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This Is the Dream-Freeze

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THIS IS THE DREAM-FREEZE

By

Timothy Brent Johnston

THESIS

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For the degree of

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

Title of Thesis: This Is The Dream-Freeze

This thesis by Timothy Brent Johnston is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Committee Chair: Matthew Gavin Frank

Date

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ABSTRACT

This Is the Dream-Freeze

By

Timothy Brent Johnston

This Is The Dream-Freeze is a collection of short stories that are all interconnected through theme (escape) and content (there's an asteroid coming). I find that it's an odd thing to obsess on (the end of times), especially when everybody's desire is to escape from their current predicament—whatever it may be—because, essentially, the last and final escape in the collection is death by asteroid. In this collection, I indirectly ask the question “What does it mean to be human?” I try to answer the question by representing a consistent animal population, whether it be mammals, birds, or insects. Depending on your interpretation of the beginning of the world (whether it be God sayith so, The Big Bang, or alternative theories), I infer that maybe humans no longer see themselves as animals and only see themselves as a people—something a step above any other species. This way, I hope to show that when people want to escape, that they not only try to escape their surroundings, but their rite as human.

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2014

DEDICATION

For Ma and Dad. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't be here.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank Matthew Gavin Frank for being a weird, little man with the enthusiasm of a dog who knows he can't piddle in the house. You've turned my writing around, and though you won't take any more credit than you already have, you've got your thumbprints all over this collection. I was an okay writer when we first started this, now, because of you, I feel comfortable saying that I was an okay writer when we first started this.

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Thanks to my immediate family—this includes my mother, father, both brothers, their

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
The Predetermined End of Asteroid-2013 MA85.....	11
Glowing Yellow, Looking Tan.....	13
Coprophagia.....	69
Falling Up.....	85
Little Harder, Little Quicker	108
Speak to Me.....	121
Somebody Get Me a Horse to Sit on so That I May Speak	125
5 : 15.....	142
Second Coming	159
A Rock Named Pavlov.....	186

Introduction

This is the part of the introduction to my thesis where I write the introduction to the introduction to my thesis:

I always like to start everything with a joke.

But, I just began with a statement, so there is no way I can start this introduction with a joke.

Unless, of course, we consider the subject line to be the joke. Or, of course, we consider the joke to be that I didn't start with the joke, therefore, making the statement the joke.

I've fucked up already.

Ah-ha-ha-haha.

This is the part of the introduction to my thesis where I write the introduction to my thesis:

I took a literary theory course about five years ago from now (if you're wondering, it's March, 27th, 2014. It's a Thursday. I like the contraction of *it's* here, because as I write, it's present tense: it is a Thursday. When you're reading this, it'll be past tense: it was a Thursday. Think this is an unnecessary comment? We're only, like, 130 words into the introduction. It will get worse from here). What I took out of this theory course is the term *dissatisfaction*. I took other terms from the course, too, but this was the first semester of my first year in the MA program—a long time ago—and I've forgotten most of them. I was nervous then, I was underdeveloped, and I was drinking a lot—But Light, if it matters. All of this was because of theory. But thank God for dissatisfaction, because this is exactly what this thesis is about. Not the word, directly. The

word we should focus on in the next 180-odd pages is *escape*. Escape because of dissatisfaction.

One of the course books I bought was McGowan's *The End of Dissatisfaction?* I remember becoming very intrigued by that question mark on the text. The book—I assumed—wouldn't discuss a statement, but a question. A question that makes the reader think, is this really the end of dissatisfaction? I don't remember most the text. I remember words like *apathy*, and *transcendence*, and *cynicism*, and this weird obsession with "freedom of enjoyment." But that's it. I'm sure I read it, and I'm sure I got bored, and frustrated, and irate, and murderous and everything else that comes free-of-charge with theory texts, gave up and peaked at the end, hoping the answer would be on the last page. I sure I hoped McGowan would wrap it up nicely with a conclusion like a sixth-grade do-you-like-me note:

Is this really the end of dissatisfaction?

Yes

No

Maybe

Just as a friend

Clearly I wasn't satisfied, because here I am five years later in a damn doughnut shop, with no memory of this ever happening. I am either not satisfied or still not satisfied. There you go, McGowan. Just answered your damn question. Enjoy my thirty bucks, you bastard.

This is the part of the introduction to my thesis where I write about escape until we're both bored and need to escape:

I agree. This *is* a tacky way to write. But how to you get to Carnegie Hall?

Type this into a search engine:

<https://www.google.com/maps/dir/Huron+Mountain+Bakery,+1301+S+Front+St,+Marquette,+MI+49855/Carnegie+Hall,+881+7th+Ave,+New+York,+NY+10019>

Ah-ha-ha-haha.

(For future reference, every time I write “Ah-ha-ha-haha” I want you to imagine me exasperated, on the end of my rope, head in hands, fingers mussing up my hair. In your mind, I should look sleep depraved. That way, it’s authentic.)

To get back on track: escape is essentially the word I wanted to express throughout the entire thesis. “The Predetermined End...” is about a planet destroyed by an asteroid and is hurtled away from its original orbit, so, essentially, the escape of a planetoid. “Falling Up,” is about a teenage boy who wants to leave town, “Coprophagia,” is about a wife who confronts her husband’s lover and tries to decide if she should leave him, “Glowing Yellow, Looking Tan,” is about a teenage boy who wants to leave town (...ahem), “Little Harder, Little Quicker,” is about a teenage couple is confronted with an unwanted pregnancy and consider fantastical ways to free themselves of their responsibilities, “Speak to Me,” is about a Swedish man who must come to terms that the world will end, “Somebody Get Me a Horse...,” is about a man who wants to...leave town, “5 : 15” is about a man remembering a friend of his who had...left town, “Second Coming,” is about the escape from immaturity, who also left town, and finally, “A Rock Named Pavlov,” is about the asteroid from the first story has finally come to Earth, and we need to learn how to escape our fears and accept that we cannot escape death. Acceptance! It’s

about acceptance! Nobody leaves town in that one. In the end, there's nothing.

Ah-ha-ha-haha.

At this point, you'd expect me to be an academic, to tell you why I responded with my impression of dissatisfaction, used my knowledge of dissatisfaction, applied McGowan's definition of dissatisfaction, how I was influenced by the complete and total *essence* of the word. Well, let me tell you about academia: it influenced my thesis as much as Grimace influenced the sale of maternity pants in the mid-80s. I don't need a series of over-contextualized books written by over-contextualized people to tell me how people can get pissed off at life and want to find something new.

This is my essential understanding of *escape*. It's a straight-forward word, right?

To escape means to escape.

To see the situation. To want a different one. To get the hell away.

How can I make this clearer?

I + hate + this = I'm moving on.

This is the part of the introduction to my thesis where I state that I'm going to have a conversation with one of my characters and you put your head in your hands and say over and over, "Why?" and then I'll spend more time answering that question in this section and never get a chance to talk to my character until the next section:

Why? Why what? Why make this a joke? Why talk to one of my characters? Why treat this as though I don't care? (I do, by the way. I assure you that I do. I'll even repeat myself later.)

Why? Because I'm frazzled, I'd tell you, if you were here.

If you were here, I'd buy you a cupcake and say that none of this matters. I'd tell you how often I've said *none of this matters* over the last few years. You know what I've learned over the last five years? Other than how tired I can get? Other than how focusing the last ten years (undergrad, MA, MFA) on creative work seems like a cop-out way to avoid reality, adulthood, responsibilities. I could have gotten a job. I could have joined the police academy, been a fire fighter, an astronaut enthusiast. I could have been anything, but I chose this life, to work at a literary journal, to publish successful writers, to extend the idea of "art" into the world. But, still. Read the first story of this thesis, and then read the last. This may be fiction, but this is kind of what I believe (...except I'm a fairly devout Catholic, and these stories are awfully atheist. Don't tell Dad). No matter if our world is demolished by an asteroid, or we crumble our own civilization by our own hands, everything we hold dear (even Shakespeare) will no longer exist. Just like our own lives, the Sun is going to collapse on itself. It will burn out and explode. It could be a billion years from now, and even if civilization lasts that long, nothing can happen on this Earth once the lights go out. Ooh. That's theatrical.

Ah-ha-ha-haha.

So, *Why?* Why not? I'm enjoying this. I'm having fun. *None of this matters* in the long run. This matters now because it's what makes me happy. And maybe it makes you happy too. There's a *theoryesque* word for this. And God bless it, I can't even begin to tell you what it may be.

Ah-ha-ha-haha.

Why? Vonnegut does this kind of stuff, okay. (*Poo-tee-weet?*) And he's dead. He believed in no afterlife, but he believed humanity and its potential to get our heads out of our

own asses. No, I don't have a source where he said that. This is the impression I get from his work. And how can you tell me I'm wrong? He's dead and can't tell us otherwise. You may tell me I'm wrong. But I'm not the only one. This is how I feel, and until I make money from lies, I'm not in the wrong, however wrong I may be.

Why? Because I'm in a doughnut shop, and I'm inspired by my surroundings. If you were here, I'd point out that the only thing I want in life right now is to find out what the "Mr. Fabulous" cake is in the display case. I'd want to tell you that it's raining out, and that it sucks that it's still March and we're expecting more snow, and the Beef-A-Roo sign across the street reads *ITS CHILI SEASON*, and I want you to join me in telling Beef-A-Roo to fuck off. It's not November, Beef-A-Roo, we'd say. It's March. And then I'd buy you a pineapple cupcake, or the red velvet cupcake, or the strawberry cream cupcake, or the Key Lime cupcake, because these are the flavors of Spring and Summer, and we'd sigh, wouldn't we? Because we'd become hopeful. We'd forget the coming snow. *Why?* Because I'm trying to survive, and another six or seven inches of snow in March isn't going to help that.

And, no. My character is not the one asking *why*. You, I'm assuming, are the one asking *why*.

You are asking why I'm going to have a conversation with one of my characters.

I'll tell you why: because you are not here. Because this is a doughnut shop and I am alone, and you should always have someone to talk to in a doughnut shop.

This is the part of the introduction to my thesis where I have a conversation with one of my characters and you put your head in your hands and say, "Finally":

Tim Johnston: State your full name.

Emory: You've only given me the first: Emory.

TJ: I'll make it official.

Emory J. Stankbutt: I don't like it.

TJ: Deal with it.

EJS: Do you really think that's fair?

TJ: Of course I do. And so do you. That's the point.

EJS: What is?

TJ: We think the same thing. I created you.

EJS: Are you me? Or, am I you?

TJ: In a way, I suppose. You and I share similar characteristics. We're golfers.

EJS: But you never knocked anybody up.

TJ: Not even close, but I imagine I'd do the same as you if I had. I'd worry about her parents and what they thought. Except, maybe, you're a little immature when it comes to your girlfriend.

EJS: Leave her out of it.

TJ: See? I'd say the same thing. We protect those closest to us, and in a way, if you are me, then I feel like I have to protect you, like you're my little brother or something. Which I don't have.

But if I did, he'd golf. He'd take care of his own.

EJS: So, we're golfers, you're a little insensitive about big-picture things like your girlfriend getting pregnant.

TJ: I imagine I'd be. I like that you button her pants back up. I like that you're the young guy on the golf crew. I was, too.

EJS: What about that golf course stuff? I don't get it. In one spot, I want to be on a tractor, in

another, I'm a golf course grunt.

TJ: Your point?

EJS: It's inconsistent.

TJ: What's it matter? You're all going to die anyway.

EJS: How do you figure?

TJ: First few pages. Last few pages.

EJS: What about them?

TJ: The narrator is speaking to you, Stankbutt.

EJS: That has nothing to do with me.

TJ: Trust me. I had you in mind.

EJS: But that means everybody's going to die. Even Hannah.

TJ: And Stankbutt-to-be. Everyone. These stories are all interconnected. You and Hannah appear in at least three of them. Five if you don't count the opener and closer, of which, I'm sorry, but the words are directed, dedicated even, to you. Why do you think it's so damn repetitive? One's a warning, the other's a reminder.

EJS: Which is which?

TJ: Don't change the subject. You're fucked, regardless. I was going to have you appear in more, but I've run out of time. I was going to deal a lot more time, actually to you and her, but I'm afraid it would have gotten a little repetitive. I mean, you'll show up again in a piece that connects with the "Second Coming" piece, where we're going to follow Palmer and Gracious Halleluiaah—you're even going to be a big part of the Gospel according to GH. Congratulations. Not to give too much away, though, but you may or may not accidentally kill the Christ, reborn.

EJS: Pardon?

TJ: Nothing. It'll turn out fine. You and Hannah were also going to float by on the river of a story that follows Rollo and his uncle as they hand out flyers about the end of the world, requesting men and women to commit themselves to saving the human population. It's a fun trip.

EJS: I'm kind of put off by you.

TJ: I understand. I feel the same way. Ah-ha-haha.

This is the part of the introduction to my thesis where I treat this like a children's' diner placemat game and you find yourself hankering for a milkshake:

For each question below, mark True (T) or False (F) if this was the original title for a piece:

[] You're All Screwed

[] Your Not-yet Sainted Mother

[] Shit-eater

[] Hold on to The World

[] The Tiniest Line Between Tachycardia and Epinephrine

[] Gibberish and Luke-Warm Water

[] Just A Motherfucker on A Tractor or The Still-Working Pink Dildo We Found in The Lake

[] Boiling Water for The Children When The Cupboards Collect Dust

[] Filthy Minds and Those Who Preform Lasso Tricks

[] You're Still All Screwed

A: All true. God help me.

This is the part of the introduction to my thesis where I write the conclusion to the introduction of my thesis:

I understand the risk I run by writing my introduction like this. I understand that it looks like I don't care. I know that sentence is repetitive, I understand that saying a sentence is repetitive is repetitive, but the first thing you learn about writing in an essay is that you do not bring in new information to your conclusion paragraph.

I've failed at that, too. I received an A in EN111 by the way.

The truth is that I take this very seriously, and though it looks like I'm taking the easy way out, making a mockery of the whole process, I've spent a lot of time making it look like this. I mean, the Carnegie joke? How can you not swoon at that? All I'm trying to do here is encapsulate my jumbled personality here. Bet you didn't know I had one. So here you go: this is me unleashed.

This is me after five years in a grad program.

This is what obsession does.

This is what writing does.

This is what *revision* does.

This is a rock.

A-ha-ha-ha.

The Predetermined End of Asteroid-2013 MA85

This rock does not know what it's doing. Its motivation is not sinister. It does not think of victims. It abides the laws of gravity and apples and *De Mundi Systemate*. It does not know it was once—and will be again—the victim. This rock, this hunk of iron and sodium and carbon and nickel and copper and gold and nitrogen and magnesium and calcium, was at one time beyond memory, a much larger rock orbiting a balloon of hydrogen fire. For eons it obeyed, swam in the vacuum, harbored moons, tilted and wobbled with seasons until another rock's path met its own. From that rock, this rock was broken and separated and hurtled out of orbit and became something else, something scorched and burned and cracked, something molten and wild, something cooled and hard. This rock is aimless, waiting for something to grab hold of it again, to be kept by gravitational pull, that never-ignored force, that blind, unshakable squeeze.

This rock is destined to meet its end. This rock will meet our rock. This rock will destroy itself simultaneously breaking, scorching, and hurtling our rock out of orbit. We, once aware this rock is coming, will kneel. Mercy will be the word, but there will be no knowledge of how to obtain it. There will be no thought that this rock and our rock are cousins, made of the same metal, birthed in a microsecond of a microsecond of a microsecond—a moment to help us understand disconsolation and ozone. But understanding isn't the problem. The problem is the problem and terminology is not a solution unless that term is topological defect. The solution, for us, is acceptance. And there will be acceptance, just as there was when this rock mindlessly

went from homeostasis to that microsecond of a microsecond of a microsecond when sublimation took over, when dry ice became apparition. The acceptance was the exhale, that last feeling of breath given back. It was slow. It was the breeze playing the hollow notes of the wind chime, the persistent F-sharp and A-minor until the green flash of ozone-lit magnesium turned white in oxygen. The blue of the iron. C-sharp. The vacuum before the sonic waves. The osmosis of dew on grass. This is what we will need to learn—that breath before the boom, that moment when dipoles fail.

We will abandon the instinct to rampage, to fall back on the heels of our humanity, to claw and disfigure one another, to rape and pillage, to yield ourselves to trees, to develop gills and slink back into water, to dissolve into single-cells and sift to the bottom of the ocean where light has never existed. We will welcome comfort. We will be bacteria. We will not think of what's fair and what will never be. We will know that billions of us stacked end to end is our only chance to be noticed by anything larger than us. We will forget our retreat and attach ourselves until we are out of water, breathing oxygen, and harvesting orchards until we decide to dissolve again. We will never satisfy ourselves, and we will welcome the rock, understanding, finally, that this rock's path was set in place long before we invented a deity to deliver us. We will understand that this is a rock. We will understand that this rock will be the liberation, the squeal of the nail ripped from the wood, the exhale of what was never ours to keep.

Glowing Yellow, Looking Tan
Part 1

The blood on his knees and his hands is not his own, but he does have a laceration on his left shoulder. It's bleeding pretty good—as he'd say, if he noticed. This is Calvin Oliver Paque. Currently, he is jumping chain-link fences and running without a left shoe. He's stepped on a few stones that made him stumble, he's stubbed his foot on a sidewalk ledge, and his big toenail is cracked and bleeding, but, overall, nothing unmanageable, nothing that would keep him from moving forward. He has seventeen cuts on his face from broken glass from a school window. Six are gashes, and are deep, needing stitches. Scars will be left when they heal up, but he won't care. They'll add to his character, and if he's ever caught and taken somewhere. Maybe the mountain detention center, or worse, shipped to Wyoming or Kansas where the real stories of kid-inmates are hidden, the scars will be used as proof to all those other motherfuckers that he's been through some shit, and he'll go through it again, because there's nothing he's afraid of. Look at my face, he'd say. I'd go through it all again for a piece of bread, so, try me—he's practiced this. Try *me*, motherfucker. Try *me*, *motherfucker*. Those scars, and that line will be his tiger's stripes, his raptor's talons, his grizzly roar.

He is somber for a boy of sixteen—these are his mother's words, shared, and agreed, with the high school principal, Jaret Affel—this is the man who appears to care. He's the one who watches over 1,455 students—1,452 now, because one, the girl (Affel does not know about this) has run away, the another's dying in a hospital (this, he knows about), or in critical condition, or ignored, depending who you are and what you think of him; his family has been

called, but the only one in the waiting room is the custodian who found him in the bathroom, lying in blood like an oblong platter underneath him—and the other, the Paque kid is in custody, for all Affel knows—the last anyone has seen him was when he jumped through the window of the biology lab, hit the pavement and limped away, in a running kind of trot, like a gazelle with an open wound on his side, the gash from the lioness, the broken leg from a stray boulder on the Serengeti.

Affel is the one to break the bad news to the boy's mother. He is the one with the diplomatic face, the forced but understanding tone, the one whose voice matches a radio announcer reading over traffic reports. He is the one who has already forgotten Calvin's name, but must go on pretending that he has not, that he had that one-on-one relationship with the boy who has slipped through his administrative fingers. Oh, his voice demonstrates. Oh, I never saw this coming. Oh, your son, the foundation of our school, oh, something went wrong. Do you have any idea, ma'am, how this could have happened? Have there been *issues* at home? Is there anything we're missing?

These are words he does not say, but his tone says it all to his mother. He slides a school file across his desk, past the Donald Duck bobble head, beyond the unsolved Rubik's cube, the nearly-empty hand sanitizer, the kinked Slinky, the crossword puzzle with the wrong answers, (*Georgia*, when it should be *Alabama*). Calvin's file opens to the front page. The page with his photo. "This *is* your son, ma'am?" he asks.

He is her son, she says. Of course this is her son. They share the same sounding vowels in their language—Os sounding like *ow* no matter the word—the same curl in their hair, the same way they scrub dishes in a counterclockwise swirl, the need to rinse drinking glasses and

then wash again, getting the washcloth all the way to the bottom, but the plates and silverware are fine when washed once. They close doors similarly, too, never depressing the handle until the latch hovers over the hole, even though, as they both know, latches are designed to contract within the door frame. Neither of the Paques, mother and son, enjoy the sound of that click. It all seems, they've discussed over toast and butter, too definite, like jail cells in movies, the standard sound effect that says *that's it*. It's a sound that says two oddities were made for each other, and that the sound proves something, but they don't quite know what. Opposites attracting? Engineering for the sake of convenience and laziness? Hopelessness? How is she the latch, and how is he the click?

Calvin's mother remembers the old farmhouse of her grandfather, the one in the Missouri fields, somewhere around Loose Creek—this was forty years ago, before she made the Colorado slums her home. This was maybe when she was four. Maybe she was nine (the memory changes with her surroundings—drying dishes makes her think of a dog that bit her at seven, the sunshine reminds her of sunburn and aloe at five, when her grandmother bought her a pack of waxed crayons), when her grandfather did not like the noise, when he succumbed to bed in the early afternoons with a headache and chills and the sweats, and the only way doors would close back then was if the handles were turned to the left, put in place of the door jamb, and then the handle turned back to the right so the latch held firm—minimal noise as possible. But there was noise. The door rubbed against the jamb, and the hinges cackled like crows on a scavenged find, a deer left after a bear's kill, a drowned goat, a snake left after a mother raccoon protecting her litter. These were the sounds that could not have been avoided. This was the age before hardware convenience, when home remedies were used for body, soul, and

door maintenance—if cheap enough and not needed for anything else. Lard was used for bread, not doors. But sometimes her grandmother, who towards the end of her life only spoke Russian, (her grandfather responded in French), would tilt the bedside lamp onto a cloth and rub the hinges while her husband slept. Even now, when Calvin’s mother closes doors, sometimes she smells the kerosene. Sometimes it’s her memory. Sometimes it’s her son’s cologne, that pithy rank of magazine samples and turpentine. Of antiseptics and latex and window cleaner. This is her son, the hard sleeper. The one, who even at three a.m., cannot be woken by hallway lights, by the click of the bathroom door, by the water pressure, the flowing water in pipes by his head, behind drywall.

He is her son, and nobody can tell her otherwise. Not her coworkers at the casino, not her family, not the people in the building, not this principal. Not this washing-machine gentle-cycle-shrunk prick who claims to be a friend to her son, the man who mispronounced their last name so confidently—think of *cake*, she wants to say, when saying the name, not *ach-oo*. But, yes. This is my son. This has always been my son. Ignore his eyes, his “compassionate” understanding. This is what she reminds herself whenever she introduces herself as *Calvin’s mother*. Responses are the same. *Of course you are*, made to sound like *this is the only response you’ll accept, this is the only response I can give*. To them, she is his mother the way red oaks are houses for squirrels. But she is his mother.

But at other times she isn’t sure. Look at him, she thinks. There he is in this folder. It’s a school photo—there’s no personality. It’s black and white. He’s wearing clothes she’s seen before, the white t-shirt, probably the blue jeans with the hole in the knees, the fraying threads—he has so many of these kinds of shirts and jeans that maybe he’s wearing the same

every day, or he's labeled the tag Monday through Sunday. She remembers now she hasn't done his laundry in weeks. She can't remember if he has ankle socks or tube, and if he did, did he buy them? He isn't looking to the lens of the camera, but almost. His pupils are unfocused above the center of the photo. This is maybe a photo of a boy who is about to sneeze. It's more of a picture of a wall than a person. Look at him, she thinks, his skin, even in black and white, is the color of rotisserie chicken. Look at me, she thinks. I am sun-kissed mayonnaise. Look at him. Look at him. Is this my son? I can't remember. I barely remember the delivery. Was I put under? Did I push? Or was I opened? She feels around her middle to see if she can feel a scar through her shirt. No skin is raised, but enough is there to feel. At one time, she remembers, it was flat. There was a firmness. Now she's fluff. Look at him, he's a cinderblock. Look at him.

His last name is his mother's, an Ellis Island variation of the French side of her family—from Du Pacs, the ones on the southern Mimizan side who were known to domesticate ducks, who let the flocks die of old age. They ate the eggs, used the down, but never boiled meat away from bone. The carcasses of the dead were fed to the scavenger animals, placed just outside the property line, a half-mile from their back window, and the children painted what they could. The paintings never turned out much more than a red and brown canvas, some yellow was added to the brown to replicate the weeds, the sun, the passing time. Black smears painted by the little one, the great-great-great grandmother of Calvin. She swooped her brush full and long, even off of the canvas and saying that they were the crows, flying in, flying out. And it was the crows she was afraid of, thinking they were the escaped souls from *enfer*, the ones who were tortured, cursed. The ones who extended their curses onto others hoping to unload their own, only to expand the misery—they were the birds that followed the cattle rustlers, these

men who wandered the countryside, unapologetically. But one of them said he'd take her to Sweden—she had asked him knowing he had potatoes and bread in his satchel, her family had eggs, and not much else. Sweden, where he was born—the great-great-great-grandfather of Calvin. For the rest of her life, she feared the path to hell. But meeting the cattle rustler meant she no longer had to taste the fire, the brimstone, because he would take it in for the both of them. This was his sacrifice to her, this is what he promised when he hoisted her on his saddle, and she promised, too, that she would be his savior, his beacon of hope, of angelic quality, and they, together, would bring a new generation of children to the world. Ones with pure hearts and brazen lives. They traveled south through Spain, and she was left six months later on a ship in Portugal with her own name, where she had tasted hell. Stewed turnips, a taste she was never able to shake, tasting it even when she became a mother. She was then a world traveler, soon to be a Paque, soon to be an American, soon to be in a country where she never spoke to another man, and her daughter, years later, found a man who also rode away on a horse, and the Paque line, the Paque tradition continued, each generation having only one child, always unmarried, always abandoned, always a girl. Until Calvin, until this Cuban born boy—supposedly, but not remembered—to a pastel-white casino waitress. This is the uniform she wears to meet with Affel and the police. Her skirt is too tight, so is the midsection, and her chest barely has any fabric covering it at all. The bottom four of the eight buttons are fastened. Her name is Alice. Her nametag says Molly.

Though neither she nor Affel recall, they have seen each other at the casino. Alice works the slot machines, but sometimes she's ordered from her post to the blackjack tables. She's grown used to the patrons never looking away from the machines, the spinning wheels, the big

red lights that are almost a strobe. She's grown used to the constant clamor of slot machines. Even when she leaves her shift at 3 a.m., when she follows somebody to a hotel room, or a car, or sometimes, when it's warm and *the guy* is eager enough, an alley or a park—sometimes they like the outdoors, the public spectacle, the danger of being caught—she hears the bells, the whistles, the cheap money sound effects in the jingling of undone belt buckles. But she finds it easier to work in the card pit, where there's no sounds but dealers saying what they say: *bust, blackjack, good luck on the ace, sorry, next time*. And this is what Affel hears, too, every Saturday night when he takes one-hundred sixty dollars—and only that—to the tables. Sometimes he loses right away, blames the dealers and moves on, waiting, itching for the next Saturday when he can tackle the table again. And sometimes, not often, but enough to help himself believe that he could make a living playing cards, he rides that one-sixty until the early Sunday morning hours, when he's sometimes stacked up five-thousand worth of chips. One of these nights, Alice was his waitress, and she'd come by with another free, watered-down scotch, and he'd put a twenty-five-dollar chip on her tray. Neither looked at the other. Affel watched the tables' hands, and Alice watched her tips.

Affel recognizes the style of the nametag Alice wears and thinks he'll use his small-talk expertise to pass the time before the police come into the office. Affel wants to talk about the casino's air filtration system, how he never seemed to go home scented of smoke, but he thought better of it. Unprofessional, he thinks. Unsavory. The whole concept of small talk and going home could maybe provoke her to speak of her home, and that's the last thing Affel wants to know about. There are many things he doesn't want to know about: he doesn't want to know about her son or why he's attacked another student, doesn't want to know why no

father has shown up, why out of all the parents involved, this casino waitress is the only person who has showed up at all, doesn't want to know why she looks like she has slept all day, her hair frizzled and out of place, her uniform wrinkled, shifted out of place and slept-in, doesn't want to know why she wears a thick line of mustard-looking concealer around her eye and forehead, why she introduced herself as Alice when her name is Molly. He wants to know none of it. All he wants is the police to say that they're done, that everything's cleaned up, that there are no more questions, and that he can go home where he'll open a beer, sit in his boxers, and watch *Little House on the Prairie* episodes until it's dark enough in his house for him to search the Internet for porn—he tells himself that it helps himself avoid clicking on the advertisements for online gambling, something to keep his hands busy, the way smokers eat pretzel logs and carrot sticks—and continually searches for the step-daughter-video he hasn't seen yet, always typing the same words in the search engine: *unsuspecting, summer camp, trouble maker*.

That last term takes on a new meaning to Affel now. He likes the thought of somebody always having that troublesome side—that something that allows a person to stray away from the expected, righteous path, that thing that makes somebody human. But now he's dealing with a real *trouble maker*, and not the kind he has wished for—the car-wash girl, the after-school detention rebel who doesn't want to go home, who wants to write on the board a hundred times *I will not chew gum, I will not chew gum*, and after seventy-three and two-fifths lines, that's exactly what she'll do. The door will be closed, the blinds drawn, and it will be dark and he imagines that his hand will be guided across her chest, along the fabric down to where his hand will hover where the silk meets denim, and the door would open, lighting the room, and there's Ms. Langford, the librarian, at the door, finally. She'll be approving, he imagines.

She'll be accommodating. She'll say she'll allocate the chalk. And the door will close behind her. All dark, and nothing but hands, chalk dust, and the sound of zippers and Lamaze breathing techniques. Sounds, Affel thinks, that could belong to bellowing whales and the hissing of a giant tortoise, the one at the zoo. The one that's eighty-years-old and eats cabbage from the hands of elementary-school children on fieldtrips.

The room has gone silent as Affel stares into his Rubik's cube, and Alice stares at the file folder. The both of them have come to an unspoken understanding that they are there to wait until somebody says they may go. The door to the office is closed, and they wait to hear the handle move. Voices are heard from behind the door, but it's only the secretary talking on the phone. The newspaper has already called, saying they've heard police cars were in the parking lot, and they needed an update. The usual questions: what is it? What happened? Who's involved? Are there interviews available yet? But Marcy, the secretary, reads the one note card Affel has given her to answer any questions from the media. Underlined: I do not have any information at this time, and this is what Marcy repeats after every question, and it does not deter the reporter. He asks them anyway. He asks his questions in the same tone, and she wonders how many times he's been boxed out, because he's awfully patient, he's awfully consistent, he's awfully calm for receiving the same answer over and over, and what can he possibly think will change her answer. Marcy adds an "I'm sorry" into the mix before reading the card, and the reporter—he never gave her his name, just where he works—asks his questions quicker, maybe, thinking that he's getting somewhere, so she responds the way she's been told as an officer comes through the door, silently pointing to the principal's door—amazing, she thinks, that he can point in a certain way and have it come off as a question. She

nods to the officer and says, “I’m sorry, I do not have any information at this time,” and she’s beginning to get used to the reporter’s voice.

She is reminded of a man from her undergrad years, the one she met at a place she can’t recall, when maybe there was grass and breeze, a conversation that may have never been, but a feeling rushes back to her. She remembers something faintly, but can’t put it into words, but it must be him, she thinks. It’s the way the reporter pronounces the *gs*—gravitating, running, feeding. Marcy waits for the officer to open and step through the door until she asks the reporter his name. It’s Robert, and she remembers something more, knowing seventy-eight percent—she likes numbers—that it’s not the man from her memory, but she asks anyway. “You sound familiar, Robert,” she says, her voice flutters. She finds her hand leaving the note and picking at the top button of her blouse. She finds herself thinking that Robert sat on the other side of her desk. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, thinking that somebody else was doing it for her, that it’s a moment she’s lived before, and she knows now, recalls the taste of raspberry and tonic, smells the dew and the dust, feels the turn in her stomach as the words *sauté* and *onions* come to her mind. She reaches at chance as she leans in her chair, placing her feet on the corner of the desk. Her dress dips down, and she feels cool air on the back side of her upper thighs, where the elastic of her underwear pinches some of the fat of her ass that she likes to look at in the mirror in her bedroom. This is what she has to offer, she often thinks, and wonders, even while talking to Robert the journalist, if the officer can see the yellow of her underwear, the red like blush on the upper part of her legs. “Have you ever drunk wine coolers on a brick wall while talking to a curly-haired woman about the proper way to cook a frog?” she asks Robert. He hasn’t, and she brings her legs back to the floor while the officer closes the

principal's door.

Jackson, the police officer, did notice—he believes that he can see everything, can take it all in like his TV heroes of his childhood, the Columbo/Sherlock-like way one can see the crime as it happened by looking at the clues presented. The secretary, he thinks, is lonely—anybody could know that just by listening to the way she talked on the phone. It was a man on the other end, no doubt. She wore no ring. She had no photos on her desk. What doodles were on the desk were not of hearts, but of stick figures climbing hills, stenciled on restaurant recipes with one order—a sandwich, a glass of wine, a piece of cake for nine dollars. She wore no makeup, no nail polish on her fingers. She wore a watch, but it was simple, painted with fake gold and just large enough that she wouldn't need to stare at it too long to see the time, that she could see the hands in quick passing. She's a woman in a rush, Jackson knows. A woman in a rush is always running toward something, somebody else, wanting somebody, anybody to talk to. Her legs on the desk, seemingly unshaved for maybe a week, the black stubble like iron filaments. And the panties. Yellow, like good American mustard, the stuff you don't have to chew. And what does this tell me? Jackson thinks. It tells him what he's known in the past of younger women who wear colorful underwear—it's meant to be seen. It's worn by women who don't plan on showing it, but prepare anyway. And this secretary—Marsha Boyle, as the name on her desk says—is ready for a drink at four in the afternoon, even knowing what has happened in the building. Her eyes say she's tired, that she's getting older—and so am I, he thinks—and time is running out. Where is love? That's what he sees projected on every face he meets, every person he questions—and it's never the good people, the people who know the answer. They're people who find themselves in the midst of some kind of action, and they're

jumbled, scarred, shattered, all wondering—even him—where it went wrong. Where is love, and why hasn't it found me? He heard it from Marsha's voice, the way she said a stranger's name, as if she were trying it on like a jacket in front of a mirror at a store. So, Jackson questions, were the legs for me? And he concludes that they were, and he determines her age—he guesses mid-thirties, same as him—and thinks, Yes. Yes, I will talk to her, and he becomes aware of how many hours he's been wearing his briefs, aware of the tightness in his belt, the ridges and hemlines of his trousers, the sidearm poking into the his thigh, and wonders, as he always does, how tight the cap is on his pepper spray, and simply thinking about it makes him taste it again, from basic training, standing in line waiting for the first time his sergeant walked down the line of cadets. He stood in the middle of the line, listening to each cadet reacting to the spray, listening to the sergeant say that *pain is love* and *let me love you, you bastards!* and when it was his turn, he kept his focus on not blinking, not turning away, letting that love hit him directly in the pupil, thinking—after the event when he had flushed his eyes and nose—how suspiciously bitter it tasted of car exhaust and bleach.

Jackson blows the air out of his nose, knowing the taste has only been sparked by his memory. He ignores the spice, and takes in the aroma of the room. There's something of hazelnut, maybe some chocolate—it's all a part of stale coffee. There's the lingering of cigarette smoke, and judging by the two in the office, it's from the woman. The man in the tie is too tightly wound, fingers too white to be a smoker. It's the woman, for sure. Her fingers and her lips are nicotine-stained, she's got the wrinkles of a chain smoker—maybe she's forty, maybe she's sixty. Jackson sees her fingers tremble. She's not afraid—even though he knows she's the runaway's mother, he sees that it's the shake of withdrawal. Jackson's father had that with

booze, his uncle's was something else, but he was never too sure what it could have been. The man in the office—the principal—looks like his uncle, without the rolled up sleeves. Looks like the kind of guy who doesn't ever have an appetite and won't eat unless he remembers to. Probably a broccoli, rice and beans kind of diet. Maybe an orange or banana so his teeth won't fall out. The collar of his shirt doesn't fit his neck and his eyes shift from one end of the room, where the bookshelf sits, to the other, where there's a bottle of cleaner and a rag next to the window. He looks everywhere but to Jackson, and that's a clue to him, like maybe he did it and blamed the kid. But that's a jump, he thinks. It's easy to misinterpret the squirrely as the guilty. He's a creep, that's all. However, he still decides to talk to him later. For now, he's there to ask only one question of the mother:

“Ma'am,” Jackson says, “do you have any idea where your son could have run off to?”

“No,” she says, too quickly for Jackson.

“Ma'am?” he says.

She thinks of every one he may know, which doesn't exceed ten people, and the only thing that seems plausible is that Calvin would go to Julio before anyone else, because who else can he—who else than she—trust? He's the man who's there. The man who doesn't have to be—or does he? she wonders.

“Maybe home,” she says to Jackson.

“We have someone there now,” Jackson says. “Would there be anywhere else? Friends? Family? Anybody he trusts?”

She thinks that he's on to her, that she's hiding something, which she isn't, because she's trying to convince herself that Calvin would not go to Julio, that he would think that going

to him for help would be too obvious, but she can't begin to understand what must be going through his mind at this exact moment, having done what he has, being on the run. Maybe he would, she thinks, to go the first person that popped into his head that could help him, which is Julio. That's who came to her mind right away, so why wouldn't Calvin think of it as well?

"Westwood and 34th," she says. "He might have gone there."

"Why would he go there?" Jackson asks. "What's there? Who's there?"

"He thinks he's his father," she says. This has been a conversation she hasn't been able to kill. Calvin had asked years ago, when he turned thirteen and Julio brought a cake to the apartment, stayed for dinner, watched the TV until Calvin had fallen asleep between the weather report and the late-night show. He woke when Julio closed the door as he left—he didn't turn the handle. He pulled it shut and let the latch do what latches do. Calvin sat up, listened to the monologue on the TV, smiled at the places where the audience laugh trailed on. "Where'd he go?" Calvin asked.

"Home," she said.

"I'm thirteen now."

"You are."

"I'm old enough."

"For what?"

"To know."

"To know what?"

"Who Julio is."

"Julio is Julio."

“Tell me,” he said.

“Tell you what?” she said. “What am I supposed to tell you about him that you don’t already know? That he plays Canasta?”

“Tell me who he is.”

“I told you,” she said. A car commercial showed a sleek male driver in a leather jacket, his passenger, a summer-tanned brunette in red lipstick and gray eye shadow. “Julio is Julio.”

The conversation—always the asking, but never the asking specifically, never using the words *my* or *dad*—continued for a few months. It was the standard breakfast conversation. It replaced *good morning, how’d you sleep?*, the newspaper, the dishes, the morning TV program where the hosts talk to magicians, hair stylists, and try to bake chicken in ten minutes. But Calvin grew tired of the same answer in the same tone. He would have been happy to hear his mother’s voice change, even if it were headed towards unbearably frustrated, even a crack, a threat to be kicked out of the apartment, to sleep on the street for a night and get straightened out. He would have gladly slept on the stoop, would have told everybody who walked by, neighbors, mail carriers, dogs, that he was waiting for the truth; he’d repeat that word *truth*. The truth, the truth, the truth, until it became nonsense. He would have done anything but keep up the same question every day, but his mother’s response stayed the same, and Calvin stopped asking, let the breakfast conversation return to odd dreams about roller coasters and cracks in ice, classes and homework, the casino and the gamblers, what was in the paper, trick boxes, trimmed bangs, sage and thyme. However, Calvin returned to the table on the last Sunday of every month loaded with the question. He poured his cereal, avoided milk, took a spoonful in his mouth, and said, “You can tell me.”

And she had always responded with “I can tell you what?”

Jackson asks, “Is he? Your son’s father?” Alice notices the vest under his uniform. She wants to reach out and poke it, wonders how soft it is. She wants to take the gun from his holster, wants to aim at his chest and see if taking a bullet really is like it is on TV—the spinning, the exploding fuzz like pillow down, the red mist of dyed corn syrup—secretly wants to have the bullet line up exactly with one of his ribs, wants him to feel the bone crack and the marrow liquefy and leak into his chest, wants him to feel some other kind of pain than the pain men are used to—which is none. She wants him to feel what she feels every time she’s asked this question. She wants to take the gun to Affel, too, because his reaction is just like everybody else’s—an unintentional scoff, that quick air through the nose—and doesn’t think the world would miss him. The cops and the ambulance are already at the school.

“Calvin thinks so,” she says. She tries to recall a closed-in room with dirty floor tiles and a Styrofoam-like ceiling, a nurse with tweezed eyebrows like the Gateway Arch, but nothing comes to her. She thinks nothing of IVs and hospital bed sheets, or scissors and amniotic fluids and powder-blue knit caps. “Lost track a long time ago.” And Jackson nods, says he’s gotten everything he can, for now, gives both Alice and Affel a card where he may be reached in case Calvin turns up. He turns to the door, opens it, and exits, and Alice pays no attention to how the door closes. Her mind is on her hands—they’re shaking. She wants a cigarette, but she’s out, her last one smoked at the entrance of the school as she wondered what exact shade of red the metal detector was. She wanted to say it was rust colored, but thought maybe it was more like ketchup mixed with mustard, swirled until diluted to an almost-orange. She crushed the empty packet in her hand, the plastic crinkling around the black white sticker that once held a coupon,

one her son peeled away, because this is what he does in the mornings, and each cigarette that Alice sucks down, she thinks of her son, how reliable he is that she'll have two fresh packs waiting for her on the kitchen table when she wakes up to see him off to school. And now she sits in Affel's office, looking through the door wondering if she'll ever see her Calvin that way again. She knows somebody will catch him and cannot decide if she could look at him behind paned glass, their only conversations through a corded telephone, trying to ignore his face as it'll seep through her reflection. She'd rather never see him again than see him like that, and she wishes that he's free now, that he's running, that he didn't go to Julio, knowing that's exactly where he's going, because he's a Paque, whether or not he doesn't look like it. She knows that he's a boy of routine—he's addicted to his own ways, just as Alice is with door latches, the way she smokes her cigarettes from the top left column to the bottom right, the way she will not step on sidewalk cracks, how she'll eat the brown M&Ms first, peel bananas from the bottom up—the way monkeys do on TV. And because of all this, she's insured her son's capture, because she's put him in his own routine. No matter what, Calvin goes to Julio's in the morning and after school to get her cigarettes. It's after school now, and as she leaves the principal's office, neglecting to respond to Affel's *goodbye*, she can see him getting closer and closer to a man whose full-time job is what vending machines are made for, a man she had tried to love, but never could, a man who has her son hidden in the employee bathroom as he talks to an un-uniformed officer, saying, of course he can hang around, but not to get their hopes up, he hadn't seen the boy since that morning and doesn't know why he'd come back here. "What was he doing here this morning? It's his birthday, and I'm his friend," Julio says. "I bought him a candy bar and sent him on his way." That was after six a.m, just an hour after

Calvin had woken up with the same thought on his mind as every day, the demands of his ongoing four-year routine: two packs, unfiltered, use the coupon.

There's a one-in-five chance a buyer will find one of these coupons—it's a buy-five-get-three type deal, that gives the consumer—these were the opinions of the cigarette company when the coupon was conceived—the illusion that they are getting a deal, and they kind of are, but it's also known—and these were the statistics three years ago from the people opposed to the cigarette company—that twenty-three of their customers die every hour. So, what happened? The idea came that they should sell as much as they can, as quickly as they can. And it worked—sales had gone up eighty percent in just under a year. The number of deaths per hour had also gone down to twenty-two. Nobody knows why. Cigarettes are still selling. People are still dying, and protestors are still livid. However, his involvement was a much more personal endeavor, and he snatched up as many coupons as he could find, because there was no fine print on them, and most importantly, there was no purchase limit. Even though Calvin's only instructions from his mother was to buy two, he used the coupon to stock up, and in the mornings while buying from Julio's corner shop, he felt disappointed when he looked to the back of the cartons and found no coupon, but that did not last long. For a few years now, he has checked the streets, the open trash cans, the back-alley Dumpsters, storm drains, public bathrooms. Anywhere and everywhere, beyond brown banana peels, wadded gum, diapers, used condoms like empty sausage casings, boiled and stuck to fast food cups. This was where sacrifice became necessity. When Calvin first ran these errands for his mother, when he first became aware that this could become something much bigger, he did not think much about what was gross, what wasn't hygienic. All he knew was that there was money to be made, and

sometimes he had to be uncomfortable about the way he went about it. So that meant dealing with the trash, what people discarded and the rats depended on—the garbage water that quenched them, the half-eaten food truck deposits, the linger ants. But lately, especially in the last few months, Calvin didn't bother with trash cans or Dumpsters—the risk was too high, the rats he would come across, the occasional needles that are invisible in the early morning.

Calvin woke up every weekday at about five a.m. and dressed in the dark in front of the full-length mirror. Stickers lined the top of the mirror. Since then, he had tried to peel them away, but a majority of it stayed behind, stuck on the glass. They were the scratch-n-sniff kind. One, he remembered was shaped like a piece of pizza and when scratched was supposed to smell of pepperoni was more like cherry and leather. Another, a turkey leg, smelled of vanilla, a birthday cake that read *good job* smelled of blueberry. A streetlamp's light shone through the curtains enough to cut his silhouette from the air, and he looked into the reflection, his figure a shadow. He did not stand at the mirror to help him dress. In no way did the shadow help him button his jeans, guide his feet to his socks, pick out the right t-shirt. He did it to remind himself of the alien movie he saw alone a year ago, the one where the alien ran around in the dark, and the only part of him anyone could see was the shape running through the corn fields, the shadow on the tops of barns. Calvin kept waiting to see the face. He wanted to see the nose of the alien, to compare it to dreams that he's had where Martians had landed, where none of them had noses. They were more like bumps with three nostrils. That was how he saw himself most mornings as he searched for his face, but all that looked back at him was a featureless figure, and he often thought, "This is who I am."

The movie never showed the face of the alien—Calvin paid for three more viewings that

week, wondering if he missed something, but the only part of the alien that was shown was the shadowed figure, and the hand reaching out to a woman's head—it was red and black like burnt flesh with nails pointed, yellow and green, the same dark moss as the theatre seats. It made a noise like wind through an alleyway and broken-glass wind chimes. The movie ended with the image of a swing set swaying in the breeze, the same wind-like noise flowing, but the corn behind the swings was not moving. Roll credits. And though Calvin knew how the movie would end the same way every time he watched it, he always expected something different, some kind of definition to the shadow, to the corn, to the swing set and the immediate pitch black theater with the ominous tuba blare from the speakers, but he left the theater every time with no feeling of satisfaction. He thought maybe one more viewing would help him understand it all, thought that if he were to get close enough to the screen, he could see its nose, and everything would make sense—he could then believe that they aren't that different from us humans—so Calvin, in the early morning, stood inches away from the mirror after putting on his t-shirt, and he bared his teeth so the light reflected off of them, and he worked his jaw as though he were exaggerating speech, but, in the dark, he saw only white teeth drawing away from the other teeth.

Afterward, Calvin steadied himself to his knees and reached under his bed until he found a book safe half the size of a pizza box. A cardboard flap that read *dictionary* covered the door and key hole. He left the key in the toe of a discarded shoe that had no partner. The laces were tied in a triple knot and smelled of rot. Once the safe was opened, Calvin took out four bills and stuffed them into the front pocket of his jeans. The safe was full of cash, and even in the dark, Calvin didn't need to search for the right kind of money. The loose bills were all

twenties, and the fifties and hundreds were folded in half, stacked together, and bound with rubber bands. He hadn't counted it all in over a month, but the last he knew, he had ten grand in hundreds, four grand in fifties, and the twenties, as scattered as they were, added up to nearly eight hundred. When he had what he wanted, he closed the safe, relocked it, tucked the key back in the shoe, and pushed the safe back as far as he could and covered it with a couple of dirty shirts, ones with dried semen that he had spent months masturbating into for the sole purpose of making it look like a jerk-off rag, permanently wrinkled and off-white like the speckled spider web of sweat stains. Whatever kept people from poking around.

He left his bedroom, turned the knob so the latch made no noise, and tip-toed past his mother's open bedroom door. He thought of himself as an Indian hunting elk, side stepping around loose twigs and dried leaves. He read the shag carpet as he would read the soil, searching for tracks, for a clue of where the herd had gone, what direction he would need to take. As he entered the living room, he did not see his mother as he sometimes did, asleep on the couch, TV on, illuminating her spotted-banana-bruised legs that were often sprawled open, the nub of a cigarette wedged between her pointer and middle finger. During those mornings, he abandoned the Indian, and became the mischievous English-speaking cartoon cat, the one whose footsteps were accompanied by the shrill tittering of a xylophone. During these times, had she stirred, Calvin would drop to floor and crawl to the door. He had no illusions about who he was. He was just a guy crawling to a door, and it felt pathetic, so much so, that he couldn't even remember the times he had practiced fire safety in his elementary school. To avoid the smoke, one had to crawl as close to the floor as possible, the nose should touch the carpet until the fire escape was near. Maybe, he thought, escape was the word that made it feel real,

because had there been a fire, he wasn't expected to come back. He'd let it burn, let the fire eat the life he knew. But during those mornings when he would crawl, he knew he'd be back within the half hour with two packs of cigarettes and the change from the ten-dollar bill his mother had left for him. It was tacked to the corkboard that hung next to the door frame. Along with the cash was a photo of Alice and Calvin at Lake Bill; he, holding a sand bucket, wears a rubber-duck swim trunks, she, a red polka-dotted one-piece suit. Neither remember the name of the man who took the photo, but Calvin remembered that he smelled of black olives and red licorice. Alice remembered the same. And his hands. His grip covered the entire side of her thigh, and when the other cradled the back of her head, she felt as though she were wearing a catcher's mask, backward. The photo, sun bleached and yellowed, had hung there with emergency phone numbers and a plastic rosary for almost nine years, and when either Alice or Calvin looked to it, they smelled sun and sand, banana scented sun block, smelled the forgettable man, and the heated leather interior of his car. It had been a good day for all, especially Calvin, who remembered chasing seagulls with a plastic rake and opening his eyes underwater.

Nothing else, not even the cash, affected them the way that photo did. Not the rosary, the photo of Alice's grandmother's home. Not the pizza delivery number. Not even the post-it, blue, with a smiley face, drawn as a reminder.

That morning, as Calvin left his apartment building, Donald Graham jolted awake from a bad dream. He did not know where he was, did not recognize the lamp next to his bed, the switchblade, or the sneakers, the jeans that hung from the back of a desk chair, the poster of a

bikini model. She was who he stared at, her red, untied top, her hand pulling the straps away from her shoulders. His surroundings came back to him. That was his poster. Those were his shoes, his pants. That was his lamp. His heart, his lungs. He was home. It was morning.

He didn't know that in about twelve hours, he would be in a hospital bed. Did not know a nurse would change the dressings on six stab wounds, did not know she would find that he would still be bleeding, that she would draw her finger over the self-inflicted scars on his arms—the swastika on his left bicep, the social security number etched along his right wrist, the *my rosie* on his left wrist, the tiny smiling faces—the two-vertically-dashed eyes, the U-shaped curve under them—on each of his ten knuckles. He did not know that he wouldn't be alive by the time his father returned from work at the recycling plant. Didn't know that his father would ignore the answering machine. Didn't know that he'd be dead by the time his father would open his fourth beer, would fall asleep on the couch before the news report of his son would play between mattress clearance sale commercials. All that was on Donald's mind at five-thirty that morning was that he never thought about dying until then.

He'd had faced his mortality in dreams before—the alien invasion dream, the walking-lungfish dream. The zombie dream where he was backed into a corner, out of ammo, no stick to beat at the teeth, but even then, he felt as though it were a movie, and just as soon as the audience thought he was a goner, in would come a rope, and he was saved. He'd had the tidal-wave dream, but he could always conveniently breathe under the water, could swim through the current as though he were a fish, thought the water was a tan kind of murk, but awoke knowing it was apple cider. He'd had nightmares all the time, but were bad memories of worse times—the chains, the boxes, the smell of sand and the sound of shovels working dirt, the thud

of dirt on pine planks—but never had a *this is it* moment until that morning he lay awake wiping away the sweat on his neck.

In the dream, he had survived the first asteroid strike, the one that leveled buildings, choked the air with ash. The smoke was thick, and somehow—and this is what he didn't understand—the sun had grown hotter, and anybody who stepped outside burned. He heard the crackling of skin, and the screams of those outside. He found shelter in his old first-grade school room. Seventeen desks all in a row, the alphabet poster above the green chalk board, Lizzy Dirks' pink, strawberry smelling hair tie, the loose hairs intertwined, the counting blocks stacked neatly in the back of the room, next to the stand-up rice box with the Ferris wheel and the funnel, the old Matchbox cars with wobbly wheels, the broken fire engine with the once-extending ladder. The hamster in the cage—Harry 2—and the rabbit—Harry 6—next to it in its own cage. The sink, the empty milk crate used as a stepping stool. All of it still there, and Donald, after ten years, there again, found some odd relief in its comfort, found the urge to run his hand through the rice, to smell the dust left behind. But outside the windows were the yellow tint, the heat waves and burning pine trees, and above him, the ceiling tiles melted, letting the light in, the heat. Rocks—pebbles, mostly—pinged against the glass, cracking it. The classroom door flew open, and the hallway was gone, nothing but a pit and flames and yellowish gas. Donald was alone and everything around him and above him dissolving—even the animals were gone, and he thought *this is it*, and he readied himself. He spoke to no god and thought nothing of salvation. He thought of himself, again, as a character in a movie. He rolled up his sleeves and ran towards the open door. He thought of his leg muscles, the ones under his ass, the ones used in jumping, and he leapt out of the door, held his breath, and

awoke in freefall right about the time that Calvin, four and a half miles away, crawled over Ms. Bidwell's back-yard fence. He slipped, and fell face first into dewy grass. And though Calvin was not on Donald's mind—even though he was one of the people in his dream who screamed and melted—Donald was definitely on Calvin's, because falling on his chest feels like a punch to the gut. It was the same squeezed lungs, the stars in the eyes, the complete loss of control of the saliva glands, and he almost expected to open his eyes and see a towering eighteen-year-old gripping his collar, shaking him awake and asking where his goddamn smokes were.

Calvin had caught his breath, opened his eyes, and saw no Donald. Only a birdbath standing erect in the dark and Ms. Bidwell's back porch and the sliding door. The lights inside were off, but Calvin thought he could see a figure moving around behind the door. Had he known Ms. Bidwell, he may have waved, gotten up and carried on, but he knew only her name and nothing else about her. He knew nothing about how she was a widow, how she liked kids' cereal better than bran, how she did the puzzles on the back of the box and found herself terribly clever that she could finish them all, quickly, before the orange juice could sweat the glass. Calvin didn't know that she liked to swipe batteries from gas stations, sweaters from thrift stores, apples at the farmers' market, and candles from the church. He didn't know she walked in unnoticed at two in the morning, blew out a flame, poured the wax over her hand, let it harden into a smooth disk and then inserted it into the collection box. He didn't know that she attended the same church every Sunday morning, read every church bulletin, gazed over the message board and looked for any sign, any plead to stop offering wax coins, but she had never read a word about it.

He also didn't know that Ms. Bidwell watched him jump over her fence every morning,

didn't know that the morning he tripped and fell on his face delighted Ms. Bidwell because the shadow—as she calls him since she's never seen his face, only a dark figure who loomed over her back yard every morning at six—could have wound up smearing his face into one of the shit piles she left in her back yard, for Calvin also didn't know that one of Ms. Bidwell's hobbies was to frequent the dog park and collect as much bagged dog shit she could put in her handbag. Didn't know she'd empty it all out into her back yard sporadically as *doo-doo landmines*. But, as she saw that morning, the shadow did not take any extra time to wipe his face, and he rushed through her back yard, avoiding, *miraculously*, she thought, every pile there, and she questioned *what* this shadow *was*. She sat there, ate her cereal, felt around with her tongue for the chalky marshmallows so she could separate them and store them under her tongue because they tasted better dissolved. Could he really have gotten tripped up by a fence if he was a ghost? The question stayed in her mind like an oil stain, and she tried to rub it away with the logic that spirits don't follow the same physiological rules as humans. But what if? What if, she thought, she were being tormented by the souls for whom the candles were lit? Each morning, especially that morning, she had the urge to stand, open her door and face the figure, but what stopped her was the memory of almond-colored skin, blue eye shadow, cherry lipstick and the chipper whistles of a bird, and the words of her mother, *Bleach and ale, lemon and rice powder*—the recipe for squirrel poison that can also go unnoticed in baked chicken. What if? she thought, the smell of burnt coffee and sage stuck in her nose. What if it was about more than stolen wax?

The other half of Ms. Bidwell's fence was easier to jump, and after that, before Main Street, all Calvin had to meander through was a few more yards—one with an above ground

pool, the other, a blind dog, long forgotten how to bark. The backyards of people who teetered along the edge of loose and tight blue collar. Calvin's mother complained about the *filth of poverty*, but Calvin knew she had grown up more comfortable in Missouri with her grandparents. There was never an issue of a food shortage, there was always water in the well. She had never heard of a thing as garbage piles or recycle day, nothing of drug money or sex workers. Back then, it was fields and farms and neighbors and a house-call doctor when he was needed. Cemeteries were optional and often bodies were buried at the bases of trees, holes were dug until shovel met root, the bodies weaved between them.

Calvin's great-grandfather's favorite oak was at the edge of the property out by the river, and soon after he was buried there, a microburst swept through. The winds ignored the cornfield and the hay, and every tree except that oak by the river. The field hands refused to cut it up and remove it, so the family let it lay there, uprooted and starving, and a year later Alice left Loose Creek and went off on her own to Cola, Colorado, just southeast of Denver—a little kind of city, condensed, dirty, and thriving like ants on a spoiled apple core. No place to raise a son, but there she stayed, and it was home. To Calvin especially, who had evolved in the dark, who could find Main Street with very little light. And though he didn't need them, Main Street was lit with street lamps and that made it easier for Calvin to pick out the reflection of light on the plastic of discarded cigarette packs.

The trick to finding the packs was to keep the head down—Calvin knew the area, so he didn't need to take in the scenery. He knew the hanging flower baskets at the corner of every block, had read all the live music posters, advertisements for guys and guitars in parks, the ink smeared from rain, faded by sun.

He'd start at the bottom of Main Street and pick up any cigarette box left in the street or gutter or garbage can. The probability of finding a coupon was five-to-one when store bought, but Calvin found that his luck was much better searching for the litter—almost three-to-one, so usually Main Street alone, he often found up to fifteen to twenty coupons that read: *buy five packs of the smoothest cigarettes around and get three free. Limited time only.* The deal had been going on for six weeks then, so Calvin gathered as much as possible. He thought of a zigzagging squirrel gathering acorns before the winter, and thought the same while dodging early-early morning traffic in almost-abandoned streets. These drivers were the school custodians, the insomniac office workers, the ones who woke alone with the thought of somebody they couldn't have, who didn't want them. These were the ones who wanted pancakes before work, who hated coffee, but liked the sound of it poured in cups, the gurgling of percolation. These were the ones who never saw Calvin. And he barely noticed them.

He could see their headlights at the bottom of the street, and he stuck to the curb when he could hear the cars behind him. He traveled two blocks west to check the all-night pizza place where cops hung out between shifts. The garbage can next to the entrance had nine or twelve empty packs waiting. After that, he checked the gutter—one more block up the street—next to the Methodist church where AA met on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. That morning was a Thursday.

Underneath some grime, an empty pack waited and with it was the familiar glare of an unpeeled coupon. He picked it out of the can and wiped the filth on the sidewalk, peeled away the plastic and dropped the cardboard back into the can atop *Boozing and cruising and losing* pamphlets. Printed on the pamphlet were the cartoon faces of unhappy people, their eyes

overly red, and blue squiggly lines were printed over their heads, their cheeks flushed, their tongues stick out below their chins. Behind them, a faceless, uniformed officer takes up most of the background, and Calvin wondered if these three faces were of children, but he had never considered drinking to be the problem at his school—the problems there were knives and cigarettes. And Donald Graham at the center of it all, but as a necessary evil, Calvin conceded. Without him in the picture, all of those morning trips, all of the risks he had taken at the school and out in the world would have been for nothing. Calvin would be broke—financially and physically, both of which are always a possibility, and it was what was always at the edge of Calvin’s mind, which is why he was alert to all sounds—even as something as soft and unthreatening as leaves against asphalt at six in the morning. There was no wind, and Calvin clenched his right fist, spun around, raised his left arm, and put his forearm next to his throat. He elevated his elbow and backed away, letting his eye adjust to the streetlamp. He held his breath and waited.

He let his breath come out, and that was the only sound. Just a heavy exhale as his heart.

Calvin could have dug deeper in the can, but decided it was time to move on. He walked another three blocks west on Main Street, one block south on Even Street to the corner store where Julio worked.

His name is Steven—not *Julio*—but, as he sees it, *the customer is always right*, and most of his customers, especially when he had first got the job twenty years ago as a post six-day high-school graduate, the white guys called him Pepe, Juan, Eduardo, or Julio, and he responded to them all the same way dogs respond to bacon. The men were older than him—

most looked to be in their thirties, men who wore ties, put oil in their hair, who owned shined shoes, who came in early to buy coffee and cigarettes and lotto scratches so they no longer had to be men who woke up early to go to a corner store to buy coffee and cigarettes from some *damn immigrant*—so he accepted the nickname, smiled when needed, and overcharged them for coffee, taking the profits to buy his own lotto scratchers.

However, later, he became fond of the name, because it came from men who talked to him, and since he worked a job that took sixteen hours a day out of his life, he became desperate to speak to anyone.

Growing up—born and raised in Miami—he wasn't much of a talker, preferred to go off on his own in the alleyways searching for quarters and dimes outside of night club exits, saved up enough money to buy how-to-speak French books ever since he saw *Casablanca* during a half-off weekend matinée. His family moved to Colorado when his father and uncle found work grinding dried tea in the garage of an old man who had won the state lottery and needed something to keep himself busy—so he hired two *illegals* to make it more interesting for him. Julio's father and uncle were also born in Miami, but never told the man. They preferred a boss who didn't speak, and enjoyed cash up front. Julio had helped when he was younger, but once he graduated he found a job to help save up for a trip to France. He found that serving two-hundred silent people a day left him lonely and desperate for conversation, so Steven became Julio, *the talker*, and he would talk to everybody who came in, even the ones who wouldn't speak to him.

Alice was one of those who wouldn't speak to him. She was then, twenty-two years ago, a high-school dropout, a runaway from a Missouri farm, and a desperate girl who searched for

easy cash. Julio's store was one of her frequent shoplifting spots, especially for beer and granola bars. She'd hit up the super market a few miles away for produce, hide scoops of shelled peanuts in her bra, bananas in her pants pockets, long carrots up her sweater sleeves, quarts of milk tucked into the front of her belt. She'd attend AA, NA, SA, and EDA meetings for cookies and to bum cigarettes from other members and try to pick up a guy to see what he'd pay for a night with her—or an hour at the very least. Afterwards, she liked to lie in the bed—had he taken her to his house or a hotel—and imagine that it was all hers, that she could get up, if she so pleased, and open the refrigerator and eat. There would always be groceries.

During that time, Julio had seen her get out of a car in the alleyway behind his shop, and he watched as the man in the car chased after her with a tire iron. She was missing a shoe, carried only her bag, and wore only an unfastened bra. Julio intervened by stepping between the two, stuck his foot out and tripped the running man. He dropped the tire iron and it slid to a clink against a Dumpster. Julio picked it up, gripped it firmly in his hand as the other man stood, panted, and watched Alice run. He reached his hand outward toward Julio.

"Give it," he said.

Julio found himself without words. Just minutes before, he longed for someone to talk to, and then while standing in an alleyway wondering what to swing at first—the head would be most effective, but could kill him, the side, maybe, but that could be blocked. Maybe the kneecap—he said nothing. He shook his head, and nodded towards the man's car.

"C'mon, *man*, give it," he said. "I need it."

Julio stepped forward, and the man stepped back.

"Leave her clothes and drive," Julio said.

The man walked to his car, threw out her clothes and drove away. Julio, his break almost over, picked up a pair of panties, skirt, blouse, sweater, and a sneaker, folded what he could, placed them next to the back entrance, and went back to work at his counter. Seventeen customers later—five of them were kids trying to buy beer with fake IDs—Alice walked in the front door, wearing the clothes he had laid out for her.

“You okay?” he asked, and then more words came, about how he’d never seen anything like that, and said how he would have bashed in his head had he taken one more step, “And I didn’t have to because the guy knew I meant serious business, and he could tell,” he said, “he could tell that, I, Steven—St. Julio Santino of Cola, Colorado—would never, ever, in the history of foul-breathed men and small dicks, let that man by me, and,” he said, “as a gift from him to me to you,” he put the tire iron on the counter, “I give you this to keep forever as a token, as a symbol, as the rod, your staff, your—”

“—I’ve stolen from you,” Alice said.

“—Oh, I know,” Julio said. “You think I’m stupid?”

Alice said nothing. The tire iron had rust.

“White girls,” Julio said, with an eye roll. “I know everything you’ve ever taken. I know how you’ve taken it,” and he laughed, slid the tire iron over. “Here,” he said. “Last week you took a box of crackers and hid them down the back of your pants. I’ve heard of flat asses on white girls before, but *square?*”

Alice had to laugh herself, mostly from embarrassment.

“This is not my store,” Julio said, “what do I care? If I stopped every pretty girl in here who stole from me and kicked them out and banished them forever, I would never see another

pretty girl again.”

Before she could respond, another customer—a bearded man with no teeth looking to buy chewing tobacco—came in, and Alice took the tire iron and left, thinking that *pretty* had never been the right word for her, but was glad to hear it said aloud, and it was a memory she carried with her every day, dusted it off when she was depressed about the weather, or no money, or hunger, or a job, finally, but a bad one, about a man who wouldn’t pay up front, and then not at all, and stick a knife or a gun or a bat at her when she’d pull a can of mace from her bag. She’d remember the word *pretty* when her teeth cracked together, or she felt a fist in her side, or wiped blood away from her nose and lips. There was the world, and then there was Julio and that word. Never mind the hunger and the cold and the pain. She had a friend.

A friend who wouldn’t shut up. A friend who offered Alice a place to sleep when the shelter filled up. A friend who allowed her to move into his studio apartment that could fit only a refrigerator, a toilet, a sink, stove, a twin-size mattress without a box spring, a folding chair, a foot stool, a stand up shower and drain, and a storage bin that held his clothes. A friend who shared the covers and only held her for warmth, who never reached his arm around her and grabbed or caressed. A friend who copied a key for her, who never asked for rent, who wrote grocery lists and left cash, who brought home cigarettes every afternoon after his shift, who smoked with her on the front steps of the building, who shrugged every time he was asked *why?*

Why had nothing to do with it. He accepted Alice into his life the way he flipped pages in a book. Page seven-hundred and six, she wasn’t there, seven-hundred and seven, she was, and she stayed for the remainder of that time. He never asked her to leave or stay, never asked to

sleep with her, but when she offered, usually out of boredom, he never said no. They'd lie afterward under the sheets of his mattress, and she'd rub his spine with her palm, and she thought that this was what it was supposed to be like—that feeling of the quiet, the no rush to leave, the lack of a name, the countless wonderings of who the man was. With Julio, she was home, and when she reached for him some nights, she was comforted that he responded silently and took her body into his like a breath, and years later, when she walked out, she left a note saying he was the only man she never charged, and she taped it next to the door frame by the light switch, and it still hung there when she returned a year and a half later with a baby boy in her arms, an extinguished cigarette hung from her lips.

“I've stolen from you,” she said.

Or maybe she said, “Is there room at the inn?”

Or maybe she said, “Your brother sends his regards.”

Or maybe she said nothing and let the moment linger at his door.

Julio remembered only seeing her differently, as a woman who had aged, skin turned to oiled leather, wrinkled, nicotine lips no longer painted peach or salmon. He remembered the bundle, the tiny tan hand sticking out from the blanket, curling all the fingers except the index, and Julio had the urge to step back and close the door. He did not welcome strange women bearing children and had no problem turning them away, but he stepped aside and let her in, because that's what his body did before he could tell it differently, and Alice laid the baby on the mattress as it wriggled out of the blanket like moth larva from a cocoon, and that was the last Julio saw of the boy until he came into the corner shop as a fourteen-year-old.

That morning Calvin first arrived to the store gave Julio a rare shock. It was jarring to see

a kid come into the store at six in the morning, a boy who looked strangely familial, the ears maybe, he thought. We share the same ears, long in the loop, kind of a rounded point at the bottom of the lobe like flat chicken's beak. The hair, too. The eyebrows, thick like pine needles.

"My mama's Alice," he said. "She said you'd help."

Julio grabbed his jacket, and said "Let's go," as he led Calvin toward the door. But Calvin stayed, didn't understand the rush, because he was only there for cigarettes, and his mother could leave the bed on account that she had the flu, didn't understand why this guy he's never seen had a baseball bat hung over his shoulder. "Well?" Julio said, and Calvin didn't move. He handed Julio ten dollars and a paper that read: *bed-ridden, can't come, two packs unfiltered. Please. He'll be back tomorrow if I'm not good enough.* He was back the next day, and the day after, and every Monday through Friday for almost two years, Calvin Oliver Paque: Cola Colorado's only Cuban delivery boy for a broken-down, drastically ageing, white woman who calls herself his mother.

A white mother of a Cuban boy might make people gossip in another town but Cola? None of them cared enough to start up a conversation with one another. It's a city made up of small circles that disguised themselves as a community. It's a city full of shut-ins and misplaced country-folk looking for the excitement of close-proximity habitation. It's a city full of tired-urbanites looking for noise without animosity, for traffic that ends after nine p.m., for crime that keeps to itself, that thieves in shadows rather than deal with knife-to-face confrontation. None of these people knew Alice and her bastard child Calvin, and the ones who did—these are the gals Alice works with at the casino, the people they see at Christmas Eve and Easter service—never go out of their way to make a fuss to Alice face-to-face. They stayed behind and

talked with the others they're more comfortable with, the ones more like them with their stable bank accounts, their health insurance, weekend trips to the Clair City Municipal park where they fed ducks, bought ice cream during the peak of summer, where they planned these trips, carpoled even, tried to arrive before noon so they could set up picnics as their husbands lit grills and complained that they brought the wrong buns, the wrong amount of hot dogs, too many barbecue biscuits, the expensive lighter fluid, the cheap matches. And their wives sat together, kept an eye on the kids as they ran from one another, and talked. *Her?* they've said. *She's a saint. A natural mother? No. The kid looks nothing like her. Bless her,* they've said. *Bless the woman who filled that role.* And they all nodded in approval. Yes, they agreed silently. Bless that wonderful woman who took in an orphan.

"Orphan?"

"She stole him?"

"Did she steal him?"

"Couldn't she have just had—"

"—you can't say that."

"Say what?"

"That she—"

"—*don't* say it."

"He's *not* hers. They look nothing alike."

"So, she stole him."

"Or was left at her door."

"Who would leave—"

“—He’s *hers*.”

“He could be *anybody’s*.”

“You know what she does after her shift. So says Anthony Val—.”

“—who?”

“Blackjack dealer.”

“Which one?”

“Doesn’t matter. But still.”

“Still.”

“She takes care of that kid.”

“Orphan or not.”

Orphan was the word Calvin had on his mind a lot—not from these women who knew his mother, but from pure wantonness. He pretended, often, that he was an orphan, a bastard, a child who needed a home and settled for whatever open door he could slip through. He went days believing that Alice was not his mother, and he wanted to believe that she had found him rather than made him. Was I born? he wanted to say to people who didn’t ask. No. He’d say he was a boy who asked for a place to sleep, *Just a bed and a roof for a few days, Ma’am, and not much more than that*. He pretended that the deal was she’d never know someone had used a mattress and a pillow in her home. He’d hug the wall, stay out of her way, and it had gone well until she had grown used to someone being around, that she left out milk and food because she let in a cat rather than a person. Maybe, he thought, this is what she thought of him, an animal she can’t chase down, who pleaded not to go back to the street with yowls and yips when he was finally caught back the nape of his neck. And maybe she looked into his eyes, and knew she

had grown used to the company, and as long as he benefitted her, the door remained unlocked so he could come and go as he pleased, knowing that milk would be served and food would be hot just as long as she got her cigarettes before her toast and coffee in the morning.

But pretending became useless; he knew she was his mother, even though he had heard her say that Calvin was just a boy with familiar hair, a hungry mouth, and a stomach that couldn't handle her milk as though it were made for another baby.

"What the hell does that mean?" she asked herself aloud. Her eyes didn't blink, not even in the heavy cigarette smoke. "Is that even possible?" She sat at the breakfast table, long after Calvin had walked to school, and waited for an answer never produced. She had spent that night—the only night she asked herself what it meant to be a mother—with his hand in hers, extending his index finger and drew it along the bridge of her nose, and then did the same to him, let him see the similar ridge just below their eyes, said, "This is me. This is you. This is me. This is you." She only did this with the nose, so when Calvin was around a mirror, he bared his teeth and thought he shared them with his father. He drew his thumb along his jawline, pulled the skin under his eye to see how much of the eye could be exposed, flapped his ears between his fingers to see how much they could be stretched over the earholes. He furrowed his brow and counted the folds on his forehead—three—while he expressed an over-exaggerated angry face, surprise, sadness, and overjoyed happiness. He said, "This is me," as he placed his palms onto his cheeks and squished them towards his nose, his mouth, which was then squeezed together and looked like a two-segmented snowman. He wondered, *Who are you?*

When he met Julio, it was like he had looked into a mirror. Julio's face tightened when

he heard that Alice needed help, and as he grabbed the bat, Calvin noticed his eyebrows, how when put in the position of anger, his left brow dipped lower than the right, and the right was more curved than pointed. That is when Calvin figured it out, and nobody since then—not even Alice or Julio—could convince him otherwise. Even when Julio—as a Christmas present to Calvin—said that he had known his father for years, but that’s all that Julio offered—a puzzle that said Julio was not the man, and would not give any more information other than that. Which, to Julio, meant that Calvin’s father was not a man he wanted Calvin to meet, and maybe he’d then stop asking Julio for the truth about who he was to his mother, but Calvin took it to mean Julio was his father and didn’t want to take the responsibility. Alice confirmed Calvin’s suspicions every morning for a month when she’d said, “Julio is Julio.”

Julio had convinced himself that he is not a father to anyone—maybe a dust bunny he hadn’t bothered to name, maybe a stray dog in the alleyway from time to time, but to Alice’s boy? Never. He’d done the math, estimated that the first time he had seen Calvin, he wasn’t much more than a month old, a wrinkled prune, and the last time he had seen Alice before that was a year and a half. Where Alice had been in that year in a half, he didn’t know, told himself it didn’t matter. He figured she had probably stayed in Cola, did her rounds in the streets, and wound up with a pregnancy from any man other than him. He agreed that the boy looked like him, but he had a brother in the city. A few cousins, Travis and Paul, twins, college graduates who worked at a salvage yard, were known for making money by melting down car tires and selling them to biofuel plants. They also dove into Colorado Springs at Christmastime to pig farms and steal pigs in the night and roast them for Christmas dinner and their New Year’s party. It was at one of these parties that Julio was knifed in the belly by his sister’s husband,

Peter, who, while both were drunk on gin and pork, told Julio—even his family called him by that name—he had heard about his bastard child.

“It’s not mine, brother,” Julio said. “For all I know, the damn kid is yours. Looks just like *you*.” Before Julio could give his brother-in-law a cursory laugh, a sign of teasing, he was face down on the ground with a two-inch blade sticking in him, a blade that left a small mark on his right side that looked like an appendix scar. Calvin noticed it that morning on his sixteenth birthday as Julio reached to the top shelf at his counter, and Calvin wanted to tell Julio he also had a scar, on almost the same spot, too, except Julio’s looks like a button slit and Calvin’s is a capital D—D for Donald. Calvin said nothing, and counted his coupons.

“You know,” Julio said. “I saw your pop last night.”

“Uh, huh.”

“Told me it was your birthday. Which one would that be?”

“You knew it was my birthday already,” Calvin said. “And you know how many I’ve had.”

“That’s not true at all.” Julio said. “I couldn’t care less about your birthday, whether it was your sixteenth or not.” Julio put a red envelope on the counter and slid it towards Calvin. “He said, ‘Hello’.” Calvin imagined—if his father really wasn’t Julio—that the *hello* was said in the same way that Julio gave it, a soft and sad kind of tone, with his chin dipped to his chest. A tone rank with shame, the same way someone would say, “Don’t slam the door,” and Calvin wondered when the last time somebody had said that in this store. Julio had one of those automatic deals. A door that closed because it was timed, not because somebody had left. A door that works, Calvin thought, based on its own rules. It had nothing to do with anybody.

“How is the old fucker?” Calvin asked.

“Hey,” Julio said. “That’s not needed.”

“Look,” Calvin said. “I’m running behind already.” It was six-eighteen. Calvin put the coupons on the counter. “What’s this,” he asked, tapping on the envelope.

“Just put it in your pocket,” Julio said.

So Calvin did. “So, how’s the morning?” Calvin said. At this point, he felt as though this was what businessmen said—the small talk, the chitchat, the start of a personal conversation that led to the money-making conversation.

“Fine so far,” he said. “Beer, liquor, cigarette sales. The usual.”

“Oh, yeah,” Calvin said. “Speaking of the *usual*.” Normally, Julio would have already had the cigarettes—all eight packs of cigarettes on the counter—but that morning, Julio shook his head.

“Look,” he said. “Go grab a candy bar from the rack, and look up at the ceiling nonchalantly.”

“What?”

“What do you mean ‘what’?”

“Nonchalantly?”

“Don’t make it look like I told you to look around,” he said. “You’re here for candy *only*. Now, go pick out a candy bar and look to the ceiling.”

Calvin turned to the candy rack; walked up to it and thumbed through Snickers and Baby Ruths. He looked up and saw the surveillance camera—its light blinked red, its cord was attached to the base of the camera and looped around and was stuck through a drilled hole in the ceiling. The lens was pointed towards Julio and the supposed customer—or criminal, Calvin

figured.

“It doesn’t pick up sound or anything,” Julio said. “Grab a Snickers or whatever, and come here.”

Calvin looked for something with peanut butter and wondered how his mother would take this when she woke up. He thought of words to reason with her—beyond anyone’s control, police involvement, jail time, punishable, juvie, birthday. Calvin walked to the register and slid the candy towards Julio. He shook the words from his head and figured that this was it. This was the day he left. Words? Words wouldn’t be necessary.

“So, if you were able to get *anything*,” Julio said, “what would it be?”

“The *usual*,” Calvin said—five packs of unfiltered cigarettes. With the coupon, that’s eight packs total, and a two-dollar lotto scratcher.

Julio knew not all of the cigarettes were for Calvin’s mother, but he felt free to sell them to him. But what he didn’t know was that the ticket was not for her. The ten dollars left by the door every morning was for two packs, but with the coupon and the extra money made from selling the extra packs at school to Donald Graham, a lottery ticket was affordable, and his odds increased every time he bought one, knowing that his odds went to zero if he didn’t buy any at all, and Calvin had found that he had made more than money than he had spent.

Calvin never picked a ticket out himself. He let Julio choose for him. Julio said he knew just by feeling it if it’s going to be a winner. “It’s a gift of luck,” he said. And he chooses a big-winner almost every other day—some days, twenty-five dollars, some days a hundred.

Calvin never returned them to Julio, instead he sold them to Donald at a discount. Twenty-five dollar tickets went for ten, one hundred dollar tickets went for seventy, and three

hundred tickets went for one-eighty. Julio, one morning, asked if his lucky gift is true, but Calvin said his mother hadn't had any winners yet, and he furrowed his brow—three folds—clicked his tongue, and nodded. He tore off a new ticket, slid it to Calvin and said, "This one, then." That one, the one with the scratchable money bags, was worth three hundred, sold to Donald for two hundred. It was his third that year, and Donald was in a good mood.

That morning however, after Calvin pocketed his red envelope, Julio tore off a ticket from the roll, put it in his shirt pocket, and said, "This one. This is the *one*. I know it."

"Maybe," Calvin said.

"As usual, then," Julio said, "it would be twenty-seven dollars. With the candy, twenty-eight."

Julio opened his wallet, took out a twenty and a ten, and placed it in the register, and took his two dollars in change. He walked to the automatic door and turned off his *open* sign. He returned behind the counter and pulled down eight packs of cigarettes. He exposed his scar again, and Calvin rubbed his own side. "Going on break now," Julio said. "I'm going to the Dumpster in the alley with twenty-seven dollars less." He slid the candy away from him. "Happy Birthday."

Calvin put the candy in his pocket next to the envelope.

As Julio walked to the back of the store, passed the nacho chips and salsas, the beef jerky, the girly magazines, he said, "And I'll need that coupon. Leave it on the counter."

Calvin fanned the coupons out like he might fan out cards in a poker game. He chose one and slid it over towards the register like a man who had asked for one more card—swift, firm, and hopeful for a lucky break.

Calvin exited through electronic door. It swished and clasped shut. Calvin turned left at the edge of the corner store and walked down the alley. The sun hadn't quite come up yet then, and Calvin used the alleyway lights to help him step over oil-spills and garbage-water puddles. He again turned left to find Julio and the Dumpster. Julio leaned against the wall under a floodlight. All there was to see was Julio, the Dumpster under an orange glow, and a little bit of a white-like yellow light from the cracked-open door.

"What the hell is the camera for?" Calvin asked. He said *hell* like it was a bigger word than it was. Calvin did this to let Julio know that the conversation coming up is between two equals, two business associates. His voice echoed to the back of his ears, the voice became deeper, less stringy. Less childish.

He did not answer. He took the cigarette boxes and handed over all but one pack. Calvin gave him the twenty-seven dollars—a twenty, a five, two ones. Julio folded the cash and stuffed it in his back pocket while he fumbled with the loose pack of cigarettes. When he slapped the pack against his hand, the sound echoed through the alley. An applause. He pulled one out and put it in his mouth. He shook out another loose one and holds it out towards Calvin. Calvin shook his head. His first memory was of standing in his crib. He held onto a rubber toy that looked like a blowfish, but can't remember if it was a blowfish or just a ball. Whatever it was, it had tasted the same as the plastic railing of his crib, of which he had a habit of sucking on because the white paint had chipped away and what was underneath was a brown that looked like peanut butter. Instinct, he supposed, took over, and he spent most of his nap times trying to find the taste of peanut butter, but only tasted something rubbery and metallic. His mother had come in, and she smoked a cigarette, blew the smoke into the ceiling fan, and the

smoke swirled and came down on Calvin like mountain mist. She picked Calvin up from the crib, and some of her ash fell from the cigarette, down the back of his diaper. It never burned him too badly, but he remembered knowing something felt off, and he screamed. Since then, Calvin had never seen his mother at home without a cigarette, and he knew this wasn't who he wanted to be.

Julio flicked his wrist, and the cigarette went back into the pack. He lit his cigarette, inhaled, and put the pack—minus one cigarette—into Calvin's hand. "Sell them at a discount," he said as he blew smoke away from Calvin's face.

"What does that mean?" Calvin said.

"Sell them less than your normal price."

"You know?" Calvin asked.

"Know *what?*" he said, and he inhaled deeply. He fished around in his pocket and pulled out a dime. He took out the lottery ticket from his front pocket. He pinched the dime and the ticket between his thumb and forefinger and held out his hand.

Calvin did not move, but Julio did not retreat his arm. Water plinked at a consistent rhythm from a storm drain next to the Dumpster.

Calvin had practiced this, expected it, but the opportunity to say it had never come until then. *The ticket is not for me, it is for my mother.* He had said this in front of the mirror with all of the other phrases he tried to believe.

"But this is for—"

"How much have you won so far?" he asked. "Honestly." The orange light from the floodlight highlighted Julio, and the image of his face became a silhouette, and Calvin thought

that it was an oddly familiar sight.

“This isn’t for—”

“—you’ve bought scratcher every day for a year now and haven’t claimed any winnings,” he said. “What’s that “blind squirrel” saying? The one about the looney-bin patient with the vasectomy?”

Calvin said nothing. He tried not to think about the thousands of dollars that he had won from those tickets, tried not to think about the cash in the book safe under his bed. He said the same story in his head, the same one he’d been lying about for a year, the story that let Julio think that he wasn’t as lucky as he thought, the story that let him think it was all for the *ol’ lady*, as Julio called her. The old lady, Calvin thought, must be waking up soon. He tried not to think of her waking then, tried not to think of her calling out for help in the darkness only to be greeted by dead air, a creaking, settling apartment, the ticking clock on the wall, tried not to think of her in the kitchen with no toast, no coffee, no cigarette, tried not to think of her lighting the butt of her cigarette from the night before. Instead, Calvin remembered the promise that *it* would never happen again.

“I need to leave,” Calvin said. “Thanks for this.”

“Let’s see if I’m *really* lucky,” he said as he dropped the cigarette and stubbed it out with his foot. Another puff of smoke, his last, left his mouth.

“Another time,” Calvin said, thinking of the mid-dark setting on the toaster. “The sun’s coming up.”

Julio checked his wristwatch. “You have another minute.”

Calvin signed heavily, tried to be rude about it. He snatched the dime and the ticket,

placed the ticket against the Dumpster so he had a hard surface. He scratched away the silver in the first box—08, \$4,000. Calvin never scratched away the *winning number* box first. It wasn't due to superstition, but as part as a routine. His first ever ticket—he won a dollar—he scratched away the *winning number* box last. It never ensured that he would win, but he never felt comfortable outside of the pattern. He hoped that his winning number wasn't an eight. He could never sell that one to Donald, even if he asked for seven hundred. If he saw that much, he'd beat it out of him. As Calvin moved on to the next box, he figured that no matter if he won or not, he'd tell Julio that he hadn't. *Not today*, he'd say. The second box was 33, \$1.00. He scratched at the third—16, \$300. The fourth—10, \$10.00. Calvin scratched away the “secret number” box—16. It was a three-hundred ticket, and Calvin sighed like he lost. He shrugged his shoulders and said, “Oh, well.” He folded the ticket but Julio snatched it away before Calvin could put it in his pocket. He read it.

“Congratulations,” he said as he handed back the ticket. “Must be a good birthday so far.” He tugged the door open. Light from inside flooded into the alleyway. The Dumpster under the floodlight was an orange-brown, but from the light inside, it was a forest green with spots of crumbled rust.

Calvin waited for him to go back through the door. But he didn't. Julio looked down the alley and asked if Calvin had ever been down that way, if he'd taken a left towards the old warehouses by the Interstate Bridge. Calvin said no, that's where the prostitutes work. Everyone knew that. And everyone—at Calvin's school, at least—knew because that was where Calvin's mother worked. That's where all the bastard's mothers worked. Mothers like Scotty Martinez's, Frank Marznof's. The guys at school chant at Scotty, Calvin, *Interstate-whore-boys*,

bastards, fatherless spics, or Jew (to Frank), as they walk by.

“When you’re eighteen—when is that? Two years from now?” Julio said.

Calvin nodded.

“I was taken there when I was eighteen,” Julio said. “By my uncle. I’ll take you down there, too.”

Calvin did not nod at that. He listened to the morning traffic. It swished by the opening of the alleyway. One car passed by. Nothing, no noise. Two more passed by, and it sounded like what Calvin assumed an ocean wave rolling back sounded like. Calvin shrugged and let Julio see him shrug. He didn’t want Julio to know that he had already been down that way, visited on an afternoon of wall-hugging curiosity. He had watched the women in short pants lean against cars they eventually got in. He watched others as they backed away from some cars slowly, and waited for another car to pull up. Calvin tried not to remember hiding behind trash cans, how he thought that maybe one day he’d be in a car, that he’d drive up and roll his window down, that he’d find a girl to speak with who didn’t back away. Calvin would say his mother’s name and ask the girl if she’s ever heard of her, wait for her to say *no*. He’d laugh, and say, *I knew they were lying*. And then he’d laugh with the girl because she wouldn’t know his mother, and then he saw that it was possible for him to get to know the girl. And then they’d both drive off somewhere. Maybe, he thought, he’d drop her off later, or maybe he’d drive her somewhere else, another state, maybe, or Canada, or to Cuba, where he would blend in.

Cuba, he thought, where he could find an old woman, sneak inside her home and ask for a bed and wait for her to grow used to a son sleeping on an unkempt mattress, or until he could forget about that wrinkled woman he once knew who was only a saint of a woman rumored a

whore, but who truly was neither.

“Come on back in tomorrow,” Julio said. “I’ll redeem your ticket, but I can’t sell you anything else. Come in, buy some gum, and meet me back here, and that’ll be it.” But Calvin knew the ticket would not go to him, and if, by chance, he ever saw Julio again, he’d tell him it was stolen on the way to school. “I never saw a face,” he’d say.

Calvin didn’t move until the door latched behind Julio, a loud disorienting click. Calvin waited five seconds before he ran home. He knew that returning to Julio’s was no longer an option. It was over. Whatever stack of cigarettes Calvin had left in the closet of his room would slowly have be sold to Donald over the next week. And when it was all gone, Calvin would be, too.

Calvin opened the apartment door, turned the handle so the latch wouldn’t make noise. He placed the two packs on the kitchen table. He brewed coffee. He went to his bedroom and placed the other packs in the closet, unzipped his bag and put six of the older packs inside his school bag. He would be able to sell them to Donald later that morning, behind another Dumpster. Calvin had decided to give Donald the discount pack for free as a thank-you for his help.

Because of Calvin’s supply, Donald had stopped calling his mother a whore, had stopped calling him a fatherless spic, stopped shoving him into lockers and parked cars, stopped pointing his pen knife at his throat in the boys’ room asking Calvin if he knew anything about God.

Calvin had made Donald a fortune and Donald knew this—Calvin sold him winning

lottery tickets for less than they're worth. He sold five dollar packs of cigarettes for eight bucks a pack, and Donald then turned that around to freshmen for ten, or fifteen, depending on how desperate they were. Donald knew he made money because of Calvin, and this is why Donald covered up the swastika he'd carved in his arm. This is why he stopped cornering *those* friends like Scott, and Frank. Calvin bought their protection and knew all would be okay as long as the supply stayed full. His only concern was to not let that happen, to let the supply diminish. So, he kept taking his Mother's money, not because he needed it—there was plenty of cash stashed in his safe—but because a front was needed, an opening, an expected routine. Calvin thought he had Julio believing his mother smoked more than two packs a day and scratched one lottery ticket on the side. He knew that once that all stopped, business was done. He'd be finished.

So would Scott. Calvin imagined Frank would be fine—Donald can handle Jews, but it was a Cuban who supposedly stabbed his father, who left him in the hospital for a week so medicated that his father said anything to his five-year old son that came to mind—mostly about the *dirty, filthy man* who put him in the hospital, and so Donald did the same to all Cubans he met: "I'll carve an X on your throat," he had said, clamping Calvin's head between a toilet seat and rim, urine splotched like melted butter, shit smears like dried blood. "I'll let it heal. Then I'll make it bigger. I'll let that heal too. I'll let it scar real big. So big I'll be able to see it down the hallway, and that's where I'll jam this knife." He lifted Calvin off the toilet and put his forearm into his throat and backed him into the stall. He lifted his shirt and scratched a D in his side so lightly it barely bled through the toilet paper gauze.

Calvin pulled out the safe from under the bed, locked the extra cash and coupons with the rest that has been saved up over the year, just enough to travel away from Cola. Calvin

knew he could leave half for his mother, as a thank-you for putting up with him, for letting him stay. He tried not to think about it too much, figured he had time to plan it out over the week.

He ate the candy bar and went to the kitchen to put bread in the toaster. He watched the coils grow red, and he thought of the surge of electricity that flowed through the metal. It's the electricity that made it heat up like that, and the color was a sign that it was doing what it was supposed to. He gripped the knife in his hand, and remembered one morning when the bread had gotten stuck, remembered sticking the knife inside to dislodge it, remembered the buzz that flowed through his arm, the strength his hand had when his fist clenched around the knife, the feeling of bees in his chest, the feeling of his mother's grip on his neck, the floor, the smell of bacon and chocolate.

The toast popped up and he put the knife away and buttered the toast with the back side of a spoon. He placed it on a plate next to her cigarettes and empty coffee cup. Calvin opened the pack, smacked it against his hand, and let one of the cigarettes poke a tip out. He placed the pack back down, cigarette facing out. He knew it's what she'll go to first.

Calvin entered his mother's room and shook her awake, said that her the toast was getting cold. She grumbled. She had been pulled out of a dream where she was back on the Missouri farm. She fished with an oak-branch pole at the river, used canned corn as bait. The fish weren't biting, but they made themselves visible—the water was murky, but shallow, and their fins projected from the water. Alice walked to the middle of the river and let them swim around her, and they swam circles until they created a whirlpool, and she sunk underneath the wake. She held her breath and floated until a catfish swam up to her face, opened his mouth and spoke. It said, "Coffee's ready."

She leaned up in bed, pulled her legs over the mattress and asked him to help her with her slippers—her eyes weren't so good anymore, she said.

“A new pack needs to be broken in,” he said.

Calvin watched her rise from bed; the light from the morning was still dim. He tried to determine whether her hair was bleached or had turned white. He watched her as she had trouble stretching her arms. A joint popped somewhere in her body—maybe the elbow. Maybe the neck. She groaned and coughed, and Calvin helped her with her slippers. She patted her foot on the carpet as she looked for them. Calvin grabbed her ankle, felt the bone and the cartilage and a vein in between his fingers and guided her toes towards the opening. He did it again for the other foot.

“Morning, Ma,” he said. “How was work?”

She grunted an answer, and Calvin noticed that she was much more tired than she normally was for that time in the morning. She was a dying sheep, he thought. This is how they look right before they tip over in the mud.

“You can go back to bed, Ma,” Calvin said.

“That's not family,” she said.

Calvin did not ask her to define family, did not ask why her bones crack in the morning, did not ask her to find a new job with different hours, did not ask her why she sometimes slept on the couch, or sometimes wasn't home at all, did not ask her why she sometimes came home with black eyes and bruises on her arms and legs, did not ask about the guys at work who sometimes, as she said, hit her to make a point, did not ask questions about how she makes her money. His only thought was that he had to make sure she had two fresh packs, a pot of coffee,

and toast. That was it. He constantly felt the urge to find the answers to all of these questions, but he found himself shaking it all away, that everything was okay.

“Get me up,” she said, and Calvin held out his arms and helped her out of bed, walked her through the door frame. He did not close the door behind them. They sat at the table together, and Calvin watched the sunrise and listened to her chew—it sounded like kicked gravel and walked-on dried leaves. She had a cut on her forehead that scabbed over with rust colored blood, and around it was a purple kind of yellow. Calvin looked away, didn’t want to be caught staring. He squinted into the sunlight, tried to figure out if the sun had peaked through a horizon-cloud or if it was just the smoke in the apartment. He decided that it didn’t matter—no matter where he was in that apartment, it was either smoke, or both. Calvin stood up from the table and went to the kitchen window by the sink.

He washed the dishes with the orange dish soap she stole from work. He listened, as he washed, to her talk about the people at the casino, the people who throw away more money on a failed split hand than she made that week alone. He listened to why these people disgust her. Listened to her talk about why people are terrible, how they use their hands more than their words, how things never used to be like *this*. “Until *you* came along,” she said.

“Uh huh,” he said, thinking that she was talking of a time period rather than the actual event of his birth. Calvin tried not to think of it any other way, tried to pretend she was a woman talking about somebody else, somebody not her son. Calvin was not her son in that moment. Calvin was a bartender wiping plates and glasses and mugs, listening to the woes of a broken-down rummy who exaggerated her problems so she could feel better about the world. He pretended that the old, white woman, the white woman who shared his nose, maybe his

cheeks, definitely his survival skills, was simply a barfly with an awful, freeloading child. He imagined telling her that he understood—that he had a few tan bastards of his own out there somewhere, rummaging the streets, buying and selling cigarettes to underage kids just so their family could eat. He imagined himself saying this while taking out a cigarette from the box, putting it in her mouth, and lighting it with a wooden match. He wouldn't shake the flame out. Instead, he'd exhaust the flame in a cup of water because he liked the way it sounded.

Calvin wiped the table down with a damp cloth, got all the crumbs and ash. She stared at him with eyes that asked where she went wrong. The bartender in Calvin wanted to say, *pick a year*. It was the question that appeared to always be on her mind. Calvin did not answer her, even though he was sure she already knew the answer. He patted her shoulder, felt the cotton on her nightgown, faded and thin. He lifted up on her arm and guided her to the living room, where she could fall asleep again.

When she flopped on the couch, he put a blanket over her and said that everything was going to be fine. Soon, he'd be old enough for a real job. They'll get extra money that way, then maybe things wouldn't be so bad. He put another cigarette in her mouth and lit it for her. He turned on the TV and switched it to the morning news. He hoped for a report of a missing child, or a gunned-down cop, or a fatal car crash with a Chinese take-out delivery boy. He hoped that there would be a mother crying into the camera lens, sobbing that she'd never get her baby boy back again. He prayed for this so that she'd know that some people had it worse.

But it was the weather report—sunny and 75.

“I'll call Julio today,” she said. “See if he knows of any cakes.”

Calvin tried to tell her that it wasn't necessary, but she cut him off.

“With some candles.” She yawned. “Sixteen.” She blinked slowly, watched the TV. Florida had rain coming. “I’ll ask him to drop it off about the time you get home.”

“Maybe Julio could stick around here,” he said.

She blinked again. “Why would he want to do that?” she said and yawned.

Calvin pushed the coffee table ashtray closer so she could reach it from the couch. He listened to her cough and stood still until she stopped. When her breath returned to the standard wheezing, Calvin walked to his room to change his shirt—dishwater had splashed on it. He stared at himself in the mirror for the second time that morning, that time in the daylight. He pushed on some of his bruises to see if the pain had expanded. His hand lowered down his side and he felt the ridges of his scar. He wondered what it would look like if it were bigger, if Donald had decided to finish spelling out his name on his stomach. Calvin looked at his eyes, sunken. He needed more sleep but put on a new shirt—another white T—and walked to the living room to sit with his mother before he was tempted to return to his bed.

They listened to a report about a downed power line on Main Street, and Calvin’s gaze went to the painting of Mother Mary above the TV. She was calm and serene and rosy cheeked and white. Snug and protected in her arms is the baby Jesus, glowing yellow. Calvin remembered when his mother had said the painting is the only picture of his father. The only picture worth looking at, anyhow, she added. He did not ask if he was truly the son of Jesus, because he believed that no matter how he asked it, no matter what mood she was in, she would always answer, *Yes, without question.*

She lit another cigarette, and the apartment hung with smoke. Eventually it would find its way toward the window, but at that moment, it floated in the living room like smog. Calvin

thought of the cigarette packs in his bag, could almost feel them in there. It was something sinister, something forbidden, illegal, but necessary. Maybe it was for the best, he thought, that it was ending. She was bound to find out about it, so no matter what, it was always going to end. It was a kind of relief to Calvin. It helped him ignore what he should have really been worried about—the future. But at the moment, it was okay, he knew, to enjoy life. He took in a deep breath, let his lungs fill with second-hand smoke, and he breathed out even deeper and watched the haze swirl like a cyclone.

She had fallen asleep. Calvin took the half-smoked cigarette from her hand, and put it, still burning, in the ashtray. He pushed it away from the edge, turned down the volume on the TV, turned on the ceiling fan, and closed the window except for a small crack. He left a note for her, wrote that he loved her and would see her when he got home after school. He pretended that he was going to write *Thanks for the room, lady. Until the by-and-by.*

Calvin walked to the door, opened it, and didn't depress the handle until he was sure the latch was over the hole. Don't wake her, he thought. Let her wake up later on her own. He knew this was how it will happen a week later when he won't let her think he had left for anywhere but school, won't give any sign to her that he won't be back. He'll let her think that he had vaporized and slipped out through a gap in the windowpane with the smoke.

[End Part 1]

Coprophagia

The oolong has gone cold, and the police have not yet arrived.

It is a peach-coconut blend the tea lady, Amira—a young, maybe twenty-one year-old girl (her husband’s lover, Lidia suspected)—at the new tea shop had said was “A bit earthy, and a bit *naughty*.” Lidia sniffed the jar and thought that maybe it was—it reminded her of a VW van’s air freshener, stale beer, and evening dew. It was another something that had helped her grow comfortable with a memory from twelve years before. The van had smelled of cigarettes, dog shampoo and latex lubricant, and the evening dew was more like the dwell of river scum. All, to her, resonated with *naughty*, with lowered inhibitions, with orange painted nails, shag carpet, and a boy who yipped like a coyote when jumping off a rope swing, the wild animal with musk and territorial instinct who emerged naked from the water as hair, teeth, and freedom, who owned a piece of her she could never get back, a piece of her that she, ten years ago wanted to give to her new husband, Zac Swann—biology major, asthmatic, Sudoku and red pen obsessive.

After he said he wanted to wait until marriage, she confessed to him about the boy whose name she couldn’t remember. Lidia flipped the pages of his textbook, skimmed through the chapters on bone density and pack mentality, finally landing on a page about bees, about the honey stomach, about step-patterns and communication and the frequency of massed paper wings. He was a mistake she said, but it was her first. He was okay with it, he assured. He closed the book and said he understood, that he’d almost done the same himself with a girl in

his high school physics lab (they had bonded over graphing calculators, thought that cosines were elitist, found *integer* to be a suggestive word). He asked if Lidia would be okay with his choice, too, because he thought it was intriguing, wonderful, brilliant that humans were the only species to practice abstinence, and though he was extremely tempted to mount her like an elephant after their first date at a low-rate Italian restaurant known for busty, tight-pants waitresses, chocolate cannoli, and a paprika white sauce, he said he wanted to know what the hype of waiting was all about, and he added that he would love to find out with her. She agreed, and he would not waiver. Even during anniversaries. Even during Christmas-eve nights at her family's house as they slept next to each other on the pullout couch in the basement so far away from the other rooms nobody would hear them. Even the night he proposed. Even on the Valentine's trip to Tahiti three months before the wedding. Even the morning of, before their vows.

On their wedding night, as Lidia, out of her dress, helped Zach unclasp his tux pants, he told her the hissing the velociraptor made in those dinosaur movies was the sound of tortoises mating.

"Sorry," he said, undoing his bowtie. "I'm nervous."

She is thirty-one now, and a bit of naughty is be expected. While she still has it, she thought, as she cached the peach-coconut tea. She chose it over the mint julep and chocolate rooibos. Sexy-boring was in. The housewife jeans-and-blouse look Lidia had mastered grew more popular ever since the conservative librarian thing came back (had it ever left?), along with the widely popular MILF—an abbreviation which Zac had once called her—though they have no children. He said it in such an I'm-an-aging-middle-school-teacher way that she thought

he didn't know what it meant, or maybe he looked it up and became cautious of how she'd react that he referenced her as a woman who could be fucked. He was not going to make love to her, but fuck her. The thought turned her on, but his delivery had not. He said it as though he proposed a different restaurant from an old Zagat's. When they finally went to bed, he did not rip the covers away, buttons were not popped, the pillows stayed on the bed, and his hands led hers as they always had. They suggested the reach, but never demanded it. She settled for love making, which was beautiful, of course, but boring. She lay there with an arm around his back, the other around the neck, sometimes she pinched the skin under his ear, to let him know rough was okay, but he never picked up speed, never checked his hips to the side to allow her the chance to flip over and take the topside. They did not speak. It was consistent. It was satisfactory. It was marriage.

It is the exact opposite of what Lidia thinks about as she sips the cold tea from her mug. She thinks of lace, of new sheets and lit candles, face-down photos, and a made-up names, a safety word in advance. *Alberta*. She thinks of the adult store by the Laundromat and BBQ place, the one that says it's there to *rekindle the embers of your passion*. She thinks of what the shelves may look like. Purple and pink and organized by shape. Blue carpet. Christmas lights around door frames. She thinks that Amira would be the clerk behind the counter, changing the prices on the clearance vibrators, the DVDs about firemen and pizza-delivery boys, of, oh, God, dirty, *naughty* MILFs. *Naughty, naughty*. She cannot get off this word.

To Lidia, Amira said *naughty* in a way that implied Lidia didn't know what it was. But Lidia had known once. She relished in it, bathed in it, let her long hair soak in its essence and let it wrap around her body until the two became one like vines choking twigs. It was the naughty

working for Lidia, and Lidia working for the naughty, and somehow, over the years, she had lost it as maturity snuffs routine or an aging body ignores metabolism.

She wonders what made this tea girl the authority of naughty. Is it because she's young? Is it because she looked like the kind of girl who could pack spontaneously for a trip to Hawaii, who would never worry about the money because she knows what rich, older men look like—they read newspapers, keep coffee as an appendage, ignore recycle bins—and can talk her way into a *gift* while balancing herself with her palm against his triceps as she lifts her leg behind her to adjust her sock, her back arched, shirt unbuttoned, the bra a size too large, neck wrenched away from his face, and a grateful thank-you as she lands a final squeeze to his arm, and lets the conversation continue for a week—a month at most—before they're both on a plane, a return ticket in her bag, ready to welcome the moist air of the Island, where she can lose him at the gate.

Lidia thinks, *Couldn't I do the same?* She isn't shackled to her kitchen, to her house and bedroom. She drinks the oolong cold because she wants to. Even if the police were there, she'd offer them a cold cup, would offer them to smell the jar as persuasion if they refused, would offer them to share in the *naughty*, to take the trip, to practice the repeating verse and chorus of The Song of Amira, the girl she could emulate if she had to. Amira was the kind of girl who looked like she knows how to weave through a crowd, how to blend in with the other brunettes, how to score a free trip and find another man, knows how to tell him that she's there on a business trip as well and has gone through the corporate plans, too, the trust falls, too, the team-building, too, the warm water, too, the lavender oils, the juniper, the jasmine, the bath salts. A girl who has the same interest in dividends as the lonely, pushpin banker, the

same the fiscal-year profits, the same excitement of the quarterly rise. She's the kind of girl who knows how to suggest the king crab celebration, knows when to tell the lie that she's here with her girlfriend—and not her friend who's a girl, but her year-and-six-month-long partner, and the no, I don't think she'd be interested, but I'll ask and let you know, and the I hope she says yes, too, and the thanks for dinner.

Lidia can see Amira in the coconut bra, the grass skirt tremor like the steam of the boiling point, the whistle, the squeal of completion, the sweat and condensation like the vapor on her kitchen wallpaper, the combination of joining droplets to dribble down the wall together behind the counter's sealant. The meniscus of a too-full poured mug. The bend, the sip, the burn. Lidia can see Amira finding that woman on the beach, can see Amira convince herself to go along with the story that they had been together for over a year, can see Amira's imagination run, can see Amira convince the woman that she desires the skinny dip in the moonlight, the embrace in the waves, the hands rested on the shoulder blades, the ease of her nose into the crook of the woman's neck, the hold, the awareness of fingernail length.

Lidia can imagine no further, because that's where she would stop herself. She wants to know that place where a thin line of water between their skin separates them. She wants to see what the appeal is, to see what makes it so easy to wander away from a promise, but when she breathes in deeply, wishing for the smell of sand, all she smells is stale peach and dirty coconut like old lotion.

Lidia places the kettle on the giraffe cozy and calls the police station again. The same receptionist answers the phone.

"It's Lidia Swann," she says. "You said to call if nobody came within a half-hour."

The receptionist says nothing, but Lidia hears papers moving on the other end of the phone, assent typing, other voices, muffled, monotone. Lidia imagines them saying, *chapter eleven, reality TV, and real Vermont maple syrup.*

“It’s been an hour,” Lidia says. And she repeats it. She repeats it again, and she wants to say that it’s an abomination, but she says nothing like that. She keeps her voice light, with just the right amount of concern. “Please,” she says. “Is anybody on their way? Are they close?”

The receptionist apologizes and says that a car is near and that Lidia does not need to stay in the house, and was advised during the first call it was best she went to a neighbor’s house in case whoever broke in may still be there. But when Lidia came home, door opened, nothing was disheveled except a lamp that was tipped over, and a bowl of popcorn from the night before was on the floor upside down, the un-popped kernels sprawled along the carpet like the frightened bulbs of pillbugs—the Roly Poly, the bugs her husband often speaks of—how they turn blue when dying, he said, can drink through the anus when necessary. He had told this to her over dinner years ago, facts sparked by her attempt to make a blueberry risotto—how he thought (not that it tasted like it, of course) that he was going to eat a rice dish filled with sick pillbugs, the *armadillidiidae*, to be specific (because they looked and rolled up like armadillos), and he imagined, he said while scooping his first spoonful, that since the pillbug can handle ammonia so well that they have no need to urinate so it must taste sweet, sour, and bitter all at the same time, like a ripe blueberry. And he smiled, and said he thought it ironic to be served asparagus as well. He snapped a stem between his teeth and said, “Urine is such a funny thing we don’t think about enough.”

The receptionist asks again if Lidia would like her to stay on the line until the police

arrived, and Lidia turned on the stove, put the kettle over the flame, and said, “No. I don’t have much to say other than what I have. It could have been a raccoon because I don’t know if anything’s missing. I’ve checked the house, and there’s nobody here, no lights on, nothing broken, no notes, no fur, no shit, just my door open for the world to come in. My neighbors were home all day, they’re still there, and they saw nothing, but if it’s not too much trouble to rush them,” she finds herself speaking faster, harsher, as though the receptionist were Amira, “I would really like it if they would *please* get here, because I don’t know what to do other than stand here.” Lidia closes her eyes, breathes in slowly and exhales. The frog clock above the sink has stopped, the second hand twitches in place by its right eye between the 3 and 4. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, looks at the front door, which is still open, looks at the lamp which is still tipped over, looks at the popcorn bowl which hasn’t moved, the kernels still alert and rolled into themselves and Lidia thinks of the vacuum upstairs, tucked away in the walk-in closet next to Christmas ornaments, a wicker sewing basket, and red Stilettos with the opaque heels she hasn’t worn in years. “Please.”

Lidia hangs up, returns to her mug and drinks enough tea to make room for more hot water, and she stares at the teabag until she hears the kettle’s whistle.

She has already called Zac’s phone, but could not reach him. Tried his school, but the secretary could not get him on his classroom phone. Maybe he was at the gym, Lidia said, and thanked her. She would wait for him to call back or come home, whichever came first.

She has already called the locksmith—she did this first—but they could not promise that they could get there today—the flu had hit the staff pretty hard, the locksmith said, and had only one guy out there, doing the job of six people. And he said he had heard that his one guy

wasn't feeling too well either. And he said he'd come himself but somebody needed to answer the phones. And he said he was sorry. And he said he would get somebody to her as quickly as possible. And he said that he understood that it was an emergency, but so were others. And he said he wishes he could refer her to somebody else, but he's the only one in town. And he said that if she hadn't been helped by nine that evening, that he would personally come by. And she said she'd appreciate that. And he said goodbye. And so did she, thinking he may be the one to show up, wondering if she should make something for him, that maybe he would appreciate a meal after the day he's having, and now she thinks the same thing about the police receptionist.

Lidia wants to call her back and apologize for her prodding, for her persistence. Maybe she'd invite her over for dinner as well. Maybe she's a vegetarian. Maybe the locksmith is a carnivore, or an omnivore and he wouldn't mind going one meal without beef or pork. She wants to make tofu, wants to buy spinach and tomatoes and balsamic vinegar. Wants to toast pecans in her oven. Maybe they're single. Maybe this is how they meet. Maybe this is how Lidia and Zac are invited to an in-town wedding, and over the clinging glasses and the happy speeches, the receptionist will call everyone's attention onto Lidia and say, "If it weren't for Lidia and her broken door..." Lidia can see the locksmith, pink cheeked and freshly shaven. He'll wear a baby-face well, and she thinks that he'll look Irish. Red hair. Freckles. A robust laugh. Lidia can see the receptionist in her dress, and the bride will choke up as she fights through the sentence. She'll gleam through the speechlessness, raise her glass, and all will raise their glasses, too, and say: "To Lidia and her broken door." They will drink to her, and Lidia sees the reception hall, the olive-green bridesmaids' dresses, groomsmens' ties, cummberbunds,

tablecloths and sheeting, a 12 x 12 photo of a stern-faced Marine in his dress uniform at the empty chair next to the locksmith. They'll share the same jawline, the same nose. There will be a beef carving station and a vegetable lasagna buffet, and Lidia thinks of Zac next to her, at one of the front tables in the hall, but he will be a manikin in a suit, his legs missing, his hand a cupped into a C. She will hold it, will feel the plaster. Lidia wonders what he might say about the dish, whether the chives in the mashed red-skinned potatoes would remind him of something in the insect world, what kind of anthropodic fact he would have—something about aphids. Something about the frogs that eat them. Something about the frogs' secretion from the something-something gland and how it would something-something-something and something, and the others would put down their forks, but Lidia imagines herself listening and tasting, marveling at the natural world, bemused at how others would not be ready to hear it.

The police, which is just one man—a kid, really—has been in her home for ten minutes at the most. He has walked through the house, checked each room, even the basement and the parlor, has found nothing out of the ordinary. She offers him coffee. He declines. He declines, tea, too, even though she has made a fresh batch. She uncaps the tin, and puts it in his face and asks him what he thinks of the smell, but he backs away two steps, and asks her questions: if she noticed anything missing (*My mother's ruby earrings were still on my bedroom dresser, my wedding ring was still on the bathroom sink, all out in the open*), if she had a home-security system (*No*), if this has happened before (*No*).

She places the tin on her counter. She does not twist the cap. She lets the aroma drift. It is fresh, so it is potent, and it's a smell that she now will always attribute to a woman named Amira—a self-starter businesswoman who understands her demographic, who goes on

unchallenged in this neighborhood because the only other tea shop in the area is aisle fifteen next to instant coffee and cocoa marshmallows. Amira is a woman who understands the earth and what nutrients a body can absorb at what steeping temperature, and Amira's the woman who's probably with her husband right now as Lidia speaks to a cop—a boy named *Officer Davis*—as he walks to the door, inspects the handle, turns it twice each way, closes the door, locks it, and tries to open it. His left hand bears no ring, not even a tan line. His arm hair sticks out from his sleeves, but does not continue beyond his wrist, not even the knuckle. His grip on the handle makes the veins on the topside of his hand poke up. The door does not open, and he says there appears to be no forced entry, nothing missing, so he speaks to Lidia about proper home-security measures as he reads from a pamphlet that he'll leave behind: Listen for the latch, wring the handle, push on the door to make sure it's shut. Say an odd phrase to help you remember that the door is/was locked, something like: *orangutan tail, doughnut bucket, pen church*. Think about upgrading to a home alert system. They are cheap, and insurance companies like homeowners who have them.

“Is there anything you'd like me to go over before I leave, Mrs. Swann?”

There wasn't, and he had her sign a paper, and he unlocked the door, opened it, and closed it behind him as he left.

The question to Lidia seems straightforward, but she hoped that there was something he was implying, something that was inviting her to follow him outside, to tell him her husband won't be back until dark. But, she locks the door, says “Gangrene on a lemur's toenail,” and returns to her kitchen where the tea has cooled again.

He is young, she thinks, but not too young. She imagines that he grew up in town,

probably had her husband as a biology teacher, heard his lectures about the habits of primate monogamy—how some male Golden Langurs in India have been found to mate with several females, but choose only one female to protect, to bring gifts of food—often the durian fruit. He is a primate that, some observers have found, will separate himself from the group if the female dies or rejects his offerings. If that happens, sometimes, the male starves himself and is often captured by predators. Zac emphasized that some were found to stand their ground and give up no fight—even against the constrictor snakes, who seem to understand their prey and they squeeze as hard and fast as possible.

And this is also what Lidia thought as she handed cash over to Amira. She wondered what her husband told Amira afterwards, if he cradled her in his arms and whispered the same things he's told Lidia—about the heartbeats of hummingbirds, the jaw strength of the carpenter ant, the never-ending growth of the beaver's teeth. She wanted to ask Amira what she knew of the Bengal tiger, the Siberian mountain goat, the fucking manatee, wanted to ask if she knew why Lidia refused to break eye contact after she slid over the jade earring across the counter atop the cash. Lidia had found it in Zac's shirt pocket, the one with the extra slot that can only hold a pen. The shirt she had bought him for his birthday, the one Lidia said he looked sexy wearing. It was a gray kind of silver, she said, that brought out the smoke in his eyes, made him look older, more distinguished, mature, dependable. An old man, she said. Nothing quite like it.

Lidia wanted to know if Zac had told Amira about the horned Egyptian sand lizard, the one locals call *Satan's Tail*, the one who, when faced with a territorial intruder, will freeze while standing with its front left leg in the air and stare at the other until the other blinks or adverts

its gaze—the sign that it’s willing to be killed and eaten. When Amira blinked, Lidia placed the tea tin in her bag and asked, “What do you know about the pillbug?” Amira pinched the earring and put it behind her back and said she’d never heard of it, as she flushed and handed back the wrong change—five fives, rather than five ones.

As Lidia left the shop, she thought there should be a bell on the door. Something clamoring would have felt satisfying. Anything more than the sound of the traffic outside, the booming of somebody’s car-radio bass, the quick honk—the kind that says *hello*, not *hurry*.

It is 11 p.m. The locksmith has not come, and no one picked up the phone when Lidia called the shop. Zac had come home around 8, placed his jacket on the couch, and sat. He stayed there as Lidia told him about her day, and he responded to everything—the “break-in” (*I probably forgot to close the door properly behind me*), the cop (*Davis sounds familiar, but it’s a pretty common name—he could have been a student. Did he have a scar over his eyebrow?*), her irregularity, probably brought on by dehydration (*Camel crickets have been known to nibble on recently-dead bat saliva when dehydrated*), but had nothing to say when she said she bought some tea.

When it grew dark outside, Zac turned on all of the lights in the house, and when Lidia said she knew she locked the door, but maybe somebody was coming back, Zac faced the TV toward the living room window. He unplugged the radio, went to the basement, plugged it in, and turned it to a talk station, and since then, there was nothing in the house but husband and wife, lights, and noise.

“I don’t think he’ll be coming,” Zac says. He rips a piece of duct tape from a roll, and tapes down the channel up button. He points it at the TV, and the channel turns to the Home

Shopping Network (“—his cubic zirconium necklaces are a gre—”), to the local news (“—high of eighty-two tomorrow with a chan—”), to the science channel (“—astrophic conditions due to solar exhausti—”), to the music channel (“—aby, baby, baby, don’t go. I want—”).

“Can you put a chair up to the door then?” Lidia asks, and she wonders if it’d be worth it to nail some 2x4 planks to the doorframe, to drill and secure bars against the windows, but her husband shakes his head. He has been quiet all night, which is unlike him. No speeches over late-night dinner about the dung beetle, about antivenin, about the Argentinian water spider’s fear of fire.

“The chain on the door will have to do,” he says.

“Maybe we’ll go to a hotel?”

Zac says, “No.” He walks to the front door, wrenches on the handle, makes sure that it’s locked. His shoes are in front of the door, and he slides them to the wall with his foot. He fiddles with the chain, unlatches it from the guide, and slides it back into place. “Go on to bed. It’ll be fine.” He scratches the lobe of his ear, and he looks to the carpet, does not look to her.

“Is it locked?” she asks.

Zac nods.

“You’re sure?”

Zac wrenches on the handle, and the door does not open.

“Fuse box and a peanut butter telephone,” Lidia says. Zac looks to her and says nothing.

Lidia walks down the hallway, tries not to look at the photos that line it, the wedding photos, the beach photo, the one at the end of the roller coaster, her eyes are closed, Zac holds her hand. She enters the bedroom, pulls on the windowsill to make sure they’re locked (*Self-*

sacrificial head scarf). She draws the shades, and turns on the bedside lamps. She closes the bedroom door, undresses, and looks at herself in the full-length mirror. She takes her palms and pushes them in and down on her abdomen. The skin flows away from her hands and glides back into place when she takes her hands away. She opens the dresser drawer, pulls up a pair of underwear, a plain-white jersey-type fabric that has had all its softness worn down by years of friction from blue jeans—these were for casual wear at the time, when they were first dating, when even changing in front of each other was a sensual act, and for Lidia, comfort was sexy. Casual and domestic were naughty. Now, comfortable was just an aid for sleep, and she pairs it with a baggy T-shirt Zac had worn as the middle-school basketball coach. There are holes in the armpits, and the fringe lays just above her knees. She turns off the lamps, and slides under the covers, and listens to herself breathe, lets her eyes adjust to the dark. Though she cannot see, she knows there, on the nightstand, is a book that has not been opened in week, the bookmark, a cream soda sucker wrapper, left on a page about an outburst during a court hearing. There is lip balm and hand cream, a needle and grey thread. Hanging on a hook on the door is an umbrella. It is light, it is solid and can be swung easily.

She hears Zac open the hallway closet, move some objects around—probably the boxes that are only there for Christmastime and birthdays, the boxes that hold sweaters and slippers and socks—slowly, but still loud enough for Lidia to know he’s trying to be quiet. For her. She hears the hallow *tunk* of wood on wood. He closes the door, and she watches as Zac blocks the light under the doorframe as he walks by the bedroom door. She hears him walk down the hallway, hears him slide a chair away from the dining room table, hears him walk back down the hallway and place the chair down.

Lidia hears. She exits the bed, opens her bedroom door and squints into the hallway light. She shivers as the warmth of the bed leaves her legs. She rubs her eyes until they can handle the light, and she sees Zac. He sits in the chair he finds sturdy enough to stand on when he changes the batteries in the smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, the only household chore, Lidia thinks, that makes him look like a meerkat. He holds a baseball bat by his side. His head does not move, even when she purposefully swishes her feet on the floor so he can hear her coming up to him. She faces him, and he stares forward, his face slack and tired, and he sighs as though he's fighting a yawn. Lidia presses her back up against the wall, and slinks to the floor. Her shirt lifts, and she exposes most of her torso, and her faded underwear and legs. When she sits, the fake hardwood flooring is cold. She does not pull the shirt beneath her. She lets her thighs careen and face Zac. He looks to her, and she hopes that the sight is exciting to him, his wife, wearing nothing but his T-shirt and flimsy elastic. He grins, and shifts the bat to the other hand. He has gained weight, she notices. Just a little. Just enough that his cheeks are puffier, softer, older.

"Tell me," she says, she extends her leg and rubs her foot on his. "What don't I know about the pillbug?"

Zac chuckles, shows his teeth, and the smile lines on his face—crevices, *canyons*, Lidia thinks—grow deeper. His head dips to his chest and says, "Tell me, first, what you know about the pillbug."

She tells him, and he nods throughout her list. "Anything else?" she asks.

"You know they need copper to survive, right?"

"Sure," she concedes, wants to say *everybody knows that*, but decides against it.

“Well, sometimes,” he says, “there’s not a lot around except for—well.” He stops. His lips twitch, and she thinks that it’s something he doesn’t want to say. “So sometimes—”

“So sometimes?” she says. “What? Sometimes what?”

“Sometimes.” His eyebrows rise, and his voice becomes that informative lecture voice that he must wear in the classroom, that wonderment of wisdom, the passion behind the knowledge, the fascination he must feel to tell something to somebody who had never considered his view. It’s the voice, Lidia thinks, that implies an appetite, a desire to share a piece of himself with somebody, not just to speak and be heard, but to affect. And she remembers that she’s heard this tone before—their first date, every date, their wedding night, anniversaries, arguments, Saturday brunches, bowling nights, grocery shopping, walks through corn fields, and she listens to his words, the vowels, the moments where he chooses to take in breath, and she no longer cares about the subject, but knows that he is speaking only to her, that this is something he had read at one time. This is something he had stored away for this moment, left it wrapped in something rank and reserved, hoping to be accepted.

Falling Up

Today, Tucker wants to call the old woman Eleanor, after Roosevelt's wife. Tomorrow, she'll be Mary Todd or one of the other early ones. Monday, three days ago, they agreed to call her Ida—as in McKinley—and while she was on the ground grabbing onto a lamppost to keep herself from floating away, they—Addie, Rollo and Tucker—chanted *Ida* as they circled like vultures around a dying mule, and Addie, in his school uniform, imagined himself with wings, aloft and soaring above a rot that sparked his appetite. He imagined the stench of her death, sour milk and corn. He imagined himself going for the eyes first, assuming they, like eggs in the sun, would be the first to spoil.

Had they all been a few years younger, he'd have screeched like a hawk (since he knew what they sounded like), but now, at almost fifteen, he knew he'd just embarrass himself; besides, he'd often seen hawks leave the heads alone, the eyes in the sockets open, lifeless but still terrified. Instead, he hopped over her three times, changed his fantasy from a bird to a leprechaun dancing around a pot of gold. And that's when she smiled, and it made Tucker sick. Not because of her teeth, stained yellow like beeswax, or the gap, or her veined purple tongue behind it, but because she smiled at Tucker like he was a friend to her, as if all of this was fine, a welcomed tradition. So, today, Tucker, who finds formality between him and the woman to be a problem, suggests they try out Eleanor. Addie and Rollo nod in agreement, and Rollo, who's grown hungry for an after-school snack, looks to the top of Hoover Road, knowing it won't be too long now until they see her.

As Rollo watches the top of the hill, Addie watches the bottom where the accidents

happen. Hoover Road, the steepest in town and the only hill in the whole of the Missouri Plains not growing something, is the only place you can get anything you want. Since it's littered with stores and banks and shops and restaurants, some of the moms in town—especially Rollo's mother—call it Errand Street; however, some—like Tucker's mother—call it, simply, that awful damned road where everybody goes to die.

When the blacktop is wet or icy, cars careen into the brick wall of Hoover Bank. Behind the brick is the bank's vault, lined with four feet of lead. Instead of crashing through a wall, the car collapses into itself, trapping the driver between the steering wheel and the bumper and maybe, sometimes—as the boys have heard and are waiting to see—a tire or two.

It doesn't happen often—eleven times in thirty years—but when it does—as it did a month ago—the city council comes together and listens to the hundreds of citizens who plead that the bank be moved. The motion passed 7-to-1 (the one vote being Harold Rowe, who honestly wanted the bank moved but hates seeing the word *unanimous* in newspapers) in favor of moving the HB Savings & Loan uphill, and once the boys heard about this, they knew their time was limited, and so, every day for a month now, they've sat on the steps of Miles' Deli across the street from Andy Jay's guitar/tobacco shop as they finished homework, drank pop, and waited for someone to lose control. The old woman is just a happy accident who distracts them from the nothing that'll never happen. In two weeks, tops—two weeks, where weathermen have not predicted a monsoon or an early-Autumn ice storm—a construction crew will go down to the bottom of Hoover and remove the lead vault with a crane and creep it in first gear towards its new spot half a mile away on the corner of Hoover and Taft.

A tan Buick, dented front right bumper and hood, rust around the hubcaps, grinding

brakes (Addie notices), comes and crawls to a stop by the boys. The passenger window rolls down, and Walter Gravely, a high school baseball star, yells out to them, “Any of you see my dog?”

Addie stands and walks to the open window. He says nothing and leans on the side mirror, pressing his elbow onto the top of it, testing its durability.

“My dog?” Walter says. “She’s white,” and he pauses. He says, as though embarrassed, “Has a purple collar?” His hands don’t leave the wheel, he doesn’t have much time for this with these three freshmen still wearing their school uniforms. Walter had changed his clothes the second he got into his car, exchanging a blazer for a tank top, slacks for jeans, a tie for a pack of cigarettes, black socks for a ringing cell phone—his mother. Maggie’s run away again. “That dog loves Hoover,” his mother said. “Check everywhere around there.”

“Big dent you got here,” Addie says. “Couldn’t stop in time?” He doesn’t take his eyes from Walter’s face.

Walter sighs. “A deer,” he says, his eyes back on the stretch of road, ready to gun the gas. A buck had run its hip right into him during a four a.m. nothing-to-do-trip in the farmland with Sara Holland sleeping in the back seat, her brother Karl—catcher for the high school team, a .385 at bat— in the front cleaning his nails with a chopstick, Kung Pao stained into the wood tip. “I hit one yesterday,” Karl had said, plainly. “They’re all over the place.”

Walter’s hands strangled the wheel, his foot heavy on the brake, the transmission in drive.

Karl sniffed some air. “You got a hammer?”

“A hammer?”

Karl leaned his head out the window and brought it in quickly. "It's still alive." They usually were; it takes a big vehicle to kill a deer at 35 mph. Karl knew this from shining trips with his father. They'd spend hours driving around cornfields with a .30-.30 looking for fat, corn-fed deer. They never shot unless the deer were scared still, which they never were, because they carried fire crackers with them, lit them once they found a deer, scared it into a trot towards the road, where they would then run them down with Karl's father's old wood truck. A truck with more dents, his father mused, than a fat woman's ass.

Walter said nothing.

"Most humane thing to do," Karl said, "is to just get it over with." He tapped his forehead with the chopstick. "Fast."

"You want me to get out?"

"Even a tire iron, you know?"

"Can't you?"

"Your car, your kill. Swing like it's a tied game. Get that fucker out the park."

So he tried.

Sara never woke up. Even when Walter missed the deer's head and hit the side of his car with a cracked wooden baseball bat, she never moved, even when Walter put his head inside the passenger window and said to Karl, "What do I do now? The bat broke." Instead, she swallowed sound and tasted dream. She had heard Walter close the trunk. She bobbed with the car, the dust from the car floor rose to her, but all of that became part of memory. There was Walter with her in the back seat, both unclothed, his finger stroking her cheek, his eyes saying he wants to but can't. She wants to ask him why. She knows, she just wants to hear from him

that it's broken. She wants him to ask if she can do something about it. He blinks, and it sounds like a slammed door.

That bat had seen three years of high school games, thirty-seven RBIs, twelve home runs and three decorative mailboxes before it finally broke in half against a hood of a Buick meant for the skull of a buck.

Addie turns to Tucker and Rollo. "Seen a dog?" he says. They shake their heads. Addie looks back to Walter, his hair is flopped over into his eyes, a cigarette hangs from his lip. A large red splotch covers the tip of his nose. Addie shrugs. "Nope." He steps back and Walter scoffs and takes off, cutting off another car. Walter brakes hard, and then steps on the gas again. His car lunges forward, and the car behind him lays on the horn—a tinky little lingering beep-beep-beep. Addie stands tall, fingers crossed, and watches as Walter turns right at the intersection of Hoover and Garfield. The other car, a Toyota, guns up the hill. "That carburetor could use a cleaning," Addie says. Nobody listens.

Tucker searches his pockets, and he pulls out a couple of quarters. Addie, sitting back on the steps, does the same. They pool together a dollar and hand it to Rollo, who stands and goes inside the deli to buy a root beer. This is how they avoid the *no loitering* sign posted on Miles' door. At first, Miles tried to turn them away—kids on steps keep away the business—but, by the end of the fourth consecutive day, he had grown used to the fat boy (and he emphasized *fat*—tits like droopy eyes of a bubble-headed clown pressed tight under his untucked shirt) coming in to buy Coke and root beer. Miles likes how the kid presents himself, even when buying pop. Professional, Miles thinks, a strange professionalism not necessary in a small in-and-out, one booth/one table kind of place like this. It could have been the uniforms, the tie

and jacket and slacks, but only one of them—the tall, skinny one—keeps his clothes intact (his damned tie always straightened, shoes shiny, sitting on a towel to keep the dirt off his pants). Four bucks extra a day is four bucks extra a day and certainly nothing to piss on.

Rollo hoists up his pants and jingles the quarters in his hand. “They want a root beer,” he says.

“What do you want?” Miles asks.

“Doesn’t matter,” Rollo says, but thinks of sourdough and butter, melted cheese on baked ham. “Their money.”

“It’s a conversation, son,” Miles says. “Now, what do you like?”

Rollo looks out the front door window. Tucker and Addie pull out books from their bags. A car drives by, toward the bottom of the hill, and Addie follows it with his finger. “Orange, I guess,” Rollo says. Addie drops his arm back to his lap and opens a book. Rollo turns back to Miles. “Or cream soda’s okay.” Miles nods. He opens the cooler, makes note that he should wipe down the handle, and pulls out a root beer. His neck needs a good shave, Rollo thinks, all the hair coming out from his collar is a nest of spiders trying to escape. Also, he can’t tell if Miles has a red birthmark on his earlobe, or if a tick is about to crawl into his head. As Miles walks to the register and holds out his hand for the quarters, Rollo eyes the birthmark and waits to see if it’ll move.

“Next time,” Miles says, thinking back on how he was the gopher, the first to walk into abandoned barns, was always the lookout as the others rifled through unlocked cars, “send in one of the others. Have them do something, huh?”

Rollo nods but doesn’t see how that would work out. He hands over the quarters.

Conversation, he thinks as he turns to the door, opens it and sits back down next to Tucker, who's reading a science book—he's skipped ahead again, towards the back of the book, to the space chapters. Another car drives downhill.

"Dodge," Addie says.

"Dude, shut up," Tucker says, taking the can from Rollo, cracking it open. He takes the first drink, five gulps, and reaches, again, in his pocket for two more quarters. All that's left in his pocket now is a used tissue, a bottle cap, balled lint, a green Army rifleman, three quarters, a nickel, and three pennies, one of which is a heads-up wheat penny he found underneath a urinal at school during history period. He spent another five minutes washing it in the sink, almost losing it down the drain twice. This penny, just like all the other good-luck pennies he's found over the year, will go in a mayonnaise jar which, now, has just over three-hundred pennies, and a quarter stamped 1969—when Armstrong landed on the moon—which sits on top of the pile, facing him.

The jar sits atop Tucker's dresser and shakes and jingles when he does his morning sit-ups—his feet wedged in the gap on the bottom—seventy-five every morning. After that, he flips to his stomach and does pushups. He was up to fifty-four a day; his goal, up until two weeks ago, was to add one more every week until he reached two-hundred. But just as things were looking optimistic, Tucker watched on TV what was going to be the last US shuttle launch. So Tucker sleeps in now and notices the slack in his jacket sleeves. Still he reads his Earth science book as often as he can, which now is turned to a chapter on the universe, but all that Tucker can get from it is that the universe is an infinite amount of space, that it never ends and there's no point trying to understand all of it except for the small bit that orbits around him.

Tucker lives on Earth, which revolves around the sun, and the only thing he needs to know about the sun is that it's already setting in the sky, and pretty soon the lampposts will click on, and he'll wander up the hill of Hoover and back down again, all the while trying to get the thought out of his head that when he looks up to the sky, he'll never be any closer than he is; then he'll lean on the brick wall of Pets-n-All at the top of Hoover, looking down on the mile and a half stretch of Fuckstick, Missouri. He'll refuse to look up at the stars, because he'll catch sight of satellites and he'll know there's nobody inside them.

"Ford."

"*Dude*," Tucker says.

Addie shrugs, passing off Tucker's grumpiness as a whiny, crybaby stance towards something he won't talk about. Addie pulls out a couple of his own quarters as he watches the Ford drive by. He hands the money to Rollo, who takes them, but does not stand up. He watches the truck drive over a manhole cover and turns right onto Garfield and Rollo goes back inside. A no-go, Addie thinks, but it's only a matter of time. The safety performances of American vehicles—these are the words of his father, who worked and was fired from some job in Detroit in the 70s—are a joke. You want to live? Buy from Japan.

The car that crashed into the bank two weeks ago was a GM. Brake lines, Addie bets. Least checked, first to go. When Addie stops watching the reverse side of Garfield's stop sign wobble in the breeze, he returns to the manhole cover and wonders what it'd take to get it off. Maybe just a crowbar. Maybe a couple of crowbars and Rollo with a rope. Addie digs in his bag past books and crumpled papers and old sandwich bags until he finds a pen at the bottom. He jots down *hole/Rollo?* on the top page of his history book. *Nighttime?* He's heard from his

father that one of the guys—a huge mountain of a man—who built Hoover Road died down there, drowned in cement around the Taft intersection, and was left there, hand with a gold ring sticking out, ready to be taken. Maybe all it'd take is a crowbar and a chain, Addie thinks. No need to get two people involved. He crosses out everything except for *hole* and *nighttime*. A gold ring, even belonging to a giant, couldn't be split two ways.

Miles' door opens, and Rollo comes back out with a can of orange pop. Addie returns to his book to the chapter covering the First Ladies—there's a test in a week. He turns the page and finds Lady Bird. Maybe tomorrow, he thinks, and puts his hand on his forehead, his frozen-in-hair-spray hair poking the flesh of his palm. Rollo sticks the pop can on his book, condensation wetting his pages. Addie tosses it back to Rollo saying he hates orange pop. "If that guy was going any faster and didn't turn," Addie says, "he'd have been a goner."

Rollo sniffs and looks downhill, seeing nothing but shops and trees. He pops the top and guzzles the entire can.

A man's voice makes them all jump. "Slow down, boy."

Tucker slaps his book shut and stands to make way. He's seen this man—Miller, according to his shirt tag—and the two others—tagless—since he, Rollo, and Addie had begun sitting in front of Miles'. They're construction workers working on the new bank site. Men with dust on their pants, muscles not from a gym, beards you could strike a match on. It's these men that make Tucker stand, because they're exactly what Tucker feels he should respect. To hell with the accountants of the world, the men who wake up and shave before they piss, who sling their ties over their shoulder so they don't stain it with the milk from their all-fiber cereal, their sugar-free jam, who sit behind desks and think a good view is earned, who eat shit from their

boss all day and take it because a hundred-twenty-five dollar tie makes the rules, and then, when returning home, give that same shit because what's tied around their necks is worth eighty. These guys with the hardhats are the real deal. They don't button the first three buttons on their shirt because the hair prevents it. When shit gets in their way, shit gets nailed to the wall.

"Excuse us," Tucker says.

"Goddamn, Senator," he says. "Sit down. Get back to studying. God knows I should have at your age."

The two men behind him chuckle. One of them, the one with the tattoo of a spider on his neck, says, "Right on. You boys don't want to end up like us, working all the time. Be smart."

"Get a desk job," says the third one, gray hair, missing bottom-row teeth. "With a secretary."

"And you know what secretaries do, don't you?" Spiderneck says.

"They take notes," Rollo says. The men roar with laughter, and Tucker feels himself grow hot. Secretaries do a lot more than that, goddammit. And now that Rollo doesn't know that, it looks like Tucker doesn't either. And Tucker knows damn well what secretaries do.

"Excuse *us*, boys," Miller says and walks up to the door, past these kids who sit outside as he and his temporary-work buddies—guys with almost full names like Kal and Harv—go to Corner Deli to eat a late 4 p.m. lunch—usually chicken salad, or anything with bacon, or the special, which today, as the paper taped on the door says, is an apricot clam chowder.

The door clasps shut behind the men, and Tucker turns back to his book, hurt by the way the man called them *boys*.

He flips a few pages to a section on ozone and reads how it protects the earth from space objects, burning up anything through friction. Tucker already knows this. For years now he's had the idea of going up into orbit and taking a barrel of his own frozen piss to throw at the earth. He falls asleep some nights fantasizing about watching it ignite. He imagines it stretching across the world and falling as snow over Russia, mist in Hawaii, as drought relief in Africa. He imagines the world, shining and grateful. He sleeps weightlessly after that, and now Tucker feels that lightness in his legs, and he tries to dig his heels into the concrete cracks, thin as shadows, filled and hardened with sand.

"Buick."

Walter again, driving downhill towards the bank, flicking a cigarette from the window.

"C'mon," Rollo whispers.

Tucker finds himself watching, too, but when the brake lights go on and Walter successfully turns without wrecking his car, Tucker returns to a photo of a large streak of green light in a night sky, white, unfocused stars in the background, silhouetted trees and a barn and someone pointing to the sky. Under the photo it reads: *A meteor—commonly known as a shooting star—during a meteor shower.* Written above the photo in green ink is *Make a wish.* The letters are large, loopy and smooth. Probably written by a girl, Tucker thinks. Men don't make wishes; they either earn what they need or take what they want.

The door opens behind them, and the three men exit the deli with white sacks. Tucker stands again, but the men ignore him this time. They step around Rollo and Addie and walk up the hill towards the job site. Their back pockets are eye-level with Addie and he watches the bulges of their wallets. Miller's sticks out from the top of his pocket, and a ten dollar bill hangs,

and Addie wonders how easy it would be to take it.

Tucker sits, and Rollo puts his head in his hands, but Addie watches the men walk uphill until his focus is interrupted by a shade of light purple. It's not the dog, but the old lady, about nine blocks up. Eleanor. Normally, Addie became energized at the sight of her. He'd jump up, put his books in his bag and try his best not to run in front of Tucker and Rollo. He thought that maybe it was a hunting instinct, the thrill of the chase, the lust for the result. But today, Addie doesn't feel that rush. A Nissan drives by, and Addie doesn't say "Nissan." He turns back to his book and waits, hoping she walks by unnoticed. Addie turns a page in his book as Rollo looks uphill.

"There she is," Rollo says. He reaches into his pants pocket and pulls out a pack of gum. He unwraps a few pieces and sticks them in his mouth. He hands the pack to Addie, but he waves it away. The last thing he wants now is wrinkled wintergreen-whatever gum that's been in Rollo's ass-sweat back-pocket all day. Tucker accepts, taking three.

They all stand and brush the sand off their pants, except Addie, whose sitting-towel has kept him clean. He straightens his tie and adjusts the shoulders in his jacket. They leave their backpacks on the steps of Miles' Deli and walk the same path as the construction workers. The plan: meet her half-way and cross. She'll have fallen by then. Rollo takes the lead and Addie takes the rear. Tucker in the middle watches Rollo waddle, already out of breath, beaten by the incline. A small strip of sweat slinks down Rollo's back. He hikes up his pants, but once they're up to his waist, they slump back to the top of his ass. Today he wears blue Hanes. Earlier at school he had told Tucker that he's losing weight, but Tucker knows that the pants belonged to his older brother. He'll fill them in, Tucker said, by his fifteenth birthday next month. "You'll eat

half a cake,” Tucker said, “and then they’ll fit just fine. No belt or nothing.”

Rollo remembers this as he’s pulling his pants. He knows, he truly does, that he should lose weight. Vegetables would be a good idea. Cut back on the junk. Maybe go for a jog. Do a push up. Do a sit up. Ask Tucker to help out. He’d say *please*. He’d tell him he’s tired of having tits, that he hates the metallic taste in his lungs when he’s walking up this damn hill every day. *Motivate me*, he’d say. Help me make it better. They walk by the doughnut shop, and Rollo finds himself smelling the air and wanting at least six. Three glazed. One coconut. Two sprinkled.

While he walks by the doughnut shop window, Addie sees Aime Curr and her grandfather sitting at a table, facing the street. He’s struck by her, by the way she wears red, how her shirts are just a little too tight around her armpits and because of this he looks away before she can look at him. He straightens his tie again and puts his thumbs in the belt loops of his pants. He fights every urge to look right, to see if she’s looked at him. She has, but barely notices him.

Her grandfather’s plate holds a few glazed holes, and Aime’s plate has a half of a hole, cut with a plastic fork. Martin, Paw-Paw to Aime, pops one of the holes in his mouth and pushes the plate towards his granddaughter. He doesn’t understand how she doesn’t have an appetite. Feed her, her mother (his daughter-in-law) says, and watch her eat. Make sure she swallows and keeps it down. Keep her there, too, because sometimes they throw up at that age, and Trudy knows, doesn’t she, because the damned woman talked with child psychologists and got a pamphlet of rules and warning signs of eating disabilities or what-have-you. Anorexia. Bulimia. The words everyone uses don’t make sense. His granddaughter’s a dried-up twig,

that's all it is. She needs to eat, so doughnuts it is.

“Three more, and we can go,” he says, and Amie takes her fork and pokes at one of them, breaking the sugar-skin on the hole. She licks the glaze off the fork, but she's not thinking of eating or not eating because just moments ago, Tucker Welsh had walked by, so she's stopped listening to her grandfather's stories about how it was when he was a kid; how if the crops didn't grow, they boiled bark, and how, in the war, they boiled mud and grass when rice ran out, and how, once, when they had no money, he and her grandmother and her father were starving so they boiled their own boots. She's no longer thinking about how she wants everyone to just leave her alone, please, let her live her own life, she knows what she's doing. Instead of the pants she wants to fit into, she thinks of losing her virginity and that time she saw Tucker at a nighttime pool party over the summer. They had sat at the edge of the pool and talked about the upcoming school year, how weird freshman year was going to be. His words became nothing in her ears, and she listened only to his tone and rhythm; she found herself laughing, helplessly, at all of the appropriate times. She became fully aware of how much air her lungs could take, and felt her chest swell with each inhale. While he spoke, she looked mostly at his feet, saw how manicured they were, how the nails were perfectly round except his big toe on the left edge came to a point. He reached out, rubbed her knee with his thumb and brought her attention back to his face. Below his eye, and slightly above the cheek, was a small pink scar. He patted her knee twice before leaving her on her own. When he was out of sight, Amie jumped back in the water to get the buzzing from her leg, and since then, she forgot about Billy Troupe, who tried kissing her at the Spring dance, and focused on Tucker. Now she spends most nights studying herself, holding her breath, imagining what his chest would feel

like against her breasts, how the weight of him on top of her would feel, how soft his leg hair might be, how he'd be motionless except for his toenail scratching her ankle.

She stabs a doughnut hole and eats it whole, chewing with her mouth open, letting her grandfather watch the first part of digestion. Look away, she's thinking, but he watches the small gap in her two front teeth, the four back fillings lined with doughnut and saliva. He doesn't look away. He's seen worse than this.

"Good," Paw-Paw says. "Two more."

She puts one more in her mouth as Tucker, like he's done too many times already, walks out of sight.

By then, they're by the new bank. Some of the construction guys nod at them. No time for talk, their nods say, we're working. Tucker's nod back says the same thing. Rollo doesn't nod. He flexes his bicep underneath his shirt, but nothing jumps.

A block later, they slow to a stop. The old woman is across the street walking by old Frankie Marznoff Jr.'s bakery as Frank sits on his steps smoking a cigar. The smoke floats in the breeze. The woman's head is lifted high as she walks. She's carrying a grocery bag. Her shirt is purple, her pants are black, and her nails are shiny and painted blue. They reflect the light like tiny mirrors.

Rollo eyes the grocery bag and says, "Wait til' she swains."

"Don't you mean *wanes*?" Addie asks.

Tucker ignores them. He watches her feet move in a smooth pace. They glide almost, and he knows she'll eventually slow. She does every day. And that's when he gets excited, like now, when her feet change pace. That's why they're here. For this moment.

She stops, and Rollo begins to move forward, but Tucker grabs him by his shirt and says to wait. He lets go of Rollo and wipes his hand on his pants.

The woman shakes her head and drops her grocery bag. Cans roll out and entangle in her feet as she crawls to a lamppost. Frank stands and crushes out his cigar with his foot. He wipes his hand on his apron, walks up his steps and goes inside remembering that in high school, he had tried out for a play, and when the role sheet was posted after his audition, he found that he would be playing *Yelling Man*—a filler role presented with one line: “I’ll call the cops!” He practiced for weeks, that one line, in his room, in the fields, on vacant streets surrounding Hoover, projecting it as loud and convincingly as he could. On the opening night, when his time came to say the line, he yelled it to the other players on stage three times instead of one—once while pointing at his schoolmates, another time to let it really sink in, and another, for good measure as he was fleeing off stage. The director and English teacher, Mrs. Stavely, whose crucifix necklace bobbed above her beginning-to-wrinkle cleavage, rubbed his shoulder and whispered *Good job*.

Twenty-five years later, he found himself yelling the same thing every day while chasing these boys away from the woman, and after three straight weeks of threatening, he found himself unconvinced that he would do anything. His father wasn’t there to encourage him to say it again. His father was the man who drove into the bank a month ago. He had been fired from the bank the morning he died—a seventy-year-old teller with nothing but his family and his daily routine. No skid marks. No foul play. “It’s just the way it goes sometimes,” Frank Jr. tells himself, remembering it in the voice of his father. “Do you think my friend Rolins wanted to die in Iowa? He built this road and was dead a day after he left. It’s just the way it goes

sometimes. Remember that.”

Instead of all the yelling and all the chasing, he goes inside to his oven and cranks it up a degree. He listens to the gas kick on, and then he turns it back to what it was. He goes to his bay window and cleans it, pretending that he can't see beyond the backwards letters of his last name. And he watches the boys run across the street towards the old woman. Frank's phone rings. He hasn't picked up the phone since someone called about his father. The ringing has been giving him all-day headaches, but he still lets it go.

A tan Buick screeches to a halt, and its horn blows. The boys run the rest of the way across the street. It's not a quick toot-toot-get-out-of-my-way kind of horn blowing. It's a long continuous blast of noise that suffocates the phone's ringing. Frank wipes his glass in a circular motion without cleaner, spreading and stretching the smudges.

Walter's horn works well, and he's proud of its sound. It's a nice blaring kind of loud that carries. More of a trombone than a trumpet. Lately, he's been finding enjoyment in these kinds of little things like car horns. It's a small thing, he knows, but he feels important. It's something he can control, like his accelerator, his crank windows, his cigarette lighter. Sometimes he'll lay on the horn for the hell of it, feeling the rush he used to have when he first turned sixteen and was given this '86 *O'lay O'May* four-cylinder freedom. She smelled of musk and dust and stale vanilla freshener then, which soon turned to musk and dust and cheeseburger wrappers with corners of cheese that, even after a few months, never changed color. The backseat used to hold three passengers—sometimes seven—but lately has been filled with papers and game jerseys and equipment and an empty Styrofoam cooler that's held nothing but an empty beer can. The dog barely fits back there now, but once he finds her, she'll have a hell of a time

digging through the trash, looking for the mouse that's been shitting on his dashboard at night.

Walter sees, beyond the kids running in front of his car, a lump of white trotting a few blocks ahead by the used bookstore. He depresses the horn and lays on the gas. She's a fast dog, but can't get too far away now that he's seen her.

His exhaust mixes with the woman's perfume—lavender.

The boys are back to it, surrounding her like a campfire. They tip-toe around her spilled groceries: a box of macaroni and cheese—the cheap kind with the poorly drawn cartoon bears swimming in a river of neon orange—an apple, two bananas already bruising in the sunlight, five cans of split-pea soup, a white pill bottle—calcium with joint health additives—a quart of lactose-free milk, a quart of soy milk and an eight-pack box of double-fudge ice cream bars.

“What's going on, Eleanor?” Tucker asks as he squats down by her face. He pokes at her fingers which have a death-grip on the lamppost. Her hands, which are normally purple with veins, are a sickly flu-like white. Her nails have begun to flake.

She mumbles into the ground, and Tucker tries to make sense of it, but he can't hear over Rollo chanting *Eleanor* and trying to spell it.

“What was that, Eleanor?” Tucker asks.

She shakes her head. Her eyes are clamped tight like she's in pain, but her mouth is not twisted. She's not in pain, Tucker thinks. Just scared. “We'll all fall up,” she says. This pleases Tucker, but not Addie. Addie has begun to bag her groceries, and Tucker glares at him.

“What's the matter, E-L-E-L-N-O-R?” Rollo says, and he gooses her leg with his foot. He blows a bubble with his gum and snaps it by sucking it in. He chews with his mouth open, getting his gum into as big of a wad as he can, and poots it out into his hand as he bends over,

grunting, keeping a hand on his belt loops. He sticks the gum to the bottom of her shoe. “This will help keep you on the ground, Eleanor.” He laughs and he picks up the box of ice cream bars. He opens the box, unwraps a bar and begins to eat. Tucker laughs, too, but he keeps his gum in his mouth. Instead, he goes to her feet, pries off a shoe and throws it into the street in the path of a car. Addie does not say “Ford” as the wheels run over the shoe.

“I want to see it,” Tucker says, and the woman winces at this—she hears the sincerity in his voice. She knows that she is not crazy. This boy believes, too, that it can happen, and it scares her even more. “Let’s watch her float away,” he says, trying to pry her hands off the lamppost, knowing if he were in her position, he’d let go. He’d float slowly at first, and when he’d be thirty feet in the air, Marznoff would come back outside to sit on his steps with a cigar, and he’d watch until the smoke reached Tucker. And then Tucker would go higher. He’d look through clouds on Missouri, on Hoover Road, and see it as nothing but the tiniest of bumps on the flattest piece of paper, and he would not miss it. They’d all look up at Tucker, the whole world would, news cameras focusing on him—the first flying human ever, more at eleven—until he was nothing but a speck against the settling dusk, and they’d know he made it when a bright green streak ran across the world. He’d be on every TV set. On every magazine. In every heart. Young mothers would name their boys after him like they did with Neil Armstrong.

Eleanor screams into the concrete. Tucker grasps her wrists and pulls her away from the lamppost and she flops like a fish on a dock, grasping for anything that could keep her on Earth.

It’s at this moment that Addie has what his father—had he been standing behind him and not in line at the unemployment office—would call a moment of ball-dropping maturity. Tucker and Rollo don’t expect it and will not understand it even when they sit down next week

on Miles' steps for the last time ever, to discuss it. Addie slaps a half-eaten ice cream bar out of Rollo's hand, steps over the old woman and pushes Tucker away.

Rollo looks at his treat, dirt and grime stuck to the wrapper. He thinks of grabbing another, but he's distracted by Addie pinning Tucker to the ground, yelling at him to leave her alone. Dust surrounds them. Addie's jacket has a tear in the elbow. His skin pokes through and looks like cream. Dirt sticks to his pants. Tucker rolls away from Addie and sits wide-eyed as Addie stands over him, fists clenched. He turns to the woman. During their scuffle, she had returned to her lamppost, clutching it hard.

Now it's Addie who squats before her.

"It's okay," he says. "Gravity doesn't stop." He stands, jumps and—gravity—comes back down. She shudders and puts her head between the crook of her arm. Addie jumps again, and again, landing harder each time so she can hear the soles of his shoes clap on the ground. He jumps one more time. "See?" he says. She hums to herself, shakes her head.

Addie turns towards the bottom of Hoover Road and walks away. Rollo extends a hand to Tucker, and Tucker accepts. He pulls himself off the ground. He spits his gum out towards the woman, and it lands in her hair. Rollo takes the box of ice cream bars and they, too, face the bottom of the hill and walk back towards Miles'. They'd gotten what they came for. Not even Addie could say otherwise.

Addie's only thought—other than that he hopes Amie sees the dirt on his jacket and the hole in his pants—is that he has feet. He's become aware of them, feels their weight, and he's using them. One ahead of the other. Down the sidewalk. Off the curb. Into the street. The doughnut shop is to his left. He doesn't adjust his tie. His head turns towards the window, and

he searches for red.

A block behind, Rollo sees the Buick before anyone else—even Addie—blow through the stop sign on Cleveland as it sweeps Addie underneath. It comes to a complete stop halfway into Hoover. Rollo drops the box of ice cream bars and runs towards the car, and Tucker, unaware of what happened, watches the fat underneath Rollo’s shirt bounce and jiggle. He tries to think of a joke but stops. He sees everything now, and he runs too.

Walter, later, will tell his arresting officer, “I’ve driven Cleveland before. I know there’s a sign there.”

“Why—” the officer will reply.

“—I was trying to keep the dog in the back,” he’ll say, but he’ll think to himself that it was the clutter in his backseat, how when the newspapers and the candy wrappers and the Styrofoam cups all together, crunched under the weight of a nervous dog, sounds like radio static, how this white noise reminds him of breeze, of waves, of a beach and Sara and an untied bikini.

The officer will write in his notes *negligent*.

Phones in the police station will ring. A water cooler will bubble and churn. A fax machine will feed paper. Voices talking about weather, about wives and kids, about weekend plans, about a pancake place on the dodgy end of town, about terrible service, dirty bathrooms, and real maple syrup, about Vermont and ski trips, about snow pants and hot tubs and a one-night stand and all will merge into a dull murmur that Walter will not hear. He will hear the metal chain of his handcuffs clink against itself as he tries to replay the moment in his head while staring at the officer across from him. Walter will think how ordinary this man is. A fresh

college graduate at the peak of physical fitness with razor burn who barely blinks and who holds a pencil like he's stabbing a meatball with a fork. There will be just enough dandruff on his shoulder that Walter will notice it as a remarkable amount.

"And then I hit something, I guess." Walter will shrug in his chair. "I was looking back at the dog." Walter will look up at the officer. "Could someone call my mom and tell her I lost the dog again?"

He will write a note, and ask Walter for his mother's phone number.

Walter will say, "I thought it was a deer and I thought *what was a deer doing in the middle of town?*"

He will ask this because hitting Addie sounds exactly like hitting a deer. And it's this sound that gets Walter's attention away from the back seat, and what Walter sees is a hand, fingers sprawled out like antlers, but it's not a hand. It's part of a rack—five small points on something so much larger. So Walter's foot comes off the gas and applies the brake. He cranks his transmission into park. He turns the car off and fumbles with the trunk key—a longer, thinner variation of his ignition key, a fading bronze like stained wood. There's a shovel in the trunk and it's nearly four o'clock. "Not again, not again, not again," he whispers to himself, opening up his car door. He doesn't see the construction guys running across the street towards him, pleading that he get back in and drive just a little bit forward. He doesn't see two boys at the corner unable to move. What he sees is his open trunk and a muddy shovel with a wooden handle. What he sees is his dog jump out of the car and run uphill. Already, he's planning on getting back in the car and tracking her down, but right now, he thinks about how he left the deer the last time. How it was still alive as they drove off. When Walter had first gotten out of

the car, the deer's leg twitched and scratched at the dirt of the country road. It breathed heavy as it tried getting back to its feet to run away, but only the front half of the deer had life. Its hind legs were broken, cracked into Zs. After Walter missed his first swing, maybe it was the bang of the bat that made the deer stop and slow into a paralysis. As Walter held each half of the bat in his hands, Karl picked at a hangnail. Sara licked her lips lightly in mid-dream. The deer laid down, heavy breathed and stared at Walter with one eye as if to say *Try*.

Behind him, the boys pace behind the car, behind Walter, and none of them but Frank, almost two blocks away, smoking, wonders what all the trouble is, sees a barefooted old woman walk by them all, as she puts a scuffed black shoe into her grocery bag. Rollo does not see anything beyond his feet. He does not notice Tucker next to him, or the growing crowd of passersby or the six construction guys hoisting the front of the car. Instead, he sees daylight and pavement and finds it to be awfully yellow. This compels him to move. He has legs, he thinks. He has never noticed them before.

To Walter's left is his open door calling him to drive away. He grips the shovel's handle and remembers that at night, when trying to sleep, when tree branches scrape across the house siding, the windows, there's the deer, alive in his mind, scratching at the asphalt. Weeks gone by, still alive. Still suffering. When Sara writhes and pants in his car, there's the deer's panicked breathing; on his fingers and palm, it's bloodied fur and coppery murk.

There's the terrified breathing. There's the wordless begging of mercy. There's the hooves on the pavement. Walter tightens his grip. A groove in the wood cradles his thumb. There's the begging eye. Walter's shoulders rotate and he swings. It's a humane thing to do.

Little Harder, Little Quicker

She said she hadn't slept all week—the nights are too warm, and the crickets—but now that we're in the movie theater, and the speakers tremor the seats, she's conked out with her head on my shoulder, arm limp, heavy in my lap. When she wakes up, I'll accuse her of being bored. But she'll probably say, No, just comfortable.

The popcorn left in our bucket and the butter on our lips and fingers cannot mask the peaches in her body wash, or the lavender fabric softener pressed into her cotton shirt, or the lilac pollen from the bushes that wrap around her bedroom window like ivy, the bushes she climbs through from her first story window to meet me for dates like this. She's not sneaking out, but sneaking away, avoiding the conversation with her father who crowds the doorway until the truth about me really sinks in. His arm does not leave the frame to the front door until she stands tall and understands, truly, that I'm a typical guy and all I have is a car and a dick and no job.

I'm not allowed to come to the door for her either, not since I was caught hiding in her closet one night behind the sundresses she likes to wear on beach days. As he said goodnight to her—his voice soft—I thumbed the fabric, thinking it thick enough for her to go braless, and it fell off the hanger. The dress swished against the others and the hanger, clicked against another, and that was enough for him to hear, and he forced me out the same way I had come in, the dress tangled around my foot. An equestrian trophy fell off her dresser when I rammed my shoulder into it. Blue ribbons and picture frames followed. I clutched a ribbon when getting

back to my feet, her father's grip on the back of my shirt. Though the silkiness of her ribbon was the same as the green ENTRANT one hanging on my rearview mirror, hers was weightier, and I couldn't risk wrinkling it, so I loosened my grip, lifted my hand off the ground and lost balance again. Luckily her father was still dragging me and was able to guide me the rest of the way. My knee caught the windowpane, my shoulder dug into the dirt, and her dress snagged an unbloomed lilac branch. I trotted away; limping, and she and her laughter followed. From then on, I haven't been allowed on the farm. It's romantic, anyway, she said when I met her earlier. To wait for her while she broke free through flowers, she said, was *Romeoesque*. She picked leaves from her hair and brushed pollen off her shoulders. We're only in high school, she said. It'll be better when we graduate—when we're both eighteen.

That's fine with me, because I don't like talking to him either when he has his hands angled on his hips, when he stands too straight. So, whatever, I'll stay away. I like waiting by the road and looking at his corn fields anyway. I imagine myself plowing them one day—when he and I are getting along, finally, because I'll be respectable, his daughter will have my name—nine feet high on one of his tractors, waking up with the sun or taking the long way back by the forest on the edge of the field, to look into the woods and watch for moving deer, or to stop by the river in the back acreage to swim or fish for rock bass. That's my only chance to stick around, or I'll have to join every one of my friends who look to the Army for escape. I'm not good enough for college—instead of studying, I've spent most of my time daydreaming of overalls and dusty boots. Boots like her father's. Boots cracked from the mileage and the sun. I wear sneakers with frayed shoelaces. Whatever's on them is whatever's on this theater floor.

The movie is about an asteroid headed for Earth, and there's a bunker that could save only a small number of people of the world, and it's been nothing for a while but a bunch of talking and arguing and crying and I'm thinking that it's just like me and her, and the only thing that's missing right now is the big rock that'll end it all.

When we leave the theater, I look to see if any stars are bigger than the others, or growing, but, other than Venus, I see nothing worth getting excited about. So, I hold her hand while we're walking to the car, and I squeeze it to see if there's any life there, and she squeezes back. I squeeze again, and so does she, and it's like we're talking.

You in there? mine says.

She squeezes again. Maybe she's letting me know she's here, towing me along to somewhere else, anywhere other than this parking lot, because this is somewhere we've already seen. Maybe she squeezed prematurely, misunderstanding me. Maybe it's reflexes. I could ask, but I'm licking my popcorn-salt-covered lips, preparing them.

It's not much later than eleven, so I drive us into the woods by the edge of state land and Stevenson's forest and put the seat down, and, just like all the other times, it doesn't take long for me to try and start something. When I unbutton her jeans, she grips my wrists to stop me and says she'd just rather be held, tightly. So I do, and I spend most of my time spitting her hair out from my mouth, trying to make her laugh, but instead she sighs and shivers. I put the car blanket over us, the burgundy patched one the dogs lay on during trips, but it smells like dog and marrow bones and paper grocery bags, so I kick it to our feet and rub warmth into her arms instead. I consider buttoning her pants back up, but I figure since they're already undone,

maybe I could work a little later on the zipper. And when I try, relieving my hand from her arm, she says, No, hold me.

So I do.

After a long while of shivering and sighing and nothing, we step out of the car and walk the kinks out of our legs. She reaches her hand to take mine, but I pick bark off a pine tree instead. I stick it by my nose and inhale. The entire forest smells like this bark—fresh and sharp and kind of dirtish—I don't know the word. A kind of musk, I guess, of dirt and grass.

Earthy, she calls it, whatever that means. Natural, she says. Kind of like you. Not pleasant, but still kind of nice.

I smell only of a mix of bacon and last week's Old Spice and hamper socks. A smell she has come to depend on. To appreciate, she adds. Consistent. Reliable.

Me.

The full moon is out, and the mood of it all feels expected—some kind of a night-time, summer-love, cliché. She walks to the edge of Stevenson's forest and takes a step past the yellowed-white and rusted-red *No Trespassing* sign. She's almost glowing under the light. An orb through the trees. I follow her.

I have no problem trespassing. I do it all the time around here, floating from field to field until the sun sets completely. There, I take over ownership. Every stalk and each plant becomes my responsibility, and though the sun is gone, the plants know it's me by my smell when I brush against them, their hands eagerly outstretched snagging my pants, my shirttail, my shoulders. They want my attention; they want to be chosen. When the breeze snakes through the topsoil, they shudder against each other, a crescendoing applause of approval.

It's strange, she says as I catch up to her.

What is?

She says she dreamt all this in the movie theater and is remembering it all now: we came to the woods and kept going until we got to a clearing, and what makes her remember it is the smell of spearmint. I tell her all I smell is dirt. Where are you smelling spearmint?

She doesn't answer me. She asks me if I've ever heard of Stevenson Rock, and I think there may have been a time or two when my parents had talked about it, but nothing ever worth remembering. Whatever it is, all I know of it is that it's a stone slab next to a pond that supposedly glows when the moonlight shines on it. A stupid rock, a wonder of the world on a piece of property owned by a drunken dairy farmer who says his cattle speak to him, letting him know whose milk tastes best.

How bright do you think it'd be tonight? she asks.

I tell her I've never seen it. I don't even know where it is.

I do, she says. I dreamt it while at the movies. We left the movie, came here to the woods, found the rock, sat down on it, and we were crushed by an asteroid.

I say, We were sitting in an asteroid movie, so that makes sense.

She says there's more, but won't tell me until we find it.

I ask her what time she needs to be home, when her parents are expecting her.

She says it doesn't matter.

Why not? I ask, but I must have said it in a way that sounded like *Why not look for the rock?* rather than *Why don't your parents care?* because she keeps walking deeper into the

forest, disappearing and reappearing as though she's walking through the trunks of the trees. As she walks by them, she cups their knots and rough spots, pats down peeling bark, grooms and picks dead twigs. She walks as though she is among family at a funeral, extending her reach because a comforting hand does more than words ever will. She was the same way when her grandfather died, and she held on to her grandmother's arm. They never broke away from each other, even while eating, as though he would come back if they stayed together, or maybe she realized her grandmother was next, or maybe her grandmother, used to leaning on her husband no longer had anyone to hold on to, and her granddaughter was sweet and young and sturdy and a long way from expiring.

Nobody has died here, though, or dying. Not tonight. Tonight, we're looking for some magical rock because she was half-asleep-dreaming during a stupid movie, and it's July, and it's night time, and what else is there to do when parents are sleeping?

I tell her we're going to get lost.

She says that I'd say that. I ask her to tell me what's going to happen next without it happening first.

We'll see a rabbit, she says.

I say nothing.

But it won't see us, she continues. We'll walk straight ahead from there, make some turns, trip on some stumps, climb a hill, and we'll find the clearing. And the pond. And the moon. And the rock. And we'll wait.

I follow her as she turns left here, and right here, and then straight when I think we'd

turn. She stops from time to time, says nothing, and changes direction like she's remembering a path she's taken before. She marches ahead, looking like she did in a picture she has tacked to corkboard by her bed frame. She's a child in that photo, maybe ten, kicking through sand dunes on a covered walkway to the beach. She's on a summer trip excited to see the waves again, she said. She showed me that photo when I first drove her home. I had just gotten the car, and she asked for a ride. Nobody home, she invited me inside for a tour, which ended in her bedroom. Showing me that photo, she said she'd had enough of farms and longed for an ocean. I told her—small talk—that I'd seen the Atlantic once. She pushed me onto her bed, and I used the only other thing her father said I had to offer her, asking through the whole time undoing her blouse, her pants, her bra, her socks, if she was sure.

Now, I ask her if she's sure she knows where she's going, and I keep asking, trying whatever I can to make her mad so we can turn around and go home. She had stopped answering me a long time ago, and now it feels more like I'm tracking a ghost than walking with her. Maybe I'm the ghost. She hasn't listened to a thing I've said.

So where's this rabbit? I ask, I thought we'd see a rabbit by now. Even in the full moon as bright as it is, where I can see every tree and twig before it slaps me in the face, I have seen no rabbits.

We're coming up on one soon, she says, I *said* it'd take a while.

The movie took a while, I say, three hours, and it wasn't even that good. The asteroid never came. There was this whole big scene where people are jumping off buildings because they didn't want to die by the asteroid. It made no sense.

It was an allegory, she says. She read somewhere that the movie was about the

Depression, how a lot of people killed themselves jumping off of buildings when they lost all of their money. They died for nothing. The movie is supposed to be political, she says.

But the asteroid never came, I say.

And they still died, she says.

You didn't even *see* the movie.

Maybe it's been a half-hour. Maybe longer. In the dark, seeing tree after tree that looks like any other tree, every minute feels longer than it is. Maybe it's only been ten minutes. Maybe it's been all night. But it's been long enough to where I'm no longer thinking about the rock but rabbits. I just want to see something else living other than us. If I see a rabbit now, I'm going to chase it down, pluck out the eyes, and show it to her so we can leave. It wouldn't be my first time holding a dead rabbit. It'd be the second, and I imagine I could handle it this time.

I had a rabbit when I was growing up. We didn't live on a farm, but my father used to, so he thought it'd be good to have some kind of *countryness*, or whatever, in me. Where we lived was starting to look suburban to him—to a one-time farm boy who's now a middle-aged man, having one neighbor a mile down the road is pretty suburban. So he bought me a rabbit to keep in the yard. But the weird thing is that I'm not thinking of the rabbit because we're out here looking for one, but because we're hiking up a hill, and my heartbeat is increasing and I can't remember the word for a rapid heartbeat. I had a health class last year that dealt with the heart, and I can't remember a damn word to describe to her what's going on in my chest.

When I hear *rabbit*, though, I never usually think of that one my father bought me. I think Easter and chocolate rabbits, how the ears taste better, and how the eyes can be picked

off. But now, I think of that caged rabbit in my yard with our dog, Doogers, watching it cower in the corner of the cage. She'd be there for hours watching the rabbit with a slight twitch in her tail.

I took rabbit from the cage to show it that the dog wasn't anything to run away from (she was an old dog, and nothing would have happened), but I could feel the rabbit's heart beating like an electric razor anyway. Just a steady buzzing. I took it out of the cage, cradled it in my arms and let the dog come in for a sniff. The rabbit didn't try to run away or get loose or anything. The closer Doogers came in, the more it buzzed in my arms. When Dooger's nose was just almost up to the rabbit's nose, the rabbit had kind of a hiccup and went limp, and the buzzing stopped.

I come up behind her at the top of the hill, I'm out of breath and my legs are tight and my heart won't slow down. The trees downhill clear open and at the bottom is a pond, and next to the water is something that could be a rock glowing under the moonlight. It isn't exactly what I expected, but it is there, white, a lot brighter than the moon's reflection on the water.

There's the rock, I say, where's your rabbit?

She points at the front of her feet, and there's a small mound of fuzz that looks like a large lily petal. I sit next to it and nudge it away with my foot. I ask, So, what now?

She looks down, maybe she'd been crying, or is about to, or is about to again. I never can tell. She says, You tell me a story.

A story about what?

Whatever's in your head.

I tell her about the rabbit and Doogers, and in the middle of it she bites her lip and

paces from me to the edge of the woods. And I think maybe she will walk back to the car, which makes me look at the rock, and I wonder how cold it'd be to the touch. We'd come this far, I'm about to say, but she comes back to me. She sniffs. Her voice choked when she asks, What'd you do with the rabbit?

I don't tell her what I did—I dug a hole and sat next to the pile of dirt and apologized that it had to die in my arms. Apologized because it was my fault. Instead, I tell her, I gave it to Doogers.

She breathes like she's going under water. I tell her I'm joking. I buried it, I say. She shakes her head and says, I haven't—she stops. She breathes in quick and exhales long. She says, I don't know what to do.

We'll go home.

No. This isn't about going home, she says, holding her stomach.

Maybe a cloud was covering the moon before, but now the rock seems brighter. A beacon of light shines straight at us. Like a lighthouse we're bound to ignore. Her face is pointed downhill, too. We're moths.

I say something like, What do we do now?

She says nothing. Now that my heartbeat has slowed, and I'm able to listen to everything else, I notice how loud it is. There's a breeze through the forest behind us, something is scurrying through last year's dead leaves, frogs chirp and croak, insects buzz and hum. They have no idea what's coming.

She hasn't answered, so I ask again.

She says, pointing ahead, From here, we went to the rock and waited as it was coming.

She pauses. And then you woke me up because the movie was over. So I don't know if it ever really came. But I think we knew it would. Or it was. Or we just wanted it to. Or I just wanted it to.

But in the movie, the asteroid, it never came.

This isn't the movie, so what do we do? she asks me.

I know, but what can I tell her? We'll wait until the last possible minute to tell our parents. Until we turn eighteen, or until they ask questions—*Why is she sick all the time? What did you do to my daughter?* We'll eventually have to go up to my parents, and they'll be okay after some talking. I'll convince them that we're eighteen, and that means adults, and hadn't the same thing happened to them? And I know it'll take them some getting used to, and I'll have to live with the sheepish looks on their faces like they didn't think it was possible, like they didn't know I had a dick. But her father knew all too well that I did, and he'll pull me aside after we tell him and he'll say in his concrete-voice I can either get a job working with him on the farm, marry his daughter, and be a member of the family, or I can get shot and become the dirt underneath his barn; neither will be posed as a question. So I'll graduate school in a year and learn how to farm so I can take it over since he has no sons to leave it to—just girls and the guys who'll take his daughters out of the county. The kids around this town, they don't stay long unless there's something to stay for.

What'll we do? I say. No matter where we go, we're dead.

She asks me if I love her.

I hold up my hand and ask her to help me off the ground. She holds her hand out, her fingernails bitten raw, the skin around them like sunburned lips. I take it, but I do most of the

work getting up. I hug her, and I feel her the button against my leg. It's still unfastened, so I let go of her, squat and button them. I lift her shirt a bit and kiss somewhere around her navel. Wherever the hell the baby might be. At this point, I have no idea.

She says, That's good enough. She pulls me from her stomach and nudges me towards the pond, and we walk downhill towards water.

The rock looks like maybe it's a slab of limestone, but with nuggets of quartz fused inside. It's flat, just big enough for the both of us to lie on, and when we're shadowing the moonlight, it's as dark as a plank of wood. And when we stand on it, and when I'm looking at the sky, she grabs my arms and hyperventilates until she almost passes out. I ease her down, and she sits.

When her breathing slows, I sit next to her and take her hand in my mine and squeeze it twice. She lies down, and I lie next to her left side. She guides my arm underneath her neck, and her hair sticks to the sweat under my arm and my face. There's a strain in my bicep where her head lies, and the tingling of an sleeping limb goes from my shoulder to my wrist, to my palm and fingers, but I don't adjust it. I just squeeze her hand again. She slowly squeezes back twice, and so do I. She does three, a little harder. I do four, a little quicker.

You okay? I ask. She lets the breeze off the pond speak for her.

We look to the sky to see what's coming. A thin wisp or two of clouds pass by the moon like ghosts ignoring us. The stars, in their billions, stand alone, but none of them move. When we see our first shooting star, she traces it across the sky with her free hand as though I don't see it myself, and her other hand clenches mine until bones pop. Her hand trembles, but mine is completely asleep and useless and limp like that goddamn rabbit right after it couldn't handle

it any longer.

Speak to Me

Swedish astronomer Dr. Arthur Ragnar Smedberg has come to America. Missouri, specifically. Central Missouri, more specifically. Most specifically, he is five-hundred feet below topsoil at the edge of a corn field where a run-down outhouse plays host to an elevator shaft atop a square-mile, lead-lined bunker—a multi-million dollar hole in the ground that uses fourteen-percent of all of Missouri’s electricity. Underground cables from the Callaway plant run exclusively to the Loose Creek Hollow. Only fourteen-hundred-and-seventy-six people in the world—including top scientists, military personnel, government officials, the President of the US, and the Canadian prime minister—know about LCMO Hollow. The birds have their suspicions and avoid the area when migrating.

Smedberg is number fourteen-hundred-and-seventy-seven and is underground with two-hundred others because he was the one to discover the rock, and though he refused to supply his name to it, everybody knows it’s his. They hold the gray snapshots. They see his face on the paper. The asteroid has his eyes, these deep narrow pits.

This little Swedish man, in a room full of silk and cashmere, wears field dungarees from Scania. He’s a man who understands poverty, who understands extravagant spending, who appraises the value of the steel desk that stands firm in front of the room, and Smedberg knows that, if melted, compressed, and weighed, the desk could have at a time on his father’s dairy farm been traded for a two-year-old *kviga*, could have been the bribe to convince his father to let him to go to university—which he did anyway—to receive an education for the sole purpose

of discovery beyond fields. And years after his father's death, Smedberg finally found something, and now avoids the blame for the end of our time.

This little Swedish man sits with the coffee and the smokers in the back of the stark-white room of cinderblocks, of computer screens, military uniforms, gold watches, and mismatched tile, brown and teal diamonds meshing uncomfortably well with orange and yellow circles. The chairs are stained-oak and hard and sturdy, but stack well in corners. The Germans sit the straightest. The Americans, especially Smedberg's translator, Stevenson, shift like boats.

Smedberg hopes the Germans will acknowledge him, see him as a man also away from home, a man privileged, *invited*, see him as man whose role is something other than *discoverer*. He had heard these are men known for good conversation, who will talk elegantly about fine wine, hearty cheeses, chocolate, and flawless watch engineering, engineering also responsible for Smedberg's high-powered telescopes, the ones that use prisms as magnifiers. They could talk about peacetime, about the heliocentric solar system and ignited nitrogen, about fourth-generation hunting dogs, Cambozola over Limburger, but they look through him, haven't bothered to learn his name. They call him *Aufuhr*, and only Stevenson gets the joke.

To Smedberg, Stevenson is more hair than man. He is a hay-brown fur, topped, finished, accented with a beard like Arvidsjaur weeds, choked, clinging and dying. A rabbit could feast on his moustache alone. A spark would engulf the hillside, would threaten the village, ashes within the hour, the sky blotted out between the breaths of smoke.

He translates well enough, maybe a little slow with his pronunciations, his vowels clipped short, especially his Os, but he does not like to talk. He's a listener and speaks more in head nods and hand gestures. His fingers curl in, his palms cup as if to receive water. He avoids

eye contact, especially with higher ranked men like the man in front of the room with the papers—the man with the glasses, the white shirt, the gold pen, the sour-milk eyes, the short English clicks in his Ts, the harshness in Cs and Ks, the awful amount of Bs and Ss.

Everybody listens. The Germans understand without translators, words like *devastation*, but Smedberg, who shares different Latin roots, whose tongue is better suited with *tuts* and *vouys* and *ahhlahs* rather than *ets*, *ruts*, and *apts*, waits for the man to take a drink from the glass, and tugs on Stevenson's shirt at the shoulder where the stitching comes together like a caterpillar. *Vad ar det? Vad hander? What is it? What happened?*

Oundviklig. Ooh-one-vay-clay. Unavoidable.

It's on the computers, his rock. The numbers and the lines—universal language—fill the sides of the screens, and Smedberg joins the rest in their silence. The man up front says his final words—something with *ahs* and *ohs* and *ess*—bows his head, and walks from the room to the elevator. The Germans remain still and erect as others drink water. Shoes are untied and re-tied needlessly. Stevenson pushes his finger into Smedberg's sternum, the button of his vest, a brown horse-hair kind of brown, digs through the wool and into his skin. Smedberg can feel the threads, the quadruple wrap around the button his wife is known for—extra precaution for a man who tugs rather than guides. *Vi kan inte saga*, Stevenson says. *We cannot tell. Ga hem nu. Go home now. Och anta. And wait.*

Smedberg rides the elevator alone. There are two buttons. Two arrows. One up. One down. No emergency switch. No start/stop. No telephone. At the top, he is greeted by sunlight and an old, hanging-on-one-hinge door, *Martha's Kitchen* painted in red. Below that is an egg-sized hunk of galena, and Smedberg picks it up and pockets it, only to have it taken away from

him as he boards the plane to Sweden. He holds the safety card hanging from the seat in front of him, but finds that it's written in English. The pictures are clear in their directions, and if the time comes, he'll be able to apply the oxygen mask, or will be able to find a flotation device, or will know how to stay calm when the fire breathes overhead. Smedberg focuses on the cartoon man on the safety card and sees that there is no panic in the man's eyes, and he realizes that must be the trick, so on the flight home, he looks to his reflection on the airplane window and tries to mimic *calm*, and he finds that the best way to do that is to think of cantaloupes, to mentally guide his finger through the crevices, like the grout between tiles, like the folds on a turtle shell.

He practices as he lands early in the morning, as he drives home, as he blocks the sunrise with his car visor, as he opens the door and wakes his wife. She says he disrupted a dream about squeezing bacon from chickens, but she's glad he's home, and asked how the US was. He forgets the cantaloupe, thinks of breakfast, and hands her a purple nightgown. He asks that she call his brother. He tells her it's gone on too long and it's time to make amends. He walks into the kitchen. He pulls out a cast-iron skillet from the stove, two eggs from the carton in the refrigerator. He holds them in one hand, and the other lights the stove and turns the burner on high. He won't crack the eggs until he smells heated metal like scorched ozone, like cooling, molten copper. His wife comes into the kitchen. She does not go for the phone. Instead she tells him to sit at the table. She removes a newspaper and sweeps away crumbs. *Tala till mig*, she says. He considers the butter. *Tala till mig*. He considers the cantaloupe.

Somebody Get Me a Horse to Sit on So That I May Speak

What I should have said was I want to make a speech. And then I would have spoken. Instead, I coughed to get their attention. It wasn't a speech-making cough. It lacked phlegm. It was the kind of cough that's usually followed by raised eyebrows and a nod towards an open zipper. When they looked to me, I hoisted a gobletless hand to the sky and said *L'chaim*, whispered like a secret in the Midwestern Yiddish that had been chased out of southern Missouri seven-to-eight decades ago by packs of uncircumcised men—these were our great-great grandfathers, our great-great uncles. Their neighbors. Their field help. Their barbers. Any man who could hold a rope in one hand and the New Testament in the other. Except for the butchers. They had the pork—hundreds of pounds in rucksacks hanging from field mares

I left it—one poorly pronounced word—at that. I should have done something big. I should have caracoled them all into a choir and put myself at the head, and we'd have sung *Amazing Grace*, or *R.O.C.K in the USA*. At the very least, I could have raised my arms and folded them over my head into an *M* and let the others figure out the rest. It was midnight and we were night-golfing—the perfect time for something like a eulogy, one year too late. At the time, what I said was good enough, but then again, it should have been more, because how was I supposed to know Emery had packed a boat and had his girlfriend waiting for him at the river?

What I would have said was that this is the opening to our documentary, as if someone would ever make documentary about four golf course maintenance men who golf once a year in the moonlight. This last round would be our climax, I'd say, the reason people sit and turn off their

lights and switch on the surround sound. Children would be allowed to stay up to watch, and when they're carried to bed, when they reach out to pet their father's beards, they'd ask if they could be turf dogs, too. These were the questions we had asked when we first saw men digging holes, cutting grass, and dragging hoses during our father's Sunday matches, but that was when turf dogs didn't have a name. We named ourselves because we thought it'd look good on a t-shirt—something made of cotton with iron-on lettering. Forest green with a droopy-eyed basset hound sitting on its own balls, a crumpled beer can between its teeth. We could print that on anything: hats, wallets, golf bags. Women'd wear thongs with some kind of slogan. *Long rough ahead. Replace all divots. Repair all ball marks.* That last one is mine.

I know, guys, I'd say, not much of a movie. Not many people want to watch something about a bunch of Missouri turf boys night-golfing. But I would. And so would you. Here, I would have said something about purpose. Something about why we wear ankle socks. Something about waxed floss, red fishing line, and rubber mallets and how it all ties cutting grass together. Imagine it, I'd have said: the camera zooms in on us on here on this tee box. The sky has sunk into a dark denim, as it is now, and though it's too dark to see our faces, our silhouettes stand out—look at this strange variation of size: here's Bryan, short and round. Here's the lanky, taffy-pulled Sherm, who, at six-eight, could be a baby elm instead of a man. Here's Emery, average height, average thin and not one thing special about him—truly made from American soil, a man who eats hash browns with his pancakes, who likes Kentucky bourbon poured on apple pie. And in front of all of you is me. I've sprouted from Missouri soil, too. My frame is musclewood. My hair, my beard, beaked panicgrass. *Panicum anceps*. The stuff horses eat mindlessly. The same way we like beef jerky and butter mints.

Look down the fairway. Look at those houses with their unlit windows. Men are there. They're there at their kitchen windows, their robes open. They're holding some kind of liquor and ice. It's that time of night for them, these old men with money and businesses to run. It's that time where the moon compels them to their porches, to their patio chairs, but they stay in because they feel the chill waiting for them on the other side of the door.

Colds come easy to them now. One will take them out of work for a week, and their wives, aged, no longer bother to take care of them. What did their husbands do to raise the children? What did they do to ease their menopause? What did they do when family members died off? They went to that goddamn course. Or they went to garages and sat on musky love seats pointed at big screen TVs under stuffed bison heads, antelope horns, large-mouth bass, photos of black bears and grizzlies. What did they do? They did what they knew.

What they know is how to avoid their wives, these empty women, these loveless, wrinkled sacks who once held their children and now hold nothing, not even the energy to lie in bed and let the air from their lungs mold into real words. What's left is a rhythmic breathing. It's purposeful and strained and strangled into something like words, something like *remember when?* And these men do *remember when* and their minds race. They know those days are over, so they get out of bed and leave the slippers behind so they can feel the carpet, so they can feel the switch from soft synthetic fibers to cooler fake hardwood flooring to the frigid linoleum. They pull the cork on a bottle and pour and sip without tasting and stand at their kitchen windows and gaze into the dark and pretend there's something there, that there's something happening. And tonight, I would have said. Tonight, they see us. Tonight, wives pretend to sleep, and husbands—their mouths numbing—they see us. They see shapes in the

dark fumbling with clubs and all around are these tiny multi-colored lights like fireflies flying and falling, blinking spastically, almost like they're letting the other balls know where they'd landed, almost beckoning to them to come visit and wait with them while they extinguish. Isn't that something? I'd ask. Isn't that terribly familiar?

What I would have said is that we—you, Bryan, you, Sherm, you, Emery, and me—we, have nothing but this: these clubs, these balls, this night air, and it's everything those old bastards want.

A note on the glow-balls: they're terrible.

We take pride in our equipment, spending thirty dollars on a sleeve of real balls, the light-touch spinners, the long-distance rocks. We spend hundreds on titanium clubs. Emery's got a range finder—a good one—he bought cheaply at a depot sale for four-ninety. Even Bryan, the cheap one among us, bought a putter for two-fifty. It goes well with his duct-taped shoes, his length of twine belt. These balls, although not real golf balls, are twenty bucks a piece. It's the German initiative, the Chinese manufacturing, the American tag. Bryan borrowed them from the father of a neighbor-girl he's seeing—Rachel. Her father's a blacksmith of sorts, making custom shoes for race horses and steel locks for cow and pig pens. He's a bit of a horse doctor, too, accompanying the racers he shoes with a .45 in his belt. He waits on the side, his eyes closed, praying the galloping continues and the crowd's cheering never switches from a roar to a unified groan.

The man's four-eleven but has arms wider than his legs. Bryan, an inch taller, made of Crisco flank, steps lightly around him, always at a distance from Rachel, even when they're

alone. Bryan likes the left side of the tailgate, and when she scoots over from the right, foot by foot, he hops off, unties his boots, and reties them, tugging on the laces hard enough he can smell the dust and friction. On Sundays, the three of them play nine together, and even then, Bryan plays his shots on the opposite side of the fairway from Rachel, except whenever they make their way to thirteen. Then, he aims for the left side fairway—that spot with all the divots. That’s the spot to hit from—it’s the angle to the green, a straight shot where you can avoid the pine trees on the left and the right-side fairway bunker. We rarely keep score, but thirteen is the hole we never let beat us. Anything over par is shameful, and the only way to get to the green in two is that spot with the divots, that spot where we pour bourbon on the grass as a sacrifice. It’s good for the grass, we say, when we’re asked. Never mind the brown. It’ll go away. We know how it works. Trust us. We’re turf dogs.

These stupid balls have their own special plastic egg carton. “Twenty bucks,” Bryan said, “if you lose these.” He held out the box as if they were eggs, the last in the world. “Thirty,” he said. “Let’s say they’re thirty.”

“He’s not going to care,” Emery said, taking his ball. He threw it to the ground to activate the light. It turned on and blinked green. He stood above it and nudged it with his foot, and Bryan cradled the carton before the rest of us took ours. His mind was elsewhere, probably in Rachel’s father’s shed where the shoes are heated, bent, manipulated. The fire pit and the anvil and the hammers and the water barrel are in the center of the shed, and on the shelves are jars of formaldehyde with floating horse eyes that look like barnacles growing against the glass. Each from a horse put down by Rachel’s father. Each from a horse that’d thrown a shoe during a race, legs broken in half, bone-ripped flesh. I imagine the spectators thinking about

how they'd never want to hear the gunshot over a horse screaming, and how welcoming they'd be once they heard the pop and echo and nothing but a few people in the crowd murmuring. The country-folk and the farmers and the unified heartless all saying the same thing: *unavoidable.*

When the time comes, after Rachel's father pulls the trigger, he takes a knife and removes the eye. The fear in the iris fades quickly—and that's what he needs, a constant reminder to avoid mistakes, to hammer hard, to cool quickly. And once when Bryan was called to the shed, he found his probably-future-father-in-law staring at his jars—all seven of them—with a hammer in hand, a hot-iron shoe in the water. Rachel's father's finger twitched, the tendon rose and seemed to stretch as though it's been sleeping and finally woke, stiff and bored. He put the shoe back into the fire, and over the hissing of the shoe, he asked if Bryan believed in hesitation.

Bryan handed a ball to me. "Thirty-five," he said.

I took mine, orange. Sherm, yellow. Bryan, red. All of our balls were then on the ground, throbbing like strobe lights. One-hundred and twenty-four blinks a minute. I should have said something about how it lies there like a duck egg, how I wanted to lie in front of it and unhinge my jaw like a snake and see if the light would shine through my chest as it went down. I wanted to talk about how long it'd take to digest. I wanted to say something about stomach acid and how it can dissolve nails and razor blades. I wanted to say something about boxed lye, how it can do the same thing, but the only words coming from us were jokes about seizures. We, except for Emery—who by then had crouched to his ball, grabbed it and held it to his face—joked about epilepsy as though we knew what it was and this was how you got it. This is how

you're given medication that gives your children cleft lips. This is what makes us dream of building bell towers and restraint-beds for the offspring we don't have. Emery's face, green, never twitched, eyes never blinked, never let us see him take in a fucking breath. It took ten minutes for the balls to switch themselves off, and if Bryan hadn't pushed Emery over, he'd have taken it all in until the night became just dark enough to where a cigarette burning would have been as bright as a beacon, steering ships from shore.

I would have mentioned music. Maybe at this point, I'd have been whispering. Here, I'd imply that the night air and the feeling of summer would be fitting for something classical, something of a solo violinist using notes too quick for vibrato, something accompanied by a perfect crescendo on a snare drum. At its climax, I'd have said, a symphony joins in and tapers off. Men wear small cummerbunds and blow into their horns. They sit stiffly in folding chairs, their guts pinch into their belts, their legs tightly together, the circulation cut off from their balls. Women wear thin black dresses and opt to go braless so their arms aren't restricted when pulling on bows. Their breasts shift with each note, grating against the fabric, and they find themselves wishing for *arcapelgio*, for something a little faster, something a little more vigorous because the music now moves inside them, the notes are ecstasy and what they need now is that crescendo, but the dusty conductor shushes them, and they all remember what they're playing for, except for the conductor, whose heard the song so often, he can no longer be moved by melody. He longs for the only thing that can move him now: a double, and a double after that, served by a Swedish beer maiden with the winter tan. As he fights the urge to quit the music, to drop the baton and walk off, he strains through the twinge in his shoulders. Sweat pools on the

small of his back and gravitates towards his belt where a levy is about break. Then the song will end after hanging on to the final note for what seems like, to him, something that could smell like coconut lotion, something that could own a silver charm bracelet with skulls and hearts, something that could be named Majken, something he could hold for days in a cheap motel in a town where everyone is a stranger. And it's in that moment when his arms fall that the audience realizes the song is over and they can applaud. I love that little moment when nobody wants to be the first. That silence—that's the music for us.

We don't deserve the strings and horns, do we? We will never be that important. This is a night to celebrate the quiet. Isn't it the owl who flies silently? Isn't it the field mouse who avoids the dry, fallen leaves, who finds food and packs them in its cheeks, who waits to gnaw the seeds underground? Underground, where it cannot be swept up by a shadow. Underground, where the earth can mute its hunger. This is going on around us and we're unaware. It's our tradition now to be unaware until we stumble over it in the night. So, who are we then? What do we deserve? Tell me, men. Tell me about oblivion. Tell me about fucking epiphany.

I would not have expected a reply. I would have supplied one for them.

We're turf boys, aren't we? We're all pollen and grass stains and diesel exhaust and four a.m. rises. We're a shade trendier than the farm boys, more biceps and less axle grease than the country boys. We don't need the symphonies and drums—leave that for the citified. What we need—but never admit—is the wind using the pines as reeds, blowing with the stringed crickets. What we need is the silent shiver, the suffocated weeping that's found its way into our muscle memory, that's crept into the aches and marrows of bone. What we need are the fish

jumping in the lake. We need ducks slapping their wings against the water. What we need is a loon. A whippoorwill. A mouse paralyzed at the waning sight of a stick, a branch, a cloud passing the moon. We have that now. Not the owl or the loon or the whippoorwill, but we have a duck. And a fish somewhere, and here comes the breeze.

Others looking at us would be puzzled. Four men and light-up balls and a duck. It won't make sense. But to us now, it all makes sense. This would be our year of making sense, because we understand, truly, that there is nothing to understand. This is the beauty of summer nights. It's the appreciation of sunburns and mosquito bites and poison ivy rashes and bee stings. This is the mystery of night golf. If it made sense, we wouldn't be here. And where others, these old, jealous men, try to wrap their minds around the purpose of staying awake and walking blind, we will keep our heads down, keep our follow-throughs grand, keep faith that at least one of us has an eye on the ball and will let us know where it's ended up. We'll walk slowly. We'll feel those old men at their kitchen windows—we'll feel their anxiousness. They'll urge to call out to us from the window to walk faster, to tell us we'll run out of time. They'll remind themselves that their own time has passed and they'll wish someone would have told them at our age. But they won't want to wake the neighbors. They'll squeeze the door handle, but never turn it. They'll hold onto the brass until its warm and sweaty, and when they take their hand away, it'll remind of them of how their wives used to feel.

What I would have said was: Men, a man who stands alone is nothing but a dying tree waiting for a windstorm. Fuck that. Fuck twin beds. Fuck soup bowls. Fuck wrapped cheese and bologna and white bread. Fuck microwave popcorn and fried eggs. Fuck canned beans and fire pits. Fuck

the Lone Ranger. Fuck the man who wants to be him. Fuck step ladders and bourbon barrels and rolled cigarettes and easy ways out. Fuck the field mouse. Fuck the moon. Fuck the shadow it makes. Fuck shovels. Fuck dirt. Fuck sod. Fuck Death. Let Him come, and let's face it, because together, men, we'll know that when He guides the next one of us to a hole, we won't have to hope that there'll be somebody left to cover it up with a box of lye to trick coyotes, to keep them from digging at what's been covered. We know somebody will have that shovel. Somebody will stand guard. One of us will be that man, and when you're the last one, you go ahead and speak to the dirt and tell it what it means to truly be alone.

Man is the word I'll use most. For the three of us, myself, Bryan and Sherm, it'll be confirmation—we know we're men, have been for some time. It's still something we remind ourselves of. We grow beards in hope they may strike matches. We forego showers so the stench will hover. We look at our armpits in bathroom mirrors. We note the proof wherever we find it. Sure, we're sophomores rather than seniors, but it'll be our time soon, won't it? Except for Emery who is a woeful eighteen or something close to it. He's an introductory man whose only privilege is that he can smoke, which none of us do. *Man* to him has become a congratulatory word, something he can roll in paper and light and take into his lungs, something he can grow to depend on until it'll be the only thing he needs, until it's the one thing he'll let destroy him.

When he left, he was no longer the sheepish child he was months ago. Something changed in him, and we all noticed it. He no longer showed up late to work, he treated his job as a privilege, and it had become something for him to accomplish. Like they were corn, he

grew his calluses by rubbing his palms and the inside of his fingers on concrete as if he were grating cheese. He caught on, knowing that to toughen something, it first needed to be weakened. He wore a watch so he could take it off during lunch breaks and gleam at the tan line, to see what his skin was like in the spring, when his arm didn't smell of burnt hair. He drank his coffee black. He got on the shovel and he dug until the job was done. There was no more panting—there was no more stopping.

When he spoke of his girlfriend, it's as though his mind slipped to the far future and still saw her there on a bed for two, a picture frame for five. There's a dog house, arguments about battery purchases, sex in lieu of conversation, bad TV. There's hand holding and sagging skin and ageless rings. When he floated away from us with Hannah, we saw the mark of a man—one who took care of himself so he can take care of someone else, to brush hair, to pour cereal, to watch cartoons, to lend a voice to a doll named Pony.

Men, I would have said. Let me tell you about not falling apart. I would have said Morty's name. I knew everybody had him on their minds, especially that night. How questions seemed to keep boiling over into their slack faces. How he up and disappeared on everyone. He's gone, and from our crew, he won't be the last. It's strong in our minds that we'll soon lose the others and eventually ourselves. We're young now, I would have said, but that doesn't last. There's some gray hair already, creaky knees. Two a.m. piss trips. Thirty's coming, then eighty, and once you start tumbling downhill, as Morty said, all you can do is duck and cover and keep fucking rolling. That's when we met him, years back, when he was already rolling. And there we were when he finally hit the fucking bottom, when we found him at midnight with a shovel, a cigarette, some

bourbon and a box of lye, waist-deep in a hole out in the 13th fairway *fixing a goddamn fucking leak*. We should have talked to him then, but instead we stood around the hole. A full moon aroused crickets. An owl somewhere swooped fairways and devoured mice. And there was Morty and a shovel and a hole four feet deep, five feet long, getting deeper, and Morty only stopped to roll another cigarette and drink from the bottle with a horse and jockey on the label. Three other shovels wedged in the sod invited us, but Morty said *no* when we went to grab them. "You'll fill it in," he said. He lit another cigarette, took a swig from the bottle, and grinned. "Filling in's the worst part, right, boys?" His eyes went to each of our faces, as though he were going to tell us something, but remained quiet except for his dog-like panting. As he looked to me, I felt it. *I used to be so much like you*. I saw myself at seventy-two, and I thought about, even that old, how right it would feel to fix a leak at the peak of the night. He rolled another cigarette and went back to digging. We waited, wondering, where was the water?

A year now, I'd have said. We'd have dipped our heads and our clubs would become shovels. We'd smell the dirt and cigarette smoke and bourbon. We'd hear metal on gravel and panting and sniffing of the night air. We'd hear the sizzle of foam like a small leak in a pipe, hissing just faint enough to let us know it was there, that it could be found, that it could be fixed.

Remember him, I would have said, so we don't become him. Remember what it looks like to fall apart, what it's like to rot from within.

I should have said his name before we went off into the night. I should have said anything more than what I said. I should have mentioned the bourbon bottle with the horse head, how it was a profile of a Kentucky racer, a blue strap around it's muzzle, it's eye wide, ready for victory, probably in mid-trot, waiting for the leather strap of the jockey to stop slapping it forward, waiting for the reins to be tugged up, forcing its eyes off the track. I would have talked about how a horse will not run if he doesn't know where his feet will land.

I should have said that we are going to march these nine holes. We are going to scatter away from each other and find what we're searching for in the trees. We'll be isolated, won't we? But we'll still be together. We'll still be able to look up from the ground and see the colors we're chasing after. You'll know me from hundreds of yards away because you'll see the waves of orange light. Follow that, and we'll meet on the green and talk about foggy mornings and third base and trimmed nails.

I would have said how we'll keep doing this on every hole, how we'll keep getting lost, how we'll always find each other. I would have said, remember: this is nighttime. Sound carries. We will hear the clacking of our clubs in our bags. Understand, now, if you become lost and without light, simply call out, and someone will hear you. Keep breathing. Head to the green. You'll be able to find it easy enough because we know this course. We've been here for years. We know every hill and every swale. We know the sycamore from the dogwood. We know when apple blossoms need pollinating. We know where all the pipes lie. We know where every leak has been and when they were fixed. We know how deep to dig. We know how long it takes to fill a hole by how big it is. We know how to replace sod and make it look like no one was ever

there. We know when the dew sets. We know when the fucking sun rises. We know that it's most blinding right after it peaks over the birches. We know we can stay awake all night and then work through the next day. We know hard sleeps come quick and dreamless. We know this is how to escape nightmares. We know how to keep from complaining. We know how to keep our mouths shut. We know how to keep promises. We know how to pay our respects. We know what bourbon does to grass.

What I would have said was something about leaving because I'd been thinking about doing it. I imagined packing my truck with enough clothes to last a week, and canned food for the road, camping equipment, and every penny I owned—just south of nine grand. I'd fill the truck with gas, buy a North American atlas and drive northwest to Washington and find the highway that hugs the ocean all the way to Alaska. It'd take nine tanks of gas if I didn't get off track. I'd run the tenth to fumes and settle in the nearest town. Somewhere they prefer cremation because the ground never thaws.

I would have mentioned water, how it's everywhere. I would have made a joke about boats, how we could fall out of a boat on dry land and still drown.

I would have talked about how it's like our blood, how we never think about it until it seeps from the vessels we buried to keep it contained and hidden, how we see it as something that needs to be controlled, because when it's not—when it's flowing—we're dying.

I'd remind them that we're made of the land, but built not just from soil. Water holds that dust together. Look, I'd say, at what happens when we spend too much time in the river.

Our hands wrinkle. It's evolutionary response. Our bodies think we're abandoning the grass and the soil, exchanging corn and beef for algae and trout. The fingers' pull taut to grasp fish easier. Our teeth sharpen. We lose our hair. We grow skin between our toes. Our lungs expand so we hold oxygen longer, can manipulate our buoyancy. Eventually we wouldn't need lungs. By then, we'd feel the vibrations of predators and take off before they arrive. We'd be better at that than how we are now when clouds darken, when winds shift, when sirens seep through root cellar walls. It's called smelling trouble. Horses feel earthquakes before the seismographer twitches. Anthills are found barren hours before Tsunamis hit. Fish choose not to feed when alert to the rhythm of paddles and oars.

This is what abundance does. Look at what happens when grass is watered too much. It becomes dependent. Its roots shorten. It weakens. It develops disease. It dries out from within and dies, browning and curling. Not as a blade, but as patches. And look at us, I'd say. Look at us when we're by the river. Look at us stand firm like oak, longing for that rush that'd sweep us away to beyond the bends of farmland, USA to the mouth of the Mississippi, to the Gulf and saltwater. We stare too long, and the swimmers in us thirst as the grazers we are begin to starve, rot, and attract buzzards. This is what I'd have said if I'd known Emery was taking off. Not to talk him out of it, but to let him know I understood, that there's no shame in the search for quench.

When we reached the twelfth tee that night, he handed his clubs to me and walked to the river. We followed him through the long grass, through the pines that grouped along the bank, down the hill to the boulders that lined the shore and there it was—bags in a boat, and his girlfriend, Hannah, waiting by the rope. Sherm asked what this was, and he said Hannah was

pregnant and they were running before their families found out.

I said. "You weren't going to say anything until now?"

"Morty didn't."

"He said enough," Bryan said.

"He said nothing," Emery said.

What Morty said was just enough to tell us to wait, that we'd be the ones to fill it in.

Filling in's the worst part, right, boys? When Morty had finished, he threw his shovel to me, and I caught it. He pulled out an envelope the size of a postage stamp and poured something like sugar into the bottle. He swirled it, tipped the bottle to us—*L'chaim*—and finished what was left. When he fell, he sounded like soil in a sack thrown from a truck. We never looked away. Enough moonlight was out that the foam around his mouth glowed. There was no breeze and no wings and no scurrying or gnawing. There was us, breathing, and Morty, not. There were piles of dirt on the grass, and there was a hole where it all—the dirt and the man—belonged. There was Sherm taking the lighter from Morty's shirt pocket and flicking a flame so he could read the instructions on the box of lye. He said there was nothing about bodies. Just *wear gloves and keep away from open skin.*

I should have said something then while putting dirt back in the hole. I should have said something about how none of us just threw it in, how we knew when to be slow. I should have said something, at the end, about how strange it was that we used all the dirt and there were still no lumps in the sod, as though Morty weren't even there. But I said nothing.

Instead Bryan said, "What do we say when they ask if we saw him?"

And that's all we asked when Emery got in the boat and helped Hannah in. I tried to see

if she was showing yet, but I saw nothing. I thought of coffee shop pay stubs. Broken pencils. Tax evasions. Obituary pages and baby formula coupons. I thought nothing of their trip. Nothing of good idea or bad idea. Nothing of support. Nothing of understanding.

“Tell them the truth,” Emery said. “Tell them we took the river south. Probably Louisiana.”

Louisiana, I thought. He’s not going there. That’s someplace with alligators. Someplace with wild, uncharted bogs. Someplace where the young and the living go to remember the opposite. Someplace where water isn’t the life, it’s the shadow. Where it’s better acknowledged through the peripheral. Where it’s respected. Where it’s feared.

He took an oar and pushed them into the water. He removed his glow ball from his pocket, activated it by hitting it against his thigh. His hand blinked green, and he held it up as he sat. We watched them drift until they crossed the bend, and there was nothing left but the three of us. I imagined Bryan returning the egg carton, forty dollars stuffed in the empty hole. I saw him saying things like, *we lost one* and *unavoidable*. I could see the hammer, the orange heat of the fire, every jar, every eye.

I should have said something about it, but there was the water against the rocks.

By the time I heard Hannah had left, she'd already been gone for two weeks. I can't say if she ran away, since she was over eighteen and all, but I'm pretty sure that's what she was doing—ever since I've known her, she's been the kind of girl to take off.

I like to think she did it in the night. Maybe she caught a train out of town the way thieves do in old movies, like the one I saw once where an old straw-haired lady sat in the corner of the car and read from Galatians. I like to think that's what Hannah saw, too: some old lady with a voice the same as the narrator from the *Your Changing Body* videos, the one who explained the body, the biology, the blood, the clots that looked aborted. Maybe she'd remind Hannah of her mother, who gave the same lectures on the love of neighbors, the starvation of the soul, on the dangers of the top three buttons of blouses, the hidden line of the cleavage, the sin of the flesh cured with a dose of holy water—enough to wash away the acne cream, the stuff that kept her eczema at bay. She'd preach on the lies of quenchable urges and how the best restraint was the Word made flesh, rope, and a mother who *knew*.

I'd never met her mother, but Po' boy Joe works for her dad, and Joe says that's exactly what Hannah's mother was like a few years ago. But her dad was different. "It's like he gave up when she started getting all womanly," he says. "He probably didn't even notice her leaving, and I guess that her dad wouldn't be all too upset about one of his daughters being gone, because knowing him, he's glad there's one more out of the house. She's an adult now."

I imagine her dad thinking this. She's an adult now, pregnant and ruined, so what's been done is done and what's done is done. So he probably let go already and mounted one of

those tractors of his, plowed his fields and fed his cows and spat his chaw like he did when she was around and was still one of those little angels of his that could do no wrong. Bows in those shoes, sunlight in those curls. What a glorious day, God gracious almighty.

Her mother's long been a bored farm wife who'd gotten used to drinking gin from a bottle by three in the afternoon and calling up the reverend's wife to see if the devil was still drinking hot tub water in southern Ohio—doesn't make much sense, but the reverend's wife stays on the line anyway, at least until Hannah's ma sobers up and apologizes or runs out of questions like if it's immoral to dream about sleeping with a woman as long as she knew the woman had her husband's penis. I can't tell you for certain if that's what she asked. My cousin Kyla overheard it while at the Reverend's house when Kyla and the Reverend's daughter were in the basement scrapbooking, listening to every word. After that, it kind of took over from there. Kid stuff, you know? But since it's been said, rumor around here may as well be gospel. Hannah's sisters don't seem to notice she's gone, but they're all cranked out half the time anyway. I know that for sure because I'd been with one of the twins, and Hannah is the only thing she and I have in common. So that's what she talks about, that and she likes knowing I don't mind fucking while she's on her period. She likes knowing that I don't think the doorknob thing is weird, either. As long as I get my twenty minutes in and a finish, I don't care what pops her corn.

It's not that I like blood, it's that I don't mind it. What a lot of people around here don't understand is that I don't actively search for a girl who's ragging—the twin seeks me out now because of it, but only after people heard about me and one of the Breannes together at a party. She was bleeding after I was done, and she must have told everyone that I, without

gagging, helped her finish as though I left a twenty in her. I won't say I'm not freaked out by it sometimes. Blood is blood. But, I have it, too, and I'm sure a girl here and there has tasted it. I mean, by the time I started getting blowjobs—in cars after football games—I'd been jerking it pretty regularly to the point that I was rubbing myself raw. They dealt with it, so who am I to get grossed out?

At most, it tastes like a dirty penny, which is something I tasted a lot as a kid. Not from sucking on change, but from a swing set I liked to sit on at the middle school. That is where I'd eat my lunch. I'd sit there gripping the chain, and I'd swing back and forth between pumping my legs and eating my sandwich. Some of the rust would transfer from the chain to my hands to the bread to my mouth and it felt as though I was eating iron—Fe. Fe for the bones, Fe for the heart, Fe for the blood and lungs and eyes. I was Iron Man with my pulsating hands defeating the enemy, my rocketed feet pushed me from the ground. I'd drop my bagged lunch then. Usually there was only a bruised banana and a granola bar left inside that I saved for the ride home with my brother. I'd fly forward on the swing with my hand outstretched ready to blast whoever was crazy enough to go against the Iron Man. Which was nobody.

At some point between elementary and middle school, the playground became this type of ghost town where your occasional runaway horse was Oliver Olds, who galloped away to nowhere in particular, the air in his face enough to give him some misguided sense of fun. Later he fell to his knees, and picked some grass and chewed on it. And when he lay down, I wanted to yell that horses always stand.

I swung like a tumbleweed in that one-horse town. I didn't care. Give me Oliver Olds and a rusty swing set any day over hanging out in front of the school. All those other kids hung out

there like a hive of bees, circled around somebody more important than them, someone who made the rules. Sometimes two of them broke away from the hive and buzzed off into the back of the playground by the chain-link fence that separated school grounds from the edge of a Christmas tree farm. All the pines marched in rows for miles, and all had grown far too high for anyone's living room, so there they grew, ignored by all except whatever kids hopped the fence. They'd hide behind the trunks searching for pollen until the bell rang and lunch was over and some kind of class began.

For me, it was biology. And biology was a time for digestion. A time for the bologna to find a way out, and it made me pale, sweaty and shifty, and my tablemates veered away from me like they were thinking, *Jesus Christ, he's going to puke*. We were in the back corner of the room at one of seven long-frame lab-tables. Four each—two boys, two girls—two sets of lab partners. Amira, who sat across from me, was mine, a brunette with budding breasts and a shirt ruffled in the chest to give the illusion that it could one day be filled with something more. Her face was the attraction—white teeth and a pointed, but not sharp, nose, and a head shaped like an acorn. To the guys in my class, she was perfect, even with her too-dark eyebrows and a black birthmark on her earlobe that looked like a swatted housefly. I wanted to rub it with my finger and name it, and she wanted nothing to do with me. Her eyes—almond shaped, almond colored—followed our teacher, Mr. Swann—that's with the two n's like he was from England or somewhere like that where a guy can own a castle and a horse with a personality and nobody thinks it's weird. He never sat at his desk. Instead he paced in front of the class, ballet-like, with his teachers' edition cradled in one arm as his other hand expressed to the class how passionate he was about whatever he was talking about—the life cycle of fruit flies, the pillars

and mesas of elephant graveyards. His hand pumped with the facts, and his voice strained as though he and I had the same stomach cramps: Ah, *plants*, don't you understand? The *plants* take *our* CO², yeah? And they take *sunlight* and *use* it—his watch slipped up and down his arm, his wedding ring caught the light, and I saw the girls look away from it, trying not to acknowledge it as though that ring reminded them of razor wire, something that could be climbed and crossed if it were worth the consequence, the wounds, the blood, the scar tissue that proved they'd been through something once—*use* it, you know? They *take* it in. It's how they *live*. It's how they *survive*. *Photosynthesis*, right? *Yeah*, he said. His arm slacked to his side, and his watch, silver, braided and loose, finally rested. Then he turned to the board and wrote *photosynthesis* in chalk, ticking and scraping white on green. His hips wiggled with every letter, and Amira would sigh, longing, and wrote photosynthesis—o's were hearts—in her notes as though it were a word from him to her that she could keep, an invitation to cling to him like moss, to grow and thrive, to breathe him in until she grew and grew and grew and suffocated him.

And it was then, usually, when I would stare out the window and ignore everybody in the room, even Mr. Swann and his hard-on for biology. I'd look at the swing set. Behind that was the sand field, where sometimes, guys played touch football. They'd invite girls to play then, too, as a way for the guys to sneak their hands between their legs or across their chests, or a guy patted another guy quickly on the ass, and then did the same to a girl. After hours, the games turned to tackle, and if there were any girls around, they'd stand to the side and watch. I played then and liked to rush the passer. My brother taught me how throw my shoulder into a guy's stomach as hard as I could so that he'd fumble the ball. He did it to me at home, slowly, to

show how it was done. He pressed his shoulder into my bellybutton and picked me up and dropped me to the ground. Then he stood me up, told me he was going to do it for real. And when he did, I threw up on his back. Tomato juice and red licorice.

The after-school passer was always Taylor Howzar. He couldn't throw a ball worth a damn, but he took the position when everybody else avoided it. I've never seen his face without a bruise or something swollen. He had a crooked nose and scars around his ears and neck where there'd been stitches. This made it easier to run into him, and I always tried to make him puke, but whenever I put him to the ground, I could never even get an *oomph*. He'd do some cackling thing like he had a spider running up his pants.

He died about a year ago. His prick dad. He ended up drowning him in a Holiday Inn indoor Jacuzzi near Trenton. I'd been to that one before, the one west of the highway next to a car rental place and Italian-Mexican grill where I got a lasagna taco served to me by a Chinese guy named Tony. My brother and I stayed there when he was visiting colleges. We swam there, too. They've got those fake indoor trees and those rooms that face the pool. My brother made it to second base with some girl in the same Jacuzzi where Taylor was found half-floating on his back, his stomach and an arm breaking the surface. The newspaper said that his dad admitted to it, but said it was an accident—something to do with roughhousing. When the hotel people found Taylor, his dad had already checked out, headed to Red Oak.

I'd heard deep bruises could last for years, and I wondered if the coroner could tell which ones were from me and which were from his father's pipe wrench. It was found in a drawer inside a knotted knee sock with so much rust inside it could have been scooped with a spoon. I read that and remembered what it's like to get tackled, and what it's like giving it back,

what it's like feeling his ribs sink into his sternum like rusted door hinges, what it's like to have never made him puke. All I ever got out of him was that laughing, and *Stop tickling me, pussy, and hit me.*

He was dating that Kathy Scott girl then—strange and buck-toothed and wide hipped: a true Missouri heifer. Kind of walked like those little dinosaurs in that movie where they came back. She leaned forward like she was top-heavy (which she wasn't—not until freshman year when she discovered carbs and a growth hormone she injected with rattlesnake antivenin). She let her hips roll around, her feet lagged behind. She said stuff about trains and how they can't be stopped. *Toot-toot, mother fucker,* she said. *Toot-toot.* So that was Taylor's girl. Made sense and all for him, being a sucker for embarrassment, but who was I to say anything then? I was thirteen and still sat on the swings. I couldn't read aloud without stammering *Fs* and *Rs*. I couldn't piss at a urinal without letting my pants drop to my shoes. At least I never threw up or cried in class. That Kathy, though, man. A hardcore crier as though she couldn't control it, like it was an impulse—I've seen her cry over a B-minuses, wet shoes, daylight savings.

All our teachers got sick of it and passed her off like she was sneezing: a few words of acknowledgment, *bless you, Kathy,* and moved on with the day. But that fucking Swann. Every damn time she'd go at it—hell, anytime *anyone* was upset—he'd stop and try to think of a way to make it a lesson for us. A lesson that usually ended up with how we were all *changing,* yeah? And it's *tough,* right? I mean, I *went* through the *same...thing* at your age. And let me tell you: it gets *better,* right? *Right?*

How were we supposed to know? We were the ones in it. We were all tired that time of day, and I had to fart. But Amira was there. As she looked to me, I imagined her hoping I was a

13-year-old version of Mr. Swann. I had a watch, too, and I unhooked it from my wrist, slid it across the lab table to her. The noise of the watch on the tabletop made my tablemates turn their eyes to my hand, and I stopped pushing once the strap touched her notebook. I held my hand on my side of the strap and wouldn't have moved it until she touched the other end. I wanted her to slip it on—even though it wouldn't fit—and never take it off. She could shower with it on, sleep with it on, go to funerals and family reunions and fiddle with the knob when she couldn't take the site of caskets and potato salad. The battery would eventually die, and she'd still keep it on, and when the hands were right twice a day, she could plan on looking at her wrist then, knowing that even though it feels like time had stopped, something still worked, and she could think of me and how we all wanted to grow up so quickly, so badly that we stood still to feel our bones growing, felt our skin stretching to make the adult bodies we one day would be, when everything we would ever need would be there. But she looked away to the board again, and I put my watch back on and became me. Just a kid who sat on the swings at lunch, who ate bologna and white bread, who preferred 1% to chocolate, spearmint to Juicy Fruit, who was nothing more to her than a guy to share a table with for fifty minutes a day, who could cut a worm into segments easily with scissors, who could pin them to the carving tray, who was never grossed out, who turned the pages of the book too loudly, who took forever on tests and didn't write legibly enough for her to copy, who huffed at Mr. Swann when he kneeled beside a Kathy Scott—usually. But it was Hannah Barkley who got Swann's attention that week my brother was arrested for beating down and killing a guy who slapped his girlfriend in the high school parking lot. During Swann's lecture on nucleic acid, she put her head down on her desk and wondered publicly why life had to be so hard.

Swann, right on cue: It is for *everyone*, you know?

But what Swann usually had figured out was that everything came down to us being horny. It was biology, and we were *changing*, yeah? Of course he didn't come out and say it, but I get it now. He was the young-ish teacher at our school, so he was the one who could *relate, yeah?* The one who understood he was around kids who thought a long relationship lasted two and a half weeks. He was that age not so long before. *At least you're not fruit flies, right? Ha-ha-ha. Nature! What a playground!* And he went on about how bobcats sound like they're fighting as they mated, how frogs can be hermaphrodites—clownfish and seahorses, too—how sometimes dolphins showed homosexual traits. How swans mate for life. How otters hold hands while sleeping in water so they don't float away from each other. How the praying mantis will eat her mate right after.

Hannah moaned into her desk that it had *nothing* to do with any of that. But what did it matter? Swann was already writing *cannibalism* on the board, and Amira wrote it in her notes, looking to Swann as though being devoured by him was everything she could ever hope for. Her face red. And when she shifted her weight in her chair, I could feel the heat.

I felt that heat a year ago after our senior-year homecoming dance—the homecoming where Taylor, a month dead, was named honorary king—and during the after-party, our first party with beer, we chugged and slammed those cups as though we thought a buzz would never come, and when it did, Amira and I found a closet and made out, and when our mouths dried out we talked of how long we've really known each other. She thought it was freshman year in geometry, but I told her it was in Swann's biology class in seventh, how we sat by each other,

how I tried to talk to her every day, how I imagined her always wanting to rail Swann, even if everybody in class watched. She tilted her head in thought as though she agreed and said, “That wasn’t you who sat by me.” She leaned her body into mine and undressed us both until my face was pushed down and she shoved my nose into the crook where leg meets groin, where the sweat collected, where another birthmark shaped like an eel hid, where I stayed rubbing my nose wherever she guided it until she fell asleep. Her hand clutched a broom, the tip rested on her bottom lip and saliva dripped down the handle and slung from her mouth to her chest like a spider web in dew.

Swann had taught us nothing of spiders and everything of the praying mantis, thanks to Hannah’s insistence that *nothing* was wrong, *okay*? But of course something was wrong, and when I was waiting on a swing for my brother to pick me up after school, Hannah joined me, leaving a swing between me and her, said one of her sisters was coming. She had broken down twice in class that day and prompted lectures about spawning salmon and grizzly bears, the naked mole rat and inch worms, and, of course, a video of praying mantises mating. The class, me included, tried to hide the giggling, but it fell out of all of us no matter how hard we tried to suppress it, except for Amira, who took notes, allowing herself to smirk when the male pulsed into the female’s enlarged abdomen. She glowed when Swann said words like *insert*, *thrust*, *sperm*, and *inseminate*. Swann paused the video. He went to his desk and pulled out a jar, and by the time I realized that he had a praying mantis in it, everybody had cleared their tables and surrounded him. He sent everybody back to their seats, placed the jar on his desk and let only four people up at a time. My table was last, but we were lucky enough to watch her feed on a

field cricket Swann had put in there. As she fed, Amira tapped her finger on the glass, but the mantis chewed on and never moved her head. She let go of her half-cricket and leaned into a live one that inched towards her. She had it and we sat down.

Swann let the video play some more, and then it happened. The female in the video latched her thorny arms around the male and began to chew away at his head. It took some time, but eventually she freed it from his body and ate away as his abdomen continued to pump until it finally slowed and fell away, and the boys cheered, including myself, not quite understanding why, but somewhere within us, we knew something was accomplished.

And after school, as I sat on a swing and waited for my brother, the girl who was responsible for all of it with her breakdown in the middle of class joined me. The paint on the frame was orange and chipped. Underneath was a bluing rust that matched her socks. We waited together in silence until she turned to me and asked what I thought of her.

I didn't know what to say, and at the time, I felt that I should say something, maybe that she was pretty. I liked her hair—she didn't spend time on it. Ponytails were easy. That's what stuck out the most, but still, she had cried eight times in class in two weeks and something about it seemed off, undesirable, and she might as well have been one I'm-a-steam-powered-locomotive claim away from becoming Kathy Scott's caboose.

I said nothing and pushed my heels into the dirt to get the swing moving. I looked at my shoes and clapped them together and watched the dirt fall.

"I mean, do people think I'm weird?"

I answered with a shrug.

She hopped off the swing and picked at the paint on the swing set's frame. It crumbled

from her fingers and she wiped them on her pants.

I looked to the parking lot to see if my brother had arrived. I knew he wouldn't be there until after five, but I thought it'd be neat if he were early. I looked even though I didn't need to see him to know if he was there—the muffler fell off the car a few months before and he never fixed it. The car could be heard from four blocks away. There was no sound but the squeaks in my chain and Hannah scratching the swing set with a stone, but I looked for his Buick, the color of dirty snow, the one working headlight. But nothing but teachers getting into their cars and driving away. The shop teacher, Mr. Mallory lit a cigarette and leaned against the hood of his car, and Ms. Destin, the one with huge tits and what we all called a garbage bag ass that could only be contained in stretch pants, leaned against Mallory's car, too, and bummed one. The suspension held.

“Want to see something?” Hannah asked. She flung the stone, squatted to her bag, unzipped it, put her hands in and stopped. She faced the school's front entrance. “Has Mr. Swann left yet?”

I didn't see any lights on in his classroom, and his car wasn't parked in its regular spot, a spot I knew because he was the middle-school football coach and on the first day of tryouts, he'd pop his car in neutral and made eight guys at a time rope themselves to his Geo—which had a *Darwin WAS Jesus* bumper sticker—as Swann called out from his car saying that the howl from the manatee while birthing pups could be heard from two miles away, *So, howl, men! Howl like manatees!*

I nodded to Hannah—Swann was gone—and she pulled out the jar with the female praying mantis. It shone like ice in her hands. She held the jar with her fingertips. I hopped off

the swing and knelt by her. Tin foil covered the top and was kept on by a pink rubber band. Cricket legs were scattered all along the bottom and blades of grass crawled up towards the top like ropes. I imagined Swann stuffing the grass in there, thinking if only he had a chalkboard, he could write *habitat*.

Hannah rolled the jar in her hands. The mantis clutched the grass and kept herself from falling on her back. "It was on his desk," Hannah said. "He wasn't around." So she snuck in, she said. She shook the root beer can that was on his desk and put the jar in her bag along with a box of chalk. Her fingernails were chewed and painted green. The hair on her arms was thin and blonde and could hardly be seen, and where the sleeve of her shirt ended, in the middle of a bicep, I noticed the form, kind of like a boy's—strong, firm. The neck of her shirt was wide open, and I could see the smallest glimpse of the starting of her left breast, held by a white knot of a bra. "I don't know why I took the chalk," she said. I wanted to take her to the parking lot and trace an outline of her body. I wanted her to do the same to me. I wanted her to lean over me and let her shirt hang down and brush against my face as she worked her hand around my shoulder, up my arm, and around my head.

I held the jar with my fingertips.

"You want to know why?" she asked.

"To free her?" I said.

She shook her head, no.

"Why then?"

"No," she said. "Why I cry in class."

I said I didn't.

“Oh, my God,” she said, and swiped the jar back. Something clinked against the glass, maybe half a cricket or the grass, probably the mantis. She walked away, leaving her bag, and headed towards the trees. When she reached them, she sat against the fence. So I grabbed her bag. It was light as though there was nothing in it. Not a book. Not even a sandwich or banana. Just a box of chalk.

I went to her, kicking sand the whole way, never looking at her.

“Tell me,” I said, sitting next to her, my arm hair touching hers.

She wouldn’t. I wanted to use that chalk. I’d have given her big feet and Xs where her teeth should be.

She stretched the rubber band away from the mouth of the jar and flipped off the foil. A smell like vinegar came out and Hannah said, “Oh, jeez,” and she made a bit of a retch in her throat. She said they looked like something from an alien movie, her voice cheerier. They didn’t belong at our school. Maybe, she said, they belonged on some other planet that was nothing but plant life and these creatures, and all they did was eat and mate. There’s two suns there. Maybe three, and when one or two of them set, the other would rise, and there’d never be any night time, ever. As she said this, the female nibbled at her own arms, tilted her head and pondered the opening.

I grabbed the longest pine needle I could find on the ground and stuck it in front of the mantis. Her abdomen, swollen, ripe and red, pumped and kept a rhythm like a tapping finger, and she reached an arm towards it, batted it twice and left it alone.

“Don’t,” Hannah said, and she pushed my hand away, tipped the jar to the ground and shook everything out. The mantis shook herself from the grass and crawled to Hannah and

climbed her pants leg, reached the summit and stayed, nibbled her arms and pulsed her abdomen. Hannah pressed her back against the tree.

“I don’t think I have a ride home,” she said.

“I have to wait until my brother’s out of practice,” I said. “Maybe he’ll take you.”

“Why don’t you take the bus?” she asked.

“Why don’t you?”

She smirked. She no longer hated me. I’d give her a chalk necklace. I’d make her eyes wide. I’d draw that understanding smirk. “My sisters don’t want to be my sisters anymore,” she said.

“They said that?”

Hannah shook her head. The mantis twisted her head towards the school. She crawled an inch and stopped, bowed. “They’re twins,” she said, as though that meant something to me, as though she knew my brother wouldn’t pick me up from school if my parents weren’t making him, or she knew he stopped asking me to throw a ball around, no longer patted me on the back on late Saturday nights when I couldn’t handle sipping the whiskey he handed me, no longer invited me out to the garage at all, no longer let me hang with him and his friends, no longer gave me advice during car rides on how to talk to a girl, how to tell if she likes you, when and how to unhook a bra, how her underwear can tell you everything you need to know about her, how that, even if she’s begging for you, you have to say the words. That’s the last thing I can remember him really telling me in a tone that wasn’t like how someone answered a phone: *You still gotta’ ask*, he told me as he turned down the radio. His eyes left the road and landed on me, on grass stained pants, on muddied hands, on dried tomato juice. *Promise me you’ll*

always ask.

I got why she, then, was choking on her words and going on about how her sisters won't drink from the same glass as her any more, but I didn't want to say it. So I said nothing, and she left it at that, and the wind blew through the trees. It sounded like cars on the freeway from that hotel room that faced the indoor pool. I breathed in so much chlorine sitting by the pool, watching my brother inch his way closer to the girl in the Jacuzzi, watched how long it took him to slide his arm behind her, how she didn't pull away, how she leaned herself into him as though they weren't strangers.

I smelled chlorine around Hannah, I had an itch in my arm, an urge to stretch my arm around her, to feel her shirt along my forearm, to feel pine sap on the other side. She broke the silence and said she wanted to find a male mantis. She'd keep him there connected to his mate, she said, even if he tried to get away. If he did, she'd catch him, she said. She'd shout after him and run him down. It's only fair, she said. He'd have to come back. He'd have a job to finish. It's the law in the world they came from. The males grew on trees like pears. They call to the females, they reach their arms out, wanting to be chosen. They fold their arms up to their heads. He prays then. He prays to the female to detach him from the tree and attach him to her, and he's so grateful that when it's almost time to finish, he bows his head and lets her take him. Whoever heard of a pear running away? she said.

By then, the female crawled off her leg and flew away. Hannah didn't follow her. She even left the jar when she stood and hopped over the fence. She told me to follow her, and I did. When I hopped the fence, she took my wrist so hard that when she squeezed me, I felt my heartbeat try to flow through her fingertips. She guided me five rows in where she turned to

me and leaned her back against a pine. She pulled me to her, and when she recognized what was hard against her thigh, she grinned and, with the inside of her right leg, positioned me more to the center of her. She rose on tip-toes and met my mouth, opened mine slightly with her tongue and I found that her lips were as dry as mine, and when I became repetitive in my style, she inched down my cheek and into my neck and shoulder. I'd draw her a smile, I thought. I'd draw the lips into a heart. I'd give her tits like grapefruits, a necklace. A ring.

Three days later, when Hannah was finished with me, when my brother left a guy toothless and unconscious in a parking lot, when the red and blue lights flashed on our walls, when the cops were knocking on the door, I noticed my mother at dinner pinch my brother's shirt and pull it towards her nose. She took her fingernail and scratched away something—blood, my brother said. She's okay, he said. It'll be okay, he said. She circled the powder between her finger and thumb and then wiped it on a napkin and looked at my father, who used his spoon to push down the collar on my shirt. He hummed and asked me her name, and my mother asked what it mattered. At that age, she said, they're all the same. And when the knocking at the door got louder, she took the bowl of mashed potatoes, spooned some on my brother's plate and said, "We're going to finish this dinner."

My brother reached for the gravy and our door broke open.

Second Coming

To those selling pumped-up soft drinks and grandee slacks in New York, 1999, he was the Great One, the one who kept you from getting sued. He was a man with immaculate talent, but, his superiors—the fat-cat members—these rich men who belong to The Inherited Privileged—the financially elite (and semi hush-hush) club that had once claimed that Rockefeller wasn't the true American—saw this savior, of sorts, as off-brand saltines in a shut-down soup kitchen. They admitted their awareness of his existence, of his purpose—however useless as it seemed to them—in their company, but had never, and will never acknowledge the value behind Harold Palmer—known in his prime as The Hairy Palm—or anybody like him. So, the question is: What, then, was Palmer to these men? Dumpster water—somebody who had an unavoidable purpose, somebody better left settled in the dark underneath the piles that created it. As of 2012—after the Occupy group fiasco—the opinion of the 1% was that Palmer was the unfortunate necessity birthed from consequence. Among Palmer's peers—who are claimed to be his never-ending followers—those in the remaining 99—he was the cornerstone. A Ferrari among woody wagons. He was, as they say, the tits. Some go as far as to say he --was the only one. The only one? No. But The Hairy Palm was the first to start a whole new way of looking at the advertising world. He became the fungus in the dark who absorbed shame and expelled cash. He was amoeba-1 of a now multi-million dollar business filled with 1,800 people just like him whose sole purpose is to avoid advertising boners.

When I last interviewed Palmer—this would have been two weeks before his disappearance—he spoke of a trip to central Missouri, with mild amusement, an air of those were the days mixed with a bit of don't judge me; that's long behind me now. At the time we spoke, he wore tan slacks and a poorly tied half-Windsor, his wife, a denim dress. Her hair looked like a bob that barely survived a windstorm. She was a woman with nicotine stained fingers, mismatched wool socks, and baggy eyes that shifted from the floor to my shoes. Her nose was a constant detectant of sulfur. Even more when her Harold spoke. Maybe he was, at one time, a stand-up kind of guy, someone to depend on. Maybe she was, too. I had been given no indication that this was the case. I assumed they wed solely to share in each other's misery, to partake in the true American marriage—a bond to create progeny from pure boredom, to settle bar bets, to silence the naysayers who wagered weeks rather than years. I only say this, because I'd been in the room twelve minutes before he introduced her, or their son. When he finally brought them to light, it was to break the silence caused by me watching his son lick a thick burgundy-red stain from the carpet. We were in a hotel lounge on the side of a southern Illinois Interstate. One of the directional cues was three exits past the road kill pile. That was 2008. Now, 2013, Harold Palmer has been gone for five years—his last known whereabouts—in a letter—states he is alive and well, vanning it to California with a surfing religious group who await the second-coming of Christ.

In 1998, Palmer had been a gifted 22-year old financial planner. That July, he was invited to attend a business trip with the CEO of Airco (Kansas City's then-top financial advising firm who oversaw clients like the Missouri state governor, two senators, and seven players of the Kansas

City Royals (men who had notorious reputations losing games and counteracting their low salaries through betting against themselves—successfully)). The trip invitation was, without doubt, provided with a wink-wink, nudge-nudge—the business’ crest—but also promised to be nothing but a benefit to his already promising career.

I’ve been shown photos of those days, Palmer wearing \$1,000 suits, \$300 silk ties, Palmer driving leased BMWs (driven only because the car began with BM, because he loved to introduce it as his piece of shit), Palmer eating Beluga caviar off strippers’ midriffs—he preferred ones with caesarian scars and tattoos of cartoon characters: Woody Woodpecker, Bam-Bam, Betty Rubble, Sylvester J. Pussycat, Sr. He was the prime example of a man who could climb a ladder, who could bring in the right kind of money, the money that waived disciplinary measures. While appreciating the view at the top of his game, he received no more pink slips from his superiors, received no more suspension threats. With the taste for immunity, pushing the envelope became a way of life for Palmer. He compared himself to a toddler on cocaine brandishing a power drill. Several quarterly reports at the company praise his brilliance, but his coworkers had condemned his Daily Kama Sutra desk calendar—his favorite taped to the wall: The Glass Half Full position—and his 47 sexual harassment complaints—45 verbal, two counts of handsiness—all contracted.

Palmer digressed later as a 34-year old in regret, admitted a lot of those complaints would have been averted if casual Friday hadn’t existed. “It was the leggings,” he said. “Ponytails and Garfield t-shirts. My kryptonite.”

Misconducts aside, Carson Vine, Airco's then-CEO—who wasn't on the light side of sexual harassment either—saw promise in his young protégé and brought Palmer as his plus-one to a golf retreat with all the top financial planning companies in the lower Midwest and upper-Southeast—a golf outing famous within the ranks as a retreat that had a three-to-one ratio of prostitutes to golfers, a bottle of Kentucky-mountain gin for each foursome and—most importantly—no golfing whatsoever. As excited as he was to avoid golf, Palmer never arrived to his tee-time. He found his purpose first.

On the southbound side of I-75 behind a Waffle House sign, Palmer saw a billboard for a salon that offered patrons double the savings on quality hair-care products. Its slogan: Missouri beautician's secret gem. The model, a still-successful billboard-Jane named Daisy Beamer, wore a tactful and tasteful blazer atop blue jeans. Upon first gaze, even the most observant wouldn't have noticed a semi-erect penis bulging under the fabric on the left-side leg.

How this became Palmer's first step into the advertising business is safe to say, a happy accident. It wasn't even Palmer who noticed his potential, but a secretary for the billboard ad company who received a call from Palmer, who, at the time, to her, was just a man who phoned and tried to put together a sentence between phlegm and guffaws, a man who was calling to congratulate them on their "hilarious ad," and to see if they wanted financial representation from the firm he worked for. Listen to the playback, however, and the only words you can make out are amazing and dick.

An impossibility? Seemingly so, but perhaps, as some wonder, this was why the anomaly had gone unnoticed for so long, this was why some people still refused to admit that they saw

what Palmer saw. It's true, though, the salon model on the billboard does have a penis, but the penis does not belong Beamer. After Palmer's call to the agency office, some checking was done to get to the bottom of it, and it was discovered the modeling agency found a loophole in their morality code. What essentially happened was the agency paid for the use of a female face, but would paste it on top of photographs of large-breasted men walking the streets. This allowed the company—according to their contracts—to pay Beamer for only eight percent of her body—which was what they determined the percentage of the body the face is—a study conducted by MIT's C-squad graduates, mathematicians and engineers who didn't go into government work.

Similar cases have been processed and taken to court where models were paid only fifty percent of what they thought they would make. However, those cases were lost when the companies supplied their signed contracts that stipulated a model would be paid for what is printed, and, such is the case, there has never been a model whose front and back can be seen simultaneously—except for weight-loss pill before-and-after models (which does not apply here because what models know most about that industry, is that though the pills don't work, the money is good and consistent). Since the outbreak of truth, however, and especially in the Gaston Inc. vs. Beamer case of Missouri, contracts were rewritten all over the country, settlements were paid, and even the involuntary male models who unknowingly supplied bodies for female faces were found and paid. Beamer's "body", Terry Moorehan, 37 of Copperhead, Mo, was given a \$7,000 settlement. Since then, Moorehan has lost a considerable

amount of weight that he attributes to a healthy diet and daily exercise. He tells me that he uses the embarrassment from the ad a motivational tool.

“[My weight] was becoming unmanageable,” says Moorehan, who proudly states he is now a comfortable 168 lbs. “When the billboard thing came to light, I had never really noticed myself as a man who could have the frame of a woman, but there it was—my tits for all of Missouri to see, pasted up on that board eighty feet in the air. Every southbound rubberneck looked at that board every morning for a year and a half. Millions,” he says, “have looked at it, and millions more recognized it, knew me by it, come up to me in the street when I’d wear the same blazer. Always asking me if I could get it up so they could get a picture with me.”

Since then, Moorehan has become an underwear model for a men’s clothing catalogue that sells to the average-built man. “It pays my bills,” he says. “Especially hotel bills,” he adds, with a relaxed grin.

“My ‘modeling face’ doesn’t have much of a range,” Moorehan says. His expressions range from a kind of sleepy-contempt to a defeated hound dog. “So you’ll find a lot of my spreads in the pajama sections. “I’ve been refusing to put on any of the underwear they give me,” Moorehan says. “Bad memories, and all.”

During my last interview with Palmer, his son, ten, predictably immature for his age, showed interest in following in his father’s footsteps.

“Unfortunate, but consistent, genes,” Harold said. “We, my wife and I, had him at the middle of my career, at 24, when I was still just a little too childish to be naming my own kids.”

His son’s birth certificate reads: Richard Nesbit Palmer. Or, as Harold planned: Dick N. Palm.

His son spoke up, “How awesome would it be if our name was Butte?” He arose from the floor, away from the stain, and laughed. His father looked concerned. It was a strange laugh that would make anybody stop—especially a parent—a cackling that seems mischievous, but similarly based on impulse, the way birds screech when territorial. .

Richard laughs on in an almost incomprehensible sentence, “It looks like butt.” I didn’t get it at the time, and I figured that maybe this was what was funny to the younger-aged groups. Hairy Butte and his son, Dick N. Harold’s wife, Rhoda, scratched her wrist. Richard stopped laughing, and I wondered if it had anything to do with the wrist scratching.

By the time his son was born, Palmer’s position had a name and was becoming popular in New York advertising firms—fifty people and growing. They’re called catchers these days (whereas, back when Palmer was the only one, the job was called Harry’s thing). Their job is simple enough: they sit in a room, look at ads from hundreds of well-known companies and search for the risqué humor.

Recently, I sat with some of the top catchers in the business and wondered how a group like this had come together. Mitchell Comez, 22, is 6’ 8” and 110 pounds; Lucas Daily, 18, 4’ 11”, 310; Wendy Miller, 20, 5’ 2”, 101, and Tobias “the brick shithouse” Weston, 23, 5’10” and 298—soon to be out of the gig to focus on his body building. He’s on the fast-track to entering

the upcoming Mr. Universe competition. He's also Mr. March in the 2012 Mr. Missouri wall calendar—his pecs look like oiled boxing gloves.

Unlike his contemporaries, Weston accepted the job not to show off his talent, or to fulfill a love for the job or New York, but to pay for his dream. "Bodybuilding isn't expensive. Pretty much all you need is a gym membership and a bunch of money for food. Good peanut butter is expensive" he said. He's been known to eat a gallon a week. "But the training leaves little time for a job or social life."

Once Weston earns enough money—which, on average, the best catchers can make fifty grand in a month—he will head back to his parent's Wyoming pig farm to get away from the city and curl sows and pull tractors from mud. Weston's invented a special strap that allows him to do this with just his own strength, the specialness being that he doesn't dislocate his own spine in mid-pull.

The others, however, Comez, Daily and the like, are happy right where they were in their careers and never plan to leave. Comez and Daily have worked together on the 40th floor of the Hossler building in New York City for three years—this is where Palmer started. This was when Palmer had pooled his talents with the already-wealthy Jules Hossler, heir to the Organic Spruce Mayonnaise throne—their slogan (until Palmer was hired and mentioned something) was Woody and Creamy, Naturally, which was then changed to Fir-licious, and then, finally, landed comfortably on Tas-tree.

The Hossler Group sees themselves as more of a specific advertising firm who works more as agents of advertising rather than advertisers exclusive. Instead of creating ads, they are

paid to receive prints of another company's ideas, who then wait for catchers to give their okay—this takes anywhere from two days to a week.

In this highly competitive career (it's said now that catchers actually have the reputation for having one of underground-America's most competitive jobs, next to choreographers, professional coaches, and real estate agents), most no-name catchers don't last more than two to three weeks.

There has been an epidemic of young, immature adults leaving their fast-food and cashier jobs without warning to capture one of these positions. In fact, the job is becoming so popular—and decidedly no longer underground—that an ex-catcher has created a course at a community college in New Jersey on how to teach others how to catch oddities in advertisements. Jack Slaw, a catcher from January to March 2010, has been “teaching” this course in the marketing department of Cossworth (“Try, Try Again!”) Community College for the better part of the year, and already has a waiting list three-hundred students long. Plans for a textbook are in the early stages, and it was suggested that Palmer be the one to write it. That is, if anybody could find him. He had been mailing some letters from all over the country, rambling about California and the “True Son,” received months after they were dated, written so illegibly and incoherently that some people—like Rohda Palmer—believe he's pulling legs to deter anybody to search for him. He's become Where's Waldo? and post-toilet Elvis combined—people think they see him, but they end up chasing imposters and ghosts. Rhoda believes that he's taken part of some facial reconstructions and may be her new next-door neighbor, Bruce Snowden, who, even I admit, has the same kind of eyes and voice of Palmer (had he a cold), and both share the particular taste for driving topless cars in fifty-degree

weather. However, Snowden's wife, Sherry, says they've been happily married for sixteen years and never once set foot in New York.

Rhoda says, "With his money, that's a well-rehearsed, paid-for story." Again, I'm apt to agree—but only with the money part. Catchers, if in the business long enough, could buy any lifestyle.

And it's easy money.

When an initial faux pas is caught, the catcher—considering this catcher works in the Hossler building (other companies vary, but the difference in the average is pretty much the same) receives \$350, another catcher receives \$100 for confirmation. The others, SOL, as they say. And this is where the competition gets messy. With good reason. Immaturity is in high demand, and if someone, as Daily puts it, is off his game, he's not benched—he's a leg-broken horse. "Bam-bam-bam!"

The last one at the end of the week who's caught the least, loses his job, never allowed to return. Currently, Comez and Daily have one of the highest records of catcher employment—five and a half years between the both of them. Godwaith, a fraternity member of Delta Iota Iota of SCSU, is in a close second with seventeen weeks. The longest employed catcher? Harold Palmer: eight and three quarter years where an estimated five-million advertisements have gone through him. He mused, during his interview, about his last ad. "Dog dogs," he said. "dog-shaped hotdogs.

"Do you realize how many meat companies advertise their products?" Palmer said. "That was probably sixty percent of my job."

Recently, in a bologna advertisement from a highly-respected Wisconsin meat producer, was found to have a gherkin next to a female model's waistline. Comez's manager, Jacob Jacobson, was pleased with the catch. This is the next level above catchers: the ones who manage the seemingly unmanageable. Their titles? Sitters.

"The job isn't finding other's mistakes," says Jacobson, the Hossler group manager. "What their only job is, is to look for something some other asshole would think is gross, vulgar, funny or an immature, immoral image. And that's who we hire: assholes who look at tree trunks and burger wrappers and see penises and vaginas." This is the regular attitude of most sitters. They see themselves as Kindergarten teachers rather than the important gear in the multi-million dollar machine. They wear ties and suit jackets and try to maintain the focus of a bunch of dimwits who are encouraged to come to work as comfortable as possible, anything short of completely naked, of which Comez tried once, without repercussion.

"Comez? He's our top asshole. Daily's a close second, but that Comez kid, a month ago, caught a cloud that looked like a nipple, areola with goose bumps, everything. Once, a turtle's shell imprint resembled a glans." Jacobson laughs, bewildered, "My God," he muses. "I didn't see it, and still don't, but just this afternoon what he found was a goddamned dick in the letter R. So, yeah, that kid's making us the most money we've seen since that sorry bastard Palmer. Who am I to send him home if he comes in naked? Maybe if the others get a good look at a dick, they'll find more in their work. It's everything I can do to promote him under this creative initiative that I have to—" Jacobson stops speaking. He tries to back track by repeating creative initiative, but does not continue. He opens his hands to me and asks me to level with him. "Look," he says, "I just want look better to my boss. I want to look like I know what I'm doing."

Jacobson sighs, stands, and closes the door to his office. On the back of the door is a dart board that hangs by a thumbtack. Tapped to the dartboard is his college degree—marketing. “Look, I don’t care if this gets out later, so write what you want. I just don’t want it out now.” This is when I notice his hands. His fingers slim, but broad—yes, like a tampon—but they seem muscular, no room for the pudginess I often notice in peoples’ hands. His fingernails are bitten raw. There’s a tan line on his left ring finger, a gold band on his right. His fingers run through his hair, and he brings them down to his eyes as he rubs them. “This is the dumbest career I could have ever chosen.” He stares at the floor, expressionless, chuckles enough that his shoulders rise, then he lets out one good laugh, the volume, robust, full of life. He stands, opens the door back up, and continues speaking.

The power may have shifted since Palmer retired, but what hasn’t changed since his absence is the process. What happens after a catch, is Jacobson has what he says are his “What’s-up calls.”

As of this afternoon, Riccardo’s of Virginia was advised they have to change the lettering in their company name—and possibly move states—as Virginia looks too much like Vagina, or Virgin, or Virginal, or vaginal. Jacobson shakes his head as he speaks into the phone. “Hey,” he says, conceding to the absurdity, “when the kid sees a dick, somebody else will, too.” He lets the other side of the phone speak for a minute until Jacobson clearly cuts him off. “I’m just telling you what he sees, and trust me, you don’t want this kind of mess on your hands.” Comez, listening in, laughs—I do, too—Jacobson hangs up, and nods. He gets it, too.

Comez makes \$350, (Dean Mallorg, an eighteen-year-old high school drop-out, makes a hundred) and Riccardo's of Virginia avoids embarrassment. Win-win.

The day for the average catcher begins at 12:30 p.m. at the earliest. At Palmer's beginning, he expressed that a month into the job, he was pulling seventeen hour days, going through several hundred advertisements in the morning alone. It was an enjoyable seventeen hours, however, filled with jovial, almost-asthmatic laughter—once, an oxygen tank was supplied when an afternoon's selection was a series of body hair removal and personal massaging devices.

During the summer months of 2002, other marketing firms caught wind of what Hossler and Palmer were doing, and tried making makeshift catchers of their own, recruiting from sexual deviant clinics of Southern Baptist churches, promising that they'd be doing the Lord's work. Busloads of "sick" young men were unleashed into the Manhattan advertising district and given simple instructions to say what they saw. Nothing compared, however, to the work Palmer produced (he caught an unintentional "Circle Game" in a presidential everything's okay TV spot—for those unfamiliar with the Circle Game, it's basically a vagina). However, Palmer and Hossler's rates were almost overpriced for most companies, and they opted for something a little more bargain-bin. Though it took away some of Palmer's business, he remained, to what most considered, to be the only option. Until, of course, he wasn't. Other companies began recruiting more fitting candidates—a lot of the most successful catchers were members in the abstaining step of a Pennsylvania Pornography Addiction Anonymous group—which is where I had first heard of the 'catcher position'—I was a member. The idea behind the recruitment was

that those of us abstaining were more likely to see what we were feeling withdrawn from—though most of us were men, we weren't actively seeking images that looked like a penis, but it was still something that triggered our minds towards our addictions. The people who came to our group refused to give us a company name, but promised we could become rich, that we should think of that meeting as an audition. An audition where they showed us photos of fruit salad, lip stick cylinders, dog food bowls, diaper boxes (where I suggested there were too many Os in their slogan "Ooooooh, Baby." I wasn't chosen for the job, but I was given twenty bucks. Seven others in my group—including two women—were given full-time jobs and free lodging in Brooklyn.

Palmer's number had gone down by this time, and (regrettably, for the money's sake) a maturing Palmer considered retirement. "He grew up," Jacobson said, "overnight, almost. He said he met somebody—a woman, a doctor. After her, he couldn't catch a tit on a cow." Maturity: the death sentence. His hours went from seventeen and weeded down to five and change. Jacobson hired a new crew, and the others took over from there. By then, my PAA group was down to three members, and I was on step eleven and learning sign language to keep my hands busy.

The catching process is simple: A group of (on average) six will come into a room—a plain white box, a solid-oak table without polish, no windows, seats bolted to the floor (anything to limit distraction—nothing shiny, nothing with joints or hinges or wheels). They look at print-ups until 3 p.m. Sometimes, however, the meeting times may go longer.

For instance, once, a folded piece of prepackaged deli turkey perfectly resembled the vulva. Work halted for two hours while the group refocused. Daily caught it instantly, though it's speculated he's never seen a real vagina.

"Wikipedia's a Godsend." He huffs on his inhaler. "It's important to stay on the top of my game. I mean, Comez, sure, maybe he's seen one. He's kind of a geek too, but this Mexican kind of God-like looking geek. But we've got this frat guy in the group. He's seen one. Imagine if he caught it first. I'd be out three hundred bucks and a job." The "frat guy," Jamie Yunker, 19, a former corn shucker for a canned corn factory in Southfield, New Mexico, has recently been let go. Jacobson states it's because the best catch he ever had was seeing a tampon in a full page tampon ad meant to feature a women's' health magazine. "I got rid of him just in time," Jacobson says. "Election season is coming."

This is what the American public seems to misjudge: they believe these companies only work for magazines, television and billboards, but really, these catchers and their so-called post-teen dipshit shenanigans are what a lot politicians have been calling political lifesavers.

For example, the '06 race for an Oklahoman mayoral position featured the, now mayor-elect's wife as the sole spokeswoman for the "higher-calorie intake position," so successfully that Stuart Ruffas maintained 68% of the electoral votes based on the save-the-fat-ticket.

"Butter Up!" was Ruffas' call to fame for Oklahoma dairy farmers. Unions had controlled most of the production values, and during the last election, voters proclaimed they no longer wanted big business in their daily dairy intake. Up stepped Ruffas, an almost-retired

dairy farmer, ready to settle down behind the desk while his seven sons took over his livelihood.

The 66-year-old roughneck took on the union's involvement throughout his campaign, stating the citizens of Oklahoma are self-sustainable. As he stated, "We can buy our own goddamned butter."

It was a publicist's dream, and soon after, propaganda posters were planned out, one of which made it to the office of Hossler, Inc.

The particular poster presented to the table showed a smiling Ruffas and wife, a nice farm setting scene—oaks and maples coloring orange, red, and yellow, grazing cattle, a red tractor. In lettering: "We need it! Up the butter sales!"

It was Ian Watchfield, 23, of Hollows Edge, Montana, who caught it first.

"I've had a subscription to Mad Magazine for fifteen years," he says. "You know, the end of the magazine? Those fold-ups gags?"

"I've never heard a man laugh like Watchfield," says Comez. "And at the time, I was, like, 'what's he see? There's nothing there.'

"He stood up, folded the poster in half, and—"

Comez cannot finish his sentence, he appears too astounded to laugh.

Folded in half, just perfectly, the poster shows a smiling couple. The words printed: We need it Up the butt

Ruffas reflects: “I received a call from my campaign manager who had spoken to the Hossler group.” He shakes his head, in disbelief, possibly. “We averted disaster.

“My wife,” he says, “would have been mortified.”

Ruffas accredited the Hossler group during his acceptance speech, and personally invited Westfield out for a visit—a gleaming photo-op of man and small businessman collaboration—and states that everything he has now, and is working toward, is because of the minds of middle-America. “We are all American,” Ruffas said in a recent interview. “What people don’t understand is that we’re all dirty, worn-out, and just a little bit warped. Why can’t we survive and progress on that idea anymore?” Long-story short, Ruffas asks, why are we apologizing and trying to hide our rough edges? “So,” he added, “buy goddamned butter. God bless Oklahoma and her cows.”

But what happens when one of these overpraised frat boys gets an idea that overturns the entire idea of a company? What happens when the desire for a sex sells kind of advertising becomes the demand, when depravity becomes the business?

That’s where Brian Lux, Palmer’s protégé, of sorts, comes into play. If you consider The Palm to be the master, consider Lux to be the blindness your grandmother warned you about. When The Palm started losing his touch—he missed, not only a breast, but an entire risen nipple in the rivets of an Amur Corktree in an ad for breakfast oats—it was Lux who inherited to the smut-catching throne.

However, when The Palm stepped down, Lux left the Hossler group, stating he was going off to sow his own wild oats, as they say. Everybody, Jacobson, especially, believed that Lux left out of loyalty, but instead of sowing, he left to build his own advertising empire in the shadows. For three years, Lux labored over two questions: why have these obscenities been taken out, and why are there so few for us to find?

Certainly family-oriented breakfast food companies didn't want shocking images of folded-over eggs and half-bitten sausages subliminally projected into the minds of their buyers' innocent children, but what if, Lux questioned, some did? What if you could sell mediocre products by simply selling to a depraved sense of humor?

Arise, ADCO.

Consider this: of the Hossler group and all of their contemporaries, they maintain a revenue of \$46.8 million a year. Lux and ADCO alone have produced half that during the second quarter of their start-up year. They may not be working as much, but their rates are higher. Advertising companies are no longer being told what's off about their ad, but instead, what's lacking. So, essentially, ADCO has overtaken the creative process.

Lux's last project for the Hossler group was for a toothpaste company—of which he caught, of course, a too-phallic toothbrush. He made his report, earned his money, and made the “what's up” call to the head of that advertising office himself. At the end of the call, Lux said, “I'm going to call you in two years. Remember my name.” And to his word, two years later, Lux walked into the office of Pete Goldman and pitched the turn of a sales revolution.

A month later, Shine Toothpaste showcased an ad in a men's magazine as a centerfold. It features the head of a thin, young woman that begins at the bridge of her nose, and ends at what appears to be her naked shoulders—in actuality, she wore a Legalize-it beach towel for the shot. Toothpaste foam—mixed heavily with saliva—dripped from the model's mouth down her chin. She's blatantly licking her upper lip. Under that, it reads: "To get the dirty, you first need the clean." Sales of Shine shot up three-hundred percent in under a month, and Lux no longer has to pay for toothpaste or toothbrushes ever again.

Cue Jacobson and the Hossler group: "We're not worried. Hossler is still the original," Jacobson states. "Family and public interest magazines outweigh the more adult venues 7 to 1, and the only way that ADCO could take business away from us is if Lux himself begins to take our catchers. And that won't happen. Lux knows we only hire idiots."

What I learned during my last interview with Palmer, and what puzzles me most now, was how remarkably well Palmer was at apathy. Around his wife, I was astounded how little he cared for life, how outspoken he was about no longer experiencing happiness in the life he once had, how purposeless was the word he said most. As I sat with him, his wife and their son, I felt like I was sitting in on a silent, couples' therapy session rather than a family interview. His wife was coy, accepting, and he was tired. Motionless as though he was on his death bed. When asked of love, they stared blankly forward. Neither acknowledged the other sitting in the chair parallel. Rhoda didn't move to look to her own son. Palmer didn't blink. Love? Their faces suggested that they've heard of it, and they looked beyond the walls of the room, maybe stupefied by a memory of once feeling something like it, that maybe there was a point where this pestering word, this motivation of the human spirit to connect with somebody else, was, at one time, the

only thing in their lives, that it's what they thrived upon, it's what quenched their thirst for life. Maybe he had her lips, she had his heart, and when they came together, the world stopped—maybe what they were was the epitome of every love cliché imaginable. Maybe they were the mold. But when I sat with them, love was a word from dust, and they spoke of their marriage like a bad road trip through the desert, something they've rid themselves of years ago, something they wouldn't acknowledge until somebody shook out the sand for them, reminding them of what they both had agreed to.

I had asked of marital misdeeds, and Rhoda opened up to sleeping next to—not with—a man who sold subway tokens. She recalled this to the room as though it were a dream she had once, never admitted in her voice the reality of it all. Palmer nodded, as he'd heard it before, and remained, as I assumed, unaffected. Her story, her life, was the chalk smearing of an erased green board—gone, but still lingering. Richard smiled—he had met the subway token man, would accompany his mother on some of the dates to some movies, the zoo, a water park. “Uncle Glenn,” Richard called him. Two Ns, as in the astronaut.

Palmer, too, admitted infidelity, however, that was when Rhoda's head turned from the floor—this is the first she's heard of it. I noticed the Palmers' age. We were the same age, but they seemed worn out, as if they had recovered from the flu, and Richard, awfully young for his age, rubbed an orange crayon on a complimentary newspaper. There was no shape, no plan, no picture drawn, no moon, or dinosaur, or straw hut. Wax on ink, on week-old news bleeding through chaos. Fitting.

Other than the woman Palmer had been with, he had never spoken of the affair until then. Rhoda listened. Richard had left the room after Palmer unfolded two dollars and gave him directions to the candy machine. “Down the hall, to the right, next to the womens’ shitter. Easy as that. Bring back change.” When the door closed behind Richard, the story ensued.

Enter the sexual mind of an immature twenty-two year-old genius and you’ll see how easy it was to find love in the little things. Say, for example, a name—such as Rhoda paired with Palmer—that was the basis for a marriage proposal. Consider how easy it was for that same man to become sidetracked when a deaf, female doctor checked him for a hernia, fingers pressed firmly up between the testicles, thumb keeping it all in place, looked up and said in deaf-speak, Ow koff.

That was Dr. Carrie Tak.

“In that small moment,” Palmer said, no curl in his lips, no twitch of a grin, “I grew more than I thought possible.” He then turned to Rhoda as Richard walked back into the room, announced that he had a Butt-erfinger. “We had a kid together, and then she found out I was already married.” He turned to me, picked at a crease in his pants. “She was upset, and I was never able to fix that.”

Dr. Tak, deaf since birth, signs she’s closer to forty than twenty-one. She is a burly woman who, as a child, survived on a diet of Kentucky wheat and salted pork. Her father farmed corn for bourbon distilleries and raised a handful of pigs. Her family lived comfortably for full house of eight, but her father spent most of the family money building his own distillery, coupled with an

invented process to take rendered hog fat and supply it to the alcohol without it appearing cloudy. The project was a failure—drinkers said it tasted more like wallowed-in mud than bacon. At the time, Tak was eighteen and ventured away from the farm, only to return during school holidays. Nothing changed, she states. Her father's still there, tinkering, trying to get the solution just right. Her six siblings—all brothers—have moved on. Three teach high school, one is a public pool life guard, and one hasn't been heard from in years. Their mother quilts. "Getting pretty good at it, too," Dr. Tak says.

Her affair with Palmer was brief, spanning only over a couple of weekends over a couple of months. She signs something that looks more like someone air-drumming a rim-shot than something in ASL. Our translator—my comprehension skills are not yet interview-ready—shakes his head in bewilderment. Whatever it is, it looks difficult to achieve. Whatever it is, Palmer had done it. Whatever it is, it produced another child, Palmer's second son, Pavo. As Tak and I converse, Pavo sits quietly, flips through the pages of a book on dogs. "He's enamored," she signs. "Sometimes I see him walking on all fours, sometimes wants to eat his dinner on the floor." She smiles, so does the translator. "Who am I to refuse the man of the house?" And she scratches Pavo on the head, behind the ear, and his foot shakes.

Tak says that Palmer paid her a visit a week after he and I had sat down for the last time. She was struck by how much he had aged, matured. "He was a different person," she says. "Not the man I was with." The last time she had seen him, was in her examination room, and he took her right there, and she found that the exam table had better leverage than any bed she's been in. She could only imagine what the table paper sounded like. To her left, a poster of showing the anatomy of tonsils hung. To the right were tongue depressors.

Tak reads lips well—the only signing I had to do was for my own enjoyment—and during their last encounter, she read from him, “Keep talking. Keep talking.”

“Nobody’s ever mentioned wanting to hear my voice before,” she says. “As though I would think it’s insulting. But he wanted to hear it, so I repeated the Hippocratic Oath until we were finished. He was first,” she says. “But he made sure that I was—” she stops signing to our translator and says to me, blushing. “Ak-len air ov.” And I’ll admit, too, she does have a stirring voice, and a full toothed smile that reminds me of vanilla ice cream, of rooftop snow, of mint Mentos before Diet Coke.

“But then,” she signs. “He told me about his wife. So, I punched him in the ear and told him to get out, and I didn’t reach out to him until our son was born.” She wrote to him to say she didn’t want to see him, but for the sake of their child, she would keep him updated. She added if he came around, she’d perform a vasectomy. “That’s not the first time I’ve ended an e-mail with that,” she says.

When asked if he had attempted to come around, she signs, “Only once. To say he was leaving. He sends letters.” Every week, she adds. “Just to let me know he’s alive.”

I’ve looked at them all. His letters mention nothing specific of his whereabouts, but the postmarks map his journey well enough. Three letters from Illinois, one each from Kentucky and Tennessee, five from Missouri, seven from Kansas, one from Colorado, two from Utah, Nevada, and one last letter from Idaho—the second of the two most phallic states in the country. His letters represent nothing of the man I interviewed in ’08. These are letters full of love and desire. Lust appears, too, but only in the Utah letters. He asks after Pavo, who is now

in Kindergarten and shows no signs of advanced immaturity. This is what concerns Palmer the most—that he may slip from the right path—and, sometimes, Tak wishes she could respond to him, letting him know everything is on track. Pavo’s marks in school are high, and he spends most of his free time playing with his friends, or sitting quietly and reading books about dogs, or home medical journals—the page on circumcision is bookmarked with a Dunkin’ Doughnuts receipt—two doughnuts and a large coffee. \$2.12.

Palmer’s first letter suggests that he’s on the road with a group that calls themselves The Righteous Path, a spiritual group whose purpose in life is surfing with Jesus.

Their leader, Atlas Holcomb, whom I met in Kansas, speaks like the 80’s clichéd surfer knob—every sentence ends with “right?” However, his bra accent is full, so it always sounds like he’s saying riot. “So, I’m driving in the van, riot, and I see Jesus. And he’s looking at me and my bra, Louie. And he, Jesus, riot, is, like, on the side of the road with a hang-ten, riot, and that’s when we knew, riot, that we had to pick him up and head to California. Holistic waves, bra. Healing, through the word of our most righteous bra ever. Our one true Lord, riot?”

But Jesus never got into the van. Instead, he said he’d meet Holcomb and his crew at Cape Vizcaino, CA, at the time of the rapture. They’ll ride the waves into the afterlife, they’ll ride to kingdom come, to their one last light.

When asked when the Rapture will be, Holcomb shakes his head. “He never said, riot, but I’m waiting for another sign, and I’ve gotten a lot, a lot of followers, bra. And yeah,” Holcomb said, looking at the last known photo of Palmer, “he’s one of them. He met up with one of ours, riot, and traveled on foot, riot. That’s a sign, too, riot.”

The traveler Holcomb speaks of is a Florida native who goes by the name Halleluiah Gracious—this is what he calls himself, his given name is Dwayne Grant. He’s taken a vow of silence ever since meeting Palmer on the road. He communicates through paper and pen and keeps a journal he hopes will one day be the Gospel According to Halleluiah Gracious. I suggest the Gospel According to Dwayne sounded better, but Gracious shakes his head. We sit in a Boise coffee shop, a place he agreed—through letter—to meet and speak with me about Palmer. I wasn’t aware when I planned for the interview, that my tape recorder would be useless—it only picks up the sound of silverware on coffee cups, other customers, and myself, asking questions.

“I am no longer Dwayne” he writes, his hand writing, a mix between tax accountant and puppies-4-sale. “Ever since I met Him.” Who is Him? Apparently, Palmer, if you believe Gracious’ journal, which is an amazingly detailed account of his travels with Palmer—starting when they met at a fireworks stand, to the end—three months later—where Gracious fell asleep in the night, woke up in the morning to Palmer’s empty clothes and shoes, and no sign of Palmer.

Gracious writes that, four weeks into their journey (on foot), while in a Laundromat at three a.m., both were clothed only in briefs and socks (they were “washing as we go”), and Gracious plucked a white feather the size of a pinky fingernail from the fat side of Palmer’s shoulder blade, blood stained calamus. “I knew then, my gracious Lord was with me, and I then clasped my mouth, never to speak again. Halleluiah, Gracious almighty, I have found Him.” Read on, and see Palmer refused to believe him, frustrated ultimately with having, “Another person in my life who won’t speak to me. Jesus Christ!”

I was not allowed to take the journal with me, so I read as much as I could while Gracious drank his coffee and looked at the birds out in the parking lot. There isn't much to report—his ramblings, though detailed, do not extend outside of the fact that he believes he found the second-coming, and lost him, and missed the Rapture, writing of the wasted redwoods at the Cape "Prepared for nothing." He didn't care to expand on that passage.

Palmer's letters say nothing of traveling with Gracious, nothing of leaving him. There is some written about Cape Vizcaino and his associations with The Righteous Path (mostly saying he met some people, and heard the West was nice), but what I've read in these letters of his spends a great deal worrying about the end of the world. However, Tak doesn't seem concerned. "He's getting older," she says. "He left his wife and son, his career, found out he has another son. I won't let myself love him or see him, and now he's on the road. It's only natural he got a little nutty. A little paranoid."

Paranoia is not the right word for what Palmer's letters suggest. It's borderline obsession, and they're getting worse:

"I think it's still another year away. I have my telescope and I aim it to the southwest at 2 a.m. and I look for it, and it's not moving like the stars. I see it getting bigger, brighter. I want you to see what I see, feel what I see. I wish you could hear me, Carrie. I wish you could hear you. I wish I could call you and listen to you ask who's there. I think I'll send you a phone soon. All I want is to hear your voice. Some days I feel like coming back just so you can talk to me, to hear no harm to anyone. I'll return soon enough. Once I find it, I'll return for you and Pavo, and we'll wait. We'll wait."

This is his last letter to her, postmarked from Oregon—she hasn't heard anything in three weeks. With it was a Stormy Kromer cap for Pavo, which he wears proudly to school. Inside the cap is a note written strictly for Pavo, and nobody else. Tak hasn't read it, and after some coaxing—I sign, May I? Important. Pavo hands me the slip of paper. It reads:

“I heard that what I'm searching for is something that has never been found, a promise of something much more satisfying than this hat.”

I turn to Tak, and I have the urge to hear her voice, no matter what words she may say. I sign Speak to her, and Pavo barks.

A Rock Named Pavlov

This is the dream-freeze, when the dinosaurs emerge from their sand castles, when the peripheral collapses, when haunches stalk, when arms bend and ready the teeth, when everything but the throat and the brain says, *Run*, when only the brain says, *Stay*. *What can I see?*

This is what happens when the sky opens, when black smoke and frayed ozone follows the orange bulb. The brain says, *This has never been seen*. The brain says, *Observe*. The brain says, *The ground burns*. The brain says, *Okay*. The brain says, *Okay*. The brain says, *Okay, I have seen*. The brain says, *Recoil the tongue and drink*. The brain says, *Now*. And instinct says, *Run*.

This is the instinct that allows no dog to drown by accident. This is the instinct that allows rhinoceroses to charge swaying weeds, the instinct that tells lionesses to stalk the long grass, giraffes to drink in turns, salmon to swim against the current, grasshoppers to swarm at open mouths. This is the instinct that supplies survival with the ultimatum—eat or starve, drink or wither, kill or watch. This is the instinct that says, *Run in the other direction, away from the shockwave, the light, the resurrection, the heat*. This instinct says, *What's not seen is slowest*. Says, *What's slowest is beaten*. Says, *Beat*.

This is the instinct that releases endorphins from the adrenal glands—the kidney huggers. The left, the overturned wedge of a frown. The right, the opposite, the ghostly hallow of an open cave. Together, they wake even the most extinguished legs, turn the acid into a tingle instead of a blaze. Those in wheelchairs, weathered and stringy, tremor and contract, and even they find themselves turning from fire, knowing it's nothing more than backdrop to the

weeds, to the grass, to the grasshoppers who refuse to acknowledge the difference.

This is the last trick the mind plays, when the pang for oxygen goes unnoticed, when dream becomes the rumor of the life once lived, when death comes soundlessly as glacier emissions. Do not blame instinct. Do not blame chemistry. Do not blame fate or karma or perpetual chance or genetic engineering or artificial flavoring, the seashells in lipstick and dandruff shampoo. Reasoning is what the brain creates to distract from the moment, the reality. Do not blame the brain. It only escapes because that, too, is instinct.

This is the manipulation of the mind that remembers the grocery store, the avocados, when the soft squeeze into flesh is the only movement that matters, when the recoil leaves only a thumbprint, when the baby girl sits in the shopping cart. Her hair, her curls, fire-red eddies. Her voice, wondrous and new, naming the cabbage *doggy*. Naming the cantaloupe *doggy*. Naming the zucchini *doggy*.

This is the instinct that says, *This is wrong*. Says, *That is cabbage*. *That is cantaloupe*. *That is zucchini*, but the mind says, *No*. *That is doggy*, and in the cart are fourteen doggies and a baby girl who pets flannel as though it can feel her fingers, as though it can come alive and respond to her touch, that it can lick her face with the fabric tongue that reminds her of the crib blanket. This is what makes her push her face against the shirt, because this is what she's seen. This is what she knows. This is what tells her, *Sleep*.

This is only the escape. Ignore the manipulation, of dreams once lived. Ignore the urge to turn. Ignore the liar who says it can be outrun, that time earned comes to those whose pace is quickest, that high ground saves those who ascend the hills. Instead, face it and run toward

the fire. Be the one whose toes burn before the heels. Be the one with the open mouth, the one who salivates, the one who devours the world-eater.