

THE

EMPTY

TOMB



a voiceHOUSE

experience

"So Job died, being old and full of days."
Job 42:17

"What are we here for? We are not alive though we are living and we are not in our graves though we are dead."
Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead*

It's appalling the dearth of language at our disposal when we hear news of a friend or a family member passing away. We stutter. We bumble. We clam up or we prattle, then turn our attention elsewhere. We can find no footing. We possess no ability to approach such an event. There are no cultural resources available to us to put a person dying, a life ending, into a meaningful context.

"I am sorry for your loss."

"Your family is in my thoughts."

And our linguistic responses mirror our emotional responses. Our perspective allows us a dumb kind of sympathy for the deceased's associates, albeit vague at best. There's concern, but it is limited to economic domains: who will pay the bills, how will the inheritance be split up, etc. A few of us might cry simple tears which evince nothing more than a threatened sense of self-preservation, then we return home to our glowing screens.

Why such ineptitude?

We have no faith, no symbolic constructs, no traditions which might help us to confront the unknown. We are rendered completely useless in the face of death. And amidst our futility, in a post-modern world where God has been destroyed and all claims on 'meaning' have been revoked and any possibility for us to live out a 'story' has disintegrated, we have taken the next logical action: we have eliminated death from the landscape of our lives.

Unable to bear the unknown, we have abandoned it altogether.

We have become so dislocated from the realm of mystery that we deny even the possibility of there being a realm of mystery.

In this, our spectral age, where appearances are paramount, where the act of living has been severed from the primacy of being alive- in the forgetting of how to live, we have also forgotten how to die. Death has become a thing impossible for us to navigate, so we have left it behind. Like an atmosphere gradually stripped away by solar winds- for what can death represent to us, those who are no longer alive? It is a system generated error. We click the icon. We ignore the window. We carry on with our supermarket discounts, with our 'What kind of car do you drive?' games, with our surprise birthday parties and championship broadcast chicken wings.

We don't need to ignore it- idiotic, like 'Who would file the quarterly report in July? Who would pick up the shirts at the dry cleaners?'

We don't need to disguise it- vanity, like 'Pass the salt.'
We don't need to turn away from it- safe, like 'Look at what science can do!'
It simply doesn't exist anymore.
We have built a world that is so attenuated from the harshness, from the physicality, from the 'feeling' of life- to negate death, as a reality, as an eventuality, as something to confront- we have achieved our dreams. In our dull, comfortable stasis...
No more Grim Reaper.
No more tombstone flowers.
No more unanswered questions.
No more goodbyes.

EMPTY TOMB
AGAINST A DARKNESS WHICH WOULD SWALLOW US WHOLE
PLAY BALL
MAGNIFICATION
PORTAGE
VIVISEPULTURE
THIS WORLD
RITUALS
STEAMSHIP
AFTER MIDNIGHT
GIRL
JOLT
DISINTERRED
PROMENADE
GOODBYE
SPF
INFESTATION
FAINT
MISTOOK
SIGH
HOLIDAY
TRAILHEAD
HOSANNA

EMPTY TOMB

It only took a cab ride from the airport to the hotel for clarity to settle over me, to understand where I had landed.

A wasteland- the lost and forlorn, stationed within a supposed oasis, when in fact they stagger warily about a desert within a desert. Unsteady bodies, drunk. Money changing hands. Leering eyes.

One more person crying

Lost- yet content to be stupefied in this forsaken Gomorra. High on the spectacle, enamored- concerned only with frivolity, dithering between casinos, restaurants, entertainment halls, brothels and night clubs where the fulfillment of any physical desire and whim can be assuaged. Forlorn- in the pursuit of fulfilling these whims and desires at any cost, under a spell, delirious and inconsiderate.

The cab driver's first question to me as I settled into his back seat, "So what are you here for? Gambling? Women?"

My revulsion stemmed from far beyond the tawdry surface of things. What lurks underneath this curated exterior are the hollow groans of pain, isolation, sadness, iniquity- on account of excess, of gluttony, concupiscence, greed.

Souls are rotting in this place, I thought to myself.

Masquerading as insouciance...

Advertised as fun...

Lost and forlorn.

I had arrived at the final embodiment of Augustine's *incurvatus in se*- a complete turning inward towards oneself, a place where personal gratification is paramount and beyond any notion of compromise or compunction. Men and women distended sick by their self-concern, self-interest. Insular, and disconnected from the truth of what it means to be a person.

A place of supposed beauty and intrigue, of flashbulb fixation on external presentation- yet rooted in ugliness and horror.

Driven past a billboard which displayed a phone number alongside glossy images of exposed women, pasted slapdash and provocatively. Confronted with this perversion of our most sacred physical act as human beings- to make love. To become united in body and mind and breath with another person, to experience complete being, a gift of the most sacred- debased by crude jokes, by wanton licentiousness, by transactional emptiness. The reduction of a human person, an embodied spirit, to nothing more than an orifice.

Not much is really sacred

I became disgusted by what I saw, angered- not from self-righteousness, but from self-identification.

I was one of them.

I was no different.

I contained these same impulses to debase my humanity, to betray the miracle of my own existence, to reduce my personhood and the personhood of those around me completely and hopelessly.

It was so easy.

It felt so good.

The road passed underfoot.

Who are these lost denizens, these forlorn children?

Why have we allowed ourselves to be led so far astray?

Under arrays of frenetic lights, our inadequacy is hidden. Sin can only be made apparent under the light of truth. Under the light of decoration, of superficial adornment, nothing can be seen. We turn our backs to the truth, and when our backs are turned, everything is permissible. Everything is okay. "I'm fine." But if we are exposed to the light of illumination, through grace, then this becomes the moment a sinner is revealed to himself. Because the light of truth demarcates the presence of our darkness, our shadows.

At least, that's what I believe.

I'm a Christian.

As much as I'd like to go home to my safe, suburban life, I know God is everywhere. He's here. And underneath Him, we are all the same.

Lost and forlorn.

But never forgotten.

Christ made it known "There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." With that in mind, perhaps Las Vegas serves an important purpose? A place for shrieking, for torment, for revelation- this was a place where our freedom and our stupidity could ultimately allow us to harrow our souls, to prepare them for grace and the luminous truth of what our life was intended to be, and what we were intended to serve.

By encouraging us to be slaves to our own self-interest, this place might in fact be the birthplace of saints- separating the wheat from the chaff. I considered this as the cab stopped in front of the hotel and I paid the driver his due fare.

But repentance is not as simple as "I'll never do it again." Repentance is a metanoia, a changing of heart, a spiritual conversion- a radical shift in consciousness in how a person perceives the world around them as well as their position relative to that world.

What causes us to change?

Why does grace come only to some of us?

How can we be so blinded by our own darkness?

We are stubborn by nature- capable of change, yet mostly resistant to it. Incredibly flexible, yet weighed down by inertia. We build our models of society, the universe. We regurgitate what we hear

and what we are taught by a capitalist, rationalist, materialist society that places supreme import on personal satisfaction, on exercising our free will, on comfort and happiness. We are inculcated from a young age to 'get ours,' and to get it as soon as we can.

What *had* I come here for?

I considered how to answer the driver's question. I considered honestly opening up, confessing that purposes of my trip had been constructed out of a desperate love to save my brother. To pull him out from the literal abyss of his addiction. To offer him help, to offer him a different way- to become vulnerable to the possibility that he would deny me, and I would never see him alive again.

To end this war of attrition.

Get you down in the hole that he's in

But I remained silent.

In fact, I had lied.

"Business."

Thomas had been arrested for possession of a controlled substance three days prior to my arrival. He had called me to come rescue him. It wasn't the first instance of him reaching out to me in desperation, when he needed assistance cleaning up a mess. It had happened countless times over the years. But after enough heartbreak and repetition, it became clear to me that no matter what I said or did, he would only return to his lifestyle of drugs and homelessness. I stopped answering his calls at the behest of my wife, and Thomas and I hadn't spoken for years. I had to concede to the power of his disease.

I had to let go and let God, so I told myself.

He must have been surprised when I picked up the phone.

He must have been even more shocked when I said I would fly out over the weekend, post the necessary money for bail, and find him an attorney.

There was no indication that this instance would be any different than those previous.

There was no reason to believe in a miracle.

There was good reason to expect lies, chaos, shouting, a punch being thrown, a plastic half-pint, a crushed pill wrapped in aluminum foil, false pretenses, manipulation, stealing, death.

There is no sense in trying

As the years fell by, and we grew apart, more and more Thomas would ridicule me for my faith. He called me a hypocrite. He called me a 'sheep.' He taunted me. While Thomas had turned to the worldliness of the world as a young man, I had turned to the church. I suppose in many ways I had been the lucky one, beatific, because I hadn't been forced to endure any extreme suffering on account of my pride or appetite. I was by no means perfect, but it

had come rather easy to align my life along spiritual principles and strive to live that life along moral lines. For Thomas, such adherence was impossible.

I used to believe that he had made his choices, and I had made mine.

I used to believe heaven and hell were lifetimes away.

Grace was for God to give, or forego.

But I picked up the phone. I decided that if I wanted him to change, then I would have to change. I would have to stop keeping him at arm's length. I would need to reach into his world, from a place of love and support, and offer my hand.

"I'm done waiting for God to help him."

My wife was not enthusiastic about my decision.

My children are too young to understand any of it.

Checked into my hotel room, I glanced at myself in the mirror. I considered a question: What did I expect to accomplish? What did I expect Thomas to do? What were my designs?

What else can you show me

I had a vision of my brother trudging behind me, following me into a church, apprehensive- as if he were a man recently disfigured by fire, blistered, pointedly and severely aware of his ugliness. He acknowledged his grotesque internal life and felt unworthy to be in the presence of the icons and statues, the baptismal font and stained glass- ashamed by their purity, their purpose.

There have been many instances where I myself have entered a church as an intruder, wondering 'How could the force which governs this place accept me? How could it want anything to do with me?'

But I turned away from the mirror, finished brushing my teeth. I knew my designs didn't matter. What mattered was I had come. I felt called, and I responded.

Before I fell asleep, I reflected again on the possibility that I might fail, that this would all be for naught. It pained me to consider Thomas might not accept my intercession- that I'd depart with a final goodbye, an impossible divide between us. Despite our differences, I cherished my brother. We spent a lifetime together, growing up, playing baseball, fishing creeks and streams near our uncle's house, lighting firecrackers, reading comics- there had been beautiful moments shared between us.

Our mother and father had orphaned us to the world.

All we ever had was each other.

We used to stay up at night, in the bedroom we shared, and talk about what we wanted to see in our dreams. We would decide to dream about racecars, or dinosaurs, or ice cream sundaes. We would decide to dream back our mother and father, dream back a life that never happened, that we never had. My uncle would shout from down the hallway for us to shut up, so we would have to whisper, between humble cots, to finish describing our visions.

I decided that night to dream about Thomas.
I decided to dream him into a new life, a new way of looking at
the world, a new place for him in it.
Then I fell asleep.

AGAINST A DARKNESS WHICH WOULD SWALLOW US WHOLE

It had been my wife's idea.
"You should bring Kevin camping this fall. It would be good for
you."
My first thought was, 'Who would take care of the fire?'
Regis was in charge of the fire. It was unspoken, and it had always
been that way. Well, it had been that way for a long time. When my
father took us camping as boys, the old man would pile up deadwood,
dried out for a season or two, into the truck. When we set camp,
he would arrange the wood pile next to the fire pit. He cut the
logs, then splintered them further into smaller chunks. He
collected tinder from brush piles nearby, or if he saw a patch of
dried moss on the trail he would stuff it into his pocket. The old
man never used a lighter or a match- always a flint, or a ferro
rod. Once the fire was lit, then his art took shape. Like brush
strokes, his adjustments with his hickory hatchet. He would bellow
into the flames, he would change the orientation of a log or spread
out the bed of coals- in perfect communion. Never a wasted motion.
Never a lost flame. As darkness spread around us, we would sit and
watch the flames dance. It was beautiful, and comforting- even as
a boy, I could appreciate the fact I was in the presence of a
master. His sense of timing, finesse- and after my father died,
Regis took over. My old man went so far as to leave Regis his
hatchet in his last will and testament. It was predestined for
Regis to bear the responsibility.
He was the oldest.
He was the next in line.
A custodian.
In all the years I had been camping, never once had I presided
over the fire.
But now Regis was gone.
And I was left.
I'd never told Regis that his handiwork was just as beautiful, if
not more so, than our father. My father had been a man beset by
history, the past. He had married young, like his own father. He
had become silent, like his own father. He had been pushed down by
the world, like his own father. Regis never had any of that
baggage. He operated in a space of total freedom. And that made
his work special.
I never said any of that to Regis.
We never spoke about the fire, or my father.
I wish I would have.

There's a lot of things I would like to have said, but if I had the chance to say one more thing, anything, it would be that.

Regis was an artist when it came to tending a fire.

So when my wife set the proposition in front of me, I thought about blue flames. I thought about other things, too. About the way Regis clutched a mug of beer above a shuffleboard, how he would spin a puck in his off hand while contemplating the next shot. About the way Ruby Dennison hung off his shoulders that night on the lake, her green eyes shimmering like the stars reflecting off the water, just before Regis packed up for basic training and never came home. About his legs, the muscles in his calves and quadriceps when he ran, and how I had always been envious of the power behind his motion, contained in his body.

I tried not to think about the way he looked in that casket, with his eyelids sealed closed, the black suit jacket.

I tried not to think about the phone call from my mother.

I didn't respond to my wife at first.

I must have shrugged, then got back to whatever I was working on. We sold Regis' Ford E-350 and the rights to his oyster farm lease. There wasn't much to sort through in his apartment. A pair of boots covered in shell hash, a closet full of wrenches and saws and driver bits. A half-drunk fifth of cheap bourbon.

And underneath his bed, tucked into a leather sheath- the hatchet with the hickory handle.

We took care of the paperwork, my wife and I. She helped me sort through the forms, the bills. Mom couldn't handle any of that.

Regis was dead.

My father was dead.

There was nobody left to tend the fire.

A few days after she put it in front of me, I told my wife I was still considering things. After a few more days, she brought it up again. My initial decision was no, the boy was too young. I told her, "He's too young. Maybe next year." I didn't want to explain my reservations about the fire, so I left it there. But my wife pressed me. She wanted us to go. I was in the garage, changing the oil in the lawnmower, and I wanted my space. I wasn't looking for a conversation. So I abruptly agreed.

My wife usually got her way when it came to those kinds of things. The boy and I would go camping.

Kevin was six years old. I wasn't sure how he would handle the tent, the sleeping bag, the hiking and the fishing. He'd never expressed much of an interest in the outdoors. He liked action figures and baseball, and McDonald's cheeseburgers. It might not be an enjoyable trip for him.

We would have to cobble together the best of it.

I packed the truck and we made the drive up to Maine. We stopped for several bathroom breaks. I was annoyed. The weather was

overcast, and rain was due the following day. Kevin didn't seem concerned about where we were going, or what exactly we would be doing.

I pulled up to the campsite I had reserved, sighed, and regretted the fact I wouldn't be able to smoke any cigars on this trip- at least not in front of the boy.

Marcy had made me promise.

"No cigars, alright?"

Besides the cigars, I couldn't hide much longer from the looming problem- who would take care of the fire?

We had picked up a few bundles of wood at a gas station outside the park.

"Let's work on the tent first."

The boy stopped at the metal stove and the cooking rack flipped over the fire pit- "What's this for?"

"The fire."

"We get to make a fire?"

There was such genuine surprise in his voice, I couldn't help but grin. "Yes. We get to make a fire. But first we should stand the tent up. It'll be dark soon."

Kevin helped me with the poles and the stakes, then we rolled out the sleeping bags and unpacked some clothes and food. There was a picnic table where we arranged our gear.

"Is it time for the fire now?"

"Sure."

I took out my father's hatchet, Regis' hatchet, and split up the first piece of wood.

Kevin watched intently.

A pile of shavings, a piece of newspaper, some smaller scraps- I unearthed a lighter, flicked it, and the flame took.

There was smoke.

I offered one of the smaller chunks to Kevin and told him to add it on top of the pyramid shape.

We waited, in silence, then I handed him another one.

The chunks became bigger, and Kevin stayed near the flames.

I decided to light a cigar.

Kevin didn't notice it.

The boy's eyes were enchanted by the glowing heat, those crackling mesmeric figures- absorbed.

We stared for a little while, him and I.

Then I sat up. The plink of a bell in the distance, from far beyond the camp site- it pierced through the flush of surf which had been humming through us and in us since we arrived, an unwavering background. It was the buoy bells. I remembered I had been looking forward to hearing the sound of the buoy bells at night.

Sirens- mellifluous, yet haunted.

I started to think about Regis. I thought about how he'd told me "Oakes, you worry too damn much." I thought about the way he bit off the tag end of a knot from a line of tippet. I thought about his laugh, his cackle of absolute satisfaction, in on the joke.

I missed my brother.

"Dad?"

I had lost my focus on Kevin. He was holding a log in his hand.

"Can I add this to the fire?"

"Do you think she can handle it? Let's build her up some before we start to add full logs."

Kevin was analyzing, calculating. "Maybe a few more of the small ones."

"Alright," I said.

We built up the fire a bit more until he whispered, "I think it's ready now."

She was ready.

My brother had always referred to the fire as a woman, the feminine form. He didn't see it as an element of destruction. It had to be cared for, loved. It was a thing of beauty, that led to rebirth. Kevin approached the flames with reverence and carefully added the log.

Then, I knelt down next to the pit and blew as hard as I could, leeward, until the base of the log caught.

"Why did you blow on that log, dad?"

"It helps the fire eat."

Kevin liked my answer. I could tell he was internalizing it.

"The fire needs wood and air to survive. It's a living thing. We give her both to keep her going."

Kevin nodded.

We sat and watched the flames. We ate a pair of peanut butter sandwiches and shared a bag of potato chips.

An hour passed, three more logs- "Do you want to go to sleep?"

"No. I want to stay by the fire."

We roasted a Rice Krispie and ate it with a Hershey bar.

Kevin ate his treat in silence.

Another hour.

I kept glancing over to him, but he was concentrating.

He loved the fire.

I'd never seen him like this.

Awestruck.

Right there, I decided he would inherit the hatchet.

My oldest son.

My brother.

My father.

"No more logs tonight. We need some rest before tomorrow. Okay?"

He didn't break away from the flames- he only nodded.

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Out in the harbor, there were two cutters and several catboats pointed towards the sound, sails full and gliding over the calm seas.

It hadn't rained.

We had hiked for part of the day, then found a spot to fish.

Neither of us caught anything.

I took him into town for a cheeseburger and a milkshake at the Dairy Bar.

In front of one of the souvenir shops, near the harbor, a flag flapped- the pine tree and star.

"Is that flag for Christmas?"

I looked down at my boy. My first thought was to correct him. To tell him the truth, and to chide his juvenile sensibility. But I stopped myself. Something stopped me. And after I paused, a thought: Arethusa had lost her son and turned into a waterfall, but I had lost my brother and turned into an angry man.

I didn't want to be so angry.

Here was my son.

Here was my life.

And one day, he would know where to set the next piece of wood, when to blow across the coals.

I replied, "Yes. Do you like it?"

He smiled, nodding.

We walked a bit more, then he looked up to me. "Can we go back to camp and start the fire?"

I laughed.

"Yes."

PLAY BALL

His was an unimpeachable father, who at the Sunday dinner table, after the blessing had been concluded with perfunctory 'Amens,' presided over a wife and three children by dictating the conversation, the progression of the meal, and the general spirit of things. His father was a man who groaned to meet Monday morning and its humble leftovers stuffed into a brown paper bag, though he inevitably punched in five minutes early with his time card and set himself straight to his work. He was never late. He never missed a day sick. A father who would enjoy a few cheap beers, then fall asleep watching baseball on the television. A father who took pride in voting Republican and changing the car's oil in the driveway.

From early on, the boy had made up his mind to hate his father, though he couldn't quite explain why. For as long as his memory stretched, Dean couldn't stand the sight of his old man, the sound of his voice, his mannerisms, his face, his clothes- Dean couldn't stand any of it.

As he began to build up a story for himself, in the transition from adolescence to adulthood, Dean attributed his feelings to a particular event, a little league game in first or second grade. His father's voice, gruff but muffled, at the end of the bench in a dugout, "Don't you embarrass me, goddamn you!" Dean had a snotty nose and could barely hold the aluminum bat.

That's what Dean remembered.

That's how it started.

He began to resent how his older brothers looked up to Pops.

He began to feel sickened by how his mother bent to the man's will. Slowly, Dean positioned himself against everything the man stood for.

Baseball.

America.

Manual labor.

Pastors.

Anger gradually filled up the hollow insides of Dean. Anger can destroy anyone. It's a formidable adversary. If you've met folks who seemed immune to anger, or who claimed to have mastery over it, you ought to tell them they've been blessed to live a life where their expectations have been met and their circumstances have been predictable. You ought to tell them they haven't been pushed up to a breaking point. It doesn't make them special, or endowed with a holy disposition- it's purely a matter of luck.

When Dean left home, at seventeen, it was like a cloud of Texas dust kicked up off the Tomball highway.

It rose up until it couldn't rise any more, then it settled.

He wrote his mother a letter when he had found a place to live, a job. He figured he owed it to her. But she never wrote back.

He couldn't imagine making a phone call.

What if the old man picked up?

Dean figured he had a year to grind out before he could enlist.

He'd join up, travel the world, serve a few tours, retire early and retreat to a parcel of land.

He worked as a stock boy for a little while, then as busser, then as a barback.

That's where he met the girl, at the bar.

She walked in like nothing he had ever seen.

She was originally from West Texas. She had Indian blood. She loved to dance, and make love, and take pills.

It continued with the girl, and some pills.

Dean turned eighteen and forgot about the army.

He lived with the girl for about a year before he started finding needles in her purse, before he started noticing tract marks on her arm. The pills weren't strong enough for her, at least that's what he figured.

It didn't change much, at first.

But then after a while, it did.
He confronted her about it. He loved her. He wanted to help. He couldn't understand why.
And she couldn't explain it to him. She wanted to quit, but she listed reason after reason for why she had to keep going. If only for a little longer.
"Well then let me have some."
"No."
"Why not?"
"You'll lose your soul."
He thought about it. "If that's the case, then you've already lost yours. And since I'm not fixing on leaving you, it looks like we're going to hell together."
He thought about her thighs, that smooth caramel skin pressed against his muscles.
He thought about her voice in the early morning, hoarse, stained by last night's cigarettes, raspy with last night's fits of laughter.
He thought about her long obsidian hair, like a silky waterfall, the way she tied it up into a bun and let a few strands fall against her high cheeks.
She hated her father, too.
Their hatred for family, for religion, for society, for everything—it was the fire which smelted their relationship.
Dean thought he was in love.
He thought she was the one.
So Dean helped her cook up a shot, bit into the tourniquet, and watched her plunge the liquid into his veins.
He gasped for air as the needle slipped out.
He fell into what he had been looking for his whole life.
Then he fell and fell and fell some more.
Iliana left him for an older man with more money, and more dope.
Dean lost the job.
Then another.
He lost the apartment.
He contracted hepatitis, then an abscess.
For two years he was in the streets, running. In and out of jail.
In and out of shelters.
Everything in his life had been reduced, smaller.
Everything except his hatred, which grew worse and worse.
In time, the squalid conditions of his outer life perfectly mirrored the makeup of his inner world.
Then one day, in a motel bathroom, he passed out with a needle in his thigh.
A maid who was in a rush to finish her shift early found Dean on the floor, lifeless.

When the ambulance came, the young man's lips were blue and he had stopped breathing.

The maid wept in the room next door.

A medical technician decided to shock Dean, once, per protocol, but didn't expect a response.

He attached the defibrillator to Dean and waited for a charge.

The electric current activated.

Then something unexpected happened.

Dean gasped for air, with his sunken chest bouncing up from the portable gurney.

"Holy shit," the technician muttered.

Dean glanced around.

"You're one lucky sonovabitch. I've seen hundreds of overdoses, and you're the first to jump back in."

Dean didn't feel so lucky at the hospital when a police officer showed up and handcuffed him to his bed.

He didn't feel so lucky when a doctor explained that because of the way Dean had fallen onto the ground, because of the way the needle wedged itself deeper into his leg, that he'd suffered damage to the femoral nerve, and he'd walk with a limp the rest of his life.

No, Dean wasn't exactly thrilled to have been brought back to life, to have "jumped back in."

But here he was.

Why?

He tossed and turned, as much as the handcuffs would allow for, considering it.

Why?

Why was he alive?

Why had he let himself become this way?

Why did he still hate the old man?

Dean wound up in front of a judge and decided to ask for help. He had been able to do some more thinking. He decided to enter a treatment facility. Then he decided to find a new job. He decided on a halfway house. He decided to go back to school. He even decided to stop hating his father.

But he couldn't.

The anger wouldn't subside.

It had stopped growing, but it wouldn't recede.

Then Dean met Rudy. Rudy was a recovered addict, crack cocaine. Rudy was imposing. He wasn't tall, but he was broad shouldered and he dressed well. He didn't mince words. In a room full of people with downcast faces, Rudy looked at whoever he spoke to in the eyes.

Rudy walked up to Dean after a meeting of Narcotics Anonymous and asked him, "What's eating you, son?"

Dean was stunned.

He stuttered.

He was scared to lie.

So he told the truth to Rudy.

"You tried praying for him?"

Dean hadn't prayed on anything in years. Prayers were for Christians, and Dean had no appetite for Christians or their vague notions of kindness- lazy, obsequious, deferential nonsense. They never stood up to fight. They turned the other cheek and went on buying a new Ford pickup truck every three years, praising Jesus. Hypocrites. Fools.

"No."

"Try it." Rudy sighed. "You have to remember, we're addicts. We have to be careful with everything. Especially our emotions. Especially anger."

Dean tried it. He prayed for his father, and his mother, and his brothers, night after night. He wished them good things like health, peace, happiness. He wished them what he'd wish for himself.

And soon, the tide went out.

His anger subsided.

Dean told Rudy about his progress. He limped over to him and rushed through everything.

Rudy listened, then waited. "Why don't you call him?"

Dean couldn't respond.

It was one thing to pray for the old man, but to call him?

Rudy looked at Dean straight in the eyes. "Call him."

Dean couldn't sleep that night. He tossed and turned. He felt handcuffed.

But he knew Rudy was right.

At 7AM, Dean called home.

It was a Sunday, his old man's day off.

"Hello."

"Hi, dad."

MAGNIFICATION

My boy was made of speed. He was beautiful. I'd never once seen him out of breath. He ran and ran and ran. He would dash to the bathroom, to the breakfast table, around the baseball diamond, towards the classroom door. On grass, across asphalt- he'd run. He had learned to run before he learned to walk it. That's what my wife and I would tell people. We would say that after someone might remark, "Look at that boy go."

Now we tell them we lost a son to cancer.

We tell them and they look at us with faces of terror, of sympathy, of shock- of fear.

In the hospital, during his last round of chemotherapy, I asked him, "Where can I give you a kiss, bud? Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere."
I'll never forget his answer.
That one word haunts me.
Everywhere.
A fierce pain, of unrelenting intensity, filling up his tiny limbs,
his shining eyes.
The tears.
Everywhere.
Begging me to bring him relief, to stop presiding over this horror-
to take care of him, to do my job and be his daddy and make sure
things would be okay.
My despair.
Everywhere.
By the end of the treatments his skin had turned the sour green of
a McIntosh apple. When he stopped breathing, that last night, his
lips turned blue.
You never think of losing your children.
You worry about red shoulders, sunburns from long afternoons up
and down rows of trees in an orchard- not green cheeks, intravenous
radiation, cold skin.
It's our first October without him.
He loved apples.
He even loved that pungent smell of vinegar, wafting up from the
ground, from all the squashed cores and half eaten chunks that
fermented in the sun between the rows of trees.
And the leaves, the yellows and the oranges and the reds- he would
stare out the window on our ride home, our bushel bag full.
The colors...
My wife doesn't know what season we're in, what month, the day or
the week. I've lost her, too.
The part of her that bounced, that put music on after dinner, that
kissed my cheek in the morning- it went into the ground with our
boy.
A part of me is covered in dirt, too, nailed shut under an aluminum
lid.
The part of me...
I wanted him to be cremated, but my wife's mother said it didn't
seem right to burn such a small, helpless body.
My wife couldn't voice an opinion of her own.
It was impossible.
Buffeted by two years of doctors, of clinical trials, of hospital
wards and intravenous lines- eager, savage hopes to be followed
with letdown after letdown after letdown.
Nine months have passed.
He died at the end of January.

I bought a telescope during the summer, at the recommendation of a friend, to find a hobby, a distraction- I opened it from the cardboard packaging last night.
I was tired, and I needed something different.
My friend said to me, "You should try astronomy. It will take you outside of yourself."
That's exactly where I wanted to be.
I was tired of being so angry.
So tired.
Yesterday morning, by chance, I read an article in the newspaper about a partial lunar eclipse.
A super moon.
Perigee.
I have the telescope, a 50mm refractor telescope- a beginner's model- set up on the balcony, pointed southeast.
My wife is asleep upstairs.
The eclipse isn't set to begin until 10:37PM EST.
I doubt she dreams anymore.
I know I don't.
I take a sip of tea from the mug in my hand.
The lens is focused in on the moon.
After a few minutes, I have to reposition. She's moving up there, slowly.
Well, we're spinning, down here.
That's it, isn't it?
Whatever it is, it's faster than I'd ever noticed.
A minor adjustment, then I'm happy with the results.
I'm content, fidgeting with the azimuth arm, and I can breathe.
Waiting.
Another sip of tea.
Then, the shadow appears.
I squint through the eyepiece.
I concentrate.
I had once thought the moon's phases were due to the earth's shadow. Then, I learned about eclipses. I realized the phases of the moon are a result of the moon's own shadow, its position relative to us on earth, relative to the sun. Waxing, then waning. Only during an eclipse does our shadow touch the lunar surface.
A vision- transported.
The shadow coalesces. Darker. We've cast this curtain of night against the glowing moonrock- a darkness, born from the earth, frozen against the northern pole of our satellite. Reminiscent of something. Was it an eyeball with its pupil pointed heavenwards? Or the spread of an awful topdown infection multicellular and fatal? Which was it?
A symbol.
An image.

A reflection.
A smudge, the inkstained thumbprint of some mischievous god playing
a joke; or that awful black emptiness, our common darkness, death,
patiently waiting for us to fall, hungry for the end.
A reflection.
An image.
A symbol.
Or maybe it's nothing more than what it is?
I stare and stare, content with the thought of nothing but what
laid before my span of attention, until a shoal of clouds rolls
overhead and swallows my view up whole.
The show is over without warning.
A storm groaning nearby.
I cap up the glass optics, adjust the thumbscrews and deconstruct
the components, then finally collapse the tripod legs.
Oceanus Procellarum.
Respite.
Raindrops.
A rock.
A shadow.
Some light.
Everywhere.

PORTAGE

Luis didn't have anything else to say to his wife. He crossed
himself at the statue of the Blessed Mother next to their door,
took his keys off the hook, and walked out.
His work boots thudded down an empty hallway.
His children were asleep.
Most of the building residents were asleep- head down and cutting
through a quiet parking lot.
He lugged his cooler into the cab of the truck, full of leftover
rice and beans, some tortillas and a bottle of hot sauce- then he
stepped up into the driver side door.
She didn't understand.
She couldn't.
There was a near empty pack of cigarettes on the dashboard. He
shook it, to make sure, and decided to wait until lunch for a
smoke.
The cabin smelled like faded boot leather and rain.
Manuel's apartment was just down the street.
He hoped Manuel would be outside, waiting for him.
In the cup holder was a thermos of coffee that had been sitting
overnight. He opened the cap. Luis didn't mind the taste of old
coffee sitting in a cup holder overnight. It had been left to
marinate, like his wife's carne asada. It had a particular taste,
a taste of hopeless hope- he took a glug and sighed.

Manuel was at the corner, slumped over.
The boy still looks asleep, Luis thought to himself. He must have been up with his girl. Young love.
Luis sighed and parked along the curb.
"Morning," Manuel whispered as he fell into the seat.
"Morning," replied Luis.
Luis set the truck into gear. "Do you want to stop by the gas station?"
"Please."
The job site was about twenty minutes away.
Luis parked at the first gas station they passed.
Manuel was slow to open the door, slow to buy his energy drink, slow to walk back to the truck. Too slow for a young man who ought to be hungry for success, who ought to want to earn a living. He had better wake up.
Luis watched the apprentice and thought to himself, There would be plenty of other Sundays for church services, for a picnic in the park with charcoal and music. They needed the money. She didn't understand.
Manuel returned to the car. "Did you see the moon last night, Luis?"
Luis pinched his eyebrows towards his cheeks, unconscious, "The moon?"
"Yes, that rock up in the sky."
Luis glanced at his cigarettes. "No, I did not see the moon."
"It turned red. An eclipse."
Luis nodded. This is how their days always went. Manuel would be asleep until suddenly, a gale of wind. Then the boy would talk and talk and talk until quitting time. Luis wished the boy would work the way he talked. He worked okay, but- Luis didn't mind the work, but the talk- usually the talk was too much. Most of his derision was private, but from time to time Luis would chastise Manuel for the boy's dilatory behaviors.
"Red, huh?"
Excitement grew in Manuel's voice. "Blood red. It was something. You were probably asleep though. It happened after midnight."
Luis nodded. "Yes, I was asleep."
Manuel took a drink from the can in his lap. "How long are we going to go today?"
Luis sighed. "We need to lay down the floorboards, get the posts up for the porch room- we'll go until six, seven maybe."
"The roofing tiles come tomorrow?"
"Yes, they do. The boss said the roof needs to be up by next weekend." Luis noticed his fingernails against the wheel of the truck. There was a mixture of concrete, wood dust and dirt embedded under the edge, caked around the cuticles and the wrinkles of his knuckles.

No amount of washing could quite clean it off.

"It's going to be hot today," Manuel said, casually.

They both knew about the heat, the humidity- the kind of humidity that could curl up the cover of a paperback book if it were left outside for a couple of hours. Sweat, beads of salty, relentless sweat- soaked cotton and denim, pools of it in your shoes and under your arms.

Luis nodded.

They didn't speak until the truck stopped, parked on the street in front of the big white house in the idyllic suburban neighborhood- the cul-de-sac street, the trimmed hedges and power washed sidewalks, the expensive cars.

The woman had complained about them parking the truck in the driveway, so they parked on the street.

The doors opened, then shut.

Manuel and Luis gathered up some tools in the back of the truck and began to walk up the driveway.

It was quiet, aside from the chuck of sprinklers in the lawn. In the owner's lawn, and the neighbors of the owner- Luis looked up, and there were sprinklers firing across the entire neighborhood.

The mists of water reminded Luis it was going to be a hot day.

The green lawns reminded him of something else.

Manuel whistled to himself.

They trudged up along the side of the house and towards the back. This was the site. Cherry Lane. A concrete patio. Support poles, and beams spanning the length of what would be a new deck, a new screened in porch. A month-long project. A few thousand dollars. But something was different.

Something they hadn't submitted as part of the building permit plans with the town inspectors...

A body, naked, hanging off one of the support beams.

Luis, gravely, "Go. Now. Back."

Manuel couldn't take his eyes off the man.

"Go!"

Manuel ran back to the truck.

Luis slowly followed.

They shoved the tools into the bed, opened the doors, and the engine started.

There were birds in the oaks and maples rousting up their hymns to the morning sun, but neither of them would remember that.

Luis began to drive.

Three weeks at the job. A man, the owner- overweight, rushing home at 6PM or later, each night. A woman, waiting for him, fit, done up- she was always ready for a fight. A little girl in front of a television set. Nice cars. Nice light fixtures. A nice piano in the living room. Nice appliances in the kitchen. Shouting.

"Shouldn't we tell somebody, Luis?"

"No. You will tell no one. We will never speak another word of this."

"What if..."

Interrupting the boy, "Whoever needs to find out will find out."

A pause before, "What if his child wakes up, before his wife?"

Luis rebuked Manuel. "That's not for us to interfere with. He should have thought of these things. He should have..."

Manuel shook his head. "It's not right, I feel like we are cowards."

Luis chuckled, "Cowards? A coward hangs himself outside his own home. A coward ruins an honest day of work for another man who needs the money, who wants to support his family. Cowards? We are not cowards, Manuel. That gringo is the coward. And a sin like that is a sin against God."

It could have only happened a few hours ago, late at night.

The truck came to an intersection, brake lights and a crossing signal.

Luis reached into the pack of cigarettes.

Manuel opened his eyes. "A man like that is willing to risk everything to break the wall between him and God. Even if it means a terrible judgment. It is desperate, an act which cannot be undone. But still, such a man must be in terrible pain." Manuel knew a man who took his life by a knot, a noose, must be swallowed up in an ocean, drowning, unable to set his feet on land. The apprentice knew this to be true and refused to believe his mentor did not.

Luis considered it, then, "It is foolish, and selfish. And a sin."

"But, perhaps the man deserves our pity."

Luis replied, "No. Not my pity."

Manuel thought of the young child he had seen through the windows.

"His baby girl?"

Luis sighed, "She will be taken care of."

Manuel thought of the woman he had seen in the kitchen, fixing dinners and lunches. "His wife?"

Luis grunted, "So will she."

Then, both of their minds harmonized, busy rendering an image, recollecting specific details: the pallid face, strained; the paunchy and sagging stomach; a horribly shriveled penis; a purple bruise around the neck and shoulders, the tongue; his bare feet pointed downwards and suspended above the concrete.

Manuel muttered, "It was horrible."

Luis took a long drag off his cigarette. He couldn't help himself, "What's horrible is we lose a day's work. And probably a week more on top of it. We won't be back at this site. We'll have to wait for the boss to reassign us."

"How can you think of money?"

Luis turned to Manuel, his tone shifting, a harsher color- "When you have a family, a boy and two girls- when you go, make babies, have a wife and children, then you come back and ask me this question. You know nothing about life."

A tear in the boy's eye. "I know money is what caused the pain for that man. Money is what killed him." Manuel knew a man could be tormented in his dreams even if he owned the whole world. The apprentice assumed and believed his mentor also knew this to be a truth.

Luis didn't respond. Sinews of thought began to tighten and flex behind the master carpenter's brow.

He wanted to say something, but he couldn't.

Manuel turned over to his boss with a look like a searchlight casting shadows, and waited.

Ash, smoke- sunlight poured in from the windshield.

The apprentice didn't understand.

His wife didn't understand.

Luis opened up the worn paper pack on the dashboard and slid out the last cigarette.

He took a sip of cold coffee before he lit it.

VIVISEPULTURE

Paxton Road, off Concord Street- an alleyway dotted with four houses like a spur off the main trail. A neighborhood in miniature where each of its residents parked either a pickup truck or a boat in the driveway, where fathers drank beer by the gallon, drunken with names like Butch and Rex, where mothers cussed in front of their children and occasionally flashed tattoos printed on their backs or ankles. In short, it was a place where things had gone irrevocably wrong. And inevitably, whenever she passed Paxton Road, minding the speed limit westbound towards the grocery store or the dry cleaners, a shudder flexed through her upper body.

Jennifer Reilley's husband looked like a butcher but had never once worked with his hands. Jonas Reilley had little appetite or desire to interact with the physical world. Options, exchanges, forecasts and charts and brokerage fees- buy low, sell high. Abstractions. Computer screens. Numbers.

He was at work, downtown.

It was a March afternoon.

She had been out for errands, then a walk, and now had safely returned home.

Jennifer's eyes pointed out from the living room windows, between ruffled curtains- eyes that had lived and suffered many more years than the body in which they occupied. Her eyes were the eyes of a harried old woman, tortured and bloodshot with worry.

She hadn't managed to walk very far before the rain started.

She wished she had made it further.

But it was important to at least try.
She had tried.
She had done her best.
She had driven out to the county forest preserve with good intentions. She tied up her gym shoes, filled a water bottle, and even bent over to stretch her hamstrings. But a half mile into the trip, she saw them, overhead. Treehung mandalas woven in yellow and blue yarns circular and arranged to dangle off the branches- odd figures which at first confused her then quickly filled her grim notions, portends of doom and witchery, spun by some maleficent force, a curse to those walking underneath. Never mind the sign which read TRAIL OF LOVE PROJECT.
She turned around, back to her car.
Then the rain started.
She figured it was meant to be.
Tomorrow she would reach her step count goal.
For now, she was flustered by news of an E. coli outbreak reported by a broadcaster from her television. Hundreds of thousands of watermelons and cantaloupes and kale. An image of fruits and greens, festering, putrid in slimy molds of fur, colonized, teeming miasmas- entire warehouses of sickness.
She couldn't erase it from her mind.
Her eyes pointed out the window.
She began to wonder what she often wondered- had her childhood been less stressful, less anxious, easier than her adult life? Overdubs of phosphate soda fountain laughter, birthday candle scenes of pizza then ice cream, backyard June bug dervishes- had it been anything like the movies? Had she enjoyed herself? Had she been calm? Happy?
She couldn't remember.
Given the fact it was so difficult to recall particular instances as a little girl when she felt at ease, at peace, she was inclined to believe and ultimately settled that things had always been this way for her.
Her parents were both dead, so she couldn't investigate the matter with them.
She had been an only child, so there were no siblings to ask for confirmation.
None of her friends went that far back.
Why would she be so different than other little kids her age? Wouldn't she have sensed it, remembered something peculiar, something being a little 'off'? Or would that require too much self-awareness? Would that have been too nuanced of an observation to make at five or six years old, and then to internalize it?
She was like most people nowadays.
Sit on the phone. Look at what other people are doing, wearing. Buy stuff. Think about your problems. Buy more stuff. Watch an

episode. Open an email. Download a coupon. Buy some more stuff. Complain about billionaires, while openly declaring you wished you had more money. Think about how much more money it might take to be happy. Buy even more stuff.

One among many- a sensitive, middle-class, self-obsessive.

All the luxuries of palliative care.

Vanity.

Deceit.

Hypocrisy.

She was no different than anyone else, really.

Her husband and she had made a trip up to Maine, to eat lobster and capture pictures of rocks and water and sunsets, to buy souvenirs, maybe drink too much wine then roll around each other with tongues and cellulite. On their way, they had passed by a modular home dealer, BREUGGEMANS, which boasted a sign on its property for both Single and Double Wide options. Jennifer had turned her head out the window, along with Jonas, and they noticed a family, a man and a woman and two children, with a sales representative, an older gentleman dressed in khakis and a pressed shirt. Everyone was smiling.

Without a thought of consideration, "Must be a big day for the Clampetts. Finally got the financing approved for the trailer of their dreams." Jennifer's husband chuckled at his own joke. She chuckled, too.

Chuckling the way everyone chuckles.

Doing the things everybody does.

Thinking the way everyone thinks.

Impressed with moon landings, but unmoved by common decency.

Paranoid about their phone service, but unable to donate three dollars outside a grocery store at Christmas.

It was impossible to think her childhood had been idyllic, but it was equally impossible to think she could have been so different than any of the other little boys and girls. They must have all been that way.

We were all the same.

From the very beginning.

-

A sign had appeared outside the abandoned church. GRAVITY ROCK. Hand painted, red letters- a rather menacing script, now that she considered it, for a church entrance.

Saxonville Methodist had been without a congregation for nearly ten years.

The town had seemingly run out of Methodists to support the building, the parish, the ministries.

The Catholic church had stayed in business. So had the Lutherans. And a Baptist church had opened its doors recently, in the past three years or so- over on the corner of Juniper and Hemingway.

But this was the corner of Moody and Cross.

This was the old Saxonville Methodist church building.

GRAVITY ROCK.

Jennifer stopped walking, even though she was out getting her steps.

A tower, though hardly ostentatious- a small belfry, maybe five or six feet, more of a cupola than any sort of angel tickling steeple. A main building, a turret on each corner, the white paint chipped and worn and mostly yellow with stretches of exposed pine board. A pointed arch shaped doorway, a side entrance- large, bulky, black paneled doors closed shut with a chain double-wound around the handles, secured by a combination lock.

She had never been inside a church, Methodist or Baptist or Lutheran or Catholic.

Her parents were atheists.

Scientists.

Five windows, high, rectangular, stretched the length of the building- there might have been stained glass, but it was hard to tell. Caked in dust, grease.

Her imagination wandered as she inspected the building.

GRAVITY ROCK.

Who had painted that sign, then hung it above the door with the pointed arch?

What did it mean?

It was only a matter of time before her nerves would flare up, so Jennifer resumed her walk. As she passed the building, she turned back over her shoulder for one last glance. Back to the row of dirty windows, rejecting sunlight. And in the bottom half of the furthest window, an image. A man. Wild hair. A beard. And in his hand, in front of his chest, a severed head.

Jennifer quietly turned back to the sidewalk.

Her feet kept moving.

Her eyes did not blink.

She made it to the intersection at Cross Street, did not stop for traffic, and continued on.

A man holding a human head, a woman's head, clutching her hair between his infected knuckles- Jennifer's face, fixed in terror, detached from her body.

GRAVITY ROCK.

-

That night, Jonas figured his wife was tired. He appreciated the silence. He watched television, drank a beer, then went into the shower feeling good about things. For a Tuesday night, things weren't so bad.

"Jennifer?"

Jonas would never be forced to suffer another conversation with his wife again.

Catatonic.

Nonresponsive.

Paralyzed.

Despite the medications, the therapists, the tests and examinations- no one would hear about GRAVITY ROCK or her vision in the window. Jonas solicited his friends. He consulted with his partners at work. He searched the internet for answers.

Jennifer needed help. Professional help.

He tried his best.

That's what he told a woman in a coffee shop, years later, a blind date- "I tried my best to help her. I really did. I felt so guilty about it, but there's nothing anybody could have done. And you know, the funny thing is, she was always so normal. There was never anything off about her. She was just like everybody else."

THIS WORLD

My mother used to say for every good angel that watches over you, there was a demon waiting to drag you down to hell.

For every white angel, there was a black one.

It was the way of this world, good and evil.

I have to admit, after everything, I think it would have been easier to have been married to a black angel than a white one. I married a white angel whose brother was his black counterpart.

Ramon managed to keep his younger brother from drinking too much, from acting out on his violent tendencies, from losing himself to his animal insides. Ramon's presence balanced Ricky. Ramon was able to find the glimmers in Ricky, despite all the shadow. The parts of Ricky that hadn't been overtaken by his demon. With patience, with love, Ramon was able to breathe life into those parts of Ricky.

Ramon's care for Ricky was undeviating.

I never spoke much to Ramon about it. I understood my husband enough to know I wasn't going to change his mind, no matter how much I considered Ricky to be an undesirable character. I kept my distance from Ricky, but he was Ramon's family. Which, to Ramon, meant everything.

So I learned to accept things.

I learned to tolerate Ricky showing up at our home uninvited. Ramon lending him money. Ramon finding him a job. Ramon offering him a couch. I didn't like it, but there was no sense in taking it out on Ramon.

You can't choose your family.

You can't choose your angels, or your demons.

When Ramon died, Ricky was the first thing I worried about.

It wasn't the car payment, or Lucinda's medical care, or groceries. I worried about Ricky, and his demon.

What I came to learn about demons is that they don't exist independent of a host. A demon always belongs to somebody. You have your demons, I have mine. Demons are parasitic. My husband was not overcome by Ricky's demon- he could handle it. He could separate Ricky from the monster. He created that space. But once Ramon died, Ricky's demon became indistinguishable from its host. It would become our demon, too.

I could tell it by the way Ricky fixed his glare on Lucinda from across our living room, after the funeral. I remember the moment. That look, it was evil. Cast by a demon, not a man. Infernal eyes. I locked the doors. I barely slept. I tried to protect her. Months and months of vigilance.

When it happened, when I found Lucinda curled up on the floor, naked, covered in bruises- I knew it was him.

Rather, I knew it was his demon.

There were no angels sent to help Lucinda that afternoon while I was at work.

It was the way of this world.

Sometimes the good holds out.

Sometimes, darkness swallows everything.

People believe because Lucinda cannot use words very well that she is unable to communicate. It's not true. She can speak fully to me. It's a language between us. I know what she is thinking, what she is feeling. I can read her soul, and she can read mine. I've been with her since the beginning, and I know her better than anyone else. She's my baby.

When Ricky's demon destroyed my baby, there was nothing else to do.

This is a world at war. It is the way of things.

If you don't believe that, you are asleep.

And because it is a war, I had to fight back.

I covered Lucinda in a blanket, kissed her, walked her into my bedroom, took Ramon's .38 from the dresser drawer underneath my socks and panties, and ran out of our trailer. I stepped into the truck, and I drove to The Corral. It's a highway bar, a roadhouse, not too far from the center of town. It's where Ricky liked to drink.

I knew Ricky would be there.

Because Ricky was only an intermediary. A host. The force of evil is not so personal. We are agents for evil, influenced, transformed into alters, and then left behind to make sense of our sin. Whatever demon occupied Ricky would leave him, if only for a few hours. Its work was complete. It would return to hell, to celebrate. My mother also told me about this, the celebrations in heaven and hell, demons and angels.

There was a big party going on account of my baby.

And I knew even the worst kind of man, when left to himself, when his demon flees, cannot bear the anguish. No matter how dark or how evil that man is presumed to be, he is still a man. He is confronted by a distortion- the truth of his possession is never more starkly pronounced than immediately after a terrible act is committed. Helpless. Tormented. Prisoners. A man will try to escape the truth at any cost when his demon takes leave. He'd almost prefer for it to return. And Ricky was no different. He would be at the roadhouse escaping whatever contact he had left with those grisly decisions he had been forced to make earlier that day.

I kept thinking of my baby, what her eyes had told me.

My poor Lucinda.

I never asked my mother why God had to make black angels to go with the white ones.

My mother passed away before I could think up sensible questions like that on my own.

When I pulled up to The Corral, I made sure the gun was loaded and the safety was clear. Ramon had taught me how to shoot, and I wasn't scared to handle a pistol. I left it in my purse, my hand firm against the grip, and pushed passed the oldtime swinging saloon doors into the bar. There were several cars in the parking lot, and it was busy inside. I was glad for this, because I was able to walk in without drawing attention to myself.

I saw Ricky's head, with his faded red ballcap, turned away from me and facing the rows of bottles and the line of tap handles. There was a glass of beer in front of him. There were men on both sides.

I walked up behind him, about five feet or so, took the pistol out from my purse, and I aimed it between his shoulder blades.

Three shots.

Everything went so slowly in my mind.

There was shouting, chaos. A man reached over to me for the gun and I let him take it. Another man jumped onto the floor. The bartender ducked down, out of sight. A few people at tables ran out the door.

Then, for a few seconds, all I could hear was the jukebox playing. It was quiet, and somber. A country singer's voice filed up the scene.

Maybe it was Johnny Cash or somebody, who knows.

I couldn't take my eyes off the blood.

By the time I explained myself in the courtroom, everyone in town knew my story. The prosecutor tried his best to paint me as a black angel, but everyone could see my colors. A recently deceased husband. A daughter with Down Syndrome.

Temporary insanity.

I laugh to think of it, now- I don't know if I've ever been more clear-headed in my life than in those few minutes driving to the

roadhouse with the Colt in my purse. There wasn't a doubt. There wasn't any confusion.

My mother told me to pray when demons come whispering bad thoughts, to stay close to your angel.

She never told me what to do when your angel leaves you.

I had to learn that on my own.

RITUALS

It had been after a long trail through pine and oak, off the main loop, full of buttress roots wrought out of the earth with their bad intentions, the kind that tripped up your feet with a snicker and brought you down hard. He had been walking, concentrating on each step, for the last twenty minutes.

There it was.

In the midst of a patch of partridge berries- the healing stone. A chunk of limestone, five feet tall, eight or nine feet long- the healing stone.

The sweat and the heat from the vigorous walk had done him good. A rotten pit of venom had been in his throat when he started off, and now, catching his breath, he already felt better.

He set his hand on the mesa.

Those weren't the kind of wishes a man made against his wife, he thought to himself. They weren't the kind of wishes you could easily take back. Wishes like those would haunt a man if they ever came true, wishes that became curses, curses that would put lips to a bottle and hands to a knot and a body to a rafter.

No, those were wishes you had to undo, and undo quick.

It wadn't right what he had whispered to himself.

No matter what she did.

No matter how it made him feel.

After he had left their house, down the driveway and into his truck, he had noticed a host of sparrows shifting like a plume of smoke across the sky.

A bad seed would come to bear fruit.

It would destroy her, then him.

He closed his eyes, his hand still on the rock.

He heard a banjo, a singer's voice- Amazing Grace.

"I take it back, Lord. I take it all back. Every word."

The forest was silent.

The first verse transitioned into the second.

"I'm sorry, Lord, please forgive me. I never meant it."

He waited for the chords to settle into resolution then brought his hand off the cool, gray surface. He made the sign of the cross, then ventured off the same way he had come.

It was settled.

Things would be alright.

He'd wend himself back to the main loop, then to the parking lot, then back up his driveway. He'd apologize to her. He'd tell her he was no good. He'd admit he was wrong. He'd ask her to forgive him. He'd kiss her cheek, hug her, and explain how his temper had gotten the best of him. He'd clean up the dishes after supper. He wouldn't turn on the television. He'd listen to her talk about her day. He'd make it to his pillow, say his prayers, and fall asleep. All that evil would stay locked up in the stone. It had to.

STEAMSHIP

There was my brother, or whatever it was that was left behind to mark him- a vague outline comprised of skin and muscle and hair and bone.

The part of him which had connected itself to me, which made me a brother to him, which told jokes and won fishing tournaments and bailed my ass out from county jail- his essence had been relieved of the burdens of time. Call it a soul, a personality, consciousness- whichever word you used to describe the thing which maintained the channel between us, it had disappeared. Any relationships my brother had were now wholly external, dependent on an outsider- like how a shadow is dependent on the sun.

I can't help but stare.

A stranger.

Drooling.

It's hard to look at him, but...

A cupcake with a candle glowing on top of it- I mumbled, "Happy birthday, Pete."

I had promised I'd spare everyone the anguish of my singing voice, so I hummed the perfunctory melody quickly then waited.

Nothing.

Drooling.

The candle remained lit.

There isn't so much as a flicker behind his eyes, I thought to myself.

In fact, all I can see in his eyes is my own reflection, a worried and phony smile pasted across anxious cheeks. My face, resembling the tag end of a line, twisted up and pulled tight.

All I can feel is the awful power of goodnight over this scant little lifetime of ours.

All I can sense are empty promises, broken dreams.

This isn't my brother.

I blew out the candle.

It couldn't be...

I left the rehabilitation hospital and drove down to the docks with my passenger ticket. I had a few minutes to spare, but not

enough time. I intended to buy a beer at the Convenience Mart, but I had to take my place in the queue with the other cars. It was important to me my brother ended up on the island. He loved to camp, to fish, to canoe. He loved the fog of sea salt on a kitchen window. The island was the place where he had kept his heart. Maybe if we stuck his body nearby... That's what I must have figured when I made the decision. Doesn't seem as long ago as it is. Into the hull, parked, engine cut- I tipped the chair back, pulling then pushing a lever, reclining, and closed my eyes. I nudged the lid of my cap down. Asleep. Blank. A car horn blared- the boat had reached port. I drove off into the Steamship Authority overnight lot, found a quiet row, parked, and opened the car door. I smoke a couple of cigarettes. I walked over to a package store down the way, bought a few 24 oz cans of beer, and opened the first one back at my car. There would be no ferries back to the island tonight. It is quiet. I drank the beer and checked my watch. My boy and my wife would be getting themselves ready for bed. In another half hour they would both be asleep. I didn't feel like answering any questions. I didn't want to think about my brother, his accident, the doctors- none of it. So I waited. I kick my time across the asphalt parking lot like a can, waiting. I didn't think on much. I don't want to, at least. Suddenly a chill came on in the air. Pete had been the kind of kid to smell the cold of winter, ice crystals at the corner of the windowpanes, and make note of it to everyone at the dinner table. Even my suffering, overworked, pot-bellied father would smile. My mother adored him, my brother- she never said so, but I had my grandfather's looks, her father in law, and I knew because of that she secretly feared me. I wore his sharp nose and oversized ears like a naive criminal. Mom and dad were gone now. It was up to me to take care of Pete... Eventually I finished the beers, smoked one last cigarette, then made the road back home. Laconic stoplights. A white wooden cross.

I pulled up our driveway. The trash bins are still out. I parked the truck in the garage then wandered out to retrieve the yellow containers before the neighbors woke up. As I grip the handles, I glance skywards.

A submarine, surfacing.

Chilly, a clear night.

Goddamn, I thought to myself, how long has it been since I stopped to look?

Stars glimmering across open space, multiplying as I squint and search- the stars of my penitence, my tragedy- what were the stars made of, for Pete?

A silence.

A fact.

Star light from a billion years ago, messages across dead oceans of time, here to kiss my eyes. Thousands, millions, billions of them- out there, winking my way.

I gaze and gazed.

A new moon, I realize it had to have been- the only explanation for this pelagic canvas to admire upon.

Crickets, a cool breeze through the late summer oaks teeming with silver acorns- no headlights, no alerts, no sign of anything or anyone.

Confronted.

The cloudy spray of our home galaxy.

Who could account for such wonders?

Who could say what was possible, what wasn't?

Pete and I would camp together as boys. He taught me the shape of Orion, how to find Polaris, the distinct 'W' of Cassiopeia. He loved to cast his eyes upwards on an October night with the smell of burnt tannins hung up in the canopy, a campfire at his feet.

Maybe he wasn't gone.

Maybe he was somewhere else, something else.

The stars of my deepest secrets, my tender hopes.

I swore I heard him whispering to me...

I would have to wake up Janey to tell her.

AFTER MIDNIGHT

Bands of moonglow striped across my forearms and thighs- I had fallen asleep with my head pressed onto the stool of the window.

My eyes ached.

There I was, only partway drunk and coming down, a few minutes past midnight.

The lift of the window had been pulled up as high as it would go, four or five inches.

Desperate for a breeze.

It had been a damned hot July.

When I moved into the boarding house on Crescent Avenue, my room at the end of the hall on the third floor, I asked the landlord, "Why are the windows nailed shut?"

"Rent's due Sunday morning for the week ahead," she croaked, "if I don't have cash in hand by noon, your gear is on the lawn by one."

Both of my windows had a block of wood fixed into the casing about four or five inches above the sash lock. I could tell the nails had been slammed in hastily.

There were six rooms in the house, excluding the basement apartment where the proprietress lived. Eighty bucks a week. No contract, no background check, quiet hours after 10PM and a communal bathroom on each floor.

A damned hot July of torpor and drinking, sweat and more drinking. After I lost my shift at the mill, in Saxonville, I sold my rotating pedestal fan.

After I lost the girl from the boutique, off Center Street, I took the money from the fan and went on a spree.

I heard the loud calls of crickets and the purrs of faint motors while my eyes followed the lines across my body.

Naked except for underwear.

The river didn't make a sound- I tried to listen for it, but nothing.

No.

Mine had been a sleep without dreams, induced by liquor.

An empty bottle of vodka at my feet- I wouldn't make the rent by noon.

Saturday night.

Folded over, seated on my bed.

What had I done with myself?

What the hell did anybody do?

Empty- poured out. Alone, broke, uncomfortable.

Partways drunk in a clammy room.

Coming down.

My forehead pulsed as I reached down to check the bottle- come to think of it, I decided it felt alright, the pressure.

That didn't bother me.

The street outside- I opened my eyes after closing them for a long while.

There wasn't any booze.

There wasn't any money.

No hope for even a gulp of comfort trapped in this infernal cave. Inside me- cavernous.

A perfect Shakespeare.

I traced my fingers along one of the bands of moonlight on my skin.

The window of my entire life, too exhausted to draw up the blinds
and look out- fixed in sulk, in brood, in despair. That damned
window, practically nailed shut!
I needed a horizon.
A gust of wind, from the distance.
A pair of lazy saloon doors, swung open then shut.
Even if I had it- what was I supposed to do with everything out
there?
What did anybody do?
I lost another job.
I'd lost another woman.
I would lose the room tomorrow at noon.
Tracing another one of the lines...
I could start packing my bag.
I could lean back into the bed.
I could dress, walk out of the door and chase whatever was left of
the night.
But I stayed there, with my fingertips and a band of moon rock
reflected sunlight.
I chuckled, feeling the pressure mount.
I might have put my head back down onto the wooden ledge, but
instead I picked up the bottle.
I found my feet, then I took a swing at one of those blocks of
wood.
The bottle thudded as a nail rattled free.
I took another swing.
Then another.

GIRL

He had missed the turn onto Beauchamps Drive.
At the intersection of South Street and Drexel, that's when he
realized it- he had missed the turn home.
Nose to nose with a red light, as it flashed to green- he blinked
and realized where he was. Startled, he wasn't sure what to do.
The man's consciousness had been overrun by eyeliner, applied in
a seductive flourish out from the corner of a girl's eye- the Eye
of Horus. Light, hazel irises, baked like the clay stuck in the
treads around the tractor wheels- the glossy black makeup matched
her pupils, disarming, obsidian mirrors contracted by the sun.
A rusted bucket filled with brushes.
The girl wearing the makeup had been painting a sign that read
FRESH BLACKBERRIES near the entrance of the Farm Stand.
The man continued driving straight ahead.
He couldn't go home, not now.
Not yet.
The girl must have been seventeen or eighteen years old, not much
older than his own daughter.

She wore faded teal cowboy boots. Crouched down, the milky flesh of her hamstrings covered with sweat and dirt, pressed into her toned calves, a ponytail jutting out from a ballcap- glancing over at her as he walked back to his car, it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

A girl with a paint brush.

His wife had sent him out for a couple pounds of tomatoes, for fresh salsa, for the annual Labor Day party.

"The tomatoes from the Farm Stand always taste better. Why don't you pick up some on your way home from work this afternoon?"

He resented the errand, but he acquiesced.

It wasn't worth the fight.

But now...

Furtive visions of beauty.

Imperial delusions.

Indecision.

In a rearview mirror, he took account of the graying strands around his temples. His hairline had been receding at an alarming rate since he turned forty. There were wrinkles in his brow, at the corners of his lips.

He sucked in his cheeks and poured over his reflection.

What was he?

What was she?

It had been so long since he had felt this kind of feeling...

For so long- a sarcophagus.

Three summers ago, on vacation at the shore, there had been a moment with his wife. It was one of those places he had bookmarked in his memory, amidst a pelagic unconscious. The man thought back on it as traffic in the left turn lane beside him began to creep forward. For a moment they had become free from their routine of abstract worry, pointed cruelty, unnecessary overreactions. The vicissitudes of married life- escaped. Unexpected, his wife's arms around his shoulders and his around her hips, a passionate kiss- low tide, the waves enchanted and rhythmic like kitchen morning sounds of fried eggs and drip coffee and "How did you sleep?" She kissed him out of nowhere, the two of them in the Atlantic. He looked down at her after their lips pressed onto each other's. He grinned easy with the taste of salt. He could tell by her face she was in love with him, in that moment. He, too, fancied himself to be a man in love. Suntanned bodies, breaking in the ocean, broken open by the waves- her wet hair, his laughter. She whispered something in his ear and it didn't matter that he forgot it so quickly because everything sparkled- glinting crests, iridescent spume and a wash of diamonds all the way up to the end of the horizon.

They loved each other and it was simple.

For a moment, it was perfect.

Maybe they could return to the sea, to dive headfirst into the water so everything would heal. Shells and rocks tumbling up and down the coastline in a slow, patient polish- it could save them again. No matter what had been said, who had reserved their love, how much had been drunk, why it hurt so badly- a sea of absolution. A lighthouse, vigilant- now, with his course locked northwards on South Street, the man wanted to conjure up that same feeling for his wife he felt on the shore. It was the right thing to do. He kept watch for more of those moments. He tried and tried but he couldn't. All he could think on was eyeliner, and cowboy boots. He couldn't go home, though he knew that he should want to. He should want to turn back. But he couldn't. He imagined the girl- a teal bathing suit, goosebumps on her forearms, bobbing up and down amidst splashing giggles, his shoulders and her hips. A deadly tsunami, immovable, a rip tide pulling him out further and further- that girl. Maybe he hadn't bought enough tomatoes?

JOLT

Awake for only a yawning groan amidst predawn windowshade orangeglow, nothing striking particularly about the prior evening or the day ahead, a mere arabica blend and washed blueberry Tuesday morning in March, full of timid sunshine and a cold easterly breeze- but there, in that nondescript nothing to do other than wait for the alarm clock hour, it struck me.

It arrested me.

Far exceeding the eureka of intellectual realization, like a pop bulb of a thinking thought, and far stronger than the butterfly kiss nature of an incipient emotion- it inhabited my being, an experience and fullness as if it were lived and alive, merged with my consciousness. Not a premonition, not faint or prophetic or symbolic, but instead complete and undeniable and actual.

It froze me under the blanket and sheets.

What, exactly, was it?

What had I come into contact with?

In short, upon awakening to the day, I touched the reality of my disappearance- forever goodbye in a final heartbreak dream of deepsleep blackness at the fingersnap of death, blink and you're gone. It came for me, that unconquerable angel's doorslam of gravity. Laid bare, I experienced the awful truth of instantaneous complete erasure.

I died.

More than merely knowing I will be gone one morning, more than the thought that I would die one day and we all would die one day,

mortal and doomed to that fatal morning we fail to wake up- no, I disappeared into the empty kingdom of death.

Terrified.

Yet, somehow, still breathing.

And so sensing the tenuous veil which protected me from that bleak and infinite realm, how nothing it was, how scant a barrier it represented, how exposed I am, how naked, how tender- my bones shivered. Never to rise again. Never to kiss my daughter. Never to touch my wife. Never to wink at my boys. Never to mow the lawn. Never to flush the toilet. Never to wrap a Christmas present. Never to twist keys into ignition. Never, never, never- a pit in my stomach and flutter in my heart and a defeated gulp of dreadful sadness- my God, this will all end in a singalong candle poof. Here, then nevermore. Every memory and every holy vision and every love, every friend and enemy, every impression and sensation- whelping, squelched, sucked into the drainsewer void of starless nighttime shadow.

My God! How to go on, in light of this tragic inevitability? How to put feet to floor given the circumstances?

That looming thing we all pretend isn't there, that menacing specter- well that morning, there was no pretending. There was no fooling. There was no chance.

I shivered, shut my eyes.

"That day will close on you suddenly like a trap, it will cone on all those who live on the face of the whole earth."

My God!

What could I do?

What can anyone do?

Out of bed, meekly, with nervous footsteps and defeated brow towards the bathroom, towards the coffee pot, towards the front door- a daze. Sickened. Disturbed, truly- I couldn't snap out of it. The phone calls, the deposit slips, the summer vacation plans- what was there to anything? What could any of it mean, given the facts?

A man cut me off on the highway driving home and I nearly cried. Who could believe in their life? In this world of ours? Who could take it seriously?

I arrived back to residential comforts of a warm meal and screaming tired babies and a list of errands, my life- my life?

What life?

A pebble on the shoreline, rolled back up into a midnight tide then spit out again- clattered about in the crash waves of moonlight, smoothed over in a fine polish, churned with the rest of the splintered rocks and lonely stones- can you hear the faint whisper we sing, as the water breaks and spreads out in a spill across the beachy sand? Tumbling in the breakers, churning, a low hum- finer and finer.

What a life.

DISINTERRED

"It's pretty, how the light and the shadows mix, isn't it?"

"It's all a shadow."

She turned her eyes away from the branches, where the oak leaves and pine needles blocked portions of the sun's rays, "What do you mean?"

"It's a no-good nothing world of shit is what I mean." He met her eyes. His mother's eyes- fixed, "Why did you bring me here?"

It had been her idea. She had picked him up in her car from his apartment. A quiet lunch. The botanic gardens. Then a ride home. She didn't know what to say.

A dead-end trail spur.

Insects screeched.

A brook babbled.

A humid, oppressive afternoon- the kind of afternoon you could hardly suffer through fanning yourself over and over unsatisfied amidst a crowded subway car covered in graffiti; or, the kind of afternoon speckled with massive exuberant cloudreliefs, cumulus bursts of shade like a desert oasis that made you glug a breath so deep you fooled yourself into feeling a gust of wind, that made you close your eyes and grin wide like it was Railroad 1949 with your collar unbuttoned and you've found an open seat next to a pretty girl in a peach dress for the long ride home.

A heat that winnowed.

That sharpened.

That separated.

Ruin.

Exultation.

Past from present- a tear in her eyes, realizing it was the kind of afternoon long ago that would have found her son giddy with laughter in a Boy Scout singsong campground, roll call followed by a trip down to the swimming hole, an energetic J MY NAME IS JOEY and I COME FROM JAMAICA and I BROUGHT STRAWBERRY JAM- fulsome, alive and excited because there's rumors tonight they'll be serving sloppyjoes in the Mess Hall.

She had only wanted him to be happy.

And it had worked out for a time...

The afternoon had become swollen with an awful heat, and she didn't know how to answer her son.

Why was she here?

Last week she had been worried. The young man hadn't responded to her phone calls. In the midst of a sleepless night, unable to drum up any useful convictions, a way forward occurred to her: what would Ken do? Her husband, the boy's father- killed making a left hand turn out of a driveway, handsome and healthy, disappeared to

eternity in an instant. Absentminded. Forgot to look both ways. Forgot to buckle up. In a rush to work, because he forgot to set an alarm. Dialing a number in his phone he had forgot he had to call back. Gone, but not forgotten- they buried John after a mortician confessed there was nothing within his power or at his disposal to prepare the body for an open casket viewing.

Grey matter, shattered glass.

After John died, the boy grew quiet. His demeanor, his silence, his withdrawn attitude- the changes had been culminating over the last few years. Now, there was an impenetrability about her darling boy- the sunlight and the shadows had made her forget.

She felt like a climbing vine, reaching her eyes up along the trunks.

But not any longer. The boy's glare- that impregnable barrier had been cemented back into position. Racked by a world he couldn't understand, a world that had betrayed him, neglect- turning, tighter, the meat wheels of existence, wishing only to escape.

She couldn't help but think- who was this strange young man, fixed at me with a face of disdain? What would Ken think of his son's hollow countenance, black and unreflecting?

John had loved gardens.

She began to cry.

When she ran out the front entrance of their home, after she heard the sharp burst of the collision, she couldn't bring herself to the car door. She couldn't look inside. She knew John was gone. She knew whatever bits of flesh and blood, lifeless, in that driver's seat- that wasn't him. That wasn't the man she loved.

Her son never saw his father's body again.

The boy jumped onto a school bus with a brown bag lunch, and between the stop on Elm Street and the main driveway of Parker Elementary, his father had been converted into a mahogany casket. She remembered, in the funeral parlor, the boy asking her, "Why can't I? Why can't I say goodbye to him?"

"He wouldn't want you to be afraid or upset."

In truth, she had no idea what John would have wanted.

She was doing her best.

That's why she was there, with her son, crying softly among shadows and light.

PROMENADE

"You aren't entitled to subject me to this kind of an assault."

She said it so coolly.

Her hair, the color of a sorrel horse, it flew in front of his view- she broke eye contact and turned around to leave him.

What could he say?

How could he explain himself?

She walked off in a new pair of sandals, and he remained alone, impotent, and embarrassed.

He was the kind of man who never questioned the economy's spurious reasons which compel its citizens to wake up each morning, gulp down their plastic flavored coffee, microwave their carcinogenic bacon sandwiches out of deep freeze and slip into their Nike sneakers.

He had the perfect face for his life.

So did she.

She was the kind of woman who took charge of bank accounts, paid the mortgage, decided when to hold or when to sell their stock options.

They were the kind of people who had become accustomed to palliative care, comforts which had been sneakily transformed into needs after decades spent in upper-middle-class tax brackets.

Several vacations a year, mostly international.

Two homes.

A boat.

Necessities.

Despite their best efforts, neither could ignore the signs. He felt an unbearable emptiness whenever he found himself in her presence. She felt a disgust which couldn't be hidden. Their marriage had been floundering- it had become increasingly harder for him to speak his mind. She couldn't help but say what she was feeling.

Instead of complimenting each other as partners, merging their strengths together to accomplish something which they could never hope to actualize on their own- they remained focused on what the other person provided. How to fulfill some unmet, selfish need- they had approached their relationship from the lens of 'what can I get out of this.' For years and years...

Things had changed, yet nothing had evolved.

Still, it wasn't entirely their fault.

They were unable to conceive children.

She had been opposed to adoption.

He didn't press the issue.

It wasn't entirely their fault.

He hadn't experienced the privilege of waking up in an early morning haze of anger, slamming bathroom doors frustrated and stupid with anxious nerves, not enough sleep, not enough money, where's breakfast and what are you wearing to school- only to be disarmed by a dawn of sunlight reflecting off a daughter's buck tooth'd smile. Asking her, 'What are you smiling about?' Her effulgent response, 'You, daddy.' Broken open, those perfidious eggshell fallacies of pretense and notion and contrivance calcified by his limited mind, liberated from the weight of his own limitations and opened up into an immense joy, this moment of

freedom born from a midnight dream years and years ago. Bent down to kiss her forehead, and all is well. Rise, and begin again. Flower petals and good morning.

No, he'd never had such an experience.

It wasn't entirely his fault.

It wasn't entirely his wife's fault.

She hadn't experienced the privilege of feeding a child at her breast, embedded in goddess energy which forms the structure of a loving reality- a suckling babe, voracious then satiated completely. She'd never cared for somebody else so deeply. She'd never created life, carried it across worlds. She'd never touched the truth, formed order from chaos. She'd never been able to fulfill her purpose as a woman, and it pained her.

No, it wasn't entirely their fault.

Yet, in spite of their pain- neither of them had been chastened. Neither.

Only a spastic, "What the hell did you ever do for me?"

That's how this had started, on a dimly lit boardwalk in a foreign country, after a few glasses of wine.

GOODBYE

Wearing Ralph Lauren usually put Anna Kaplan's mind at ease. A familiar fit, texture- a yellow cable knit sweater, denim capris. In public, she wore a dry, elegant smile. In private, the pursed lips of determination. By anyone's description who spent more than ten minutes with her, she was a dour woman. By her own estimation, she was a victim who emerged a survivor, and thus somebody who deserved whatever good came her way.

She had been born into money.

She had made certain, consciously and unconsciously, to remain in money.

A father who furnished a mistress.

A mother who chewed pills.

A brother in the Cape Cod summer league.

That's how she grew up.

That's how her own kids would grow up.

At the moment, however, she was confronted by nebulous, looming specter- a recent news report on mail thieves who stalked front porches in wealthy subdivisions.

It rattled her.

Now, as a mature woman, she lived amongst neighbors who locked themselves inside homes curated by magazine editors, anxious with their doorbell cameras and security systems, chewing fingernails as they awaited the next delivery, the next package, the next spike of dopamine- the answer to their latest problem.

She was no different.

They wanted better cars until they purchased the best car.

They wanted better vacations until they booked the most exotic trip.

They wanted better dining experiences until they participated in the most sumptuous of gastronomic affairs.

They wanted better sex, but they never found it.

Anna was no different.

Organic grapes, self-help literature, floral print dresses delivered the next day via air freight.

Waiting for a confirmation code...

Seated on a petite sofa in her reading nook, a can of sparkling water on a coaster, her feet pointed daintily and resting on the edge of a chic coffee table- the kids at school, Roger at work. She had been to the Tennis Club. She had been to the boutique. A book on her lap.

Everything was in order, except for this...

She checked her phone again, refreshing the page.

--

Her father's advice, professed from his patented leather chair in the living room with his eyes fixed on a television screen: "Well honey, you do what you can to make sure you're not the next one." Her mother's advice, whispered at the kitchen table with a cup of tea in front of her: "It's scary to think about. So you don't think about it too much."

Uncle Gerald had passed.

A protracted battle with prostate cancer.

Seventy-eight years old.

Aunt Noreen had lost her husband.

Billy and Shannon had lost their father.

Anna had been crying after the phone call arrived.

It was the Fourth of July.

Roger and Anna and their two children had visited Anna's parents, at their country home, for a catered barbecue.

Anna wiped a smattering of tears from her eyes and begged her mother for sympathy, for support, "I can't believe I'll never hear his voice again."

Roger sat next to his father-in-law and secretly hoped Anna would bring the children to the funeral. Three plane tickets to Cleveland. Two days at a hotel. A thousand dollars, give or take? A fair price for two days to himself.

Anna's mother sipped at her mug. "I'll call Noreen after the funeral. Maybe we can help with sorting out some of the paperwork. It's so difficult to untangle all of that. Like the cable bill- she'll have to change everything to her name. I hope she knows all of Gerald's passwords. I hope they wrote them down."

For some reason, a thought popped into Anna's beleaguered mind, "Should we call Mark, to let him know?"

Nobody spoke about Mark.

After his college baseball career, Mark moved to Los Angeles. He received a sum of money under the pretenses of a graduation present, and convinced his parents to provide additional funds so he could afford a down payment on a condominium. They sent more money. Then, he pleaded with his father to help him purchase a car. Mark promised to pay everything back. So more money changed hands. It was then when Mark broke all ties with his family.

Nobody spoke about Mark.

Anna's mother nearly choked on her lemon mint tea.

"Mark?"

"Yes. Don't you think he might want to know?"

"I have no idea. Would you like something to drink?" Anna's mother excused herself from the table.

A television hummed in the adjacent room.

The children were outside, in the pool.

Anna didn't know what to do.

SPF

Ashy, roan- the heat of the day had drained any trace of color out from the sky. It was as if the deep blues had bled below the horizon, into an unknown impossibility, down to the other side of the world.

Uncomfortable- more miasma than sky.

Relief from this blinding afternoon came in the form of baleful seagull energies which dipped from overhead, shadows across the baked sand- sentinels, on watch- their cries, their screeches- dozens of them, imposing birds hungry and desperate and black eye'd blind with instinct. Under attack. Beads of sweat.

This was the configuration of things.

Neither of them had noticed the aerial wonders of the svelte plovers further down the shoreline, their daring dives for minnow. Neither of them had relaxed the shared tension in their jawlines since the car parked.

A poisoned latency festered underneath the scenery, blended within it- marked by a confluence of fiery emotions- frustration, disappointment, vindictiveness.

The previous evening there had been another argument- clumpy eyelashes, salty. Her mind was drunk with bitter resentment and sadness, and wine. His- whisky, and regret. Neither of them was to be exonerated. Accusations. Yelling. What trouble existed between them had gone beyond a vague sense of malaise- recently it had been transformed by a vigorous sense of dramaturgy. Deleterious comments, vicious. Broken furniture. Bright red faces. A minor car accident in the driveway.

What they had intended to do was arrest things. A trip, to incite relaxation. Rejuvenation. A ceremonial cleansing- courtesy of the Atlantic.

A few days at the beach- a vacation.

An escape.

A reconnection to forgotten pasts.

A place where their problems ought to have been cordoned off..

"We're almost out of sunscreen."

She said it in a tone which indicated the diminished amount of lotion was primarily his fault. As in, he ought to have brought more, planned ahead, checked the bag- been more conscientious.

Sea breezes- the ocean was tepid, dull, lacking in both spume and spindrift. There was hardly anything to the tide.

"We can pick some up at the supermarket on the way back to the cottage."

"We need it for today."

He fidgeted, then, "Are we almost out, or are we out?"

"We're out."

He reached over and yanked the tube from her possession. He squeezed at the malleable plastic. A dollop emerged from the nozzle, then another.

He rolled the tube up and squeezed again, with more force.

Sunscreen filled up the entirety of his hand.

"Look. There's plenty."

The heat wave persisted through the end of June into July, week after week. Day after day, temperatures in the nineties, the hundreds. He made a comment at dinner their first evening- "What we need is a good storm, a cold front, lightning and thunder." Midnight, on top of the comforter, your feet crossed, your eyes fixed on the window shades, crackles of blue and white, torrents of rain through the gutters.

Several orange buoys bobbed, desultory, marking the swimming area- no, it hadn't worked.

Nothing seemed to work.

He was sitting in his plastic folding chair with the mound of white cream in his palm, foolish, embarrassed.

"What are you going to do with all that lotion?"

He rubbed his hands together and began to apply it to his arms and face.

When they first checked in, with the children in the car, he had stopped in town to take a picture- a bronze statue, the mariner at his helm, pointed towards the open sea:

They that go down to the sea in ships,

That do business in great waters

These see the works of the Lord,

And His wonders in the deep

Two nights ago, she had made a demure suggestion, "Why don't we go for ice cream?"

Ice cream hadn't worked either.

Not even ice cream...

INFESTATION

An ant crawled out of the folds of a bruised yellow peel.
She had noticed it while slicing up paper-thin cylinders of banana
for their daughter, from the corner of her eye.

An innocent, black speck.

She gingerly picked up the peel and sent it into the wastebin.
There had been another ant crawling about the floor when she first
entered the kitchen.

There had been another scurrying along the windowsill.

It was June, and there were ants in the house.

"What are we going to do about these ants?"

Her husband was the kind of man who, coming home from an evening
walk around their quaint cul-de-sac neighborhood, would analyze
the ominous oak trees and Norway spruces near their property,
gauging the angles, the heights- what it might take for one to
topple, to crash onto the roof of their home, to destroy their
peace and contentedness. He was the kind of man that secretly
wanted every tree cut down within a fifty-foot perimeter of his
home, and each summer, he would hire a landscaper to dispatch one
or two, so as not to draw the attention of his neighbors towards
his final designs. Sure, their homeowner's insurance policy would
have covered any arboreal related damages- but financial
restitution and spiritual well-being are two very different
things. He was the kind of man that fixed his vision out the living
room windows during a thunderstorm, wary of lightning, of wind.
Calculating. Concerned. 'That one will be the next to go.'

He finished tying his shoes near the door to the garage. "Let me
do some research at lunch. I don't want to be putting any chemicals
around our kitchen. There has to be a natural way."

"Alright. Let me know what you come up with. Each morning I find
more and more."

His keys in hand, "I understand. We'll take care of it."

There had been mice in the attic last winter. A procession of Pest
Control Experts- one, then another, and another. Vitamin K
dispensers. Traps baited with almond peanut butter. Traps baited
with chocolate. Aromatic packets of concentrated mint. The mice
would scurry at night, in the ceiling above their bed- it affected
their sleep. One night his wife sent him up with a flashlight.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Kill them!" she shouted.

"I'm not a goddamn cat."

He was a real estate agent, specializing in commercial properties.
He graduated from community college with an associate's degree and
had worked his way up in a local outfit before setting off on his
own. He was slightly overweight, but not obese. He had weak ankles.
He was near-sighted. His hair was thinning.

He was not a cat, and so, he caught no mice. Back to the kitchen, his wife with a gallon of milk in her hand, "I think I remember my mother once used peanut butter to attract them."

"That's what we did for the mice."

"I know. I think it works for ants, too."

Fortunately the sounds above their bed diminished, and then disappeared as winter turned to spring, and spring to summer. It must have been the warm weather. Maybe it was the scented repellent.

At the office, he harbored a secret notion that had first occurred to him that morning- if she had swept up the kitchen more often, if she had kept a cleaner home, they wouldn't have this problem. Her mother and father's house, the home she had grown up in, had been a pigsty. He should have known.

Meanwhile, after finding another ant on the tile floor, she listed her reasons as to why he was the one to blame. Despite his obsessive nature, he had a profound inability to properly forecast, to prepare correctly for impending situations. His focus was misguided. There was never the right tool at his basement work bench, the right size of wood or the right kind of solvent. He cooked up all the scenarios, but he never succeeded in predicting which would unfold. It wasn't conviction he lacked, but rather insight.

She remembered his mother last Christmas, "They just keep flying lower and lower." Airplane engines shook the crystal ware and the lladros and other porcelain figures inside her ornate China cabinets- it had been driving the old woman mad.

That look in the old woman's eyes...

FAINT

She shouted up to her husband, "What?"

Her husband turned back, several paces ahead of her. "I didn't say anything."

She replied, "Did you hear what I said?"

He turned his head forward and grunted, "What?"

The wind was blustering from up the cliff walls, but a stubborn fog clung to the landscape.

Casey, their daughter, moped between them, a pair of headphones plugged into her ears.

Mrs. Kane had made a remark about the tribe who originally claimed the island as home, the Wampanoag. Their name translated, in English, to 'People of the First Light.' She read it off a placard. She peered out across the dense foliage beyond the rail of the walkway- unseen, yet on top of her somehow, the sound of breakers crashing. Then, something had struck her. Their pride, the men and women who belonged to the Wampanoag community- it must have been

tremendous, she thought, on account of having such a beautiful appellation, such a profound distinction. Mrs. Kane was part Irish and part Polish. She was descended from the People who drown themselves in liquor, the People of cold stinginess. But it meant something to be a Wampanoag. It meant the sun found you first, across the whole continent, out of the entire world. It meant you sang hymns to blue whales breaching their flukes and blowing their spouts along the horizon. It meant you gathered berries and danced around a fire and you thanked the creator for every meal, for every friend, for every morning.

What did it mean to be Mrs. Kane?

It meant your marriage was failing.

It meant your daughter started using drugs.

It meant your family vacations never took the shape you envisioned. A red light, suspended above the dune grass, flickered on and off in the distance as the Kane family made their way off the wooden walkways and back down the trail towards the parking lot. A signal of hope, a beacon which beckoned sailors home...

At their car, Mrs. Kane caught sight of a woman and her son, a disabled boy of ten or eleven buckled into a green wheelchair, who were adventuring up the path towards the lighthouse. The wheelchair was long, sleek, and fitted with a canvas back, almost like a beach recliner. It sat on oversized wheels which resembled those of a bicycle. It had been specially designed for rugged terrain. A smile of unabashed delight was fixed on the woman's face. She had picked several lilac flowers from one of the overgrown bushes which hung onto the path and was now holding the purple bunches up to the boy's nose. His jaw hung slack, but his eyes were bright and blue. Thick glasses were fixed to the bridge of his nose, inhaling deeply.

Purple, like the sea in October.

Fragrant, like the emergence of summer.

A high tide of beautiful, tender thoughts.

Thoughts that felt like stars migrating across the sky, like death transforming to life and back again, shoals of fish and thundering rocks- thoughts that meant something bigger was at play.

People of the First Light.

The car started. Mrs. Kane returned to her situation. "Did you notice that woman and her son?"

"Which woman?"

"She had a boy with special needs."

"No. What happened?" Mr. Kane was nervously checking his phone for updates as he pointed the car back into traffic on the main road, their return trek across the island. Above his thin lips perched a hooked nose, so obscene it neatly resembled that of an osprey- a pointed, sharp feature that stood distinctly from the rest of

his physiology and set the pale, limpidness of his arms and thighs and midsection into stark relief.

Mrs. Kane did not respond as they picked up speed.

"What about them, Maureen?"

Ready to explode- a privation of truth and beauty, and finally, of love.

"His wheelchair, it was..."

Unable to finish, Mrs. Kane wanted so terribly to cry. She wanted to unfasten herself from the passenger seat and sprint back to the Fresnel lens. She wanted to gaze out upon the Atlantic, hypnotized, then strip off her clothes and dive headfirst into the crashing surf, beating her breasts, covered in warpaint. She wanted to cut off Mr. Kane's legs and hand them to the boy's mother as an offering of atonement for so many countless lifetimes of unforgiven sins.

Mr. Kane clicked his phone again. An alert had appeared, transmitted from his bank.

They visited the island every summer.

They rented the same cottage.

They inspected the same menus.

They complained about the same crowds at the beaches.

It had been years and years, this coda to their marriage. Once Casey disembarked for college...

After a mile or so, massive panels of sky began to burst open with sunlight, falling through the diminishing fog. The road passed underfoot.

The day had warmed, as morning turned to afternoon.

Mr. Kane, innocuous, uncomfortable with the silence, "What should we do for lunch?"

Casey's eyes were in the backseat, shut closed.

Mrs. Kane rolled down the window, a rush of wind in her hair.

She let out a hysterical scream.

"Maureen?"

Then another.

MISTOOK

She was a denominational woman, in so much as being religious provided her a basic footing for her psychic life. In so much as the pulpit made for an efficient whetstone to sharpen her teeth. By appearances, though, she was short in stature. A bland face. An unremarkable physique- compact, wound together and lean.

"That's not the way I see it."

She would recycle this statement, over and over.

When confronted by an apparent contradiction to her worldview, she would quickly prevaricate. A mind armed with dustbins and brooms, with knives and pillories.

Most people described her as wholesome, as respectable, as upstanding, even pious.

A friend's husband had passed away after a punctuated series of strokes. The woman would attend the funeral and offer condolences, her secret heart laden with judgements about why the man had gone so suddenly, why the woman's own life was still intact.

A true believer. In the arrangement of her suburban compound. In her retirement fund. In her garden. In her social standing at the Thousand Oaks Club.

Mrs. O'Bannon had once called her 'stuffy.' The woman had found out from Mrs. Chester, an evening after the fact.

A few weeks later, at the Fourth of July fireworks show, the woman made sure to greet each and every lady she knew at the club, except Mrs. O'Bannon. A calculated cold shoulder would continue on for several months, until Mrs. Chester volunteered to mediate a truce. Mrs. O'Bannon had admitted and apologized for her impropriety.

The woman privately blamed the situation on Mrs. O'Bannon's upbringing- a lower class, backwoods childhood in rural Ohio. A lack of manners. A deficiency of taste. The woman supposed most people can't be held responsible for their poor upbringing. It wasn't their fault they hadn't been exposed to the proper environment: red-brown brick homes covered in ivy with freshly painted white shutters; Memorial Day parade routes through the center of town, fire trucks ambling past the Post Office, elderly men in folding chairs waving flags with their grandchildren perched on their laps; ice cream sundaes; Easter brunches; piano lessons; private swimming pools.

The woman forgave Mrs. O'Bannon, reluctantly, but would never forget the affront.

On a Tuesday afternoon in late September, through her living room window, taking stock of a neighbor, Mrs. Riley, who had exited her car and began strolling across a newly finished walkway up to a rocking chair porch, the woman's phone rang.

Frank was on the golf course.

Toffee was asleep on a cushion in the den.

"Hello?"

"Hi Mom."

"Hello Raymond, how are you darling?"

"I'm not great. I'm- I'm sorry to call you like this, but I need somebody to talk to. I need to talk- Faye is leaving me, mom. She's filed for a divorce."

A shadow broke across the living room, one of the curtains had become undone from its tie.

Thinking, she was her thoughts- and the woman's thoughts exploded. What would the women in her Church group say?

What would Christmas look like- the holiday lights, at the club?

How could this have happened to her?

"There must be a mistake, Raymond. How could she? What are her reasons?"

The voice, subdued, "I don't want to get into it right now. She's been unhappy. We haven't been- things haven't been good. She wants something else."

"Is there another man?"

"I think so."

A revelation.

A moment of clarity.

"Oh Raymond, I just- I wish you would have listened to me. I told you. Don't you remember? I told..."

"Mom! Please! I don't need a lecture about how you were right about this from the beginning."

The woman didn't utter another word.

Neither did Raymond.

Eventually, the phone hung itself up- a strident dial tone.

Toffee was now awake, at the woman's feet.

During the phone call the woman had unconsciously settled herself on the sofa, angled and upright.

Her posture was impeccable.

She sat there like that, with her eyes closed, for some time.

Once Frank returned home, the woman would tell him. She would explain it all. She had known Faye was a bad egg. Faye's family didn't attend church. Her parents had one high school degree between the two of them. Faye wore a tattoo on her ankle, a piercing in her nose- all the signs were there. In plain sight.

But it would be for the better.

"God is good."

She would tell Frank why it would be better for Raymond. Their son could find another girl, a nice girl, a girl with a solid upbringing. A Lutheran. Dark brown hair and hazel eyes. Short, with a tight, nimble frame.

The woman decided she would explain her plans to Frank over dinner and a glass of burgundy at the club.

Frank would understand her. He'd agree.

What was so difficult about it all?

The world would continue rotating about its axis.

There would be homeless children on the streets.

There would be storage lockers packed full of obsolete electronics.

There would be Raymond, in a cheap hotel, with a loaded pistol and a bottle of bourbon, the phone off the receiver.

SIGH

On a bench, seated, taken by the silvery branches of weeping willows- a vespertine hour- a series of rugged thunderheads cast like granite crags against a blue green summer sky made up the backdrop.

He had spent the entire afternoon alone, along the bank of one of the six ponds at Veterans Memorial Park.

Mostly gazing.

The inconsolable SHORELINE HOTEL loomed in the west, a reminder and a remnant of the past, of a time that once was yet no longer is, a time when this town had been alive, before it died and fell apart.

There would be rain soon.

On the walk over, he had noticed another letter had been stolen off the sign for SHEPS GAS.

He wouldn't drive a car anymore. He refused. To buckle in behind a steering wheel against a world overrun with psychopathy? No, thank you. Nutcases, everywhere. Reckless, petulant, ridiculous creatures. Shuddering- there was so little in the way of protection against them.

A breeze blew off the water, and he buttoned up his coat.

Once upon a time he would have found a woman, alone with a sandwich or a book. Her sandal absentmindedly dangling off the heel of her foot, her legs crossed- he would have admired her from the corner of his eye, then summoned forth the courage required to walk over and begin a conversation with her. A blue heron might have been tucked away in the reeds. A summer storm on its way in from off the lake- it would have been wonderful.

There were days like that.

There had been a woman like that.

There was a time when an announcer on the radio would call out "It's a chopper down the third base line" while entire neighborhoods held their breath.

Now the park was empty. Cars sped by. The proprietor at SHEPS who sold live bait from a cooler behind the counter was long gone, and so was his collection of Excelsior Autocycles from the Depression Era, bought in Chicago and kept in working shape for decades.

As for him, the man on the bench, he knew he was on his way out too. All he'd leave behind was his only son, a selfish man who right now was likely at the casino, hunched over a slot machine, drunk, in deep communion with the soul of this depraved nation of ours- barely sentient, the ideal state.

Demarcated by idiotic tattoos everywhere.

Glowing with broadband radiation.

What had happened to everything?

What happened to all the adventure?

There were days when the man could hardly bear it.

Back then...

A cap and gown graduation from high school- it was a double brood year. Summer, pressed up against the door of autumn- excess marked the change of seasons. Bugs crying out for love, his neighborhood on fire with desperate mating calls- wails of sojourners, up from underground root structures, fed up with xylem sap, ready for orgiastic ecstasy- to make love and die. Out from the dirt. Into

the air. Then when September came, on his way to college, he remembered the acorns littered across lawns and driveways, piles and piles of them. It must have been a mast year as well. He remembered the scattered piles of golden orbs so vividly. There was life, in defiance, in abundance, forcing itself against the void. Owls, falcons, red tail hawks- a buffet, between the acorn-fattened mice and the cicadas. Chalky droppings like graffiti on the sidewalks. Timing is everything, and what a time it was: a seventeen-year cycle, a thirteen-year cycle, and a five-year cycle intersecting synchronistic.

There had been magic.

There had been life.

He'd sneak out from his bedroom window to meet with Jeanine Folsom, a banker's daughter. Her lips. Her legs. He'd work ten-hour days with the landscaping crew, then sleep for three or four hours out in the backyard on the hammock. He'd eat a late dinner, left in the oven by his mother, read for an hour or two, then run out to meet his love. They basked in moonlight, exploring every inch of each other. There was no shame, no guilt, nothing but fun and excitement.

If only he'd known.

If only some one would have told him.

Now...

Sterility. Insipidity. An inability to let go of the notion that the workaday lackaday rigamarole of everyday reality is, in fact, real. Back to our regularly scheduled programming, newspaper headlines, bank accounts, holiday sales, incorrect quantity shipments, railway timetables. Nothing but aquarium conversations, adherence to the script, line by line, don't start until I tell you. Nothing but blank stares. Off to a show, only to fixate and complain about the traffic in the parking lot afterwards.

It was time to walk back.

The rain would be coming, soon.

The man sighed.

If only there were somebody to listen to him.

HOLIDAY

THIS IS STOLEN LAND

The husband's brow shot down to shield his nose. "Are you sure about this turn? It seems like we're headed off into nowhere."

The wife didn't look up from her phone, "I'm reading it off the GPS exactly. It says we're saving fifty-seven minutes. There must be a terrible accident on the interstate for them to shut down. I mean, I've never even seen a highway shut down. It really, you wonder how people did it without cell phones twenty years ago, don't you? We'd be sitting outside Rochester in bumper-to-bumper traffic with nowhere to go."

The wife thought- It must be a terrible accident. I hope it wasn't one of those gas trucks exploding. I've seen those, with methane, or butane, whatever it is. Then she typed: LIQUID HIGHWAY TRANSPORT and clicked on a link with the words "BULK CHEMICALS."

The husband noticed more graffiti. Probably some rebellious neolib teenager with a ridiculous haircut, no job, believing in something he has no understanding of- all because he watched a video on YouTube. It's that kind of stuff- I don't mind the voting equality, the gender equality, the racial equality- but hooliganism is where I draw the line. On both sides. I can't tolerate it. It's bad for business.

Back to the wife- I would have never guessed that, "Electronics Chemicals"? What would that even be? Gas line lubricants, wire lubricants or something? Is that stuff flammable? How can they make sure it's even safe? How fast is the speed limit here, anyways?

"Are you speeding?"

The husband replied, "No."

He thought- How could anybody choose to live out here? Sure, this country needs farmers, but haven't we figured out how to automate most agricultural processes? Watering? Harvesting? Aren't they developing robots for that? A private company, based out of the Netherlands maybe? What was the headline? 'Wireless Workers.' Precision agriculture. That's it. There's definitely an application, a need for it. Imagine all the time wasted on front porches watching cars roll by out here? You won't see any robots picking their asses or sticking wheat grass between their teeth. This country is going to be so much better off in twenty-five or thirty years, once the private sector realizes the potential earnings. I need to make a note of that... future portfolio strategies...

She asked him again, "How do you know?"

"The last sign was for 55, and I'm going 60."

"Then you're speeding."

He maintained his focus on the snow flurries above the dashboard.

"It's only a risk when you're more than 10% over the posted limit. There was a survey I remember reading, in almost 95% of issued speeding tickets, drivers were at least 10% over."

She thought- Of course he has some percent to spit out. He has a percent for everything, a number for everything. It must be nice to have a number for everything. Half the time I bet he makes them up. I should check that, 10% of 95%? Oh, forget it. You know, it's kind of quaint out here. I'd like to live out here. Quiet. Peaceful.

She couldn't help herself, "Would you ever want to live out here? Like in a small town? It says on the GPS that we're going to pass

through Main St, in Cato, New York. That's kind of perfect, isn't it?"

"No," he replied.

She asked again, in a different way. "Don't you think it would be nice though, to slow things down a little bit? To be closer to nature? I bet these folks spend a lot of time outside. I bet they're healthier for it."

"You asked me, and I answered. No."

She asked again, "I mean, I used to love it when I was a little girl and we'd spend a week out at my Aunt Kate's house, out in the country. I always felt like the air was so much cleaner, like I could breathe. I bet there are fewer lung problems out here, like asthma- if Jake would have grown up out in a place like this, it makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"We've had the doctor tell us his condition is due to genetic causes- the majority of childhood asthmas boil down to your genes. Jake had bad luck. I don't where he grew up would have made any noticeable difference."

She considered it, "Well, none of my cousins ever had any issues with asthma, or respiratory conditions."

He chuckled, "Your aunt and uncle lived in the suburbs of Philadelphia! Your cousins didn't grow up in the country."

She turned away. More numbers. More statistics. Typing- CHILDHOOD ASTHMA GENETICS- The ORMDL3 gene, in particular, was associated with childhood onset, whereas the HLA-DQ gene was related to later-onset asthma. Further, the results showed that 38% of all cases of childhood-onset asthma were attributable to a combination of the identified genes. 38% is hardly a majority. It's not worth checking him on it. He's just going to criticize me.

"Jake, what do you think of it out here? Jake?"

"He has his headphones on."

"Can you tell him to take them off?"

"You tell him."

She set her phone down. "It would be nice if he respected his father enough that when his father told him to listen to his mother, he listened. That might be nice. I bet the kids out here all respect their parents. I bet they all sit at dinner tables together every night and talk, without any iPads or television."

"You only think that way because you've never spent a minute in a small town your entire life."

She didn't respond.

She picked her phone back up.

He continued, "It's dead out here. This whole stretch of land, from Chicago to New York across the 90 corridor- they don't call it the rust belt for nothing. None of these people have a future. There's no money. There's no investment."

"I think it's quaint out here."

"Alright."

She glanced up to watch a car pass them by. "Well then how come every car we see driving past us the other direction is a new truck? What are they using to buy those trucks?"

"It's a little miracle called a line of credit. Anybody with a pulse, an ID, and a digital signature can get one."

THIS IS STOLEN LAND

She changed the subject. "Did you see that graffiti? It must be some kind of vandalism- I think it said the same thing a couple miles back. I wonder if it's a gang or something out here."

His mind had been thinking about images of local hillbillies burying money underneath their porches, drunk and full of idiotic joy, shovelfuls of earth- the images made him feel more complete somehow.

"Hello?" she said.

"What?" he replied.

"Did you see the graffiti?"

He sighed, "I'm sure the local sheriff is after the culprits as we speak. He's got nothing better to do."

"It could be a Native American gang."

He shook his head, dismayed, "A Native American gang?"

"There's Native Americans out here, aren't there?"

He considered it. "Well, before we turned off the highway, there was the advertisement for the Seneca Trading Post. So yes, I'd think it's reasonable to assume there's some. But a gang?"

"Anyone can join a gang, it isn't just African Americans. I bet they're upset about land disenfranchisement. That's a big issue, mister newspaper reader. That would explain why they'd start a gang."

The snowflakes flooded his field of vision. "Maybe there's some truth to it, but it's a little too late."

She typed "NATIVE AMERICAN GANGS." The Native Mob is a Native American street gang. The Native Mob is one of the largest and most violent Native American gangs in the U.S. and is notoriously active in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and South Dakota. Would you look at that? Native Mob. You hear about the Italian mob, but you never hear about the Native Mob. I bet they have members in New York! There's all kinds of gangsters in New York, and prisons- that's how they recruit. That television special on prison gang recruitment. It's a shame, even out here, out in this beautiful land, you still have to worry about gangs.

He thought, silently- When I adjust my arm, oh my back! Jesus that hasn't let up at all since the Motrin. I'm going to need at least two more if we still want to get to Cleveland tonight. I really need to lose some weight. It's fucking impossible though. What's the point of life without gin? Speaking of which, I need a drink.

She considered- This graffiti reminds me of my law review article. A teenage defendant from the US on vacation in Singapore, who couldn't be extradited. The embassy, his poor mother- she couldn't resist, clearing her throat, "You know in some countries defacing property like that could land the offender quite the prison sentence."

He thought- Here we go. Here comes the story. The story. The one and only. The poor bastard in Singapore who got a ten-year jail sentence for putting graffiti on a bathroom stall. Her big law school review journal. Her big international legal career that never was. Because it's my fault. Like I forbid her from practicing once Jacob was born. It's always my fucking fault. Here it comes. I'm going to keep my mouth shut.

"I did."

She thought- He's always so smug. He sits there. He knows about my law school review. He doesn't want me to mention it. He's sick of me. He doesn't care anymore. How can I be married to somebody who thinks of me as such a burden?

THIS IS STOLEN LAND

"There's another one. Did you see it?"

He replied, calm, "I did."

"I wonder how long it's been a problem out here. Do you think it's recent?"

"How the hell should I know?" He snickered, "Do you see me reading the Cato-Meridian Herald on Sunday afternoons in our den?"

She declared, "I think it's a gang problem."

He thought- You might as well agree with her. She's going to GOOGLE some Indian Gang nonsense and read out an entire article and tell you why it's such a good thing we live in a city renowned for its police force. Spare me. "You're probably right."

"With all the Native Americans we put on reservations, it's no shock they might have some bad feelings."

His lips pursed together. "I don't think they're forced onto reservations anymore, not to my knowledge at least. Plus, there aren't any reservations up here. They're all out west."

She typed- INDIAN RESERVATION NEW YORK: There are currently 10 Indian reservations in New York: Allegany Indian Reservation, Cattaraugus Reservation, Oil Springs Reservation, Oneida Reservation, Onondaga Reservation, Poospatuck Reservation, St. Regis Mohawk Reservation, Shinnecock Reservation, Tonawanda Reservation, and Tuscarora Reservation.

"There are ten Native American reservations in New York state. So no- they are not all out West."

"I stand corrected. Maybe I can drop you off at the sheriff's station on Main Street and you can help him solve the mystery of the big Apache Gang who's spray painting FOR SALE signs all over the county. You'll be a hero. And you'll have clean lungs."

She shook her head, "Every time you're wrong, instead of admitting you're wrong, you become hostile. Have you ever- why don't you talk to your therapist about that!"

He sighed.

The husband thought- Of course it's the therapist. Of course. Where else would she go? I mention it one night, how it might help her to see somebody for the anxiety, and now I'm supposed to be perfect. She hangs it over me. She hangs everything over me. That's what I talk to the therapist about- and most of the time she agrees with me! Because actually, you stupid bitch, I AM right. But no-no. I'm the bad guy with the therapist. And god forbid she was to talk with someone and want to improve our marriage so maybe we could get to the point where- I don't know- maybe we started having sex again? Maybe my impotence issues aren't really my issues at all? Maybe when I told you that physical contact was important to me in terms of our intimacy you shouldn't have responded by saying there were other ways we could be intimate beside sex- like hugging and kissing. Hugging and kissing! Married thirteen years!

The wife thought- He thinks he's perfect because he sees a therapist. I bet he sits in that office and complains about me for an hour every Thursday. He cooks up his numbers, tells that woman I drove him nuts fifty-seven times this week or that week. Can you imagine? He's such a child. I married an angry, scared little boy. What does that say about me?

He continued thinking- She doesn't care. If it doesn't come up on her phone and prove whatever dumb little point she's trying to prove then why the fuck would it matter to her? Get me out of this godforsaken backwater. This car, this town, this vacation- the holidays. Always the holidays. Let's pretend like we believe in Jesus one afternoon a year, cook the big turkey dinner, unwrap the presents, and forgive the fact that it's all an exorbitant waste of time and money. But anytime I bring up the money, then I'm the money grubber- god forbid somebody wants to balance the books in our house- god forbid somebody wants to make sure Jake can go to college in four years- that makes me a bad guy. Just a run of the mill, bad guy husband. The banker. The asshole. The enforcer. That's me. Fuck, I need a drink.

THIS IS STOLEN LAND

He inquired, "How much longer until we're back on the highway?"

She replied, "I have no idea. You can check on the phone."

"No, I can't. It's a distraction. Plus, it's illegal."

"Since when do you care about the law? If it isn't 10% closer on your GPS, you won't get a ticket."

The husband spit out, "That doesn't even make sense. You're being a child."

The wife waited before responding, "I'm giving you a taste of your own medicine."

He thought- It's not even worth responding to. Ignore her. Ignore her, ignore her, ignore her. Remember what Dr. Winston said, ten seconds. Diffusion. Ten seconds and diffusion. It's a long way to go to Cleveland. If there's not a minibar in our room, at least there will be a bar open in the hotel. If we get there by ten, I should be fine. A few drinks. Three. Three gins. I'll tell her I need to decompress, go to the lobby, and put these miles to bed. Put this whole damn trip to bed. Diffusion. Visualize the diffusion. Damnit, I feel so bloated right now.

A sign flashed in front of the husband, and he reacted, "Is this the turn? 38 South?"

The wife casually responded, "89 South."

"89 South. Alright. Thank you. I was wrong. 89 South. See? I can admit when I'm wrong. And I don't see why we can't be decent to each other, you know that. I'm trying, Claire. I really am. I don't want to be in this car any more than you do."

She thought- Patented Jeremy tone. 'Oh Claire, let's calm down.' He's projecting. He's the one who needs to calm down.

After a few seconds, the husband continued, "I'm tired. And my back is sore. And I don't want to be in this car, alright? I'm sorry. Alright? I'm not perfect. I'm trying here. I hate that we're losing time in these winding backroads. I'm just frustrated. It's not you, it's the situation."

She refused to make amends, "I'm just glad Jake's headphones are on. The way you talk to me sometimes, for a son to hear his father say the things you do- it's not right. You're not nice to me. Plain and simple."

He thought- Jake wouldn't care one way or the other. If it doesn't involve the next level checkpoint, he's uninterested.

She thought- I told you we should never have let him start up on those video games. I told you three years ago. I remember the conversation. It was Christmas. You said it was 'harmless.' You said kids had to learn technology, he was going to be a product of a technological society and if he didn't understand how to use computers and iPads he would be ostracized from his peers. It's your fault.

He said, "Well you shouldn't worry because Jake doesn't listen to me anyways."

"Whose fault is that?"

He thought- Like I'm solely responsible for how our child has been raised. Like I was the one who was at home all day with him for the first five years of his life. No. But I was the one who bought him the videogame system for Christmas a couple of years ago. I'm the bad guy.

She thought- he's in a corner!

THIS IS STOLEN LAND

The husband said, "I don't want to get into it, Claire, I really don't. It's starting to snow. I need to concentrate on the road." The wife said, "If you're worried about the snow then you should be following the speed limit."

He thought- If we had sex more often, if we had any sex at all, we would never fight like this. Never. She doesn't understand how maddening it is, for her to be sitting there in her tight yoga pants, and to want nothing to do with me. If she showed the slightest interest, the slightest, god I'd burst out and everything would be alright. But of course, why would she? The guy who can't get his wife to look at him. That's me. The man of perfect irony. The short guy with the big ideas. The guy who hates his father but becomes him. The guy who works harder than anyone else but only makes senior manager, never vice president. But it's not all me. No. She sits there and takes no accountability for our physical relationship. None. She plays on her phone, messaging her Facebook friends from college, deciphering the chemical structure of carbon monoxide, buying the latest Eco Friendly Product, planning her next Peloton workout- how about you touch your husband's dick once in a while? But no. No, it's all about her. Her miscarriage, her ruptured self-image, her inability to derive pleasure from her body- when she's ready, she'll decide. Who even says that? How on earth could any man understand that feeling? I married a prude, scared little girl.

The wife thought- I'll get my book. Here. Opening my book. Ignoring him.

Time passes.

They both look up at the headlights, the scene outside.

They thought- This snow is picking up.

She thought- Let me see here, most accidents are caused by poor weather conditions. WEATHER UPSTATE NEW YORK.

He thought- We need to get back on the highway. We're losing time. At least 45 minutes. Who even knows if that GPS was right? This could all be a goddamn lark, for nothing. I need a drink.

The husband asked, "Are you checking the weather?"

The wife answered, "Yes?"

Time passes.

"How bad is it, Claire?"

"It looks bad, Jeremy."

"How bad?"

"At least through Erie. Maybe further. It says whiteout conditions. Just be careful."

"I am honey. I always am."

She thought- All I do is show concern, because I care, because I actually care about him, and what do I get? My mother was right, I should have married a taller man. Kristen married a tall man. Danielle married a tall man. They'll be happy at Christmas, with

their tall husbands and their children who didn't die from miscarriage, and there I'll be with my angry, short husband and my son who wears headphones and doesn't know how to say 'hello.' He thought- God, if only we'd get one good fuck, everything would be fixed. A gin and tonic and one good fuck. It would fix everything.

TRAILHEAD

One voice, "They ought to have given us crampons."
Then another, "They ought to have sent us home two weeks ago."
And a third, "They ought to tell his Mamma he didn't have to die."
Nobody said another word, their stern faces glowing in the fire.
They knew it was true.
Boys, pretending to be men.
Boys, laboring away for eighteen hour stretches.
Boys, far away from home in a strange country.
They ought to have been given crampons.
They ought to have been sent away until next season.
Wade Thomas ought to have been sitting with them, drinking coffee, lighting a cigarette with a match.
Their soft, dirty faces glowed from the flames.
The crackling of dry branches.
The pulsing of embers.
Frank Davies blamed it on the government, the Park Service.
Dominic Moretti blamed it on the murals, the strange markings he and Wade had encountered earlier in the season inside a network of caves, of which they spoke nothing.
Abel Joseph blamed it on the ignorance and pride of men, men who thought it was their right to understand God's mysterious ways.
Their thoughts ballooned in private theaters of their mind.
Silence.
Smoke.
The boys had joined up the Civilian Conservation Corps for different reasons, from different corners of the nation, but none of them had signed up to watch a friend fall several hundred feet to his death.
His scream, receding further and further, silenced as he plummeted to the canyon floor.
The plan had been to work through October, then quit for the winter. Yet here they were, nearly Thanksgiving week- with no end in sight.
Hammers. Dynamite. Chains.
Navajo sandstone. Ponderosa pines. Cave swallows.
Darkness pressed down on the crew like an ocean of black water. No one took stock of the stars. Nobody considered the moon. Night, heavy and forever- above them, separating them from God and their sweethearts and Wade Thomas.

Their shoulders ached as slowly one by one they faded off to sleep.

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The following evening...

"They'll call this trail 'Devils Slalom' if they know anything that's what they'll call it."

"They already found a name for it."

"Who said?"

"Overheard the foreman. Doubt it's him who named it, but it's him who said anyways."

"That Ruesch fella?"

"Yep."

"So what's it he said?"

"He called it 'Angels Landing.'"

"More like 'Angels Departing.'"

The fire burned.

Abel Joseph lit a cigarette.

"It makes for a damn beautiful place to die."

"No such thing." The boy shook his head. "No sir. There ain't no good day to die, and no good place to do it."

"What makes you so sure?"

"What makes you so optimistic? You go to church and nod at a preacher, then go home with your mamma to a fresh pie, convinced about your Jesus and Salvation and Hallelujah? Wade's was the first dead body you ever seen, wadn't it? I bet it was. And even then, that body was a thousand feet down on that canyon floor, so you didn't see much. No sir. I've seen more than a few, and I seen 'em up close, and I tell you what, being dead ain't never better than being alive. You keep your psalms and old women, I'll keep my life."

"Men go to hell for talking like that."

"More men should go to hell for not speaking up. Wade Thomas didn't have to die, and it's a rat's ass that he ain't here with us tonight."

"So you wouldn't even say a prayer for him?"

"Wouldn't do a lick of good."

"Where you see all these bodies, Davies? You dig graves before you brought your shovel out to Utah?"

"My old man, two kid sisters, and then a brother, all dead in six weeks of each other. Was the Spanish plague. Held their hands, each one of them. One after another after another. Watched them blink, then disappear. There wadn't no Jesus waiting for them. They were scared shit. Because they knew. They knew when you go, you're gone forever."

HOSANNA

You shouldn't be precious about any of it.
That's what I've learned.

I'm fifteen years old and I've committed myself to becoming a Zen practitioner.

Even the thought of 'I am going to practice Zen' gets in the way of practicing Zen.

So I shouldn't be talking about it.

Technically.

It makes me think of a pickerel, with its lip torn by the barb of a hook as it spits it out.

My father taught me how to fish.

My mother said he shouldn't, but he didn't care.

For now, I'll make an exception.

So, 'Why Zen?'

I have a sense that as I become a smaller and smaller thing, everything else around me will become right sized.

I also have a sense that nobody has ever 'thought' themselves into happiness or fulfillment or a good life. It seems to me that 'thinking' is nothing more than one, long ridiculous interior monologue that goes nowhere, that accomplishes nothing, and only brings confusion and despair.

'Why else Zen?'

Even at fifteen, I know better than to put my faith in people. People are flawed. People are vicious. People are simple and self-concerned. People are transactional. And I'm a person.

Guilty as charged.

You might reckon the elimination of personal aim and ambition is an unnatural pursuit for a young woman my age. To be sure, I am at the vanguard of a burgeoning ego-matrix. I am primed for self-consciousness. I am designed to roam shopping malls. I should be at the mercy of my peers and their opinions. I am malleable. I am naive. 'I' am all that I should be concerned with. Wired to be selfish. Young, with a life ahead of me, to take and make of it what I will.

Yes, this is all true.

And it is all the more reason.

I am disgusted, frankly.

I'm fed up.

I'm tired of maintaining this 'girl' I'm supposed to be.

I'm sick of my opinions.

I'm worn out by my reactions.

When I reflect on the content and character of who 'I' am, I am drawn to obvious conclusions. Who 'I' am is barely available to me, the notion of myself, the projection of myself- my mental world is an amalgamation of ephemeral desires, transient ideas, vague constructions and then deconstructions of limited models of reality. 'I' am held together by strings and rubber bands, blown away like dust. There is no continuity. There is nothing solid. There is nowhere to set an anchor.

What I think I want. What I think I need. How I think you should be acting. How I think I should be treated. Why this is good. What that is bad.

On and on and on.

It's flimsy and stupid and banal and ugly and I want to be rid of it.

It's an uncomfortable strapless bra.

Zen is my road.

Zen is my safe passage.

Zen is my crusade.

Now I'm not talking about New Age spirituality, a Mindfulness App on my phone- I'm not signing on for half measures. I'm in search of emptiness, in the sense of being free from inner content. In the sense of living and acting and feeling from a locus of pure being, pure experience. A part of the flow- rather, the flow itself. Now, right now- forever.

Liberation.

Annihilation.

You might wonder, if 'you' are gone, what is left?

My mother used to love scripture. My best answer would have to be a passage from First Kings. "Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah: Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there."

Maybe it's a miracle, that which comes to occupy the space.

Whatever it is, it's a mystery.

Like God.

But it's perfect.

It's exactly what is supposed to be.

Because it's not what you would expect- like ravens, dropping you bits of food in the wilderness.

Most folks from the Western tradition figure that to practice Zen is to reject life. To become a zombie. To hum in blank meditation until death extinguishes you. To feel nothing. To care for nobody. That's not what I'm after.

It's not a cop out.

It's not an escape hatch.

Our minds are not inherently evil. Our faculties are not meant to be destroyed. Our attention creates reality- this is proven by physics. How we attend is how we create. When our energy is not directed inward, self-absorbed- when we are present and open and approach the world with something like love, then it happens. It's like a perfection of our nature.

It's not an act of destruction.

It's not an act of retreat.

Zen is the opposite of disengagement. On the contrary- it's radical engagement. Zen is total loss of control. What I meant earlier by

"you shouldn't be precious about any of it" is that you need to be ready to disconnect from your limited conceptions, your preferences and your judgements which you hold against the world, against yourself and the people you are with in life. It's about getting out of the way. It's a confrontation with reality, head on.

It's an opening up.

It's sincere acceptance.

Vulnerability.

Love.

When my older brother Gabriel passed away, dead in an automobile accident, my mother stopped reading her Bible. My father picked up a bottle. I didn't know what to do. I grieved in isolation. Anger. Discouragement. Heartbreak.

Zen isn't about eliminating your attachments. It's another common misconception. The Buddha wouldn't say to me, 'If you didn't care about your brother Gabriel, if you weren't so attached to him, you wouldn't have to suffer so terribly.'

No.

If the Buddha would have been in my room, the night after Gabriel's funeral, I believe he would have spoken a lot like Christ. 'Love your brother as yourself. Love him totally and completely. But do not weep when he dies. Your concept of who your brother is, of what he was a part of, and where he is going, is incomplete. You suffer because his life did not go according to your plan. But it went according to my plan. The plan.'

I believe that.

A Zen practitioner can live with faith.

In fact, she must live with faith- it's a prerequisite.

How else can you abandon yourself completely?

It's hard to explain.

I try not to talk about it too often.

I don't want to seem proud.

I don't want you to think I'm special, as if I'm holy or enlightened or advanced, because I pretend what Jesus or the Buddha might say to me. I'm not anything special. Losing Gabriel didn't make me unique- but losing him made me take my being alive much, much more seriously.

An awful seriousness.

Imbued with gravitas.

I only have one chance at this.

That's why I'm not concerned with myself anymore.

I'm concerned with opening up the space.

I'm concerned with allowing the process to take over.

The ravens have come.

The ravens will keep coming.

A sky full of ravens- once you're ready to lift your head up and look.