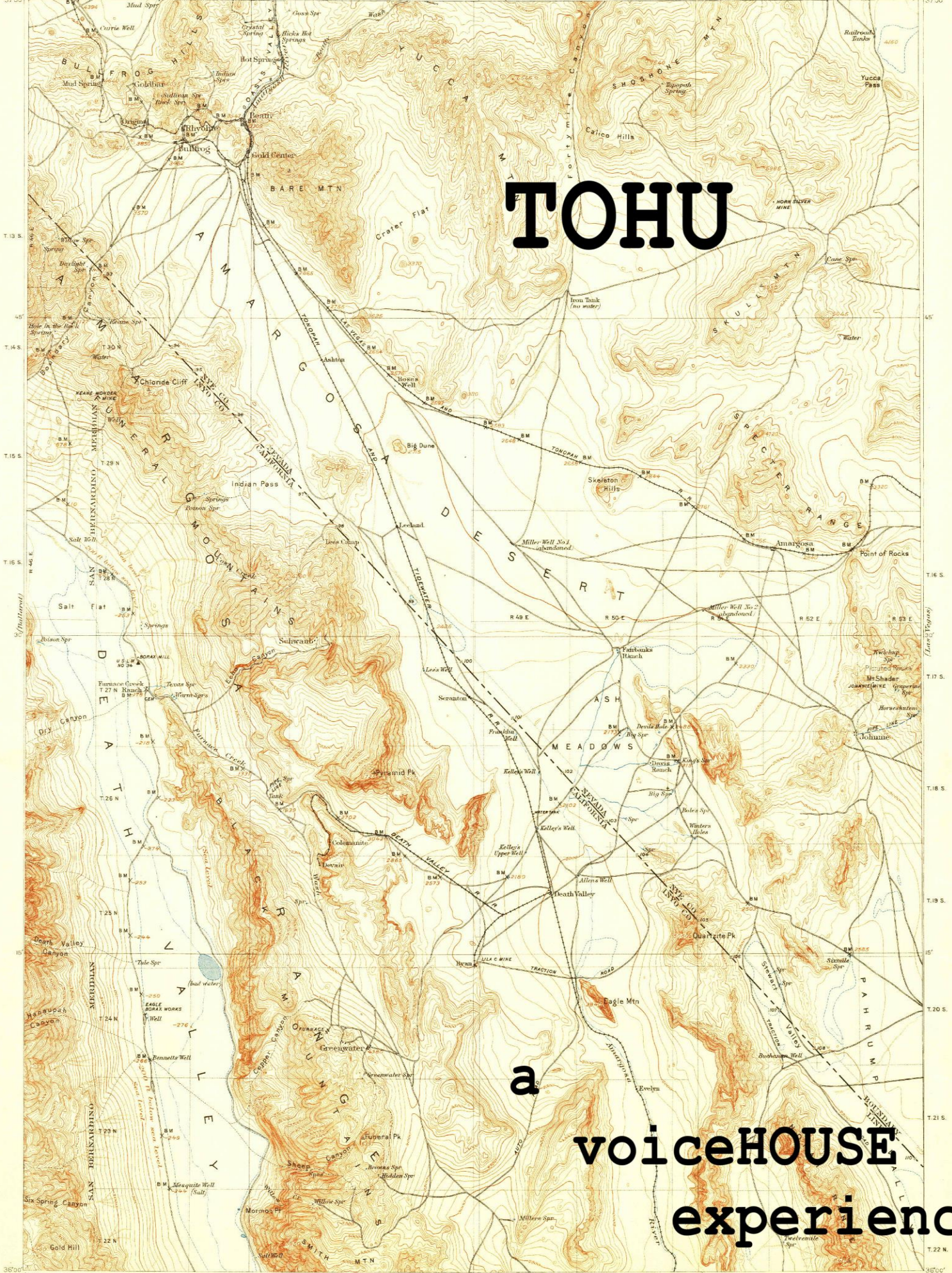




TOHU

a
voiceHOUSE
experience

Not forever on earth, only a little while here
Be it jade, it shatters
Be it gold, it breaks
Be it a quetzal feather, it tears apart
Not forever on earth, only a little while here

Like a painting, we will be erased
Like a flower, we will dry up here on earth
Like plumed vestments of the precious bird
That precious bird with the agile neck
We will come to an end

He goes his way singing, offering flowers
And his words rain down
Like jade and quetzal plumes
Is this what pleases the Giver of Life?
Is that the only truth on earth?

*Poetry by the Tlatoani Nezahualcoyōtl and Teohua Ayocuan
Cuetzpaltzin, with special thanks to SUNN O)))*

It was a younger man holding his arms across his chest after his wife had asked him whether he thought the world was made up of more bad than good, and the young man's arms are crossed as he considers her question, if there's more bad in the world than good, and the young man and his wife are seated together at a humble table in a nook of a kitchen on the fourth floor of an apartment building along a busy street, awake before any commuter buses beat on down their routes, before any of the sidewalks are occupied with middle-class torture, before any notions of sunshine, because it is dark, early in the morning, and the young man with his arms crossed is considering the question as his wife watches him, she is looking up at her husband from her cup of coffee, and the young man senses she is reaching out to him for hope with her eyes, alert and searching for a light in the darkness, as if she had become lost inside a cavern, but the young man clears his throat, his throat is choked with frustration and anger and sadness, he cannot decide how to respond, torn, his eye is fixed on his own cup of coffee, pointed down and away from her

Hard to say, the young man says

Quiet brooks of smoke escape from mill chimneys and cold water waits patiently in industrial pipes, it is the autumn of 1974, two years after Hurricane Agnes, a stoplight changes with a blink through one of the kitchen windows in the apartment before an old man wakes up from a dream, the old man had been asleep so he's awake and out of a dream, remembering his wife, her question to him at a kitchen table in the autumn of 1974, the old man wakes up to words in his head, the words of a younger man, the old man can hear the echoes of the words and the words resonate inside the old man, and listening, awake, the old man can also sense the words of a boy, spoken in voice of boy he had once been, different than the words of the young man he had once been, the old man with his dreams slowly fading into the morning

The voice of the boy is silenced, long gone

The young man is marooned at a kitchen table

He's an old man who wakes up with his gray whiskers of regret, sighing, wondering if what he might have said to his wife in the autumn of 1974 could have changed what happened between them, he considers the words of a boy he had once been, he considers what

he might have said different, when he was a young man seated with his wife, maybe things would have resolved between them, maybe the young man and his wife could have found a way out of the cavern, so the old man is awake with his recollection of a moment, the moment he decided to turn back into the tunnels, the moment he left his wife at the mouth of the cave, where the distance between them began to build until it stretched too far for them to ever hope to recover, an old man who dreams in graveyards of his past, between him and what was, what might have been, who groans to wake up from his dreams with the words of a boy, the pain of a younger man

I can't believe it, he says

You're going to be a daddy, she says

He's a young man so he heads off to work in the morning, he finishes his coffee with a meek gulp and rinses out the mug in the sink before departing from his wife because what else is there to do when the world is a place with a hole in it, a hole has opened up in the world and the young man can't cover it up or fill the hole so he figures he has to learn how to keep on, he has to ignore the hole and keep going, despite the hole, despite the grief, but his wife only knows her grieving, hers is a precious grief, she only knows how to cry, she's forgotten how to do anything else, she is trapped in the hole and her life has become nothing but tears with her head hung down, all his wife can see or feel is the hole, inside of it, nothing else

You no tiger, a little girl says

I no like you tiger, a little girl says

The young man opens his mouth in a curl to reveal his incisors, and growls, soft but tense, and his eyes become hungry slits, the young man is growling, a whisper of a growl, he's doing his best not to smile as the little girl, the toddler in his arms, brings one of her hands to his face, to make him stop, to make the tiger turn back into her Daddy

I no like you tiger, a little girl says

You no tiger, a little girl says

An old man is awake inside a rickety camper, awake before the dawn, and he remembers the young man's wife, her shimmering black hair and her blue eyes, and the young man is signing a pile of divorce papers, because the distance between them has grown and grown, the young man dates the signature line June 10, 1975 because his wife had asked for a divorce, after months and months at an impasse,

weeping, the young man would come back from his work and a terrible silence would occupy the apartment, his wife and he would sink down in the silence, a silence like a growing distance, like a wall of rock, and occasionally the silence would crack because the woman would cry, she would mention to her husband

The pain is too much, his wife says

I can't think about anything else, his wife says

The young man signs the papers and with his signature still wet he recalls the details of when they first met, how he had bumped into his wife outside of a bank, a fated collision, the way her eyes narrowed, it's what you first noticed, her blue eyes slightly narrowed at you, her eyes immediately intimating you were the one, an object of her desire, a man who had attracted the attention of a woman, she wanted you and expressed an unconscious desire through her eyes, narrowed like a coy smile, her light blue eyes, and the young man walks out of the apartment onto Market Street, he leaves behind the kitchen table, a ring of keys, papers, her weeping

An old man wakes up in his hitched camper before the rising sun and he doesn't know if there's more bad in the world than good, or if the good outweighs the bad, or if somehow the good makes up for the bad, but he knows the world has both good and bad in it, and the difference between the good and the bad is the bad finds everyone, at one time or another, but with the good nothing is guaranteed, and some folks have plenty more of it than others

A boy believes whatever bad exists in the world is on account of us, the people born into it, it's an evil we've brought into the world and allowed to fester, thanks to our fallen nature, our sinfulness, flowers from the Garden, and whatever good might exist is present on account of something greater than us, something pure and beautiful, the LORD, who made us in His image and likeness, who wished only good for our souls, but allowed for us to sin because what use is love if it isn't a choice

The boy believes nothing happens outside of LORD's plan for us

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the boy prays

A young man is confused, sad, angry

I never thought it would end like this, she admits

Neither did I, he says

Awake on his mattress, under a blanket, above him the slats on each side of the camper which are propped open, for ventilation, and with his dreaming finished the old man waits for a groan to

emerge, a groan of pain, exhausted, sore, with his bones aching, retching with dry heaves, the fainting spells, the cold sweats, he's waiting for a groan to uncork itself from inside of him but the groan doesn't arrive, instead it's a fulsome breath inward, instead the old man breathes deep to notice how full his lungs fill, he feels strong, the old man inhales with an easiness in his chest, his legs and his arms are attached to him without an ache or pain, his head is clear, and as he's breathing he decides today has the makings of a good day, the old man doesn't feel sick or sore, he's not groaning, his stomach is calm, he's awake and his head is clear, so it was meant to be, driving out with the moonrise like he did last night, today is the day, calm and reassured, awake in the camper inhaling and surprised because he's feeling better than he's felt in a long while

This tiger, a little girl says

This my tiger, a little girl says, pointing to a stuffed animal, a blue mouse she has named 'Tiger'

Last night the old man nearly turned around, he felt worn down and unsure of why he embarked on the drive, why he hitched the camper to his truck and set out on an expedition like a prospector windblown and desperate for a score, he had been worn out and tired and pitiful, full of self-pity, the knob for the volume twisted off and a voice in his head like a torn up pile of envelopes, he thought to himself I'll stop at the Gas Station in Tonopah because the tank is almost empty and maybe I'll turn around because what the hell did I leave for in the first place, what was I driving out into the desert to accomplish, an insane act of desperation

A gun is like a baseball bat, it ought to have a woman's name, says Ollie

It's yours to name, says Ollie

Last night various notions converged inside the old man and he made the decision to drive down into the National Park, because it was no longer a National Monument, since the California Desert Protection Act had been signed for almost a decade, October of 1994, an annexation of land at both the northern and southern ends of the protected area to create the largest National Park in the lower forty-eight, and even though the congressional bill had long been signed the old man had to remind himself it was a National Park and not a National Monument because of habit, he had the habit of calling the protected land a National Monument, and even though he felt sick, sore, his lungs strained to breathe, his stomach

ached, maybe a trip into the Panamint Mountains would do me well, I had been considering it ever since I walked out of the hospital, a place on the map I had been saving, so he dropped a letter on his kitchen table and gathered up his keys and hitched the camper onto his truck to make the drive southwest

Another car will drive into the Park, later in the week, a husband and wife, a couple from New Mexico convinced of an abduction by aliens, an ordeal in which they had been detained for nearly three hours, their mutual experience, in their driveway at nine o'clock in the evening only to see a vast ring of light then shudder and realize it was midnight, three hours vanished from under their noses, forced onto a spacecraft and subject to physical examinations, poking and prodding by grey, hairless beings with thin bodies and large black eyes which covered expressionless faces, years ago on a Thursday night in June amazed at each other in disbelief, and ever since they would be on the hunt for answers, uncovering secret messages across radio static, trans-atmospheric communications, TACs, they will have been sent to the Park by a series of TACs instructing them of the time and location of the aliens' return, a reunion, because the grey extra-terrestrials signaled plans for coming back

The wind picks up, then dies down

Crickets in the scrub brush

The boy walks to a stone church, alone

His father and brother are asleep

Once the old man had turned over the ignition to his truck he realized he was nothing but worn down, worn down like a scrapped trailer in Beatty, its chipped red paint and oxidized panels and patina splatters, rusted pockmarks like infected blisters, a wrecked vessel, dustblown with a sign reading NV-95 to indicate the highway nearby, a worn down trailer parked on a worn down ranch with a worn down fence separating one abandoned parcel from the next, squinting out the windshield to blink your eye out of a blur, these damned cataracts, scrap metal and gravel pits, years and years slowly eroding alongside the dashed white lines of NV-95, cars passing by, truck drivers in their cabs, lovers and the unloved, anonymous, wired on amphetamine, who cares about NV-95 or NV-6 or NV-93, no difference how far you've come when it's nothing but a thousand more miles waiting ahead for you to endure, more road to unreel underfoot, so the old man felt worn down, like the slack busted string of a steel pedal guitar, the plink of a broken

note at the hands of a blues singer with cigarette stained fingers with his gold tooth with a glass of sweet wine with his brow of humid droplets wiping it away in a handful of handkerchief, frowns and wrinkles at visions of hell, worn down, sore to the insides of his bones, a blues singer who wakes up tired and goes to sleep restless with no woman at his bedside, who goes to sleep with black angels who dig themselves up from the junkpiles of yesterday to keep company his lonesome self, what's the rush, the wind and the sand and the scorched light of the sun will eat everything away, born to die, it will chew holes through us like infected blisters so we're left scarred and broken old men, an old man with the blues in his heart because the blues ain't nothing but bad things happening to a good guy, the old man is worn down and tired and beat up by the desert's winds, by the infection spreading inside of his body, and he knows it's this ride on the highway between me and a gravestone with its markings erased by desultory years, a headstone with no name, no place, with no dates, with nothing but laid to rest, which wouldn't be so bad considering how worn down I am, it wouldn't be so terrible for a long sleep, would a rest be so unwelcome, would a break from the turmoil of life, these unrelenting thoughts in your head, the things to do, the workday ahead, the television programs, would it be so terrible for it all to end and for our reward to be a quiet slumber, a long, uninterrupted rest, a break from it all, because isn't it tiring, isn't it exhausting, fifty-some odd years of life, of being alive, of judgments and decisions and regrets and wondering what it might have been like, how it might have been different, hasn't it been enough, haven't you seen enough, done enough, lived enough

The old man pushes a sarape blanket down from his chin then exhales in the cool predawn, he breathes out through his nostrils, slowly, his dreams have ended, dreaming, a recurring dream, drinking coffee with his wife, her shimmering black hair and grayish blue eyes in the apartment on Market Street, at the kitchen table, with their neighbors above and below, but now the long exhalation is over and in a moment of good morning the old man knows he feels much better than he has in a long while and today is a good day, and the old man almost makes the sign of the cross, he almost crosses himself, grateful to be awake and feeling as good as he's felt in weeks, in months, it's the best I've felt since I left the hospital, maybe better than before I went in, so it must have been something like a streak of luck which landed me in Tonopah reaching for a bottle

of orange soda pop and a bag of beef jerky in the Gas Station finally affirming to press on and finish the drive into the Park, even though I considered turning back, even though I had left the gun in the top drawer of the dresser, even though it would have been quicker that way

The boy bows his head after glancing up at the statue of the Blessed Mother

The little girl is in her Daddy's arms, on Easter morning, she's wearing her special purple dress, with her porcelain eyes painted up to him, and the young man is handing her a piece of chocolate, Mommy is in the bathroom so it will be our secret, and a pile of colored eggs rests on the couch and the little girl points to one of the eggs and names it 'Frank,' Frank the Easter Egg, so her Daddy is smiling with a chuckle

What shoes are we going to wear, her Daddy asks

Slippers, the little girl replies, a princess wears slippers

The old man stares out through the scratched plastic window at the rear of the camper, the old man opens his good eye, his one eye, he looks through the window and notices even though the sky outside above the desert valley has no color, drained of color, yet somehow a light glows inside the darkness of night so the old man wonders if his eye is playing tricks, if his mind is putting the glow into the darkness because he anticipates morning is bound to arrive, the old man knows the day will break with the dawn of daybreak so maybe the glow to the darkness is something he's put inside the night, something I've fooled myself into believing, because how can a darkness glow

The wind picks up

A boulder falls from off a ledge

Silence overcomes the old man as his thoughts dampen, as his breathing continues, he's silent and watching the glowing darkness outside the camper until a scream disrupts the silence, a rupture, the old man hears a Galway girl screaming out from inside of herself, tormented, because the scream originates from the same place as the silence, from inside, because the silence isn't outside, it isn't a naked desert, it isn't an empty wasteland, it doesn't matter how many people are nearby, the silence is a place you find inside, it isn't out there, it doesn't depend on the world or how noisy or distracting your proximate environment is, the externals don't make a difference because silence is a place inside, the silence comes from within, unshakable, a stone, but whenever

the old man enters the silence it is broken open by the screams of his wife, so he hears a woman screaming, inside of him, inside of the silence

Forewarned by rattlesnake tails

The flight of a long-eared owl

A young man is surprised by the sound of a bicycle bell, in the quiet of the bedroom, his wife is asleep next to him and it is an early hour, he had been suspended in the tectonic quiet of an early morning hour, between the prayers of the Matins and Lauds, but there it is again, he heard a bicycle bell from the street, so he'll teach his daughter how to ride a bicycle, because didn't I pass by a bicycle in one of the shop windows the other day and I almost bought the thing right there, even though it will be years before she'll learn how to ride with her hands on the handle bars, the young man is determined to make a Christmas present of a bicycle for his daughter, with pink streamers dangling out of the handle bars, like the one he saw in the window, he'll build the bicycle the night of Christmas Eve while she sleeps and he'll attach a bell near the grip for her right hand so she can flick the bell with her thumb to make it ring, and it will be Christmas morning with the little girl begging her Daddy to let her ride the bicycle Santa brought her down the hallways of their building with the training wheels attached, since the sidewalks will be covered in snow, up and down in the hallways, and he'll promise to teach her to ride when the spring comes, and the bell is ringing inside of him, breaking up the silence of the morning

The young man had been dreaming of his daughter, a dream of a little girl riding a bicycle, so the bell rings and he is awake, before the sun, before his wife beside him, the young man is awake with a dream in his heart of his daughter because today might be the day

You shouldn't go riding out there alone, without telling anyone where you're headed, he says

It's dumb, even by your standards Ollie, he says

Excitement fills the young man, in the bed next to his wife, excited because today might be the day when his daughter is born, and the young man has been dreaming of meeting his baby girl, waiting for the little girl to arrive, he's nervous and excited and anxious to meet his daughter and point his gaze into her eyes and find them to be identical to his wife's, a light blue which darkens slightly as the noonday sun climbs then softens back into

a grayish blue with the night, because he's convinced his daughter will have his wife's eyes, without a doubt, and he'll be the first to discover it

The young man has been dreaming of the little girl, visions of his future with her, visions like prayers he's made to the LORD, prayers of safe passage for his baby, how she'll be seated at the kitchen table with a pile of crayons, coloring books, how the young man will ask her if she wants to be an artist when she grows up, how she'll look up to him with her morphing blue eyes, her mother's eyes

I'm already an artist, Daddy, she'll say

Why do I have to wait until I grow up, she'll say

The old man rubs his eye and hears the tormented screams of his wife, because whenever the old man enters the silence he finds his wife screaming, the silence is broken up by a woman's screams, but the old man remembers how alive he feels, like a jungle cat, fierce, full of energy, how he isn't connected to a machine, how the treatment is behind him, swallowing pills, intravenous tubes and a nurse politely asking how was he doing and him pretending like he was alright, he doesn't feel like a chunk of mesquite cured by the salt of the flats, he's got muscle and sinew, he can feel it in his hands and his legs, today I've got muscle and a life inside of my body, my body will move today, so with whatever life I have left, with this feeling, I'll take special care of the coming dawn, I'll watch the sky change colors with my good eye, I'm an old man and I've watched the day break through the night on many occasions, and the darkness glows before the colors of dawn transform the world, I'll watch the dawn break, I'll fix up a cup of chipped tooth coffee, I'll light the kerosene burner and set the kettle on the ring, full of water, and while I wait I'll light a cigarette, I'll enjoy a cup of coffee and a cigarette watching the dawn break before I head out into the canyons, I'll tie up my boots and I'll head out into an unexplored area I had been saving for some time, waiting for the right moment, this section of my map, I'll head out into the cliff ledges and the washes because today is the day I don't have anything to lose, says Ollie

You should know that better than most, says Ollie

The boy believes in miracles

The young man is ashamed in what he believed as a boy

The old man remembers how it started in the examination room, Dr. Klein is grave and professional with a series of pictures in her

hand, images of the insides of the old man, holding them up to a light, first Dr. Klein explains how the machine works, the machine which made the pictures in her hand, then she explains what the pictures indicate, what she has learned from studying the pictures, and after she is done explaining the meaning of the pictures to the old man he pauses, the old man stops for a moment before he tells Dr. Klein how he appreciates what she has done for him, everything she has done, the past eighteen months, it's the first of May, the old man tells the doctor he appreciates how she has done her best to help and he understands what she is telling him It's alright, the old man says

I'm not going to outrun this thing, it's not something you can shake yourself clean from, he says

Even if I was a young man, not on my best day, I couldn't outrun this, he says

I'm not foolish enough to try to outrun something you can't outrun, he says

Dr. Klein listens as the old man explains why there's no shame in accepting the inevitable, there's no shame in deciding what was after him would catch him and do with him what it had to do, because everyone is going to die, every one of us has the same fate

Why should I be precious about it, he asks

What more could I reasonably ask for, I've come as far as I was supposed to go, he says

The old man shakes the doctor's hand and thanks her for all her concern and care, they are together in a small room that smells of sterile chemicals and latent hopelessness, then Dr. Klein wishes him the best, because it wasn't much time left

I wish you more good days than bad days, the doctor says

The old man leaves the room, and on his way out of the hospital he realizes, with a tear in his eye, it has been a long, long while since anyone has wished anything for him

He's an old man and he knows enough about life to not expect anything, to not build yourself up towards certain outcomes because you're liable for nothing but disappointment, it's better to take whatever lands at your door and not complain on it because what else is there but what's in front of you, who cares about what could have been or should have been, reality is what is in front of you, you might as well accept it, oh how our dreams mislead us, so the old man refuses to allow himself the hope of a happy ending

or flower days but it's been a long time since anyone has wished anything for him

I'm happy for you, his older brother says over the telephone
You don't need to hear it from me, but you'll be a hell of a father, his brother says

Her Daddy presses his lips to form an apology shaped like a kiss on her forehead, the little girl, outside of a warm bath wrapped in a pink towel with her blonde hair pressed down against her eyebrows, I'm sorry for what I've done to you, I'm so sorry, culling you out from the darkness of peace into this world of chaos, only two-years-old and you smile with soap and bubbles and splashing so you don't understand what I've done to you, summoning you here, the misery which waits for you, the heartbreak, the disappointment, the suffering, it waits for you, lying in wait, a flawless killer this life of ours, doomed, this life I've left you with, innocent and unknowing with your laughter, Daddy kisses his daughter's forehead with his lips in heartbroken resignation, resigned because I know I am as helpless as she is, as powerless as she will be, swept up and overtaken, what an inheritance, my cursed blood and a roof caved in

The young man is waking up

The old man is awake

The boy is asleep in his bedroom after he's said his prayers

An old man leans on one side, resting on his elbow, a worn sarape blanket covering him, lying on top of a worn mattress, his camper is hitched to his truck, the opaque plastic window of the camper is at the end near his legs and the slats on each side are above him and tilted open, the desert is quiet, it's silent out in the back country, in the wash at the mouth of the canyons, walls of stone fifty, sixty feet high, and the old man is sitting up with his legs stretched out, his white mustache underneath his nose, he can feel the muscles in his back, in his shoulders, he can feel a life inside of himself so he figures he ought to let whatever is alive inside of him live

It isn't much further to go, the young man thinks to himself

His wife is pregnant and it will be their first child, and the young man is convinced the baby will be a daughter, before long he'll be a father with a daughter, he'll be a husband with a wife, they'll be a family, so they've been saving money for a house, soon he'll buy a house with his wife, he'll buy a house with a room for his daughter, outside the city, but near the river, maybe

with a view of the water, near a park, a place where his baby girl
can learn to ride her bicycle

I never shot one before, he says to Ollie

It's alright, says Ollie

You click here, then pull the trigger, says Ollie

Easy as one, two, three, says Ollie

One, two, three, he says

The old man tugs at a clump of whiskers at the corner of his white
mustache and his thoughts settle down, because now he ought to get
moving, it's better to get a move on than sit around inside your
head, no good ever came from any words circling inside your head
like a pack of vultures, so shake a leg, because the action is
what matters, the activity, in the activity a concentration can
emerge, a concentration which acts like a buffer to the silence,
the concentration of activity which holds true and doesn't collapse
into the shrill cries of a young Irish woman with black hair and
blue eyes and fair skin

It's in the silence where we hear the LORD speak, a boy says

The old man is a boy and he's answering a question from his
Religious Studies teacher, the boy intuitively understands why the
LORD spoke to characters in the Bible through silence, it wasn't
a voice from the heavens, or from outside of the people, the boy
intuitively understood the voice of the LORD came from inside,
from a kind of internal silence within, and the old man considers
what the boy might have to say about our modern preoccupations,
how we scoff at the Bible, scoffing to imagine a LORD of heaven
and earth speaking to us, with our television sets and stereo
systems, it must be an embellishment, or a delusion, a form of
mental illness, so we scoff because we cannot comprehend silence,
we cannot comprehend the possibility of the LORD speaking because
we don't have contact with the silence required to listen, the
depth of the silence, we've lost contact with silence, so we've
lost contact with the LORD

Here am I, send me, the boy repeats

The old man knows it's better to get a move on than to sit around
ruminating inside your head about things you can't change, whether
it's something you didn't say to your wife at a coffee table thirty
years ago, whether it's the clouds of cigarette smoke you puffed
out of your lungs which caused the tumors to grow, whether it's a
little girl who never learned how to ride a bike, you never had
the chance, the chances, but I know for certain no good ever came

from any words circling inside your head, thoughts and ideas and none of them ever add up to anything, your voice talking to itself inside the theater of your mind, both actor and audience, no, the action is what matters, the action is what drives a purpose, so the old man leans on one side, resting on his elbow, on top of a worn mattress, out from under a worn blanket here in his camper hitched to a truck with the slats propped open, and the desert is quiet, with his legs stretching out, with his body feeling like today is a good day, so it's time to move

Where is mom, the boy asks

They took her to the hospital, his older brother replies

His wife is asleep so the young man is making coffee in their humble kitchen, quietly as he can manage, his keys are on the table and he'll walk to work, energized, and work as hard as he can because before she died his mother used to tell stories about her own father, his grandfather, his mother would talk about how much she adored her father, she would tell stories about the size of her father's hands and how he built her a tree fort, how he threw away her makeup and told her she didn't need any of it because she was beautiful, and the young man's grandfather died when his mother was only sixteen years old, he had been her hero, so the young man decides if his baby is a girl he'll be his daughter's hero, like how his grandfather was for his mother, he's the man I'll become, I'll work hard today and gulp my coffee with confidence because my grandfather was a diligent worker so if I work my best every day why couldn't it happen

The young man finishes his coffee with a wish in his heart that the baby is a girl

His wife is convinced the baby is a girl, and the young man trusts in his wife's intuition

The boy watches as the priest shakes the incense near the casket, the smoke rising from censer, the chains rattling and clanking Outside of the hospital, after the meeting with Dr. Klein, the old man had been parked between yellow lines, stationary in his truck, frozen with a terror inside of him, dreadful, overcome by the truth of the matter, the fact of his death has become more than an idea, more than a vague notion out ahead beyond the horizons of the future, it became real, a place on a map, because we all live with our death somewhere inside of us but for most we are oblivious to the time or the place and it is a death from above swooping down like a Cooper's Hawk in an instant and without a moment to consider

it or be afraid, but now his death is in the passenger seat, the perfect fact and inescapable truth of his goodbye, because he'll be gone, he'll be one of disappeared, dissolved beyond time and being, into nothing, into total blackness, with no memories, no love, no loss, no claim to anything, as if he never existed, with a pit in his stomach confronted by the magnitude of it, like a hole inside, falling, the hole

The young man sets the mug in the sink and checks on the bedroom where his wife is sleeping so he closes the apartment door and turns the key in the lock before he's down the stairs onto the street, walking to work, and the sun is out, the day has begun, and today might be the day because the doctor told his wife it would be soon, soon the baby would be born

Wouldn't it be bad luck if I was in the room, the young man asks
No, that's superstition, I want you to be there with me, his wife says

The old man remembers last night, the Gas Station in Tonopah, the beef jerky and the soda pop, it was his preference, he preferred beef jerky and orange flavored soda pop, especially when he was out on the road driving in his truck, it had been a preference of his as long as he could remember, you can hardly choose your preferences, so beef jerky with bright orange soda pop is what I preferred, and I haven't changed much, leaning forward, with his elbow off the mattress, sitting up with his shirt off and the blanket in a folded mess covering up his legs and his torso, he's seated upright now and looking over himself, look at my arms and my belly and my chest, I haven't changed much on the inside, but I've changed plenty on the outside, my body has loosened on itself, my skin and my muscles, I can see spots of brown and red, splotches, folds, grey hair, a white mustache, I possess this wilting body which has aged, which has endured through time, yet somehow my mind doesn't feel like it belongs to the body it occupies, I don't belong inside the body of an old man, I'm a young man at heart, a boy almost, I feel so much younger inside of my body than I do looking at it from the outside, so it's the dissonance between how I feel inside versus what I see outside which I've never become accustomed to, not so long as I've been an old man, however long it's been

I'm an old man, but today I don't feel so old

The young man hangs up the telephone and he won't walk back home after work ends, he'll meet his wife at the hospital, his wife

called and she said she felt a pain inside of her, so she spoke to the doctor, and the doctor told her to hail a cab to the hospital, so she made arrangements with the cab stand and now she called her husband to tell him, to explain what was happening

Meet me at the hospital, she says

I will, he says

You're sure you're alright, he asks her

Yes, I'll be fine, I'm ready, she reassures him

The old man has positioned himself upright on the mattress and he says to himself, I'll put this shirt on, this white t-shirt, it's over my head, my arms are through where your arms go, my head is out the other end, and now the blanket is kicked off of me, I'll itch at my neck and pinch at the skin under my chin while I make out the scenery outside the camper, looking out the window, a contrast between the stone and the sky and I can make out the edges of the world as the sun looms somewhere east underneath the horizon, outstretched, the valleys and the mountains of daybreak, a day without a night, the old man smiles to think of it, a day without night, today, I'm not going to pack any gear or fix any supplies, I'm going to head into the canyon with my notepad and my pencil in my pocket, with my hat, my t-shirt, my boots and my socks, my khaki pants, my suspenders, I'm going in because I haven't explored this channel of stone, I've had it in my mind to make an expedition of this section of my map when I felt good, when I felt ready, and I followed an intuition last night driving down here through Tonopah so today is the day

I'm a young man, but I feel older than I've ever been

I'm an old man so I ought to bring enough water to make it out and back, truly I ought to wait until tomorrow, until I have a plan worked out, I ought to clock a route, account for my pace, estimate the distance and the time out and the time back so I can ensure I have enough water and food to last, to sustain myself in the heat, I ought to be meticulous, set up a cache, familiarize myself with the terrain, then head out early tomorrow so I can arrive back at the truck before the midday heat crescendos above a hundred and twenty degrees Fahrenheit, I ought to set my pack out on the bed of my truck and double check the supplies I'll need in case of emergency, like the batteries for my radio, then test my compass, up and down my list, a lighter, a ferro rod, a blanket, sunblock, the standard items I provision for any hike out into the desert, but I turn to look at the shelf in my camper, at my pack, I look

at my jugs of water, I look at a bag of almonds and a first-aid supply kit, and I decide today is the day, so I won't assemble any of it together in a logical, orderly way, in a safe way, no, I'll fix a cup of chipped tooth coffee and I'll roll a cigarette and I'll look back at the truck and the camper as I head out, I'll leave the keys on the driver's seat and the door open, my wallet tucked up in the visor

The boy hears the priest say, Dust, and to dust we shall return

The boy's father is silent, motionless amidst headstones

The young man notices his palms are sweating, because of his nerves, on account of how nervous he is for what his wife is to endure, for the baby to come, he says a prayer to himself out on the sidewalk, out from his building, despite the pedestrians and the cars the young man finds a quiet space inside of himself where the LORD can speak to him and he can speak to the LORD and his prayer is silent, simple, it's for his family, it's for health, for everything to go well, please let it be alright

A kangaroo mouse flicks its tail

Scorpions burrow deeper with their claws

Barefoot, with the latch open, the old man is outside the camper with his khaki pants in his hand, he can clearly make out the light of the day hidden in the purpleblacks of the night, and the light is suddenly there on its own accord, it isn't something he's imagined, so the old man is standing, looking out, he can make out the sky from the stone, sharp lines of shadow, furrowed between rock faces, between crags and peaks, limestone sentinels at watch on both ends of your eyeline so any feeling of beyond is gone, the horizons have disappeared altogether, you're locked in a place, without any sense of the rest of the world, no continents or even a globe, only this place, where I am, between mountain ranges, the dust and the sand, hedged in between upheavals of the land, a singular point, fixed

Do you want to have a baby, she asks

Yes, I do, he says

It was on the Fourth of July 1973, looking out from Prince's Bay Lighthouse with your vision stretching infinite like one of Turner's watercolors, luminous, a Wednesday afternoon out for a picnic in July, a trip to New York to visit his older brother and it only took a day of chaotic Manhattan streets and subway grime to build up so they retreated to the Atlantic, the two of them, where the sky and the sea met, where the boundary between the two

merged into a mixture and somehow like magic an opening into the infinite was conjured up, where the sea stretches into the sky on and on forever, it was only her and I but somehow everything, everyone, all time and all space was here, with us, what we had become

How do you know, he asks his wife

I'm not sure how, she says, but I just know

The old man glances back at the camper, his truck, he's parked slightly off the road, a couple of yards, a dirt road only accessible by high clearance vehicles with all terrain tires, it is a secluded area in the Park, so no one else is around, no other people, no other cars, maybe a chuckwalla lizard, maybe a raven, but the area is remote, an arroyo of gravel and sand and chunks of rock in the flat runoff of several canyons, a confluence of channels, he parked last night with a half-moon rising, he had climbed back to sleep in the camper after parking because he had headed down N-95 after a hunch came over him, a premonition, so he drove to the place he had marked on his map, he figured it would be a good place to set out from, he had a general idea of where he wanted to explore, a vision of how it might proceed in his head, a section of the map, veins of canyons he hadn't entered, but he won't know for certain until he's out on the trail, once the light of this day breaks open, this day without a night

His wife's blue eyes are narrowed, they confess in secret I am an object of her desire, narrowing like a smile, shimmering, eyes like wrinkled dawn bedsheets

The young man is smiling

The little girl smiles, her eyes closed, blown out like birthday candles, asleep after a long day, a day at the beach with her sandcastle buckets and shovels, with her arms outstretched in the water, shimmering, reaching for her Daddy to throw her up

Put me up in the sky, Daddy, she says

Put me in the sky, she says

The old man smiles

The moon hangs up in the sky above and the old man acknowledges it, it's the tenth of June, the sky is a gradient of color from the cold blueblack of the west to the warming pinkwhite of the east, the moon presides above the sunrise, a moon he had noticed last night after turning into the Park from Beatty, with the basin and Old Telescope out there in the moonlight, a snowcap of cornices, with the citrus fizz of a glass bottle, it had been a rogues' moon

shrouded in clouds, a half-moon rising above the rock after midnight, unable to break through the shadows for long stretches until it would burst forth, the moon would dance until another cloud swept her away out of sight, looking up through the windshield, up above the desert, I noticed it once I stopped feeling sorry for myself, a moon like a dream behind the clouds The young man wonders would her dreams have come true, could she have been a ballerina, or a teacher, or a movie star

The baby doesn't want to come out, his wife says

Why doesn't the baby want to come out, she says

An old man watches as the earth spins her sun across mountain ranges, a sun erupting like magma up from the shadowed spine of the Amargosas over to the dramatic peaks of the Panamints, casting violets and lilacs and cool silver tones at daybreak and nightfall, a valley which bears the oppressive heat of the day as a worthy burden, to celebrate the rise and fall of our star, an amphitheater of time, and the moon plays her supporting role, she rises and falls like a ghost amongst the rocks, her metallic shadows on the sands of the dunes, so the old man admires it, he's standing next to his camper with his khaki pants clutched in his hands, he knows the valley will burn up in light and heat like a kind of fiery hell and today is the day I'll walk myself out into the canyons

The letter is addressed to her, with her name

A sealed envelope

It will be alright, he says

The doctor will know what to do, he says

The old man watches the day break through the walls of stone, the desert is cool but it won't stay comfortable for long, the sun will radiate, radiation, burning your skin, scalding hot, like your flesh methodically seared off, and your stomach is inside out, nothing will stay down, no food, nothing to drink, for eighteen months I went through with what they told me to go through, the doctors at the hospital, they told me what to do so I did what they said, I quit smoking, I followed their treatment protocols, I was scared, I didn't know what else to do, but today I'm here, and it's a good day, I feel alive today

The old man is still smiling

The young man is intent, paying close attention to the doctor's eyes

Silence like the sound of the wind in your ears

Silence like a scream

Silence like the dried-out carcass of a kit fox who's darted across the white lines

Up towards Wildrose, the old man makes out the peak hung in relief against the brightening sky, the bluegreys of the sky, the mountain painted in sunset colors, a peak he had summited on various occasions, before the diagnosis, cairns amongst the clouds, you would polish the USGS marker with your thumb looking down on the ravens and the condors swooping below you, above them, through a trail of pinyon forests scattered with Mojave pricklypear, violet stalks of silver lupin in the long shadow hours of dusk, the time for striding down a mountain, returning home hours, dried trunks and twisted limbs of juniper sunk into the sand and rock, dead, with smaller trees bunched around, a parent dying for its children, a generation waiting in the shadow of the one preceding it, a devil of an ascent, a wild burro of an descent, the burrows of the vale up and down the slopes grazing and anxious for evening, for rest, Bigsby's Hoodoo and its patient campfire tale of erosion, the ride home through the wide canyons, a canyon like a valley, a valley full of shadows, the moon rising in the east over the ledges, back through Nemo, down past Emigrant Pass, the temperature steadily rising, with the moon

Shadows of dusk and shadows of sunrise, the gurgling yawns of ravens, cool sand

Today is the day, the young man says to himself

LORD, hear our prayer, the boy says

The old man has seen many days come and go, he can feel the ground with his bare feet, he can feel the sand and the cracked crust of dirt, he's content to enjoy the feel of the earth underneath him, being rooted to something, because when you're rooted to something then every question is answered

The young man's palms are sweaty outside the room in the Maternity Ward, waiting, his feet on a linoleum floor, he's nervous because what if he loses his foundation, he's become rooted to something, an answer is in front of me because she is my answer, my daughter, the prospect of this little girl has brought so much meaning and purpose because her arrival is an answer to my questions, beyond my prayers and my faith, beyond words printed in Bible pages, she is my answer, our answer, my wife and I, this little girl is our common goal, having a family, a mutual sacrifice, a dedication, our daughter would keep us together, she would ensure we continued to grow as a couple, pointing towards a shared dream, and the young

man is afraid because he knows if I lose her then my answers would all disappear, my roots would shrivel up and leave behind cavities under the ground where they had once been, pockets, empty pockets, a space cold and empty which had once been full, so what can I do except sit here in this chair and pray

A young man prays in a hospital

The boy's father watches through a window as he walks up to the front stoop, from the sidewalk, back home from church

An old man is standing under a half-moon, gazing up at a mountain peak, bewildered because he would have never guessed it, who could have guessed it, he is an old man who never intended for himself to wind up alone, parked off a dirt road, in a wash of sand and gravel, waking up in an empty camper hitched to his truck, with a few meager possessions, with his notebooks full of sketches, notations, a map with pencil markings, with quadrants checked off, I hadn't intended my life to be a set of instructions for how to dig a tunnel underground, I hadn't intended to make a hermitage of so many years, decades, I could have tried to find another woman, I could have let someone else in, but it was polite customers and Ollie and a few dogs I owned and that is what it was, what it had been, I kept to myself mostly, I justified it, I figured to myself what the hell good are relationships, achievements, progress, what is society but the collective expression of our paranoias and apocalyptic tendencies, the sum of our most insane and dysfunctional aspects, so how could any of it be worthy, holy, I told myself the world deserved a liquidation sale, this world of scattered minds, scattered hearts, a scattered world, I hadn't meant to dig myself out of sight from my fellows but I did and I went on with justifying my isolation, burrowed into the ground, underground, for years and years, I even convinced myself it might have been for the better, she had been spared the torment, the abyss of sorrow, because what was life, junk house fires with frantic handfuls of baggies and grams of powder and wads of cash while a baby is asleep upstairs suffocating in a whisper? undersized boys with lisps at baseball parks tortured by older, bigger boys who chew bubble gum with sharpened teeth? careerists like rich old men who turn human lives into numbers, who turn themselves into numbers, into bank account statements, into financial plans, fixated on digits, how did the market perform today? millions without access to drinking water or electricity while entire nations go insane with stockpiles of storage lockers,

mountains of their indiscriminate trash bags? what a place to be born into, what chaos, that's what I thought, that's how I justified it, it was the story I told myself, the story of a world beyond redemption, a world useless and forlorn, a confused place marked by violent shouts, by helpless eyes behind shut doors, by holes which could never be filled in, but the truth is, standing here in the Park, the truth is I was scared, I was scared to lose anything else, anyone else, I was frightened of those tenuous threads which hold us together, I was heartbroken, families with little girls wiping ice cream off their noses, I nearly cried, it appeared so fragile, so terribly fragile, and I was too scared to see anything else broken

How old were you when your mother died, she asks

It was two weeks before my eighth birthday, he says

How old were you, he asks

I was sixteen, she says

The boy wonders why an omniscient, omnipresent, all-powerful LORD would choose us, fractured human beings, to work wonders, why the LORD couldn't simply do it Himself, why had the LORD decided on using us, fallen creatures, so the boy is vexed by the logic of the LORD's design

I'm an old man who's been acquainted with violent lunatics on the run from the law with their 4X4 treads in my shop, pacing back and forth, chain-smoking cigarettes and spitting on the floor, but I've also seen the most tender, saintly figures like that old woman out in the Sonoran Desert fixing me a hotdog from her roadside stand, her dark brown eyes like a blessing on my forehead, pleased with my own first-bite approval, neither of us saying a word

The young man is about to pray, he's hunched over with his head in his hands on the seat in the hallway, outside the room, his wife is overwhelmed, disappeared, the young man traces the sign of the cross over himself but he's thinking whatever is holy or almighty or all-powerful is so far beyond our reach, when folks say the LORD works through others, how could anyone know anything about the LORD other than it was a curse upon man, thorns and thistles, the LORD condemned us to suffer and die alone in this cursed world, and the young man is languishing by himself in a bright hallway unsure what good will come from a prayer, another prayer

Westward blowing, the land of the dead

A rising sun, a falling moon

The old man squints away from Wildrose Peak, with the wind in his ears, and he rubs his eye, because he's an old man missing an eye, his left eye, ever since the afternoon when my older brother and I were fighting with sticks in an alleyway slashing at each other back and forth, that fateful afternoon when the accident happened, I wore a patch until my parents could afford a glass eye, a prosthetic insert, which I've had changed several times from then until now, I lost my eye and I've made due with one good eye, and my brother struggled with guilt about what happened even though we were only boys and it was an accident, I never held it against my brother, a coiled spring if there ever was one, he died from pneumonia years ago, December of 1990, he lived to holler at a wave of colts rounding the turn, he'd slap a rolled-up Racing Form against his thigh, he'd lean over to me in line at the window with 'I'm seeing the board today, partner' if he'd be making money, or if he'd lost money we'd be in the parking lot of Penn National after a long pall of silence with a dismissive 'You can convince yourself of a lot of things, you can find every winner in tomorrow's Racing Form, but none of it matters once the gun goes off, you don't know a damn thing about a horse until it's out on the dirt,' he'd win then he'd lose but he was a coiled spring who lived to gamble on horses because he figured out at a young age a horse can't hide what they're made of

His wife has finished the spinning mobile of felt angels and puffy clouds, it hangs from the ceiling above the wooden crib, the crib the young man had assembled, the crib next to their bed, where they would sleep, where they would dream

Do you think the baby will like it, she asks

Of course, he answers

A young man walks down Market Street with a suitcase and pays for a bus fare at the station ticket office, a departure without handshakes or goodbyes, anonymous, another piece of luggage on the rack, another harried woman in Cleveland with her purses and handbags and her root tips in need of more dye, the young man doesn't look away from the window, westering like a setting sun, westward to forget about the Susquehanna until he reaches Mojave country, he doesn't strike up friendly conversations with the other passengers to pass time, he keeps his head pointed out the window, with one good eye he sees limestone, heartbroken, the remnants of ancient oceans, bands of rocks, tides overtaking the land then retreating, memories

Daddy, you're doing it wrong, the little girl says
The young man is holding strands of the little girl's black hair,
there's a red bow, a disjointed look on his face
It's this way, she says
The bus continues and with his good eye he is confronted by Joshua
trees silhouetting the desert, thick branches of yucca, trunks
with no rings, he is curious through ghost towns like Pahrump,
past the main drag and into the back streets, the gravel pits and
the trailers, the busted fences and abandoned properties, dirtbike
junkies revving engines, sheds and trucks and poor mothers yearning
for adobe roof tiles, a land of titanic vistas, of drunken stumble
up the slopes of a mesa, of tight jean shorts and young men howling
coyote for their girl, the land is for sale but no one is buying,
no one has the gall to outlast them, adapting like scrub brush,
beautiful in their agony like the pink spines of a barrel cactus
up on a ledge in the canyon, he sees the people of the land and
they are lost and forlorn and he senses he will become one of them
I'll never leave you, he says
I'll take care of you, he says
The boy was most concerned about baseball when he lost his eye, he
had to relearn how to gauge depth, he had to strike out again and
again in the sandlots until he had retrained his good eye to bring
the barrel of the bat to make contact on an inside pitch, small
things like the position of his head or the tilt of his shoulders
to compensate for the challenge of losing half of his field of
vision, training his peripherals to widen, he learned to trust the
sound of the ball off the bat when he was fielding, he wanted so
badly to continue playing baseball so he focused and practiced and
trained himself, because he had to acclimate to a world cut in
half, a world with a giant hole on one side of it, after he had
lost his eye
After the young man left wheeled his wife out from the hospital he
found himself confronted by a similar challenge, he had to relearn
how to do everything in a world with a giant hole, how to walk to
the corner store, how to talk to his colleagues at work, how to
twist open the lock to the apartment door, because the hole in his
heart was like the hole from losing his vision, so the young man
learned how to deal with the hole, he had done it before, the young
man had done it once as a boy so he knew he could do it again, he
figured out how to fill up a glass of water at the sink despite
the crater inside of his heart, with its exposed opening, because

the wound which hadn't scarred over, but it would scar over, and slowly it did, like the socket of his empty eye, it took years, it took courage, it took rainy Sunday afternoons pulling off his socks, a simple thing which became impossible, crying for hours and hours, inside the hole, lost in its pain, its defeat, but slowly he learned how to navigate a world with a hole in it, and eventually he stopped thinking of the world as a place with a hole in it, his heart scarred up, the hole became so familiar that it disappeared, and the old man had adapted and made a life for himself out west in the desert and he became so accustomed to the scars he forgot about the hole, he forgot about his wife, his daughter

I don't know how to make the sadness go away, she says to him
How can you do anything, she asks

A SUZUKI mini-truck with a faulty manual transmission, it came off the hitch from the tow and onto the asphalt in the front of his service garage, the young man signing paperwork, while the owner of the vehicle lights a cigarette then sharpens a pocketknife on a stone

You'll take good care of her, won't you, Al Quinones says
She's the only woman who ever loved me, Al Quinones says

Al Quinones grew up on a reservation in New Mexico and I let him sleep on the couch in my garage overnight because he had nowhere else to stay, so we sat up drinking beers while he told me about the land, the people, a creation story passed down from generation to generation, since the beginning of time when the first beings crawled out from the last world and into this one, and how the medicine men, the shamans, maintained contact with the Creator, with the other world, we drank beers and Al told me stories and he slept on the couch a few more days until I could fix up his SUZUKI, its transmission, the four-cylinder engine

The old man thinks back on being a younger man, a wrench in his pocket, fixing up the SUZUKI, and hearing about the petroglyphs from Al Quinones

On the canyon walls are markings, instructions which hold secrets, they assisted the medicine men who used to travel between worlds, Al Quinones says

A boy's jaw drops, praying on the kneeler with his classmates in the second-grade, as Marty Coburn stuffs the eucharist in his pocket, the body of Christ, it happens during the May Crowning Mass, and afterwards Marty removes the consecrated host from out of his pocket in the corner of the school yard and casually throws

the wafer down into a sewer drain, Marty Coburn who pronounced his last name as 'koh-been' whose father drank too much whose mother also had passed away, after one of the boys made a bet with Marty to steal the Blessed Sacrament and throw it down a sewer drain, for five dollars, Marty threw the Blessed Sacrament in between the openings of the grates and pocketed the money and I couldn't believe what I had seen, I'd never felt worse in my whole life, I went home and prayed for the soul of Marty Coburn, I asked Our Lady of Sorrow to save Marty's soul from the fires of hell, I hated to see a friend of mine like Marty exchange eternity for a five dollar bill, it was something so awful, it hurt the boy, deeply, the temptation of this world, the sin of it
I'll play Belmont and Aqueduct, and make Saratoga in the summers, his older brother says

You come visit whenever you like, his older brother says

There's nothing left for me here, his older brother says

A young man retreats westward, learning to ride buses with a hole in his heart, the crater inside of him, he's riding a bus unsure of where he is headed, exiled, he's watching the daybreak edge along the curtains of night and the desert is cool but it won't stay comfortable for long, on into the valley where self-permissiveness and self-indulgence and self-interest will be destroyed, because Canaan's milk and honey is truly a wasteland of salt and granite, exiled into a valley of lepers, so it's postcards from Hell, thoughts of a wasteland, thoughts of purification, thoughts of fire, thoughts of ritual sacrifice, that's what he's thinking, it's postcards from hell, I could have gone to New York to stay with my brother but for some reason unknown to me at the time I booked a ticket as far away as I could imagine so here I am
How much for this property here, he asks, pointing at the map
Cheap, says the realtor

What do you want it for, says the realtor

I want to build a garage, he says

Ollie, his neighbor, moseys by around quitting time looking to tie one off, a bucket of cold beers, so the young man sits in the garage with Ollie, he pulls out two chairs and they sit facing the open garage door, and Ollie would ask the young man about what life had been like, back on the Susquehanna, before the young man settled on Mojave land, and the young man would answer Ollie it wasn't much different, making ends meet, getting by, but Ollie

would express skeptical facial strains and press on the young man about his ex-wife and what happened between the two of them
Sometimes things don't work out, he said

It didn't work out between us, he said

Ollie rubs at his chin and his skin is a cured tobacco leaf and his bones jut out from his sides because he is a scrawny old desert rat with a ballcap and a cigarette in his mouth and a can of beer in his hand and he asks the young man if he'll take out his glass eye one last time, because boy what a sight it is, it's a hell of a thing when you've had a few drinks, since no main attractions are rolling through this forlorn part of the world, are they

The boy sings with the other children, The LORD is good to me, And so I thank the LORD, For giving me the things I need, like the sun and the rain and the apple trees, The LORD's been good to me

A shaman undertakes these ecstatic journeys for four reasons: first, to meet the God of Heaven face to face and bring him an offering from the community; second, to seek the soul of a sick man, which has supposedly wandered away from his body or been carried off by demons; third, to guide the soul of a dead man to its new abode; fourth, to add to his knowledge by frequenting higher beings, he reads quietly

A little girl clicks the picture viewfinder, jungle animals, then clicks it again

What those is, she asks

What those is, Daddy, she asks

The old man thinks to himself it's always made me sad to leave the wilderness after a day exploring, to return back to my camper and my truck after hunting down the markings in the stone, after scrambling up onto furrows, after spotting a panel in the distance with a slight discoloration, with a pattern that made it stand out, it makes me sad to finish a day adventuring out in the canyons, searching

I'll miss this, the old man thinks

I'll miss all this, the old man thinks

I was a young man was out in Mojave National Preserve in the Woods Mountains in May of 1979, I went out there with my truck and with the first dog, the dog and I, I had just met Al Quinones and fixed up his SUZUKI ST-20 with the round headlamps, boy I was fond of those headlamps, the shape of them, and I was driving aimless through the Woods Mountains with the dog and we ended up refilling at a water station because I had decided I needed a break from my

service garage and Ollie and the dust storms so I picked a spot on the map which caught my eye, I craved trees, forests, I had been in the desert with the rush of the wind filling up my ears and the sand in my eyes and I missed the forests back east, the trees, the coolness of a forest trail shaded in the afternoon, in the comfort of droplets and bosk, so it was the Woods Mountains, I figured there had to be trees in the Woods Mountains, and that's when I met a Ranger at one of the trail heads with his hat brim and his leather belt and he motioned a greeting over to me

Hey buddy, you got a smoke, the Ranger asked

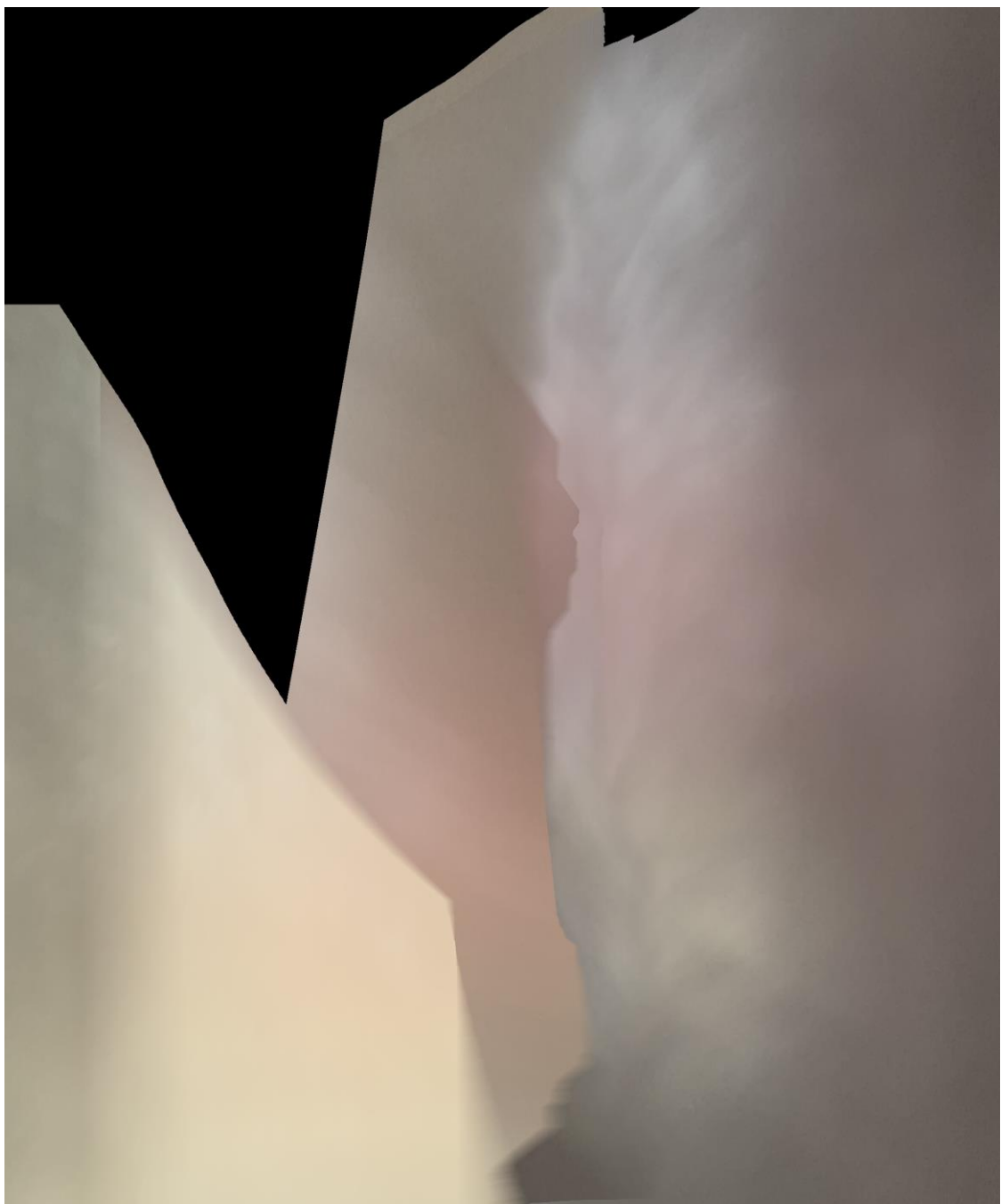
Sure thing, I says

I lit the end of the Ranger's cigarette and the Ranger patted my dog on its head and asked if I had been up to see the rock markings, if I had seen the panels with the ancient inscriptions, the Ranger held the cigarette and told me it was a hell of a place to visit, almost a thousand years old, so I explained I was unaware of the inscriptions or the people who once dwelled in these parts then the Ranger told me where to find the panels, the Ranger explained how the place had an energy to it, you can feel it, you really can feel it, so the young man was curious and followed the directions from the Ranger, the waypoints, and once the young man reached the site he was mesmerized, the geometric patterns, the abstract humanoid figures, the animals, and it was one figure in particular which caught the young man's attention, a series of circles, interconnected, with lines and demarcations, as if the circles were worlds, dimensions, and the figure indicated a kind of ascension, emerging from one world to the next, which reminded the young man of Al Quinones, the creation stories, and from that trip in the Woods Mountains an obsession was born

How much longer can she go like this, the young man asks

We'll continue to push with the oxytocin, it should be over soon, the doctor says

Approaching sixteen hours in the hospital, the young man waits inside the room with his wife, out from the night and into a new day, his wife is pale white chalk with beads of sweat and the window shades are drawn shut, the nurses stop by to check on her in intervals, they measure his wife's heart rate and her pulse, an IV line drips into his wife's arm, and what the young man is thinking to himself is it's bad luck with me being in here, the young man is convinced, it's bad luck for me to be in here, my mother once said it was bad luck for a man to be in the same room

















as his wife having a baby, I remember my mother saying it before she died, one of those strange memories you hoard away and you don't understand what about the moment made it stick to you like a burr for all these years, but my mother said it, she said it was bad luck for a father to see a baby born, so I'm nothing but bad luck

My mother died too, he says to Marty Coburn

Big stinkin' whoop, says Marty Coburn

The old man is daydreaming with his khaki pants still clutched in his hand, waiting for the sunset to break, and it's a vision of flowers, a little girl with flowers in her hair, she is turned away from him, her eyes, he can't make out her eyes but she'll turn around to face him, soon, because she's spinning in a circle, she's dancing, and the sunlight glows inside her full cheeks and her button nose, the fulsome contentedness of her face, spinning, dancing, as if the light were coming out of her, and not reflecting off of her, as if she were the source itself

There's got to be more to it than that, says Ollie

Come on, what happened with your old lady, Ollie asks him

An old man blinks an eye, next to his camper, holding his pants, and the little girl and the flowers have disappeared and he wonders to himself how long has it been, it had been so long, it's like he had forgotten about the hole in the world, in his heart, the little girl, he had become so accustomed to it, to the hole, losing her, and it startled him to notice it again, the emptiness, it was still there, and come to think of it by now she would have been old enough to take a husband, to start a family of her own, wouldn't she, and whenever I would dream of her my dreams were of a little girl, a little girl with black hair and a button nose, because I'd never imagined her beyond the years of a little girl, but she would have grown up by now into a woman, it's been so long, I haven't had a dream of her in so long, I wonder if

The sound of the wind in his ears

A bus continues westward, climbing vertical runs of highway, up into titanic vistas with the asphalt stretching off into the horizon, the smell of petrichor and thunder

A young man drives up to the library at the University of Nevada in July of 1984, he's diligent and combing through a pile of academic journals, research, it's been five years of hunting petroglyphs and hiking, of drawing pictures on notebooks, copies of what he has seen, and he makes friends with one of the librarians,

she helps him pile together different books, and scholarly articles, so he spends a few days near the campus doing research and learning about the spiritual beliefs of Native communities, of medicine men, prophets and healers

A boy walks into his bedroom and his mother is seated at the edge of the bed, he can see her golden red hair, he can see her hands folded on her lap, he sees the woman at the edge of the bed and a look of repose is over her face, she's serene, peaceful, sitting on the edge of the boy's bed, and the boy stops and gasps and she is gone

The old man walks over to the passenger side door of the truck and opens it, he clicks the handle and reaches inside, at the floor of the seat, for a propane burner and a stainless steel kettle, a bag of coffee grounds in the glove compartment, coarse grounds of coffee in a plastic Zip-Loc bag, he adds a jug of water to his burdens, then it's water into the kettle and the flick of a lighter, his thumb flicks the lighter with the knob turned on the propane burner so he can smell the propane before it ignites, and he's thinking to himself I'll warm up the water to near boiling then dump the coffee into the kettle and I'll be patient so the grounds release their flavors into the water, I'll wait for about three minutes, more or less, then when the coffee is finished I'll pour it into my thermos mug, my steel thermos with the twist off cap, because the lid doubles as a cup, so I'll pour a cup and take my first sips of hot coffee out here in the desert in my underwear before the landscape is scorched torrid by the sun

The young man looks at his wife, he wonders if the girl's eyes will be like her mother's, her mother's eyes, his mother's eyes, where had she gone, this afternoon, that afternoon, the young man has been awake all night with his wife and he blinks remembering his own mother, something he had seen as a boy, something like a ghost

The sky in the east is like a furnace, orange, red, the sun is rising, almost broken free from the stone tops of the mountains, as the earth spins, this day without a night, and the old man is drinking his chipped tooth coffee and looking up at the colors of the sunrise, at the illusion of a sun rising, the wash is dry and the arroyos haven't flooded in years

The young man is concerned his little girl might be colorblind, the way she guesses and laughs when they ask her what color a banana is, a raspberry, a leaf, a grape, the ocean

Boo, the little girl would say
Ello, the little girl would smile
The young man is concerned but mostly he's convinced the little girl is playing a joke on him
It was March of 1981, the first dog would have still been alive, and we reached Mesa Verde late in the evening and camped overnight to stir ourselves up with the sunrise, we walked around all morning admiring the Pueblo figures which had been inscribed eight hundred years prior at the Colorado and Utah border, warriors armed with bows and protected by shields in the smooth mural walls of Sand Canyon, figures that seemed alive, that seemed to shift and move, figures which commemorated a great battle, bravery, fallen members of the tribe who had defended the honor and status of the clan, with the women and children hidden in the alcoves of rock faces, in caves, praying for their husbands and their fathers to return to the fire that night, and while the dog is off bounding back along the trail I could feel their presence, the people, their longing for their loved ones to return, and the feeling is like a prayer, praying with them for their loved ones to return, overwhelming, it reminded me
A woman screams in the silence
Storm clouds gather in the east, a country beyond, out of sight
I'm an old man, coughing, sipping his coffee, coughing, so I reach into the pocket of my pants for my bandana, I cough into my bandana, I check for blood because it's a habit, I had coughed up blood for months, before the surgery, before they excised a portion of my lung, they took part of my lung out and a rib, but the cancer had spread, it had metastasized, years of unfiltered Camels, I'm coughing but I feel a strength in my legs and in my arms, I feel good, I take another sip of coffee, I set the lid of the thermos on the hood of my truck, I walk around the truck into the driver's side door and reach above the wheel on the dashboard for my packet of tobacco and my rolling papers and I roll a cigarette and light it and walk back out to retrieve my cup from the hood, smoking, a cup of coffee, I taste the tobacco and the grounds, I can taste the dry air, it's satisfying, the desert air, the boundary lands of cinders and ash, boundaries between angels and men, men and demons, between heaven and earth, earth and hell, between death and life, the living and the ghosts, this hostile place between worlds, this place of lonely travelling, I've been out here for decades amidst the silence and the harshness, where a stark

landscape of solitude forces you to reckon with yourself, with who you are, because the turbulence of the world prohibits you from seeing yourself, if I know anything it's the beginning of evil is a scattered mind, so for my years while I've been here, in vigil, I've been forced to contend with my own inadequacies, my own insecurities and judgments, because my sin is before me everywhere I go no matter or not I believe in heaven or hell, smoking my cigarette, pouring my second cup of coffee, I'm a man, a man who has done what he could with the life he was given, though I have realized in the desolation I had not been a good husband to my wife, I had withheld love, I withheld my heart from her, I pushed her away, I could have grieved with my wife, we could have grieved together, it was too much crying alone, not enough crying together, and now, after so many years, the old man knows the truth, I had a part in all of it, in everything that happened, the gulch between us, our parting of ways, she was a Galway girl with black hair and blue eyes, she only wanted love, to be loved, her heart broke and I refused to help her piece it back together, I ran away from the hole which opened up between us because I wanted nothing more than to pretend it wasn't there, when it was, when it is

A mother with her two daughters walks delicate into the General Store at Stovepipe Campground, their outfits match, blue tops with denim skirts, and their hair is blonde, they are beautiful, and Mommy is wearing sandals, her toes are painted cobalt blue to match her blouse, so the girls walk ahead of their Mommy to the freezer with the ice cream sandwiches, and Mommy is watching them with a sad grin but she is having trouble keeping up so there is a hidden wince behind her teeth, her gait is tortured as she limps forward until the younger of her daughters comes back with an ice cream sandwich and takes Mommy's hand, and Mommy pays the clerk for the ice cream sandwiches at the counter and the younger girls rush out of the store while the oldest stays behind, hand in hand with Mommy, so the trip is a kind of memorial service, Mommy is planting memories inside of their heads before she is exiled from the garden, and her daughters, onto the salt flats of Badwater splashing in the puddles of an alien world, waiting for rain, for the right moment to bloom

The old man delights in the long shadows of daybreak against the sand and the scrub brush, the mesquites and the creosotes, the rich smell of the chaparral bushes, like incense, like a ceremony, the silver-grey leaves of the brittlebush with its bright yellow

daisy flowers, the wind blowing through the canyon, the sound of the wind in your ears, the only sound you'll ever hear until the croak of a raven, a pair of black wings set off, low to the ground, out for carrion

You ever think about shaving your mustache, Ollie asks

Never considered it, says the man

What makes you ask, the man says

Not sure, question popped into my head, Ollie says

The young man is afraid of the shadows inside his wife's eyes, remote, searching, she has gone so far away from him, from wherever they are in the hospital room, she isn't nearby, his wife is off someplace on her own, in a kind of different world, he cannot see through to the inside of her because the doors have shut, and it must be on account of the pain, the exhaustion, she's gone somewhere else and I don't recognize her eyes, I don't know where she is, I have no way of reaching her

On the reflection of the glass in the window of the bus the young man can see his daughter's nose, a nose like a raspberry, as if it had turned red from a cold January wind, a tiny red nose, he sees it in the reflection of the window as his eye switches focus, as he shifts focus from the open stretch of the desert back inside of the bus, at the light reflecting off the window, his own face, her face, it was something beautiful, my baby's nose, it was something perfect and now it's in the ground, it's turned to dust, all my dreams for her, so I'll never see her nose again, I'll never watch her grow up into a ballerina, a movie star, an artist, so I'll cry one last time, I'll allow for one final tear to fall down my cheek here in this westward bus with my face pointed out the window, because it's better this way, to forget, to leave any memories of her behind and never mention her again, so the young man vows never to speak of his daughter again, buried underground

You never got around to having kids, asks Ollie

Most women, after they're married, only want to have a baby, Ollie says

I'm an old man with a cup of coffee and a cigarette, I enjoy the smoke mixing in with the taste of the chipped tooth coffee in my mouth, the grains on my tongue, a kind of cowboy espresso, strong, thick like peanut butter, I've started every day as long as I can remember with a cup of coffee and a cigarette, a ritual of preparation, prepared to end my journey through time, though I'm not sure what it will bring, if time ends or if it slows down,

because what is time to an atom trapped in stone, in rock, what is time to an atom trapped in the granite of mountains, cooled magma, spilled from cinder cones along fault lines, plumes of ash, an atom locked in stone does not mark the passage of time, but maybe I'm wrong, who knows if we ever remove ourselves from time, if anything truly escapes, when a mountain of fire cools and solidifies, confined to move at such a glacial pace, and I'm smoking and wondering how long does it take for a thought to form in a strata of sedimentary limestone, how long does it take your bones to pray after your flesh is decayed, for your bones to recall your life, her life, reflecting, ossified, I'm wondering if it will take thousands of years to render a word, a syllable

Archives of history, cast in stone, mineral

Juniper berries, transformed into ghost beads

It would have been March of 1989, near Owens Lake, I was roaming about on the vernal equinox, with my second dog, I had read about the site and when I found it I waited around for the setting sun behind the Sierra Nevadas to cast a shadow onto one of the petroglyphs, a carving of parallel bars, and the kiss of the shadow coincided with the inner vertical bars, moving south one bar per day, because I returned at sunset for three days, and I watched, I marked the shadow and the bars, I sat in awe, awestruck by an ancient shaman's marker for time, a series of lines etched in the rock like a solar calendar, marking the seasons, because the shaman understood time, the shaman's knowledge from the underworld was brought back to the community to aid them in planning when to hunt, when to migrate, where water might be, shamans had the power to read into the future, to decode the relationships between the sun and the earth, the earth and the animals, the living and the dead, so the shaman would retreat into the wilderness with a handful of datura to visit sacred sites where cracks in the canyon walls would serve as portals to the spirit worlds, portals where the ancestors first emerged from the primordial regions to occupy the earth, the first people, birth canals from one realm to another, a place charged with energy and potency, wisdom of the tribe's position in the cosmos, of the tribe's part to the story, which is a wonder to me, because I am flummoxed by time, even with my wristwatch and my calendar, my position in the cosmos is anything but certain, a lost wanderer, wandering now, today

The young man is in the bathroom down the corridor with cold water splashed up against his face, and he realizes the little girl is

already something beautiful, she's been alive inside of his dreams and imagination for nine months, she's riding bikes and painting pictures at the kitchen table, she possesses a life which she loves and she's lived it inside of my dreams but here I am at the sink with the cold water pooling in the cup of my hands and I might lose her, I might lose everything, so I'll recite another prayer, I'll pray some more, because something has to protect us

Whatever LORD who laid the earth's foundation, who gave orders to the morning, who sent lightning bolts on their way, who fathered the rain, who pulled in leviathan with a hook, I am powerless, impoverished, so help me, it belongs to You, it is Yours, so help me, please

Let this pass

Please let this pass over my family

Let my wife come back to me

Let our daughter be healthy, let her be born

Let me see her eyes

Help us, please

Please, help us

The old man shrugs to himself because he can still sense the empty hole nearby, it's been present for years, this hole, I've forgotten it, but I haven't, so the old man finishes the last of the coffee from his cup and tosses the butt end of the cigarette onto the sand, the light has broken through, the day gains its footing, so the old man pulls up one pant leg, then another, and he hoists his suspenders into place, in his bare feet he walks back behind the truck to the camper to his boots with their untied shoelaces, the red shoelaces, the worn leather, the old man is lighthearted and on with his boots, fixing the laces through the loops, sitting on the step of the camper and the door unlatched, he ties his boots and turns inside to find a notebook and a map and a few pencils, he folds what he gathers into his pockets and shuts the camper door

The boy is convinced he'll meet his mother again in heaven

He isn't angry or sad or upset because he knows his mother is in a better place, a much better place, and his father's knuckles are cracked, the gas has been shut off in the apartment, and his older brother is running errands for a bookie and making himself scarce around the house

The boy tells no one of what he saw in his bedroom

The young man looks at one of the nurses with his good eye but the nurse doesn't look back at him, the nurse is watching his wife, his wife has her eyelids shut closed and winces in pain

Okay, one nurse says, one is coming

Take a deep breath, the other nurse says, I'll count and you breathe

The old man decides I'll leave the keys on the front seat of the truck for whoever comes along to find my camper, my thermos, my kerosene burner, the blankets and the mattress, there won't be much to clean up, there won't be much to clear out, my ranch back in McGill, it's a small ranch, it's a garage and a shed and a one bedroom ranch, it's clean, my bedroom is a bed and a dresser full of socks and underwear, my garage is oil cans and tarpaulins, my shed is four walls of shelves full of tools, so if she receives the letter and wants any of it she can have it, and if she doesn't then whoever wants it can have it, same with the truck, I smoked my cigarettes and listened to ballgames on the radio and fixed engines when engines needed fixing I replaced belts when belts needed replacing I recommended a new set of tires or brakes when the brakes or the tires were worn down, and when the work bell sounded I kept my private time occupied with tracking down petroglyphs, from the Timbisha Shosone, the Mojave, Paiutes, Chemehuevi, people in touch with a Creator, with Creation, I admired them and their history, their ceremonies of painted faces and the hunt, their dances of rain and fertility, I walked into canyons and scoured boulders, I made sketches in a notebook and borrowed literature from the University of Nevada library in order to better understand these people who carved their secrets into the rock, people who were hardly savages or uncivilized, who were perfect in their understanding of a nature, of life's preciousness, though I'd never fully comprehend their world or their ways, so the mystery is what fueled my exploration, and now I'm one man who lived a life and now that life is over, why be so precious about it, what good is it to recite from the Book of Job and get all worked up

Come on, says Ollie

Did you catch her sleeping with one of the neighbors, says Ollie

Did you come home from work early one day and catch them going at it, says Ollie

Come on, says Ollie

The young man jumped from his seat and with one motion removed the bottle of beer out from Ollie's hand and with another motion pulled Ollie from off of the plastic chair so the young man was standing nose to nose with his neighbor, they had been sitting in the young man's garage in the shade on a pair of plastic chairs with the garage door open and now he had Ollie's collar in one hand and in the other Ollie's bottle of beer

We lost a girl, says the young man

We lost a baby girl, she was stillborn, she was dead when she came out of my wife, says the young man

She didn't take a single breath, she came out purple and she was dead, says the young man

When we left the hospital, my wife couldn't set her mind on anything else except our little girl, says the young man

There was nothing left between us, other than sadness, other than pain, says the young man

I never even saw the color of her eyes, says the young man

To this day, I don't know what color my little girl's eyes were, says the young man

The young man shakes his grip free of Ollie's collar and Ollie clears his throat, Ollie swallows after he clears his throat and he begins to shake his head, because Ollie realizes what the loss must have been like for the young man and for the young man's wife when their baby came out purple and lifeless, because Ollie has seen dead bodies, he's seen men mutilated by bullet holes, Ollie has been in the jungle alongside soldiers hysterical and clutching at the organs inside of their stomach cavities, so Ollie knows what it is like to be around death and how it can change a person and Ollie feels sorry for pressing on the young man the way he had been for so long, trying to bust the young man's chops when they shared cold beer on Friday afternoons

I'm sorry, says Ollie

That's a bad deal, says Ollie

Ollie never married or had children, he collected a check from the government each month and rode dirt bikes and was excited when the young man built a garage nearby because the young man was a fine mechanic and willing to help Ollie fix up his bikes for fun, free of charge, so Ollie had taken a liking to the young man and only meant to bust the young man's chops when he found out the young man had been divorced back east before moving westward into the desert

The young man hands Ollie the bottle of beer he had taken
It sure was, says the young man
I'm trying to forget it, says the young man
Ollie knows what it's like to try and forget, how nothing is forgotten, how whatever it is you're running from or trying to make invisible it lives with you, inside of you, its burrowed in, it spreads and the energy builds up inside of you, and the pressure builds, Ollie knows how the pressure builds up, like how the young man jumped and snared Ollie by the collar, like one of those tigers the soldiers would warn each other about in Vietnam, orange and white and black striped with claws and teeth, Ollie saw the ferocity in the eyes of the young man and it reminded Ollie of the stories the boys used to tell about the tigers in the Vietnam jungles, and Ollie understands it was the sadness inside of the young man, the pain of losing his daughter the young man had been trying to forget, the image of a child, stillborn and purple, so Ollie extends his hand and after they make a truce they go back to sitting on the plastic chairs in the cool of the shade inside the young man's garage
Tough to forget, says Ollie
Never had much luck myself with forgetting, says Ollie
The old man shuts the door of the truck and looks up at the sky to the breaking sun, the oranges and reds of a new day bleeding out atop the mountains, those granite waves frozen at their apex, the purpleblacks have disappeared and a hazy blue fills the west while wild sunrise colors fill the east, so even though I'm one man, one among many, and what awaits me but silence, and darkness, asleep in the dust, being as though I had never been, even though the Blessed Mother won't be waiting for the old man in heaven with his daughter and with his mother and with the people he's loved, it doesn't change the fact the world can be something wonderful, so the old man admires the miracle of sunrise with his suspenders pulled up, with his boots tied, his small notebook in his pocket with its gossamer pages ruled with red lines, a ballpoint pen, his canvas hat on his head and the drawstring dangling across his chest, he admires the sublime colors and remembers to put his glasses on, putting them on with a grin, because he is a one-eyed Cyclops wearing his glasses, and wouldn't it be a picture if it were a monocle he wore instead of glasses, watching the sky brighten

The little girl points skyward, with her back on the cool grass,
lying down, pointing to clouds, shapes appearing and disappearing
out from the canvas of the sky, faces and castles and animals

Look at this one, Daddy, she says

It looks like a whale, the little girl says

See its tail, she says

The young man has his hand on his wife's stomach and he's praying
a Hail Mary, he's silently praying with his hand on the baby, and
he feels the baby kick, he feels the life of the child cared for
inside of his wife and the young man's eyes are closed as he
silently prays to the Blessed Mother and a feeling is inside of
the young man like he is protected by the goodness of the LORD and
the Blessed Mother will grant safe passage for his unborn child,
the Blessed Mother will watch over his wife and his baby girl, and
the young man will continue to dedicate his prayers and his
thoughts to the Blessed Mother in exchange for protection

Echoes in a cave

Bootsteps on the ground

Wind in your ears

How far apart are the contractions, one nurse asks

About four minutes, the other nurse answers

I'm an old man and the desert is warming up already, I can feel
the heat in the rocks slowly leeching out into the air, but I am
resolved, I'm not afraid, I'm not scared to hike into the canyon
without any water or supplies, I'm not nervous, I won't take the
time to rig up the shade overhang to protect the camper from the
dogged heat of the day because it won't matter if the camper ramps
up like an oven, it won't make a difference, I made up my mind in
the hospital before the doctor entered the consultation room with
my test results on May the first because it became suddenly
important to go out on my own terms, I've never charged more than
what was fair, I've tried my best to live out a decent life so if
the ledger closes today I'll account for myself with my head up,
my shoulders back, with life in my legs, I'll stand by what I did,
how I lived, who I was, I made the best of what I had, I was dealt
some good luck and some bad luck and I dealt with what came my way,
so I'm not afraid, I'm not scared for whatever might be waiting
for me because whatever it is, well, it's our common fate, death
is what unites us, what binds us all together, so who I am to
resist it, why should I be afraid, everything disappears

Glacial textures emerge into and out from the disappearance

The mountains, the wasteland

A beeping metal detector

Inside the old man's notebook, in his back pocket, ruled with the red lines, are sketches he's drawn, sketches of what he has seen over the years carved onto the layers of desert patina, like a pilgrim, he's drawn big horn sheep and coyotes, he's climbed up steep inclines with loose footing over layers of mud and breccia, the rocks sliding underneath him, he's cut his hand against jagged walls, he's tucked himself underneath boulders and narrowed himself into slots to find thunderbirds, atlatls, storm clouds, and he's sketched the figures out with detailed notes on their size, location

Sickness is thought of as a loss of the soul, and so the shaman has to find out first whether the soul of the sick man has strayed far from the village or has been stolen by demons and is imprisoned in the other world, a man reads quietly at inside a university library

The old man has watched the faint hibiscus of dawn bubble into the molten light of day, he's watched the reds and oranges disappear and give way to a bright blue, so the morning has broken over the Amargosa Mountains, the silent rock, as the clouds of the sky form then evaporate, trailing off into nothing, the bitter disappearance, a flower dries up, a roadrunner sheds a feather darting across the road, coming and going, so it must be pleasing to whatever put us here, why we're here, to be born, then to die Carefree swing sets, up and down

Headlights on the opposite side of the median, approaching then gone, forever

Zinc-nosed tourists dawdle about in a parking lot, they arrive in gangs of four or five and they refuse to stop prattling, aimless with their cameras around their necks, image mesmerized, a trance of capture, of possession, mine, framing the next picture with the next click of the button, they want it for themselves, to bring it home and arrange it on the mantle, a conversation piece

I never saw her eyes, he says

I never even had the chance to hold her, he says

Sunday Monday, Tuesday Wednesday, Thursday Friday, Yesterday, sings the little girl

Her Daddy chuckles

Last night the old man thought how it might not be so terrible for a long rest after such a burdensome and tiresome interminable

lifetime but suddenly it doesn't seem so long, walking away from the truck and the camper, walking with the long shadows of morning as his own shadow is cast out in front of him, and it feels like my life has only been a moment long, like I've only been here as long as this moment, and it's such a short while here because it doesn't feel like a long time at all, I don't feel so old, I don't feel finished with this body casting its shadow on the desert sand, and the illusion of a lifetime it disappears before his eyes and it's the moment of him walking with his eyes on the canyon opening, creosote dotting the rocks and the sands, it's as if it were the beginning, as if it were only the beginning, the start

It's time for one last push, says one nurse

You can do it, says the other nurse

Both nurses glare at the young man and the young man intuitively their eyes so he repeats what the nurses have urged on to his wife, the young man encourages his wife that she can do it, one last push, and he's holding his wife's hand, he is holding onto her, but his wife is gone, she is somewhere else, merged within the agony, within the prison of each contraction, his wife's blue eyes have disappeared to another place, somewhere far outside of the hospital, and as another contraction gathers his wife's hand squeezes back and she holds her breath and yells, his wife closes her eyes and yells out with a wild barbarism and the doctor is at the end of the bed with one of the nurses and the doctor motions forward with his hands

You're almost there, says the doctor

Keep going, says the other nurse

And the young man watches his wife's face flush red with blood, with pressure, every muscle in her face is taut like the muscles in her hands and in her legs and in her pelvis, pushing, hours and hours of labor, sweating, grunting, now yelling, the contractions and the waves of tension, but the young man can sense this is the moment, she will become a Mommy, he will become a Daddy, a moment they had been pointing towards, they had decided to have a baby on the Fourth of July last year and now they had reached the culmination of that dream so as the doctor bends down towards his wife the young man is silent, because here we are, this is it, this is what we have been drawn towards

The boy is hesitant to remind his father about the Paczki donuts, as badly as he wants to say the word 'poonch-key' and remind his father today is Fat Tuesday and every year mother would surprise

her boys with the donuts from the bakery on Fat Tuesday, the powdered sugar and the jelly filling, his father seems to have forgotten and is drinking a beer at the table, and the boy can't muster up the courage so he decides he will ask his big brother instead

At school the nuns had instructed the children to copy the phrase,
Man does not live on bread alone

The old man is walking with his notebook in his pocket and a pole in his right hand and his glasses on his nose up into the mouth of the canyon, and the rocks are loose, like a kind of mud underneath him, chipped and worn down, at the end of their journey through the canyon, a rainstorm every ten years, every hundred years, a slow progression gradually inching from the higher elevations down into the valley, the canyon walls smoothed by particles from flash floods, polished in muddy slurries, the old man looks up and into the cleft of the rock, an opening, a portal between worlds

An exhibit hall is closed at the Ranger Station, a series of pictures and words commemorating the Timbisha Shoshone, a people who summered up in the valleys to celebrate marriages and reconvene with their extended family then returned down from the mountains in winter to disperse and camp near the mesquite groves in the basin, eating the beans, eating pinyon seeds and chuckwalla lizards they caught on hooks, watchful, on the lookout for herds of bighorn sheep and other game, Tupippuh, the ancestral homeland, their home, the place of the red rock paint, the red ochre, where every landform, every plant, every working of nature belongs to the Creator, so their land is a church, everywhere they walk is a place of worship

In another section of the closed exhibit hall hangs a picture, a parade of miners at the turn of the century in the town of Rhyolite, a procession down Gold Street with a brass band and banners, a town of nearly ten-thousand inhabitants soon to bust, scattered, a stampede of drunken wealth seekers, in then out, sorting through claims amidst bottles of whiskey, this one is mine

The old man doesn't think about good and evil anymore

The boy knows the good will win out

The young man watches helpless

I am a young man, but one day I'll be an old man, and I'll have grown old trying to forget that afternoon in Community General waiting for our baby to breathe, our first born, unborn, as the little girl's head emerged, then her body, she never changed color

from the purpleblue of the womb, our daughter entered the world silent, a lifetime of silence, a lifetime extinguished before a word could be spoken, before a cry could be uttered, our little girl came out then was gone, I tried to forget how I watched the doctor and the nurse clear fluids from around the baby's nose and mouth, the chest compressions, my wife behind me, asking what was wrong, what was wrong, what's happening to my baby, then my wife screaming for somebody to hand the baby to her, hand me my baby girl, give me my daughter, give me my baby, screaming louder and louder, my wife had come back from the pain she had been subsumed by, the lonesome island of her struggle, in the room at the end of the hall in the Maternity Ward, my wife was awake, screaming, I could see the blue in my wife's eyes, the deep blue of afternoon had returned, but it was too late, there was nothing to do, I looked on at our baby girl until the doctor shook his head and apologized, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I tried my best to forget the doctor's hand on my shoulder, my wife screaming, the lifeless body, a stillborn corpse at my wife's feet, not moving, not making a sound, I'll try my best to avoid remembering the pitch and the volume of my wife's screaming, the blistered anguish in her cries, the suffering of that moment, the tortured horror of it, inside Community General with purpleblue skin, the silence of a lifeless body in my wife's arms, crying, a darkness, a hole, I will have tried my best to forget it but every day I'll remember the little girl, her helpless life, balled up in a blanket in my wife's arms, eyes closed, sinless and perfect because who could argue for claims like original sin when confronted with a helpless, lifeless body, only seven pounds, wrinkled, fingers so tiny you could barely make out her translucent nails, I'll try my best but I won't forget any of it, the screaming, one day I'll be an old man and in the silence of my moments I'll hear my wife, her screams
Your father hasn't paid tuition, son, the nun says
Make sure he reads this letter, the nun says
The boy's father tears up the letter and stares at a bottle of beer

Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, pray for us
The old man is walking up into the mouth of the canyon, one of the last remaining sections on his map, and the hike up into the canyon is simple, he isn't searching for waypoints or markers, it was only a half mile or so from the truck and loose rocks are underneath his feet and he's into the canyon, his eye is open and he makes

out a barrel cactus on one of the ledges, the pink spines of the cactus, it catches his attention, and the old man is slogging upwards, slowly gaining elevation against the alluvial fan of loose silt and clay and gravel, he has a pole in his right hand and his steps are measured, paced, in a rhythm, his movement is controlled and his eye wanders in precise lines up the sides of the canyon walls onto ledges and towards pinnacle rocks, a keen eye upwards, there are fins of jagged rock, there are pancaked layers smooth and bulging, sections widen, sections narrow, he pinches the brim of his hat, he pulls his suspenders tight, wandering and scanning, comparing what is in front of him against what he has seen before, other sites he's visited over the years, the decades, passages through the Grapevines, Titus Canyon, Emigrant Wash, Greenwater Valley, his pilgrimages, his copious notes, his discoveries, his afternoon in Starvation Canyon with the colossal thunderbirds, carved below where the water would flow down from the declivities in the rock above, with the heads of the birds eroded by sacred rainstorms, figures found nowhere else in the Mojave area, the raincloud wings, a site which may have contained ancient springs with water supplied from aquifers, Ice Age water which seeped down from the Black Mountains, or it may have been a place where rain waters would flood the canyon, a place for medicine men who would travel hundreds of miles, who walked for weeks to reach a spiritually charged area, to bring the power back to the people, the ability to make rain, to make water, to make life

The young man realizes he never had the chance to uncover the color of her eyes, and he's standing above the tiny casket fighting the urge to pull up his little girl's eyelids, to check if her eyes were blue, like her mother's

A lizard scurries out of the sun's rays

A raven flies overhead

The old man stops and sets his hands at his hips, he doesn't have the wind in him like he used to, he takes a deep breath in and feels his legs and the muscles in his shoulders, he takes a deep breath and wipes a bandana across his forehead

Where do birds fly, her Daddy asks her

Birds fly to the sun, the little girl says

The boy finds himself enrolled in a new school, the teachers are not dressed with habits and rosaries, the teachers instead remind him of his friends' mothers and grandmothers, the classes start without morning prayers, the walls aren't decorated with

crucifixes, the boys and girls don't attend Mass on Friday mornings, so everything is different, everything has changed, but the boy doesn't have a choice, so he opens up his books and completes the lessons and stays quiet even when the other boys stir up trouble
The young man watches the lid of the coffin shut

I can't, his wife says

I have to go, she says

Reading at his desk in the library, *Equally surprising is the voyage of the shaman to the other world to escort the soul of the deceased to its new abode, the shaman narrates to those present all the vicissitudes of the voyage as it takes place*

I am bad luck, the young man decides, I shouldn't have been in that delivery room, I should have stayed away, I brought bad luck to my wife and to our baby and I should have never been there, I should have trusted my instincts, I knew it was bad luck, I knew it, I'm a curse, I killed my mother, I killed my daughter, I watched my father pickle himself in booze, I've cursed my wife and her beautiful blue eyes, my poor wife, she could have been with another man, she could be mother to a dozen children, healthy children, but I cursed them, I cursed the people I loved, the curse of my sins

The old man has been diagnosed with cancer, he's alone in his garage with a cold beer in the shade and he wishes to himself Ollie would drop in, but only one plastic chair is out, only the old man is sitting alone and drinking his beer and looking out through the garage door, so the old man sits wishing Ollie was alive so Ollie might come over and tell the old man a joke, it's a Friday afternoon and the workweek is finished but instead of lighting a cigarette he stares off towards the desert, Ollie died out there, an accident on his bike, I told him not to go, I felt an intuition, so maybe I cursed him too, this curse of Cain's mark, so all the better now that I'm going to die, I'll end up like Ollie, like her, like everyone else, and whether or not a heaven exists or a hell exists, what's the difference, whether or not everything in the Bible was true or was made up, who cares, who can tell if there's more good out there than bad, if this is the way things were supposed to go, how the LORD envisioned it, who can say, and what difference does it make, because it'll all disappear and be gone, so long

The young man is struck by something in Ollie, he's been around Ollie a thousand times, drinking in the garage, working on a bike, but it's like the young man is seeing Ollie for the first time

because a sadness is pressing up against Ollie's eyes, like the sadness wants to come out, like a wash of tears, a tender sadness, swollen hazel rainclouds of eyes, the young man sees it and understands what is inside Ollie and wants to tell Ollie to let it come out, the young man figures it was Viet Nam, or a rough childhood, but Ollie never mentions it, Ollie never says a word about the sadness, not even after the young man told Ollie the truth about his wife and his stillborn daughter, but the young man can see it plain behind Ollie's eyes because a person's eyes can't lie, the truth is inside their eyes

No like tiger, says the little girl

Scary, she says

The little girl is afraid of tigers, though she admires their stripes and their fangs and their quartz eyes, because tigers are fierce and tremendous and likely to pluck her up with their claws and drag her away to their lairs

Tiger stay in the cage, she says

Scary, she says

South, in Badwater, as the heat of the day boils up, the basin is a salt pan of mirrors melting with crystalline fracture, shallow pools of brackish water shimmer like a mirage come to life, mosaics of reflection, white light, a lone star above an alien world, pupfish in Salt Creek joyful with their impossible lifetimes

A passage catches his eye, *Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different*

A bald madman from Idaho spends the winter with sunblock rubbed onto his head pacing up and down Panamint City, the meanest most hard-boiled little hellhole that ever passed for a civilized town, the former home of silver miners, men who lit dynamite sticks, men who worked ball mills and impact crushers, a bald man from Idaho wearing headphones spent the entire winter between abandoned transport carts, brick smokestacks, he paced into Lewis tunnel which smelled like the rust of oil drums, listening, beep after beep, a search for treasure, with his metal detector and headphones, beep, beep

She's exhausted herself, upset her nerves, the doctor said

She has to rest, the doctor said

The medicine will help her rest, the doctor said

What happens to the body, the young man asked

Where is the baby, he asked

The little girl is on the porch, morning, springtime, and she points to a screened window dotted with ladybugs, the shells are like dots on the screen and the morning is cool and dew blankets the grass outside in the lawn, she points at the ladybugs and asks if they are alright, are the bugs dead, the tiny dots aren't moving or flying or crawling, the bugs are shrunken into their shells, so Daddy explains to the little girl the bugs are asleep, the bugs are sleeping from the cold night safely on the screen porch and they will wake up soon to the warmth of the sun, drying their wings, ready to fly, and Daddy watches his little girl's eyes, visionary, innocent eyes like the fawn of a forest, wondrous, full of wonder, encountering a wonderful thing

You know something, says Ollie

What's that, the young man says

Nevermind, says Ollie

The old man stops again, he bends down, and he picks up a rock, he's stopped only a couple hundred yards into the canyon, he's adjusted his suspenders and stopped himself to wait for a deep breath to settle his heartbeat, because he's panting, and he's bent over with a rock in his palm, his fingers are stretched around the edges of the rock, holding it, examining it with his good eye, his only eye, and it's only one rock in a desert of rocks, millions of rocks in this single canyon alone, pumice and granite and obsidian, it isn't special, a chunk of rhyolite, it isn't remarkable, and the rock eclipses his entire palm, the size of a slice of bread, and the rock is covered in striations of varying thickness, layers of color running parallel, beiges and purples and greys, distinct bands, and cracks run perpendicular in fluid channels across the layers, the rock has an oblong shape, almost triangular, smooth, and feldspar crystals glimmer in the shade of the canyon walls, and the rhyolite is in his hand, explosions from within the earth, lava flows cooling, millions and millions of years and somehow the old man knows this rock is wonderful, it is part of something wonderful

Feel this, his wife says

Give me your hand, she says

The canyon walls tighten into a steep climb and the old man is onward, his breath caught, he's poking his walking pole out in front of him through the narrow channel, he can see the scratches and marks where boulders have rolled past and scarred the walls,

layers of rock like bulging pancakes stacked upwards, walled in, and I'm an old man with my walking pole and my one good eye and my lungs are filled with cancer cells, coughing up blood, but I feel good, I'm sweating, the heat of the day is picking up and I'm sweating through my t-shirt around my neck and my arm pits, the silence fills up the space above the floor of the canyon but I'm moving and sweating and I'm waiting for the next bend, the next twist, where the view will open up, where a rock formation will catch my attention, an outcropping of rock with two holes, hollowed out, eroded like a pair of eyes, with two more holes underneath, smaller, like nostrils, this place of the skull, it will catch my attention and I'll denote a human skull carved into the slope of the canyon by winds and by rainwater, carved by nature, for man, for me, this place of the skull, this place of final resting

The boy is unnerved by the word, Golgotha

The young man walks into the room with his wife and the doctor has left, the nurses have left, his wife is asleep so he sits next to her in the hospital bed, in the hospital chair, he sits down and he looks over at his wife, her face is white, her eyes are closed, she's wearing a blue gown, the bedsheets are white, an IV-line is hooked up into her arm, night has fallen so the windows are dark and the room is quiet, and the young man is alone, he's alone with his thoughts, and the thought occurs to him, to pray for the soul of his child, for his daughter, because his wife had been correct, his wife's intuition proved true, their baby was a girl, a baby girl, their daughter, our baby, our little girl, ours, a girl unborn yet dead, her soul departed, a girl without a name, unnamed, and the young man begins to make the sign of the cross but he stops, he stops before he finishes on his left shoulder, his finger is in front of his chest and he refuses to finish, he refuses to pray to any power or force or entity who takes unnamed daughters from their mothers and fathers, the young man refuses, I'm finished, so he puts hands across his chest, he sits upright with the weight of his head on his shoulders, no longer concerned with the Blessed Mother or the Holy Trinity, to hell with it, it didn't do any good, nothing was here to help us, no ghosts of our mothers, no signs of the cross, we're alone, you're alone in this wilderness, you're stuck between the forces of fate and nature and random chance and what could you possibly hope for or believe in, we're alone on this globe of rock attached to a hapless star in an unremarkable section of an unremarkable galaxy amidst the dizzying expanse of

space and time, it's an accident, it's pure accident, nothing put us here, nothing cares about us, nothing is here to avail you, so why make absurd gestures and mutter incantations to a fiction contrived by delusional archbishops, adored by the weak and hopeless because what other hope could history offer them, a blind faith, an idiotic faith, don't be ridiculous

What's the use, he says

I'm done, he says

The old man's eye scans upward from the skull formation along a trail, it appears to be a trail, and a ledge, and behind the ledge is a panel, a flat surface, opposite the open face of the ledge, it appears to be a large panel, so it might be a place of interest, it could be a site where markings exist, so the old man sets his walking pole up from the canyon floor and onto the trail, the tops of the canyon stark against the blue of the sky, and the footing is loose, it's difficult trudging up the run of loose pebbles and sand, and jagged stones cut out from the ground, some quite large, but the old man is ascending a faint trail towards an area worth exploring, his heart is beating inside of his chest because he can't help but be excited by the potential of a discovery, even after all these years, the various sites and locations, the thrill persists, so with adrenaline coursing behind the old man he pushes himself upwards along the faint trail and ambles for a hundred yards or so until he makes the ledge

A service vehicle with a READING body customization, with heavy duty aluminum compartment doors, a white paint job chipped and worn by the desert wind, it's in the garage, it's been sitting finished up for weeks and the young man can't get hold of the owner, nobody picks up the phone, it was a state-owned service vehicle, a reliable truck, and the young man considered calling in to the Department of Public Works but I'd rather not cause any trouble, I'd hate for a guy to lose his job, so I'll wait, I'll wait, so a few more days pass until a woman shows up, she's wearing a tan leather jacket with tassels dangling along the hem lines from her shoulder to a pair of faded elbows, she's wearing turquoise earrings and a cool look like she'd been riding horseback all night and into the morning, the woman showed up to claim her husband's truck, because her husband had died, he'd died unexpected, recently, and she was his widow and I was a divorcee and we glanced at each other because we had nobody else in the world to look at or who might look at us, and I could tell, I could see it like I

once had seen it, how her eyes narrowed, how they told me I was an object of her desire, narrowing like a smile, shimmering, I felt the excitement stir up inside of me but as soon as it stirred up I pushed it back down, I let her go and she drove away in the truck to leave me lonesome, and I couldn't ever tell Ollie about the widow, I could never mention the woman in the leather jacket again, Ollie would never let me hear the end of it, even though if anyone should understand what it was to be an exile it would be Ollie

The young man places his hand on his wife, on top of his wife's belly, and the young man's fingers extend to spread out

Did you feel it, his wife asks him

Yes, he says

That was her, she says

She's saying hello to you, his wife says

Hello, the young man says

Nice to meet you, he says

The ledge is unremarkable, the outcropping might have been a place for hunters to wait on big game but nothing about the ledge indicates it held special interest for anyone, ever, in fact the old man might be the first human to ever make it so he pauses to look down from the ledge towards the next bend in the canyon, and the view is in front of the old man, he's looking out with his good eye and the heat of the day is gathering up strength, the sun is chasing after the old man from somewhere behind the rocks, and soon the old man is on his backside sliding down the faint trail, the old man has tied up two bandanas to protect each of his palms as he slides his way down the trail because he is tired and the trail is steep, too steep to walk down, because he doesn't trust his footing, lacking confidence in himself, even with how he felt this morning, with the life in his legs, the old man cannot ignore the heat of the day, angry and headed for him, to drain whatever life is left in him, rising up behind the rocks, a dread star which cannot be stopped, turning towards it

The boy repeats it to himself, the verse from Isaiah, Here I am, send me

Here I am, send me, says the boy

Next season, when the campgrounds open up for the winter, a father and son will be seated in fold-up chairs, next to a stove, an open fire pit, with a pair of long branches of desert driftwood sharpened at the end by the father's pocket knife, the father will teach his son how to sharpen the branch to a point, then how to

secure a marshmallow at the end, how to roast the marshmallow, patient, thoughtful above the coals of the fire, waiting for the color of the marshmallow to melt, a golden hue, sugar crackling and caramelizing, the father will remove the marshmallow from off the skewer by pinching it between two graham crackers, a Hershey chocolate, and his son will watch, excited, ready to enjoy a mouthful, the fire crackling, the zodiac above, and a tradition will have been passed on so something good will indeed have happened at **Section 10-T**

The sound of breathing, a struggle

The rapture of stone

Reading, silently, *A shaman typically has a special entrance into the Lowerworld, and this entrance exists in ordinary reality as well as in nonordinary reality, for example the entrance among California Indian shamans frequently was a spring*

The jungle taught me every lesson I ever remembered, Ollie says

What do you need books or professors for, Ollie says

The old man has made it back below the place of the skull, back to the canyon floor, he's lying on a bed of sandstone flakes, thin wedges of rock with crisp edges, sharp, deadly, visions of arrowheads and obsidian blades, layers of desert sand cemented together over eons, time and pressure, pressure and time and water, rough surfaces, less than a quarter inch thick, the old man sits upwards with his backside pressed down on a mound of death, he's done sliding down the trail and he's chuckling to himself, on the ground, laughing to himself, I'm an old man, it should have been a hospice bed, a daughter and a wife, morphine to ease the pain, it should have been milky lamplight and tender last words, picture albums, music on the radio, I should be leaving behind a lifetime of memories with people I loved, with a sadness to leave it behind, but the old man is chuckling, because of how much he enjoyed the rocks and the slide down the trail, because he feels like a boy, he's laughing then coughing, he coughs and then coughs in a fit, it could have been so different, everything could have been different, but what else could it be other than what it is, sliding down a canyon, exhausted, no legacy in my wake and the heat of the day upon me so I have no answer for any of it but to laugh myself into a fit

Coughing, and laughing

Brake pads worn thin

South, the sand dunes radiate under the stress of the sun, dappled crests peak above the desert floor while shadows disappear, they recede with the height of the sun, into a shadowless noonday, unforgiving, so it will be sidewinder rattlesnakes burrowing under pockets of mesquite trees, dormant, hungry for night, like ripples in the wind

I'm an old man who has lost his breath, exhausted, stagnant between the torpor of canyon walls, lying on his backside, useless, I'm done laughing and I've run out of energy, enervated by the heat from the rocks, the heat from the air, the heat from the sky, I'm inside a kiln, alone, with the life drained from out of me, a lifetime behind me, yet somehow any sense of regret has been purged from me, because the greatest loss would be not having lost, the pain of losing is the nature of our existence, this sad and beautiful disappearance, it is the essence of who we are and whatever put us here, and it is the purity of lost angels and their heavenly prayers which hold the world together, which allow for the living to go on, the ghosts of children who never grew up to name their favorite horses at Shady Grove Stables on the way to school in the morning pointing demonstrative fingers out the car window, to hold hands down the stairs to breakfast kitchens of browned butter and knock knock jokes, to flutter eyelashes and bedtime pages of pretty please just one more story, our lost angels, their prayers which afford us the grace to continue into the beautiful tragedy of what we are, today, this life of sublime heartache, I lost my angels and cried, and lived, now the coughing has stopped

We'll name her after our mothers, his wife says

We'll use both of their names, and they'll be part of her, and she'll be part of us, his wife says

The old man can hear the pulse of his veins inside of his ears, inside of his head, thumping, as if he were underwater, or underground, somehow inside an amphitheater with the outside world blocked out and only a baadump, baadump, and the heat is overwhelming and the pressure against the walls of his veins pulsing is overwhelming and this is it, so he forces himself up, onto his walking pole, up from the bed of jagged sandstone on the canyon floor

Tablesides at a diner, a pair of blue-plate specials, meatloaf and mashed potatoes and peas, where the boy asks his older brother a

question that has been on his mind, the boy asks his older brother when they might see their mother again
She's gone, says his brother, she's dead and she's never coming back, we're never seeing her again
What about heaven, asks the boy
There is no heaven, says his older brother, it's like Santa Claus, it's a lie
I believe, says the boy
Believing makes you a fool, says his brother
And his older brother's response is like a jolt of pain thrust into the side of the boy, the knife of his brother's words, because the boy loves his brother, he holds his brother in high esteem, his brother has watched out for the boy and taken care of him, his brother's love is all the boy has, and for his brother not to believe, it means his brother may end up in hell, his brother's soul will be commended to the mercy of the LORD, he may not be with his brother in eternity, united with their mother, with the Risen Son and the twelve apostles, with the saints through the ages, it means one day he will have to say goodbye to his brother forever, never to be with his brother again, and the pain is too much to measure or weigh, the pain is something terrible inside the boy because the boy knows somehow his brother will never change, his brother will never believe in heaven, he'll never believe in the body and blood, he'll never believe when the disciples met Jesus in Galilee, when Jesus appeared to them, resurrected, firstborn from the dead, it was a vision of light, so maybe we become like stars, no, no his brother would never believe in anything like that, his brother would go through life renouncing faith as a foolish crutch, the boy knows it, so he is at once heartbroken, he feels heartbroken to have lost his brother, but behind the heartbreak, underneath it, a subtle thought enters, a thought which stirs an even greater discomfort, a discomfort which stems from the possibility that the boy's older brother is right, what if he's right, and believing in heaven makes you a fool
How does that suit you, he asks Ollie
Right down to the ground, Ollie responds
When the old man first checked into the hospital, with his handkerchief stained by blood, when he passed out in his garage from exhaustion and couldn't lie to himself any longer, admitting to himself a sickness had entered inside of his body, something had gone wrong, as the old man was brought into an examination

room with a gown and a mechanical bed, as he was laying down with his eyes closed, he remembered the Maternity Ward, the cries of the other babies who had made it, the blood stained linens, the second-hand ticking from the clock on the wall, the nitrile gloves, he remembered pushing his wife in a wheelchair leaving the building and on their way out they passed by a photographer, a woman with a camera, a woman hired to take pictures of somebody else's newborn child

She never even took a breath, the young man says

She never opened her eyes, the young man says

Runes and ruins

Her Daddy is looking at her, his daughter, grown up, a woman he could have never imagined, she's no longer a toddler putting stickers on the kitchen table with a grin, she's no longer asking for a popsicle after dinner, no more bike rides, no more bedtime picture books, no more hunting between couch cushions for missing puzzle pieces, she was once a little girl, she once held little girl interests, but somehow the years have passed by, past, and now she's a woman standing in front of him, she's not a little girl, but the little girl is there, inside of this woman, so her Daddy reaches out to her, realizing the truth, he hugs his daughter
Ruins and runes

I love you, her father says

I always have, he says

The old man stands upright, as tall as he can manage, and the exhaustion of the day has worked its way through his body, so it isn't much left, whatever life in his legs and his shoulders is gone now and he's worn down, worn thin, he's looking up into the canyon and what sense is it to continue on, what's the point, why are you here, what are you looking for, when you ought to go home, to lay down and die in your bedroom, put Ollie's gun up next to your temple, end it in peace, because the hole has been here all along, in front of you, next to you, you had never escaped it or covered it up or left it behind, Ollie was right, forgetting is impossible, it was with you through the years, she was with you, from the AL Quinones to your research at the university, hasn't it been your secret hope to find a way through it, to make sense of the hole, because you still haven't learned, you still haven't accepted the truth, have you, the truth that your older brother was right at the Blue Line Diner that evening in February, remember when he told you heaven was a lie, religion was a lie, mom was

dead and dad wasn't far behind and the two of you were sharing a meal because your brother had a job running errands for a neighborhood wiseguy so he took care of you, your older brother, he tried to explain to you the truth and you couldn't believe it then and you still couldn't let it go after all these years but enough is enough and I'm ready

The young man watches his wife plug a night-light into the wall, near the crib with the rotating mobile

So she isn't afraid, his wife says

I don't want her to be scared, she says

The boy finds himself on top of one of his classmates, one of the kids who had been calling him names, who had been knocking over his books, until enough was enough, the boy is swinging his fists, vicious, left hand, right hand, pummeling his classmate in the face and in the chest and the other children surround them in the hallway until a teacher pulls the boy from off his wounded opponent

Bad tiger, the little girl says

You had a nightmare, her Daddy says

Scary, the little girl says

The boy's older brother is responding to the principal, explaining how their father has to work, their old man doesn't have time for principal's offices, their family is barely scraping by, then the boy's older brother asks what about the other kid, wasn't that kid picking on my brother, didn't he knock over my little brother's books in the hallway, didn't he call my little brother names, and the principal doesn't say a word so the boy's older brother calmly tells the principal where I come from, you know, where I come from, when somebody is ganging up on somebody else and then all of a sudden they catch a punch and then cower to the ground and whine like a baby, that makes it so they deserved the whooping they got and makes it so probably they ought to catch another one, I don't know about where you come from but where I come from, where I come from, my little brother here was in the right for whooping on his classmate, and if that classmate doesn't learn to shut his goddamn mouth and mind his own goddamn business he's going to have to watch his back for me, because I'm going to be the one who gives him a whooping next time, I'm going to be the one to catch him and give it to him, and I'm not going to do it in a school, I'm not going to do it where some lousy teacher can save him, no, I'm going to do it out on the street, I'm going to do it where nobody can help

him, and when it happens, that little sonovabitch is going to wish he was never born

Bad tiger, the little girl says

It was a dream, it's not real honey, her Daddy explains

The little girl kisses her Daddy

Daddy kisses his little girl

I'm an old man staggering up an isolated canyon in the back country, I'm in the wilderness, in the fires of a desert, confined by rocks and sand and jagged lines, monoliths of colors like the color of sand and the color of salt and the color of wind, I'm forcing myself forward with each footstep, my walking pole, I'm trudging ahead and the sweat is done, I'm not sweating anymore, it's done pooling up at the corners of my body, my tired, old body, instead it's a chill and I'm shaking, I'm shivering, I'm an old man shivering and I'm up ahead one more turn, another bend, I notice aplite veins in the rock reflected in sunlight aglow and otherworldly, fine grains of quartz and feldspar sparkle like star dust, iridescent almost, and it's beautiful, below the scorched blue of the sky, the skies of heaven, the skies of hell, and it's the vein of aplite where my eye catches a slot, a cut into the main formation of stone, an opening, with a boulder in front of it, a large boulder blocking a false canyon, so I'm curious and excited and determined, an old man is determined, he's forcing himself behind the boulder, a large boulder, into a false canyon, he couldn't scramble up and over the boulder so he was determined to fit himself through the gap between the wall of the canyon and the rock, the pile of rocks, a pile of large stones, like a cave with the boulders forming a kind of roof, it opened up somehow, as he crawled inside, panting, wider than the canyon walls, he's into the structure and somehow it has opened up beyond the walls of the false canyon, the old man is inside so he pulls out his headlamp from a pocket in his pants and flips on the light, he draws a sepulchral breath, he is caked in sand and dirt so he removes his bandana from his pocket to pat himself and after finding a comfortable position on the floor of the cave he notes a series of indentations in the walls, markings, like holes, little holes marked into the walls with carved circles around the holes, figures with legs and a neck and arms protruding from the circular forms, vulvas and bellies and torsos, he understands the markings as symbolic, representing women giving birth, life, fertility, the

light slowly passes from one figure to the next, the old man with his headlamp

A little boy's older brother squeezes his shoulder

The young man's wife is holding his hand, their fingers intertwined, after she's introduced him to his daughter

The darkness of the cave encircles the old man who falls into a silence inside himself, he's seen the carvings, sketched them into his notebook, and the headlamp is shut off

And the silence is a scream, a woman screaming

The silence is a bicycle bell

Tires on a gravel road

A rattlesnake in its den

The wind fulsome in your ears

A crackling cigarette, rolled then lit

A freedom, free from my coyote's burden, up near the rim of the crater, surrounded by wildflowers, ephemerals, once dormant seeds now burst into bloom, out from a sea of black rock, the white Mojave desertstars against the volcanic gravel, the contrast, their bright centers of yellow pollen, the stark contrast of a thing so beautiful in a place so harsh, I'm on a ridgeline with pebbles and desertstars against my back because the drought has ended, the rainfall of January has unlocked the life of March and April, spring, I'm heavenward lying on my back in a miracle of color, of fragrance, sphinx moth caterpillars coiling and uncoiling then a girl laughs, it's her, she's somewhere nearby laughing, a brilliant sky with lazy cumulous overhead, I'm looking up, and my vision is perfect, both my eyes are open, good eyes, clear, my glass eye is no longer made of glass it's made of tissue and alive so the photons excite my brain and I am gazing heavenwards with both my eyes open blinking to feel the moisture and the life of my vision, flowers surround me, the perfume of blossoms, and my daughter is laughing, she's here with me, so I raise my neck up from off the volcanic gravel and the mountains are to the east and the mountains are to the west, and she is running, she runs towards me, her blue eyes, like her mother's