make sure I'm in a good place, but I'm on the couch, sitting here, and how can I ever reach a place where, it seems like the walls rise up forever, with no ledge, with no way out, stuck inside of myself, I'm not sure how it happened, this fear, this feeling like life isn't for me, how it is for everyone else, how there's nobody out there for me to love, or be loved by, and that's why it seems.

PLAYGROUND

I had never noticed it before, the gulls flapping into the breeze, their wings up and down but only enough to remain stationary, hovering, suspended above the boardwalk, above the beaches, above the boats and the commotion, like ornaments hung on the sky, I had never noticed them suddenly, with a turn of their chest, pitch to the side so they would drive away with a rush of air, diving off with a current, after they had been hovering, motionless, then jettisoning off with the wind, with real style, and I watched the gulls as they'd take turns up there at about the same height above the beach, one after another, near the pier with countless people walking below, so after that first time I noticed them I would look, year after year, and they'd be up there every summer on the same southeasterly breeze, and I never noticed them until I noticed it that first time, as a young boy, when the world was full of wonder and on warm July afternoons every summer I'd be at the pier and I'd notice them taking turns, the gulls, hovering and then darting out towards the water, and that first time I saw them I couldn't help but think the gulls must be having fun, to float up in place then to suddenly dive out of sight, at the slightest of twitches, what style, what fun, I couldn't help but think it because I was a young boy and the world was full of wonder to me, full of fun, so I'd look up into the sky while most of the folks on the pier had their eyes pointed out towards the open water, towards the boats, the steamships and the sails, the trawlers,

their eyes would be hungry and aching for the horizon, mesmerized, while I'd have my head tilted upwards up to where the gulls took their turns at swooping down from their magic point in the sky, because the world was full of wonder, magic, I was a young boy and it was obvious to my eyes the world was a place where gulls played games because wasn't there something magic in the way everything worked, so every summer I would look for the gulls, and I would wonder to see them, performing their feats, but as I grew older and older, the summers passed to autumns, then winters, years went by and the world became less full of magic, it became less wonderful, I lost my convictions as the world became full of hungry looks aching towards the horizon, confusion, hatred, shame, I grew up and the world became less special, I didn't care about seagulls or library bookshelves with secret facts about trees, like how a tree is made out of thin air, literally, how carbon in the air is reorganized into cellulose, a magic trick requiring sunlight and water, how a tree's bark is composed mainly of carbon from the air we exhaled, such facts didn't matter to me anymore as I grew up, I didn't think on sea birds or library books or butterfly collections as women came along, as jobs came along, as mistakes were made, as everything happened that happens to a boy who grows up into a man, but when I came back to the pier, to the beach, after all these years, so many, and I looked up and I watched one of the gulls hovering, motionless, ready to dive, I smiled to remember.

TEHOM

He inhales deeply and hears another detainee in the cell, a black guy, the man is pacing forwards and back shouting about a woman who left him, a woman who left him and a two-timing sonofabitch who took the woman, and the guy must be drunk or high or something because his eyes are red, on fire, as he's shouting, he shouts that he'll kill them both, the woman who left him and the sonofabitch she left him for, and he exhales, and he's thinking to himself my old man never laid a hand on me, not once, though he had every right in the world to, that's the truth, but my old man he took a different approach with me, both him and mom, even though I would give them hell, I'd complain about their rules, about chores, about school, I'd fight everything, bedtime, dinner, I fought them and I made it difficult but neither of them ever hit me, not once, and he couldn't for the longest time figure out why

exactly, why he fought so much, what made him so opposed to the rules and the chores and the way things were, why he made it so difficult, why it all bothered him so much, and he, for most his life, he figured it was more or less his nature, it's who he was, he couldn't point to anything, but it was something that had bothered him and he had been carrying it around as long as he could remember, he never quite put words to it or took the time to reflect on it and understand it better so it bothered him and that's why he was the way he was, but now one of the other detainees in the cell stands up and walks over to the toilet in the corner of the cell and unzips his fly and urine splashes against the seat and the floor, and the black guy, the one who is angry about his woman leaving him, he turns to the man by the steel toilet and he shouts Watch where you're aiming you goddamn slob! and the man at the toilet, a white guy with a gold tooth and tattoos, he turns to the black guy, while he's still urinating, and he yells back at him I'll piss wherever the hell I want to! and he's thinking to himself he's seen this before, he knows how this is going to end, and he exhales deeply because it will be a fight, there will be blood, the guards would swoop in and the two men would be forced into different cells, and after it happens, the cell is quiet and he goes back to thinking, he remembered seeing a good friend of his get walloped for refusing to put on a ballcap in the sun, he's thinking to himself, I saw my buddy catch it right upside the head, from his old man, and that backhand sent him flying, and I remember I looked at my buddy on the ground and I remember thinking to myself, you know what, that's what I deserve, my old man ought to crack me upside the head, and other folks would have agreed, the other families in town, the other parents, the teachers, the preachers, my brother, if they could've had their way with me, I'd have been getting walloped day and night, they found me to be objectionable, but not my parents, not the old man, not mom, they didn't raise a finger to me, not once, and the cell is quiet with the smell of urine and the smell of vomit and it was nightfall when the Army doctor let him out of the office, he had been in for almost an hour, and the crickets outside, he remembers the crickets on his walk back to the barracks and he remembers how the heat of the day had quit, it had given way to the dark, but the humidity hadn't cleared so the sound of crickets hung in the air like flies trapped in a spider web, it was thick and loud and he remembers the sound of his own footsteps and walking back to the barracks,

how the echoes from his boots against the concrete hung in the thick air, and he inhales deeply, he figures tomorrow morning he'll be in front of a judge, they'll assign him a public defender, he won't need to say much and it will be motions and paperwork and they'll transfer him to another facility, and he isn't scared or afraid, he feels calm, and he exhales deeply and he looks over at one of the other detainees, a Hispanic guy, asleep in the corner, he had been asleep while the fight between the two other men broke out, asleep when the guards unlocked the door and separated the two men, he glances at the Hispanic guy asleep on the steel bench and he remembers that was the first time he had ever looked at his medical files, when the Army doctor showed him, before he slowly walked back to the barracks, that was the first time he had seen it, in the heat of July, that's when he learned why his parents never gave him any trouble for his behavior, why they never raised a hand to him, why they took it easy on him, and he chuckles to himself because now it's July, today is the dead center of the month, so it must have been destined for it to happen this way, in July, a bastard of a month, after the fireworks and the barbecues, it stalls out, the flow of the entire year stalls out, like a busted radiator on the side of the highway, it drags and swelters and plods along and you can't imagine any other month other than July, any other temperature other than too hot, and he remembered having to wash out maggots from the trash cans in July, those white worms, crawling, festering in the bottom of the aluminum containers, how he'd keep a few for bait, for fishing, but he'd never wake up early enough to go fishing, by the time he was awake and ready to go, it was too hot, how he'd have a can of dead maggots laying next to the shed by the end of the month, and he's thinking about the shed and the river and the heat of July in the desert, how much he'd be missing football, missing October and the rays of a tired sun, and the cell is quiet, the Hispanic guy is sleeping on the bench, and the cell is quiet with the smell of urine and the smell of vomit and he inhales deeply, he misses October, he thinks how he always missed October when he was stuck in July, as a kid how much he missed football, being able to hit somebody, how he'd watch those Mormon boys with the pearly white teeth and the blonde hair warm up on the other side of the gridiron, he knew back then they had gotten a whole lot more out of life, a whole bunch of nice things, nice houses, nice looking cars, nice brains, he'd watch them and he'd know that he didn't have nearly as much as

they did, he'd know it, and whatever he had he'd been dealing with as long as he could remember, arguing, fighting, making his stand, when he saw those boys warming up across the field the feeling of whatever it was inside of him would grow even bigger, it would push up against his skin, and usually there would be nowhere for it to go but when he played football and the referee's whistle blew he would be foaming at the mouth, even though the other kids on his team knew they were outmatched, we knew it, it didn't matter to him, because he'd take what he'd been dealing with and turn it inside out and he'd play his best games against those boys with the white teeth and the blonde hair, under the tired rays of an October sun, they would be faster and longer and their plays were better, but he was always the meanest one on the field, and he smiles to think back on it, he exhales deeply, he can hear his teammates whooping along the sidelines, hollering for him, how his teammates would cheer for him to go kill those sons of bitches, how nobody cared about the scoreboard or the touchdowns, his teammates would wait for the big hits he'd make, and they'd cheer, the game would end and it would be nighttime and there would be the croak of ravens and the desert would be cool and he would be lying in bed, sore, but satisfied, he'd feel as good as he ever felt because whatever he'd been dealing with, as long as he could remember, it was outside of him, it was somewhere on the field, it had legs and muscles and was after somebody else, putting them in the ground, it was like an exorcism, it would move through me, sweep through me, it filled me up and pushed up against my skin, against my eyes, it pushed from within me and it overwhelmed me, it weighed me down, and I would try to force it out through my eyes, I would try to tighten it in my palms into my fists, but it wouldn't leave, it wouldn't seep outside of me, it wouldn't give way except when I was playing football, except when I was out there on that field, and the cell is quiet with the smell of vomit and the smell of urine and he remembers standing in the living room of his father's trailer, after basic training had finished, when he'd be home for a short break before they would ship him off for his first tour, he's asking his father why nobody ever told him, he's demanding to know, how could you hide it from me, this is why you always took it easy with me, why you always gave my brother a harder time, you felt guilty, mom felt guilty, and he's shouting at his old man and his father isn't saying much, and finally his father clears his throat and his black hair is short, its cut short

and it's angular on top of his head because he didn't grow it long anymore, not since he was a boy who wore a traditional braid, his father clears his throat and explains how she was trying to get clean when she was pregnant, when she found out she was having a baby, the two of them were having a baby, she wanted to get clean and that's why they left Los Angeles, that's why they packed up and headed east, into the desert, she wanted to get clean and do right, she wanted to be a good mother, and she tried her best, and once he was born she went clean for good, she never touched the stuff again, she tried her best, I tried to help her, his father told him I tried to help her, and he can see his mother, while his father is explaining it to him, he remembered his mother going to church, the Pentecost Temple of the Holy Ghost, he remembered the music, the speaking in tongues, he remembered how his mother believed the Holy Spirit had baptized her, how she wanted her boys to receive the Holy Spirit, he remembered being in the church and never understanding what any of it meant, how somebody could believe such nonsense, and he can see his mother's eyes, her eyes were red and on fire and she wanted so badly to be reborn, to be forgiven, she spoke about repentance and being freed from the devil, and that must have been her way of squaring herself up with her guilt, with the past, with her past and with my old man's past, a man with Lakota blood, a Viet Nam veteran who came back home from the war to find himself a crazy white woman wife, who fell in love with her, who called her 'Coyote' and tolerated her insane habits and her wanderings and her crushed pills and her needles and lassoed her up and brought her out to the country, tried to bring her to medicine, his father put a baby in her but couldn't protect the baby, the boy who his father would name after his dear friend, how there wasn't enough time for the medicine to help, to help her, to help the boy, and the lights in the cell are on and the walls are grey, the other man is sleeping, the Hispanic guy, but he's awake and he exhales deeply, whatever it was he had inside of him, for as long as he could remember, he had it because of her, because of what his mother had done, and some part of him must have known, some part of him must have sensed it, he had been poisoned in her womb, and that must have been the reason why he carried it with him, why he yelled and fought, why he disobeyed the rules, that must have been the reason why, and he remembers leaving his father's trailer after he had cursed his mother, and his father told him to leave, told him he didn't understand, how people make

mistakes, and down the hall comes a slam of a steel door, a lock turns, and the other guy is asleep on the bench in the cell, on the opposite wall from him, and he inhales deeply, he remembers before he signed up to join the service, after his mother died, while he was playing football games on Friday nights in October, he remembers his father at the kitchen table, for months and months, after the funeral, after they put her in the ground, and his father is cursing God, his old man yells out, it's a harsh world, an evil world, and no good God could be in charge of it, and it occurs to him, exhaling deeply, God has nothing to do with any of the evil or darkness or hate or hurt of this world, we've made all the evil in this world and then some, we've done it to each other, we're the ones responsible for it, even though his mother was baptized and forgiven, even though her dark hair shined in the sunlight, even though her skin never cracked the way it did for other folks who spent their lives under the desert sun, even though she moved like how he imagined a field of wheat might blow and sway in the wind, imagining it because he had never actually seen a field of wheat, surrounded by rocks and dust, even though she was beautiful, his mother had done that to him, she had poisoned him in her womb, the medical file had said it, it had called out the words, it was an acronym, there were words behind the letters, and the Army doctor explained why he had been given morphine as a newborn boy, a tiny amount, to help with the withdrawals, and now he knew the reason why he was dumber than all the other kids in school, why he couldn't concentrate, why he couldn't read well or do math, why he hated everything, why he hated their rules and the chores and having to clean out the trash cans with the maggots in July, it hadn't been anything to do with him, it hadn't been his nature, it had been his mother, and if those teachers would have known, if the other kids would have known, the ones who said it to his face, making fun of him for asking once how did a raven know how to never build its nest on the weatherside of a cliff if nobody ever taught the raven, maybe they wouldn't have laughed so hard, maybe they would've understood where he was coming from, maybe they could have seen why it was so difficult for him to keep pace with the words on the pages, why it was so easy for him to drift off thinking about radio antennae towers, so he inhales deeply, and the lights in the cell are on, and the other guy is sound asleep, the Hispanic guy, and he remembers a flabby arm hanging out of a beat up El Camino, and little girls with brown skin are playing barefoot out

on the red clay, on the cracked rocks, and even though they were people who were dispossessed, people like him, like me, like my old man and his old man before him, people who were forced into poverty, they still had something out there in the country, a part of the country, of the desert, of the cracked rocks and the canyons, the mesas, it was still theirs, far away from television programming and airport bars, far away from the Manhattans and the Washingtons, even if they didn't own it according to a piece of paper, according to a department or a registry, the land was theirs, because they belonged to the land, and I could see it on their faces, the kids playing out in the dusk with the dust and the lizards, they were free because they belonged, and I wished it for myself to feel like them, because somehow I didn't have that freedom, I didn't have a feeling I still belonged to the land, or it belonged to me, my father and his father before him, we had lost our connection, we didn't have the range of the hills, or the lowland along the water, or the resting place, or the place of red rocks, or the place where you get to the other side, our names were what we had, and our names were gone, our language forgotten, renamed, replaced by names, numbers, so we were never able to find a way to settle into, inside of ourselves, a contentedness, and the cell is quiet with the smell of urine and the smell of vomit the night air is dry, it isn't humid like how it was at Basic, in the barracks, the air is dry like an oven and there's dust and through his night vision glasses, in a green blur, he can make out his buddy running after him, a yellow figure in the green and the black, and in a flash his buddy stops, a look is on his buddy's face and it's a look like a lightbulb going out, when the centerlight pops blue in a dark room, that was the look on his buddy's face and he knows his buddy has been shot, he's been greased, and later that night, back at the base, filling in the report with his commanding officer, he remembers his old man and the night his old man told him about his good buddy Teddy Czacki, Tango Charlie, and how his old man explained if ever he had a son he'd make sure his initials were TC like his good buddy Tango Charlie, and how his old man looked at him as he told him, because I was that boy, he was thinking how he had been his father's first son, named after a soldier who was killed in Viet Nam, and even though Teddy wasn't part Indian, he didn't have any blood from way out on the plateau, the blood of buffalo people, my father's blood and his father's before him, but my old man liked Teddy and they

became good buddies, best buddies, like brothers, being stationed together and fighting in some rough country, he exhales, my old man was so quiet, people mistook it for a country kind of silence, a working man's silence, a silence of the plains, but it was a silence of pain, it was a silence of deep pain, a kind of sorrow which can't speak for itself, that can't be conferred, because he had lost, lost the land, lost his people, lost a best buddy, lost his brother, lost a wife, and that's why he cursed God in the broken hours of the night, while my old man thought my brother and I were asleep, with his bottle in his hand, and my brother was asleep because he was younger than me, he slept and my father cried but I listened, I heard it, I listened when my old man told me how he had seen his buddy Tango Charlie die in combat, how he had dragged TC's body into a helicopter in the middle of a field in Viet Nam, and my old man didn't tell me about it until I was ready to hear about it, and after he told me the story, I realized it was my old man's way of telling me he was proud of what I had just done, why he was talking to me in the darkness of our living room, alone, like two men, my old man told me so I would understand why it was so important to him that I stand up for my brother, why he thought any man who turned his back on family was no good, because it was the night I came home with my face bloody and my nose broken, the night my brother danced with Tony Vargas' girl and a group of kids from the neighborhood went after my brother after the dance, how they conspired to kill my brother, how they tried to push me away and told me to stay out of it, but at the moment of truth I jumped in and told my brother to run and since I was bigger and older I took on the whole lot of the sons of bitches and even though I took my licks and I ended up with a busted nose, my brother was safe, and my old man told my mother to leave us alone because my old man was proud of me, and my old man said it by telling me about his buddy from Viet Nam who I was named after, and after that night he never said anything else about the war, not a word, though maybe my old man would have, if he would have grown old and gray, with no more cards in his hand to play, maybe my old man would have said more to me about his time in the war, but I don't think he would have, because he was so quiet, even the night my mother died, he didn't say a single word, so I had to call up the hospital and ask what happened to her, after my old man came back home, parked the truck in the driveway, walked into a bedroom and locked the door, my brother and I were shouting for

my old man to come out, but he wouldn't, he didn't say anything to us, he didn't tell us how she died, if our mother ever said anything to him, what happened, and he inhales, and the man across from him, on the steel bench on the opposite wall of the cell, is asleep, and the cell is quiet with the smell of urine and the smell of vomit and he remembers how his mother had gone to the couch, how she said she had to take a nap because she was feeling dizzy, and when his old man came home he asked on her, where she was, and he told his old man she was on the couch, and then his old man came rushing out of their living room, with the sofa and the television, and asked how long she had been there, so he told his old man it must have been a couple of hours, maybe three hours, and so his old man picked his mother up from off the couch and brought her into his truck and drove away and that was it, so whatever was inside of him, the thing that bothered him, it only got worse, it got worse after his mother died, and it got worse after the Army doctor told him what his medical file read, and it got worse after his own buddy was killed in combat, after he got home from his first tour and found out his old man was sick, it only got worse and worse, even though he thought he knew where this thing inside of him had come from, it didn't matter if he knew why, because it was still there, still inside him, darkening his face against the rest of the world, a world that had put all the meanness and anger inside of him, because it wasn't God's fault, God wasn't to blame, it was us, it was our doing, because he was an animal and he knew everybody else, they were animals too, and whatever baptism his mother had been trying to find for herself was all a lie, because the whole thing was a big, complicated, ugly mess and at the end of it we die and there's nothing else to it, that's what he thought sitting at his apartment, recovering from a surgery on his spine after he busted a disc from descending on a rope down a building and losing his grip on the rope, he was sent back home for treatment, he was given a medical discharge and they told him he wouldn't be called into active service again, so they gave him a new disc, put him on assistance, with no job, with nothing to do, nothing to be except mean and angry, before his brother called him up, before his brother reached out to him from across a long span of time, a couple of years since they had last spoken, and invited him to come visit, to come visit and see him so they could reconnect, so they could get to know each other, because they were all that was left, after his father died, after his mother died, his brother

had gone to school because he was smart, he could concentrate on the letters and the words on the page, he could think straight, his mother hadn't been on drugs while his brother was living inside of her, she had spared him, so he was smart and went away to college and had himself a job and was doing alright, and he thought back to that night on his couch, his brother's voice in his ear, telling him to come visit, he exhales and closes his eyes because the light is on in the cell and he's tired, he's watching the Hispanic guy asleep on the bench across from him and he figures it might be a good idea to get some rest, tomorrow he'll be at the court house and who knows where they'll bring him, it will be a long day so he might as well try to sleep, so he quits leaning against the wall and repositions himself on the steel bench, he curls up best he can without his back hurting too much, and he can see his brother's face, how his brother's face froze up like his buddy's face in Iraq, his buddy he saw killed through the night vision goggles, like his father's friend Tango Charlie, and his brother can't believe it, the man on the bike came out of nowhere, the man on the bike came up out from nowhere and there was a thump underneath the car as the wheels rolled over the man's body, as the bike flew off the road and into the woods, the man didn't move and the bike was nowhere to be found and the car had stopped, it had been pulled over to the side of the road, and he remembers his brother's face, the frozen look on it, shock, he knew it, the face, he knew the look, he had seen it down at the Temple of the Holy Ghost, as we'd sing hymns with the rest of the folks, fanning themselves, begging for forgiveness, praying for the spirit to fill them up, sometimes folks would be moved by the spirit and their faces would freeze in wild flashes and I never did believe in any of it, he thought all the folks in the church were crazy, but he didn't really know what crazy was until he rode a subway car in New York City a few years ago and I saw a man, dressed in rags, wild like a rabid dog, talking in tongues, screaming, yelling across the train car, and no one paid him any attention, and his eyes were wild with madness, like a wilderness lurked behind his eyes, you could tell, I could tell it, and it scared me, it scared me because I understood the wilderness behind his eyes, what lurked there, because most people don't wander back into that place, they don't stray, they take it for granted the fact they can remember their home address, they can sit down to a dinner table and unfold a napkin, they can open up a newspaper and read the box score of

yesterday's game, even though the wilderness is back there, it's inside of them, inside of everyone, and he figured while the subway clanged and sputtered its way down the tracks that's what those folks reading the box scores are most afraid of, and his brother's face, earlier in the night, in the heat of July, it's like he had caught sight of the wilderness, he had seen how far back it went, how vast and untamed it was, with the body on the road, lifeless, behind them, with the orange caution lights blinking against the trees in the forest, his brother was driving, the car was stopped, and he knew he was better suited for the wilderness, he knew people could go into that wilderness and never return, or they could go into it and turn out mean and angry, and they would only make things worse for each other, because we were the ones who turned this world awful, but we were also the ones who would turn this world good, and looking at his brother's face he knew he could let go of the thing which had been haunting him, which had been bothering him for all these years, this thing that had warped his mind, and his heart, it was his chance to let go of it, to be rid of it, so he got out of the car, and he waited until he saw a pair of lights, and even though they had been drinking, even though he knew he'd end up in a quiet cell with the smell of urine and the smell of vomit and there would only be a steel bench to sleep on, even though he knew there would be a judge, there would be a trial, he didn't care, because he was here, with his brother, with a chance to let go of the thing for good, to go out into the wilderness and make the best of it, make something beautiful out of the chaos, because if God couldn't take the blame for making the world an evil place then He sure couldn't take the credit for making it a beautiful one, and the first pair of lights came down the road and he stopped the car and told the driver what happened and asked the driver to go to the nearest police station and when the police officer pulled up with his lights flashing he walked over to the officer and told him he had done it, I had been the one driving the car, it was me, I was driving the car, and I had drank a couple of beers but the biker came out of nowhere and I had no time, I couldn't react, and I'm sorry for what happened, I'm sorry for what happened to the man who has to go into the ambulance and then onto the morgue, I'm sorry for him and his family, but I couldn't be happier because now the thing inside of me is finally gone and it isn't my job anymore to figure out what to do with it or where to put it or understand what put it there,

it doesn't matter, so I'll rest my head and tomorrow will come and bring whatever it will, I'm breathing and I'm ready to sleep because it's left me, ever since I saw the look on my brother's face, I knew what I had to do, and I knew if I did it nothing would bother me again.