

TRUST THE MAN IN PIECES

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University-San Marcos  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of FINE ARTS

by

John F.K. Wagner, B.A.

San Marcos, Texas  
May 2008

TRUST THE MAN IN PIECES

Committee Members Approved:

---

Debra Monroe, Chair

---

Nelly Rosario

---

Robert T. Tally, Jr.

Approved:

---

J. Michael Willoughby  
Dean of the Graduate College

**COPYRIGHT**

by

John F.K. Wagner

2008

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to those that let me into this place and provided me a small salary on top of the admission. Thanks to Texas State University-San Marcos for having Christmas lights permanently affixed to one of the tallest buildings on campus, for green-form fiascos, and for health insurance with the finest of exclusions. Thanks to the state of Texas for making tuition remission illegal. Thank you San Marcos for putting up with Texas State University-San Marcos and its students, for creating Craddock and Sagewood, and for keeping the automobile king.

Thank you Tantra, you San Marcos jewel, for the lattes, electricity, and good cheer.

For their invaluable guidance and criticism, many thanks to my committee members, Debra Monroe, Nelly Rosario, and Robert T. Tally, Jr.. While many found misery and awkward silence in the Defense, we found joy. Thanks again to Debra and Nelly, for workshop and friendship. To my friends—you know who you are, right, Saurabh?—I love you, even if I don't call.

Thank you, Tim O'Brien, for giving pieces of yourself to start fires.

Thank you, Mom, Dad, Danny, Scotty, Coleman, Corey, Tom, and all my family living and dead. I love you.

Thank you to anyone unmentioned. Sure, even you.

And thank you, Amanda, for patience, grace, and love. I owe you more than I owe the government, and I can't wait to start paying you back.

This manuscript was submitted on April 4, 2008.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
A Little Red Meat .....	1
Eyo On the Mountain.....	14
Birds of the Heart.....	35
A Strong Hand .....	65
Be Gone .....	77
The Second Coming of Gerald .....	106
Sowing Ash.....	123

## A Little Red Meat

Geraldine, glad to be out even in the gray snow, fidgeted in the seat, waiting in the driveway of the home for a caretaker to put Stewart into the car. He didn't look at his wife when they wheeled him out, a dull blue crocheted—maybe torn—blanket over his legs and the sharp December wind playing with his hair. The caretakers helped very little, putting Stewart into the car. He'd done quite a bit of the work and as they drove each breath of his was small and tired. Once they got to the restaurant and the tea arrived he would perk up. Stewart's right cheek was bruised and she would ask him about it once they had the sandwiches. On an empty stomach Stew could be short. Of course it might be news to him, the bruise. High on his cheekbone like he'd slept on a rock last night. Or two nights ago.

The two sat down to a late lunch at their usual place. It was nearly evening. Heavy flakes of snow fell, wet. In the parking lot a man hurried around the back end of his sedan and opened an umbrella to keep the thick stuff from falling on his wife. Stewart looked worn. Getting him into the seat from his wheelchair took real effort. But it was Saturday and they were going to get rich on prime rib sandwiches like always—last weekend the exception. One pound of thinly sliced, medium rare beef stuck between two pieces of white toast humbly dressed with a slather of mayonnaise and two rounds of a Roma tomato. Geraldine felt comfortable in the soft, bright booth. A gray, green, and pearl silk scarf hung over the opening of her white blouse, wildflowers embroidered on

the breast pockets. Her stomach growled softly, anticipating the meat. She slipped the heel of one foot in and out of its navy pump. The other patrons rustled up a low, even noise like an accompaniment. Geraldine's black pants squeezed her upright on the bench seat, but they fit nicely. For an old woman, she had a remarkable figure and she deserved a big red-meat sandwich dripping with mayo once a week.

Stewart's bruise was deep and ugly, like some bile spit had dried upon his cheek. She knew she'd taken better care of Stewart at their home. That was obvious, and neither of them was yet accustomed to the particular loneliness of separation. All the same, Geraldine had shopping to do. Toilet paper, carrots, sliced turkey, a half dozen eggs and a carton of milk. Maybe something else. It was like that these last few weeks. Shopping alone was nothing new. Buying groceries for one was effortless. But Geraldine always felt herself forgetting something. Her cart seemed empty. She needed so little.

Stewart looked down at the table. He leaned his chest against its edge.

Snacks. She would make dried apples for Stewart. Take them to him later in the week. She would have to get the box fan from the basement to dry the fruit.

The waitress smiled brightly at them with her young teeth. She bounced her round hips side to side and pressed together her lips, ripe with blood, as she took their order. How cute, Geraldine thought. What lovely blonde curls. The waitress was beautiful, warm and fluid despite the gray and blowing cold outside. Geraldine smiled at Stew but he wasn't looking at anything but the blue table, the seat covered in a mustard yellow vinyl. He seemed dull against such a color. American mustard. The kind Stew likes on his sandwiches and always gets on his shirts. There was a faded, brown round of it below the collar button of the one he was wearing.

“What?” Stewart said.

“Food’ll be here in a minute,” Geraldine said. Stewart needed a little comfort.

“Goddamnit,” he grumbled.

“Sometimes I think I’m hearing things,” he said, real low.

She’d delayed for a long time moving him out of the house he built, a long rectangle, the master flared and opening onto the deck at the west side. Arms under his shoulders, she carried as much of him as she could, for miles back and forth across the house over the past year. Every day from the bed to the toilet. Toilet to the shower. Shower to the bed. Briefs, undershirt, socks, pants, belt, and button up. Shoes. Bed to his television chair. Breakfast. Chair to the bathroom. Bathroom to the card table, the telephone, the files. Back to bed. Shoes and belt. A nap. He’d been killing her.

She found herself wandering the house the last few weeks following the old routine, a lightness about her arms and shoulders, her back free of his weight. He’d fallen once and pulled her down. She thought that was it, a sharp pain in her back. She thought that would be her price, and that Stewart would not rise.

This morning she fingered the keys of the piano, the car keys ringing in her other hand.

A little red meat would open Stew up to talking. Geraldine felt emotional in the silence. If she was after silence, she’d have stayed at home. This was worse than Stewart’s years in the Army, off who knows where inventing secrets. He’d been phone calls. He would tell her that he missed her cooking, that the Army couldn’t hold a candle to Geraldine in the kitchen. Her stomach growled, hungry, impatiently turning on itself. Geraldine reached across the table and put the tips of her fingers to Stewart’s shirtsleeve.

The food arrived and Stew stared at it, a thing in front of him. This stubbornness bothered Geraldine. It was what landed him in the home. Stewart wanted to go downstairs, demanded it. And did.

She could not eat unless he ate, she would not. She slid over to his side of the booth, placed a napkin in her husband's shirt, and lifted half the sandwich to his mouth, touching his lips. He opened and slowly bit down, the breaking crust sounded like a step on a gravel path. A tomato slice fell from the back of the sandwich and plopped down on the plate. Stew grunted softly and turned his head away from Geraldine. "You want more?" she said. Stewart turned his head a couple of times. "You have to eat, Stew. A little protein'll do you good." He pulled himself away from the table and leaned back.

When Stewart fell he'd pulled so hard on Geraldine's arm she had to let go of him. She thought she was going to be sick. Watching him fall tore at her stomach so badly she'd wished she'd held on to him. She thought there would be blood. She was helpless to stop the mess. The wood paneling cracked when his shoulder hit the wall. She wished he'd broken an arm, and she wished she understood why he could fall down a half flight of stairs so easily.

Stewart said something that Geraldine couldn't make out. He felt better already, she thought, and picked up a potato chip and touched it to Stew's lips. He pulled back, tasted the salt, and then took it. She would feed him if he needed, which he did. "See." Thirty years and she knew what he needed. He produced a cough so that she knew he didn't like his cough. That he wanted to be well and that this might be the last time they sat together in the restaurant. His jaw sagged like a flat tire. His eyes were empty like

the winter fields washed of their crops by the cold and vapid season, though they had not aged. They were bright, a crisp and marbled blue. “Eat, Stewart.”

Thirty years and he’d never left even a single crumb of Geraldine’s cooking on a plate. Geraldine always joked that they could have built their house from all the cobs Stewart had cleared of kernels. And a couple of years ago he’d started building—just building—walls of corn cobs in the back yard. He measured an ear after dinner one night, drew up plans, made a materials estimate, and told Geraldine to buy corn of uniform size. A good size. The work was fast. He happily ate a dozen ears of corn a day until he got sick and his skull filled with fluid.

In the hospital, Geraldine’s husband grew old right in front of her. Stewart could not contend with his body. Doctors drained his head by a shunt, the burnt orange stuff collecting in a bag beside his bed. Four gray walls, each two cobs thick, of Stewart’s structure stood in the back yard near the fence. A doorway in one wall faced the house.

The waitress brought the check and said to Geraldine, “You haven’t eaten a thing, sweetheart.” Neither had Stewart. Geraldine smiled at her. The girl had lost some of her charm and smelled of cigarettes. The odor still sickened Geraldine, more than a decade after her heart attack—sixteen years, actually. One moment she was smoking, her slippered feet in the snow on the back deck, the next she was on her side, sick, heart hacking at the inside of her chest, the icy snow burning her ear.

Geraldine looked at her husband. She thought about that word, *husband*. How ferociously she’d loved Stewart after her attack. A small slice of her ear had been removed, blackened by the ice. And here was her husband, retreated from her.

The waitress's teeth weren't as white as earlier, her lips blue and spotted, and she smelled. "Is there anything else you need?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

The tires spun when Geraldine put her foot to the gas trying to pull onto the road. Slowly the little Oldsmobile found a steady place in the snowy left lane. Geraldine shook with the cold. An exhaust smell blew from the vents and choked her a little. Stewart was still. He looked out across the empty university baseball field. The grass was green and fresh in the middle of winter, heated and watered from below. Stewart used to run on about the engineering of it when they'd drive by. He was silent now and she thought about dancing with him at her son's wedding in Florida all those years ago. He'd made her so happy then, in the spring sun, straight and tall in his tuxedo. They were the only couple dancing, close and spinning. Stewart only lasted a few numbers but she was tingling drunk and had the time of her life at sixty-three years old, her heart renewed.

Stewart grumbled in the passenger seat. His hair was a mess and Geraldine reached over to smooth it with one of her gloved hands.

Put on your seatbelt, she was about to say, feeling the words rise wifely and motherly in her throat. Stewart looked over to her with a thin, soft smile on his face, the cool flesh of his jowls raised slightly. He was not responding to her touch. Geraldine took no comfort in his smile, in his sharing evidence of some internal epiphany he may have had while looking out the window. It was another secret he teased her with. A memory of his past, of his career, could lift the age off his face. She knew almost nothing about this part of his life.

New snow began to fall lightly. Geraldine turned on the wipers and they squeaked across the windshield.

There was a box in his dresser full of military pins. Medals he'd carried for sixty years, tarnished and scratched from neglect. Geraldine never went through his things until he'd been moved into the home. They'd maintained a certain distance always. And now, when they were together, she felt him dangle their separation in front of her. Weeks ago he couldn't make it to the toilet alone and he mocked her here. The work she put into their marriage left unreturned.

"You think you're pretty funny," she said, squeezing the steering wheel.

He grunted.

"I miss you," she said.

"I loved a Jap woman when I was twenty-two," Stewart said.

He kept looking out the window. Geraldine thought that maybe he sensed she wanted him dead. She thought about it. She had thought about it. She turned the heat down to a cool draft.

Geraldine felt a teasing, Stewart silently trying for her to admit that he cost her. He gave all their money to a best friend, a connected man, to have models and prototypes of a plastic surgical screw drawn up, manufactured, pitched, and sold. Stewart's invention was good. It was a surprise, Stewart had told Geraldine. The friend promised them. But her husband had invested with a man who'd defrauded them, and she had swallowed it hard and kept quiet. Stewart's secrecy was unspeakable. She decided what they would and would not talk about. The bills could not be paid and she shortened phone calls from creditors' with 'Sorry, he's passed.'

“A world away,” he said.

“There’s this world, too,” she said.

“A dumb kid soldiering with a rifle and a goddamned dumb hat.”

“You worked in a lab.”

Geraldine did not want him to hang on. She’d pictured that he would walk her out to the middle of a frozen lake, tell her that the hollow claps of thunder in the ice were beautiful, and an eye would open in the surface under their feet, she would descend.

When the shunt came out, his skin color returned, energy and affection, too, but that’s to be expected when a person has a tube removed from his brain. Geraldine stowed that memory of his healthy flesh because she knew it would not last. The doctor had said so, but not to Stewart. And she would not spoil good feeling by saying what Stewart must have already known: that the cheer would run out.

“I don’t think I loved anyone like I loved my first wife,” Stewart said. His head rolled in Geraldine’s direction.

She heard a ringing in her ears and a burning in her throat. She laughed hard, short. Her eyes felt like they were freezing from the back forward.

“We had two wonderful children,” he said.

They hate you, she wanted to say, snow falling in a flurry, and Geraldine turned the speed up on the wipers. They *hate* you.

“I hate not driving my car,” he said, and he patted the center console with his hand. His breathing was strong and forced. Stewart tried to move in his seat. He pulled at the belt across his chest.

Geraldine didn't speak, held back that he could not drive, that he'd ended up in a ditch last time, and the time before, and that his son would not pull him out again. His son would not tell his father this. She tempered this information.

"I know damn well what I can and can't do."

Geraldine's stomach growled again. She hadn't eaten anything at lunch and could see the foil wrapped sandwich in the back seat. The grocery was just a block down the road. She hated that Stewart always hid his panic, his body so worn and tired. Geraldine wanted him to acknowledge that he was dying, to voice some loss. He was a lot closer now than a few weeks ago at the top of the stairs. She wanted him to tell her something to save the memory of their marriage—to end it properly.

She pulled into the grocery store parking lot, deep with new snow yellowed by the lights overhead. She parked near the back and thought to get her shopping done quickly and return Stewart to the home before the roads became too bad.

She said, "When I come back you better have something good to say to me." His face was turned out towards the street dotted with evening traffic. She hesitated in her seat, looking at him. She'd taken good care of him.

"Run the heater if you're cold," she said and checked his seatbelt.

She left the car running and walked into the store. She looked through the front window. He was just sitting there, watching traffic. She pulled a cart from the bunch inside the door. Geraldine needed her staples, things from which she could make nearly anything.

She turned up the aisle of canned goods. Almost nothing good comes in a can. Mixed fruit in syrup. She turned it in her hand. Just stuff. There was a report on the news about the syrup. She'd give him a few minutes, good ones, and get back to him.

There was nothing in her cart, and the routine was clear to her then. She knew these aisles so well. Another store might be the end of her. She might tire before finishing her list, collapse again, and it would not be her fault.

At the end of the canned goods were eggs and milk in a long cooler. She took a half dozen of one and a half gallon of the other. The scent of sweet dough played in her nose and she strolled over an aisle to the bakery. Behind the display glass were rows of shining, glazed doughnuts, cheese and fruit Danishes, cookies, loaves of bread. A boy pulled a tray of long-shaped pastries from the oven and placed it in a cooling rack. Sweets always made her feel guilty. She'd have one. She took off her red gloves. From the case, Geraldine pulled an iced doughnut filled with bright red raspberry goop. Without a tissue, the sweetness already stuck to her fingers. She'd eat it, then grab her meat and veggies. Piercing the chocolate glazed skin of the doughnut and feeling the cooled fruit filling on her tongue made her want to kill Stewart. Quarter him like a chicken. Put the pieces in bags like they were to be battered. For both of them, get it over. A last favor.

An old woman at the end of the aisle handed out sausage samples from a crockpot. Geraldine giggled at the woman's fat hands. She could cut them off and put them in the crock until the meat fell from the bones—the doughnut tasted so good. The sausage smelled sharp and decayed. A child reached for a little plastic cup, a colored toothpick sticking out. Stewart would have liked that sausage with eggs, but he was not

the shopper. Geraldine didn't know if he'd ever been in the grocery. She'd made these decisions, dished out little punishments and rewards this way.

Geraldine wiped a drop of raspberry from the corner of her mouth and licked the sweet finger clean.

She went to the meat aisle.

Chicken thighs. Shoulder roast, too. She would make chicken for herself and the roast for Stewart. She pulled a pound of each from the cooler and dropped them into her cart. They could eat at the facility. There was a nice dining room overlooking the frozen pond. Or the beef would make a nice stew, but would likely end up on Stewart's shirt front.

Geraldine turned the corner and gathered up some loose carrots, broccoli florets, a tomato, and two potatoes. Asparagus, she thought. It's possible. Why not? There was a sugary film on her lips.

In the checkout aisle, she laughed at herself for thinking about killing Stewart. Hopefully he'd speak some memory, mention the dancing. Even watching her dance with another man. Just that he'd watched. Everything could be fine.

"Hi," said the girl at the register, shallow beeps counting off Geraldine's items. The girl's hay-colored hair, pulled tight up front by a pink plastic headband, fell to her shoulders. She had full eyes, their shade and pattern like the heart of kiwi. Her name was stitched across the right breast of her red collared shirt, *Angie*. Dark spots scattered over the fabric. The cashier didn't belong here, Geraldine thought. She wasn't made to stand behind that machine all day picking up stains and listening to these droning electronic ticks. Seeing the girl turn the tomato looking for the sticker, Geraldine noticed

how tender her hands were. How gently the tomato rode on her fingertips. The girl would be so lovely on a piano bench, her mother and father, a new boyfriend, all in the room admiring her.

“Do you play the piano?” she asked the girl.

“Is everything all right, ma’am?”

“Quite,” she said. A cold draught of air blew in from the opening door.

“Is there anything else you need?” Very cashier.

Geraldine shook her head, wrote out a check and handed it to the girl, pulled on her red gloves, adjusted her coat around her neck, and picked up her two bags. She paused at the door, bracing herself for the cold, for her husband.

Snow came down hard—sun below the bank across the street. When the door slid open in front of her, a stinging wind blew sharp white crystals against her cheeks. She lowered her head. A diesel plow truck was grinding its way around the lot, an inch already on the pavement. She stepped slowly, wishing she’d parked a little closer as a sliver of wind found its way into her coat. The plow seemed to follow her, getting closer with each tearing pass. She looked up. Snow covered her windows, but had been cleared from around her car. Passing in front of her, the gray haired plowman tipped a hat he wasn’t wearing to her and smiled. Flattery *now*, she thought, a gesture that would have driven the blood to her cheeks twenty years ago.

She pulled the handle to the back door and it popped open. The light came on inside. Bending down to put in her bags, she saw that Stewart was gone. Her sandwich was still on the seat. She walked to the other side of the car. The plow passed again. No footprints. The car wasn’t running. She lifted herself to the balls of her feet and looked

for Stewart, any sign. Her breaths were full and fast, colored amber by the parking lot lights. She was cold.

Geraldine walked back around and got in. She put her fingers to the keys and they sounded like the wind chimes outside her kitchen door. There would be phone calls to make. It was still early. The city was dark and flat, snow being scraped away and piling up again. The home expected Stewart by eight. She turned the key and the lukewarm air made her sick. Geraldine sat there thinking. The radio clock read six twenty-seven. She would call from home. The police first and then the home. She could circle the parking lot and look for footprints. How much time passes before someone disappears? Already she felt like she'd been waiting a long time.

## Eyo On the Mountain

We're out of Lawton, another day teaching months away, and the three of us are high. Stew is worked over pretty good by the pot. He and Ana sit in folding chairs with empty dinner plates in their laps. To cook for people was nice, but as I learned from my mother, the cook eats last. Tethered to a leg of the chair is Stew's dog, which has eaten my dinner, my twenty-five dollar celebratory steak. Next to us is a picnic table on a covered concrete pad, which would have been a much better anchor for Eyo. That's its name—two infant sounds. Though calm, the dog is a larger presence than Stew, and, if my analysis is correct, Stew does not correct pooch because it misbehaves the way Stewart would like to. Humping is one of these behaviors, as we and an adolescent androgyne learned in the parking lot of a Marathon, Texas grocery where Stew stopped for candy.

He can't get a thought out. "I think—" he keeps saying. "Guys, uh—I..."

"Who are you, Stew?" I ask seriously. I don't know either of my colleagues well. I know half-truths, arrows I could sling at their hearts and end this thing.

But we are the newest hires, the youth in the department—same small team, not one of us an Okie. Stewart is quiet and shy. One of the secretaries thinks he needs to be rescued by a good woman because he's been emotionally battered by a bad one. He also likes sweets too much. Staff and faculty begrudge Ana her good looks, and I suppose the same treatment comes my way every now and again. Which is not to say I'm interested

in her, or that I was or was not at some point. We have been out to lunch a few times, so we are beyond chit-chat, banter about newly instituted copy room policies, nods, rumors. There was that kiss. Regardless, I want to keep some distance between us. There are things I don't want to know about coworkers, situations I don't need to entrench myself in because of limited options. I can live off past rain. I've developed my defenses, barbs I wear like a cactus. Without them, I'd be where I was a year ago in graduate school, scared of losing the offer of a tenure-track job in Lawton because of a woman in a class titled "Grief during Reconstruction." We both taught undergraduates and got on well, naturally, by being single and attractive in a doctoral program. The sex was almost inevitable, but it was not the crossing of stars. I felt for her, but of course that didn't make a bit of difference. The professor of the course knew and was sympathetic to my situation. "Learn that you don't shit where you eat," he'd said, and then let me finish the course by correspondence. "Avoidance is sometimes best."

In Lawton, I already feel too pretty for my job, to have my face behind books and computer screens, to have consequences as friends. We are here in the west of Texas, partly, because I broke this code by speaking of something interesting at the department's year-end party—a camping trip to reorient my compass, sublimate, and distance myself from aging professors whose wrinkles are fissures of lost time and isolation.

"I—that's, well—you know that's, uh..."

Stewart is what I am trying to get away from. He settled into the smallest office in the building. He is not part of the department. He fixes computers and relies on the kindness of others for interaction.

Ana is very kind. She has a cat named Molly.

With my knife, I cut and eat a raw onion. The sensation is to my mouth what a little lemon juice is to the eyes, a refreshing pain. Pooch also stepped on my lunch, a chicken sandwich, in Fort Stockton.

Yet I could not have eaten the whole steak. This is karmic. I should not have bought a twenty-five dollar t-bone. I should not have bought a house and settled in so easily, painted it, planted annuals and bought lawn mower—those silly romances of poverty. But there was romance.

I should not have talked about this trip at work. And maybe picking Big Bend after looking through a photoblog was a bad way of making a decision. One photograph of a tree, though, a specific tree at the edge of a cliff overlooking the Chihuahan desert, convinced me to come. There was a spirit to the place that's missing from my life but is also not at this campground.

The day's light is minutes from gone and fading are the evening wind and shadows. Soft brays that began in the distance grow closer, and if I close my eyes I hear a nightmare. Mules scream like dogs left out in suburban backyards on a freezing night.

Two silver-headed camp rangers, one male, one female, pull up to our site in a golf cart equipped with headlights. Eyo opens his drooling mouth, darts at them, then pops into the air and onto its back when the leash runs out. Stew's chair comes out from under him, but he grabs hold of the line and reins Eyo in.

“Eyo,” he coos.

An orderly looking woman holding a clipboard clicks on a flashlight and sets her black boots to the ground. Her partner distends into her seat. I pocket my knife. Stew tenses. That's funny. The man seems very kingly. His tan uniform shirt is untucked,

and I wonder if he's trying to suggest that the woman's age, uniform, and procedure belie that she is a submissive slut on the cart and he's got hard proof.

Generators click on, buzz like the white noise of televisions around us. A full moon is coming.

"Your hieness," I say. "Sire." The man nods.

The woman turns her flashlight on Stew. "That typical behavior for the animal?"

"Well," Stew says. "I, uh—" He chuckles and the woman stares at him for a moment.

"Sad lookin' mutt," says her man. "Black shepard?"

"Black something," Ana says.

"A free spirit." The anti-Stew.

"Meeyo," Stew says quietly, a hand over his eyes. "Oh..."

"Chicken sandwich," I say, and Ana looks at me like I'm a bully.

"Y'all're here for one night," the woman says, puts her light under her left arm and writes something on her clipboard.

Ana shifts in her chair because the woman has made a mistake. "Excuse me," she says. "I think, actually, that we're here for two nights." This I do not like about Ana. She disrupts a natural order for a more comfortable one, without misunderstanding. Like all mediators, she cannot let things be.

"Here're the rules," Ranger Jane says, "no loud noise, no illegal substances, no dogs where cars can't go. Understand?" We nod. "Here're tips to keep you safe: no illegal substances, no dogs where cars can't go, no food left out. There are the lockers." She points to a steel box behind the picnic table. "Javelina'll come through here like a

tornado you don't use those boxes. And they can and will kill. Maybe not you, but that dog won't stand a chance." She returns to the cart. I think about the dog, beast-mauled and locked in the food box by a Javelina. For safety, I imagine the Javelina saying.

The mules call out sharply and the man on the golf cart lets out a tearing scream. Everyone looks at him and he smiles, says, "Like to get them back once and a while."

A breeze stirs the leaves of the low oaks.

The man sucks himself up and puts his arm around his girl. "Keep a leash on the dog," the woman says with her light trained on Stew. "Keep it off the trails. No dogs where cars can't go. Checkout's at nine." She has taken a stern tone, which annoys me, but I'm sure it helps her. The man starts the small motor and drives their lights down the road, gravel crunching under the cart's tires.

Our camp is dark again. I envy that couple. They are disgusting, overweight campground chaperones, happy and sexed, concerned only with the park.

"What was that about Javelinas?" Ana asks. "What's a Javelina?"

"Like an American Tasmanian devil," I say.

"Oh—" Stew says, petting the dog.

Ana gets up and puts on a head lamp. "We have to clean." She moves a bag of groceries from next to me on the picnic bench. Under the bag is a faded paper sign covered in plastic and screwed into the wood. *Beware of Javelinas*, it reads. There are also Javelina factoids and suggestions for safe camping.

"Beware of Javelinas," I say. *Careful what you take to bed!* someone has written on the sign. I laugh at this.

“Stew, you don’t leave Eyo out when you go to sleep.” Stew’s face is cupped in his hands.

“‘Brutal curiosity,’ it says. ‘Great noses, bad eyes, strong odor’—You know, how do animals with great senses of smell not hate themselves? And someone wrote ‘no conscience whatsoever, naturally destructive.’ That’s interesting. That’s what I came for.”

Ana shudders. “Not me. Brutality is not what I came for. Peace and quiet. Decompression. Friendship,” she says, throwing her arms up and thrashing at the air in big circles. “Not brutality. Where’s the trash bag?”

“You dead, Stewart?” I ask.

“Yeah-yeah. Just I, uh. What kind of pot. You know. I’m feeling...that was a lot. I’m very—I don’t know how to say how I feel. My thoughts—the animals. Eyo.”

I am still hungry and the chorus of mules is maddening. There is no variation in their tones, and each bray is a report of this damn dog’s name. Ee-yo! Ee-yo!

“Insulated self-awareness can be dangerous,” I say. “Take the lid off, Stew.”

He laughs and shakes his head.

“Leave him alone. He’s wasted.” Ana opens a garbage bag and starts to fill it with scraps of food, paper, and plastic, looking strangely at the items as she goes.

“I just want to help,” I say. “If something’s bothering him, he should talk about it. Right? You know, Stew, you’re going to have to put some effort into this relationship for it to work.” This was an arrow, a low blow. His now-ex said this to him the last time they talked. Ana told me the last time we had lunch together. I wasn’t surprised at all.

Stewart is willing to be a doormat. The woman cheated and then blamed Stew for not talking to her enough.

“You’re being a prick,” Ana says.

“Stewart can defend himself.”

“I shouldn’t have to.” The reply surprises me because it’s a reply, in sentence form. It makes sense.

“Yes!” I say. This is a different Stew than the one didn’t stop his dog from eating my dinner while I was pissing, worrying a snake would strike the head of my penis. A phallus hemorrhaging from snakebite, venom burning as I listen to mules crying out for fertility. The idea puts a tingle of fear in the small prairie between my legs. I am staring at the moon in front of me with a sharp, dry taste in my mouth. Maybe Stew enjoyed watching that mutt eat my dinner.

“Help me clean,” Ana says. Stewart does not get up. He pets the dog.

We tidy up more thoroughly than I think is necessary, but I don’t say so. I stop wiping off the table and look at Stew. A bray catches Eyo’s attention, and he howls back. Stewart calms him; his love is a sickness. He keeps moving his hand over the animal. Ana is finished, and she ties up the trash bag and sets it on the table I’ve just cleaned. We put our food in the locker. I laugh thinking again about Stew’s dark dog in there.

“These donkeys are driving me nutso,” I say.

Ana laughs. “They’re better than the generators.”

“A mechanical death is one I’m prepared for. I expect to die vehicularly. Those mules sound like they each have a hoof in a meat grinder.”

There is silence for a moment. “That was disgusting.” Ana stands in front of me with her arms crossed. “I want something sweet,” she says running her palms over her biceps. “Doesn’t anyone else?”

“Too much sugar,” Stew says, patting his stomach.

“You’re clearing up,” I say. He nods slowly.

Generators click off, then back on, purring. String lights and bug-zappers around RV patios give our site an impoverished glow. We have turned blue with the opening of the night sky, and I am waiting for someone to say something about the universe or the fat man watching us and smoking a cigarette, but no one speaks. Ana rubs her arms.

Over the low hum of diesel motors, I can hear my heart beat, bored. “Why are you standing up?” I ask Ana.

“I don’t know.” She pulls up small arcs of skin on her forearm by the hair.

The food is put away and I am hungry and will have a temper in the morning unless I eat.

“Wine,” Ana says.

“I can’t,” Stew says. “Brain’s melted. Stomach hurts.”

Ana goes to get a bottle from the Jeep. The dome light comes on when she opens the door and her leg sticks out as she pokes around the back seat for the booze. “Why’d your brain melt, man?”

“Chemicals. You.” Stew adjusts himself in the chair.

“You were weird.”

“I already feel ashamed; I don’t need interrogation.”

“Friends ask questions, Stew,” I say, “that’s it, a question.”

Stew looks at me, maybe for the first time all day. “Sounds like an accusation.”

“It would be an accusation if I inquired about your candy eating.”

“What are you two talking about?” Ana asks, the bottle of red and a corkscrew in her hand.

“Self defense,” I say. “Stewart’s practicing.”

“Well, let’s do some more of that. Who wants a glass?”

“Cup,” correcting.

“I think I’m going to bed.” Stew rises and takes hold of the leash.

“Stay up, Stew. Have a glass,” says Ana, opening the bottle.

“A cup,” I say.

“You are beautiful and sweet and nothing like *him*,” Stew says to Ana.

“Goodnight,” Ana says. She gives him a hug, and Stewart closes his eyes. He keeps a hold of her, after she’s finished the embrace.

Stew stumbles to his tent pulling his dog. “I hope it doesn’t rain,” he says.

Ana and I are looking at each other, amused by Stew’s awkwardness. “It’s the desert,” I say quietly.

“Come on, Eyo,” Stew says in a baby voice. “Come beddy-bye-bye.” I want to tell him to cut it out, that his emotional cord to that animal needs to be cut, but Ana is pouring wine, and with each step the dog takes out of my sight, I am more relaxed.

“I’m glad we’re here,” Ana says. “Away from the department. I was starting to feel closed in.”

“For three and a half months—free.”

“How miserable it makes you.”

“Always has.”

Ana mocks me with some stupid noises that the donkeys respond to. Eyo barks from the tent. Stew groans. I press my eyes closed and hope this does not continue. I turn around. There are things out here that can kill us. Javelinas out for dog. People. Cigarette smokers with diesel-powered tents. Things that must be considered and decided upon, chosen or rejected.

“I hate those things,” I say.

“When I moved here—you know—two years ago, I felt like a piece of meat. All the old, bearded men in the department. Everywhere. Small town old men, the worst kind, groaning over me. I don’t think I had a normal conversation that first year. Until you showed up.” Ana picks at her cuticles. “I think you’re lonely.”

“Okay,” I say. “That’s not it, but okay.” I warm with the wine and smile.

“Cheers to that,” Ana says. “To unknowable loneliness.”

“And misunderstanding. And violence in nature. Aging poorly, desperately, suckling from our lawn mowers.”

“Down on your lawnmower already? You prick.” She takes a slug of wine. I finish my glass. “Does anything make you happy? Besides sex.” An RV door-spring creaks and there is a metallic clap. I’d revealed some information about my sexual proclivities last week during the party at the department chair’s house, a hyper-detailed scene of a woman approaching me wearing a man’s dress shirt as I lay in a chaise, the room colored with ashen moonlight and smelling of grilled meat. The Dean of Liberal Arts excused her very sober self from the conversation, and I liked that.

“Sleep makes me happy,” I say and get up. The temperature has dropped.

“Stay and talk with me,” she says, and moves a wisp of hair off her cheek. I want to. I drink the last of my wine and do not ask for more. There is a soft pull from a recognizable place, a moon-on-the-oceans kind of thing. But we look like scrap aluminum in this light, tarnished and dumb.

“Big day tomorrow,” I say. “I get cranky without sleep.”

“We could be more friendly.”

“I know.” I look at my feet. I say, “Goodnight.”

“Are you?” Ana says. “Lonely, I mean.” Her voice is soft, and I know that she won’t ask me again if I keep my feet going. I want to say yes, because I am afraid of the hollowness. I do not know how deep it goes, and Lawton anyone could easily get to the place where there is no way out. And I want to say no because her loneliness is a comfort, a commiseration. The wine has made my legs and shoulders heavy. I carry on to bed, not wanting to see her face.

Blades of long grass sting my ankles like little bites. I am paranoid and wishing the fly on my tent, another barrier. Why did I want to see the sky? It makes me feel small. Smaller than the roads and toilets and dumpsters and RVs and generators and golf carts. In undergraduate, as a late night experiment, I looked up into the stars for a whole night and felt, slowly, the turn of the Earth into the universe. Like I had lain on the tip of a screw being driven into some stellar hole. I open the door of the tent, crawl in with my feet up, roll over and take off my shoes. I set them inside, undress, take my knife from my pocket and put it in a shoe, brush a few blades of dead grass out before closing the door, and zip into my cool bag.

There are noises.

The rangers never said what javelinas sound like, and some things I'd rather not experience. My one-person tent is new, a piece of equipment for new habits, and I want to use it again. From every direction a rustling of leaves and grass, the donkeys braying, a spring door opening and closing. Ana is silent.

I look out and see the man smoking again under the awning his camper. Maybe he can see me looking at him like a cat, quiet and low, watching the cherry brighten and dim with each draw. I want to keep my eyes on him until he gets inside of that tin box and the lights go out, but I'm falling asleep and cannot hold on to my civilized paranoia.

\*

I am startled awake and am lost. I hear Ana. "You can see everything from in here," she says, but I see nothing when opening my eyes, so I close them. A breeze blows, hush, the sweet, moist smell of oak. The mules have stopped.

"I thought someone was watching me," she says. "You left me out there alone."

I look to see if the fat man has gone in, if the lights are out. Ana is squatting like a catcher, wrapped in a white sheet pressed to her side by the wind. Her ponytail is a brown stripe over her shoulder and chest. No light but the moon. The fabric opens and swells with wind as she reaches a hand out and presses it against the tent. I see the outline of her body, a dark triangle, cleft apex, level with my eyes and I feel a pull towards her from my chest. Her nails zip back and forth across the mesh wall of my tent. This is the danger of opening your mouth at parties.

"You're imagining things," I say, the words thick in my dry mouth.

"I didn't say goodnight either."

“Everything is fine.” Hard against my bedroll, I am grateful for the wall and its transparency.

She starts to unzip the door and I hate the way I say her name, shaded with a parental disappointment that clings to me like burrs. She stops, closes the sheet and walks away. “I don’t know if that was your last chance,” she says, “but real close.”

Some other time, maybe I’d have pulled the zipper myself. I roll onto my back, close out the stars, and breathe. Breathe and smell the oak until I fall back to sleep.

\*

An animal head is inside my tent, through a hole torn in the wall. Donkeys are screaming. I do not know if I am breathing. The animal’s sharp breaths are like sneezes, small barks and grunts, and the black head is gnawing on something and tearing at the ground with its feet. The red band of my waist-bag is in its mouth, being taken from the tent. I take hold of the bag and pull, angry, knowing I’d been irresponsible with jerky. I reach for my knife with my other hand. The head comes back in with the bag. The blade flips open and I pause. Do this fast. I grab the fur and skin at the top of the animal’s neck and drive the steel into its right eye, up, and there is a thud, like a solid wood door shut, when the hilt hits bone. I feel it tap the skull in the palm of my hand.

My breaths are heavy and long. The animal is soft and does not smell. Blood is dripping onto the new plastic floor. I push the head out of the hole and feel the torn fabric. “Stay,” I say, and let the thoughts come. Self defense. The tent was new and will not be covered by any warranty. I could have made love to a woman tonight. She would be right here beside me, who cares if it would be right. I am unsafe with this meat lying around, so I take care of it properly.

Back to sleep.

\*

Stew screams for God's help. He actually believes, which I think is strange for a computer guy. "Dear God," he says. "Dear God, I can't—" He's found it.

Ana is with him, muttering comfort. I am too warm to stay in bed so I get up. Ana sits on the picnic bench by the food locker. Stew is on the ground. My tent is ruined. Deep breaths. I grab my toothbrush and water bottle. When I get to the locker, the door is open and they are staring at Eyo. I left the knife in its eye, and seeing it makes me feel a little bad. I step forward to get it and Stew puts his hand on the dog's face. "What happened? What did you do to Eyo?"

Ana is looking over the locker into a patch of oak.

"It came into my tent like a javlina. That's what I figured it was."

"I thought he was dead. I woke up and knew it. The hole in my tent. I thought a javelina got him," Stew says.

I thought a javelina was going to get *me*. I want this day to get going, to shit and eat, then see about patching my bloody tent. Stew is just sitting there trying to put the pale tongue back in the thing's mouth.

"It's seven-thirty. Let's try and make the best of this, huh? You would have done the same," I say. "We'll feel better after some breakfast."

"Jesus Christ," Ana says.

"You both had a pound of steak last night." Ana's face contorts, a hard compression, when I say this. Stew is somewhere else, thinking about the death of his first pet, maybe. How his parents probably told him all about animal heaven and he is

just now realizing it was a lie. But Eyo was an impulse buy, a gift to himself after his breakup, a tether to his past.

I will not be made the bad guy. Bad guys do not make breakfast. I step forward, lean down and pull to get the blade out. There is a low, sucking sound when it comes free. I head to the john.

The cool morning air is fresh in the outbuilding. My shit floats, which is pleasing. It just is. I wash my hands and knife in the sink, and brush my teeth enough to get the foul-taste out of my mouth.

I walk back to camp and see Stew sitting at the table with his head in his hands. Ana is standing with a hand on his back. When I notice the dog on the table, I am not surprised. It is very much like the dog to be on the table.

Ana tells me, in a soft voice, sensitive to Stew's condition, that she would have been very scared if this had happened to her.

"Yes," I say. "Let's make breakfast." My stomach is cursing at me I am so hungry.

Ana follows me to the car, where I'd moved the food last night. She offers me her tent when I hand her the eggs, onion, and green pepper. In our short history, she's been generous. Offering me her tent, camp, to be my hiking buddy, lover. But, no thank you. Not at this general time in my life when I am making headway with rectification. Good choices, positive choices: organic milk and recycling for the common good, exercise and less sugar, and no sex. I was there too, in, out, in, out, out, in, in, that woman a few years ago, and then running after with her clothes and worried like hell for

the both of us, for my future and unacknowledged soul. And its interests, I've found, are in direct conflict with my own. At the moment, however, there are eggs to be cooked.

\*

The dog is wrapped in Stew's rainfly and slung over my back. When I suggested that we bag it and leave it inside the food locker, Stew collapsed to his knees and started wailing out his lost love's name. There isn't another scene in the world can bring my bile out like that one, so I just screamed it out with him, over him, trying to be sensitive. He cut out the crying and dropped the soil he'd picked up. Ana grabbed my hand and told Stew about her plan to bury Eyo on the mountain. "He'd like that," Stew said, but his mouth hung open, and his face colored with despondency.

And here we are on our hike, signs clearly prohibiting dogs on trails. No dogs where cars can't go. Stewart and Ana are a good distance ahead of me. Old Eyo weighs about forty-five pounds and we've got three miles of hiking before I think we'll get into a very awkward situation with some strangers at the top of this mountain.

I should have cut its throat to shed liquid weight.

Yuccas, like red-flowering pineapples, tropical headdresses on pikes, dot the landscape, light and open, grown from stored sustenance.

The pooch on my back cannot be good for my health. This trip should have been solo; a sorry man deserves the opportunity to apologize in his way, even if he wasn't sure of the reason. I chased that girl and gave her the clothes and dressed her. All that could be done. Some guy of hers had accused me of lacing a joint and drugging her with PCP, a popular news story at the time. But he'd smoked the same joint, and so had I. Why's she the only one with a problem? I'd said, insulated by my friends, the hosts, the house.

Five minutes later she led me to an upstairs room, removed my clothes and took me into her mouth, the beaded tassels of her shirt chattering not a word.

“Keep up,” Ana said. She and Stew were a hundred yards up the trail, holding hands. Very sweet. Stewart is a sucker for sugar. And don’t I envy that a little, stinking dog on my back. This is the worst walk of my life. I am thirsty, and those two are skipping, some sick movie I’m watching, very aware of my narrow point of view. I am not a wide-angle lens, by nature.

Ana yells back to me again and I throw a halfhearted smile her way. She makes a production of catching the smile like a football and hauling into her chest, which is more a painting than a sculpture. That kind of talk feels wrong. But I am a triangle man and glad to have caught my eyes’ worth already.

Stew plods ahead.

We’re a few miles in and there is maybe one to two steep hours left. The dog is heavy and my shoulders tingle. Further along, Stew stops and wipes his face with the front of his shirt. Maybe it’s sweat, but a mean feeling in my chest ridicules him. My heart is black and smiling, and I wish Stew is crying. That he’ll cry all weekend and during the slow dance home he’ll detect the unusually pleasant peacefulness of the drive without a dog in his face or stomping on his testes, and he’ll wonder, then, what happened. Maybe he’ll question if he ever had a dog. Eyo was just a bad vowel in his head, some memory of a cartoon from childhood.

\*

A small pain has developed between my shoulder blades. I stop next to an agave and marvel at the excess of its weaponry. I am drawn to the spikes at the tips of its

leaves. Ice picks. Sixty years ago, an exiled Trotsky had an ice pick jammed into his brain on the other side of these mountains. I haven't had a drink of water in hours. It would be tough to get a bite of this plant's green, wet heart. A six-foot stalk shoots up from its center, browned and dead-looking. I touch the black point of one leaf with my thigh. Trotsky lived for another day with the hole in his head. There is no feeling, so I push again and the tip goes into the side of my leg—not much to it. It's in there. If this is anything like what I do. Bastard. Adrenaline pounds through my body. I was not after adrenaline, but my mouth is watering. A lightness rushes toward my head, and as it climbs up my throat I am scared to pull away from the needle and don't know what I'm doing. The thing is in there, it cannot be felt, and I want it out.

\*

They've paused and are speaking. Stew is looking up the mountain. Once I catch up I see a stone marking the last mile. My stomach tells me I am hungry, but the sun-warmed pooch in my nose and the crawling sweat on my back say otherwise. The little hole in my thigh has reddened. It hurts deeply, my thigh bone asking a question, but it's not all that bad.

Stew turns to me and shakes his head. He's missed the point that there is a restart to nearly all things. Parole for prisoners, pills for papilloma, paddles for lazy hearts, and the pound for new and used pets. All P's. Penis and pussy and procreation. Second chances.

“Stew,” I say.

“Don't talk to me.” He turns away.

Ana starts to open her mouth and Stew gives her a look. I can only see the result. Ana's lips fall back together and onward we go. To the mountaintop.

\*

Ana bounces up the last few hundred yards, her legs tanned red with dust and sweat. The trail is beaten smooth. I feel a viscous wetness down my backside, a smear of warm butter on a piece of soggy toast. Stew is already at the top, his fingers probably sticky with peanut butter and honey, chin wet with apple juice. He can gather the rocks and scoop out a place in the earth for this creature dripping from the tarp. Ana seems to enjoy her outside position as buffer and has jockeyed between Stew and me over this last stretch of trail, bouncing, rhythmically, purposelessly. A long triangle of sweat has formed on the crack of her ass, surely dripping between her legs. Step, step, drip.

I should not have kissed her that night at the party, but I was out of control and needed something to stop her from dancing. Such horrible dancing, like hiking in place. I'd be lying if I didn't admit I was glad to stop my own dancing.

I am in a considerable amount of pain and making it worse by thinking about it. Where did I hook up with these two? How did we all fall together over cocktails? Why could no one drop out, cancel? I want an explanation to blame. A jism of time. Who wasn't wearing protection? Again, P.

A soft ache, a freezing egg pushing against its shell—ache is what I feel. I would stab the dog in the face again. I want to do it now but my shoulders cannot feel that I am carrying anything, only that a juicy weight is on me.

A sign says fifty feet with an exclamation point, my least favorite punctuation mark. I make a last turn and we're back together. I try to drop my cargo but cannot.

Stewart is in my tree, the place I wanted, and maybe we are joined at some point of seeking.

“How did we become friends?” Stew says.

“I wondered the same thing,” Ana says, lying against the rock wall.

“Someone help,” I say, feeling robbed of my thoughts.

Stew does not respond. Ana gets up and lifts enough of the weight for my hands to open. The dog hits the dirt like a loaded canvas laundry bag. My arms burn like hell, like my feet and these rocks and this desert. I would do it again. People are dying out there. Crossing from Mexico. Mex-ee-coh.

“You smell horrible,” Ana says. “Absolutely rotten.”

“I think I’m gay,” Stew says.

“Jesus Christ,” Ana says.

“Shut up,” he says. Yesterday, I would have laughed. “You were my last crush, Ana,” he says, looking out over the Chisos Mountains.

“I don’t know how I didn’t know,” she says. “I always know.”

“He just said why.”

“And people like you,” he says, “who will murder dogs out of convenience can sniff out the lusts of losers and you kill those too.”

“Stew, an animal tore into my tent,” I say. “And *lust* doesn’t sound like the right word now.”

“It was a dream,” Stew says.

“Oh, right.”

“You can have a crush on me,” Ana says. “Even if you are gay.”

“It’s dead. It was almost worth losing Eyo just to have my head in your lap. To have my head in *a* lap.”

“Quite a nose, Stew. Maybe old Eyo is in you after all,” I say.

“Something was missing,” he says. “Dead,” he says. “I’ve known for a long time, dead.”

“Let’s bury this thing,” I say.

“You bury it.”

There is no future for the argument so I look for a cut of rock to dig the hole. Ana offers Stew some kind of apology, but it doesn’t dig a hole in the ground, and it trails off over the cliff. She looks at me and I shrug. The air is clear. A wind could carry Stew from the tree onto the jagged earth, and all would be as it should.

## Birds of the Heart

At one time, Gilbert loved that he had a hand in something great and massive, a mobilization of men as productive to America as its military victories abroad. And his work was not so different than a soldier's, though his uniform never scored him any tail. Gilbert had a place in line, an air gun, orders—one man on a team. Now, his first day at work in four months, he was leaving after only a few hours. He hadn't slept all night for weeks and didn't feel perfectly well, but this was expected on the tail end of prescription addiction. There was sickness in him as hard and endless as the razor wire around the five-million square-foot factory. As Gilbert started out of the plant parking lot, a portly man in a long black coat, tan suit, and woolen cap, briefcase under his arm like a football, hurried down the icy sidewalk and knocked on the window of Gilbert's sedan. Gilbert rolled down the window and the man introduced himself. Ed Hert smelled like the grill in a diner during the breakfast rush. He was a lawyer, and that's how Gilbert found out about the restructuring.

“Does anybody know about this in there?” Ed said.

“Why should I trust you?”

“Because I'm not your boss, and I can get you more than what they'll offer *you*, the bastards. Pull over and we'll talk.” Ed wiped a bead of grease from his cheek with the sleeve of his jacket Gilbert pulled to the curb and Ed got into the car, clapping the snow off his shoes before closing the door. Gilbert liked Ed's fury. *The bastards*, he'd

said straight off. People outside the plant fence didn't speak that way about the Fords without feeling uneasy.

"You mind?" Ed reached forward and turned up the heat. Gilbert shook his head. "There's a cane next to you." Gilbert put his hand on the cane to cover it, a cheap drugstore stick.

"It helps," Gilbert said.

"Work-related?"

"I was shot."

"Sweet Jesus, you were shot on the job." Ed crossed himself and took a few deep breaths. "This wasn't the Yoo incident, was it?" Ed asked gravely. The memory of that shooting—a "massacre" the news had called the murder of one man—almost a decade ago was still fresh on some people's minds. "Because the statute of limitations is up on that."

"It wasn't Yoo."

"Why didn't I hear about this?" Ed asked, looking at the back seat.

"Family business," Gilbert said. He turned down the heat. Ed wanted to know about compensation and Gilbert told him about the paid leave.

"Bastards." It wasn't as convincing the second time.

"It was a fair deal," Gilbert said.

"You got a hamburger with fries when you deserved steak and mashed fucking potatoes." He'd hit the right note and was making himself the first lawyer Gilbert liked. Gilbert was hungry, for lunch, the meds he'd given up, and to not return to the line. "Tell me what you dream of, my friend," Ed added.

“I want out of here.”

Ed laughed like he'd been tickled and put on the hot air again. “That's it?”

“I don't think it's funny.”

“You're asking for what you've already got.”

The changes in temperature bothered Gilbert. His face flushed. He felt cold and nauseated. Gilbert signed a paper that Hert set on the steering wheel. To get the case going, he'd said.

“Well, Gil, you're my numero uno.”

Gilbert felt himself becoming another man's tool, swept into another form. But this was his habit of feeling. Ed could probably get more if Gilbert were dead, but there was no one to inherit the money.

“Don't tell anyone about this,” Ed said. “In case.”

“What in case?”

“Reprisal, you know?”

“I know. Now, get out of my car. I don't feel so hot.”

“You're the boss,” Ed said, and, despite knowing it as the ‘you can be anything’ fairytale of childhood, Gilbert liked the sound of it. He'd never liked truth, of the last red gurgles that escaped his emphysematic father's mouth or his mother crumpling to the linoleum floor mid-sentence a week after he'd started at Ford twelve years ago.

“Call if you need me.” Ed Hert gave Gilbert's shoulder a squeeze, and got out of the car. Gilbert drove home.

\*

*Dear Gilbert,*

*This is a part of my punishment. A letter, you believe it? One letter for shooting up my best friend. So it's treatment, they say, the people around me, measuring me up once or twice a day, and not with rulers. Precise, boy. Testing my patience, that's what they do all fucking day. Let me know if you see something like [REDACTED] [REDACTED] if [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. If not, may be a sign of improvement. I've sent other communications that didn't make it past the censor.*

*This didn't get off the way I intended. You know me. Doesn't help that I'm at old Betty's. Keeping it in the family. There are a lot of high-brow folks here. They come and go as they please, don't even wink their tanned eyelids at me. There's this kid here who's real proud of his Mustang 5.0. You know that crowd. I told him I probably put the engine in the thing, and he told me he'd done that piece of work himself. What for? I said. It's my shit, he said. Then in group he got up and revealed himself as another rich kid with a wrench set and coke problem.*

*Hell, Gilbert. I'm sorry about what happened. You know that. Probably didn't have to tell you. I'm having a hard time connecting here.*

*They're singing Happy B-day to some asshole and I can't keep my thoughts straight. I yell at them, but yelling has no effect. They think everything works as therapy, that it all counts for some good regardless of the harm done to me. Are you getting a sense of things here? I hope you aren't worse off than this. If so, I'll make it up to you. Sorry isn't enough. When I walked into the plant I was only a little drunk and didn't mean to shoot you. I wanted to get even, to right things. That's fair, right? They said I can't get in trouble here, that a deal's a deal, but it'd be a lie to say I'm not nervous. I*

*didn't spend half my life up north learning to defend myself to get locked up by some Pinkertons reading through my mail. There aren't many people I can speak to honestly, Gilbert. I wanted to kill that prick upstairs, and I hope more has changed than my drinking, which I've cut back a good bit since being carried across the threshold of this facility like a hog. Storming the plant solo never would have worked. That I understand. A failed mission from the start. Thank God we missed Vietnam, Gilbert. I'd have been killed in a minute.*

*I've met someone here, a woman. You'll meet her soon. She's a lawyer and says she might be able to help you. Her name is Lourdes. She has a pill problem, uppers I think. Gets a lot of work done, she says.*

*Well. I'll be seeing you in no time, maybe before you read this. I'm out in a few days and will meet you inside the plant. From there, we proceed. Thank you, Gilbert.*

*-Franklin*

\*

Gilbert stepped over the threshold of his apartment and looked into his accumulation. The Chinese shelving units and entertainment center, the end tables, the four-sided dining table with three chairs—a sale item—the coffee table, his ex-girlfriend's television broken on the floor. He'd put his particleboard life together with a screw gun.

He hadn't cleaned in months and the beige carpet was covered in clothes and paper, glass, a few empty boxes. There was nowhere to go and none of his stuff was worth packing. A good deal of the crap was only his because of a woman. She left him

two weeks ago. Her name he would not speak. He did not want to think the name it was so beautiful. He had no idea where she went two weeks ago.

An old gauze bandage, rusty with blood, lay on the coffee table next to her teevee remote. There was a letter from Franklin, still unopened. Franklin was a decent friend even if he'd shot Gilbert. Franklin had been after the plant manager, a man indebted to Ford's two, brave, unarmed guards. There wasn't a man or woman on the line that would have stopped Franklin, or any beer-soaked gunman, from getting upstairs, not for some low hourly wage. That's a few shy of sixteen-hundred people. All of them, about to lose their jobs, would gun for the white shirts.

Gilbert's stomach went tight—withdrawal. He was too sick to throw up. Gilbert kicked his way to the sofa and picked up a pill bottle. He opened the orange container and dropped two into his hand. He would put them in his mouth and snap his head back, act as if he were swallowing them. But he'd spit them out. He'd quit, and he said that word, *quit*, every day.

He tossed the pills in and let the chemical taste stain his tongue. He felt a kind of relief then and sat down. The old, worn cushion next to him sank under the weight of Gilbert's hand. These moments of sickness were infrequent, now. He spit the dots out onto the floor. It was not a comfortable sofa anymore. For nearly two years Gilbert and that woman came together like a pig and a spit on this piece of furniture. They'd take turns playing piggy. He smiled, remembering the discovery of a pleasure previously unknown, one that he could not talk about with anyone. Really, it was disgusting what they did, a meat tornado tearing through the place. There were grease marks on the wall across from Gilbert, stamps and splashes from their last rampage. She'd brought home

some baby oil and caught Gilbert on the couch under an electric blanket watching the video a girlfriend of hers had made some years back, a grainy VHS recording of sex that made Gilbert sorry, for the first time, that he'd never gone to college.

"The sound's no good on this thing," Gilbert had said when she walked in.

"I surprise you with oil since you're hurt, and look what happens," she said. "I told you never to do this."

"It was in the player," Gilbert said, hoping for the best.

"Get up," she said. "How many of these have you had?" She held up a nearly empty pill bottle.

"Surprise!" He stood up, on both legs, numb and happy.

"I'm giving you a surprise all right."

She went at him and tore his clothes off and he was excited as hell and buzzing all over. The woman uncapped the oil and squirted it on top of Gilbert's head, and as it ran down his face he squealed and rubbed the stuff over himself. They squirmed and pawed, whirled and dug into each other. The next thing Gilbert knew, they were in the corner of the wall and the entertainment center. He was knocking a beat to the scratchy moans of the girl on the tape with his girlfriend's head against the piece of furniture. The thing rocked, screws creaked in the wood, Gilbert tried to get inside of his girl, and the television fell and broke against the floor. That was it. No more teevee and no more love-making and no more girlfriend. "It's not a luau if the spit can't stand," she'd said on the way out, and it took him a second or two to understand.

\*

Gilbert lay on the couch with a persistent and joyless erection. He punched at it like the weighted, blow-up clown he'd had as a boy. When he was seven he'd wanted to hammer the smile off that stupid toy. That woman, he thought. She'd made him younger, by demand. He'd been happy with her in charge of his day-to-day life. Peace.

His back hurt. He'd slept all afternoon and now daylight was gone. A waste, he thought.

His watch read half eight and Gilbert was meeting Franklin at the bar, nine sharp. When he stood, the pain in his wounded leg took hold. The leg had become his brain, of sorts. Pain pills had done their job and then some. While his woman was still around, he'd found that the pills delayed orgasm and heightened his sensitivity, diminishing returns.

Gilbert took the last pill out of the bottle and worked himself into the bedroom with the dose between his lips, turned on the light, and undressed. He faced the mirror-glass closet doors. The smooth, pink scar on his leg, when he ran a finger over it, emitted the kind of numbness produced by low, even electric current, an involuntary sensation, a living dead. Gilbert put on blue jeans and an insulated blue zip hoodie, and he placed the pill in his front pants pocket. He'd gained weight. His stomach had sagged like an old woman's chest. Gilbert laced up his boots, grabbed his cane and hobbled out of his apartment shouldering the unmanly feeling of having a midsection distended over half of his belt buckle.

A strange blue car sat parked in front of the empty lot across from Gilbert's fourplex, a nice car, and the only one clear of the afternoon's light snowfall. His neighbors were mostly-quiet family types, young people saddled with children and

unreliable vehicles. They drove small, cheap, sporty four-doors and light trucks with faded paint and rusted door bottoms, the names of the models—Escape, Mystique, Ranger—ringing with freedom and adventure that did not exist inside these ungated, rotting pine fences or on this street with its abandoned-house playgrounds, or in a neighborhood where men are shot at work by friends, then laid off. Gilbert, single, with savings, felt like an estranged grandfather around struggling families, like help disconnected. What would it take to shake these people? Gilbert waited for some explosive moment, a restructuring to make this a place to live.

The windows of the blue car were blacked. Gilbert got into his sedan. He breathed into his hands and put the key to the ignition. It was ten till nine. That this stranger had something to do with Ed Hert was not absent from his mind. The lawyer had told him to be careful, and maybe he didn't trust Gilbert. Ed probably didn't trust any autoworker. He started his car and backed into the street.

At the stop sign a quarter mile from his place, he looked back. The blue car had pulled out and was creeping down the road, headlights dark. Gilbert's heart beat hard as he thought about a chase, on ice, rubbing quarter panels. Gilbert took off, tires howling like huskies. After a couple of turns, he was out on the main road, his eyes going to the rearview every few seconds. He'd lost the car. It was easier than he'd imagined, a disappointment.

\*

Pulling open the soft pine door of the bar, Gilbert felt he was entering an ice shanty. Which wasn't too far off. Maybe thirty people could fit in the joint, five times the present company. It had wood panel walls, dim yellow lights, and year-round

Christmas decorations, and smelled of cigarettes, beer, and deodorizing carpet powder. Gilbert saw Franklin playing pool with himself.

Franklin noticed Gilbert immediately and stopped. A man in a leather bike vest and black, silver-buckled boots sat alone near the pool table.

Gilbert waved his cane hello and Franklin walked quickly to his friend and embraced him. The top of Franklin's head hit Gilbert in the chin.

"Easy," Gilbert said.

"I'd have never forgiven myself."

"Your heart was—"

"Never forget."

"Okay."

Franklin squeezed Gilbert's shoulder and smiled. "Good. This is Jack," he said, pointing to the man at the table.

"Jackson," the bikeless biker said, and they shook hands.

"Gilbert. I know you from somewhere?"

"He worked at the plant," Franklin said. "Why didn't you tell him you worked at the plant, Jack?"

"I worked at the plant," Jackson said, before calling up a whiskey and a beer from the bartender.

"Couldn't take it anymore?" Gilbert asked.

"Yoo shot me."

"Get paid?"

Jackson laughed. “Would you hang out in this place if you got a Fortune 500 settlement?”

“Sorry. I was so far away, I didn’t notice a thing till the line stopped rolling.”

“Turns out a crazy man’s footsteps aren’t as loud as MIG cells or that screaming bitch, Denise Ezzardo, who used me as a shield.” Whiskey arrived. Jackson threw back the drink and his face tightened up. “So I caught a bullet in the stomach.” He lifted his shirt. He didn’t have a simple hole like Gilbert’s, but a wide stripe of raised pink skin from the base of his sternum to his navel. “Then I signed a paper I don’t remember signing and that was that.”

“Can you believe it?” Franklin said, laughing. He put his hand back on Gilbert’s shoulder. “Poor Jack. Took a bullet meant for the bastard upstairs. Just like you, Gilbert.”

“That bastard was all right.” Jackson took a big swill of his beer. “He was a good friend of mine.”

“Bastard was a bullfrog,” Franklin sang. “He was a good friend of mine.”

Jackson chuckled, but Gilbert could see he wasn’t too amused.

“Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea—”

“All right, Frank, can it,” Jackson said.

“And if I were the king of the world—DUH-DUH-DA.” Franklin belted it out. Gilbert laughed. “I’d throw away the cars and the bars in the world, and I’d make—sweet—love—to—you.” He pointed at Jackson.

“Enough,” Jackson said, his shoulders back, squared to Franklin.

“I didn’t know you could sing,” Gilbert said, and Franklin started up again.

“I’m a hard-knock flyer, and a rainbow rider, a straight shootin’ son of a gun!”

Jackson socked Franklin in the gut. Franklin doubled over, gasping. Gilbert put his cane between the two and felt like a real old-timer using it. The bartender looked over and Gilbert waved.

“That’ll do,” Gilbert said. Franklin was down on one knee and put the palm of his right hand to the ground. He stood.

“Joy to the world,” Franklin sang softly, laughing a little. Jackson stared at him.

“Why don’t you two make up?” Gilbert said.

“Let’s, Jack.”

Jackson said, “You two are what’s wrong with this town, if not the whole damned world. When that plant closes, goes with the rest, you’ll have nothing to live for. Thank God that Yoo-fuck shot me, because I learned. I lost a friend, but I moved on. You understand? Who knows what’ll take for you to do the same.” He slammed his beer sitting on the table, and walked out.

Gilbert hopped onto a stool at the bar and Franklin took up a place next to him. Two big women sat at the end of the bar. One worked at the plant and gave a short nod in their direction, like they shared some unspoken, underground bond. Gilbert did not like the gesture. There was pride in it, something that Gilbert lost when Charlie Brown—his real name—was hoisted from the line, from beside Gilbert, by the neck six years ago, plucked out by one of the new, revolutionary robots. They’d replaced fifty linemen, and then one had picked off Charlie and tried welding him to a frame. Gilbert looked away from the woman.

“Two specials,” Franklin said to the bartender.

“No specials,” the man answered, a grayed towel over his shoulder.

“Two regulars then.”

“Beers,” Gilbert said. Franklin nodded, made a little pistol of his hand and fired at the man getting the drinks.

“Talk about women, Gilbert. I want to talk about women.”

“I don’t.”

“Going to piss,” Franklin said.

They’d been to this bar so many times over the years. Gilbert had grown tired, and the closer he got to being clean and free from the pills, the more restless he became. The bartender set two bottles down in front of them. At the table near the door, a woman, chin length brunette, sat leaning over a glass of pink wine. She wore broad sunglasses with silver accents at the corners and was well-dressed, not overdoing it, but any woman wearing a skirt in this dump was asking for attention. Gilbert had never seen her before. She looked at him. She touched her hair and slid the hand down to the opening of her brown blouse and undid the top button. He wanted to see her eyes, know their color and the shape of the brows. She blew a kiss at him and he approached her.

“Hello,” she said. “I didn’t think you’d notice me.”

“You blend in well,” he said, placing a hand over his eyes.

She giggled lightly and sipped her wine. “I heard your conversation earlier. Terrible what happens to you men in those plants. I’ve always been a supporter of union labor.”

“We certainly appreciate that.”

“You weren’t crippled or anything, right?”

“No,” he said, pointing at his thigh. “I’m functional.”

“Got a check for that, I bet.”

“Coming. The guy with me is the trigger man.”

“I hope you boys weren’t perpetrating some fraud.” Watching her lips cup the rim of the wine glass, Gilbert could feel them on his skin, wherever he chose to place them.

“Well, I should buy him a drink,” she said, and laughed while reaching a hand out to touch Gilbert’s hip.

“Get away from him!” Franklin said, pulling Gilbert by the arm. “Shame on you, taking advantage.”

“Goddamnit, take it easy,” Gilbert said.

“I’m helping, man. You need the redemptive power of a woman, Gilbert, a universe of heart and sex. A wonderful, abrasive yet soft, mysterious vaginaverse. But not her.” Franklin leaned close to Gilbert’s ear and said, “Not a pension whore.”

“She’s a nice woman.”

“All the signs are clear, Gilbert. There are only three reasons to have short hair: cancer, old age, and trying to avoid detection, which she’s doubled up on with those shades. Trust me, I’ve seen her before.”

Gilbert drank until the beer foamed up into his nose.

“Now you’re talking, baby,” Franklin said.

“I didn’t say anything,” Gilbert said, eyes watering.

“Sometimes I worry there’s no making you happy, cripple.”

Gilbert couldn't deny that. Even that woman only pulled at his loneliness. Nothing took hold of him. The pills had, but despite the continuity of his drugged self, he yearned for something natural, satisfaction and joy as he'd witnessed in one of the big box churches that had risen like calluses on the old, beaten fields at the outskirts of town, and which his neighbors fled to in those specks of man's creation called *Taurus* and *Explorer*, dressed in their finest clothes, purchased with hope of the first week's wages for interviews to jobs that would barely pay bills.

"I only shot a rifle. One pop. There's things I didn't do, things you've done and that don't have anything to do with me and have turned you into a friendly coward, man."

"Last pill right here," Gilbert said looking into his palm. He wanted it. "Only one spell this week. Today. That's it."

"You need help. I got my heart back in that place, Gilbert—the white house with barred windows. You know I met CEO Jr. there? Good kid. They tried to make me give over to Jesus, but I'm mine, boy. You understand?" Franklin slapped the bottom of Gilbert's hand and the pill shot into the air. Gilbert didn't see where it went. Franklin smiled.

Gilbert stood. His leg ached. He wanted to hit Franklin but he wouldn't.

"Some day you'll thank me," Franklin said. "For this *and* the bullet. You're targeted for something good, Gilbert. You've been the loser too long. You've been quiet and strange. Say something, dammit."

It sounded nice to Gilbert but didn't mean a thing. Franklin had always derived optimism from beer, and Gilbert wasn't the kind to believe in change. "I'll be right back," Franklin said, and walked away.

Gilbert started toward the door. His leg didn't hurt as much as he wanted. The woman at the corner table looked at Gilbert, then stood and ran, her steps shortened by her skirt, out in front of him. Her heels clicked on the lino tile floor like nails hammered into a board. "Shit makes me hard," he heard Franklin say. Outside Gilbert didn't see her in the parking lot, didn't hear her shoes. He went around the side of the building and when he turned the corner a car started, lights beamed in his eyes, and when Gilbert heard the transmission click and engine's working growl—he could name the parts, the car, a Town Car, from his plant, Gilbert's own hands—he screamed, eyes closed, and pressed himself against the cold brick wall of the bar. The car swerved, whooshed past Gilbert. He slid to the ground, crying for the first time in he didn't know how long. He hadn't shed a tear when Franklin shot him. The bullet had burned in his thigh, and in his mind there was a small fire in his flesh then, smoke and blood seething from the hole. Now, called a coward and a cripple by his only friend, and almost flattened by the product of his labor, Gilbert sobbed against the bar's exterior.

After a few minutes Gilbert calmed down. He was still crying. He wanted a couple of Demerol and another beer. He wanted to lie on his couch, melt onto it, blotto. He wanted his money and he wanted to get a hold of himself. Franklin came around the corner and walked to Gilbert.

"You broke your cane."

"I didn't." Gilbert wiped his sleeve over his face.

"Who broke your cane?"

"A Town Car."

“There are more Town Cars.” Franklin helped him up. “You have nine dollars?” he asked, patting his pockets. “It’s cold.”

“Sure,” Gilbert said.

“Good news.”

When Franklin didn’t say anything else, Gilbert said, “What?”

“We’re taking your car.”

\*

Franklin drove Gilbert’s sedan, the heat on full blast. He drove fast. “What’s that grinding noise?” he asked.

Gilbert didn’t hear anything.

“There’s no noise,” he told Franklin.

“Cars are nothing but incommutable troubles, man.”

Franklin drove towards the highway and, when Gilbert asked where they were going, Franklin asked, “Did you get my last letter?” Gilbert lied and said he hadn’t. “I knew it,” Franklin said, striking the steering wheel. “We’re going to meet someone.”

Gilbert wanted rest and car rides made him tired. The constant, even motion lulled him, and it would be hours, a hard, unstoppable, near-death sleep. He closed his eyes, but the lights planted in the median flashed—on, off, on, off, on, off, on—a kind of childhood bedtime torture. The same as now, a factory man who labored through halogen nights and darkened his days with sleep—easy as a switch. In winter, he saw the sun on weekends, like a child of divorce. It was funny, the difference, how it mattered.

They headed east, to the glowing halo of Detroit suburbs. The lights grew brighter, reflecting off stone and mirrored glass buildings. There were big houses on

dark, smooth roads, then smaller houses on snowy, two-or-three-acre lots. Bright lights again, Christmas lights strung in young maple trees, jewelry stores, and coffee shops and coffee shops. The cars Gilbert and Franklin put together ended up in places like this. No chain-link fence, no razor wire.

Gilbert hadn't been out here since he was a kid. The Oakland county suburbs were like a theme park, and he expected to see his mother, in a new ivory hat, stepping out of a sweets shoppe with a bag of bonbons. As a boy, his parents would drive Gilbert out here for cultural activities.

"You ever go to that planetarium up the road?" Gilbert asked.

They stopped at a red light at Woodward. Franklin shook his head.

"Mom and Dad took me every couple of months. Gave me encouragement, about studying and working hard and how I could be a scientist."

"Horrible, Gilbert. Nasty trick."

"They didn't believe it. I knew. All that wonder and imagination wasn't for me and I knew."

"Wonder and imagination, my dickhole. It's a goddamned picture-house that should be demolished."

"Can't take the militia out of a militiaman."

"Survivalist." Franklin squeezed the steering wheel and shook it hard. "And I do have reason. All these suboobanites would watch the blast, the orange ball *booming* up and then, Oh, Look! Stars! They've made televisions of everything, lights that bleed out the one true sky, and we're supposed think *wonder* and *imagination*? Sometimes I think looking up is the only thing that keeps me alive. Look up, Gilbert." Gilbert looked up,

out the window. “Look up at the sun—on Saturday—look up at the sun and stare at it until it hurts. That’s your retina *burning*, man, on fire. That’s power, real power. Tell me if some halogen bulb can do that. The answer is no.” His voice grew louder, and Gilbert thought Franklin might snap, until, “Here we are.”

Franklin pulled into a slider joint, a white diner with a glass front. Gilbert smelled beef and onions and chili in the cold air.

“Fanciest fast-food in the county.”

“Sliders aren’t what I need, Franklin.”

“Gimme ten dollars, then we’ll get out of here.”

Gilbert handed Franklin the cash.

“I always forget you’re smarter than me.” Franklin got out and jogged in, hands pocketed. Gilbert shifted in his seat. He rolled the window down and then up again. His legs were soft, atrophied.

Inside, Franklin chatted with two shiny high-school girls at the counter. The girl next to him didn’t seem to understand what Franklin was saying, and she turned away from him to whisper in her girlfriend’s ear. They laughed and leaned into each other. Franklin smiled at them and then pointed out towards Gilbert and the car. Gilbert’s heart beat in slow, hard, thuds. Franklin might get them to come along. His hands grew wet and cold and he thought about touching those girls, not as himself, but as he was in high school. Or a year after. The things he’d do. Two years, three years after. He began to play this in his head. They would smell like waxen cantaloupe lip gloss, beef, onions, chili, and it would be difficult to decide whether to devour them or pick politely at the

sweetness. He wanted to see, the girls, in a dream, but could only see himself when his eyes closed to sleep. He was warm and falling into his own still body. Snap, he thought.

\*

Franklin got in the car and saw his friend curled up and sleeping. What a baby. Franklin set his grease-stained paper bag down on the center console. Cute baby. They'd known each other for only a few years, but Franklin thought of Gilbert as a brother. Gilbert had never judged him. He wanted to kiss him for that.

Those pills, man, Franklin thought. My pills are good pills. My pills are up pills. Since the incident, up pills. No pills but good pills. Pills, pill—small and easy. Snowflakes. Winks. That's what they were. No winks but good winks. Those dolls. Baton-twirling blonde tease, algebra-taking—"Hey, Gilbert."

Franklin shoved him. He checked Gilbert's neck and counted the pulses, soft and slow. He put his face to his friend's nose and there was a faint breath. Franklin let his face down against Gilbert's cheek. He put his arm around his friend's head and hugged the man. He had more to give him.

Franklin had been planning on blowing up the plant. He had everything. But how stupid an idea. He was glad to have Gilbert. The plant meant nothing. The plant was only a consequence of a larger thing, of thought, of the Ford vision of transformed industry that failed many people, an organization to insure failure's repetition every new contract, to subsidize itself with victims' money, to adopt CEO slogans like *A New Direction* and *The Way Forward* as descriptions for the progress made by a pay-raise and benefit cut alongside the reduction of the full-time workforce. He'd taken pride in his hatred of the structure that he'd dreamed of clearing from the earth with a crate of

homemade dynamite because these plants became Mexican, Brazilian, and Chinese, and the more bolts an American drove into a Ford, the closer he came to his end. The Mexicans, Brazilians, Chinese would do the same, but they'd do it for less, and so the shame would be agonizing, a hatred, men dreaming of cleansing their souls with explosives. But Gilbert, his troubled friend, held Franklin's attention. Gilbert needed the same counsel Franklin had found in Lourdes, the woman he'd met in therapy.

“I can wake you up, brother, no compromises.”

Franklin wanted to take care of Gilbert. Franklin ate a slider in three bites with practiced efficiency. They were delicious. Steamed meat and grilled onions, one pickle—almost good enough to make him forget about those elusive blonde fireflies. Those were women.

1.2.3.4.5.6.7.8.9.10.11.12.13.14.15.16.17.18.19.20.21.22.23.24.25—Twenty-six.

Zero. Three bites this way.

Then he pulled from his pocket a small baggie of pills. He opened the bag and dosed himself one. He took out another and crushed it up in the palm of his hand. Franklin turned Gilbert's head up and opened his mouth. He changed his mind then. Gilbert had cleaned himself up and it was not Franklin's place to pour in the powder, so he took it himself.

He patted Gilbert on the shoulder and his body stirred. Franklin ate another slider and then checked Gilbert's breathing.

“Good man. Good.”

Franklin knew Gilbert didn't know that Franklin had wanted to destroy himself the day he returned to work with his rifle. Gilbert didn't know that he had saved Franklin's life by taking that bullet, and Franklin had never said a word.

"I owe you."

He took the last slider from the greasy white paper bag and peeled the parchment away. Gilbert was restless unconscious, which Franklin thought strange. He expected his friend to break out into a dream run, like a sleeping dog. They would return home soon, but Gilbert needed nourishment. Franklin took a small bite, chewed fast and thoroughly.

He had learned a thing or two about humanity and brotherhood from therapy, and from Lourdes.

When the mixture had thinned with saliva and pop, Franklin delivered the beginnings of his friend's fresh start to Gilbert's mouth and coached the food down Gilbert's throat with his thumb, his most human digit, he thought. The moment stirred in Franklin endearment he had never imagined before, or heard of in group sessions. He cared deeply, for the first time in his adult life.

Franklin and Gilbert finished the slider, then Franklin wiped his hands, popped himself a few more pills, started the car, and pulled onto the road. When a man reveals a part of himself that hurts like a nail in the foot, slowing his every step, the nail must be removed. The planetarium must be done in. Blammo. All things have roots, where terror must be struck. He needed to talk to Lourdes. Their roots were in their work, a thing in jeopardy. This was an opportunity to make up for lost time. To bring down from the sky those reigned flights of hope, props for escape, the hemorrhaging memories

Franklin knew Gilbert had been trying to cut off. The plant shutdown was coming. Flint was coming. A tourist economy was coming. Always had been. Glass coming down. Bullets and glass and that final check for a security deposit on the next life.

Flakes of snow blew in through the window. Franklin put his hand on Gilbert's warm side, rising and falling with each breath, and drove to their appointment.

\*

Gilbert felt Franklin pat him on the back. "Welcome home," Franklin said. They were stopped. "It's a beautiful night. The stars are out."

"Hi, honey-pie," a woman said from behind Gilbert, startling him. Her voice was smooth and erotic like those late-night telephone girls. When Gilbert looked back at her, he only saw the outline of a woman. He thought she was wearing a tie. There was no light but starlight. She smelled like bar soap, chemical spring.

"Where are we?" Gilbert was hot and had been sweating.

"That's Lourdes," Franklin said, "attorney and spiritual advisor."

"Holistic legal guide," she said, reaching a hand forward for Gilbert to shake.

Gilbert laughed and itched at his damp clothes. "Take me home, Frank. I've had enough. I'm tired, I'm sick. And there's something I don't understand, like there's something I'm supposed to do, and I hate it." Gilbert felt as if his guts had been shaken like a can of paint.

Franklin smiled and patted the steering wheel as he spoke. "Home, Gilbert, back to zero. That's where we're going." He rolled his window down a bit.

“Relax, honey. You’re dirty inside, understand? Polluted and inferior to your true self. Of course you don’t understand what you’re supposed to do, and it doesn’t matter because it’ll happen. It’s your becoming.”

Not a word made sense to Gilbert. He had no response for Franklin or this woman but his desire to get away, to draw the curtains, bury himself until Hert got back to him with news and money.

“Gilbert,” she said, “your friend’s hatched a kind of rebirth because he owes you his life. Told me everything. Franklin had prepared to destroy himself the day you were shot, but you saved him. Now, I don’t start traditional legal proceedings as much as stop malicious ones.” She leaned forward and placed a cool hand on Gilbert’s neck. He felt grasped by Lourdes, the only woman to lay a hand on him in weeks, and a big hand. He tried to turn and look at her, but she squeezed his head forward. “I understand, Gilbert, that it takes a push to get you moving.”

“He was shot in the leg,” Franklin said. “Touch his leg.”

“I’m following his pain!” Lourdes said. She took a few deep breaths. “Parents dead, girl split, dump of an apartment—yes, easy, very easy.” She squeezed hard enough to stop Gilbert from speaking, and he nodded. “Do you know Ed Hert, a lawyer?”

Gilbert nodded.

“Plant’s closing,” Franklin said, and Lourdes slapped him on the side of the face. Franklin flailed his arms around and knocked the rearview from the windshield. “Get to the point.”

Gilbert reached up to take Lourdes’s hand from his throat, to get his air back, but she squeezed harder when he touched her wrist. “I’ve been working with Franklin on

not interrupting. It's a bad habit," she said. "Did you sign any papers?" Gilbert nodded again. She said, "See, Frank."

"Didn't think you'd do it Gilbert. You're smarter than that," he said. "Tell him now, please, and let's get this over with."

Lourdes let go of his neck and told him that Hert was a corporate lawyer. That he'd been picked by CEO Sr. to sucker suckers and Gilbert was one of many who'd penned his name to a buyout agreement.

"We'd better hurry or we'll get caught in the sunrise," Franklin said, and started the car.

"Did you sign, too?" Gilbert said, and Franklin nodded.

"We have to get those forms back," Franklin said. He turned the headlights on and lit up a building. They were behind a white, six-story building with large mirror-glass windows.

"Back or not, I want done with all this." It embarrassed him to respond this way, that he'd done so already, minutes ago, thinking about running.

"When I pulled back onto the road, you sleeping there where you sit right now, I'd planned to blow up the planetarium, drive a wedge between your past and your future. And in one day I'm sick of it. We worked ourselves out of a job."

"This is carefully detailed, prescribed therapy. It is action and you'll carry it out," Lourdes said. "You're going to fix your problems here, get even. That's fair."

"I didn't know the plant was closing," said Gilbert.

"You couldn't," Lourdes said. "It was your livelihood—the heart of every Ford employee—but your welfare doesn't mean a thing to a salaried man, a man who knows

how much money the company makes for every bolt you drive and how much more could be made if you were only a second faster.”

“Gilbert, we know something that our brothers don’t.”

“Getting those papers won’t get our jobs back; it won’t keep the plant open.” He didn’t know how to do anything but bolt engines into cars. The job was important because he couldn’t do anything else. People who used to work at the plant, people who quit for one reason or another, couldn’t hold down work flipping burgers. The complicated, made-to-order world made no sense, and without a payoff Gilbert’s future, and that of more than three thousand people and the pulse of a city, would die.

“We can help a lot of people, Gilbert.” Franklin got out of the car.

“Go,” Lourdes said. “I’ll drive when you get back, baby.”

Gilbert got out and met Franklin at the trunk. Inside were eight twenty-five gallon canisters. Pieces of newspaper and cotton lay scattered between them. There was another car in the lot, an old Ford Tempo. They were parked under an overhang of a white building and faced a densely wooded lot. Gilbert wondered how long he’d been droning through his bolt-on life as a man in a long line of laboring men.

Franklin moved canisters from the trunk of Gilbert’s sedan to the Tempo. There was no secret once the smell rose up to Gilbert’s nose. The papers would burn. The files of a company would turn to ash. Gilbert lifted a canister and strained getting it the Tempo. The two did not talk. He did not want to talk. When they’d moved all the cans, Franklin poured fuel into each canister and screwed on lids, and then he tied wires together and fed them to a single box on the center console, all with the practiced ease with which he bolted bumpers to Town Cars. That Gilbert was still an instrument, could

be tuned and played, did not leave him and he feared it never would. Wiring. He could operate an air gun and drive bolts. Jackson had it. Gilbert knew how to avoid being killed by the robot cells. But he had to use the directions to assemble his entertainment center. Franklin could walk into a home supply store and come out armed, and as Gilbert watched him tape red and green wires together, he couldn't imagine why he'd put such effort into something to be exploded. But he felt close to Franklin then, for his care and focus; he envied Franklin. His friend put this thing together the way Gilbert put together Demerol habit, pill by pill, wire by wire, but what Franklin made from forward motion, Gilbert made from stillness.

Neither right nor wrong applied to what they were doing. It was. For all Gilbert knew they could be suggesting a mere possibility; and what is a bomb that does not explode but a question? Franklin stopped and said to Gilbert, "There comes a time when a man knows that the law has been used against him by the forces charged with his protection, and he must become the law unto himself," and then he shut the trunk.

"We really going to?" Gilbert asked.

"No."

"Okay." Gilbert felt an uneasy relief that he knew as fear and denial of what they were doing.

"The bomb is."

"Jesus, Franklin—"

"What does that mean when you say it, huh? Jesus. What does that mean?"

"Nothing."

“This is what I’ve been talking about, man. Hollowness. Please say something else.”

“Boys,” Lourdes shouted from the car.

Franklin started the Tempo and turned on the heater. “Seventy degrees.” He held the door and admired his handiwork, then he locked and shut the door carefully. “Fifteen minutes.”

A wide beam of light shone into the parking lot and Gilbert ducked behind the Tempo. Franklin stalked over to the concrete wall and pressed his back to it. Gilbert could hear the expensive whine of its engine. Franklin waved at him to stay down. As the footsteps neared, Gilbert’s heart beat furiously, and he became dizzy, hiding behind a ticking bomb warming up. Franklin began shouting police commands. Gilbert heard the whimpering of a young man, and he stood. Franklin had him in a headlock, some suited kid kneeling beside his briefcase, asking not to be killed. Franklin told him to shut up and tightened his grip on the kid’s neck. Gilbert felt the cold getting through his jacket.

“Help me,” he said to Gilbert. “I’m a lawyer.” Gilbert didn’t care.

“What are you doing here?” Franklin asked.

“Dropping off papers. Every Friday.”

Franklin motioned to Gilbert look in the case. A stack of buyout contracts, most signed, sat in an envelope. “You work for Ed Hert,” Gilbert said. Some of the names were familiar, and Gilbert flipped through the papers hoping to find his and Franklin’s buyouts. He made two checks and began a third.

“My boss,” he said. “Look, he and I can do things in this building. Benefits, pay, anything you want. Let me go.” This kid, an errand boy for an errand boy,

embodied what Gilbert had been raised to believe in, but hearing him plead to Gilbert, dealing, brought forth a surge for Gilbert that he thought the source of Franklin's action.

Gilbert wanted a peaceful solution, though. He did not want or welcome violence, not against people anyway. "Let's take him upstairs and get the papers, Frank."

"Car's counting down." The two stood there. Gilbert could feel the bomb.

"Then we take him," Gilbert said. Franklin hollered like a cowboy.

"You're trash, you understand?" the kid said. "Failures committing felonies. No wonder you're losing your jobs. Welcome to jail." He went on.

Lourdes came towards them, her heels clapping against the pavement and punched the young lawyer in the mouth which shut him up. "Boys," she said, pulling on gloves. "Decision?"

"Who the fuck are you?" the kid said, and Lourdes punched him in the mouth again.

"He's cute," she said, and pulled duct-tape from her purse. "Gilbert, hit him if he speaks." She handed him the roll and winked.

The lawyer tried to wriggle away from the tape, but Franklin clamped him so tight his head turned purple. "Let's go," Gilbert said, satisfied with his work.

"Smart," she said, turned, and Gilbert and Franklin carried the lawyer to the car. She opened the trunk and they put him inside.

Maybe a minute passed—they were on the road—before fire-light danced on the belly of the blast-cloud. They'd felt it, even in the car, a drum beat, and Gilbert became terrified, like the first time he'd been left alone as a child. He didn't know what to do or where to go,

only that they needed to keep running. To get away from this place and the suburbs, where they stood out, did not fit.

## A Strong Hand

Harmon

The elevator was cold at that time of year when neither air conditioning nor heat was appropriate, and Harmon welcomed the relief. He didn't want sweat-stains to become noticeable. Harmon had taken his jacket off on the sixteenth floor, hot from climbing the stairs because the guys told him the elevator was out of service. They had a good laugh when he opened the fire-door on twenty-two.

"I'm sick of the same old breakfast crap," Carter said. "Let's get Chinese."

His guys Brian and James laughed. Harmon remained silent, embarrassed that he'd eaten breakfast and would have to eat again. He should have remembered.

"That's pretty out there, sir, if I may say so. Pretty nontraditional," said James, Carter's number three on a three man team.

"Sounds good to me. Coffee and donuts, coffee and muffin, coffee. Boys, breakfast gives me the shits," said Brian.

Everyone laughed, even Harmon. Brian was funny.

"I love coming out here to see you guys. I don't have friends like this back in Cincinnati," Harmon said.

Throwing his overcoat across his forearm, Carter said, "You're not from Salt Lake? I thought you were from Salt Lake, Harmon?"

"Me, too," said Brian.

“Very funny. Very funny. Cincinnati, born and raised.”

“Okay, so. Chink garden or imperial chink?” Carter and Brian laughed, so Harmon joined in. He didn’t think anything particularly funny, but better to be safe. This is Harmon’s last chance with his office. Close the deal or look for a new job.

“Screw you guys,” James said. “And who said you could laugh, Harmon? What if they’d said, ‘let’s get some Black-B-Q or McNigger?’”

“It wasn’t funny, James. I laughed is all. You’re Chinese and—”

“That’s another one of your problems, Harmon. You can’t tell a Gook from a Chink.”

Harmon looked down. He’d polished his shoes. He wanted to finish this deal, and would eat all the Chinese he could so he’d never have to come back to Boston.

“So which place,” Carter said.

“Let’s go Imperial,” Brian said.

“It’s on me,” Harmon said quietly, even though he knew the check would more than double his meal allowance.

“That’s generous of you,” James said.

—

Harmon and Vivi

Harmon had woken at four, a half hour before usual when he’d travel to Boston. The morning seemed not to notice him. The cat did not notice him. When he got out of the shower and hung his towel on the hook inside of the closet door, his bare backside two feet from his wife, she did not notice him. He turned towards her, hot under the

down comforter, like she'd come from a shower, steam coming off her back. Harmon petted the silk teddy, measured her hip with his hand. She moaned and he leaned down to kiss her neck. It smelled like ground beef and lavender.

She said his name into her pillow.

"Yes, dear."

"We did it yesterday."

"No we didn't."

"Oh, Harmon."

"Who did *you* do it with?" he said sweetly.

"Maybe I dreamed we did."

Harmon chuckled. "Must have been pretty good."

"Baby, I'm tired."

He squeezed the soft flesh on her lower hip, almost her buttock. She'd said all this before, and he wanted to say something about that, but he had to get ready. Anyway, he didn't know how to phrase what he'd say.

He dressed. His best suit, ash-colored and American-cut. There was a tip-pocket that the tailor hadn't opened, but Harmon hadn't noticed until he thought it was too late to return with such a pesky request. He stood in his wingtips, looking at his wife. He checked the time. The car would arrive in fifteen minutes. He grabbed a rag from under the bathroom sink; Harmon put a foot up on the toilet seat and polished one shoe then the other until the leather looked clean, matte. When he finished, the feet did not feel his. The sensation frightened him, and he straightened up and looked in the mirror which calmed him. A great deal of preparation had been made to close the deal. For three

weeks, he'd been working on this account. He'd get a signature on the contract, and then maybe take vacation.

"I'm off," he said to his wife. "Back in a couple of days."

"Okay. Good luck."

"Who needs luck?" he said.

"Never hurts," she said, and stretched under the covers.

"I love you."

"Good luck, baby."

Harmon kissed her on the head, her meaty, flowery head, gathered his coat and briefcase, and went to the porch where he waited for the car seven minutes past the scheduled pickup time.

—

Harmon

In the bathroom of Imperial China, Harmon pulled the last paper towel from the polished-brass dispenser and wiped his forehead. He needed more. He'd begun to sweat, from the spicy shrimp that had lodged itself in his throat. Jesus, he said to himself. Not one of them stood. From the faucet he collected a handful of cool water and splashed his face. The elevator joke, James and Brian extending their legs under the table, into Harmon's space—he'd shrunk, accommodated them. Harmon saw his wet reflection and wanted to tear the ashen suit from his body. This, he thought, is how the universe treats the unfaithful, by sending them to meetings that will not bear fruit. By hiding the clearest facts. Last week they'd sent him to an address on the waterfront that did not exist. And the cabbie had told him so, but Harmon insisted. "I'll wait," the man had said, "because I

feel bad. You don't look right." It made Harmon sick to think of what he'd done, and how he'd responded to the cabbie by adjusting the knot of his tie.

The man in the mirror did not resemble Harmon as he saw himself. This man stretched the seams of his suit, had big meaty hands that could strangle a horse. Not one of them had stood to help when Harmon could not breathe. They'd watched. Carter wiped his mouth and laid the napkin back in his lap, while Brian held a ball of fried chicken before his open mouth with chopsticks, both of them waiting. Only James had any emotion on his face, and it was the purest Harmon had ever seen. It frightened him for someone to be so afraid. And thinking of Vivi's face mangled with such horror, he became someone else.

—

Harmon

James! I'm sorry about this. Really, I am. Jesus, what is that mess? Disgusting, James. When it became clear that our deal would not pull through, when I noticed that asshole twitch in Carter's lower lip, like he was about to gnaw me like a pencil, man, tattoo me with his ivory league teeth—you nipping at my heels like a terrier. That was *your* mistake, the second. You let slip, laughed first, and called me a name I've been called a thousand times, James, and only believed it once. The time you spoke it, that required action, and here we are.

I've hated you since you picked me up from the airport three weeks ago in this convertible Volkswagen. I knew you had no morals right then. You're bleeding out your eye, James. Did you know that all those crying Virgin Marys were steam-driven? Invented by Greeks or Romans—an old trick. An easy one.

Is that rag too far down your throat? You're shaking, James. You should stop shaking. Attention, James—you're distracting. If I crash we'll both die.

Don't be afraid, James. I don't think I can kill you. Thinking about it. A hundred ways. But I've kept too much inside and have accumulated a trove of useless ideas and facts, the least of which is that my wife is sleeping with another man. Or woman. Do you think that's worse, James, if your woman cheats on you with another woman? Good, you stopped shaking. Good, good. I'm thinking it's worse, James, that a jury would be less likely to go along with a crime-of-passion murder if the deceased is a woman killed by a man, or if they're both killed, two women instead of a woman and a man. Seems worse to me, absolutely *the worst*. A man and a woman is a conspiracy. Two women—that can be blamed on the husband. People feel sorry for women trapped in marriages. They're victims, beyond consideration of homosexuality. Sleeping with another woman becomes therapy. I suspect killing three lesbians wouldn't be deemed equal as killing two; the nurture is gone at three, I suspect. It only takes one woman to heal another, that's the limit. Some perversion in our minds, James, that says, 'Those damn lesbians engaged in fantasy-type sex and left me out.' Some society, James. But I'm no killer. I told you that. May be close, but I'm not there yet. Take that gag as the worst of it.

We're after something, James, something bigger than you and me. I'll need your help. I'm not afraid to say that, whatever's at the end of this highway.

—

Harmon and Vivi

His wife sat at the dining table reading. She never read. Harmon hung his coat in the closet and closed the door softly, the click slow and guilty.

Without looking up from the magazine, she said to him, “Four years, and you haven’t been home late from work a single time.”

“Now I have.”

“I’m surprised they’d ask you to stay.”

“Well.” Harmon was no liar. He wished he was, many times. Maybe then he wouldn’t be sent to Boston every weekend to grind out a contract for low cost office communication software.

“I’m going to hurt you, sweetheart. You love me too much.”

“That’s true.” He felt his sanity depended on this woman, on her presence in his life. That he’d touched their binding string with a razor frightened him.

“Harmon. Don’t say that.” She was still reading. “This is interesting.”

“I’m going to shower.”

“Yes. We’re filaments, maybe. Infinite numbers of them, energy vibrated into being.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know, but I like it.”

“Well, I’d like to know what it means.”

“Words don’t mean a thing.”

“I’ll shower.”

She went on reading and Harmon stood watching her for a moment, then turned and went to the bedroom.

Before sleep, they had sex. Harmon worked hard for her. He felt tested and wanted to do well. They went for a long time, changing positions and trying every angle. Harmon discovered a kind of power that unnerved him, one that comes when a man screws two women in the same day. And for a second he doubted that she was enjoying herself, that she was trying to get something out of him, and she'd given herself for this purpose.

—

Vivi

How is it a man carries on with himself?

—

James

I didn't think it could get so hot this time of year, but I never thought I'd be kidnapped by a business partner either.

Harmon's head hangs forward, a little to the left, almost touching the window. He wrapped the seatbelt around his neck and went at it. Simple and terrible as that. I killed her, he said. I killed her, and she doesn't know. Said that twice, hard each time, his throat closing on the words. And then he pulled the seatbelt out. He said, I need a hand. I said, No.

I won't untie you unless you help me out, make it quick. Quicker. If not, you'll go, too, but real slow. The worst way, James, he said. And he did it and now his face is the color of the north Atlantic, eyes red. I'll cover your eyes, if you don't want to see, he said. Okay, I said, shaking my head. That's okay. I can close my eyes.

No you can't, he said. Not a chance. Then there was a quiet that came and went, slow as the tides. Harmon screamed at himself, in his throat, mouth closed. That was the hardest part.

You shouldn't have any regrets, James. I've poisoned my wife's blood.

I told him about all these people I know that don't even seem sick. My sister, I said, traveled around the world. Twice, I said. I don't know.

Sure, he said.

You don't have to do it, I said.

Yes, I do. Alive, we divorce. It's been a while coming and can't wait. If that happens she's dead.

He said that the only way for her to be insured is if she kept what she had. No company picks up an expense like that. She'll be well taken care of, is how he put it.

What hand are you?

What do you mean?

Your strong hand.

Right, I said.

He untied my right arm and said that every night, for weeks, his wife came to bed after him, once he'd turned the light out. Harmon tried to play it like a game one night by leaving the light on and staying awake. He'd lost. She hadn't even cracked the door to see if he'd fallen asleep.

In the morning, she was gone. Harmon called off work and was scolded. "The deal needs done," his boss said. Like that. "The deal needs done," like the floor needs swept. But Harmon had been dragged through the mud for weeks, by Carter and Brian,

and me. I did it, too, but Harmon was nice enough not to mention it. I kicked his heels most of the way to the Chinese place, and I can feel that walk all over again, the ping of his heels in my toes. He said he thought an end was coming, that he could take all we could give and the last thing would be a contract. He was beginning to think that maybe he'd been mistaken about success and had flopped as a husband and these were only the two most recent failures. Determination kept him home, not that he would ever say such a thing. His wife, his marriage could be saved. He thought it could be pulled out of the dirt.

Said he'd waited all day, into the night when the house began to get cold and traffic rushed along the main road. After a morning cup of coffee, Harmon had negotiated the terms of his suffering. He would do nothing until she returned. It could cleanse and strengthen him, give him *balls*, as we used to say to him. By evening, he felt his body devouring itself, shifting and turning teeth. Somehow this fed his optimism. His wife did not come back for two more days. She came through the door, a dark smear on her face, in sunglasses, and didn't notice Harmon, or didn't seem to, didn't give him immediate recognition, which he needed as badly as a sip of water and a piece of bread. Walked right past him. He felt himself reaching out to touch her, catch her, but his arm lay still. The bedroom door shut and Harmon heard the shower come on.

As she showered, teased Harmon with her sounds, he began to drift. His heart slowed and beat awkwardly. It shrank, he told me, down to nothing. The organ rattled like a pea in a paper sack. He saw something dark slide over him, like used motor oil, smooth and viscous. Harmon opened his mouth maybe to eat it—he just did. It touched him on the face and he closed his eyes. The blackness cooled him, gave him water that

tasted like blood and which he could not swallow well and ran down his neck and chest.

I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, his wife said.

You're dark, he said. Pitch night, honey.

I got you, she said. I got you real good.

That's what he wanted to hear. She needed him, had taken him closer to her center, to where he thought she held him when they'd married. That helps, Harmon told her.

Right.

Good.

Let me get you some water, she said. Do you think you need a doctor?

No. I love you.

And it's a dumb thing to repeat, but he said it. "Insurance killed me."

And I looked at him the way I used to my grandfather when he'd drone on about the Japanese. He gave me this story, then tried to pop his head off, and, contrary to expectation, seemed less crazy for it.

—

Vivi

How is it that a man carries on with himself as he does? Folded and pocketed like his wallet. One-way-out-thinking. One-way-in-thinking, too. Didn't take long to get down to sex, but it'd be a lie to play like it wasn't hanging on my mind about half the waking day. This morning I warmed my own bed, the other side snow-cold with Harmon gone. There'd been a time for us. Wild, loud and beginning-to-end clear as a cannon shot. No stopping for nothing; powered forward by liquor and sex, buzzing. We went

from tying knots with our bodies and throwing ourselves—really off bridges—bungee jumping, for crissakes. I can still feel it, my heart a finch in my chest. Harmon—up and down hooting and whooping on that elastic cord, green-faced, eyes bulging—threw up on himself once he'd been stood up on his own two feet. Right down his shirt, not wanting to make a mess. A darling thing, but it was the end. He cracked somewhere inside. I didn't see it; I couldn't have. Harmon asked me that night, hard and slow and careful, to be his. Awful, it was so slow. The words came out and I jumped on him and that was that. I'd wanted it so badly, like sunlight—to be one burning explosion with a man, one dangerous blaze rolled by the wind. I should have seen—heard, I should have heard how he'd turned ahead of me, down a street and up the driveway of a quiet house, a deadened box on dry land. Not a flower will grow. No careful hand could raise a thing in these beds.

He'd turned to this place and to work and to a notebook of crude equations and lists with titles like "Retirement" and "Boston" and I took that notebook and set it on fire. It was the hottest thing in the house, and Harmon singed his hand trying to stop it. He cried, and I knew it wasn't for the hand he was soothing with cold water at the kitchen sink.

His mother told me on our wedding day that he was a crybaby, that bitch. Hadn't done a thing about it but hold him. I'm not the mother of a grown man. I'm no cold water for a man shut on himself and stuffed against his own ass like a scared child and I know that woman he found was just the first to see that he'd open up to soft talk, to a coo and a hand run over his head. I am not a woman to play the string of my husband's heart. Good or bad, I was here for love.

## Be Gone

Oskar dipped a hand in his bag and flung another paper onto another lawn. The headlines had been bad the last few days. *Cops Didn't Flinch...Downtown Unrest, Rebellion?...White Supremacists Focus...An Officer a Merchant and a Victim...Suburban Reaction...Riot Response: Jobs for Teens...Citizens Stand Guard.* The news beat on him, a bad paper and a lousy job. He didn't know he'd get a beating, and even if he did, so what? "Punk-ass paper bitch," a boy said. Oskar turned around. He felt pressure on his back, a fist stuck behind his right ear, and he pissed himself. Not a sound came out of Oskar, who, crumpled up into a ball and clutching his canvas bag of news, hoped the beating would end quickly. Last week Oskar read a small piece in section B that mentioned this very thing. "Boss," he'd said. "You know about this?" "What are you," the man said, "a journalist?"

The boys cursed him, called him fat, old, stupid, faggoty. Paperboy. Some of it was true. Oskar didn't fight back, boring victim that he was. Didn't even make a sound. An officer might drive by. He trusted them to get the job done. He wanted his mother, any woman really. Oskar, a car-less, thirty-something, speed bag lying on a stranger's lawn with his eyes closed, waiting for the feet of those future stars, *employees* the paper says, to lead them away, home, to somebody else.

A light came on. A door.

“Bastards!” a man yelled from his porch. “Go on before I shoot every damn one of you.”

The boys looked up—Oskar also opened an eye—kicked Oskar once more, and they ran away celebrating.

“You too, buddy,” the man said and pumped a round into the chamber of his shotgun.

Oskar stood slowly and dropped a paper on the man’s lawn.

He took a few deep, painful breaths. He was confused, had taken a couple of bumps on the head. His right arm beat painfully at the shoulder. Should call the cops but it’s over. Didn’t see their faces. Oskar felt like he was thirteen and didn’t have an answer to a why in the world, like he’d just had his first cigarette and had become unglued, a little sick. Now, at thirty-one, he needed that cigarette. Lots of cigarettes. A wind blew through Oskar’s shirt and his heart began to slow. He put a hand in his pocket and took out the pack. He opened the lid. Oskar put the last one between his lips. He closed the lid and put the empty in his pocket. He groped for his lighter, found it, made a flame and touched the tobacco. Better. Maybe he’d move out of his parent’s house, find some friends, get a new job—quit smoking. He didn’t have anyone. Maybe he’d call Mickey, his ex, and apologize for abandoning her when she got sick. A decade had passed. He’d made himself sorry enough. But why bring up bad memories? “Flames die out,” his father had said. “Always do, son. Did for your grandparents, and trust you me it will for dear old mom and dad.”

Out of cigarettes, he walked toward the gas station, about two blocks away and barely off his route. There hadn't always been a gas station at the corner, where there'd once been a bar and a small playground, but at least his neighborhood had a useful symbol of its decline. Oskar's old grade school sat abandoned across the street. Three stone stories, hollow. Windows busted out. He'd been stronger there, where he met the woman he thought he'd marry. An odd bit of knowledge for such a young boy, but love is the most important thing. Everyone said so. That was Oskar's job. But he'd only gotten this far. Possibly, he'd confused a friendship for love.

He'd felt sorry for a long time. They'd been here, to the old, plain, wood-faced bar that once stood where the fuel pumps are, and tried to get cigarettes as kids, sixth graders. He sent Mickey, breasts developed and bound by the bra he could see beneath her neon-pink tank-top, rubbed thin from washing. Ten minutes went by. Fifteen. Or five. A slow five. Mickey came out crying, and without cigarettes. She stood close in front of him, palms to her face. Instead of putting his arms around Mickey and running, he stepped around her and went in. His feet felt fiery and a couple of old men hid their bearded faces with hats and beer glasses. The bartender, wiping his hands in a dirty bar towel, turned and looked Oskar over. He was big, wore a tight flannel shirt and had a mustache like a rodeo belt buckle on his face. Licking his lips, he stared at Oskar, who knew then that a few old men could get into a child with their eyes. Oskar turned and ran home to a quiet, empty house. That Mickey hadn't waited, Oskar took as a small betrayal. Right or wrong, he'd felt it for years, even while they dated in high school.

Oskar turned the corner. A bus sat curbed in front of the gas station, its engine hammering idly away. Bruised and swollen, his thighs rubbed against his wet jeans and

became irritated. His heart beat slow and hard. Whump-ump. The strap of his bag dug into his neck. Pain slowly crept down Oskar's injured arm and he dropped the bag on a patch of grass next to the gas station, a small relief. He hadn't seen his mother in a couple of days and wondered if she would be home when he returned. He could use her at a time like this. She'd probably mentioned a trip and he hadn't listened and he missed her now. She could be dead, cut up, caught in the riot. That happens to women. Oskar sees it in his papers all the time. Cut up. Slit open. Almost never shot.

He'd wanted to kill Mickey for leaving him alone that day. Twenty-some years ago, small and wetfaced outside the bar—if he could tell her how sorry he's been—Oskar felt the refuse of the world booming in the cavity of his body. Her pealing love, claps of thunder—Oskar hadn't listened.

His organs churned, trying to wash themselves clean. Dope, he thought, cigarettes—funny tingle on his lips.

A sign on the station store's door said "Late night service at window." The attendant sat there, skin seeping out the sides of her shirt as she stared down the empty aisles. Knocking lightly on the glass, Oskar mouthed, *Hello*. The girl turned and looked Oskar up and down. She seemed disappointed and Oskar suddenly felt similarly about himself. She slid the drawer out. He put in his money and pushed it back to her.

"WELL?" The volume of the speaker jolted Oskar, and the gray-eyed girl reached for a small black knob.

"Two packs of these," Oskar said, holding his empty one against the glass.

"You *messed* up?" The speaker squealed, louder than before.

He stepped back and said nothing. His head was full and he wanted to lighten it up. The bus's brake hissed, the coach rolled away, and Oskar wondered where it would end up.

"Never seen an ear like that before," she said. "Not on no human."

"Come on, lady. Cigarettes."

"I'll need I.D.," she said, leaning on her elbows.

Oskar pressed his face against the glass, a cool relief that made him glad he'd done it. What happened to courtesy and kindness, he thought. When he pulled his face away a smear of blood remained where his nose had been.

"I've got till ten thirty," she said. The drawer slid out to Oskar with a paper towel in it, and he started to wipe his nose. The attendant cleared her throat and said, "The glass, man. Half a mind I've got to call the cops on you if that blood ain't wiped up *real* quick."

He cleaned the glass and put his I.D. in the drawer. She took it and hurried out of sight. Oskar walked across the storefront windows, looking, but couldn't find her. What a time to use the bathroom, he thought, and banged on the glass. He pounded harder and harder until his left hand became numb. The attendant came walking down an aisle, paused to wipe the corners of her mouth in the mirror on the sunglasses display, made a phone of her hand and put it to her ear. He could hear her heavy breaths through the speaker.

"Boy, your face looks bad. You know that? What you look like's put together and taken apart and put together again."

"Give me the cigarettes, please. I'm already behind."

“This money stinks,” the woman said, holding the paper to her nose. “Why can’t I stop smelling it?”

Oskar looked down, trying to be calm. He never lost his temper, but he hurt all over and wanted cigarettes. His lungs itched. He cleared his throat.

“You say something?” she said.

“No.”

“Why would I think you said something if you didn’t?”

“You’re that kind of person.” Oskar wanted to yell at her, about the riots and the city and people like her slowing things down. She watched him, which Oskar didn’t like. “I don’t want to be messed with, understand?”

“Okay. Okay.” She turned and picked up the phone. “One second, Mr. Impatient.”

She switched off the speaker and Oskar could not hear what she said into the phone.

The thought of jail terrified him. The possibility made him shiver. Maybe she was faking, for him to make amends. Oskar apologized briefly, trying to get his I.D. back. She stared at him from her chair. There was no use running. Oskar was not fast in any way. A police officer arrived in a couple of minutes. He would fix this right. Oskar should have reported the beating, gone to the doctor. A hospital seemed like a comfortable place to be, and Oskar sat down on a parking block.

“How ya doin’ tonight, sir,” the officer said. His thumbs slipped into the utility belt. “There a problem here?”

“Trying to get cigarettes.”

“That right, ma’am?”

“I asked for his I.D. and he started hassling me.”

“I didn’t do anything like that.”

The officer shook his head at Oskar. “Do you know what’s happening down the street? Any idea? We’re working hard to stomp out a riot and every time we think it’s about done someone like you stokes it up.”

“I only asked for the cigarettes.”

“Race relations are very important here and now we all need to be more sensitive, even to Puerto Ricans.”

“I ain’t Puerto Rican, damnit,” the woman said, and turned the speaker off. She flailed her arms around and the windows vibrated with the stabbing beats of her yells.

“Got a problem with that, sir?”

Oskar didn’t know what to say, so he shook his head. The officer stood still and silent, hand on his hips, feet a few inches more than shoulder-width apart. Oskar didn’t know what would or could happen to him. “On the wall,” he said. “I’m trying to be calm, but you’re weirding me out.”

“I didn’t *do* anything,” Oskar said, losing his patience. He wanted to hit the officer. He wanted to blow his hand up through his thumb, like cartoons, make a big red brick of it and hit the officer in the face, knock him into his cruiser and laugh. It would all be funny because his hand was huge. And if his hand was huge, and the violence was funny, it would all be a joke, and it would be safe, and he would feel good about it. He could hit every police officer he saw for a joke. People would appreciate that. But Oskar hated cartoons because there wasn’t a single real thing in them. Enough of such garbage

occupied Oskar's mind already. Here at the real, smelly gas station, he'd move toward the wall, turn, pull the gun from the cop and whip the broad side of the metal into the man's temple. And he wouldn't get away with that. Somebody tried the brick downtown yesterday. Didn't work. Too many cops and not enough bricks. Oskar thought he'd do it if he could get away with it, but he wasn't that kind of man. Sitting on the cold ground, heat and pressure rose in his chest. The bartender's stare, all those years ago, was the first time Oskar knew he was nothing. His first shame. When tested by men, Oskar failed. He would always fail that test.

"Now," said the officer, and Oskar complied. "Any I.D. on you?"

"She has it." Oskar motioned to the attendant, who, with both hands open and in the air, shook her head.

"Truth'll make this much easier on you, okay? I'm really trying to be calm."

"She's got it." Oskar was thirsty and needed some water to break the seal between his gums and lips.

"You on drugs?"

"No."

"Why do you look like this?"

"A group of kids jumped me."

"Black?"

"I don't know."

"That sounds ridiculous. You know that?"

"It's been in the papers. Happened last week to someone else."

“I’m not calling that in, bud. Absurd. Listen to it.” The officer turned into his shoulder radio: “Dispatch: be advised. We’ve got, uh, kids. Running around district five. Beating up middle-aged white males. Paper boys.” He turned back to Oskar. “Did they put that musk on you or that your own?”

Oskar did not respond. “Dispatch: victims of the kids are urinated upon.”

Oskar eyed pieces of loosed asphalt in front of him.

“They make you smoke dope? Kidnap you, say they’d kill your family if you didn’t hit the pipe. Am I right, Strawberry?” The officer laughed. “I’m just kidding. Didn’t really radio that stuff in. It helps with tension. See how ridiculous it sounds?”

“His ear’s all black too, Officer,” the attendant said suddenly.

The officer shined his light on Oskar. “Ain’t that something?” He asked Oskar to stand, started to put cuffs on him, and when Oskar tried to turn away, to ask why, the officer slugged him in the spine, on a fresh-plum bruise. He put him in the back of the cruiser. The officer sat up front and ran Oskar’s information through the computer. “No record. No warrants. Nothing. Na-na-nananana-na. That sound right to you?”

“I want to press charges. That girl robbed *me*. She has my money and I.D.”

Another bus pulled up to the curb. The engine slowed to an idle and the door opened. “Better give these people a heads up, huh?” The officer pulled Oskar out of the car and pushed him over the cruiser’s trunk, kicked his feet apart. “Be easy,” he said. “No problem. Everyone is calm here.” A few tired, sweaty passengers got off the bus, walked right past Oskar, and made some dissatisfied groans after reading the sign on the station door.

“No bathroom,” the attendant said.

“Gimme a big purple-drink,” a man said to the girl behind the glass.

“This is B.S.,” Oskar said loudly. “This is illegal.” He felt the metal fall from his wrists, but the cop was pressing him down on the trunk, his chest against Oskar’s back, his crotch against Oskar’s ass.

He whispered in Oskar’s ear, “There’ll be no more trouble in the town. Hop on that bus, bunny rabbit, and everything will be all right,” then pushed him away from the car.

Oskar looked towards his paper-bag lying on the grass. Everything he’d ever seen was past the dumpster at the edge of the parking lot. The bag pulled at Oskar. *You’ll lose your job. Get it, bucko? Your job. Your livelihood, man.* He thought of his house, his room, his parents. He was sick with trust. Everyone. Where was his mother? He felt diseased and tired. Beaten by children. Humiliation, that he hadn’t left the city on his own, for living a boy’s life without any of the fun, pushed him toward the bus. He’d go.

A well-dressed man, his dark hair slicked back and the silver chain from a pocket watch hanging outside his suede vest, stared at Oskar, and shook his skyward-pointed finger, on his way behind the gas station. The officer leaned against his cruiser and eyed Oskar.

The sign on the front of the coach was blank. Oksar put his hand in a pocket and felt enough paper for a ticket and maybe a meal or two, then climbed onto the bus.

Shadows occupied most of the seats, dark shapes too tired to get off at the stop. Some had hats pulled over their eyes. No one looked comfortable—shifting around, pulling down pant legs, adjusting air nozzles, wiping faces—riding out the long wait to somewhere. Oskar thought he’d like a window seat, to watch the inches move by so fast

he'd get sick to his stomach, but he was already feeling queasy and his face grew warm as he thought about people watching him. He found a seat and started looking over the floor.

He was so tired. His lap and legs were cooling off. And smelling. Oskar crossed his arms. The weight of his head stung his neck and shoulders. His body was bruised badly. He wanted someone to talk to him. Woman. He hurt all over. The word hurt to think. Hurt. Sorry, O, said O to O. Things didn't work out, O. Clean yourself up. And that *woman*. I know. Sorry about her. That was me. Ohio. And where is your mother?

Oskar lay turned away from the man next to him, unsure of how much time or distance had passed. He'd slept restlessly, and dreamed of some growling beast. The bus's engine, Oskar decided, had put the sound in his head.

"You smell good," the man said. "Reminds me of home."

Oskar moved his legs. He was cold now, still damp with sweat and urine. He was a toilet. A drowsy receptacle. He straightened up and faced the man. "Who are you?"

The man, the vest from the gas station, looked at Oskar, the reading light a narrow stripe of soft yellow light on his knuckled face. "Blood is the body. Every drop," he said, and wiped Oskar's cheek and held his brick-red streaked fingers under the light. "You're something of a butterball," he said pulling his fingers, clean, from his mouth.

"What are you doing?" Oskar turned, irritated, knowing this question a sign of his weakness, a childish response to this older, stronger man.

The man repeated Oskar's question in a disappointed tone. "I can taste what you feed on. Disgusting."

Shake. Shake his hand, Oskar thought.

"We're gonna have to clean you out," the man said.

"Call me Clay. Farmer out west."

"Corn?" He looked out the window. No corn in fields.

"No, flesh. I farm beef."

Oskar was starting to feel his cuts, the blood dry most places. He wanted so badly to be comfortable awhile. He itched. Piss itch. He'd dreamed of her body. Made love to it, rough, pulled back and touched himself over her obscure face and for a second she became his mother. Neither of them real in the slightest and he knew it even in his sleep. Oskar looked across Clay's body, out the opposite window, the city, its shadows and stone hiding places, out of sight.

"You need a place to go awhile. That right?"

Oskar nodded. "Something." He itched inside and out. Skin split under his shirt. Two sides pulled by the red glue. He touched a gash on his forehead with the tip of a finger then looked at it. Dust.

"Can you make it west?" Clay said.

Oskar reached into his pocket and pulled out his cash and showed the handful to Clay. Dollars meant distance, and he didn't think twenty bucks would go far, but he hoped it might be far enough.

"This is meant to be, Oskar. I'll cover your fare if you work it off."

Clay extended his right hand and Oskar took hold of it.

“You’ll be shoulder deep in cow-cunt before next week. Lead ‘em and breed ‘em with the warmest hand of god.”

Oskar expected more space when he and Clay stepped out of the Morta, New Mexico bus station. Morta, from what he could tell, was something of a boom town, just not in any modern, technological, or manufacturing capacity. This was rural urbanity. Tractors and pickups tractors pulling pickups pickups pulling pickups: the thoroughfare. Families huddled under umbrella-covered tables outside five or six cafés. Hello’s, Buenas’, and How d’you do’s rang out in the street like pigeons cooing around a fountain, pecking at seed.

“Truck’s over here, son,” Clay said.

“What is this place?” Oskar said, following Clay across the street.

“Tool Co. Hardware moved in with a few jobs, and here the hell we are. Almost impossible to find a man willing to do honest work anymore.”

Oskar thought about Clay’s last promise on the bus. That it sounded vaguely veterinary encouraged him. But his arm still hurt and how deep would it go?

“Place was better without that big box. Work makes people crazy because paychecks, *checks*, make people crazy. Timecards, computers, banks, checks, plastic, fancy coffee that ain’t called coffee—and all this called morning or afternoon. It’s all a day, damnit. ‘Oh, I’m a morning person.’ Shut up!” he said and grabbed a young woman from the sidewalk. He reached to his back pocket with his left hand. Pulled a knife. Flipped the blade out. “Who the hell are you?” he said, and released her. “Nothing. Probably lives on credit.”

The girl stood, horrified. The police would come. She ran away. Oskar looked up and down the street. Any second now.

Clay came close to Oskar's face and said, "Few gray areas exist in this world, Oskar. And where we find them, we find answers. Remember that." Oskar nodded. "Now get in."

His truck was covered in orange mud and dust, unlocked, windshield cracked, no gas door. There were tarped boxes in the trunk. Oskar could feel a stinging on his forearms and he got in the truck.

Oskar fastened his seatbelt as Clay gave the key an angry turn and the engine responded with a loud, powerful, tear. Morta was pedestrian—people walked through the streets without even looking for traffic, but Clay's engine was an alarm they'd heard before. Oskar felt nervously privileged to ride with Clay, and people jumped to the sidewalks as the two of them started on their way.

"You're gonna like the ranch, Oskar. Best in Nuevo Mexico. Quiet, secluded, efficient, purposeful, clean—everything a man could ask for. Ordained to succeed."

Oskar didn't know what he meant, but he meant it. That was obvious and good enough for Oskar.

Twenty-seven hours they'd been on the road so far, but, from what Clay said, there were only minutes left to go. Despite the dirt, the red roads were fast and smooth. Clay drove—passing through this strange country at a high speed made Oskar nervous—his right hand on the wheel and the other hung out the window. He was being taken into the bright mouth of something unknown. Oskar wondered about the farm. He'd never

worked with animals before—not even a pet—and though Clay’s description disgusted him, he was ready for the work.

When they finally arrived at the ranch, the sun had started to set behind the red, pine dusted mountains. From the gate, there didn’t seem to be much to the palace but fence. A long lot of fence. Not a cornerpost in sight. Clay unlocked the gate and swung it wide open. He turned and looked at Oskar, waved his hand with a get over here, and Oskar started out of the car. “Drive,” Clay said. His shout embarrassed Oskar and he kept his eyes low and away from Clay as he pulled the truck through, two hands on the wheel, straight ahead. First drive in a long time, he thought. Stop. Park. He slid over and he thought of other longs. All the longs of the last day. Long day. Long time, long trip, long wait, long sleep, long road, long fence. He’d have to talk to his parent’s soon.

Clay shut the gate. Oskar in the truck. A gate at his tail. Tailgate. A truck, a tail, a gate. An officer, a merchant, and a victim. The headline. He was nervous as hell. The dirt road led who-knows-where and he was penned up now, caged. Clay walked up to the passenger side and told Oskar to get back behind the wheel. “Bring her in,” he said. “Real easy. Only one road to Rome.”

Oskar started the truck forward.

“Listen carefully to what I’m going to tell you now. One time. That’s it.”

Oskar nodded.

“Say you understand,” Clay said and wiped some spittle away with the back of his hand.

“Got it.”

“Say, ‘I understand.’”

“I understand,” Oskar said.

The tops of the tall pines tipped back and forth in the wind and the road rose and fell gently.

“During work, I will tell you in a yelling kind of a voice to do something. When that happens, do what I’ve yelled at you to do. No hesitation, no shame. No cowering or avoiding my eyes. That is an unpardonable sin against me. You do that again,” he put his warm hand on Oskar’s shoulder, “I will kill you. And you’ll be glad for it. I won’t stand for a man to let himself trampled or kicked to death by being dumber than a beast.”

Oskar stared down the road, his hands moving uncomfortably over the wheel. Clay sounded like the officer. The thought of the man’s weight on his back sent a chill down his spine.

“One more time—tell me you understand.”

“I understand,” Oskar said. His mouth was dry. He hadn’t smoked in a long time. He was afraid to ask Clay.

They were silent for a moment. The wind began to whip through the cab as they ascended a steep slope. “You’ll see a gas tank on the right in a second, follow the road left. Up the mesa.”

He hadn’t any idea of what a gas tank looked like. Oskar wanted to know what to say. That he understood or yes or okay or nothing. He turned.

The mesa glowed in the twilight. “Pick up the pace.”

Oskar replied with the accelerator. He thought about what just happened. He learned something. He responded in the best way possible and the truck hummed up the road.

“You know you’re a terrible driver, right?” Clay said. Oskar did. He’d never been taught. The process was obvious, but he uncertainty hobbled him.

From the mesa the dark valley lay between them and the silhouette of the distant range. “Left here,” Clay said. Oskar turned and embedded in a patch of trees was a kind of longhouse. A porch running its full length, one hundred yards about. Oskar had never seen such a porch, even coming from a place where they were very popular. Porch city. Funny if you say it just right, Oskar thought, and he relaxed a little. His grip loose now on the steering wheel.

Clay had him pull up under a low sprawling tree. Oskar put the car in park and Clay reached over, turned the key, and took it. The job done, Oskar felt uncertain about his place here. “Sit tight,” Clay said.

How else. Little bastards, Oskar thought. His vision blurred by welling water he wouldn’t let fall. It hurt to be in the way he was. Bused out of town like the homeless. He’d seen the headline last year: *Buses Help Clean Up City*. Now him. Oskar wondered what would happen to him here. How long would he be here? He’d broken a cardinal rule: don’t go home with strangers. Oskar needed help. Trust help. Clay was taking his time. Oskar’s ears began to ring and if he squeezed his eyes shut, he could change the pitch of the whine. What tone would he use to speak to Mickey? What words? He wanted to put her together in his mind, but couldn’t. What if he made something of himself here?

Clay’s knock on the window startled Oskar. He signaled Oskar out.

The air was cooler than Oskar had expected. Red valley soil, he’d thought the land was hot. Ancient volcanic flows still warm or warming up again. The land in heat.

But up on the mesa Oskar could see the moonlit ground blushing with grass and heard the bleating of sheep and the groans of distant cattle.

There was nothing spectacular about the house other than the porch. Clay led him in by candlelight. The space sparse: pine walls, a few chairs, a table—everything sap scented. His room was in the direction of the cliff, on the east end of the house. “There’s a basket beneath the bed with linens and a blanket. One towel, too. Things’ll stay clean if you wash up before turning in. Wash and sleep. You’ve got a lot to learn tomorrow.”

Oskar said goodnight and opened the door to the room. It smelled like stewed beef and dust. The moon was high and without Clay’s candle Oskar couldn’t make out much. The mattress was narrow, long and thin. Black vertical stripes on white. He hated making his bed, one of the few services his mother still provided him. He hadn’t seen her for days and tomorrow would be one more.

The stillness of the room let Oskar’s mind wander home. Clay held him together. By some force, Oskar knew, but he welcomed it. His father home at night always. For the what for. Good reason. Oskar was hungry, but he’d go to bed. He did not need to eat.

He opened the window and there was another smell. Sage. Everything a smell in the country, the mountains of smell. None of this the city, even the gardens had no odor besides wetness and plastic conduit. Mother must be gone.

A string hung loose from his shirt. Oskar ran a hand over his clothes. How fractured he’d become. Small tears in the cotton caught his fingers. Wash and sleep.

In the long open hall of the house, moonlight shone through the occasional sections of corrugated fiberglass. Next to the door to his room was another door. He

knocked and heard nothing. It was not Clay's room. Oskar had heard his boots chatter to the other side of the place. He opened the door and entered. A tub. A toilet. A sky-lit bathroom, blue. Oskar heard the rustle of chain.

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” a woman, wrist shackled, said, and raised herself from the tub. “I heard you were coming. Bath?”

Standing in front of this woman, unashamed of his filth and wounds, Oskar felt pride. The thing he'd wanted since yesterday's beating, to be washed clean, cared for, by a woman. “Yes. A bath.”

“You look like a bubbles man.”

“That would be fine.”

She stepped out, tall, wrapped in a blanket, and Oskar could not see her bowed and shadowed face. “How's he? We haven't spoken in a while.” Her chains sung slowly like wind chimes in a soft, uneven wind as she kneeled by the faucet and loosed water into the tub.

“Okay.” Oskar looked over his shoulder at the door then began to undo his belt nervously.

“You need clean clothes.” Her voice was airy, off to Oskar's side. He heard the sudden fart of a squeeze bottle—the bubbles.

“Yes,” he said. Oskar took off his belt, rolled it, and laid it on the toilet seat. A fooling thing to do, rolling the belt. He wanted to express some importance of himself, and taking care with his clothes seemed a fine way to do so. He stepped to the tub, steam rising from the faucet, and reached to remove his shirt.

“You need clean clothes,” she said.

He got it this time. Embarrassment worse than itchy pants. That's a headline.

"Okay." She ran a hand through the foam-topped water, back and forth, in a wide, stirring oval. "Hot water."

Oskar tested the water with the tip of an index finger. It was hot. He looked up at her dark face. He stepped in slowly, his clothes pressing to his skin, and lay back. The itch was terrible, worse than before. He ran his hands over his thighs which eased the sensation some.

"I worried he might not come back," she said. "So many things need done." Her voice came from behind his head. She scooped water up with a cup and slowly poured it over him, shielding his face with her hand. It took all of the strength he had not to cry when she did so. Out of love or guilt, for his mother or any woman, he didn't know. There seemed no difference. "He's back," Oskar said, "safe and sound."

Nursing them clean with the cloth, the woman cared for his bruises. Oskar could not see her. "Days," she said. "A long few days."

"Why are you in chains?"

"Oh, I can get out. Of course."

"I could never be chained," he said, knowing it wasn't true. He'd lived at home his entire life.

"Maybe," she said. "I've never been such a good person as right now." She paused. "This very moment, right here." Water streamed through Oskar's hair and down his neck. "This is the very best thing I never would have asked for myself."

"I understand," Oskar said and she stopped her work. He lied to her again.

"Who of God's children doesn't?"

*Me, me, me, memi, mimi, Mickey.* This would be too much for her, to witness or hear. It wouldn't matter if he told her his prick was limp which it was not.

The woman, he hadn't asked her name, gently leaned him forward, lifted his shirt, and began washing his back in long vertical strokes. Oskar winced each time the woman's hand moved over a welt or cut or bruise. The air in the house had cooled. Oskar's face felt full and wet. His body was tired, still hurting, soothed by this woman's hands, and he was tearing inside. He wanted to know her name, her honest name to tell him to be true. He breathed in the steam rising from the water and who the fuck are you, he asked himself, knees pulled tightly to his chin.

"Shhh," the woman said sliding around the side of the tub.

"I need your name," he said. "I am a coward, menaced and belittled by men and boys." I can say to your shadow face, turned down from the light, "I've abused women, two women, one a girl and then woman. I didn't know and then I did and—what's the word, an A-word?"

"Absconded."

"Yes. Fled."

The woman's hand was up the front of his shirt. His chest had escaped the beating and his skin tingled, scratched by the rag like a dog's ear by its paw.

Oskar laughed. "I masturbated for the first time in the kitchen during mother's party. Women in the living room sitting around a table—the smell of white wine and salmon, the black skin stuck to the dirty plates and pans—with small mirrors, their legs spread learning. I was supposed to be with Mickey in the hospital. We knew about the end so young. Dolls. Leukemia Barbie and Negligent, Masturbator Ken. And—"

“We are not cursed tumors run amuck upon the earth,” she said, his arm in her hands, the rag passing over his skin, a sting at the elbow. He held his breath as she dug into his flesh, two pinched fingertips, foraging for the thing buried in the red hole. She pulled out a small pebble. Blood dripped from the wound onto the foamed surface of the water.

There was a knock on Oskar’s door in the middle of the night. Clay walked in. “Get up.”

“What time is it?” Oskar couldn’t see a thing. “My clothes are wet.”

“Clean?”

Oskar nodded. He didn’t think he’d been sleeping long.

Clay opened a closet and tossed a pair of overalls to Oskar. “They fit.” He stood there for a moment. “Five minutes, on the porch,” he said and shut the door behind him.

It was still night outside. Paws rustled in the underbrush and darted through the dark. Clay was looking out over the valley.

“You have a date with my herd,” Clay said. “But first we woo, we observe.” He handed Oskar a notepad, pencil, and a switch.

They walked for twenty minutes along a trail through the low oaks and the cows’ bawls grew louder. Clay explained the task. They were to watch the herd for a while, looking for estrus. “It’s all fairly obvious,” Clay said. “You see something, write down the number on the ear tag, then take your switch and get the her in the pen.” In a clearing, Oskar could see the black backs of cattle meandering through the moonlit grass.

Clay pointed to the fenced area. There were two spaces, one empty, and one with a bull that stood up when it spotted Clay. Oskar opened his notebook.

For over an hour Oskar watched the cattle mount and bawl. He saw their dripping vulvas, head-butting, muddied backs, and wrote down all the hot numbers. There were a lot of cattle. Over a hundred, Clay said. Forty-three they put in the pen, waiting for the bull.

Oskar leaned against the rail fence, watching the females bawl and jump and loose their mucous. No secretes here.

“Pretty easy, huh?” Clay said.

Oskar kept watching.

Clay put a hand on Oskar’s shoulder. “Well, Osky-boy, you cow-puss watcher, now comes the hard part. You see they want it, but how are they gonna get it?” he said, and laughed, slapping Oskar on the back. “Warm your hands.”

“Very funny,” Oskar said. “I’ve seen this on television.”

“You’re here on conditions, friend, and I said warm them hands! This is a fuckin’ near-as-natural operation here.”

Oskar slapped his palms together and rubbed. A friend. He’d thought of bosses as friends before, but they’d never acknowledged it as true. Alone here, except that woman and these animals, Clay must share Oskar’s desperation. Oskar wanted to please him now, to earn some piece of this place. Clay motioned him to the bull. “I’ll get him in the shoot. There’s two holes in the steel for your arms and some jelly next to them. He’ll be tight in there, so don’t worry about getting kicked.”

Once Clay had the bull squeezed, Oskar went to it.

“Give him a good one now.”

What’s next, he thought? What’s in this for them? The lady moo-cow keeps her head down, bowed to her meal, filling her stomachs, and then we sneak up and moo!

Clay stepped down from the platform over the shoot and handed Oskar a plastic cup. “Hole number two,” he said. “Left hand.” The bull leaned his stiff weight against the steel plates squeezing him and groaned. This was the first sex he’d been involved with in a long time, and Oskar couldn’t help but feel grossly flattered by the bull’s snorts.

Morning light slipped over the ridge of the mountains, the rusted steel in front of Oskar colored sweetly, like mango meat. Wet orange tenders, remember—

“Remember the cup,” Clay said.

It was hot in his hand. Warmer than his own, he thought. In heat. Hot heat.

Clay started howling. Cows turned and took notice. He laughed so hard he fell over and rolled in the dirt, slapping the ground, saying, “I can’t believe it!”

Oskar rose, the feeling of certain humiliation in his throat. He could see himself, as he was, standing with a bull’s dispensation in his hand, a dumb, scared look on his face.

“I can’t believe you did that,” he said. “Amazing.” Clay lay still, breathing slow and deep. “You’re a good man, Oskar. I’m sorry. Usually the bulls get after that leather sleeve over there.” He pointed, and Oskar saw the thing as a missing piece of a puzzle. He wanted some part of this system to have benefited from his input, to save himself from the shame of feeling small again.

“The finest offspring this place has ever seen may spring from this. Love in the recipe. Secret ingredient.” Clay seemed to speak to himself, but the possibility pleased Oskar. There was hope, even in cattle.

“Let’s go see about a woman for you, Oskar.”

They turned the bull loose. He wobbled a few feet from the shoot and gave a great snort.

In the other pen, cows were butting and riding one another. Their mouths dripped white spittle, eyes wide open like their bawls. Mother’s party, those women, and me in the kitchen. His hand was still warm from the bull and it smelled horrible.

Clay opened a case under an old oak and grass awning. He pulled out a box of long plastic gloves and a thin plastic tube with a button on the end. He held them up to Oskar. “Gloves. Gun. Guess what they do?”

“God’s work,” Oskar said.

“Half of it. They don’t call it artificial insemination for nothing. AI.”

AI. Aliens. Or is it robots? Cows, either way. Grass-eating bleeters dropped out the back end of big-eyed daisies.

“Where’d you learn all this?” Oskar asked.

“Self taught. Now, put on the glove.”

Oskar put on the glove. Lubrication, Clay said. Lubricate, Oskar did. Insertus innus anus, Clay said. Insertedus. Slowly forward, straightforward, Clay said. No back and forth, Clay said. Cows don’t anal sex, he said. Maybe they do, Oskar thought, if that’s all they get. It may pulse and try to squeeze you out, Clay said. But you have to push forward. Find the cervix. Feel for it. We’ll drop cargo at the opening. The fish do

the rest. I can't find it, Oskar said. Nevermind, Oskar said. Hard thing, little opening? Oskar said. Bingo. Now, Clay said, put the gun in vagina. Hold your forefinger on the cervix, and find the gun-tip with your thumb. You'll feel it. Press down. Pressing, Oskar said. I feel it, Oskar said. Okay, Clay said. A couple more inches. A couple more inches. Feel it slide under your thumb just a couple more inches. A couple more inches, Oskar said. I was kidding about killing you, Clay said. You're a good man. I understand, Oskar said, thinking haha. Clay said, Depress the button on the gun slowly, very slowly. Five seconds of pressing, Clay said. One. Stop moving that arm like that, Clay said, or I'll take back the nice thing I said to you a second ago. Three. I can't believe I jerked off a bull, Oskar said. We do God's work here, Clay said. Or half of it, Oskar said. Right, Clay said. Half of it. Five.

Happy cow, Oskar thought. She didn't make a sound. "Isn't there some way to make her enjoy this," Oskar said pulling out the gun.

"Motherhood," Clay said, looking over his heard, hands on hips, "is the female's greatest pleasure in nature, Oskar. These animals have it all built in, unspoiled by the public education system or free will. Pure nature. I feel sorry that she has to suffer the wait of gestation for the calf's cry and tug on her teat. And how sweet that nectar is."

Oskar wondered if the calf missed those moments, if cows had memory.

"Do you think, Clay, that animals go to heaven?" He slowly withdrew his arm and pulled off the glove.

"Ask the beast," Clay said.

Oskar stood next to the prrrffting cow. "Ma'am," Oskar said, "do you go to heaven?"

Moo!

“I don’t know what that means,” Oskar said.

“The kingdom is finite. There are chosen *people* because heaven isn’t that big. Why waste space with soulless livestock? Where are the missionaries to anoint these beasts to the Kingdom? While they eat their steaks are they concerned for the life that has left the flesh between their teeth? And if animals *can* get into heaven without obeying the rules I’ve had to live by all my life, I’m going with my shotgun.” Clay tapped his boot-toe, hard, on the ground. “That bull lay with you, Oskar. As a man, you know you’re doing a job, not committing a sin. But the bull cannot see his own iniquities. Something must separate us, even in death. If the cows get in, so do the flies. Strike now if it’s true!”

“That never works,” Oskar said.

“Then get back to what does,” Clay said, handing Oskar a clean glove.

They repeated the process forty-two more times

The hike back to the house took nearly an hour in the dark. Oskar tried to stay close to Clay, but he would get caught eyeing the ground, doubting his feet and afraid of snakes, and he’d look up and see only darkness. When they came through the last stand of pines, the house and land surrounding it were awash in silver light. The pride of a full day near completion, to end with a meal and a bath, satisfied Oskar in a way he hadn’t felt since his first day as a paper boy. Oskar could stay on at this place for a long time, he thought, taking pleasure, as a kind of absolution, in aiding this reproduction. Clay

stopped and told Oskar to stand next to him facing the house. “What we did today was only half the work.”

“Our half,” Oskar said, knowing the other to be God’s.

“In a way. When those gals give birth they go to slaughter. A short while later, some of the calves will go. I have a man comes to pick them up because I can’t do it. It is the most horrible sight. Slaughterhouse. Cows go in one end, hamburger patties come out the other. In between is such filth that I cannot describe. Mixture of death, of what’s outside becoming inside—the making of food.”

This part of the job hadn’t crossed Oskar’s mind. Thinking of it now required him to decide if he would think about it tomorrow. Every day he would have to make the same choice. Without thinking—that was key—he chose. A thing touched his back and he chose. And as when he climbed onto that bus a few days ago, he knew he could not look back. Behind him laid a string of traps he couldn’t keep out of. He’d proven that. Oskar was not the kind to cut himself free either.

“Sometimes I think about quitting,” Clay said.

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I’d rather let the world put me out of business. These things never touch my plate or the inside of my body.”

That night Oskar and Clay ate together. Dinner waited for them on a long pine table when they walked in. Oskar knew who’d prepared everything, but she was nowhere. The two ate slowly and quietly. After, Oskar went to take his bath. She was not there and he didn’t bother to wash. He stood for a minute looking into the empty tub. When he went to his room, he found Clay sitting on his bed. He told Oskar, in the pitch

dark, an absence of light the eye cannot adjust to, that he knew him, his kind. He said he knew Oskar had no faith and that Oskar would have to leave soon. Clay told him that before that time came, he would give Oskar the strength he did not have. Not the idle strength to endure nor capacity for suffering, but strength to impose, strength turned to force. Then Clay stood and walked out. Oskar only heard him, and felt the air move when Clay left. Oskar lay down. He mourned a place he would set fire to, sift the ashes for remains. Things could be salvaged. If he found her from here, he thought.

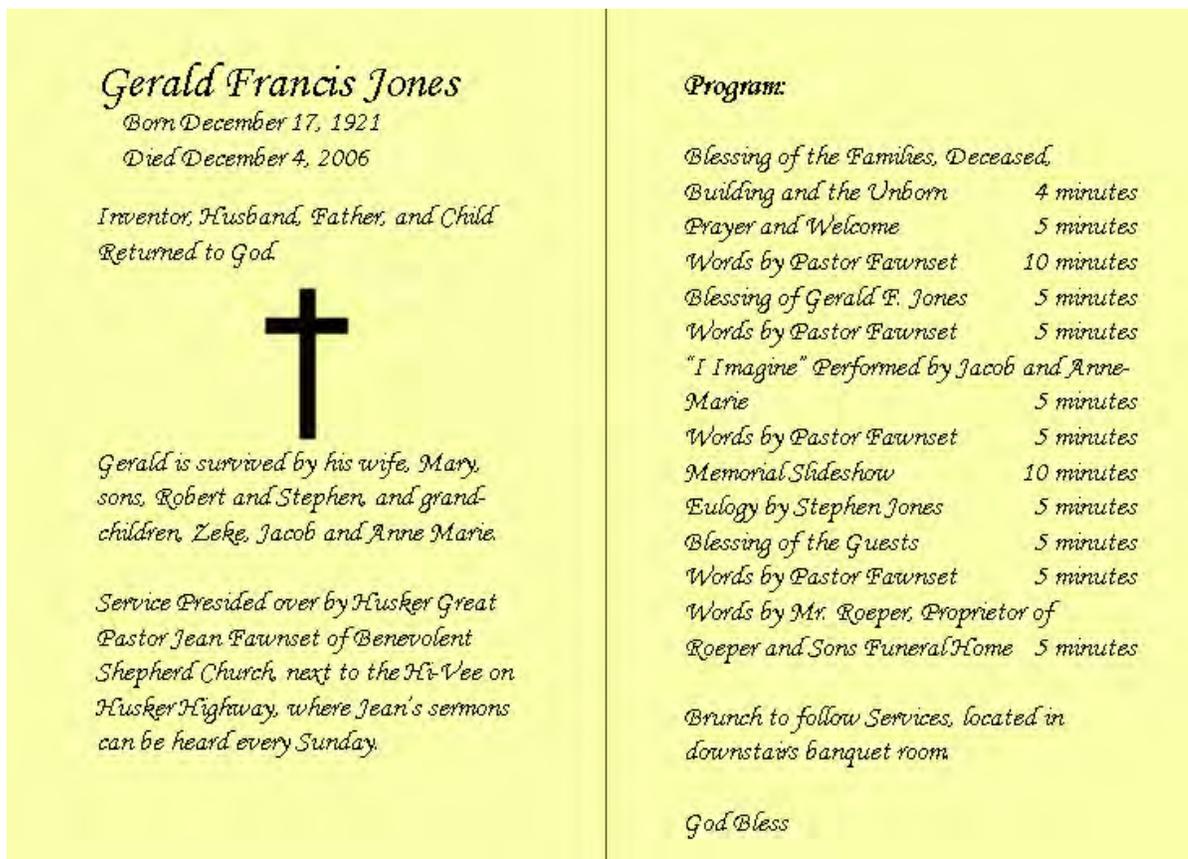
Three days ago, Oskar rose early for work, before his mother would have if she'd been around. The air had warmed since the sun set, warmer than it would be when the sunlight crested the trees, when Oskar would be on a bus. He put on his jacket. Downstairs his father slept in his chair facing the door, as he had the day before. That the man's days began and ended in the same spot, that he worked so hard for nothing and could not make the second floor, had symbolized some hope in Oskar's mind. Three days ago. In his father's hand, something dark. Oskar did not want to know what the man had woven into his hands. When Oskar opened the door that morning, in the middle of night, to bag papers, he pushed a branch aside. The city slept and Oskar had walked into it like another room of his still house, one in which he knew the doors allowed him and those forbidden. Even in riot, the city laid still. The streets and highways, curfew, still. The boys that beat him still. The boy killed still. If something like hell were brought upon them.

## The Second Coming of Gerald

Closed-eyed attendees warmed their hands between their knees. Family sat in the first row, closest to the stage and Gerald Francis Jones's pine box. A widow, two sons, and three grandkids. All the heads of those on the right side of the aisle hung deferentially, including Gerald's son Steve and Steve's wife and two children. Though the service had not begun, all but three paid this respect. Four, including Gerald's. Mary, his wife, his son Rob, and Zeke, his grandson—the lone three in the front left pew—let their eyes wander about the chapel of the funeral home.

Mary, weary of the clear division in the family, a decade-long fracture, eyed the bare wood casket that rested on a cut sheet of plywood with two sawhorses underneath. An off-white cloth was draped over the makeshift table and one of the floral arrangements had been used as a garnish. The coffin looked cheap, though Gerald had made it well. Even the saw horses and plywood were his, bought and prepared over a year ago. What he wanted, Mary wanted over with. Gerald requested he remain untouched, a natural interment, save for the box, but even that, he'd said grinning, wouldn't pollute. Mary, unconvinced of such environmental altruism, believed this an attempt to get back at the funeral home for what he thought had been an inflated bill for the handling of his mother's body sixteen years ago. He was that kind of man. "Let's do this," she said, patting Zeke on the knee. Rob held his mother's left hand.

Mary eyed the funeral program, a yellowed and waxy rectangle of paper folded in two. A cross adorned its front. Inside:



She would be too warm by service's end. Short, she'd said, her one request.

The pastor took the stage, heads rose, and he spoke. "Let us turn, now, to a Psalm."

He wore big, silver-rimmed glasses on a nose that looked like a spoon pulled from the garbage disposal, and a dark, grey suit with a nylon sheen. A roll of neck fat sat on his shirt collar, touching the knot of his plain red tie, and Mary watched it bob softly as he read from his Bible. There was a modest floral arrangement to his right, and several to

his left. Two Birds of Paradise, Mary's favorite, sat on the floor next to photos of Gerald F. Jones.

Mary and Zeke had their coats on. She knew she would be glad to have her grandson beside her later, when estranged family would fill her living room with chatter and boiled meats.

*...he revives my spirit...*

Mary picked at her fingernails, impatient for the service's end. She'd made a compromise of her husband's wishes. That this service existed was a compromise, Steve's wish, his *need*, as he'd called it. Rob gave no opinion, deferring to Steven's judgment. "Steven needs it, Ma," he'd said condescendingly.

*...I will fear no evil...*

Zeke smiled a lot. People talked about his smiling, inappropriate, poisonous grins. Mary had always *heard*. *That kind of behavior is a sign*, one woman had said. *Of things*, she'd said, holding the ess.

Mary preferred Zeke's humor to Bible verses. Quiet and still, he'd make his grandmother feel proud and strong by obeying her unspoken requests communicated through a vocabulary of sighs, gestures, and the crossing and uncrossing of her legs.

*...You prepare a table for me in the presence of mine enemies...*

Sunlight passed into the room through a modest-sized stained glass window, casting an abstraction of soft, colored light upon the backs of the guests and the pine-paneled walls. An amorous couple near the back was communicating to each other's thighs with their hands, corn-country sign language.

Only a few minutes had passed and already Mary felt the hard pew on her rear. Zeke, Mary knew, was thinking that his Grandpa wouldn't like this pain in the ass at all. Grandpa wouldn't like this at all. This service wouldn't do him a damn thing.

They were glad he was gone, Rob, Zeke, and Mary—quiet and glad. Everyone that had delivered their regrets to Mary spoke with an air of relief, and Mary grew tired of affecting grief for people who'd spited her husband, wished him, she knew, even in their mission to save him, to hell. Regardless of belief, Gerald had been saved from this and from his body in death.

*...Surely God's goodness and mercy will follow me...*

"I said short and sweet," Mary spoke into the tissue in her hands. "Short, short, short."

The lid fell off the coffin and someone said something in a muffled, deep voice. No one could understand. Before Mary had turned her head to Zeke, he hurried out of his seat and replaced the top. Catching a glimpse of his grandfather, naked and stinking like a hog truck, turned his stomach.

In front of the crowd, Zeke froze. Everyone looked at him, and Mary wondered if he saw what she did when their eyes fell on him. There was no warmth here that was not artifice—like a television fireplace—and maybe that's why she and Zeke had kept their coats on.

Gerald's death was slow. Three years. Or eighty-three. Two walkers, four falls down the stairs, one seizure, two strokes, a shunt in his brain. It was time. Seven nurses and two doctors; then one nurse and no doctors; then he became bills. "Well, you don't

have to worry about those!” Rob had told his mother before leaving for the funeral home, and the relief in her laughter was clear as she tore up an invoice from the nursing home.

“Pray with me,” the minister said.

Mary cleared her throat.

*Dear heavenly father, our Lord and savior Jesus...*

Goddamnit! Zeke thought he heard, and Rob seemed to notice too. They looked around for the source, but all seemed trained on the minister.

“We ask that you take your son into,” the minister continued, “into your light. Shine your light on Gerald, uh, H—“

“F!” Rob said.

Mary pulled apart her tissue and let the pieces fall to the floor. This preacher had shown up on her doorstep a couple of weeks ago at dinner time. When she did not let him in, he seemed stunned by the rebuff. Mary had not called him, and she made this clear. This big tent funeral could go up anywhere, she thought. Zeke took her hand.

“F, thank you. F. Jones eternally. Amen.” The minister touched his nose. “You know. Gerald had an in-ter-est-ing *life*. I don’t want to assume a familial role here, but he did. Pr-etty coooooool. His father—get this—was a leader of the De-mo-crat-ic party.”

The pastor stepped back from the podium to laugh. When he did, Mary saw his tongue fall, briefly, from his mouth. The chapel became one roaring mass that excluded Mary, Rob, and Zeke. This was the last deal Mary would make with this family. What knowledge she’d held as a privilege, all the truths about her husband she’d anticipated glossed over for his finer attributes, sank. She was too old to be made small and foreign by a sect of her own family or anyone. But Steven had always done this. He’d asked for

the car and crashed it. Once into the pond at the end of the street, and once into the rear end of a utility truck. Mary wondered what regret Gerald had felt for his son, a boy driven by impulse.

As the pastor returned, he pushed his glasses back up his nose.

“Gerald also, and get this one too, *sat* in a president’s lap. That’s pretty *cool*. Pretty cool—President Roosevelt’s lap. *That* doesn’t happen to many people.”

“It doesn’t happen to anyone,” Rob whispered. He laughed, a short, sharp, throaty laugh. Mary told him to contain himself. She was not one to speak during services, but she felt the occasion sliding away from her, Rob, Zeke, and Gerald.

Pastor Fawnset raised his arms out, palms down, and as he brought quiet over the crowd he gazed at Mary. Beads of sweat began to run down his serious, pinched face, and Mary imagined him preparing to deliver news of End Times.

Zeke turned touched his grandmother on the shoulder and pointed behind them. A man was stroking his wife’s ear lobe with his index finger.

“Did you hear that?” Zeke asked Mary.

She shook her head. “Goddamnit,” Zeke said. “There it was again.” Mary chuckled.

Gerald’s son, Steve, went to the podium. The minister stepped away, adjusted his suit, and sat down.

“Hello,” Steve said.

“Hello,” Rob answered, and Mary allowed herself another small laugh.

“I told my brother—Drew, stand up, man. That’s my brother Drew. That if I can’t finish, he’ll have to.”

Rob shifted in his seat. He probably didn't expect Steve to drop Drew's "in-law" status. Mary patted her son on the knee.

Steve took a moment to unfold and organize his paper, to smooth it over the podium. His smile hardened as his jaw relaxed.

"Short," Mary said.

"You know," Steve said, "I wasn't always a good kid growin' up. Wasn't always a good son. For many of you, that's probably hard to believe."

Mary, hearing the let's-go-back-to-the-beginning story begin, sighed loudly.

"I don't think my dad knew what all I was doin' but, you know, I think he did. And so did God. Great man. He understood that I was human. And his love allowed him to allow me to be, just as God does. And, like God, *my* dad was there when my mistakes caught up with me. We wouldn't need parents if we didn't make mistakes, and we wouldn't *need* God if we didn't make mistakes!"

Mary took hold of Rob and Zeke's hands and she squeezed them so hard their fingers were white.

"My father was like God. He made me a go-kart—built it with his own hands in the garage, and I loved it until I sold it for reasons that I've squared with the Lord. But humans are—they kill each other, and spit on each other, and cheat on." Steve began to cry. "I love you, honey," he said, pointing down toward his wife. Drew, the brother-in-law, stood, and Steve motioned him to sit. "I have to," he mouthed.

Mary struggled to stay in her seat. She immensely regretted this service. Steven she did not understand no matter how hard she tried. After his "accident," his arrest, he'd veered.

Steve summoned up the strength to finish his speech resolutely. “I have to share this, the most important moment in my father’s life. Many times, I asked my father in our many dear moments together before he died—I asked him, ‘Dad, do you believe that a man named Jesus Christ walked on this earth about two thousand years ago?’ And he said, ‘Why, yes, son. Yes I do.’ And I asked him, ‘Dad, did you ever pray to Jesus? Did you ever pray to him for forgiveness?’ And he said, ‘Why, yes, son. Many times.’ Thank you.”

Steve received a number of hugs and sympathetic sighs of satisfaction as he returned to his seat. His wife placed her arms around him. His two little girls with brownie-mix colored hair stood in their white dresses, their faces flinching from their handheld video games as they squealed “DaddyDaddyDaddyDaddy!” and grabbed at his trousers. Steve wailed suddenly, bursting for a second as he looked up at the ceiling and squeezed the paper in his raised hand. No one else cried, but they were moved.

“That was good,” the minister said, still sitting in the plastic chair to the right of the podium.

Mary began to shake, and Rob put his arm around his mother and held her. They both knew that Gerald asked Jesus for forgiveness about as often as he apologized, which was never. Not when he interrupted or yelled at his wife; not when he lusted for the teenagers; not when he killed Japanese in the war; and not when he gambled away his family’s future on a pyramid scheme and was bailed out by Rob, who wouldn’t speak at his father’s funeral because he knew Gerald wouldn’t want it. Because he had nothing to apologize for. Gerald was a Democrat and would have spit on anyone who laughed at his father or FDR.

Zeke stood, and Mary grabbed at his coat to pull him back down. She still believed that if they sat this exercise would end quickly. Steven had spoken, and the end neared. Mary planned something that she had not told anyone. This service was more than a deal, a last bargain; it was last contact.

The lid came off the coffin again.

“Goddamnit!” Gerald said as he rose from his coffin.

“Jesus!” a woman cried from the back. The crowd panicked, and pews cracked as whole rows of people leaped rearward, climbing over one another. Children sobbed. Fifty or so people tried for the exit at the same time. Two of them were stopped by the partition between the doors and trampled. Gerald let forth a tremendous laugh. A boy of five or six lay under a large prostrate woman, her head turned unnaturally toward the ceiling. Mr. Roeper, the funeral director, ran from his position beside the stage to alert his two assistants. They gathered white sheets and clipboards while Mr. Roeper, shaking with excitement, checked the fallen escapees’ pulses. “How’s business?” Gerald hollered. Roeper straightened the neck of the large woman and put wads of paper in her nostrils. “Plastic!” he called. “I need plastic!” Then he went through the woman’s purse and procured her license. “Oh, Meredith,” he said. “Dearest Meredith. God bless you.”

The minister fell to his knees and began speaking in tongues. A number of followers joined him.

A piece of Gerald’s abalone skin fell from his right arm as he shook it, walking in front of Zeke.

“Reduced to *this*, Mary?” Gerald walked over to her carefully.

“I’m sorry, Gerald. This wasn’t the deal.”

Mary slouched in the pew, and Rob fanned her face. Gerald's legs were unstable, though better than when he'd been alive. Already there was an odor—some sludge on Gerald's backside and from the hole in the base of his skull a line of dried blood ran down his back like a stripe on a race car—and Zeke covered his nose and mouth. “Hi, Grandpa,” Zeke said. “Boy,” he replied and raised his right arm over Mary's head and swung down across her expressionless face. The arm broke off at the elbow. “Christ!” he said.

“Your soul!” the minister howled.

“If I had a soul, I could hit my wife properly.”

“Plastic!” Mr. Roeper called again, and his assistant came running from the stairs with a mass of clear sheeting bundled in his arms.

“You've never hit me before, Gerald.” Mary touched her cheek and felt a cool film on her skin. She knew she'd sold him out to this, sacrificed truth for comfort.

“Dad,” Rob said. “She didn't mean it.”

“Buddy, you don't know what your mother means. The grand bargainer, a self-serving woman.”

“You're a difficult thing to escape from,” Mary said.

“I know, honey. And I always loved the games you played.” Gerald moved the stump of his arm towards her as if to hold her face. He looked at her in a way Mary hadn't felt in years, and she wondered if he'd have done so if she'd been at his bedside when he'd died.

“It kept going,” she said.

“Say’s that Steve over there?” Gerald said. “It’s been a couple of days, Steven, my dear son who stole my krugerrands, my gold, for methamphetamine and sex with a prostitute, who sold the go-kart I made for pot. With my own hands, Steven!” Gerald waived the stump of his arm across his chest in an outward sweep towards the crowd and everyone flinched as though the limb might come at them. “And then you tried to steal my soul, for profit, I’m sure. So I could be a notch on your holy belt?” Gerald smiled. He reached his left hand down to his crotch and scratched. “Oh, yeah,” he said.

“Look away, girls,” Steve’s wife said.

“He’s an angel,” Gerald’s granddaughters celebrated. “A devil!” their mother said, “pure evil.” Children and women, glowing or scowling with a bolstered faith, watched. How lucky they were to see a second coming, even it were Gerald F. Jones.

Mary cringed when Steve began to wail again—“Da-aaaa-aa-aaaaad!”—and his wife screamed at him, and then at Gerald, and back at Steve. Their daughters pulled their dresses up over their heads and sang

*I once met an old man who had a loaf of bread*

*He saw that I had tuna fish*

*He looked at me and said*

*‘Your tuna fish is lonely, and my loaf of bread is bare,*

*We could make some sandwiches if you would care to share.’*

“Who taught you that song, you devils?” Gerald said.

“You did!”

“Heartbreakers!” he said. “You’ll make your daddy awful sorry someday.” He picked up his lower arm and threw the thing into the pews. “I need to sit down. My stomach hurts.”

Zeke stepped out of the pew and offered his grandfather the seat.

“A gentleman, like your grandfather,” Gerald said, steadying himself on the back of the bench. Once he felt ready to sit, Gerald let go and dropped himself and four pieces fell next to Mary. She watched as his ribs broke through his abdomen, legs broke off at the knee, and his remaining arm fell into the second row.

“Mary, if we’re squared away, I’m gonna die again. And this time no soul-talk. Understand?”

“It was all I could stand, Gerald,” Mary said, ashamed.

People nodded. A woman laid a hand on Mary’s shoulder. There was a slow attrition. Couples and those with children left.

“I sympathize with you, dear.”

“Thank you, Gerald.”

Mr. Roeper looked up from the doorway, having secured the two bodies in plastic and sent them off to the cooler with his assistants. “Is there anything I can do to accommodate your departure, Mr. Jones? Mrs. Jones, anything?”

“Steal from me. Sell me out to Jesus,” Gerald mumbled. He took a few deep breaths because he could. Something brown, like overworked axle grease, trickled out of his mouth. “Goddamnit my stomach doesn’t feel good. Take me downstairs, boys. Let’s make a fire.”

“Like camping,” Steve said.

“Exactly like that,” said Rob. “Three men in the woods.”

“Well put, son.”

Zeke picked up Gerald’s pieces.

“You’re not in this camp, kiddo. My boys. Steven and Whatshisname, my quiet favorite. Go on and mind your grandma.”

Zeke handed what he’d gathered to Rob, and Steve put his arms under his father and scooped him up like a fork-lift. Everyone was standing except Mary. But a fresh widow can do about anything in front of these people it seemed. She could have bounced up and fornicated with Gerald’s corpse and people would have said, *She must be having a really hard time with this* or *They must have had a wonderful romantic relationship we didn’t know about* or *I better take her a coffee cake*. She’d wanted to be left alone, to be sufficient in a solo life, but Gerald had taken that away. Sure, they were square, she thought, even-stein. He’d go back to sleep and questions would blanket her like the cold and snow, and the church would send callers to her door with salty casseroles. Mary looked at Gerald and blew him a kiss.

“Bye-bye, Grandpa,” Zeke said.

“Love you all,” he said.

Steve and his brother carried their father down the wide, grey stairs, led by the funeral director. At the landing Gerald looked up at a big red, green, blue, and yellow tapestry hanging on the wall. “Goddamn,” he said. “Is that a vagina?”

They stopped.

“The annunciation, Gerald,” Mr. Roeper said.

“Exquisite taste, really fine.”

The funeral director's sweat glistened under the light. "My father bought that, Gerald, and I want you to know that I didn't know. My father handled your mother's arrangements, and I do what I'm told around here." He was talking to the floor.

"I'm gripped, boys. Get a move on," Gerald said, unable to look away from the tapestry. "Fire up your grill and put me in something decent. Better than some twist-tied plastic bag. Do that or I'll make you sorry. And you better not send nobody a bill, understand?"

The funeral director agreed. He pointed to a door ahead of them with a caution sign on it. He looked at the three of them—a false, thin smile on his face—blocked the pad from their sight, and entered his code. He opened the door and flipped on the lights.

"It'll take a minute to warm up. Go on green; there's no waiting around. Wastes gas."

"Details go to Steve, bub. Run him through the essentials," Gerald said, "or I'll make you damn sorry."

The director showed Steve how and where to place the body, somewhat distracted by Gerald cradled in Steve's arms. "When the button turns green, you go. Got it?" From the door, he reminded them to please shut off the machine when they were done because the pilot light is huge on a crematory furnace and it runs up the bill.

Steve turned his father's torso in his hands. "You're like dry dough, dad. I feel like you might crumble."

"There's no end to your imagination."

"Dad, did you see heaven?"

"I can't believe I'm related to him," Rob said.

“Tell me, please.”

“I’ve got something better than heaven. When you come back from the dead, you got the patent on torment.”

A quiet moment passed between them then.

“Green light’s on,” Rob said. He dropped the limbs into a cardboard box and then placed the container on the conveyor. Steve placed his father on the leg and arm pieces gently so that Gerald was facing the furnace.

“This won’t work, boys. This won’t do.”

They were silent.

Gerald said, “One of you will have to do me in. I can’t face it.”

“Too easy for me,” Rob said. “Doing you in—this would be insulting.”

“You’re better than that, I agree. Always my favorite. Honest. I’d kiss you if—“

“I love you too, Dad.”

Steve began to whimper.

“Honor thy father, you sinner, you failure and thief. Mistake-maker, cheater, depressive, absent father. Associate of filth. You commoner, spiteful generic poor person; you drive a used car, *my* car that you took from me.”

Steve began to swing at his father rather lightly. His fist went into Gerald’s chest cavity easily and caught for a moment between some broken ribs. Rob watched with his head leaning to the side, contemplating what all this meant. He didn’t have any answers, and he wasn’t the kind to go looking.

Gerald was cool and wet, like mucous on the upper lip in winter. The smell was horrible.

“Neglector!” Gerald said laughing. “Ignoramus! You hollow-preaching, disease spreading trick! Tell you mother I love her!”

Steve started into his father’s head with some real energy. A vein rose in his forehead. The nose and mouth collapsed with the first hard strikes. The next few knocked his father’s eyes out and a little translucent fluid rolled down the cheeks.

“Get him,” Rob said.

Gerald’s skull was stubborn though, still strong, and it hurt Steve’s knuckles to strike it so many times. He swung at a face that was barely recognizable, still speaking, mumbling love notes to itself, but the form was unquestionably his father. As he threw fist after fist at his father’s forehead he felt himself collapsing.

“This is a waste,” Rob said.

“Yes,” said Steve. Gerald mock-cried and coughed, his hand twitched at the foot of the box. The force behind Steve’s punches faded though his fists still landed on his faceless father’s head.

Rob pushed Steve back and took Gerald’s lumpy cranium between his hands, pulled it off the body, and crushed it.

“This is a horrible mess,” he said to Steve. “I was hungry.”

“That wasn’t dad.”

“You really think of Drew as a brother over me?”

“Have I betrayed God?”

“Get a hold of yourself,” Rob said, slapping his brother. “Okay? That was your God you fucked with all your life.”

“So did you.”

“Maybe, but I never got caught. Now, open that furnace door and swear that we’ll shape this into something decent for Mom.”

## Sowing Ash

The old Evinrude propelled the boat and Nana's chair toward the state park. Johnny watched Sarah steer the pontoon standing up. They'd been alone for days. She would have a driver's license in a year, Johnny two years later, and there was no shortage of cars. She'd put two bourbon-filled coke cans in the cupholders in front of the wheel, the way her father once did. He was dead, too. Dead two years and burned and cast into the shallow waters of the lake below the open, concrete porch of the big white house, maybe five-hundred yards behind them. Nana's ashes would be home soon. Four days ago she'd died. Her maple rocker, the shape of her worn into the cherry-colored velvet cushion, sat tied to the bow, bickering with the wind as it aired out. She'd refused to die in bed and because of the chair, its smell, they'd brought it on board and started cruising around looking for a place to put it.

Johnny stood behind his sister and let the sun warm his back. He leaned against the cool aluminum ladder to the top deck. Sarah took a big drink from one can. Three old white towels lay folded on the vinyl bench on the right side of the boat, and two fishing poles leaned against the railing. Sarah had brought a little picnic of bourbon, beer, and three-day old lasagna. Their mother and two aunts who lived with them on the lake had gone downstate to Bloomfield for Nana's cremation and memorial. John and

Sarah weren't allowed. They'd had enough, their mother had said, too much death for children. "Be a good girl," their mother told Sarah before taking her seat with the aunts in the black Cadillac. "A good girl."

Sarah held a can back to Johnny, but he didn't take it. This had been going on for days with no adults around, their routine of boating and alcohol, wandering out of the house until they were cold. They filled the absent roles easily, but Johnny had begun to worry about a mess. Somehow, his mother and aunts kept everything clean. There was gas in the boat and the chair had begun to smell indoors. Johnny didn't know how the odor grew even after Nana's death, but it did. What began as a scent became an odor, swelled up like Johnny's last memory of his father, shouting about a fire and the goddamned union while he packed a bag in the middle of the night. For two years that grew in his head so that he could feel it in there crowding him. If Sarah had the same feeling, Johnny didn't know it.

The motor ran loud and hard, vibrating the gray deck. Big northern Michigan pines almost a hundred feet tall surrounded the lake. Sarah cut the engine and the boat slowed, waves drumming against its pontoons. Johnny stepped next to his sister and saw a girl swimming, a pale stripe in the gray blue. They were drifting towards her with the wind. Johnny knew she could not last long in the numbing lake, maybe twenty minutes, and she'd probably gone ten, as far out as she was. Sarah sounded the boat's horn.

Fast small bubbles of disturbed water stirred in the girl's wake and Johnny followed that line to where he thought it began. There was a man in a red ball cap standing on the park beach above the black band of decaying leaves scored into the sand, pushed up from the lake floor by the ice, his arms folded across his bare chest. He was

looking at Johnny. He hadn't come from around here. His skin was too dark for this time of year—the ice gone, thawed away, for only a couple of months, oak and maple leaves fresh and small around the trees' buds. Cool air soused with the scent of new blooms and burnt pine blew from the north, over the boat and the girl, and where it hit the south end of the lake stood the stranger.

They were probably too far out for the man to read their numbers. Their father had always told them to check the numbers before they went out, so the sheriff wouldn't pull them over. The girl treaded water until Johnny unlatched the rear gate and dropped the ladder. He didn't look her in the eyes or at anything above water. He tried to hurry, to do what he knew he should. But she was naked, not as much a girl as his sister, and Johnny gazed at the dark spot between her legs bobbing like a lure in the clear water. Naked women were nothing new to Johnny, the only male left in his family, but the girl's flesh was unfamiliar and he looked.

The girl pulled herself up the ladder and onto the deck. She sat there below Johnny, against the captain's seat, shivering, breathing fast, covered in goosebumps, her blond hair matted to her blue face and neck.

“Are you all right?” Johnny said, not knowing what to do if she wasn't.

Sarah started the motor and turned the boat towards shore.

“Don't take me in,” the girl said. “I won't bother you.”

“That guy seems to want you back,” said Sarah.

“It's okay. My brother watching out for me.” The girl paused and ran her hands over her shins. “Please don't take me in yet.”

“Why are you naked?” Johnny said, looking at the side of her breast shake as she tried to warm herself.

“I saw your boat and jumped in. I just did.”

Johnny turned to his sister; he didn't need much of an explanation to want her to stay. He'd been bored and hungry and lonely since the family left. His sister must have been, too. He felt as if he were asking to keep a stray puppy.

Johnny grabbed the towels from up front. He shook them open and held them up like screens. The girl stood and wrapped the first towel around her trembling body and the second over her head. She leaned against him lightly and he felt her cold draw some of his heat away. A thin bundle of hair still clung flat to her neck and scapula. “Ice hasn't been gone long,” Johnny told her. “You could've died.” His sister patted him gently on the middle of his back and then started the motor. Johnny helped the girl into a sunfilled seat at the front of the boat, and she sat there with her arms tight against her body, chin to chest, the shakes slowing. Sarah offered the girl a drink from the can, but she didn't so much as raise her head to the offer. Johnny pulled up the ladder and latched the gate. When Johnny looked, the man was gone from the shore.

Sarah pushed the throttle forward lightly, Johnny smiled at the girl, and they headed north.

The girl introduced herself as Leila and asked Johnny and Sarah what they were doing. Leila pointed her toes out over the front rail until the tips touched Nana's chair.

“That's my Nana's chair,” Johnny said from behind his sister, his hands on the back of the captain's seat. “We're putting it somewhere.” Four days ago she died in the rocker with Johnny in her lap, his feet on the ground trying to keep some of his weight

off her. She'd told him she would go if he left, her last Johnny, her dead husband and dead son in her great-grandchild's face and name.

Leila put her fingers to the knot in the towel and moved through the front gate into the chair. She faced the wind and Johnny liked the girl. Her hands were big. Leila looked rigid in the cool air, carved into the chair on ship's bow. Johnny watched the strands of her loose hair whip between the dowels of the chairback. Her legs were crossed.

They kept on their course, away from the house and park—towards the point, a shallow swelling of rock and sand that fingers east from the western shore. A couple of minutes away, maybe. Perch were good there and trout might be, too. They had their father's old poles and Johnny intended to catch a fish or two. The lasagna, they thought, had begun to turn, but after three days of eating it they weren't sure.

Leila turned the chair around and Sarah slowed the engine. "What are those dark lines on the bottom of the lake?" she said.

"Logs," Sarah said. "They sank them."

"Who?"

"Daddy told us once," said Johnny.

"And?"

This forgetting troubled Johnny. It had not been that long ago he'd heard the stories of the lake.

Leila said, "That's something."

Sarah pulled the throttle back to a crawl.

"What are you doing out here?" Sarah asked.

“I had an argument with my uncle and wanted to be alone.”

“What uncle?” said Johnny.

“My uncle.”

“Your family’s getting bigger,” Sarah said. Johnny knew his sister didn’t trust anyone, not even their mother, especially now with their father dead.

“He’d been drinking—like you—and I got sick of it.”

“Okay,” Johnny said, “her family’s here.” He wanted Leila to stay. Sarah raised the can of bourbon to her lips.

“Worst vacation of my life,” said Leila, and sank back into the rocker. “This chair might kill me it’s so comfortable.” Sarah forced a laugh and backed off. “This boat is awfully nice.”

“Drink?” Sarah offered.

Leila, her head laid back against the chair, waved a hand dismissively. Johnny saw her bottom lip disappear when she smiled. “You guys really know how to have fun.”

“Better than a funeral,” Sarah said. She pushed the throttle forward a little more and the engine grew louder.

“We aren’t allowed at funerals anymore,” Johnny said, moving up closer to her.

“Even when the dead die right under us,” said Sarah.

Leila rocked like this was familiar play. Johnny didn’t like the way Sarah talked about the family. Sober or not, the family will throw Nana’s ashes into the shallows of the lake. They’ll talk about the chair and touch it like it was her and then they’ll cook. After their father’s ashes had been spread, the family took up all the seats in the great room and watched, through the big bay windows, the dark scud roll quick over the water,

a thing composed of all the family dead come to collect another of its own. To think of it this way tied Johnny to a world free of form that was theirs alone. The family had been in the house on the lake through wars, the depression, and riot—they'd lasted up north, away from the problems in the city. The problems, his father had said, people have when they do not improve themselves and cannot adapt. He would drive south every weekday for work, a three hour drive he'd cut to two in the black Cadillac.

Johnny watched Sarah take another quick slug of bourbon. Neither of the girls looked at him. He studied the way Sarah, glossy-eyed, leered at Leila rocking back and forth in the chair.

“She was a hundred and four,” Sarah said. “We've been getting the stink out of that thing for days.”

Leila lowered her eyes from the clouds to Sarah, and she laughed. “She must have been a strong woman.”

The wind wasn't blowing too hard, but waves came up a couple of feet, small whitecaps that whipped and broke against the pontoons. Leila's breasts shook under the towel when a wave slapped the boat. Like bunnies, Johnny thought. A small hop-hop. Sarah was small. He was small. The boat, the fish, the ashes of the family were all small in this blue lake, but their house was big and empty like the pontoon they were floating on.

Warm in the sun, Johnny began to sweat. His stomach growled. This girl, rocking in their dead Nana's chair, her mother's rocker brought over from Germany. Last week, Nana drank scotch and water and smoked cigarettes and marijuana in that chair. She'd started calling everyone Johnny. All day she sat looking out the big bay

window at the lake, her two overweight Dobermans at her sides and petting themselves when her hands would fall. The dogs were taken down with Nana's body and cremated with her.

"Hand me a beer," Sarah said to Johnny.

He asked Leila if she wanted one and she shook her head.

"Are you two really going to fish? I hate fishing."

"Nothing else to do," Johnny said. He liked fishing and knew it would please his father. But Johnny was no good at it because he wasn't trying to catch fish. The mechanics he had, but for what he wanted, to recover the memories and bodies of the family put into the lake by the handful for generations, a bucket seemed a better tool.

"That's too bad," Leila said. "I'd like a fire once the sun goes down."

"A rotten life," said Sarah. "Spoiled rotten."

Johnny told his sister to stop the boat at the point so that he could drop a line or two. The water there, at twenty feet, was a color that Johnny didn't know the name of. It was green and blue and grey, oxidized copper and slate—a glacial mystery. Fish were easy to spot, especially trout, their big, brown and silver bodies like mirrors weaving between the large boulders that made the point shallow.

"I think I smell the chair," Leila said.

Sarah laughed. "It's on you." The boat stopped and Sarah went to the bow and dropped the anchor. Johnny rigged a pole and asked Leila if she wanted the other, which she didn't. As he set up the second rod, Sarah undressed for a swim, something she almost always did naked no matter their mother's protests. Leila removed the towel on her head and watched. Johnny wondered what it meant that her lips pulled tight. He was

used to this, to his sister. When she jumped in, Johnny went to the side. Before he cast out into the water he closed his eyes for a moment and felt, again, a pulse of memory in his head.

“We should *do* something,” Leila said. She stepped forward, picked up Sarah’s shirt, and put it on without taking her eyes off Johnny’s sister. The shirt stretched across Leila’s chest.

“Where are you from?” he asked. There was no action on his lure. Nothing. Straight down, he could see the fish moving in slow circles.

“All over,” Leila said.

Johnny reeled in and cast again.

“A funny time for vacation, especially up here.”

Leila laughed and said, “Yeah, well, nobody asks me what I think.”

Sarah howled from beneath the boat, from the pocket between the pontoons, and her voice made the aluminum tubes sing. In summer, Johnny would go with her, but he was afraid. That he’d hit his head on the pontoon and drown, that someone would start the boat and drive over him. That when he’d surface below the deck there would be something terrible and dark, an aqueous mass of white teeth, fragmented bone, and dark, wet hair.

Sarah pulled herself half way onto the bow. “Give me a hand,” she said. Leila pulled her up. The two stood together for a moment, Leila’s hands on Sarah’s bare hips. The sun cast a shadow of Sarah’s white butt down the back of her thighs. She was lean and strong, the ridges of her bones raised like stitching in leather. Sarah pulled up the anchor and put on the towel Leila had placed on the bench.

Johnny's rod-tip bowed and he pulled back to set his hook. The rod doubled over and he reeled in, fast and steady.

"You got one," Sarah said, coming towards him. "Goodbye lasagna."

Johnny lifted the fish over the rail. A good-sized trout, eighteen inches, it beat its tail against the deck. Johnny pressed it down with one hand and removed the hook with the other.

"Do the honors?" Sarah offered Leila, extending a section of weathered two-by-four to her.

Leila clutched her hands to her chest and said, "No chance."

"One hit," Sarah said.

"I don't kill fish. Or anything."

Sarah swung the lumber down next to Johnny's hand, and Leila yelped. He flinched and closed his eyes. When he opened them, the fish lay calm, its eye a hole. Johnny dropped the fish in a bucket. They should have kept it alive.

"I'm going to get some sun," Sarah said. She picked up the two cans of bourbon and sat at the back of the boat. Leila followed. Drinking made Johnny nervous. Everyone in the family made him nervous the more they drank. Alcohol wasn't the only problem. He didn't think it killed his father, didn't think he'd been drunk when he'd died. He'd gotten in the car, driven away, and he never came back. The girls began talking, giggling together quietly so that Johnny couldn't understand. He knew they liked each other. The way Leila had laid her hands on Sarah's hips, softly, dragging them down and away.

Johnny climbed up to the top deck. He lay down and looked up into the orange and violet sky. They hadn't gotten rid of the chair. He felt his heart beating, his back press the platform with each pulse. The clouds on the Northern horizon always came at sunset, a screen for the setting sun. In an hour, a swarm of bright stars and stillness would come. Then evening storm, a symptom of the coming season, would send out its tendrils to take the days warmth. A crack pealed out from the South shore. "What was that?" Leila said.

"Shotgun, probably," Sarah said. "Happens all the time. People up here are nutso."

Johnny rolled over and put his head near the edge so he could see the girls. The boat turned in the wind. Leila sat with her legs crossed. Sarah leaned over her, to her ear, and whispered. Leila closed her eyes, folder her lower lip into her mouth. She seemed almost asleep, unworried by anything at all. Leila reached a hand up into Sarah's hair. The soft light made the girls look like candy to Johnny, two glowing gumdrops the he couldn't put his hands on. Leila opened her eyes and stared up at Johnny. He wanted to look, but he didn't want to be seen. He turned away, put his head towards the bow. Nana's chair rocked in the wind and Johnny watched it. The lake would be black when the sun fell behind the hill. The kissing sounds, soft, wet slips, like steps in watery sand or a knife run between the bones and flesh of a fish. If he let himself, he could feel weak from hunger, and thinking that reminded him, as did the girls, that his childhood existed in the very recent past.

He wanted to know if Leila's mouth felt like gelatin and he turned again to see the two. They were naked and Johnny fixed on Leila's neck as she moved Sarah's head with her hand buried in hair.

They'd drifted closer to shore. They would be home soon, he thought. Sarah looked up, from her knees, and Johnny wondered if he'd made a sound. Leila lay back, put another hand on Sarah's head, her hard fingers moved in little circles until they were tangled in Sarah's hair and she squeezed.

Johnny watched Leila pull his sister's head around between her legs. There were noises, like a puppy learning to bark, each time Leila pulled in another direction. His sister seemed a little girl then, more so than any time since their father had died two summers ago. He tried to distract himself, to not put words to what he saw, but he had no way to stop it. Leila looked up at Johnny, and he watched her eyes opening wider and wider, like they were coming out of her head, until they were as big and round as her quiet mouth, and that was it. Leila let Sarah go.

When she closed her eyes, John turned away and stared up at the stars. He'd felt it. Slow laps of water rung against the boat's pontoons. The night had grown still and windless. They were still, the boat still. Nana's memorial would be quiet like this. When the body had been put to fire and brought back in a plastic bag inside a plastic box, they would all rise, the family, first thing the next morning, before the sun broke over the pin-covered hills, and take the boat out into the fog, and they would cry until nothing remained. In the plastic and everybody had pieces of Nana under their fingernails.

Johnny remembered the grit of his father's ashes. The bones had not burned up well, like small pebbles in beach sand, sometimes bit of acorn.

The girls giggled and Johnny heard Leila say 'no'. He wondered what Sarah had asked and he wanted off the boat, away from sex, from thinking of death. This lake had been a graveyard. All the family's dead were in the lake. The girls went to the bow. Leila rocked Sarah in Nana's chair and spoke sweetly in her ear. "Okay?" she said, and touched Sarah's cheek with the back of her hand. Johnny watched Leila tear a lashing from one of the bad towels. "Open," she said, put the fabric across Sarah's mouth, and tied it at the back of Sarah's head. "Good girl." She tore more strips and bound Sarah to the rocker. Leila turned and walked beneath the top deck. He watched his sister. He would untie her if she'd look at him, but she didn't. The horn blew once, and then the ladder rung with Leila's footsteps, and the wind picked up enough to blow the hair from Johnny's forehead. He rolled onto his back and felt pressed to the decking, weighed down.

Leila came off the last step and said, "I've never been somewhere so blue. Hard and cold, everything dead-looking." Johnny counted the constellations he knew, the dippers, Orion—he felt Leila's weight and warmth on his thighs. What he'd heard of, watched only minutes ago, what he wanted to know, seemed a mystery to him because he'd never felt it and didn't know its purpose. He hadn't had that conversation.

As the wind renewed itself, the boat began to move, and waves tapped the pontoons. Leila bent forward and bit his lower lip. He closed his eyes, waiting for his first kiss, but it didn't come. She slid a hand down his body and said, "There it is," and undid the knot in his shorts. "You haven't done this before, have you?" He didn't respond. "I'm going to show you what a man does," she said, and put him inside of her. The cold wind raised goosebumps on his chest and arms. He was losing stars to the

rolling clouds, and he couldn't think. He wanted to remember things, to know. He didn't miss the man his father because he'd learned to expect the worse. Men in the family didn't last, his mother and grandmother said, reminding Johnny of some shadowy responsibility to live quickly and properly.

Leila's rhythm was hard, her back straight. He felt good, buzzing with cold, dizzy, but cut from his body and out of control. She grabbed his hands and he followed the motions across her body, pinching and scratching when she did. When they got the first noise out of her together, she turned him loose. He put a hand to the small of her back, cold with sweat, set his nails into her skin and dragged them up her spine.

Desiring something he did not understand, Johnny wanted to exact some meanness upon this girl, to take part of her as his. She let her head back until her sand-colored hair, gray in the moonlight, touched his hand. He grabbed and pulled. Wind whistled through the plastic lattice on the boat's sides and beat the life-jackets against the railings. He pulled until he could feel strands snap. The clouds were on top of them then, tall, Canadian thunderheads black as asphalt. When Johnny thought he'd taken some control, Leila cut his chest with her thumbnail. The opened skin stung, and a sensation as deep and shifting as the clouds bore down on him. He let go of her hair and tried to grab hold of the deck until his hands hurt. He thought of Leila's face opening wide. Johnny twisted under her, embarrassed by the wetness running between his legs. Leila sat on him, kept him, tapping her fingers on his chest. Something was after him from all directions, that had been, he thought, for two years. And here it sat, on top of him, forcing Johnny to become what he and Sarah had been protected from. He grabbed her arms and pushed her off of him.

“Don’t leave me,” Leila said. “Please.”

Johnny stood, fastened his shorts, and went below. Sarah had already freed one of her hands. It took Johnny a minute to untie the knot on the gag, swollen from moisture sprayed up by the wind and waves. He could smell bourbon and fish on Sarah when he helped her out of the rocker. He took his sister’s hand and said, “Jump.”

“What about the boat?”

“It’ll beach,” he said, “let’s get away from this.” They stepped off the bow into the black water. The cold burned and Johnny’s body embraced itself. When they surfaced, Johnny saw Leila still on the top of the boat, knees to her chest. They put their heads down and swam until the water warmed and could touch bottom. A heavy wind beat at their backs when they stood, still a couple of hundred feet from the house. Thunder sounded from the North and Johnny turned to look at the bruised sky. Climbing out of the water and onto the dock, he thought he was being stepped on. He helped his sister out of the water. The lake still pressed on him with cold, and as they walked down aluminum dock he saw a spot of orange glow and then fall to the ground. A soft yellow light lit the face of a man in a chair on the back porch of the house.

A large duffle bag sat next to the man and his feet rested on the cast iron table. He was tall and much bigger than either Johnny or Sarah. Smoke rolled out of the man’s open mouth and curled around his head. Johnny kept his head down and Sarah behind him. They came up the steps from the dock, shaking. There was a spot of moonlight on the porch at the top of the stairs. Johnny thought they could stay on the walk, pass by the man somehow unnoticed and enter another door, the side door. Enter the side, through

the kitchen and dining rooms, and lock the door between the porch and patio. Cut the man out this way.

They ducked down and walked. The man called out to them calmly, “Welcome home, kids. Took so long, I helped myself to a drink. And some things.”

The voice was deep and cool. Johnny wanted to be in the house, to bury the cold with warm clothes, and he was sure Sarah wanted the same.

“Towel for the lady?” the man said, and threw it to Johnny.

He covered his sister.

“Come up here. Into the light.” Johnny and Sarah stepped onto the porch.

Johnny looked ahead, along the side of the house and down the driveway into the dark wall of woods. “Understand. Help me and we’ll all be fine.” There were places Johnny knew he could hide. His stomach pulsed and he could not stop the chattering of his teeth. The man opened up a blue blanket and laid it on an empty chair. Johnny didn’t think he could run, but he could slow the man down long enough for Sarah to get away. He squeezed her hand, looked at her, and pushed her back toward the stairs. *Run*, he mouthed to her. The man got to Sarah in only a few steps and knocked her off the porch. Johnny heard the air come out of her when she hit the ground, and then she was quiet. He started after her, but the man clipped Johnny on the back of the neck, knocking him to the concrete. “I only want my daughter,” the man said. “She’s supposed to be with you.”

As Johnny put his hand to his head, to press where he’d been struck by Leila’s father, there was a crash. Johnny might have thought his head was ringing, that lightning had struck nearby, if it weren’t for the crunch of metal.

“Where’s my little girl?” he said to Johnny.

“On the boat.” He kept his head down. If the man beat him, Johnny didn’t want to see it coming.

Leila’s father picked Johnny up and set him in the chair. He wrapped the blanket around the boy. Johnny felt the wind die then, blocked by the fabric. He didn’t know what to do.

“Son, I went through real trouble to get here, to get a blanket in this big house. Where you people put things, Christ. Money between sheets of paper. I’ll never understand. And that smell.” He lit a new cigarette. “Did my girl tell you her name?”

“Leila,” Johnny said, and the man laughed.

“Pretty. She’s very useful that way.” Her father took a long drag of the cigarette and leaned down to Johnny. “I’m on a schedule here, kid. Can you see the boat?” Johnny nodded. He could smell the alcohol on his breath, a familiar sweetness. “Tell me again; is my daughter on that boat?” Johnny nodded. “Let’s have a look.” The man pulled a roll of tape from his bag, pushed Johnny forward so his chest laid flat on his thighs, and bound his arms behind his back. Leila’s father exhaled a cloud of smoke in Johnny’s face. No sound came from the lake by the wind and metal grinding with the wave’s rhythm. Leila’s father called out to her but got no response. He went to the railing and called again. Johnny got up and tried for the door. “They’re locked,” the man said. “All of them.” He tried once more for his daughter. “Get going,” he said, but Johnny didn’t understand. “Walk,” the man said, pointing, and when Johnny shook his head, the man struck him across the face and pushed the cherry of his cigarette into the boy’s neck. Johnny didn’t make a sound. “Get going,” the man said again, and Johnny went down the three steps slowly and backwards.

“That’s very bright of you,” the man said.

On the walkway, Johnny saw his sister curled up and shaking, the towel next to her. The man went ahead of Johnny and placed the towel over Sarah. “You two looked older from a distance.” He nudged Johnny forward.

There were eight more steps to the dock, and a short walk before that. Johnny could see stars in the sky across the lake, but there was a redness to the clouds that had drawn over them, and Johnny thought there was hatred in the wind. The boat began to list sideways, almost rolling as each wave lifted it into the wind. They could see then, both of them, Johnny thought, that the girl had left the boat. Spray blew from the lake, and Johnny closed his eyes to stop it from stinging his eyes. The wind sounded like television static turned to full volume, and Johnny’s head buzzed with the noise and the spray and the pain. A bright light flashed on his eyelids. There was a small push on his back and he was in the air flying. Johnny turned his head to his shoulder, not knowing how he would hit the ground, but when he did, there was another, brighter, bursting of light.

\*

Johnny woke. Johnny’s mother bent over him on the dock and touched his face. The lace of her glove scratched his scraped and bruised cheek. One of his aunts cut the tape from his wrists. Everyone had shown up in new black clothes that matched the box Johnny’s mother carried Nana in. He lay still, his hands blue, and he felt a sticky wetness on the side of his head. He was wet and cold, neck stinging. His aunt picked him up and carried him into the house with hardly a show of effort.

Johnny hadn't seen what happened in the night, what the sky loosed upon the lake and the people on it, or how all the water towered, stood, up. And he didn't see what the wind had blown and washed into the shallows in front of the house. The family didn't give him the whole story. Their mother saw a boat crash as the cause of injury, especially Sarah's, who'd been taken to the hospital with hypothermia and a broken shoulder. Unfortunate, their mother said. Weather here is unpredictable, especially for young adults. The aunts agreed to the terribleness of the situation, how close it had come to the loss of Nana. So much loss. If they'd known, well, how could you?

Johnny came to find that everyone around the lake had a different view of things. They'd always been seen as an odd lot, weekenders that didn't go away. But something happened that had never been seen before, not negligence or theft, but a trick of nature coinciding with familial betrayal. There may be innocence and moral flexibility in winter, when ungodly temperatures collude with roofline-deep snow to press everyone towards the edge of reason, but a thawed world, clear as the lake water and easily inhabited, oughtn't be so complicated. Though, it's no one's business to intrude. People are free to make their own decisions. Such a shame to fear things that find us all.

Well, one State Patrolman said, who could've known these people were coming. They'd been around, working toward Canada. Found some of their work in Flint. We know there's two of them out there, and we're hoping these children can help us once they're up to it.

The water came up at once, called by a bolt of lightning.

Boat of disappeared fisherman found at bottom, anchor still holding.

Two Pike found alive in floating cooler.

Yeah, I use locks so the wind won't open my doors and let the deer in. That's a lesson you learn quick, boy.

When clouds cover the lake you can see things moving in the water, shapes like bodies swimming.

Man seen picking up teenage girl outside Flint found tied up in home.

What breaks my heart are those children. They've lost everything. There's no love in that home. I knew the father, a good man, but secretive. The mother and sisters, well. It's hard, I'm sure. A shame, every bit.

We've been looking for these two since we put a few incidents together.

Risk? I can't think of a place I'd rather leave my children to themselves. They have everything they want here, everything. They're not so much children, after all, but nearly adults. They're educated, responsible, and independent—we've taught them that. Who knows what terror we might all have suffered had the circumstances been different.

From bed, warm, cleaned, and fed, Johnny looked out the window at the women wading through the water, their dresses floating around them. They waded and wiped their faces. They picked up pieces of the boat and someone found a dowel from Nana's chair. Johnny's mother held the black plastic box to her stomach and sowed handfuls of ash in gray clouds, while the policemen stood on the shore, arms crossed, looking at their feet.

## VITA

John Franklin Keeline Wagner was born in Michigan on October 25, 1981, the descendent of cowboys, thieves, and industrialists, and the first son of F. John Wagner and Terry Ryan Kane, parents extraordinaire. He learned to write with his left hand and to love peanut butter. Then he went to Texas State University-San Marcos to figure out what went wrong with this country. The problem was much bigger than he thought.

Permanent Address: 101 Fenway Loop Apt. 103

San Marcos, Texas 78666

This thesis was typed by John F.K. Wagner.