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Frontiers

Justin Lawrence Daugherty
Northern Michigan University

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FRONTIERS

By

Justin Lawrence Daugherty

THESIS

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This thesis by Justin Lawrence Daugherty is recommended for approval
by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of
English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Committee Chair: Prof. Jennifer A. Howard 04/05/12

First Reader: Prof. Matthew Frank 04/05/12

Second Reader: Dr. Gabriel Brahm 04/05/12

Department Head: Dr. Raymond Ventre 04/05/12

Assistant Provost for Graduate Education and Research: Dr. Brian Cherry 04/05/12

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NAME:

Justin Lawrence Daugherty

DATE OF BIRTH:

10/09/1981

ABSTRACT

FRONTIERS

By

Justin Lawrence Daugherty

This thesis contains eighteen short stories and pieces of creative nonfiction dealing, in various ways, with the frontier: frontiers of the mind, the heart, and the land.

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Justin Lawrence Daugherty
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DEDICATION

For Merideth, for putting up with me.

For Brian, for being my ideal reader.

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Thanks to the publications where some of my work has appeared: "A History of Loneliness in 23 Acts (of Love)" in *The Normal School*; "What the Crow Does: A Lyric Essay" in *Used Furniture Review*; "Blood" in *SmokeLong Quarterly* as a Story of the Week and in their quarterly issue; "The Essentials and Methods of Survival" in *Hot Metal Bridge*; and "The Lobster Queen" in *LITnIMAGE*.

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INTRODUCTION

A Hole in the Heart

The frontier is dead. No Wild West, no Mt. Everest begging to be climbed for the first time, just because it's there. Adventure is dead, gone, vanished. What, then, must the hero do, how to respond to what Joseph Campbell called the *call to adventure*? What of the heart, the organ that, while primarily life-sustaining, *longs* for something else, something outside? If the external frontiers have all been conquered, the object of wanting, then, becomes something internal, an itch deep inside that begs to be scratched. And, often, that itch is impossible to get at, a thing imbedded so deep it cannot be found.

We seek out the things we think we want – love, sex, recognition – only to find that, once we have them, we are dissatisfied, frenzied, at a loss. We want more. We are hungry, we are ravenous. And, then, that's not good enough. It's something defective in the heart, perhaps – the physical organ, sure, but also the metaphorical heart we speak of when we talk about love. There's an emptiness, some hole to be filled. Or, sometimes, it's the failure in pursuit that causes us to try harder to find that which we seek.

My fiction and nonfiction are concerned primarily by the pursuit, either by the dissatisfied or the desirous, of something: love, resolution, renewal. That

something is often unknown, a frontier my characters seek to find. For some, that frontier is true love, unrequited and visceral and *real*. For others, it is closeness or acceptance or safety. Or, it is connection, real connection, to the land that they seek, whether in Antarctica or the Nebraskan plains or the fishing waters off the coast of Maine.

I've found myself in that pursuit at times, lost in a world I do not know how to navigate, and it is that pursuit that defines my work. Seeking out that something, that frontier, has always pulled at me. Where does the pursuit of frontier come from, though? What makes this romantic, unrealistic desire for a far-off frontier so real for people? And, how do you define that desire? Where does it lead? These questions are all central to what my fictional characters face and the connections I strive for in my creative nonfiction.

I often find myself turning to short fiction and essays to find how characters and real people navigate their frontiers. When I write, I have to read. If I am crafting a short story, I need to have a short story collection (or two, or three) with me, available for inspiration. The same goes for essay writing. A well-worn book sits next to me, thumbed through over and over and over, studied for elements of craft such as how Charles D'Ambrosio writes dialogue or how Stuart Dybek's language gives his world an elegiac quality. I look at Annie Proulx's Wyoming stories for turns of phrase, for immediacy of voice. Caitlin Horrocks

shows me how to generate quiet wisdom in a story. Karen Hays for form and ingenuity in nonfiction. I absorb literature like a black hole swallows sound, matter.

I read for form and content and craft. When I first started writing, I needed these books, knowing nothing of craft, of how to create a beautiful sentence or a meaningful passage of description. I look back on my early work – some of which can be found, in far-different manifestations, in this text – and I might cringe, asking myself if I really wrote that metaphor or that description. The ability to look back on one's old work and find faults with technique is, I think, a sign of growth.

How did I get here? I wonder. I moved in Marquette as a tyro, unable (yet) to craft surprising metaphors or break a reader's heart with a single sentence. This is not to say that I have arrived in any sense, but that I have traveled, at least, and that I am in a different, and better, place than I started. But, there was a moment when I was certain I had not traveled at all.

In the fall of 2011, I was mostly defeated by my writing. I felt as though I had not improved, grown. I felt sorry for myself. No publications to speak of, no evidence that I had actually utilized my time in graduate school well. Graduation loomed and I was sure that I would see my time in school as a failed enterprise. As I cobbled together Ph.D. applications, I was dismayed by my work, unable to

justify, to myself, sending any one story out as evidence of my worthiness. I revised and revised, but I remained stressed, uncertain. I questioned continuing on – with applications, with writing. I was sure I was never going to *make it* as a writer. I was facing the kind of frontier – the choice of giving up or moving forward – where my characters find themselves.

Hindsight being what it is, it's easy to write this as an "I told you so" address to myself at the end of 2011, to say, "Hey, look, you're publishing and making a presence, even if it's a small one." I would tell my old self to settle down, to just write and stop being so serious about it all. To just let it all fall into place because it will eventually come together. It is easy to say all of this because I have proof in the publications and my own scoffing at older work, evidence of growth, movement.

I am a firm believer in the notion that no one can be a great writer – or, even a mildly-competent one – if they do not read voraciously. The reader-becoming-a-writer needs absorption, to soak in the rays of a radiant literary sun through the studied reading of people like Cormac McCarthy, David Means, Andrea Barrett, Eula Biss, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and so on. I learned to write, first, through mimesis, through the careful studying of texts for technique that then turned to

imitation in my own work. Embarrassingly, some of my early work imitated – or, tried to imitate – too much. I tried too hard to *sound like* Cormac McCarthy, awestricken by great, beautiful passages that described in such a way as to create a dream, such as this passage from *Blood Meridian*:

Already you could see through the dust on the ponies' sides the painted chevrons and the hands and rising suns and birds and fish of every device like the shade of old work through sizing on a canvas and now too you could hear above the pounding of the unshod hooves the piping of the quena, flutes made from human bones, and some among the company had begun to saw back on their mounts and some to mill in confusion when up from the offside of those ponies there rose a fabled horde of mounted lancers and archers bearing shields bedight with bits of broken mirrorglass that cast a thousand unpieced suns against the eyes of their enemies (52).

It was passages like this that fueled my initial desires to write. I wanted to be a great writer, to really create work that lasted, that people found beautiful and valuable. I wanted to be a writer. That was all I knew when I started out, imitating the words of writers I admired, trying to figure out how they did what they did, how to make stories really come alive.

Short stories, though, were really what I found myself diving into when I began writing. The tightness of a short story, the need for every word and movement and action to matter, was appealing as a beginning writer needing focus and attention to detail. I turned to writers like David Means, whose beautiful sentences unfurled like pythons, though every single word was necessary and could not be wasted, as in "The Grip":

If no one dies in the story, this is how it will be: the two of them a day later getting back on the boat and returning to the mainland, watching the landscape slip behind the boat, the gulls dashing above the wake, and the wake itself smoothing out from the v, fading off into the eternal uproar of the North Atlantic. (82)

I admired Means' sentences for their heft, the way so many of them branched and wound in upon themselves before turning out again. I wanted to write the way Means wrote: capturing stunning images in great elegiac rivers of words. With other parts of Means' writing, it was the image itself or the way he captured a moment, often small and seemingly insignificant, that compelled me. "Sault Ste. Marie," a story in the great collection, *The Secret Goldfish*, portrays Means' great talent for image-building:

For a long time we didn't say a word. We just drove. The radio was playing a Neil Young song. We turned it up, and then up some

more, and left it loud like that, until it was just so much rattling noise, a high nasal twang caught in a cyclone of distortion. (31)

Means' writing, like McCarthy's, inspired me to try harder to create arresting images and sentences.

I have changed immensely as a writer since first beginning graduate school, though I still retain those early sources of inspiration. I no longer use mimesis as a way to create stories. I have moved away from the bad dialogue, poorly-imagined scenes, and odd metaphors of my early writing. This, of course, was possible through not only the invaluable advice and attention of others, but also through the countless hours spent reading stories again and again, drawing from them the basic building blocks of craft.

I have absorbed many authors as part of that growth, studying their words in order to become a better writer of stories. I have often returned to Anthony Doerr's "The Hunter's Wife" for the action that courses throughout the story. I have found, more and more, that I dislike the navel-gazing of much contemporary writing, stories where nothing happens and characters refuse to take action. Doerr's story is replete with action and movement:

A coyote hacked as it choked on something. Others shifted and panted. Maybe there were ten. Elk arrows were all he had, aluminum shafts tipped with broadheads. He squatted in the dark

entryway—their only exit—with his bow at full draw and an arrow nocked. Above him he could hear his wife’s feet pad silently over the floorboards. A coyote made a coughing sound. He began to fire arrows steadily into the dark. He heard some bite into the foundation blocks at the back of the crawlspace, others sink into flesh...The coyote were in a frenzy. Blood bloomed from his wrist, his thigh. (56)

In my time in graduate school, I have evolved from that sort of inactive story to writing with a distinct eye for movement and action.

The ability to create meaningful action comes, of course, through careful attention to characters’ desires and needs, through knowing their hearts. I have, I think, grown in my ability to get close to my characters, to *really* know them. I now think actively about conflict as part of pre-writing a story. What’s really at stake for this person? I ask. I am better with dialogue and scene setting. With making things happen. With scene. Metaphors. Images. Story.

Others writers have helped shape this growth, people like George Saunders, Jim Shepard, Lydia Peelle, Wells Tower, Karen Russell and Barry Hannah. Denis Johnson’s spare but powerful stories helped me think about concision. Annie Proulx’s work helped me think deeply about the role the natural world plays in my writing. These writers’ work has stayed with me because of

their explorations of the desirous heart, the way a single moment can shatter or enlighten a life.

George Saunders writes absurd and humorous stories that often, despite their irreverence and satire, break the reader's heart. I have to admit that one of my great hopes as a writer is to create fiction that causes that heartbreak, that makes the reader's insides twist and turn. I often think of the ending of Saunders' story, "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline," as a great example of this. In the story, the narrator goes about his work at a Civil War recreation park, watching the park security guards as he kills punk teenagers and attendants breaking the rules. This killing is absurd, of course, but comes to a great and powerful moment where the guard realizes that the narrator, too, is a problem:

Possessing perfect knowledge I hover above him as he hacks me to bit. I see his rough childhood. I see his mother doing something horrid to him with a broomstick. I see the hate in his heart and the people he has yet to kill before pneumonia gets him at eighty-three...I see the man I could have been, and the man I was, and then everything is bright and new and keen with love and I sweep through Sam's body, trying to change him, trying so hard, and feeling only hate and hate, solid as stone. (26)

Saunders turns a story of absurdity and humor into something meaningful, taking this final act of violence and shaping it to turn it into something surprising and heartbreaking for the reader. A moment of realization, of massive upheaval and change, comes through these moments, the times when a character re-evaluated the frontier they have found and sees it truly and clearly for the first time.

Lydia Peelle, like Saunders, creates a frontier for her characters in "Shadows on a Weary Land" by exposing the town they live in to growth and the influx of outsiders, something many of the people in the Southern setting are afraid of. In the final lines of the story, Peelle gives us her narrator at a crossroads, a moment when he realizes the world is irrevocably changed:

Jubal Cain's heart will tar over with hate until it kills him, and the bulldozers will move steadily up the steepest ridge side...The Musician will stay up all night with a bottle cradled against his chest, watching tapes of his old days on tour, keeping the volume muted, so he cannot hear the applause...*The time is at hand, Dave reads from the book of Revelation, leaning his shovel against his hip and rolling a joint for the end of the world. Fear not, for I am the first and the last, he that lives and he who has died. Which is, and which was, and which is to come.* (189)

It has always been this type of frontier that has interested me as a writer. I want to know what people will do in desperate situations, to reclaim their minds or their hearts or their places in the world. My characters find themselves in somewhat apocalyptic circumstances, places where their lives cannot be what they once were. I deal with people living on the edge. This has always been the writing that most interests me as a reader as well.

Denis Johnson's narrator in his collection *Jesus' Son* lives on the fringes. In "Dirty Wedding," he finds himself wondering what has happened to a lost love, a woman he got pregnant. The pregnancy and Michelle's subsequent abortion had been one of the possible reasons he had lost her. At one moment, the narrator reflects on this loss:

Out in front of the abortion building picketers shook drops of holy water at us and twisted their rosaries around their fingers. A man in dark glasses shadowed Michelle right up the big steps to the door, chanting softly in her ear. I guess he was praying. What were the words of his prayer? I wouldn't mind asking her that question. But it's winter, the mountains around me are tall and deep with snow, and I could never find her now. (92)

Johnson's characters are always in motion, always on the verge of losing everything. I am most interested in characters on the edge because they require

action. They find themselves in places they never imagined, frontiers, and are forced to move into action.

Lives are fraught with turbulence, moments that alter the course of our time on earth forever. There is a lot of fiction out there, I feel, that deals in the quieter moments of change, the things that require mostly thought and introspection. I am not interested in quiet moments. I write with the idea that real action, which is sometimes violent, is what changes us and allows us to change our situations. Too many stories reside in the quietude of suburbia and the “real” world, places where characters wrestle with lives of quiet desperation, but only internally. They never have to physically confront the demons and ghosts that haunt them. I am interested in the dirtiness of life, the moments of violent upheaval that cause us to find new ways to live.

These works in this thesis represent my evolution as a writer. Some of the pieces in this manuscript originally lacked plot or distinctive voice or resolution. Many of the pieces were not ready for publication, even after strenuous revisions. Some pieces received rejections from editors. Thanks, but this isn't quite there. It lacks ambition, one editor said. I can look back on some of that work now and see those flaws, the things that I could not see then, cracks in the armor.

I have come a long ways as a writer. I still have a long way to go. I catch myself using sloppy metaphors from time to time or rushing an ending just to get a draft finished. It is in the work of my most-respected authors where I find the tools and inspiration to improve. I search, in these works, for the ways in which people confront the frontiers they encounter and how they go about the task of reclaiming their lives in the face of (physical or metaphorical) destruction. In turn, I follow that same path with my characters and in my essays, exploring how people go about getting back the things they have lost or finding something they never had.

POVERTY FOOD

Alex McCoy knew her dad had finally lost it when she found him standing at the end of the docks at three a.m., shooting into the Atlantic Ocean. He fired three shots, three explosions in the dark. He yelled to the Devil, asked him to show his face. They had a score to settle, loose ends to tie up, he said.

Alex walked slowly down the creaking boardwalk, careful not to startle the old man and get shot. When she reached him, he stood, toes over the edge, pointing at the water, head hung low, his left hand rubbing his gray beard, the right arm limp at his side with the gun in hand, swaying loosely as if moved by the wind.

“What is it tonight, pop?” Alex asked.

“Same ol’,” Lyle McCoy said. “The demon’s running scared.”

“He ain’t running. He’s probably just asleep like the rest of the world.”

The owners of the other houseboats stood by their doors watching. Lyle’s unpredictability had become, of late, predictable. People had often threatened to call the police in the past, or, worse, said they might take care of him themselves. One by one, lights went out and people returned to their homes.

“He ain’t ready to give her up yet,” Lyle said. He had believed the Devil abducted his wife, Alex’s mother, for seven months. The night she left, no note

left behind, Lyle walked into St. Elizabeth Anne's Catholic Church, hollering for God to explain the Devil's motives.

"I don't think he's going to be giving her up," Alex said. She knew the truth. Her mom had had enough of everything, of the responsibility of caring for a mentally ill man. She left and started a new life, a sort of reincarnation for the still-living. Alex sat down on the end of the dock. Lyle sat next to her and handed over the gun. The cold metal felt comfortable in her hands, like home.

"We ought to cut their balls off," Trevor said. Alex pulled another slashed line out of the water. Somewhere at the bottom of Rockland Bay, another one of her lobster traps was lost. Someone had been cutting them loose for weeks. Alex couldn't figure a reason. Maybe she'd wandered outside some perceived territory or perhaps the old fashioned men just could not abide a woman in their world. A second generation lobster fisherwoman, Alex thought she had earned better than she got.

"If I knew the bastard cutting my lines, there'd be some sort of violence involved," Alex said. There were a few men she believed might be responsible, men whose takes for the year were low, whose businesses were suffering. The lobster business was down. Everything was down. "My dad tried to shoot the Devil last night."

“Did he succeed?” Trevor asked. He tugged at a line and hauled a trap out of the water. There were three lobsters, two females and one under regulation size. Trevor threw the lobsters back, one by one, and watched them drift downward and out of sight.

“I don’t know what to do with him anymore,” Alex said. “It’s like having a problem dog, a child-biting dog, ‘cept I can’t just put him down.”

Alex had moved her father into the houseboat a month after her mother vanished. His delusions and bouts of madness had been common all of Alex’s life, but her mother had always been there to handle it. Once, he had tried to serve her a bowl of shotgun shells for breakfast. Alex couldn’t blame her mother for being tired.

“What are you going to do?” Trevor asked. He poured a shot of bourbon, drank, poured two more, and handed one to Alex. “For the trouble,” he said.

Alex gulped down the bourbon. “Nothing to do,” she said. “There’s no putting it right.”

Lyle sat between two houseplants in the main room of the houseboat when Alex walked in. He had two steak knives on the floor in front of him. His legs were splayed out in front of him, his back arched forward.

“What are you doing, Dad?” Alex asked.

“Shh. They’re whispering to each other,” Lyle said.

Alex nodded. “What do you want for dinner?”

Lyle waved Alex away and put his ear close to one of the plants, a fern.

Alex walked into the kitchen. She heard her father whistling. The fridge was mostly empty, a few condiments, past-freshness deli meats, and lobster. Lobster, she thought, always lobster. Lyle had served the family lobster often as Alex grew up, a staple of the table due to the slowness of business. Poverty food, he called it, a callback to the history of serving lobster to the poor and criminal.

“Guess what we’re having,” Alex said.

“Povertypovertypoverty,” Lyle muttered from the other room.

Alex walked into the room. The fern had been uprooted from the pot, thrown to the ground. Dirt spread all over the floor. Lyle looked up at her.

“Signals,” he said by way of explanation. “It was sending signals, ringing, in my ears.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll give the hunt up tonight? I could use a night of rest.”

“He’s out there, Alex. Your mother’s in trouble. She’s out there.”

A month earlier, Lucinda, Alex’s mother, had started calling her randomly in the middle of the night. Alex would pick up and Lucinda would start telling her a story about her life, when they were all together. If Alex began speaking, her

mother would talk over her. Once she finished a story, she hung up. Alex had not wanted to tell her dad about the phone calls. In a way, she thought, the belief that Lucinda was still out there to be retrieved, to be saved, was the only thing that kept him anchored.

“I need a boat,” Lyle said. He scooped dirt back into the pot, tried to stuff the fern back in.

“No boats,” Alex said.

“If he’s out there, that’s the only way to get him. He’s a coward. Won’t come to me.”

Alex walked over and helped Lyle put the fern back upright. She looked at it from across the room. It seemed tilted. She dug in the dirt and tried to right the plant. When she moved away again, it still seemed off.

After dinner, Alex drove over to Trevor’s house overlooking the bay. Trevor answered the door in his boxers. His face was blank.

“Are you going to let me in? Or, just stare at me?” Alex asked.

Trevor looked back into the house. He looked back at Alex.

“I need to not be at home right now. You know how it goes sometimes.”

“It’s just that, well,” Trevor trailed off.

"I see, I see." Alex had started sleeping with Trevor, her sternman, as a way to cope with her father. To let off steam. It meant nothing, but she felt suddenly alone, realizing he had someone else in the house, another woman. She turned and looked out at the dark water, the road of moonlight on the surface. "It's not like we're anything," she said and walked down the steps.

"What are we?" Trevor asked. "You never let me know anything. What are we doing?"

"Same thing everyone else does," she said. She walked slowly, waiting for Trevor to come running after her.

Alex sat at the wheel of her lobster boat, a bottle of whiskey on the console, half empty. There was nowhere else to go. Gulls lulled at the edge of the boat just ahead of her. Boat lights shone out in the night. Any one of them might be the man or men cutting her lines.

Her phone rang. "When you were nine, if you remember, your father left you in the woods with a shotgun, an axe, a tent, and a survival manual. He wanted to see how long you would last. He left you there and took up shop in some roadside Maine diner."

"Mom," Alex said.

“By the time I found him, you had been alone in the woods for six hours. When we got to you, you were asleep in the tent, an opened can of Chef Boyardee beef ravioli half-eaten beside you.”

“Stop, mom. Stop.”

“I left everything there and took you in the car. We found your father trying to buy a ride back into town with a handful of peanuts and a Maine roadmap.”

“He loves me,” Alex said. “He loves us.” Love as shown through an act of abandonment.

“The first thing he said when we got him in the car was, ‘All you need is a little tinder and friction to start a fire.’”

Alex woke up to the smell of dead fish. She heard gull calls and boat horns. The whiskey bottle lay empty on the floor beside her. Pain shot through her neck as she tried to sit up, her spine cracking, cracking. It was light out, but she had no idea what time it was. The boats were out in the sea, men already at work. Alex walked out onto the deck. A mound of gulls startled and lifted into the sky, some carrying fishbones away. At some point in her drunkenness, the night before, she had tried to placate the gulls by throwing them fish. She had knocked a freezer

over and returned to the wheel room, falling asleep on the floor. The gulls returned, undeterred by her presence. She vomited over the side of the boat.

Trevor tried to explain things as they prepared to set out for the day. Alex ignored him and went about her work, holding in waves of nausea, the acid and bile bubbling up in her throat. She watched Bo Johnson get ready for the day and wondered if it was him. They had had an argument a year earlier, something over a dog of his that had disappeared on the docks, Bo for some reason suspecting Alex of the crime. Then there was Marvin Beals, the elderly fisherman who barely had enough in him to work in those days. Most of his crew had deserted him, having had enough of his insults and inclination to hurl projectiles in fits of frustration at their heads. Working with only his loyal son-in-law (who probably hoped to inherit the sad little business), he barely made a go of it, always on the verge of having to shut down. There were others preparing their days' work in the pre-dawn dark. Any one of these men could have cut her lines, graffitied her boat. There was at least one reason any one of them might have for coming after her. Even Trevor, always wanting more from her and always being pushed away, had motive.

“Are you even listening?” Trevor asked. He readied new traps to replace the ones they would haul up out of the bay later.

"I'm really not," Alex said. "I'd rather we just forget it all and get to work."

"This is always the way with you."

Alex and her mother had always been alike. Before her dad had started losing it, their marriage always seemed at the most like a mostly-platonic friendship. How long would it take her, caring for a man she could not really help or fix, before she abandoned him, too?

"I'm thinking about leaving," Trevor said.

Bo Johnson caught Alex watching and looked back at her. "We're not even together," Alex said.

"That's not what I meant. I don't think we should work together."

"We're both adults here. If you can't work with me, I understand."

Everyone Alex saw on the docks was suspect. But, then, nobody seemed any more likely than the others, either. Perhaps her father was onto something. Maybe the Devil really was in Maine, pulling at the seams of lives – her life – to see how long it would take until things fell apart?

"Who do you think is cutting our lines and sabotaging us?" Alex asked.

"Probably Bo. Or Sven. What the fuck does it matter right now?"

"It matters because this is my life."

"You're not interested in talking, okay, fine. Let's just get to work and get through the day and then I'll disappear from your life forever."

Alex grabbed Trevor then, pulled at his shirt, and kissed him, wrapping her arms around his body, pulling him as close as she could. He tried talking through the kiss, mumbling words, grunting, trying to push her away. Alex dug her fingernails into his back. Trevor put his hands between them, closed his eyes and shoved her. She stumbled back and hit her head against the wheel house wall. The adrenaline and the sudden pain swirled in her with the nausea and the smell of fish and the boat horns and Alex vomited again, dropping to her knees. She started laughing and Trevor stood there, hands at his sides, palms open and facing out, as if to say, *what do you want?*

Before Trevor left at the end of the day, he promised Alex he would check in on her father, make sure he was still alive, had not sliced off any appendages, had not set the houseboat on fire. *I can't go home right now or anywhere else*, she had said. Most of the lobstermen had gone home. The docks were quiet except for the splashing of the tide and the calling of birds. Alex, drunk, lined up four shots of rum.

Alex's mother was calling. "Mom, I'm really not in any mood for this right now, maybe ever," she said.

"The first time your father snapped, we were having dinner at a nice restaurant," Lucinda said. "He scowled at his bowl of soup, and then threw it to

the floor. The waiter came over and asked if everything was okay. 'Okay? You are trying to poison me, all of you,' he said. He pointed at me and the waiter. He stood up and looked around the dining room."

"Mom, I think it's in me. I thought I was like you, but I think maybe I'm more like him. I'm losing it."

"Your father walked to the closest table and said, 'they know what I've got inside here.' He made circle motions with his hands over his torso. 'They want what I have and they're trying to poison me for it and they can't have it,' he said."

"I thought it was the other lobstermen at first, but now I'm not sure, not sure about anything."

"Your father ran out of the restaurant. I paid the bill and went after him. I tried to reason with him. Only a crazy person tries to reason with a crazy person. All he kept saying was, 'You can't take it from me,' over and over, just like that."

"Mom, do you think the Devil could be trying to destroy me?"

"Oh, honey, the Devil isn't real," Lucinda said.

Alex woke in the middle of the night, certain something was wrong. Wobbly, she undid the tethers from the dock. Rain started pouring as she drove the boat from the bay. Waves rocked the boat. She continued on despite the urges to throw up and return to safety. She couldn't tell how far she'd strayed from the docks when

she saw the red lights off in the distance. She got closer and could see through the rain and light fog one of her buoys close to the lights. It was Bo Johnson's boat. Alex grabbed a flare gun from a lockbox and returned to the deck. Bo was nowhere in sight. She walked to the edge and aimed the gun. A red ball of light arced through the night sky and landed on Bo's craft. Alex loaded another flare and fired again. Then, another. She heard hollering. Bo appeared, shirtless and stumbling, on the deck holding a shotgun. When he saw Alex, he put the gun down. He shook his head and yelled through the din, "What in the hell are you doing out here, Alex, firing shit onto my boat?"

"I thought you might be out here cutting my traps," Alex said.

"If I was going to do that, I wouldn't be doing it shirtless and drunk."

Alex dropped the flare gun. She closed her eyes and looked upward to let the rain fall on her face. "No, I guess not," she said.

"Go home, Alex. Go home and see your dad and get some rest."

Alex turned the boat around to go home. As the red lights of the boat receded into the fog, she thought of drifting: letting the engine go dead and raising the sails, the wind guiding her where it would, until she hit some piece of land (how long would she coast?) and walked into the first seaside town she came across, a place where no one would know her, where the world would seem new and untainted, and she would be free of all the things that pulled at her.

As she sobered, she thought to try and make peace with the man or men that had been sabotaging her or the Devil or the ocean itself. She emptied what remained of the bottle of rum into the water. She wrote a note:

To whomever,

My father is sick and I'm responsible for him and my mother is gone. My lobster business is being sabotaged and I'm losing money. You have your reasons, whoever you are, and I can understand that, believe me I can, but I'd appreciate just a bit of slack, if you could, just a bit of room to get my sea legs back. We're all doing what we can to get by. Thanks, Alex.

Alex took the note and dropped it into the empty bottle. She hurled it and it landed with a splash in the ocean.

Lyle sat on the couch, flipping through the channels on the television, when Alex walked in the door. A cigar smoldered in an ashtray. The houseplants remained in their pots. Everything was normal.

"Any sign tonight, dad?" Alex asked.

"I don't think he's out there right now."

She wanted to tell him that his wife was just fine, that she was just an irresponsible and scared person, just like they all were. She wanted to explain to him how his undifferentiated schizophrenia made him see the world different

than it actually was, that he believed things that could not be real. She wanted to tell him that everything was okay and that his wife, her mother, would return to them. She walked over to the ashtray and put the cigar out, inhaling the smoke as the fire went out.

“Not tonight,” Lyle said. “Not tonight, he ain’t coming. You can tell by the air. It’s calm and there’s no rain.” He lay down, closing his eyes. He opened his eyes now and then, wide and thoughtful, as though moments of profound thought interrupted his sleep. Alex dialed Trevor’s number, but paused, her thumb hovering over the “send” button.

“Maybe we’ll take a boat out and try to find mom tomorrow,” Alex said.

In the middle of the night, Alex woke from a nightmare. She sat up in bed, sweaty, legs quivering. She knew he was gone before she even rose from her bed. She put on her shoes and ran outside without checking her father’s room, sprinting down the docks to her car. The car windows rolled down, the night was calm, humid. She slowed as she saw a man sitting on a park bench. An old man, alone, sitting there in a suit, throwing bread to the birds that weren’t coming. She continued through the city. A group of teenage boys tormented a cat behind a supermarket, tying a can to its tail. An alcoholic woman she recognized read from the Bible, aloud, sitting on the ground in front of a downtown diner. She stopped

the car on a hill, looking down into the bay, ships moving, recognizable only by their lights shining in the dark, on the horizon. The car idled.

Alex dialed her mother's number. It was the first time she had called her since Lucinda left. When her mother answered, not saying a word, Alex waited for her to tell one of her stories, to launch into some tale as her way of hanging on somehow, but she said nothing.

"He's gone, isn't he?" Lucinda asked. "

"I don't know where he's gone," Alex said. She felt foolish. She wanted her mother to give up her stubborn betrayal and come home, to fix what she couldn't. "This is your fault," she said.

"When you were born, your father —"

"Stop talking. Please, just stop," Alex said.

"I just thought you'd want to know," Lucinda said.

"What you have to say doesn't matter anymore."

Alex drove down to where her boat was docked. She ran down the boardwalk. The boat was gone. She yelled her father's name twice. There was no response, no sound at all. Most of the boats at the docks would be easy to take. She could spend time looking for him, a few hours, and return the boat long before anyone noticed it was gone. Bo Johnson's boat floated in the water. Alex ran to the boat and untied it from the docks. She searched the wheel room and

found the keys taped to the underside of a table. Lights from houseboats came on and a couple people appeared on the docks. Alex ignored them and drove the boat away into the bay.

One or two people had called the police and police boats would be searching for her soon. The lobster boat had been her father's before she had taken the business over. He knew the boat and the ocean better than she ever would, no matter his state of mind. He was probably safe; the sea was calm and he had lived most of his life on a boat. She hadn't even checked his room to see if he had actually left.

A lone group of lights glowed off in the distance, a single boat drifting far off in the ocean. Alex expected to hear gunshots or see the boat on fire, some sign of chaos, but nothing happened the closer and closer she drifted toward the boat. It was still a long way off, but there had to be something out there. Her father had to be out there, with her boat, attempting to bring the Devil around, to get his wife back, to change everything that had gone wrong. If he was out there, she had to find him, and when she did she would not stop him and would not force him to head back home. She would find him and wait, all night if necessary, until he gave up, until he realized nothing had changed.

THE SCARECROW

My brother correctly predicted an earthquake in Venezuela once. I think about this as we cross through a cornfield, the sun-baked stalks poking and scratching my bare legs, arms, neck. We found him warning passers-by in downtown Omaha, standing on a planter, warning that the devil was going to make a visit to the South American country, thousands of miles away.

Do you remember the earthquake in Venezuela? I ask, knowing he won't. I stop him, open up my backpack, hand him a cold hamburger I stole from a gas station in Laramie. He stares forward at the sun, directly into it without blinking or squinting, and devours the burger without ever looking away from the sun. He has this syndrome, something the doctors could never pinpoint, but sometimes he predicts terrible shit and sometimes he's right.

Our mother claimed he had polio once. Claimed something was wrong with the vaccine, that his legs had gone numb, his toes unable to move. Later it was Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Prosopagnosia (face blindness), Lou Gehrig's, rabies. I tried to protect him, tried to stop her from making him sick when he wasn't, but all she had to do was tell Jacob I was possessed by an evil spirit and he would believe her.

Mother put together a benefit for Jacob when I was fourteen. This fifty-dollars-a-plate thing. The mayor showed up, gave my mom a check for one thousand dollars. She had me hand out informational flyers telling donors of Cotard Syndrome, recounted Jacob's story of a lifelong delusion that he was dead, that his body was rotting and putrefying. Mom paraded Jacob around, having him utter lines she fed him earlier in the day.

Do dead people bleed? she asked him by way of example. Three men encircled Mom and Jacob, all dressed in expensive suits with a green ribbon pinned to the jacket in support of the cause.

Jacob shook his head. *Of course not*, he said. *Dead people don't have blood.* Mother withdrew a sewing needle from her pocket, asked if she could prick his finger. He agreed and she poked his right index, exposing a red bubble. He watched the blood stream down his finger and drop to the floor, creating beautiful flowers on the tile.

I guess dead people do bleed, Jacob said and the suited men nodded, stared.

Jacob clears his throat, finally blinks at the sun. *There's going to be a train crash in Germany tomorrow*, he says. *We're coming to the train tracks where we'll hop a graffiti-caked train headed wherever.*

Our mother was arrested for fraud a few years after the benefit for Jacob. I took Jacob and decided to head west, though we had no more money than what I took from mom's hiding place, to start over somewhere. I wonder if there are new starts, though, if we aren't always just an accumulation of shit, no matter where we move to or who we try to become.

Does that make you afraid to hop on this train? I ask.

Jacob shakes his head. *You can't be afraid*, he says. The stentorian roar of the rumbling train gets louder and louder as the train approaches, then begins to slow, the squeal of metal grinding against metal. Jacob starts running to the train and I follow. Sometimes I feel sorry for Jacob, for this thing that makes him awkward, unable to relate to people, but then I wonder if his belief in the future, in always looking forward, is peace.

We board the train and will wait until it starts off again. I look back into the cornfield, way off in the middle where a shabby scarecrow rises, tilted, above the crops and three crows circle each other in the sky above, unaware, flying up and up toward the sun, untethered.

THE LOBSTER QUEEN

I tell Layla, my nine-year-old sister, to go to the end of the aisle, open a box of condoms (which I tell her are balloons) and put them in her pockets. Her clueless eyes widen. She sticks the rest of her chocolate bar in her mouth and drops the wrapper. I rattle her curly, crimson hair. We play this game sometimes. I tell her to steal something and she does it and I pretend it's okay that she is stealing. This way, if she gets caught, no skin off my dick. If I had one.

Layla comes back with condoms stuffed in each of her tiny pockets. We pass a lobster tank. Layla presses her hand against the glass. She leaves a chocolate handprint. Lobsters piled one on another on another. *Why are they crawling on each other?* Layla asks. She rises up on her tip-toes and licks the chocolate off the tank.

They're all trying to get to the bottom, I say. If one gets to the bottom and is the last one left in the tank, she gets to be the lobster queen.

But what happens to the others, Regina? Layla asks.

They don't get shit. They get boiled alive and covered in butter and garlic. Layla cries. Rufus will be coming over soon and he's going to want in my pants. *The world just ain't fair, I say. But, don't worry, sis. She doesn't get to stay the queen for long. It's just a temporary position.*

Pop asks where we been when we walk in the door. I shrug, my hand in my pocket covering the condoms like fragile baby birds, and sit down on the couch. Stuffing sticks out, like cauliflower, here and there. I tug and tug at it, pulling away its insides.

Stop that, Pop says. *Pagans cost money*, he says. Pop suffered a traumatic brain injury while over in Iraq six years ago and now he loses his words. Not forgets them, but actually loses them, never to return. One by one, they drop out of his brain. Sometimes the words that come out just aren't right, but he tries. He studies the dictionary constantly. He figures if he keeps learning new words, they'll replace the lost ones. I stuff the stuffing back in the opened fabric. It rebels going back in, much harder than pulling it out. Like it's a sponge turgid with so much water that needs to just spill out. *What the clambake?* he asks.

Layla starts galloping around the room on an imaginary horse, yelling clambake clambake clambake.

Rufus is coming over, I tell Pop. *We're probably going to have sex, just so you know*. I want to be honest with him about everything. I want to tell him that I think about becoming an escort someday more than I think about becoming a dentist. I'd divulge that I sometimes meet older men at hotels and let them have their way and I call them Daddy.

Layla starts drawing on the wall in fuschia crayon.

I'd tell about the caterpillar scar on the inside of my left thigh, how I wish Mom had never gotten pregnant and squeezed Layla out, about how I'd stab Jesus in the stomach if he showed up on our doorstep, arms open, offering redemption.

Pop shakes his head. He's trying to find the words. He wants to save me, I know. He opens the dictionary. Layla draws a fuschia lobster claw as a stick figure connected to a big blob of red, the body. She takes out a banana yellow and draws a crown on the head, antennae coming out through the top.

Pop opens my bedroom door and Rufus walks in, holding a small box. He throws it on the bed. *Open it*, he says. I shoo Pop away. He turns and closes the door. The box isn't wrapped and there's no bow. Rufus drops his pants before I even pick up the gift. *Talk dirty to me so I can be ready when you're done*, he says. I scoop the condoms out of my pockets and spread them on the bed like bread crumbs for pigeons.

Rufus strokes himself but nothing happens. There are at least twenty postcards in the box, each with a picture of some distant place. Alaska, Costa Rica, Albany, the Philippines.

Rufus starts undoing my pants, tugging, pulling. I want him to slap me, to treat me like the women he cheats on me with, to not be nice so all of this will be forgettable. *Pick a place*, he says. He strokes and strokes, trying to start a fire. *Pick a place and we'll go and never come back and fuck your dad and mom and mine and all the people we know.*

The lobster at the bottom of the tank thinks that maybe she'll live forever, I say.

Rufus twists his mouth up, says *Huh?* He puts two fingers between my legs to see if I'm ready to go. *C'mon and help me out, Regina, help me help help me*, he says.

When she thinks maybe she doesn't have to fight so hard anymore, that's when she's most in danger, I say.

After he gets hard, Rufus climbs on top of me and sticks it in, all action, no fluff. He's got a bad heart and his lungs are already cigarette-burned, so he sucks at the air with each thrust, trying just to make it one more time. I close my eyes and think of a time when my father's lost all of his words, every single one, a time when I will tell him all of the things I've never told him and he will open his mouth to say something, though nothing will spill out but air, and he will listen, he will listen.

KEEP US SAFE FROM HARM

Croft stood across the room, the pistol in his hand hanging solemnly at his side, as Rosalind instructed her stepfather, Linus, to stay where he was, not that he had a choice. They had tied him up as well as two people who had never tied anyone up knew how. Croft was no Boy Scout. He watched the old man, whose gray eyes sat atop bags that gave away a lifetime of tiredness.

Rosalind disappeared into the old man's bedroom. Things crashed to the floor as she searched for money. Croft kept his eyes on the man but Linus never looked up. The weight of all the damn world.

The sounds of something being dragged across the hardwood floor in the bedroom hurt Croft's ears. Rosalind emerged from the room dragging a safe. She set it down and contemplated the thing, tapping one foot on the floor.

"I'm not going to send anyone after you all," Linus said. "I don't know why you're doing all this, but you're close enough to blood that I ain't goin' to do a thing."

If it came to the stretch, Croft was not going to have the fortitude to use the pistol. It was just a scarecrow. He turned the gun in his left hand, set it on top of the television, old Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote cartoons flashing silently on the screen.

“Your mama’s going to be real heartsick,” Linus said.

Rosalind chuckled. “That woman ain’t been heartsick about a thing I done my whole miserable life. She’ll keep right along like an ore tanker, going and going.”

Croft watched the cartoon as Rosalind convinced her stepfather to give her the combination to the safe. As she removed the little cash that was stored inside, Croft wondered just how far the score was going to get them, how many more times they’d have to scheme and steal until they were in a comfortable enough place to stop.

Rosalind, dissatisfied, went back to the bedroom and returned to rummaging through Linus’ stuff. “Think there’s any copper wire we can tear from the walls?” she asked.

Croft didn’t answer. After a while, Rosalind came out with a laundry basket full of things Croft figured she’d want to sell. Rosalind walked out the front door and Croft, stuffing the pistol in his waistband, followed behind, leaving the door open a crack in case someone might happen by and find the old man. He wanted to go inside and tell Linus he was sorry, but as a list of all things he’d done to necessitate those words grew and grew, Croft felt like he’d be giving a confession, and he hadn’t been to a church most of life.

They purchased a beat-up Impala from a man in Petoskey for two hundred dollars and headed north. As they headed over the Mackinac Bridge, an information radio station informed them that the Algonquian Native Americans called the straits between the great lakes and the surrounding area *Michilimackinac*, meaning “the jumping-off place.”

“How about that?” Croft said. “This is our beginning.”

Amid a three-day alcohol-and-pill-snorting binge two weeks prior, Rosalind had found out she was pregnant. She vowed then and there that their former lives were over, that if there was a new leaf to turn, they’d turn it. Croft was aboard immediately.

“No one’s going to stop us from now on,” Rosalind said. She flipped the radio station until she found something sufficiently loud and turned the radio up and up, drowning out the harsh winds battering the car.

Rosalind had never been the woman Croft imagined he’d end up with, but the prospect of creating a child with her renewed him, opened up possibilities. No one had expected much of him his whole life. He was going to show the whole world, going to make them take notice.

“Where we headed?” Croft asked, but Rosalind couldn’t hear him over the roar of the music. He asked again and she nodded her head along to the song. She didn’t know, either.

They stopped for the night in Christmas. A giant Mrs. Claus stared down at Croft from across the road. All of the businesses were themed around the holiday. They elected to stay in the Yule Log Cabins.

Rosalind handed the owner one of her stepfather's credit cards and they set up in their cabin. Croft felt the familiar urge for a drink, but that would only lead to more and more. He flipped through news channels thinking about the soon-to-be baby in Rosalind's womb. He looked at Rosalind, his too-skinny girl. Her breasts, nipples, pushed against her tight tee.

He walked up behind Rosalind and ran his hands up underneath her shirt. She pushed his hands down, telling him to stop, she was watching the news, but he took it to mean she wanted him to unbutton her pants and work his hands downward. She stopped him again and turned, pushing him away. He whimpered.

He shed his clothes, hoping the sight of his manhood would entice her, but she sat on the bed and stared at the television. Croft sighed at his waning erection.

Rosalind patted her belly. She put the remote aside, announced that she intended to take a shower. Croft sat on the bed as she ran the water, stripped down. She emerged in the doorway. "You already knocked me up, Croft. What more could you want?" she asked.

When the property manager came that night to inform them that the credit card Rosalind had used had been declined, Rosalind sent the man away – she would have to get to an ATM and get some cash. That was their cue to move on to new places.

They got in the car and headed west in the middle of the night to Marquette, the largest town in the Upper Peninsula. As they drove in, the sheen of the moonlight off of Lake Superior called to Croft. This is the place, he thought.

“Where do you think we’re going to stay this time of night?” Rosalind asked. “No money for a hotel. The money we do have is for a place to live and the baby and food and all the other things.”

“I’ll figure it out,” Croft said.

“If you’d have been providing for this family all this time, this wouldn’t be a problem.”

Croft’s main area of expertise had been putting together carnival rides, traveling around Michigan and the Midwest and sometimes farther to work the machines. He had found an odd sort of peace in maintaining the machines, unbothered by anyone. When his boss found him asleep behind the Tilt-A-Whirl after closing one night, naked under a blanket with a sixteen-year-old girl – she’d said she was 21 and, boy, did she look it, didn’t she? – Croft didn’t figure much of

a future with the company. He hadn't had work in months and the unemployment he had collected had gone to paying rent, late and always secondary, and drugs.

"This isn't the life I planned for us."

"Could have fooled me."

Croft said nothing and drove around town looking for a spot that would at least allow them to sleep until morning. Eventually, he found a tourist/RV park, paid the attendant and claimed they were meeting friends, and drove into the park. Rosalind immediately reclined the seat and turned to face away from Croft. "I can do better," he said, but Rosalind didn't hear him, already asleep.

The next morning, the rising sun barely peeking over the lake, Croft awoke and opened the door to find a place to piss. His legs ached, cramped. He wandered toward the trees, looking behind him to make sure no one was around. He unzipped and began his work when he heard a whistling somewhere near him. He looked around and barely noticed a man on the other side of a tree, also doing his business. The man zipped and began to walk back to his camp. Noticing Croft, he stopped. "Nice morning," he said, standing a few feet from Croft. He couldn't piss with someone right next to him. "Don't suppose you have a

cigarette?" the man asked. "The wife catches me, my huevos will be in a vice, know what I'm saying?"

Croft turned away and zipped up. He pulled a pack from his pocket, tapped out two cigarettes. He handed the man one.

"Obliged," the man said, tipping an imaginary hat. He wore a black t-shirt with an eagle head in front of an American flag. It read *Let freedom ring. These colors don't run*. It had been nearly ten years since the attacks, but some people held onto things for a long time. "Name's Manny."

"So glad to meet you."

Manny puffed hard on his cigarette again and again. "What brings you here?"

"Trying to find a place to put down roots," Croft said. Manny seemed to contemplate this revelation, nodding, smoking. "Having a baby."

Manny took the opportunity to lay out his life story: a stint in Iraq during the first Gulf War, PTSD, a first wife, a second, a third that stuck around, three kids, a leg almost lost in a boating accident, six broken bones due to various jobs and stupid things he'd done, his father's heart disease, a porn addiction. He pointed out his camp where his wife, a woman maybe ten years his junior, grilled breakfast.

The men walked over to Manny's camp and he introduced Croft to his wife, Trina. She had been beauty queen-attractive once, but it appeared that the woman had done some hard living. She kissed Manny on the cheek. "My husband trying to sell you drugs?" she asked, smiling.

Manny smiled, letting out a little chuckle. "She kids," he said.

Croft heard his name being called. Rosalind stood outside the car searching. He waved and she shook her head, made her way over. Croft made introductions.

"Don't we have things to do?" Rosalind asked.

"Why don't you both stay and have a wake-up beer?" Manny said.

"Sure, I'd love," Croft started. Rosalind shot him a look. "Better get a move on, actually." Rosalind walked back toward the car. "Is that your truck?"

Manny nodded.

"How much would you take to let me use it for the day?"

Croft drove around town in Manny's truck, picking up stray furniture left on curbs by college students moving out of their apartments. The bed was full of random items, none matching. Rosalind used the car to find them an apartment.

Make sure you get yourself together and don't get distracted, Rosalind commanded.

Croft stopped the truck on the street once he spotted a couch. He walked over, searching around for anyone who could help. The couch was heavy, hard to drag across the gravel. The air was thick enough to hold onto. A trail of sweat ran down his back. He lifted one end of the couch, but it was difficult to maneuver onto the truck bed without anyone helping. One end finally perched on the truck, Croft went around and picked up the other end, pushing it forward.

If he could just have one drink, things would go much smoother. Maybe two. He needed to stay focused. Rosalind, since she found out she was pregnant, seemed always on the verge of realizing she could find something better. It hurt to know that she could. All she had to do was leave. At any moment, the whole world could just fall apart.

"You aren't any good for me," Rosalind had said once, both of them high and sitting on top of a small mountain they climbed. Croft handed over a variety of pills. "What are these?"

"Surprises," Croft said. "Try too hard to figure out what they are and you'll spoil the fun."

Rosalind took a small blue one and a pink one, swallowed them both. She waited for a few minutes for the pills to start taking affect. She grinned wide then gave Croft a playful scowl. "No damn good," she'd said.

Croft found Manny, shirtless and asleep, in a lawn chair when he went to return the truck. Manny awoke, as if sensing Croft standing over him, and without hesitation said, "Hey, hey, want a beer?" He reached into the cold water of the cooler and fished out two beers without waiting for the answer. He seemed already to be quite a few in.

After they finished the beer, Manny had the idea to get more and head to the beach, to drink under the moon and listen as the waves crashed on the sand.

Manny rose to his feet, dropped the empty can to the ground, and stripped naked. He walked toward the water. "If I start flailing about, don't come in after me," he said.

"What are you talking about?" Croft asked, happy to be unable to see Manny's naked ass away from the fire.

"No sense in both of us getting drowned."

Croft reckoned that if a rip current took hold and it came down to it, he'd be the only one there to save the man. Not that he could do it, but the responsibility would be on him. "Lots of things go into the water and never come out," was all he could think to say, the wrong thing.

Manny laughed. "Not exactly 'break a leg' but it'll do as bad luck goes."

The sound of Manny's feet shuffling through the sand was the only trace Croft had of him now that he was away from the fire. "We should built a boat," he called to the lake.

"What was that? Can't hear ya with the waves and all." Splashing, the sounds of Manny crashing through the water as he moved farther.

To anyone that might hear him, Croft said, "We should build it, make it strong, so it'll take us wherever we want to go."

On his first day of work at a tree limb removal company, Croft's body rebelled with each heft of logs on woodland trails, every swing of an axe. He tired quickly, felt the soreness in his muscles already welling up inside. Blisters formed on his feet because of his terrible shoes. Halfway through the day, perched atop a limb he hacked away at, Croft forgot where he was, lost in his thoughts. A man can't be a failure forever. At some point, all the loss and inability has to give way. The greatest of hurricanes subsides eventually. Unthinking, he chopped at the limb until it gave, falling quickly toward the ground where his partner had to jump out of the way to avoid being hurt. Croft descended the tree and was instantly thrown up against it. The man put his finger in Croft's face. "That's what we call a widowmaker. It makes married women into widows, you hear?"

Croft nodded. The man let go of his collar.

“Now, get a beer out of the cooler in the truck. Break time.”

“I’m not so sure I know what I’m doing,” Croft said.

Croft sat on the porch in front of the house they rented. A six pack of beer sweated on the wood next to him. Rosalind came out and sat down in a lawn chair. Nothing showed in Rosalind’s belly, no curve or bulge. Croft realized he did not know when that was supposed to start. He thought about all the millions of cells inside her and all the processes he didn’t know anything about that would come together to create a child. Inside Rosalind, something great and wonderful was growing. She would always be responsible for that great thing, something that would define her. Croft didn’t have anything like that, not really, not the way she did.

“Stop staring at my belly,” Rosalind said. “You’re making me self-conscious.”

“I’m going to provide everything for you and that child,” Croft said. He cracked a beer and took a long, thoughtful drink. “I’m really going to step it up. You’ll see.”

Croft kept drinking his beer. Rosalind leaned back and eventually fell asleep in the chair. Croft finished a second beer, a third. An arm brushed against his shoulder. Rosalind’s arms stretched out in front of her, keeping something

away, but she was still asleep. She'd experienced nightmares consistently since the pregnancy began. She had wondered if what she saw were premonitions of a child, horribly disfigured, claws for hands, born with one eye, ambiguous sex organs. She had asked Croft if he thought God was vindictive, one who would make her pay for her past sins through her child. *I don't know*, he'd said, *if God or whoever forces us to see our errors. I think we have to see that path for ourselves.*

Rosalind stirred and awoke, surprised to find herself actually awake.

"Everything's okay," she said.

"Another nightmare?"

"At first, I thought it was," she said. "I was breastfeeding and the baby sucked and sucked and no milk came to it. I remember my nipples aching." The baby choked and pulled away, coughing, a cloud of dust mushrooming from his mouth. Her mouth was filled with sand, then it felt as if maybe her breasts were as well, her whole body. She leaned over with the baby staring up at her, crying, trying to spit the sand out of her mouth. It poured and poured from her. "But, it wasn't a nightmare," she said.

"Sounds pretty horrible to me."

"I realized I had to go to the lake. Me and the baby. I was at the water, staring out, and just walked in. I walked farther and deeper. Not swimming. The baby was under, then so was I. But, I don't know." Rosalind rubbed her belly.

Croft couldn't see the old her anymore, the pill addict with bipolar tendencies.

"Even though it seemed like we would drown if we stayed under, I knew we would be fine. I knew if we kept moving into the lake, everything would be okay."

BLOOD

My father has a bullet lodged in his ass cheek. I was reminded of this as he leaned down to talk to Cerberus, our mutt, running his thick, car engine grease-covered, scarred hand through Cerb's russet-brown hair. *It's all the blacks*, he said after he'd been shot. It was a ricochet from a drive-by or something.

He was training Cerb to dogfight. To tear other dogs apart. To rip their throats out. We had a stuffed dummy for practice.

Cerb got loose and went after the dummy as if he wanted to eat it, like he had not eaten in weeks. Fluff torn from the open seams.

"Why are we training Cerb to fight?" I asked.

"Because he needs to rediscover his nature."

"What's his nature?" Cerb ripped open the dummy's head.

"This," dad said, pointing. I didn't get it. I'd seen Cerb eat his own shit once. "Like the wolf. Or, like, whatever came before the wolf, even."

My best chance at not getting my ass kicked, my guidance counselor said, was to not stand out. He was my dad's age, had orange skin like a supernova.

This didn't seem like the best advice, but I let it go through my ears. "The peg that stands up gets knocked down. All that," he said.

"But, I'm hardly noticeable," I said.

"They notice you trying not to be noticed."

Dad pulled me out of school early. He had a shotgun and two cheeseburgers in the backseat. The front windshield was shattered. We drove out on the interstate. A coyote was curled up on the roadside, a back leg bent back the wrong way, blood all over. He hit it, drunk-driving toward another bar. Shards of glass stuck up out of its body. They reflected four bright suns. Dad picked the pieces out and threw them into a ditch. He carried the coyote to the truck bed and set it down.

"I'm going to need you to put this thing down if it comes out of it," Dad said.

"What? How am I going to kill it? Isn't it already dead?" I asked.

"Mostly dead. I just can't do it if it comes down to the task."

"What makes you think I can shoot it?" I asked. The coyote rattled in the back. His glassy eye looked to the sky. I wanted to know if he saw heaven.

"It's just not in me," Dad said. "I just can't find the part of me that can do the thing."

Mindy climbed through my bedroom window. She smelled like almonds. She was still on her period. She always wanted me most at that time of the month. It made her crazy. I told her fuck no.

“Your counselor lets me put a dog collar on him,” Mindy said.

There was something wrong with the moon. I kept staring at it. The color was all wrong. “The color’s all wrong,” I said.

“Will you dress like a robber?” she asked.

“And do what, exactly?” I asked.

Mindy frowned. She turned around, lifted her skirt, and examined herself. “This is our most basic programming,” Mindy said. “Just give it to me, already.”

“Will you please shut up about that?”

Mindy threw her panties at me. Then the rest of her clothes. Does it make any sense that I didn’t want her then? That I could not will an erection to life? Like I was somehow not living up to the expectations of my sex? If I was my counselor, if I could be him, what would I do to Mindy?

There was a sound in the night like a deflating balloon. It was like someone had poked a hole in the moon and it was slowly leaking air. It came from the backyard. I noticed it wasn’t like the hissing of escaping helium at all, but more like something crying from deep within the earth. Mindy dressed and we went

outside. The coyote my father pancaked was laid out on the ground, bleeding and whining. Mindy cradled the beast's head in her arms. There were tears, on her face and mine.

"There's a shotgun," I said.

Mindy just shook her head. The coyote tried to muster some sound, but the light was going out of it. "I'll do it," Mindy said. I got the shotgun from the truck and gave it to her. She loaded two shells. "After this," she said, "we can't be who we are now." In my bedroom window, Cerb pressed his nose against the glass. He barked and barked. Mindy pulled the trigger. The coyote's head opened up. Mindy dropped the gun. The blast hung in the air. It's in all of us, I wanted to say. There was my dad with the bullet in his ass and the counselor and Mindy and me and the whole world fucking and fighting for something, and I just had to watch it all go down.

"There's something wrong with the moon," I called to Mindy.

Mindy didn't turn. She opened the door. Cerberus trotted out and over to the coyote. He pressed his wet nose against the fur. His tongue swept three times over the coyote's face. "What are you talking about?" Mindy asked.

"It just isn't right," I said.

STIYAHA

Sometimes at night, I like to wander into the woods and stand completely still, listening. The crickets, the now-and-then howl of coyotes, rushing water: the sonorous chorus of nature. I go out with only a rifle, a flashlight, and some PBR. The typical sounds warm my heart, but there's some primal instinct in me that wants to hear the ravenous howl of the stiyaha, the skoooom. The Bigfoot.

Tomorrow the believers will arrive at the cabin, but for now I sit and listen.

The night is quiet and I breathe it in, the smell of tree bark and wet grass thick in my nostrils. I wait for a while, long enough to finish a six-pack, and I head back to the cabin. Inside, in my bedroom, Jill sleeps. Asleep, my wife is something I want to frame or carve into wood so that future generations might savor her the way I do.

Throughout the night, in the dreaming mumblings from her unconscious, Jill utters her lover's name again and again like a chant, an incantation. It is not my name she repeats.

In the morning, I watch her fluttering eyelids as she sleeps. Her eyes eventually open, slowly like a sunrise, and she rubs them, erasing the sleep.

"Did I talk in my sleep last night?" she says.

"No sleep talking recorded," I say. "Would you like breakfast?"

I dice potatoes and throw in some peppers, onions, chili powder, bacon, and fry it all in a cast-iron skillet. Jill reads the newspaper while we eat. Milton shows up at nine, ready to work. He comes in to the kitchen and we joke and he greets Jill with a wide smile, all teeth and gums. I pack up my gear and we head out the door. I wave at Jill, say goodbye, and she tells me to have a good day and smiles, though that smile is for someone else.

The believers, as Milton and I call them, start showing up around noon. Once everyone is here and their fees are all paid, I take them out to the campsite. Men and women of all ages, about fifteen in all, have signed up for this expedition. Milton, as per the rules, is nowhere to be seen, far off in the woods, alone. Our clients never see him, but we are equal partners.

We spend the afternoon fishing and setting up camp. Everyone's eager to set out tomorrow. I feed their anticipation, over dinner, by telling them about past sightings. I share photos and show a video on my portable DVD player. The two kids in the group are especially excited. They ask questions and I answer with a deep voice and wild hand motions. Even the adults get into it.

We drink and tell stories through the night, sitting around the campfire. People start to retire for the evening, some wobbly with drink, and I tell them to

get some rest, to sleep with their rifles close. "Tomorrow," I say, "we go in search of Bigfoot."

I make sure no one sees me leaving camp and I meet Milton by the river. We talk about tomorrow's plans and we put down more beer. He jokes with me as though I don't know his secret. We watch two does come down to the river to drink. We carry on as if there's nothing wrong.

I found out about the affair about five months ago. Milton and Jill had known each for a long time, as long as Jill and I were married, but something must have just switched on. They met while I held debate meetings at the high school where I worked, when I was at the gym, when I worked late in my office.

They aren't in love. I can see it when they're in the same room together. I can't tell you exactly how two people can *appear* to be in love, just by looking at them. I just know. It's a feeling.

I've come close to confronting Jill a couple of times, each time fueled by beer. "Can I ask you something?" I'd say. Jill would look at me, stop what she was doing, and would nod. I lost the nerve, changed the subject. Now, five months later, I find clues around the house, things I believe to be crucial evidence to my theory, and I compile lists and notes, dates and times they've met. One day I'll present this to Jill and it will stop and we'll be fine.

My sleep is broken by the screams of a woman and then the collective panic and awe of the campers. I sit up and smile, imagining the artwork that awaits me outside my tent. I wonder what Milton has done this time.

I put on my robe and head outside to see the crowd gathered in a circle. I walk over and pat the shoulder of one of the men. Confusion and terror paint their faces. I can smell the blood before I see it. In the middle of the crowd, on the ground, is the dismembered head of a ten-point buck. Sunlight reflects in his eyes. Milton's gone to great lengths to uphold appearances this time. A lightning streak of blood trails from the neck, zigzagging into the forest.

"It's him," I say. They are a captive audience, awaiting my command. I am Ahab. "He knows we're here. We have to be careful." I tell them we eat and then head out. Breakfast is consumed with zeal, the people eager to begin the hunt. I promise them at least a sighting, perhaps a photo opportunity.

They want to know what the Bigfoot is like, have I seen him before, whether he will attack.

If he shows aggression, I tell them, you have to act like you're unafraid. Running away will piss him off. One of the kids asks how and I show him: I raise my arms wide and high above my head, straddle my legs, and howl to the blue

sky. "You have to make yourself as big as you can," I say. This advice is meant to help ward off grizzlies, but it works for my purposes.

"What if it doesn't work?" one of the kids asks.

"Then you run," I say, smiling.

The believers all pack up and we head out to find the Bigfoot. Milton has left clues here and there: fur snagged on a jagged branch, claw marks that cut through the outer bark of a tree, blood smeared on a rock. Our clients collectively gasp in horror and release squeals of delight at our findings. As we move through the woods, the tension builds in them. The big moment is near.

Milton and I started running the Bigfoot racket as a joke, an ad posted on one of those classified ad websites. We received thirty-six responses, all offering a good deal of money to witness the Bigfoot. Our teaching jobs weren't paying much and we'd had to coach sports, run debate teams, just to bring in extra income. We bought a gorilla suit, a Halloween costume, and made a few alterations and we were in business. After a few runs, I was a Bigfoot expert. Now, I get phone calls from all over the country from people who want the Bigfoot experience. I've gone out with oil men, knitting clubs, actors, hunters, and politicians. I've been on the local news.

Jill wanted to know all about the business when she saw the report, wanted to know why I hadn't ever mentioned it to her. I told her I thought she wouldn't care or wouldn't take it seriously. Right after that, she really wanted to join me on one of the expeditions. It was one of our biggest groups. When the moment came for Milton to make his appearance – he ran through the woods in front of the group about two hundred feet away – Jill acted surprised, but it seemed somehow manufactured, like she was acting.

This old guy says he hears something, a growl, something low and rumbling. Everyone stops and listens, but no one thinks they hear anything. Then there's another growl that everyone hears. Milton's been practicing. The group heads toward the sound, cautiously, as if they're hunting. The trees clear and we come to a stream. The old man looks off down the water. In the distance, hovering over some dead animal, Milton is hunched in his gorilla suit, pretending to eat at the thing. He is far enough away that people question what they're seeing. Is it a bear, or is it really him?

After a moment, Milton raises his monkey-head and stares straight at us, stands and stays still for a couple seconds, and then runs off down the river away from us. He runs and runs, the group watching like they are seeing a miracle, the unfurling of one great question of the universe.

We get back to camp as the sun goes down. This movie producer, John, starts talking about capturing the Bigfoot and making big bucks off of him. We make dinner and tell ghost stories. By nightfall, a few of the adults, including myself, are sufficiently drunk. We pass around a bottle of whiskey and trade stories.

“How come no one’s ever caught him?” John the Producer says. “I mean, he’s only a bigger version of the ape.”

“People have tried,” I say. I already dislike this guy. There’s something about the glaring whiteness of his teeth that bothers me.

“It can’t be that tough. I bet I could do it.”

“You’ve been saying that. Do you have a plan?”

“Working on one,” he says. He takes a long pull on the bottle. When he lowers it, he points at me with the hand holding the bottle. “I’m surprised you never caught him.”

“Never really any intention to,” I say.

“Why not?” he says.

“What good would it do?” I know this guy, his type. He came out here specifically to construct a story to tell his friends, colleagues. There’s no real interest in the wild, no sense of adventure. He wants to manufacture this all.

“You’d be famous,” another man says.

“I don’t think he’s out there just for something for us to shoot, stuff, and display in our living rooms,” I say.

“Then what’s his purpose?” John the Producer says.

I stand and stretch my bones as John hands me the bottle. I walk to the outside of the circle with the glass pressed to my lips, feeling the heat of the fire against my back.

“Just like us,” I say, “he just wants to be free.”

John the Producer is the first one up in the morning, ready for another expedition. We pack up and get ready to head out. The children run around and play tag. John spends all morning writing notes, announces he’s thinking of writing a screenplay. All morning with the notes.

The sun is all alone in the sky. It is bright and hot and cloudless. John the Producer talks with a couple men about his screenplay. He’s really got some charm with these guys eating out of his hand. The plot of his screenplay is laid out in detail for the men. It’d be a horror movie with a group of attractive college kids, all unknowns, playing the lead roles. “A real throwback to exploitation horror,” he says. “Sex, sex, and murder.” It’s about this group that camps and is stalked by, not one, but three Bigfoots.

I’m waiting for Milton to appear to break up this chatter.

“What do you think about that, Miles?” John asks me. “How does that sound?”

“Sounds like a hit,” I say. “A real blockbuster.” He smiles, gives a macho slug to one of the guy’s shoulder.

“I’d really like it to be stylish, shot like an arthouse,” he says and trails off, pointing ahead to a hunter’s jacket laying against a tree. Blood is smeared on the jacket. The group stops, but John is brave, reckless, and he walks up to the tree. He inspects the scene like a detective might. I tell everyone to keep close and they do as told, except for John. The rogue. A rifle lay on the ground farther ahead and shell casings are littered all around. John picks up the gun and inspects the stock, the barrel.

“Everyone remain calm,” I say, feigning caution. “The Bigfoot’s as afraid of us as we are of him.” John walks forward with the rifle now strapped to his back. I’m sure Milton’s out there watching this guy, ready to scare the piss out of him. I’d like to shoot him myself.

Then, the coup de grace: there’s a human scream, a man’s, and Milton runs past far ahead of us, sans gorilla suit. People gasp. Gunshots are fired, echoing in the trees. I can imagine Milton frantically putting the suit back on, hopping around and hoping we do not happen to come upon him in his boxers. John moves forward and I grab his shoulder.

"It's best to wait here until we know the situation," I say.

Milton, in his monkey suit, runs out into a clearing and howls to the sky. He stops and looks at us for a second, but then John swings the rifle around and aims. "No, John!" I scream but he's already got his plan in motion. He fires and misses. Milton runs off darting into the forest and John heads off after him. I tell the group to head back to camp. There's a gunshot and John yelling at the Bigfoot.

After a while of searching I see John standing on a group of rock and I wave at him. He looks serious. I join him and we wait. He's lost the trail. The Bigfoot has disappeared, he says. Minutes later, Milton, sans monkey suit, comes running out of the woods and stands hunched with his hands on his knees, panting for breath.

"Hey," John says, "are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, fine," Milton says. He wipes sweat from his head, looks over his shoulder.

"Did you see where it went?"

Milton points behind him. "Toward the river," he says. John readies his rifle and heads off in the direction Milton pointed. After he's gone, Milton smiles.

"What do you think he'll find?" he asks.

That night, after the campers have all packed and headed to their respective homes, Milton and I drink beers on the same rock grouping where I found John. There's a campfire and tents. It's still humid, a bit hot. I try John's cell phone again but I get nothing. I'm sure the reception is zero out here.

"I was scared crazy when that idiot fired at me," Milton says. He drains his beer, opens another. "Good thing he's not a hunter." He laughs.

"He's probably shot himself in the foot by now," I say.

"Should we go look for him?"

"No," I say, "I'm drunk. Let him find us."

Milton takes a long drink. The beer is warm, but I'm swimming in my head, so I don't care.

"I stuffed the suit in a hollow tree trunk," Milton says. "I wonder if he's found it yet."

"He probably gave up long ago. I bet he's doing the same thing we are."

Milton rises shakily to his feet. He pulls a flashlight out of his pack and turns it on. "We should probably go find him," he says.

"Guess we should," I say. Standing takes a lot of effort. We pack our things and head off in search of the lost producer. It's so dark that the only thing I can see is whatever's caught in beam of the flashlight. We try to track John's bootprints, but we keep losing the trail, a combination of the dense brush and

intoxication. There's something about the darkness and silence all around that makes this feel like a confessional, like the perfect place to let Milton know that I know his secret, Jill's secret.

"Maybe we ought to make sure no one brings guns next time," Milton says. "You know, to prevent my ass from getting shot."

"Perhaps," I say.

"This is a pretty great gig, despite the danger," he says. "I'm glad that we get to share this."

I listen to his voice, trying to detect the presence of pity or lack of confidence, something to tell me he feels some guilt.

"Some natives believed the bigfoot was a wild spirit that wanted people to eat his ghost food," Milton says. "This would transform them into wild spirits like him."

"Wouldn't that be something?" I say.

"You eat a raspberry and suddenly you're one of his kind."

I think about that: being a wild spirit floating around the world, invisible to humans. What would I hear, see? I wonder if I'd spy on Jill and get a sense of how she is when we're not together, her other self if there is one. That person that's different than the one I know, the person that could have an affair with my best friend.

Jill tried to tell me once. We were hiking and she stopped me and held my face in her hands. I knew what she was trying to do, searching for the right words. I changed the subject.

Empty beer cans fill my pack, outnumbering the full ones. Milton's moved onto a flask full of whiskey.

"There were maybe twenty tribes or more," Milton says, "that had stories about some version of the Bigfoot. That's gotta mean something."

"You believe there's one out there?" I say.

"It's unlikely. But I hope so."

The more Milton talks, the more I think about him and Jill, these two people I love. Those thoughts fill me with a burgeoning anger. There must be some hole in our lives that has led Jill to this point. Some deficiency, some broken piece. Part of me wants to leave them to it, to disappear and let them build a life. I think about the Bigfoot again, the part Milton said about ghost food and becoming a spirit, free to roam the wide world without borders.

"You know, I'd like to take a bite from that ghost food," I say, "and go far away, just by myself."

"Yeah, man," Milton says. He drinks.

"I'd go live on top of a mountain maybe in Peru. Something like that. Just me and the elements."

“What about Jill?”

I grab the flask from Milton’s hand and suck down three mouthfuls.

“Take it easy there, pal,” he says.

“Fuck it,” I say. The alcohol’s taking over now. My skin feels warm, comfortable. A bit of dizziness flows through me and I brace against a tree. “I’d fly all over,” I say. Another mouthful of whiskey stings as it goes down.

Through the haze and darkness, some noise breaks in the distance, the rustling of leaves and branches. I sloppily raise one “be quiet” finger to my lips. Milton levels his rifle and aims. I am sure that if an elephant wandered into the clearing at this point, he’d never hit it. I rest against the tree, the drink overpowering me as the cracking of branches and crunching of grass gets closer. Out of a bunch of bushes, John the Producer springs into view, tripping over a branch and steadying himself against a tree. He stands straight up and brushes himself off. He looks at me and his mouth widens brilliantly into a Hollywood smile.

“Where the hell have you been?” I ask.

“Wandering around in the dark,” John says.

I return home and walk into the kitchen, and the light is on, hoping to see Jill but she is not there. The room smells of fruit and I look over to the table at a

pie, one slice missing from the circle. I grab a knife, fork, and a plate and head over to the table. I face the large bay windows, looking out at the moon and the stars, the dark shadowed outlines of trees against the darker night. I am drunk, too much so. I close my eyes and feel that old, familiar spin. I open them and look at the pie. It makes me hungry sitting there. I slide the tin pan toward me and sink the knife into the crust. I drop the piece onto the plate and look at it. I hear Jill's footsteps behind me. Her reflection appears in the window.

"Where have you been?" she asks. I think about the day's events, all that I could tell her about our search for John. There was John's idiotic attempt at securing the Bigfoot, Milton's narrow escape, the talk about the legend of Bigfoot, wild spirits, ghost food. All those things flash through my mind, but I decide to keep them for another time.

The sun would come up in a few hours. Milton was home by now and John was certainly on his way to wherever he might go. Jill put her hand on my shoulder.

"Honey, are you okay?" she says.

I look up at the Jill's reflection, thinking about what I might say. Jill pulls a chair around the table and puts it next to mine. She sits down and stares. I watch her mirrored image moving in the glass. She places her hand on my knee.

"Honey," she says, "what's going on?"

I look at the piece of pie, that perfect piece as yet untouched, unblemished. I think about how if I ate this piece, I might be transformed into a wild spirit, like the Bigfoot, and float away.

“Talk to me, Miles,” Jill says. “Please, please talk to me. I don’t understand.”

I look at Jill’s reflection and again at the pie, then dig my fork in, pulling away a small bit of flaky crust and fruit. I wonder what I would say, what words I have to say to my wife. I close my eyes and lift the forkful from the plate. I take a bite, lick the cherry filling from my lips. Jill leans forward and rests her forehead against my shoulder. I takes another bite, and another.

“If you’re not going to talk to me, I’m just going to sit here with you,” Jill says.

As I eat down to the last bite, I imagine the change, what it might feel like. Would it be a momentous shift, like an explosion? Or, would it be slower, less chaotic? I put the last bite on the fork and put the fork to my mouth. I see our reflection in the glass, the two of us there like some alternate selves, and as I savor the last bit of cherry, I wait for the change to overtake me.

THE ESSENTIALS AND METHODS OF SURVIVAL

--The greater the need, the more difficult it usually is.

-Ray Mears

Fire

Fire can fulfill many needs.

The great fire of Rome spread from Circus Maximus, the site of spectacular chariot races, and burned for four days. The fire might have been started by Christians, confessing to the crime as they writhed, staked to crossbeams or trees, crucified in as public and excruciating a manner as possible. Or, perhaps it was Nero, longing for a palace built in his honor, longing for immortalization, to carry on forever as with, he might have thought, the Empire of Rome. Is it true that Nero, garbed in stage costume, sang the "Sack of Ilium," strumming the lyre, watching as the city sizzled and burned?

It can provide warmth and comfort. Fire emits heat, the process of energy transfer between bodies. Bodies against bodies – our bodies – pressed against each other, creating warmth, comfort, the catharsis of cold flesh losing the chill. We talk of

heat – metaphor, sensation – between us, fire. *When you apply heat to a fuel, it produces a gas. This gas, combined with the oxygen in the air, burns. Fire can provide problems as well.*

Birch bark for tinder, sawdust and straw. Ferns, moss, fungi. The skin-like membrane lining bamboo. Punk, the thoroughly rotted guts of dead trees.

Cardboard for kindling, dried animal dung for fuel. *Clear the brush and scrape the surface soil from the spot you have selected. Form a perimeter. Collect kindling and tinder along the trail. A spark starts a fire.*

Pyromaniacs love the fire, the euphoria released by the flame.

Igniters provide the initial heat required to start the tinder burning.

Ovid on the Phoenix: “...but there is a certain kind which reproduces itself...When it has lived five hundred years, it builds itself a nest in the branches of an oak...collects cinnamon, and spikenard, and myrrh...pile on which it deposits itself.” We tell of the Phoenix dying in fire, reduced to ashes in flame, only to be reborn from the smoldering heap.

When a spark has caught in the tinder, blow on it. The spark will spread and burst into flames. Spontaneous Human Combustion (SHC) may occur, even without the spark, static electricity building and building between flesh and fiber, the tension and friction between the two burgeoning until the body ignites. Mary Reeser, of St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1951: all ash and bone, the spinal column and her partial left foot, still in a slipper, still intact, teeth scattered like dropped kernels of popcorn on the floor, her shrunken skull among the ash, the majority of her apartment unburned, perhaps a collection of porcelain angels strumming harps unharmed in a curio cabinet, a copy of the *Metamorphoses* open on the kitchen table. Physical anthropologist Wilton Krogman, examining the scene for the FBI, said: “Were I living in the Middle Ages, I’d mutter something about black magic.”

Shelter

A shelter can protect you from the sun, insects, wind, rain, snow, hot or cold temperatures, and enemy observation.

In the aftermath of the great fire of Rome, Nero finally saw the opportunity for his palace to be built. The Domus Aurea (“Golden House”): cobbled together and constructed of brick and concrete, “the extensive gold leaf that gave the villa its name was not the only extravagant element of its decor: stuccoed ceilings were

applied with semi-precious stones and ivory veneers, while the walls were frescoed, coordinating the decoration into different themes in each major group of rooms." A towering bronze statue, constructed by Greek architect Zenodorus, honored Nero in the palatial atrium, causing Pliny the Elder to remark of the likeness to Sol, the sun god. In this way, a shelter can protect you (Nero) from erasure, from the slow reduction of your memory to dust and ash, from the cloud being swept away in the wind into the air and spread farther and farther apart, until there is nothing left. Suetonius of Nero: "When the edifice was finished in this style and he dedicated it, he deigned to say nothing more in the way of approval than that he was at last beginning to be housed like a human being."

It can give you a sense of well-being. It can help you maintain your will to survive.

Ovid, renowned poet of antiquity, found himself exiled, banished from his home, to the far reaches of the empire, to an end of the civilized world in Tomis on the Black Sea, where no one spoke one word of Latin, cast into the proverbial limbo for "74iancé et error," a poem and a mistake, a crime more vile than murder, Ovid said, more harmful than poetry. An exile by edict of Augustus, though no critic seems to really know why. One theory states that Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* may have led to the banishment, its text on adultery perceived as subversive to the state. Or,

maybe, it was Ovid's knowledge of a conspiracy against Augustus, for which Julia the Younger's husband was executed. In Tomis, Ovid wrote poems longing for a return to Rome, for respite from loneliness, a symptom of leaving home without prospect of return.

Prolonged exposure to cold can cause excessive fatigue and weakness (exhaustion). An exhausted person may exhibit a "passive" outlook, thereby losing the will to survive.

Before Sir Edmund Hillary reached the summit of Mt. Everest in 1953, thirteen people died attempting the feat, seven on the same day in 1922. Thomas Mallory and his expedition made three attempts at the summit, the third ascent against the advice of Dr. Tom Longstaff. All mountaineers were exhausted or ill, the trek ahead still so long, ice numbing limbs and fingers and toes, reason blurred by cold. Mallory, eyeing the vertical icy slopes, sucking air from bottled oxygen, elected to take the lesser slopes in four groups, each man tied to the members of his group, each man's life literally tied to another's. *You cannot ignore your tactical situation or your safety. Avoid avalanche or rockslide areas in mountainous terrain.* The groups ascended, Mallory's in the lead, as snow loosed from the slopes, accumulating in waves or in one massive tide (how does an avalanche fall, what do men in its path see, the oncoming white wall coming for them?). *Cold is an*

insidious enemy; as it numbs the mind and body, it subdues the will to survive. Mallory and two of his men, half buried, freed themselves and descended to find the others.

Mallory, digging, digging in the thirty meters of snow covering the group behind his, hoping gloved fingers might grasp anything solid, living, digging in the snow for some sign of life, a hand, reaching up, fingers extended as if reaching just a bit more might allow the fingers to graze the top of the mountain. *Cold makes it very easy to forget...to survive.* Mallory digging, a nightmarish archaeologist, hoping to unearth that reaching hand, those hopeful fingers.

Mallory, climbing again in 1924, the ghosts somewhere on the mountain, buried deep in the snow, was roped to Andrew Irvine, and the two fell from the mountain, the rope breaking and jerking Mallory's waist, and Mallory continued to fall, his friend already dead higher on the mountain, in a glissade, a controlled slide with the aid of a pick axe, and in the slide, some believe, the axe ricocheted from a rock and struck him in the head, piercing his skull, and he died there, the photo of his wife, meant to be placed at the summit, lost somewhere at the top of the world. Mallory's body, discovered by expeditors in 1999, sun-bleached and hardened by ice, well-preserved, snow goggles in his pocket, no way for anyone

to know whether he had reached Everest's peak. I picture Mallory's wife smiling with a gloved hand in front of her left cheek, hiding a blemish she hoped to keep from the truth of the flash.

When considering shelter site selection, use the word BLISS as a guide.

B – Blend in with the surroundings.

L – Low silhouette.

I – Irregular shape.

S – Small.

S – Secluded location.

Food

After water, man's most urgent requirement is food.

Even in those condemned to die, there is the desire for food. Food as a literal rite of passage. If the condemned man accepted freely-given food from his judges, it was believed in pre-modern Europe, he would be offering forgiveness, a social contract, to his accusers, never to return as a vengeful ghost. Adolf Eichmann supposedly consumed half a bottle of a dry Israeli red wine; two pints of mint chocolate-chip ice cream for Timothy McVeigh; Bruno Hauptmann, after the

kidnapping and murder of Charles Lindbergh's son, ate celery, chicken, olives and cherries, French fries, peas and cake. Joan of Arc received Holy communion before burning at the stake.

Jesus, at the table surrounded by his apostles, breaking bread and passing wine. Judas eyeing him, nerves on edge, a deep longing in his heart, and trying to conceal a shaking hand, wiping away sweat, trying to will the beating organ to slow. Da Vinci gives us Judas in blue and green, fingers wrapped around a small bag (payment for his betrayal, a reward?), standing in shadow, distracted. He reaches for a piece of bread as Jesus reaches, too. *Matthew 26:23*: "Jesus replied, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.'" And, Judas, in a self-fulfilling prophecy, does betray his master, but does he give Jesus to the Romans out of greed for a monetary reward or is it out of instinct to persist that he, following this revelation, continues down a road that leads to Jesus' eventual end? How desperate the black bear must be, leg caught in a bear trap, blood on steel, bone shattered and pressing through skin and fur. *In contemplating virtually any hypothetical survival situation, the mind immediately turns to thoughts of food.* Is it the bread, the life-giving food, that betrays Judas as his right index finger brushes over stray crumbs, pressing into the spongy grains, already condemned because of an instinctual act of survival?

The smaller animal species are also easier to prepare.

The first obstacle is overcoming your natural aversion to a particular food source.

Historically, people in starvation situations have resorted to eating everything imaginable for nourishment. The cannibal, Joseph Jordania writes, might have eaten the flesh of other humans in the early days of our species as a form of predator control. The ancient Greeks might have condemned Tantalus, who sliced up his son, Pelops, and served him (i.e., *Titus Andronicus*) to the gods, seeking approval and favor and receiving none. What does the witness display, but disgust, at the sight of returning members of the Donner party or the survivors of Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571, knowing that they have consumed the flesh of others in order to survive? Can the survivor avoid shunning? Can he avoid the indignity brought on by a simple act of self-preservation?

Insects under rotting logs and beneath stone. Larvae as well. Avoid wasps and bees and caterpillars and spiders. Cook anything with a hard outer armor, weary of parasites. Lobsters and crayfish, mollusks and crabs. *Light often attracts fish at night.* Search for fish before a storm, but not after. Find fish near groups of rocks

or in dark pools. *Frogs seldom move from the safety of the water's edge.* Eat frogs, but not toads. Reptiles for protein, birds for taste.

Several well-placed traps have the potential to catch much more game than a man with a rifle is likely to shoot.

Above the Domus Aurea's dining rooms, Nero's guests could look upward at the painted ceiling beneath the dome, slaves unseen as they operate a rotating ceiling, an illusion for the diners of the heavens spinning overhead. Perfume and rose petals would fall from the sky. There are stories claiming that once, the downpour of rose petals, immense and thick, a blanket of red, rained down on the diners, one of them gazing skyward, mouth agape, petal after petal filling falling in, and distracted by the spectacle until he asphyxiated on the flowers.

Water

Water is one of the most urgent needs in a survival situation.

In Tartarus, the place of torments and punishments beneath the underworld, Tantalus is forever cursed with standing in a pool beneath a fruit tree. He reaches for the fruit, hungry, and the branch lifts up and up, just out of reach. He bends

for a drink of water, the one thing that might refresh him, cupping his hands, lowering so very close to the pool until all of the liquid recedes into the earth.

Almost any environment has water to some degree.

Melt and purify snow and ice. Use desalters for seawater, catch rainwater in a tarp. Suck on the pulp from the sliced-off top of a cylindrical cactus, spit the pulp onto the desert sand. *All trails (in the desert) lead to water.* At dawn, look to the sky for cactus wrens or Gila woodpeckers or Nubian bustards or pale crag martins or search for ostriches on the ground. Listen for chirping and the singing of birdsong. Follow the birds. They will take you to water.

If you do not have a reliable source to replenish your water supply, stay alert for ways in which your environment can help you.

Nero, Suetonius tells us, deserted by his soldiers and followers at the end of his reign, runs out from the palace, towards the Tiber River, hoping, perhaps, that its water will envelop him and take his life, a life now devoid of meaning without anyone around to remember him. What does he imagine, standing on the Tiber's

often-overflowing banks, his undulating reflection in the water? Does he remove a shoe and dip a foot in, as if to test the river's (his) will?

Ovid on the Great Flood:

Already had he toss'd the flaming brand,
and roll'd the thunder in his spacious hand,
preparing to discharge on seas and land,
but stopp'd, for fear, thus violently driv'n,
the sparks should catch his axle-tree of Heav'n.

Remembring in the fates, a time when fire
should to the battlements of Heaven aspire,
and all his blazing worlds above should burn,
and all th' inferior globe to cinders turn.

His dire artill'ry thus dismiss'd, he bent
his thoughts to some securer punishment:
concludes to pour a wat'ry deluge down
and what he durst not burn, resolves to drown.

Save what water you can and carry it with you. You never know when you'll need a drink, when the exertion will build and build until it is all just too much.

In the End

"What an artist dies in me!" Nero cries, having forced Epaphroditos to kill him, finding no will to live upon finding that the Senate, ruling him a public enemy, intended to beat him to death. It's in the act of surviving, of trying only to draw breath, that stories are created. The act of survival leading, intentionally, to everlasting life? Does the artist (Nero, Ovid, the orb-weaver spider spinning its fantastic spiral-wheeled web) do anything but attempt to live on and on and on?

Dante's Judas, forever tormented by his betrayal, forever being consumed in Satan's jaws.

Having survival skills is important; having the will to survive is essential.

It is, perhaps, out of love (of self?) that Nero burns Rome in hopes of living on through his palace, his likeness immortalized in the Colossus standing in the atrium of his Domus Aurea? What, then, survives of Nero when his likeness is

erased from the Colossus and the statue is revised to appear as the sun god, Sol?

What survives but stories?

Erect shelters to shield yourself from the cold or the heaviest rain. Find, hunt, gather food and water wherever you find them. Avoid predators, use camouflage, seek the warmth of others. There are still places on this earth no human foot has pressed into the dirt or snow or sand. Find them. Light fires, when needed, to cook or for warmth. Drink, drink, until you've had your fill.

*All italicized portions of this essay are quoted directly from the US Army Survival Manual.

WORLD YET TO COME

“I don’t have far yet to go, but you’re welcome to ride along as far as I’m headed,” the man said as he drove back onto the highway. Janice smiled and thanked him. She looked to the back seat at the boy. His hair looked uneven in parts and sloppy. She had cut his hair and hers so that no one would notice them at first glance. She pulled down the visor and looked in the mirror. They must have looked like vagrants standing there on the side of the road. She had not had a chance to shower since they left Byron’s home back in Kalamazoo, so eager to flee and get as far away as fast as they could that showering was not a luxury they could afford.

The man turned the radio to a news station. Somewhere in western Nebraska, a fourteen-year-old Mexican boy had been arrested and was being held on suspicion that he was a hitman for a drug gang in Monterrey. Police believed he had come to the panhandle to kill two men who had been associates of his boss at one time that had since come to America to make a new life for themselves. The men, Horatio and Ramirez, had found work on an ostrich ranch and the boy tracked them there, where police believed he murdered the men and hid their bodies in a grain bin on the ranch.

“My, what the world’s coming to,” the man said.

"It sure is something wicked," Janice said.

"Hate to see a young boy coming up in a place like this," he said. He nodded to the backseat in the direction of the boy, Blake. "Your boy."

Blake was not Janice's boy at all, but the son of her now-ex-boyfriend back in Kalamazoo. Janice had believed, at night in dreams and in strange visions that came to her in the day, that Byron was going to murder her and the child. He had never been violent, barely had a temper to speak of, but Janice was convinced and decided she could not take chances.

"I'm afraid of how bad things're getting," the man said.

Blake twirled a red crayon in a coloring book, drawing a gigantic red sun hovering in the sky over a farm scene with smiling cows and sheep and people. To the boy, the size of the sun must have seemed natural, but to Janice it looked chaotic, as if the sun had gone supernova and was seconds away from devouring the Earth.

"The world needs to find God again," the man said. He looked forward and nodded as if the person he spoke to was on the other side of the windshield.

"I don't know what I believe," Janice said.

"God's about all you can count on these days."

"I don't think the boy needs to hear this." Blake wasn't paying attention, lost in the world he created on the page.

“Fair enough,” the man said. They drove west on I-80 and were just outside Lincoln, Nebraska. “Can you sing?”

“Why?” Janice asked.

“Something about you, right when I saw you, told me, ‘that girl has a set of pipes on her.’”

“How’d you know?”

“I guess I just guessed it. I sure would like to hear it,” he said. He meant for her to sing, but the way the words came out, it seemed like he hoped for something that might never happen.

“Maybe some other time,” Janice said.

“It’s alright,” he said, “we’re about at the end anyhow.” He pulled off the highway to a motel off the ramp. He opened a storage compartment between the seats and removed a name tag, clipping it to his shirt. Then he reached in his pants pocket and took out his wallet. He held forty dollars out to Janice. “You all look like you could use it more than I can. Get yourself a room for the night and we’ll see if I can’t get you closer to the place you’re headed tomorrow.” The man got out and gathered the bags from the trunk. They walked to the motel office and the man handed a room key over. “Don’t worry about paying,” he said. Janice thanked the man again and went to the room.

Janice stood at the window, watching the parking lot. Blake played with plastic dinosaurs on the floor. Streetlights outside flickered. Besides the motel manager's car, the lot was empty. As she stood, she closed her eyes and saw Byron in his car, speeding down the highway in the dark of night as fast as he could go, and she knew he was coming for them. "What're you looking for?" Blake asked.

"Pack your stuff back up, darling," Janice said. "We're headed out."

Blake continued to play with the dinosaurs, smashing toy cars with them. Janice watched him, looked back out the window, and closed the curtains. She would wait until it was plenty dark, then they would flee. Outside, the world was quiet.

Janice entered the manager's office and stood looking around, the old man looking up at her from his crossword puzzle. He gave a pitiful smile and stood, laboring to his feet. "Has anyone come looking for me?" Janice asked. The man appeared lost, as though she unknowingly uttered the question in Farsi. Janice felt suddenly ridiculous and turned to walk out, thanking the man as she turned the door handle.

"If you're in some sort of trouble," the man said, the words trailing off.

Janice gave a meek smile and walked out, down the row past closed doors and dark windows. A man stepped out of the room just past hers and lit a cigarette. He wore a cowboy hat that, in the murky light of the overhead lamps, appeared worn and used. Janice put her head down as she walked to the door, avoiding eye contact.

“Seen you looking out that window about every time I come out for a smoke,” the man said.

“Don’t see as how that’s any business of yours,” Janice said.

“Hey, now, didn’t mean anything.”

Janice stood in the doorway looking out at the empty parking lot. Out in the darkness in the grass on the other side of the highway, unidentified animals loped around. The man looked a bit like Byron, the same tall, string bean look, the skinny jeans with the legs tucked into boots, a beard that had been left to root uncontrolled.

“We’re all out here looking for somebody, I suppose,” he said. The man held the cigarette in his mouth and removed his hat. “Name’s Leighton. Pleased.”

“Are you a cowboy, Leighton?” Janice asked, deferring her earlier aggressiveness.

“Bit more of a nomad,” he said. Janice opened the door a crack to check on Blake, who was asleep on the bed. “Never touched a cow but what was on my plate,” Leighton said.

“You just looked like you might be is all.”

“What brings you to this place?”

“The old man in the office,” Janice said. She had met six different people in her travel away from Kalamazoo. Each had wanted to know intimate details about her – friendly conversation to kill time – though she had never told anyone about Byron or her motives for flight. The absence of admission made her feel guilty even if the kidnapping had not. What she suddenly wanted was to tell Leighton everything and be free of her burden.

“How ‘bout we have ourselves a drink?”

“I’ve got the boy,” Janice said. The door remained open.

“We’ll be right next door. Or we can hang out in your room,” Leighton said.

Janice closed the door and jiggled the handle. “Alright then,” she said walking to Leighton’s door.

“He won’t even know you’re gone,” Leighton said.

Janice woke in the night, struck awake by another vision. She sweated and rose quickly from the bed before realizing the place she found herself. Outside, smoke from Leighton's cigarette wormed past the window. She was still clothed, though drunk. The room smelled like bourbon. The closet was filled with clothes, at least a month's worth, and shoes and boxes stacked one on another. Everything Leighton owned, possibly. Janice opened the door and looked out.

"You're a frightful sleeper," Leighton said, offering his cigarette. "I'd hate to inhabit those nightmares."

"I just see things is all," Janice said.

Janice had hoped to meet, in any of the people who stopped to pick her and Blake up along the way, someone who she could trust to protect her. It seemed a silly notion, but the visceral nature of her visions made her claustrophobic and she wanted comfort in another body. Standing in the dark, barely illuminated by the flickering overhead lights, Leighton represented something more hopeful than the others.

"Want to go on an adventure tomorrow?" Leighton asked.

"Where will we go?"

"Away from here, that's for sure."

Janice awoke to Blake standing over her on the bed, his hand shaking her shoulder. She noticed the hair first, the violence of the cut, as though some assault had been committed to it. "There's a man outside," Blake said. He jumped from the bed and went back to his dinosaurs. The motel manager stood outside, waiting, and knocked at the door. Janice pulled the same t-shirt she'd been wearing for the past three days over her head and went to the door.

"Are you all ready to go?" the man said.

"I think we're staying," Janice said.

"You're going to stay here? I have to say, I don't know what to make of you. Yesterday it seemed you were on a rocket ship's path to somewhere else."

Leighton emerged from his room and stretched, his hat falling to the ground. He picked it up and lit a cigarette. He seemed to pay no attention to them.

"I just think I'm fine here for now," Janice said.

The old man shrugged. "Whatever you need," he said. "I just can't pay for you tonight."

"That's fine. I can find a way," she said. Janice thanked him for all he had done. The old man looked at Leighton, who acknowledged him with a nod.

The man looked at Leighton and back at Janice. "I just hope you're not caught up in anything," he said and walked away back to his office.

After the man was out of sight, Leighton said, "Let's get on that rocket ship, sister."

"What do you think he meant, 'caught up in anything'?" Janice asked.

"I think he was implicating you in some sort of scheme."

"He doesn't know me."

"Neither do I." Leighton grinned, snubbed out his cigarette with his boot.

"But I think he was referring more to me. People might get the wrong idea they see us together."

"Why would they get the wrong idea?"

"They just ain't seen the world I seen and they think they know it better."

The car beneath her shook and rattled with each bump and hole in the highway they hit as they rolled along I-80 west toward Wyoming. Janice had attempted some shut-eye, but she worried about where Byron might be headed. If she thought too much about him, she wondered if he could feel her out there in the world. She had started asking Leighton questions as he drove to avoid thoughts of Byron, about landmarks and archaeological sites and attractions in western Nebraska. He answered as he could, but his information was limited as the land he had spent his life in seemed foreign as the talked about it.

“Blake needs to eat something,” Janice said. The boy sat in the backseat, his head resting against the window, asleep.

“We all do,” Leighton said. “Maybe we’ll go hunt some bighorns.”

“We need food now.”

“Sheep stew. Maybe some carrots, potatoes.”

“I don’t think you eat bighorn sheep.”

“You can eat just about anything if you’re hungry enough.”

They pulled into a gas station just off of the interstate and stocked up on pre-packaged sandwiches and soda and potato chips. Janice let Blake run off to look at the assortment of cheap toys the store carried.

“Blake’s not your boy, is he?” Leighton asked.

“Of course he is. What’s wrong with you?”

“I can tell. You all don’t have the mother-son bond thing going on.” He picked up a handful of chocolate bars and stuffed them in his jacket pocket, looking around to see if anyone watched. “Look, I ain’t going to turn you in or nothing. I am glad you’re along for the ride, but I can’t be an accomplice to something.”

Janice looked around the store, suddenly fearful that people knew her lie.

“I don’t want to know how you came to be in this situation, but someone’s going to come looking for the boy.”

At first, the prospect of taking Blake and escaping seemed as logical as anything could, a necessary action to protect the boy. But, now, Janice realized the criminal course she'd taken, kidnapping a child and taking him across many state lines.

"I was just trying to protect him," Janice said, broadcasting the thought more for anyone who would listen than simply as explanation for Leighton.

"From what?" Leighton asked.

"I don't know. I can't explain it all and have it make sense to you."

"Whatever you believe, you gotta make a decision soon," Leighton said.

He put sandwiches inside his jacket, stuffed a bag of chips in Janice's purse. Janice found Blake and they headed back to the car, eating their stolen food. As they continued towards Scottsbluff, Janice tried to come up with solutions to the problem, but every scenario seemed ludicrous and unreal. This was not going to end well and no amount of planning, even if her intentions were good, was going to change the outcome. Leighton looked over at Janice, waiting a moment before he spoke. "What're you thinking about?" he asked.

"The world yet to come," she said.

The psychic's house smelled like fingernail polish and burning flowers. Janice expected bead curtains and tarot cards and fancy tapestries all over the

house, but the house was no different than any other house she had been. The woman came back into the room from the kitchen, carrying a tray with a teapot on it. She had immigrated to Nebraska from Panama, she had said, fleeing a violent father who had once offered to sell her to a man for twenty dollars and a bottle of whiskey. They were both American, but her father had taken her to Panama to get away from some crime he had committed.

“If you see something, something you don’t like, can you report it?” Janice asked.

“To the police, you mean?” Nina asked. She poured tea into two coffee mugs and poured some dark liquor from a flask into her own mug. She passed a cup to Janice.

“I mean, you might see some things you don’t like,” she said.

“Darlin’, this isn’t confession,” Nina said.

Outside, Leighton and Blake wandered the streets of Scottsbluff trying to find something to do. Leighton had offered to occupy Blake to allow Janice to meditate on her situation and clear her mind.

“I just want to know what’s going to happen,” Janice said.

“If you’ve done something you’re experiencing guilt for, perhaps you should be talking to someone else.”

Nina poured more liquid from her flask into the cup.

“This isn’t some IOU for the future,” Nina said. “Like, it won’t necessarily happen.”

“I know. I’m just. I don’t know. I need some sort of plan.”

“You have to stop running.”

“You saw that?”

Nina laughed, covered her mouth. “Sorry,” she said. “No, I can just see it written all over you. I don’t need special abilities for that.”

“I just need to know if someone’s looking for me.”

Nina looked at her empty glass and shook the flask near her ear. She rose and went into the kitchen. Four Hispanic men in reflective vests and work clothes filed past the window. Nina returned with a bottle of bourbon, a block of cheddar cheese and a knife on a plate.

“Look, this is a scam. I can’t really see anything, predict anything.”

Nina cut slices from the block of cheese and ate. She offered the plate to Janice.

“Whatever you want to know, I can’t help you. If I could, I’d be betting horses instead. There’s real money in that.”

Nina reached into her pocket and came up with the forty dollars Janice had given her. She ate a piece of cheddar. The Hispanic men were eating their lunches on the sidewalk, laughing and joking in a language Janice didn’t know.

“Nothing more I can do,” Nina said and walked to her door.

Janice stepped outside and started walking. She realized after a few steps that he had no idea where Leighton and Blake had gone. She could stay in one place and just wait for Leighton to come to her. She looked around, down the street, in the shop windows on the other side of the road. Leighton would find her eventually. The men on the sidewalk watched her, perplexed. “She is lost,” one man said.

“You sure are the needle in the proverbial haystack, sister,” Leighton said, standing in the doorway to the motel room. Blake stood behind him, working at a sucker, wearing a new cowboy hat that matched Leighton’s.

“Sorry, I tried finding you,” Janice said.

“I guess we were just circling the world, arriving at the place the other had just been.”

“That could be about right.”

Leighton and Blake came inside the room. There were pamphlets to all sorts of places on the table: Yellowstone, Salt Lake City, a Paris vacation.

“Planning on taking leave?” Leighton asked, pointing.

“Just picked those up. I don’t know what I intend.”

“Blake and I had a real high time,” Leighton said. He emptied his pockets and placed the contents on the table. Crumpled bills, a candy wrapper, a detached button from his shirt. “Just don’t leave me here, you know, all alone in the desert without a horse.”

“Where would I go, Leighton?” Janice asked. “You’re my Moses.”

“Leading you out of Egypt.” Leighton had at first seemed like the answer to Janice’s problems, but she realized that everything was on her, that any solution was solely hers to discover. She had been fleeing her whole life – first from step-parents who forced her to practice a fierce religious devotion, then from abusive boyfriends and go-nowhere losers who had nothing to offer her but sex. Now, for the first time, she had had nothing to flee from, save from what she saw in her dreams and in visions during the day, but had gone anyway to avoid an uncertain and improbable future.

“Do you have a plan yet?” Leighton asked.

Blake dug through a bag of chips, crumbs already papering his shirt.

Janice shook her head. “I’m trying, but there’s no real good option. I keep thinking I’ll just wake up and realize that nothing’s real, but it doesn’t happen. Blake’s still here, so am I.”

“You just want everything to be so easy,” Leighton said.

“What’s that?”

"We all do. We wish life was just an easy course, where we could just wander the world in complete hedonistic ecstasy."

"You seem to have that going on."

"Shit. I got nothing. I wander, but I'm not going anywhere, you know?"

"I think I've felt that before."

"I'm a prisoner of my own inertia," Leighton said. Blake was laying down on one of the beds, eyes closed. "Right now, I'd like to wander to a bar."

"That could be a plan."

Leighton walked over and covered Blake with a comforter. "At least in that we have a destination," he said.

"We're just a traveling circus," Leighton said to the bartender when asked where they'd come from, where they were headed. "I'm the dogboy, this here's the bearded lady."

The bartender laughed and went to washing dishes and glasses. "You aren't going to attract much of an audience if you keep shaving," he said.

"I guess you're right," Janice said.

"Didn't say we were much of a circus," Leighton said.

"Just a couple of freaks," Janice said. Leighton asked the bartender to pour four shots of Jameson, one for Janice, three for him. Janice sipped hers, overcome

with the smell of the liquor when she held it to her face. Leighton knocked his back in quick succession.

"I'd like to get a job, a real one," Leighton said. He looked down the bar. A middle-aged woman sat at the end, blouse unbuttoned to reveal cleavage. She wore little makeup and was alone. It was Nina. "We believe we want to be free, to just go and do whatever we please, but I don't think it's really in us."

"What're you talking about?" Janice said.

"We need mooring," he said. He looked down at his empty shot glass, bit his lower lip. He seemed suddenly lost, unsure of himself. "An anchor," he said, "otherwise, we are bound to just float away."

Leighton asked for another round of shots, including one for Nina. When the bartender set the glass down in front of her and pointed to Leighton, Nina stood and walked over to thank him.

"It's the runaway," Nina said, clinking glasses with Janice.

"You two know each other?" Leighton asked.

"We're old friends," Nina said. She took the shot and slid the empty glass down the bar. "From a different life."

"Well, you hens get reacquainted," Leighton said, standing from his stool, already wobbly. "I have to hit the head, as they say." He wandered off, moving this way and that, until finally he found the restroom area.

"I had a feeling I'd see you again," Nina said.

"You ever wish you could really see the future?" Janice asked.

"No way, too much of a burden, all that knowledge. What could you do with it?"

The bartender came by with three beer bottles.

"Maybe help folks," Janice said.

Nina laughed, sucked away at her bottle. "Hell, people don't want to know their futures. They're too afraid of 'em. Nobody's asking to be saved."

"You're wrong. If people knew their futures, maybe they'd work to better themselves," Janice said.

Nina looked around the room, stopping only to eye the few lone men in the bar. "I don't believe in that stuff," Nina said. She rose, smiling at a man sitting by himself in the corner of the bar. "I'm in the wrong profession. I should be a garbage man."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"You always know what to expect," Nina said.

Leighton emerged from the bathroom and went to a table of old men playing cards. They invited him to join and he sat, ordering a round of shots for the group.

"I stole a child," Janice said.

“Why are you telling me this?” Nina asked.

“I thought I was saving him.”

“We can’t save anyone. I knew a woman in Panama who drowned her children because, she said, she wanted to send them off to God before the world had a chance to devour them, to get the spirit of the Devil in their bones.”

“Now I’m not so sure I did anything good. You know, as insane as it seemed at the time, I was sure he was going to be safe from harm.”

Nina asked for a bottle of whiskey. She uncapped it when the bartender brought it over and took a couple long pulls. “If I could really see the future, I mean really know everything that was going to happen in the world in advance, I think I’d eat a bullet.”

Janice took the bottle and took a drink. “The boy doesn’t even know what’s happening to him. Everything to him must seem so normal.”

“What makes life beautiful is that we live through the shit that happens.”

“I need to do something.”

“The dinosaurs must have been as happy as cows. They had no idea what was coming for them,” Nina said.

When they returned to the room, Blake was still asleep. Leighton was drunk and went right to the bed, falling down back first onto the mattress.

"Where are we headed tomorrow?" Janice asked.

"The whole wide world's open to us," Leighton said.

"Not really," she said. "We don't have the money to get far."

"Then we'll go as far as the money takes us."

"Maybe we'll go see Eagle Rock or the Black Hills."

Leighton sat up. He stared at Blake and looked back at Janice, who was standing in the open door.

"The Inuit have a word for what you're doing," Leighton said. "It's untranslatable, really.

"What's the word?"

"*Iktsuarpok*." Leighton stood and placed his cowboy hat on the table. "It means 'to go outside to see if anyone is coming'."

"Where'd you learn that?"

"Spent some time in Alaska on fishing boats. Learned things, ate some fish."

Janice closed the door and walked over to Blake.

"Got a plan yet, chief?" Leighton asked. "Gonna march on back to Kalamazoo and return the boy?"

"I can't do that, you know that."

"I was afraid you'd say that."

“What would you have me do?”

“Right now, that boy is like the lost city of El Dorado. Everybody’s going to be looking for him. We’re outlaws.”

Leighton searched his pack for a cigarette. He lit up as he stepped outside. Blake turned in his sleep, muttering something. Janice got closer and closer to the boy, putting her ear near his mouth, but no matter how close she got, she couldn’t make out the words. The calm in his voice, the rise and fall of his chest, made her suddenly sleepy. She lay down next to the boy and closed her eyes. Leighton couldn’t understand her motivations, nor could Nina or anyone else. As a child, she had tried to explain the things she had seen to her step-parents, but they only claimed that she was being tempted by the Devil, that she needed to pray harder to make the nightmares recede. She had stopped telling people what she saw, afraid to be misunderstood as mentally ill. Now, though, she had all these things she believed to be true about the world that she could not tell anyone. As wide open as the world was, she felt claustrophobic inside of it.

When she awoke the next morning, Janice was alone in the bed. She felt suddenly panicked and sprang to her feet. Blake was gone and there was no sign of Leighton. The clothes and toys were gone, the pamphlets, the wrappers. There was nothing but a stack of twenty dollar bills on the side table. She knew then

that Leighton had made the move she could not and had turned back toward Kalamazoo with Blake. She called a cab and packed what little things she had with her in a duffel. She waited outside the room. Across the street, Janice saw a billboard with a smiling family, looking healthy and well-adjusted, with a couple wind turbines in the background. *Invest in the future. Invest in wind energy*, the sign read.

“Where are you headed?” the cab driver asked.

“As far as you’ll take me,” Janice said, tossing her bag in the back seat. She handed the driver forty dollars. “Think the wind energy thing will pan out?” she asked.

“What’s that?” The driver looked at Janice and she pointed at the billboard. He nodded. “It gives people hope, I guess,” he said.

Along the open highway, Janice asked the driver to stop the cab and let her out. He remarked that they were out in the middle of nowhere and she said that she needed to walk, to clear her head. The cab driver watched her through the passenger window as she walked off in the prairie grass. She felt suddenly at ease with whatever might become of her situation. Leighton would do the right thing and Blake would be safe and back in his father’s hands. The sun was hot on her face and she already felt sweat beads forming on her forehead. She walked west, hoping to eventually reach Scotts Bluff, the rock formation fur traders,

missionaries, and settlers had used as a marker along the Oregon Trail in the 1800s. The sounds of highway traffic receded in the background and Janice continued walking. When she reached Scotts Bluff, she would formulate a new plan. She closed her eyes and tried to picture the old car, Leighton driving with Blake beside him, and the landscape surrounding them, but the details of the scene seemed wrong, the whole blurry vision marred by the inconsistencies of memory.

WHEN YOU KNOW YOU'RE WHERE YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO BE

Bryce waited for the impound lot attendant to look over his records for the seventy-nine Impala, watching two dogs fight over a dead rabbit in the dirt. Bits of flesh came apart in their jaws and the dogs ran off into the maze of cars.

Crushed and broken cars all around, some forgotten or yet to be claimed. The attendant looked over the list, his brow drawn into a frown and his front teeth digging into his lower lip, drawing the color away from the skin. He favored his left leg and sported a faded U.S. Marine Corps tattoo on his upper right arm.

Bryce wondered where this man had been to bring him to this place.

“Here it is,” the man said. “That car was shipped to scraps weeks ago.”

“And the stuff inside?” Bryce asked. “Is there a way to get that back?”

Bryce’s wife’s ashes were inside an urn in the back seat of a vehicle he had left behind an Omaha diner months before, an agreement with the owner before he went off to jail for violating probation.

Bryce had found his wife’s body at their camp as he returned from fishing. She had been mauled, flesh splayed and tangled. He picked up a rifle and went looking for a grizzly. He found one with blood still fresh on its snout, leveled the rifle, and killed the animal there in what he thought to be revenge. Later, as the judge gave him a speech about respecting nature, Bryce noticed something

regretful in his voice. He wondered if the man had experienced a similar fate, losing his wife at the moment they were trying to fix their marriage. He imagined the judge's wife revealing infidelities and their attempts to reconnect and salvage what they had.

The attendant wrote a junkyard's number down on the back of a piece of paper and handed it to Bryce. "Best I can do," he said.

Bryce walked to the waiting car and Vincent and dialed the number. "Any luck?" Vincent asked and Bryce shook his head. The lot attendant limped back into the office. Bryce left a voicemail describing the urn, emphasizing the importance of it, and pocketed the cell phone. Vincent drove and whistled to some song on the radio Bryce did not know. Vincent had been Bryce's cellmate in jail, their relationship a technicality, and he hardly knew the man. The urn was the only thing Bryce had left of his old life and it was gone.

As they drove, Bryce took note of the new buildings and businesses that had appeared in the time he was in jail. So much had changed, he hardly recognized parts of the city anymore. In jail, the urn had been the one thing keeping Bryce going, the Penelope to his Odysseus, and now that the urn might be gone forever, he had no reason to stay in Omaha. He had promised Vincent five-hundred dollars if he would drive him away from town and Vincent had agreed, though they had to stop and see his girlfriend before the journey started.

“What happened to her?” Vincent asked.

“I’d rather not discuss it,” Bryce said.

“That’s cool. I never lost a person. I lost a dog once, though. I was doped up and took him out, believing he was a born fox hound.”

“What happened?”

“I let him go and he just kept running. He never came back. I waited in that field for two days, but nada,” Vincent said. “Sometimes I close my eyes and I still picture him running after that invisible fox, all the way out on the horizon.”

“I don’t think there are many foxes in eastern Nebraska,” Bryce said.

“Are you sure?”

“No,” Bryce said. He looked out the window, watching the buildings pass by. “I guess I’m not sure.”

It was late in the spring and pieces of dandelion fuzz floated on the air like warm-weather snow.

“You know, some of the ancient Japanese believed the fox to be a powerful spirit that could shapeshift into human form,” Bryce said, feeling a sudden need to add something to the conversation. “Some Native American myths tell about how the fox dresses up in human clothes so that he can dance with beautiful women. Maybe that’s why your dog can’t find a fox. He’s in disguise, wants to be just like us.” Bryce looked forward, glanced sideways at Vincent, who did not

seem to be paying attention. His lips moved along to a song on the radio.

Vincent's head bobbed up and down as if in silent agreement, but it seemed that he was caught in a rhythmic trance, lost in the music.

Bryce and Vincent headed out the next morning towards an unknown destination, *just drive*, Bryce said, showing enough money to at least get them to the ocean. By noon, they'd reached the Sandhills of western Nebraska, the low-rolling hills and fields of meadow punctuated by large patches of sand, as if the sun melted the grass to reveal the bald earth. They continued to drive though Bryce had no idea where it was he wanted to go, what place might help him to hide in plain sight and completely forget himself. Something about the sight of the vast fields of purple prairie clovers and goldenrods made Bryce want to wander through the flowers, lay down and wait for the earth to consume his body. "Stop the car," Bryce said, staring out at the meadows.

The landscape brought Bryce back to the weekend in Wyoming, where he and his wife escaped to the wilderness to be alone and work through her affair. They were together for eight years and at some point they had settled and the marriage was stagnant. They had forgotten to take care of each other. She had been thinking of leaving Bryce and he told her they could change, that they could remember themselves at a time when they knew who they were.

“Here?” Vincent said. “We’re literally in the middle of nowhere. Smack dab.”

“I want to get out,” Bryce said. “I need air.”

Vincent stopped the car and sat still in the driver’s seat. Bryce got out and started walking away, heading for a patch of purple flowers and prairie grass. He walked to the top of a small rolling hill and sat on the crest, looking out over the meadow, eyes squinting in the bright sunlight.

The morning of his wife’s death, Bryce had sat on the riverbank, looking over the ring he planned to give her. He had forgiven everything that had happened. All he wanted then was to return to their old lives, for everything to be simpler.

“I don’t mind driving you all over creation,” Vincent said, “but you’re freaking me out.”

“You’re getting paid,” Bryce said. “Just let me have a moment.”

Vincent sat down next to Bryce, facing the opposite direction, looking back at the highway.

“We’re not really friends, I know,” Vincent said, “but if you’re going to do something crazy...”

“I’m not going to kill myself if that’s what you want to know,” Bryce said.

“I don’t know what kind of shit you got going on, but I’ve been places, too. If you’re going to have a meltdown, let me know in advance, will you?”

Vincent rose and walked back to the car. After a few minutes, Bryce returned and Vincent continued driving in the vague direction of Bryce’s whims.

They stopped somewhere outside Scottsbluff, and Bryce watched Vincent through the gas station window, flirting with the teenage girl behind the counter, showing her his tattoo of a whale, done in a Pacific Northwest tribal design, on his shoulder. Vincent seemed oblivious to the world outside of himself, concerned only with the precise set of circumstances that might bring him pleasure. Bryce hated him a bit for this, but envied Vincent at the same time. Two young boys ran around the gas pumps, playing Cowboys and Indians, darting in and out of hiding spaces, firing their imaginary rifles and arrows. He called the junkyard and left another message, expecting it to be ignored. Vincent returned and waited before turning the key in the ignition.

“That girl has some friends might be interested in hooking up later,” Vincent said.

“How old is she?” Bryce asked.

“Old enough to know what to do.”

“With what?”

“Come on, Bryce.”

"I've been in jail once. No thanks."

"They won't tell."

"Don't you have a woman back home?" Bryce asked.

"That girl would be too much fun. She tied a cherry stem in a knot with her tongue. Just to, you know, put on an exhibition."

"Let's keep moving," Bryce said. Vincent looked back at the window and the girl smiled at him, waving.

"What about the girls?" Vincent said.

"I don't care about them. I want to get back on the road. If you don't need the money..."

"Alright, alright," Vincent said, "let's go. We'll keep driving until you get that feeling."

"What feeling is that?"

"When you know you're where you're supposed to be," Vincent said.

They stopped for the night at a motel in Casper, Wyoming, and Vincent immediately purchased a bottle of Jack from a gas station and sat on one of the beds drinking it, watching a Spanish soap opera. The bottle rarely left his lips in the course of thirty minutes and he kept repeating random words he heard on the television, liking the sound they made coming from his mouth.

“Do you even know what’s going on?” Bryce asked. He counted the money he had left, wondering how little he could get away with giving Vincent for the trip.

“Not a damn thing,” Vincent said, watching the liquid in the bottle splash against the glass as he swirled the bottle around in the air. “But I’m sure it’s no different than the American versions.”

Vincent returned his attention to the soap while Bryce thumbed through a visitor’s guide. None of the listed attractions seemed exciting to Bryce, but anything was better than sitting in the room watching Vincent descend into a stupor. They had passed Carhenge in western Nebraska and, thinking about the ridiculousness and the intrigue of it, Bryce wished he had left Vincent’s company there, camping amongst the stacked and positioned cars made to resemble Stonehenge.

“I need to take a walk,” Bryce said, rising from the bed to go the door. As he walked out, he looked back at Vincent, who paid no attention.

Bryce had walked for a long time and returned to find Vincent on the bed with the girl from Scottsbluff and a friend sitting next to him. Each of the girls wore bikinis and Vincent was stripped down to his boxers, ready to swim in the motel’s pool.

“Hey, partner,” Vincent said. “This is Angela,” he said, pointing to the girl Bryce recognized, “and this is Victoria.”

“The name’s Bryce,” he said, shaking each of the girls’ hands.

“We’re going to the pool,” Angela said. “You should come.”

“No trunks,” Bryce said.

“Neither do I,” Vincent said. “Swim naked if you want to, the girls won’t mind.” The girls laughed at this and Victoria chugged three mouthfuls of Jack before handing the bottle back to Vincent.

They walked down to the pool, moonlight glinting off of the water, and instantly the girls shed their swimwear and dove in to the pool. Everyone was drunk but Bryce, given in to a world without inhibitions. Vincent removed his boxers under the water and tossed them on the concrete. Bryce, at the opposite end of the pool, sat at the edge with his feet and shins in the water, looking out at the Wyoming night. Soon, Angela and Vincent were kissing and Victoria splashed them, moving her arms in wide swaths through the water. She became bored and waded over to Bryce, staring up at him. The outline of her body, her breasts, were blurred by the rippling water. Victoria beckoned for him to join her, but he remained where he was as she watched him. What did Victoria think about him, how did he appear to her from the water? He felt like a specimen in a lab, cut open with flaps of skin pinned down, all of his organs open to viewing, his veins

and blood vessels pumping, as Victoria traced the movement of blood away from his heart.

Bryce woke with the first rim of sunlight cast through the sky, alone on a beach chair with a towel draped over him as a blanket. Vincent, Victoria, and Angela were nowhere around. Bryce had not remembered falling asleep or leaving the poolside and figured he was better off not having returned to the room with the group. Vincent's boxers lay in a wet pile on the cement where he left them and one of the girl's bikini tops floated in the water. Bryce rose, wobbly, and walked toward the room.

Vincent was sprawled out on the floor of the motel room with a blanket draped over him. The girls huddled together in one of the beds. Bryce changed his clothes and lingered in the doorway, wondering if he should leave all three of his companions where they were.

"Where to today, captain?" Vincent asked, sitting up. Victoria woke with the sunlight in her eyes and pulled a pillow over her head.

"North," Bryce said, though he was not sure where he intended to end up.

They packed their things in the car and Bryce agreed to allow the girls to tag along, certain that no amount of protest would deter Vincent. The girls went

on a liquor run while Bryce settled the room tab. Vincent steered the car north towards Billings.

“Stop the car,” Victoria said hours into the drive, pointing at a historical marker road sign, “there’s a monument over there.” Vincent pulled off of the road. The girls got out of the car and wandered over to the short, stone tower-like monument.

“There was a big fight between the government and Indians here,” Victoria said. “This plaque says the Fetterman Massacre occurred on this field.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Vincent said. He opened the trunk and removed the cooler, heading with it towards the girls and the monument. He removed three beers and handed them out. Bryce stood by the car, scanning the horizon. He made out dark, human-like figures here and there scattered through the hills, like sentries guarding something Bryce could not see. Vincent and the girls had already begun drinking and soon were re-enacting their own clumsy version of the battle with invisible weapons. They tired quickly and Vincent walked back toward Bryce, carrying a few cans, drinking from one.

“What say you?” Vincent asked. “Time to let loose.”

“Why’d we stop?” Bryce asked.

“The ladies asked nicely,” Vincent said. He looked off at the women sitting in the dirt, drinking their beers. “Look, if it’ll help, drink with us and I’ll call your travel payment good for today.”

“You’re not even interested in American history,” Bryce said.

“I am today,” Vincent said. “I love all this Wild West stuff.” Bryce shook his head, took one of the cans from Vincent and started drinking. He thought this, his attempt at bonding, might shut Vincent up. Vincent watched the girls again and, without looking back at Bryce, said, “Hell, you don’t even know where you want to go. You’re wandering all over the place looking for *something*, only you’ve got no idea what that is.”

“Drink your beer,” Bryce said. “I’m fine.”

The men joined Victoria and Angela and before Bryce knew it, he was drunk and most of the day had withered away behind him. He wondered about the urn and whether it might ever turn up, where it might appear. He had still had no luck with the junkyard and no one could tell him where the Impala was or if the car had actually been destroyed.

Bryce rose, holding a bottle of rum, and stumbled away from the group and beginnings of a campfire, headed towards one of the dark human figures in the hills. Scattered bushes swayed with the quickening wind as the sky grew orange. Drops of rain pecked at Bryce’s skin, but it did not seem that it was likely

to rain all that much, as hot and dry as it was. Bryce approached the figure. It was not human at all, but a wooden cutout of a mounted Indian, someone's notion of what they must have looked like in battle in 1866. There was another cutout on the next hill to the west and few more littered throughout the ridge. The mounted wooden Indians were ridiculous, like scarecrows guarding an infertile field, but Bryce could no longer locate Vincent and the women. He was suddenly lonely and isolated, himself a comical figure standing amongst the hills.

Vincent stood up when he noticed Bryce returning, his arms akimbo, the look on his face seeming to Bryce like he had seen some alien thing in front of him, something he did not recognize.

"Where've you been?" Vincent asked. "We were just partying away down here. Thought you might have been carried off by wolves."

"There're no wolves here," Bryce said. "Not anymore."

"Huh," Vincent said, scanning the hills as if he hoped to spot one. He looked back at Bryce, noted the empty bottle in his hand. "Been drinking alone out there, eh?"

"I was with the Indians," Bryce said.

Vincent cracked another beer and took a drink from a flask full of bourbon. "Fighting the good fight," he said.

“Have a drink,” Victoria said.

Bryce held out his bottle of rum, turning it over and shaking it to show that he had finished it off. “I’m out,” he said. He sat down in the circle with Vincent and the girls, accepting another beer from Victoria. Angela took the empty rum bottle and began spinning it, on its side, in the dirt. A small cloud of dust rose around the bottle as it twirled and the neck pointed to Victoria. She smiled and spun the bottle again, this time stopping the motion short so that it landed on herself. She rose and pounced on her friend, kissing her like a long-time lover. Vincent rose, dancing and clapping his hands wildly like a deranged court jester, whistling at the show. Bryce tried to ignore the girls. They stopped and Victoria took the bottle. She spun it in the dirt and after what seemed like forever, the bottle pointed to Bryce.

“No thanks,” Bryce said, rising difficulty to his feet. “I’m going to sleep in the car.”

As he walked unsteadily off in the perceived direction of the car, Victoria ran to him and spun him around to face her. He stumbled with the motion, almost falling down. She pulled him close to her, holding his arms. He tried to wrest himself away, but he was too drunk to provide much of a fight even if he really wanted to.

“You’re a good man,” Victoria said. “You’re not like Vincent.”

"You don't know," Bryce said.

"But now you're lost and don't know where you're at," Victoria said. "You may have done things you regret, been places you don't want to remember, but you're a good man *now*."

"I'm not who you think."

"Close your eyes," Victoria said, moving her lips closer to his. "Think of good things."

The next morning, they headed back out on the highway through northern Wyoming. Except for the passing whir of the landscape and highway outside of the car, the car was silent. Body odor and the smell of alcohol filled the car. Empty beer bottles and food wrappers lined the floor. They stopped at a rest area, washing up as much as they could in the bathroom sinks. Bryce and Vincent waited next to the car. "This sure is a good time," Vincent said.

"I feel like hell," Bryce said.

"Nothing more drinking can't fix," Vincent said.

"Those ladies are taking a long time."

"That's what they do."

"How about we ditch them?" Bryce said. He had wanted to ditch Vincent, too, but he was running out of money and did not want to search for a new ride.

“No way,” Vincent said, “I’m this close to sealing it with Angela.”

“You’re hopeless.”

“She’s hot,” Vincent said.

“This would be less a pain in the ass without them around,” Bryce said.

“Oh, man, again with the nomad bullshit,” Vincent said. He leaned on the hood of the car, head hung and rolling around. “Look, you got a lot of shit happening right now. I get that.”

“You have no idea at all what is going on,” Bryce said.

“I get it, but I am not going to drive around aimlessly, searching for the cure to your ills.”

“We had a deal.”

“We did, and I’m sorry if you feel sour about it,” Vincent said. He stood silent for a moment, searching for the right words. “This isn’t doing you any good.”

Vincent was right, but he had imagined the endless journey as a way to cleanse his mind, but now he was more lost than before.

“When you get a destination, you let me know,” Vincent said, “and we’ll head there. I promise.”

“I thought I’d have figured it out by now,” Bryce said. He watched as the girls came walking out of the bathroom, holding hands, smiling and giggling at

each other, as though to let on they had a secret between them. They walked past Bryce and Vincent and got in the car. Angela leaned out of the car window, whistled.

“Nothing’s ever figured out,” Vincent said.

Bryce sat at the edge of a rock cropping overlooking Billings, trying to contact the junkyard once more. The phone could not catch a signal, so Bryce walked around a gnarly tree and along the edge of rocks, holding the phone out in the air to catch a stray signal as if it was a butterfly net.

“No luck?” Vincent asked, standing behind him, lighting a cigarette.

“Not a damn bit,” Bryce said.

“Maybe that’s a sign.”

“I don’t believe in signs.”

“You should start,” Vincent said. “Besides, the ladies want to party.”

“They’re not sick of you yet?”

“Shit,” Vincent said, looking back at the girls as they attempted to build a fire. “Maybe we’ll let them get that fire started before we join them.” He held out a bottle of bourbon to Bryce. Bryce took it and drank.

A Mormon church sat at the bottom of the rim rocks surrounding the city. Bryce scanned farther toward Billings and out along the wide open skyline.

“There you are, all off in your thoughts again,” Vincent said. He took the bottle and put it to his lips and, after a long drink, said, “You have to let all that go. Give it up.” He wandered toward the camp as the beginning embers of the fire crackled and stray ash flitted into the air. “Come back to the world,” Vincent said.

As night came on, Victoria wandered off to the car, leaning in the driver’s side window to start the car and the radio. She found a song and turned the volume up enough that they could hear it clearly at the camp. She walked back to the fire, hips moving and twisting to the music, her hands twirling in the air. She stripped off her shirt in a fluid movement, as though part of the dance, leaving it on the ground. Then came her bra, the worn-in jeans, her underwear. Naked, she danced toward the fire, gesturing for her friend to join her, and soon Angela was naked and they both danced around the fire. They helped Vincent to his feet and stripped off his clothes. He joined in on the dance and they circled in an uncoordinated group that seemed to Bryce to be performing a ritual, as if the dance was meant to ask for rain or luck on a hunt. Victoria broke from the group and tried to get Bryce to join them, but he refused, preferring to watch them move around him. She returned to her dance, eyes closed with her arms reaching to the sky, and she looked to Bryce to be consumed by some primal force within her that was unconstrained by anything outside of her.

Bryce, watching the rain dance, thought back to the river in the middle of the woods. What had his wife wanted? Had she strayed because she did not love him anymore, could not handle his dedication to his research and work at the university? His long hours spent in the office, writing grant proposals? The empty bed on many nights, his body's outline a reminder of his absence? Was it something else? Perhaps she woke up one day and realized that she no longer knew herself. She went out looking for other men, other experiences to fill up some void. As Vincent, Angela and Victoria danced, Bryce pictured his own moment of clarity, sitting at the river as his wife passed away, watching the rushing water, contemplating diving in and letting the water carry his body out to sea.

He watched the manic dance of his companions as they continued to be lost in the music even after the song changed. Vincent wandered off with the bottle of bourbon raised to his lips, looking for a spot to piss. The women continued to dance, circling Bryce as he sat on a rock, tugging at his shirt and clothes to undress him. "Come, come," Victoria said, chanting the word over and over. Bryce let himself be brought to his feet and as the women undressed him, he closed his eyes and raised his face to the sky, hoping that the dance would guarantee the promise of rain.

THE THINGS I'VE DONE FOR LOVE

Love

Annabelle Salmon shone like a forest fire in the darkest night the first time I saw her – no, like the brightest light of some exploding star light years away. I met her at a mud drag, when women in bikinis, charging through the swamp of mud, broke the October chill and sprinted toward something, great and frenzied. I followed Annabelle to her car afterward, once she had toweled off, and said even if she wasn't in a bikini, I sure would like to show her a time or two. She covered herself, suddenly timid, unlike before, and waited. Like she awaited a better line. Something deeper and heartfelt and all that. You find me again and you can take me out, she said. I knew then she was trouble. I called my girl, Lucy, just as Annabelle drove away. Things are over, Luce, things've changed, just the way they always do and there isn't a thing to change that and I guess I'll see you around and on the other side of it all.

The Racing Horse

I bet the same horse every time. I called my granddad, a bookie back in Iowa (not the kind that's connected to a *family* or any organized crime at all, just an old man with too much time), and as soon as he answered and heard my breath about to

utter a word, in my ear buzzed the sound of his teeth grinding like a masseuse's knuckles into knotted muscles and skin. You goddamn idiot, he said, how many times do you have to lose on the same goddamn glue-bag before you give up? I have dreams about this horse, the kind that make you ill, I said. This horse ain't won one damn time but every dog's going to get his day, am I right? I asked. Dogs and ponies aren't the same fucking thing, Rory. And besides, where'd you learn to lose so badly and so often and keep coming back for more like some junkie, like there isn't a thing in a damn universe more worthwhile than failure? I told him to put down two hundred and he hung up without another word. He knows I'm good for it. I learned from the best, I answered.

Finding the Way

I found Annabelle after wandering Marquette for a week like a parent searching for a missing child. Some woman I met at a bar knew her, showed me the way. You're just wasting your time with that one, she said, flipping her hair over her shoulder, leaning forward to show cleavage like the sunrise. You'd be better off with me, she said. We stood at the apartment building, looking up at Annabelle's window. I will take my chances, I said and she walked away, shrugging her shoulders, saying something about the way I could have with her if I'd just see clearly. I've seen all those movies, the one where the unlikely guy chases the girl,

and she finally sees something in him she didn't know was there. I entered the building and climbed the stairs, trying to figure out her apartment from where I had seen it from the street, but I was all turned around and looked around at each of the four doors in the hall. I waited. I went back out to the street and looked back up at the window, trying to figure the way.

Evolution of a Species

Annabelle finally showed, found me sitting in the grass outside her building. I knew I'd see you again, she said. She kissed me on the cheek and I lit up, like I'd been talked to by God. Let's go somewhere, she said and took my hand, leading me away. I knew I'd let her lead me into a lion's jaws if she wanted. We went back to my place and Annabelle threw me to my bed. She climbed on top of me, legs straddled on each side, and put a finger to my mouth before I said anything. The wedding ring. I noticed it for the first time. I kept quiet. Annabelle removed the ring and tossed it on the floor behind her. She told me to close my eyes. I got up and I heard her clothes hitting the floor. She returned to her perch on top of me and took my hand. She guided it down the curve of her side, around the side of her left breast. I tried to peek and she covered my eyes with the other hand. I'd certainly done stupider things for stupider reasons than sleeping with another man's wife. Humans are the only animals that know better and drink the poison

anyway. We stayed like that, her naked on top of me, my hand tracing the lines of her body's map. I didn't open my eyes. Do you think you could love me? She said. Oh, yes, I thought, I don't think I have a choice and never have, never will. We evolved to do this, to find a way to continue the species, and love's the thing that gets us there sometimes, the ticket to that train that's just waiting at the station until we get on board.

The Racing Horse, Pt. 2

My Virgin Bride lost again. This time, I'm out another \$300. Granddad called me at work to offer his condolences. I took a break from fixing some lawnmower a guy dropped off the week before and went outside. I'd say quit while you're ahead, Rory, but you've never been ahead, have ya? I picked My Virgin Bride because I saw something in her, some flicker of potential greatness that just hadn't had the chance to spark. I told granddad to have faith, in me and in the horse, that we would all come around eventually. I'm half likely to take a shotgun to that horse myself just to put you out of your misery, he said and hung up. I turned my attention back to work. The lawnmower, a half-dead, twenty-year-old thing that should probably just be thrown in a heap of garbage somewhere, had given me trouble for a week. I'd taken the motor out and held it in my hand like a surging heart, took it apart and rebuilt the thing three times already. I thought I'd

known what was wrong and I had fixed that thing, but no matter what there was just no putting the thing right again. I put the motor back in the lawnmower and put all the parts back together. I thought about whispering a prayer before I tried the pull cord, but that never did me any good before. I yanked the pull cord back, again and again. A murmur of life in the motor, but nothing else but that whimper. Not so much a sign of life, of something to be salvaged, but maybe the dying breath.

Bleed

The thing to do is to go limp. Just let it come. Especially when you have it coming. I'd invited the hurt, so when I saw Bobby, the husband, sitting on my doorstep that night I didn't run. You the man? he asked. I shrugged my shoulders: if he found me, there was no point in asking the question. I guess you have to ask a man on death row if he has anything final to say before you deliver his sentence. First the bat to the ribs, then to the side of the head. I blacked out. All the better. I woke up on the ground, my face caked in a pool of my own blood. At least it was there to tell me I was still alive. Bobby sat on the doorstep again, eating an apple. He stood up once he noticed me squirming. Sometimes talking to a man just ain't good enough, he said, sometimes all those words are just a waste. I nodded, spit a

gob of blood onto the cement. It looked like a mostly-chewed cherry. We'll just pretend we had that discussion and came to an agreement, he said.

Breathe

We meet in the middle of the woods and unclothe like butterflies shedding their former selves. We meet in the university library. On the beach, against the lake, waves blanketing us over and over like paint strokes from a brush. Annabelle leaves once we're done, once we've neglected to utter things we both know are burrowed into our brains, and I watch her go as if she marches off to some battlefield. Every night, Bobby parked late at night near my place, hidden as much as he could be away in the dark. I could smell him, the same weed-and-bacon odor he pounded into my flesh that first time we met. One night, Lucy came to the door and pounded away, demanding explanations for things I couldn't develop words for. I slouched in a corner, hid in the shadow of a shadow. When the pounding became too much, when she said she'd felt like someone watched her go into the building and might have followed her in, I opened the door. She slapped me, let herself in past me. He might have thought you were someone else, I started. She turned with her hands on her head, shaking away a headache, an echo of me. He? You know who's out there, who just stared at me from across the street? She asked. Never mind, I said, it was nothing,

nothing, nothing at all. The door remained open. I looked into the hallway, waited for a flood or some fingers of flame to burst into the apartment. You should stay here tonight, I said. You're staying here tonight, I corrected. Lucy clinched her eyelids. One moment you throw me away, one moment on your knees, begging, she said. She rushed past me, instinct taking over, and I grabbed at her arm and she tried to wrestle free but I took her with my other hand, knowing my nails hurt her, that she was scared. I held her as she struggled, waiting until the rage in her subsided, until all the energy of her rebellion flushed and the pulse of her lungs receded, her body at rest against mine.

Fight

Once Lucy fell asleep, my hand rested against her chest testing the easing of breathe I walked out of the apartment and down the hall and the stairs and out into parking lot then into the street. I smelled him. I waited and sat and got up and paced. He wouldn't have done anything to Lucy, I realized, and I didn't love her, never had in any way that would have gotten us through, but I wanted to protect her, some kind of instinct inside me guiding me, something violent and ancient.

Learn

A few things I know about the horse: white horses in mythology are signs of fertility or of doom, depending on who you ask. The white horse is the rarest color of horse, though it appears often in literature and film. The Spanish brought the horse to the new world, Columbus being the first Spaniard to introduce it to the continent. My Virgin Bride was not a white horse and I don't think she was a sign of anything. Indian tribes who were able to get access to horses had a huge advantage in war over those that did not. But when Cortez came to Mexico with his horses and guns, the advantage didn't much matter because he had guns and numbers. I told this all to Annabelle in bed one night – we'd snuck off to a hotel, Bobby, I'm sure, on a stakeout to find us. I told her about My Virgin Bride and her history of losses, of never placing. Still, Annabelle said, maybe she's your good luck horse. She'll win eventually and then you'll see the whole world open up, I bet, like everything is suddenly possible. I sat up in bed. I wanted to tell her about Wyoming's attempt to kill off high numbers of their wild horses, these wild and roaming creatures the state promotes in tourism ads. I would have told her that farmers and ranchers see the horses as nuisances encroaching on their land. I would have told her about kill squads and airborne surveillance and castration. I would have said that we only love the horse when it's convenient, when it can do

something for us. Instead of all of that, I said, Luck isn't a real thing. You either fail or you succeed. There's no magic in it.

Confusion

Bobby waited again on the front stoop when I got back home. As I walked up and saw him, I sniffed to get a sense of Annabelle's scent on me. Bobby stood up, a tire iron laying on the concrete. He didn't pick it up. He ran a hand through his greasy hair, stared at the ground. I know you were with her, he said, but I can't prove it. He turned, looked back toward the silhouetted trees behind the building. When he turned back to face me, his eyes watered. He wiped a sleeve across his face. Oh, goddamn it, goddamn it, he said. He stormed past me and I flinched as he did, feeling a beating coming on, but he just kept moving. The tire iron left behind. He got to his car. I just can't lose her and I feel like I already have, he said. She's the only thing I know and that makes a man desperate and dangerous. He started the car and drove off. I wanted to feel sorry for the man, wanted to feel something at all relating to his position, but I couldn't. Nothing. Not even a sinking in my heart. We were both willing to hurt each other in the name of some innate need, some primal instinct to carry on life. What do you do with a love like that?

Persistence

I wandered out on Third Street, taking the walk to think about things. Past bar windows and restaurants. Saturday night, college boys circling women in some mating dance ritual. Is that love? Is it an elderly couple, still together long past their primes? Is it butterflies in the stomach, an ache of the heart? As I walked on, it came clear to me that those physical things that happen that we interpret as love are just reactions by the body. Bones and muscles do not know what love is, the brain and heart just try to keep us alive. Regardless of whether there's love or not, whether we can actually define it, the heart only pumps as long as it can, keeping us going, going.

Desperation

I called Annabelle early Sunday morning to tell her that we couldn't make it, that all that had happened already was a sign that it wasn't going to end well for anyone, that the heart is a fickle and inaccurate thing. She hung up without a word. Two hours later, she showed up at my door. In her hands she held a book, *Animal Behavior and Survival*, from the library, a marker sticking out from the pages. She opened the book to a picture of an octopus. I wanted to show you this, she said. The female octopus, depending on the species, will lay between 50,000 and 200,000 eggs. As she protects the eggs, the octopus will not hunt or leave. She

will sometimes end up eating her own arms to survive. I told her I wasn't sure what she was getting at. I asked if Bobby knew she was here, if she was even worried about his mindset. The octopus will leave her lair to gather food as the eggs start hatching, too weak to defend herself. Many mothers die simply out of extreme acts of love. You can't let me go so easily, she was saying.

Flight

I got anxious, looking out my window nightly expecting to see an armed Bobby or a beat-up Annabelle, purplish bruises on her face. I expected a broken arm, shattered jaw. Bobby was capable of anything. We all were. I told Annabelle I needed some time and I took off for Iowa. When granddad opened the door, he simply turned and walked back to his recliner without saying a word, like he'd been expecting me for some time and I was very late. Granddad had his racing forms out, took phone calls all morning. When I was a kid and we'd have big Christmas family gatherings, he'd be on the phone talking to gamblers more than he talked to us. We sat there all morning, watching ESPN. He made lunch and brought me a plate. Eat up, we've got places to go, he said. We drove to Omaha to Horsemen's Park. My Virgin Bride was scheduled to race. People think the horse track is a happy place, full of young, beautiful, rich people. They see that shit in the movies. But it's all old people, people who've given up. A man with an

oxygen tank takes the tube out of his nose now and then to light up a cigarette. Another man, legs amputated at the knees, wheeled around in a motorized wheelchair, a veteran. With each race, he bellowed the name of his horse, a great banshee wail. He lost three races in a row. Granddad told me he had a tip, that My Virgin Bride had looked great all week, that the jockey had some advantage. At the window, I put \$1000 on my horse. I went down to the holding area, met her, whispered in her ears for good luck. The race started and she looked great, getting out to an early start. The crowds hollered. Granddad leaned close to me. I lied, he said. That horse has looked as bad as ever. She's sick, got some sort of heart problem. She won't win, now or ever. I felt my heart speeding up in my chest, an involuntary response to whatever the brain told it. My Virgin Bride lost. Tough love, granddad called it. Only way you're going to learn, he said.

Home

A few days later, I made the drive back to Marquette. I called Annabelle and reached the voicemail. I called again, again. Two days passed and nothing. On the third night, I picked up the animal behavior book. One part said that female house sparrows will often seek out the nests of other females her mate has been with and will kill the sparrow's young, eliminating the competition, and will return to the nest, waiting for her mate to come back to her.

Rationalize

I saw Lucy on the beach walking along Lake Superior. She stopped and came over to where I sat in the sand. She sat and we watched the waves, small and tight, roll in. College kids tossed a Frisbee around in the waning warmth of the late summer. Dogs and children played in the water. The water was already colder, the season already seeming to change. After a long while, Lucy said, I don't really yet understand anything that has gone on, not a single piece of it. I looked at her. I had been reading the book for a week with no sign of Annabelle. I hadn't given up on her, but some part of me knew we shouldn't see each other. Still, I couldn't make sense of anything, either. I told Lucy the anecdote of the mother octopus. She crunched her lips and frowned, stared out at the lake. I don't understand either, I said. An ore boat docked far down the coast. We watched. Lucy put her hand next to mine on the sand. I resisted the urge to find solace there. I kept my focus on the boat, workers loading it up with iron ore, giving it everything the earth had to give, until the boat was full and set out on the impossible lake, smaller and smaller until it was out of sight.

A HISTORY OF LONELINESS IN 23 ACTS (OF LOVE)

1.

"I'm sure the large part of me is Holden Caulfield, who is the main person in the book. The small part of me must be the Devil." This is Mark David Chapman in his statement to police following the December 8, 1980 shooting and murder of John Lennon outside the Dakota building in New York City.

2.

My mother brings her first child home. A 1981 baby, a class-of-2000 baby. Curly black hair, small, one month premature. John Lennon and I share the same birthday, though Mark David Chapman assassinated (killed?) him ten months before I was born.

The facts of my early life are unknown to me. I most certainly experienced those first years, but I can no more write about them than an elephant can know the names of the plants it has eaten, the geological formations it has crossed over.

What I do know: that, like all newborns and humans and animals, I was hungry. I have learned in psychology classes that one phenomenon inherent in all human

children, suction, is the automatic turn of the head toward the mother in search of milk. My mother did not breastfeed. I would turn and attempt to suckle, waiting, waiting, waiting.

3.

The elephant, though it cannot access the names of places and things, shares with humans at least one characteristic: it mourns its dead.

Studies show that elephants recognize the bones of their fallen, can even pick them out from skulls of rhinos and other large mammals. They are drawn by the bones, scientists say as though that is something that can be known. The elephant grazes the skull or tusks of a fallen comrade, friend, lover with its trunk and feet. A desperate gesture, a rebellion against its newfound sense of isolation. A self-awareness that is brought out only through the loss of another.

Other studies show that the elephant will tend to and care for the sick of its species, even if they are not part of the same "tribe." Compassion exists in dolphins and chimpanzees as well. What is compassion if not an attempt to connect, to be a part of the lives of others?

4.

David Spiegel and Edwin Turner, astrophysicists at Princeton, released an article in 2011 in which they showed that the likelihood of intelligent alien species on other planets is unlikely. Apparently, scientists from the Search for Extraterrestrial Life (SETI) use the Drake Equation to calculate the possibility of life elsewhere in the cosmos. Spiegel and Turner claimed that the equation is flawed in one way: scientists have assumed that the probability of life on other habitable planets (ones with water, rocky surfaces, etc.) is 100 percent. Without this factor, Spiegel and Turner have decided that life elsewhere could be absolute or it could be the case that the only beings like us anywhere in all of existence are each other. And, yet, members our species try with a fiery ferocity to destroy each other and ourselves. Is the search for intelligent life a sign of our own mass-suicidal guilt?

Why do we search for this life that, in all mathematical likelihood, may not be there? Does our possibly-innate search for God seek out the same human truth? The possible nonexistence of extra terrestrials or God does not necessitate a cessation in wonder.

If we knew, beyond a doubt, that neither one existed, would we stop believing?

Does the elephant, knowing nothing of God or spirituality, experience isolation and loss in any less powerful of a manner?

5.

I sat alone in the high school lunchroom, not even with the outcasts, the vampire-wannabes, the skaters, the punks, the possibly-sociopathic. I wore dog tags, thick metal ones depicting an anime female robot and a large-eyed alien with an impossibly large gun. Some of my jeans had openings on each leg that were wider than my waist.

Two women befriended me sophomore year. One, a beauty pageant princess, took me to parties. These gatherings were frequented by those who physically were not like her: men wearing mascara and black lipstick, a girl who cut herself daily before coffee and Cheerios, and, her best friend, Glen, a giant of a teenager, well over six feet tall, dressed in the stereotypical goth/skater/emo/punk uniform, generous with his drugs. He liked me. One time, in the school hallway during the passing period between classes, Glen approached another boy as he sipped from a drinking fountain. Glen grabbed the other kid by his hair and pulled him back before he slammed the kid's face into the white porcelain, spiderwebbing the

fountain with blood in the drinking water. The night before, the story went, this kid had argued with his girlfriend. He angered, called her names, hit her. She and Glen were friends. There's chivalry somewhere in Glen's savagery. We find that chivalry in our own savagery at times, as though it's somehow hardwired into us, a question of genetics, but it's still something we never understand.

My other friend, Becky, was the first woman I thought I loved. We talked constantly – over the phone, in the car late at night when neither of our parents enforced curfews, on AOL – but I never knew her secrets. Whatever they were, they were buried deep, out of reach. I grasped at her, tried to know her in the most intimate way I could, but we were always just far enough apart that I could never hurt her.

All three of us would skip school, slipping out through the delivery-receiving door, slinking like soldiers on a battlefield towards Becky's car. The beauty queen, my tainted love, and me: perceived fag, loser, psycho. We went everywhere together. Parties where the beauty queen and Becky did drugs and drank while I watched. Strange, sketchy houses at two or three in the morning, one owned (or rented) by a thirty-year-old dealer who sold out of a backpack and talked about film history as he bartered with teenage girls, trying to trick them into something.

Three unused, unwrapped condoms, like promises, on a coffee table. A Che Guevara poster on one wall, yellowed by a fog of neverending smoke. Mascaramessages written on mirrors. Blue pills, white pills, Ecstasy, needles.

Valentine's Day, 1997. I had a girlfriend I'd met in an AOL chatroom. I wasn't in love, I was only happy to be wanted. She used her parents' credit card to buy me clothes, food, Amazing Spider-Man #300, the first full appearance of Venom. I had not told Becky about her. Hope springs eternal, I suppose, whatever that means. Becky arrived at my house in the middle of the afternoon with a bouquet of roses. I was not home. She peeled the petals one by one from the stem and made a heart out of them on my bed for me to find later in the day. When my girlfriend found out about this, she forbade me from seeing Becky again. I've pictured Becky in that moment in the fourteen years since: dressed in a low-cut, sun dress, a love letter tucked in her bra, sitting on the bed next to the silky heart, her hand brushing over the petals, pink fingernail polish, waiting.

Word arrived a year later of Becky's death by overdose on cocaine. My girlfriend, who I was still with, delivered the news with a straight face, a smirk I was sure hiding somewhere underneath, the Chapman's bullet in John Lennon's breast, the elephant's sorrow at the touch of another's lifeless skin.

6.

There is no God.

I first arrived at this knowledge – I say “knowledge” because the position of an atheist can no more be a “belief” than it could be a turtle – attending church with William, both of us forced to go by his step-father, the morning after I spent the night. After the sermon, standing outside, drinking watered-down lemonade and bad Sunday School cookies, William asked me if I believed. At 13, the cognitive wiring is not sophisticated enough for a young boy to form an elaborate system of theory as to why he does not believe in God. I simply *knew* it. I knew it as we drank our lemonade and commented on our then-innocent fixation on the young women in their church dresses, carrying their Bibles, totems neither of us would ever understand.

7.

Mark David Chapman. John Wilkes Booth. Lee Harvey Oswald. James Earl Ray. Charles Julius Guiteau. Why is it commonplace to attribute all three names to assassins instead of the more common two? We can exclude Leon Czolgosz in this pantheon of American assassins as he was a foreigner, which, in a way, is enough

to put them in a category “not us,” by himself. Is Czolgosz’s otherness enough to satisfy our need to distance ourselves from acts we would like to believe we are incapable of? Is this why we seek to compartmentalize and segregate the other: to assure ourselves of our own pure humanity?

We strive harder and with more care to name the things we do not understand or have no explanation for. Or, is it that we focus on the micro-details – the middle name, the number of letters in the three names, the length of fingernails, the color of eyes, the exact time of birth – as a means of providing answers when we know, full well, that this is impossible? Perhaps it is the case that calling the assassin Mark Chapman or Lee Oswald would make him too much *like us* – a man who played baseball as a boy, a man with a sister and a mother and a dog, a man who hated asparagus, even caked in butter and cheese – something we might not be able to stomach.

A Slate article boils the issue down to making sure that the innocent, people with the same first and last names, are not embroiled in mistaken identity. What if it’s not as easy as that? Do we attribute three names to assassins not only because we want to distance ourselves from them, because we can see in ourselves the same traits these people possess? Is it more complicated than that?

8.

I tried to believe in God once. Two months shy of 9/11.

Krista and I met working at Applebee's. She had made local news as a child as being one of the youngest heart transplant patients in Nebraska – or, American, as far as I know – history. In the dark, I traced my fingers over the scar over her heart, a reminder for her, always, that it beat, the blood still coursed through its walls.

We did not last long.

On our second date, Krista wanted to take me somewhere special. We arrived at the Westside Nondenominational Church early to get a seat. This was the kind of church where that kind of eagerness was necessary. Television cameras. A giant screen projecting the sermon, literally larger than life. A pastor cast in the mold of a game show host. The theme of the sermon – the whole grand prize in the game – was salvation in the hands of Christ. One by one, those who had been saved and those who had not went to the stage and proclaimed the desires to be washed in

the grace of God. Krista held me. "Will you do it? For me?" she asked.

Nevermind, again, that it was only our second date.

After the breakup, over the poisonous issue of my absence of belief, I wanted to find God somewhere. I went back to Westside, this time on my own, to let the spirit find and guide me, to be "saved," to wash my soul in the cleansing water and breathe of God.

Three youth group members – and missionaries – from Westside arrived at my parents' door one day. They displayed an eagerness to convert I can only remember witnessing in the heroin addicts (recovering) I'd worked with while volunteering at a soup kitchen on the north side of Omaha. They jumped and sang and shook me. The spirit, if it was in me, just needed to be awoken. The one girl in the group did the shaking and I went limp in her hands, an act of non-resistance, and hoped for some change to come.

9.

J.D. Salinger was a notorious recluse. In an interview with the New York Times in 1974: "There is a marvelous peace in not publishing...I like to write. I love to write. But I write just for myself and my own pleasure."

10.

I'd known Leonard for my entire tenure at Barnes and Noble. He was there every day: an old man who never spoke of a wife or children or relatives. We talked daily: about the Vietnam War books he ordered, the political science books, books on everything he could absorb. He had a continual wateriness to his eyes, probably some kind of duct issue, which always gave him the appearance of being on the verge of tears.

My longest conversation with Leonard was over Ernest Hemingway. He talked about Kilimanjaro, the Spanish Civil War, depression. We stood in the American History section. We didn't discuss Mark David Chapman and his act. We didn't discuss the mourning instincts of elephants or our views on God or the possibility of life somewhere else in the universe.

"Do you know why Hemingway shot himself?" Leonard asked.

"I'd heard absinthe had something to do with it," I said. "Holes in the brain, wormwood, all that."

Leonard shook his head. "He killed himself when he realized he was no longer a young man," he said.

11.

Anna and I stood together on the pedestrian bridge, looking out at the turgid Missouri River, its banks swollen and swallowing the landscape. Rick's Café Boatyard: a patio and music stage underwater. Trees half-submerged. Fields to the east like new, manmade ponds. It had been a year since she left. I'd called her that day, hoping for something, some re-connection, a rekindling of something I'm never sure was really there. As we gazed down at the rushing flood, a family of ducks swam with the current, unbothered.

"Why did you really leave?" I asked.

"We didn't take care of each other, didn't love each other the way we needed,"

Anna said.

"You never said a word, not until you were already gone."

“There was nothing to say. We’d already made those mistakes. There was no going back.”

The ducks made their way to the safety of the bank, where the mother gathered her babies, brought them close. A Hispanic family asked us to photograph them. I fumbled with the camera and Anna shook her head, laughing. I snapped the picture. Anna had nothing more to reveal to me, nothing that would bring me any closure. We said our goodbyes, wrapped our arms around each other as tightly as we could, as if struggling for warmth, and Anna walked away. With every few steps, she slowed and looked back at me, a smile almost on her lips. There were tears somewhere in her eyes. At the end of the bridge, Anna looked back one last time, disappeared. A man from the family I’d photographed stood close to me. I am sure I looked beaten to him, confused, lost. He placed a hand on my shoulder, a simple gesture of humanity. “What is she looking for?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said, “but I hope she finds it.”

12.

Mark David Chapman, hours prior to shooting John Lennon, approached Lennon and got him to sign Chapman's copy of *Double Fantasy*, his new album. "At that point," Chapman said, "my big part won and I wanted to go back to the hotel, but I couldn't. I waited until he came back. He knew where the ducks went in winter, and I needed to know this."

Why would the Devil win when Salinger's hero was such an inspiration?

Chapman's logic here is suspect, but it's still curious. His need to know "where the ducks went in winter," a reference to the novel, seems directly implicated in the murder to follow.

It might be futile to attempt to discern the logic of an assassin. But, maybe there would have been peace in the knowledge Chapman sought from Lennon.

Salinger's "marvelous peace" in not publishing, in the simple pleasure of writing.

Maybe that's what Chapman was after.

From Yahoo! Answers (grammatical and usage errors unchanged):

Q: Why would assassins prefer novel "Catcher in the Rye?"

A (from user *g0000000*):

“i think they understand the theme in the book of lost innocence. Holden is trying to preserve. But loses it to the crazy world we live in. the insights into human nature.

i think confused people might also 154iancé154ze what’s really going on with Holden. That he’s not only coming-of-age, but he’s coming of age devoted in a form of depression which no one seems to notice or care about.”

Holden Caulfield or the Devil. Love vs. (an inversion of) faith. Does one find marvelous peace in belief of the absence thereof? In the act of assassination or in the quest for some sort of truth? Mark David Chapman needed Holden Caulfield, J.D. Salinger, depression, the Devil, and a gun to answer this question. John Lennon needed only Mark David Chapman.

“The equivalent...is the apparently irrational but useful habit of falling in love with one, and only one, member of the opposite sex. The misfiring by-product – equivalent to flying into the candle flame – is falling in love with Yahweh...and performing irrational acts motivated by such love.” –Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

Dawkins discusses religious behavior – and love – as by-products of some function of the mind meant to ensure the survival of the species.

Religion as an act of love. Caufield and the Devil, sides of the same coin for Chapman. A misguided attempt to come of age, to be noticed and cared for, through an irrational, and murderous, act of love. How beautiful the death throes of a sparrow, broken-winged and flailing on the ground as it attempts to fly as if that will bring it renewed life, as it succumbs to the slowing and ceasing of its heart.

13.

The essay as an attempt to come to terms.

The essay as bloodletting.

The essay as religious behavior.

The essay as song, as universal connection.

The essay as understanding, coming of age, standing outside of the self looking in.

The essay as the smudge on Mark David Chapman's left eyeglass lens, blurring, partially, the final image of his victim in that final moment of life, just before the sulfurous odor of gunpowder filled the air, before Lennon's blood ran in rivulets in the cracks on the sidewalk outside the Dakota building.

14.

One version of the myth:

Shiva maddens at Ganesha, who has come between him and his consort, Pavarti. Shiva beheads Ganesha and replaces it with that of an elephant.

Another:

Ganesha is born of Shiva's laughter. Finding Ganesha too attractive and charming, Shiva gives Ganesha the head of an elephant and a potbelly.

The violence of the first myth: the beheading as an act meant to ensure Pavarti's love. The absurd gift of the second myth: replacement with an elephant head as an act of vanity. Both versions come to the same end. Chapman taking Lennon's life with a bullet from a black, Charter Arms .38-caliber pistol: violence as a way to peace.

15.

When my fiancé left me, I tried to reason it out. We weren't enough in love, she was crazy, I didn't want kids. Maybe we loved too much. Perhaps in the pursuit of love, in the proclamation and absorption of it, we tried too hard. We worked to the bone to find the necessary feelings inside, the rationality of the act. Love as an irrational act of self-preservation, of survival, of connection.

The essay as an act of love that parses the rational and irrational mind.

16.

One way Brian tries to entice women to talk to me is to tell them that I've been stabbed. I shy, I've told this story so many times, and brace.

Kegs submerged in garbage cans full of ice. REO Speedwagon's "Keep On Loving You" playing from a laptop hooked to speakers. The frenetic electricities of drunken bodies negotiating sex. Finite space, claustrophobic fervor. Bodies and bodies and bodies.

Earlier in the night, we denied entry to a group of teenage boys, members of some South Omaha gang. They returned, walking up an alley, carrying broken bottles and pipe. They shone like electric eels in the Amazon, slithering, alight, hungry. They surged through the backyard. They attacked the first man they came upon, one boy breaking the man's rib and stomping at his face. They moved through others in the yard and worked their way inside the house.

Grunts and pleads and yells. I flew down the stairs. One of the attackers ripped a hanging light fixture from the ceiling and smashed it against another man's head. A Goodwill-purchased portrait fallen to the floor, a portrait of cowboys leading burros through a pass away from the portentous shadows of approaching Indians projected on the mountainside. My friend Justin's dislocated, almost-flat-against-his-face nose. Three droplets of blood on the kitchen counter next to empty plastic beer cups, a rolling ping pong ball, soiled pots. I threw the man brandishing the light fixture against the wall and then to the floor. "No more," I said to him and anyone around. I loosened my grip on his collar, pushed him away. The fighting had moved into the living room, downstairs, outside. I stepped through the sliding glass door. Gang members kicked Curt's unconscious body as his brother tried to drag him away, into the alley, pursued by hyenas. Curt's bong in the grass. An uncooked steak in the dirt.

Riley followed, wrapped his arms around me, tried to pull me back inside. Some of the gangsters turned their attention away from Curt. They swarmed, rabid dogs. One went to the miniature grill on the ground. Hot coals and tiny red embers glowing in the ash. Hot dogs cooking on the metal. The lid falling and rattling on the cement, rattling, slowing, stopping, as the boy picked the grill up and swung. Streams of fire in the air, soot, charcoal, meat. The thud of the hot

metal against my skull. The final image of a shattered window on the detached garage, the sun glinting in the reflection, before all went black.

This is the part of the story I have to improvise: I fell, and Riley, arms twisted around me, Limp Bizkit baseball hat backwards on his head, fell with me. My head bounced off a concrete stair and most of the skin on the right side of my face tore away (standing at the mirror, I picked pieces of gravel from the wounds, wiped away dirt and dust). The boys piled on and hit me with fists, shoes, pieces of metal. A hole in the pile opened up. One boy stood and reached in his pocket. He opened a switchblade. He dove back on the pile, thrusting the blade into my back, the skin giving, opening.

I woke up on the cement patio, alone, confused. I picked myself up and went inside. Men and women in bloodied clothes picked up glass and helped their friends up from the floor. Bloodied men searched for the attackers. Women cried. One girl's tears smeared her makeup, black lines of mascara running. A bloody handprint on her shirt. John grabbed me and walked me to the bathroom mirror. My brain in a fog. John showed me my mangled face, open gashes below my bottom lip and above my right eyebrow.

I've tried to write this scene before, to write it as essay in order to give it meaning.

To extract substance from chaos.

My stabbing means something. It is survival, it is life, an act of love. It is the caterpillar scar over the heart of a three-year-old transplant recipient. It is Chapman's .38-caliber bullet. It is the siren song of bones and ivory.

17.

The Darwinian sees the yearning for love and the pursuit of it as a way to ensure our survival. Love, or belief that we love some *one* person, is adaptive.

We love in order to survive. To fail is to be alone, to diminish, to tend toward extinction.

What if.

We survive in order to love.

18.

I engage my students in an activity meant to help them avoid abstraction in their writing. They take an idea (love, God, patriotism) and create a poem only with concrete, surprising images that call that idea to mind. They want to say, “love is an elderly couple holding hands.” *Too easy*, I tell them. They write and write, getting closer to something. We discuss the images and keep working. *Something surprising*, I say throughout their readings, a mantra. They work and work until they are so focused on the image, a real picture, that they lose sight of what they were trying to represent. The symbol, the written image, becomes the *thing itself*. The blood-caked switchblade. The beheaded elephant. John Lennon’s lifeless hand on the concrete, reaching for Chapman, fingers outstretched.

19.

From Wikipedia: When Chapman was asked [at his sentencing hearing, my addition] if he had anything to say, he rose and read a passage from *The Catcher in the Rye*, when Holden tells his little sister, Phoebe, what he wants to do with his life:

Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody’s around — nobody big, I mean — except me. And I’m standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I

have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff — I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all.

20.

John Lennon would have turned 71 on October 9, 2011, my 30th birthday and what would have been the three-month mark of my marriage.

Anna and I discussed many nontraditional ways to go about the ceremony. One, a joke, was to do something themed around *Lord of the Rings*. Among the silly ideas thrown about was that Brian, my best man, would step into the aisle when Anna appeared and, emulating Arwen from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, say, "if you want him, come and claim him."

21.

As of this essay, I'm still searching for my chance to ensure the survival of the species. As of this essay, the switchblade-shaped scar below my left shoulder still itches and pulsates now and then.

22.

Richard Dawkins:

Does religion fill a much needed gap? It is often said that there is a God-shaped gap in the brain which needs to be filled: we have a psychological need for God – imaginary friend, father, big brother, confessor, confidant – and the need has to be satisfied whether God really exists or not. But could it be that God clutters up a gap that we'd be better filling with something else? Science, perhaps? Art? Human friendship? Humanism? Love of this life in the real world, giving no credence to other lives beyond the grave? A love of nature, or what the great entomologist E.O. Wilson has called *Bibliophilia*? The gap. Loneliness. The fear of being alone. Chapman waiting on the curb outside the Dakota, waiting on the police to take him. Ganesha's headless body in the moments before the elephant head is affixed. Anna glancing back, glancing back, glancing, walking, away.

23.

I imagine _____ in his late twenties, perhaps married, perhaps with children. A house built in the 1920s by Italian immigrants. The Mexican flag waving next to the American stars and stripes. A foul ball, a souvenir, caught at the last game of the College World Series at Rosenblatt Stadium. A small boy he sees a lot of

himself in: a lot of fight and heart, independence, fierce will to live. A small boy swinging a stick in the backyard, the wife watching him play. Fireflies lighting the early onset of night. I wonder if _____ looks at his wife and his child and ever thinks back to that day. I picture the knife: a once-sleek red handle now chipping paint and collecting dust. The *thing itself*. I wonder if he still has it, buried in a sock drawer. I see it: the boy climbing up his slide and going down, head first, with the stick in hand, crashing at the bottom and cutting his cheek on the stick. The wife rushes to her boy, puts her hand over his heart, feels the hurried *ba-bump, ba-bump*. She wipes the blood from the boys face, a bit of it staining his shirt depicting a cartoon elephant. Does _____ recover the switchblade from obscurity as he watches, through the window, his wife care for their son in the backyard, the cold of the metal against his right palm, letting it remind him of an empty life he once led, before he returns it to the darkness and goes to his wife and child, arms spread wide as his family greets him and thinks, *this is all I'll ever need?*

MONKEY, LAST EXOTIC ANIMAL, STILL AT LARGE IN DETROIT

The trains always ran on time in Mao's China, Dad said, walking the grounds of the Michigan Central station. I asked if that was true, even though I figured it couldn't be. We walked through the old restaurant, tables still covered in plates and knives and coffee mugs. Dad asked if I wanted to shoot his assault rifle. I didn't, but he pushed the gun against my chest, like he was lowering the safety bar on a roller coaster, something meant to be fatherly.

I suppose background is in order: an old man, waking up one day and realizing that *today, I'm going to die*, opens the cages housing his private zoo of animals: grizzly bears, black bears, a tiger, flamingos, parrots, an ostrich. He opens the cages and tells them to go, to be free. He condemns them in his freedom-giving. My dad and other deputies were dispatched to hunt the animals, killing them if necessary, sedating them if possible. And there we were, hunting the final remaining animal, a monkey, spotted, possibly, around the train station among the ruins and overturned tables and the refrigerator lying on its side, a family of raccoons inside.

I asked my father why the old man would do this, why the cops had to kill the animals. *These things happen*, he said and asked if I was going to shoot the damn gun or not. I lowered my head and he took the gun back. These things

happen. That's what he said when I got my first period three weeks earlier, holding the marooned shorts out to him as evidence. That's what he said when mom ran off with the ornithologist, saying she was done with being a mother, a wife. I doubt he believed those words any more than a parrot believes the series of sounds it imitates from human speech.

The trains were never on time here, he said. That's why this city's in ruins.

Why did the old man let his animals go out to die? I asked again.

Do you understand what I mean? he asked. We wandered down a wide corridor, crumbling columns lining the hallway, displaced tiles and puddles of water beneath holes in the ceiling along the floor. Animal droppings. Needles, broken beer bottles, a soiled mattress. *If you don't have control of the big stuff, he said, you won't have control of the little stuff.*

When mom left, she left behind a one-hundred-sixty-two item list of reasons she was leaving. Dad put the list on the fridge, a sort of not-to-do list. None of the reasons mattered. Not even that mom and the ornithologist had run off to find possibly the last remaining ivory-billed woodpecker in the Big Woods region of eastern Arkansas. *They'll be looking forever, Dad said once. They don't even know where to begin.*

Dad's eyes widened suddenly, he looked to the end of the long hall. He started running. He heard something – the monkey, I suppose – or thought he did.

Where are you going? I yelled after him. *How do you even know it's the monkey?* I stood for a moment alone. I sat against the wall. After a while, I rose and went after him. He stood out in the overgrown grass among three tall sunflowers. His chest rose and fell violently. He shook his head. He wanted me to believe that this all had to be done, that the world came to this moment for a reason and he pulled a petal from the dandelion head, then another and another, until all the yellow petals lay at his feet like the lost feathers of a molting bird.

THE MOOSE LIFT

Alden Pruitt stabbed at the pieces of homemade deer jerky arranged haphazardly on his mother's fine china serving platter. His father's idea of proper reception food. Past the table, on the fireplace mantle, Alden stared at his dad's prized moose antlers, a relic of some other time, and at his father, Kale, telling the story of the journey of those antlers to one of the guests.

The urn rested at the center of the antlers. His mother's ashes. The reason for the gathering, the funeral reception. Alden chewed on a strand of jerky, watching Kale attract listeners. He told of the moose lift in 1985, the attempts to reintroduce the moose into the wilds of Upper Peninsula Michigan. A funeral reception and he's talking about the moose, Alden thought.

Kale waved his right hand in front of the gathered guests, showing off the incorrectly healed bones on his pinky and ring fingers, trophies of his more reckless days. "These have their origins in a bar fight with a copper ore miner over a five dollar bet," Kale said. This story had numerous versions, each different depending on Kale's level of drunkenness. Sometimes the offending party was an Ojibwe Indian, and other times there was no bet at all, just a misunderstanding, different ideas about the nature of the world. "Shirley was so impressed that I fought with a broken hand for most of the fight that she agreed to a date." Kale

took a picture of Shirley and him down and brushed the dust away with his thumb. He smirked, keeping to himself some private joke, Alden figured, something only he and Shirley had shared.

Alden walked into the kitchen and out the back door, attempting to get out of earshot of his father's stories. He had told his wife he would behave, that this was no time to relive Kale's past failings. Before he left Chicago, Alden convinced himself he could make it one week without wanting to shake his father and yell at him, but already, within twelve hours of seeing his father, his thoughts turned ugly, shameful. He hated that Kale could cause this turn in him without really doing anything. They would be civil during and after the funeral and they would distribute the ashes according to Shirley's wishes and Alden would return home to his son and wife. He only had to get through the week.

Alden had become a father far later than most of his friends his own age. He was in his late thirties and had avoided the possibility of children for most of his adult life. Memories of his own childhood, of his father, acted as a "How Not To" and a reason for never having kids. Kale had been the best form of birth control.

The back door opened and three of the male guests, old friends, flooded into the backyard followed by Kale. "There's my son," Kale said, "there's my boy." Kale wave a beer can in the air, trying to evoke something. Alden watched

as the four men gathered in a circle and lit up a home-rolled joint. More stories spilled out. Kale told the one about the time he and Shirley had tried to become “romantic” in Yellowstone and were discovered by a park ranger trying to locate a sick bison. There was the story of Kale tracking a wounded deer through the woods, drunk, getting lost and wandering well into the night. He had found, eventually, a dirt road and followed it until he found a house. Standing on the porch, leaning against the door frame in a stupor and holding a shotgun, he had pounded and pounded on the door, hoping for help, until the police showed up to take him home. Alden had to get away.

On the kitchen table, remnants and tokens of the north woods were on display: gull bones, pellucid sea glass, driftwood and wormwood, petrified tree bark and agates. There was a mounted deer head above the front door, always watching the room, and a wolf-pelt-rug Alden was sure his father had obtained through less-than-legal means. These things, all taken from the world outside, and appropriated for the purposes of art or decoration, Alden wasn't sure.

Alden owned an old house in Chicago he had bought as a fixer-upper, something small where he could start his family. As he began the process of renovating the house, starting with the dining room, he began taking a sledgehammer to one of the walls so he could eventually expand the room. Inside

the wall, Alden found an old satchel filled with letters, a couple diamond rings, and a picture of some woman with Al Capone.

Friends of his mother and people he'd gone to high school with and the man who used to sell the family firewood and people Alden had never met swarmed him to pass on their condolences. An elderly woman told him stories about his childhood he did not remember.

"Let me show you my sea urchins," Kale said, returning to the room with the other men from outside. Sea urchins smuggled in following a trip in Chile, Alden thought, more shit that didn't belong. Kale and Shirley had eaten the urchin's gonads, delicacies, served raw with lemon, onions and olive oil. Kale wanted the bodies as souvenirs. Alden wanted to interrupt, to tell the guests that none of these things mattered. He wanted guests to be told stories of Shirley, to remember her as the woman they all loved, but Kale filled the time with inappropriate things, out of place things.

Alden had wondered what else might be hidden in the walls, under the floorboards. What secrets quietly lurked in the bones of his house? He dreamed up remodeling projects that would allow him to break apart the floors, to dig in the backyard. After he put up new drywall in the dining room, he removed the old toilet from the downstairs bathroom. Surely Capone could have hidden something behind the toilet where no one would look?

The sea urchins were intact. Flotsam and Jetsam, Kale named them, after *The Little Mermaid*. When he had brought them back from their vacation, Alden had tried then to tell his father that, in the film, they were eels, not urchins, but he couldn't change Kale's mind. Guests passed the urchins around the room, commenting on their spines, wondering if they could still be venomous after all this time.

"The urchin's teeth are so sharp it can chew through stone," Kale announced. Alden shook his head and excused himself. As he ascended the stairs, he heard Kale say, "My son's embarrassed, don't mind him." In his parents' bedroom, Alden looked at the picture as his father told of the moose he had accidentally killed just after the moose lift began. He was in a blind, hunting deer, and came down with buck fever, mistaking the moose for a buck. After the shooting, Kale claimed the moose's ghost roamed the north woods, waiting for him to right what he'd done.

Downstairs, Kale sang Shirley's favorite song, strumming, poorly, his guitar. *I really want to know you, really want to go with you*, he sang. Alden removed the photo of the woman and Capone. He had researched every database and piece of microfilm he could get his hands on and could find no trace of the woman's identity anywhere.

Alden had torn the tile up in the bathroom, stripped the boards beneath. He broke down the old cabinets and ripped out the old pipes. He found a Thompson submachine gun beneath the old clawfoot tub. Despite the discovery, Alden wanted to know more about the woman. This wasn't Mae Capone, Al's widow. She was too beautiful to be any of the prostitutes in Capone's employ, too pure-looking, Alden thought, to be a bootlegger.

Dismayed at his sudden, intense preoccupation with the woman in the picture making him forget about his mother, Alden put the photo away. It doesn't matter who she was, he thought. He returned downstairs. Some of the guests had left. The Martin family brought over a gaudy bouquet of tiger lilies and roses and cattails. Kale started singing another George Harrison song, *Till There Was You*, a song Alden hated as a child when Kale would try to play and sing it, attempting to get him to sleep. If Shirley was around, she would have told Kale to stop murdering the song, would have made him stop at the first glass of whiskey. But, without her there to tame him, Kale returned instantly to old habits. He had not been sober since Alden arrived. He carried on self-importantly. He told Alden to "stop being such a goddamned baby" when he first cried at the funeral, twisting the cap on his flask.

When his son was born, Alden made a list of all the things he would never do to the boy, a permanent reminder. He would never ignore the child's sadness

at being bullied, hoping the boy would toughen up and fight back. He would never tell the boy he could do better when the boy brought home B's on report cards. He would be open and tell his son how he felt and they would talk, really talk, to each other.

More guests, the Andersons and Gilberts and Mr. Touhy, left, leaving their pies and pot roasts and seven-layer bean dips behind. Soon, Alden was alone with his father, sitting in the living room picking at more deer jerky. Alden watched his father pace the room, cherry pie in his mustache, laughing at something. Flotsam sat on the mantle next to the urn now. Alden wondered if his son would remember him positively when he was gone, if he was doing the right things to avoid making the boy hate him.

When Shirley first found out she was dying, that the brain tumor had returned and was spreading, Kale said that he liked the way she looked bald, at least. Alden called his mother daily, made as many trips back to Marquette as he could. Shirley told Alden, on his third return trip in as many months, to stop fussing over her. "I knew it was coming before it happened and there was nothing to do about it," she said. Kale bought her ridiculous hats and scarves. A hat in the shape of a deer head; one with beer cups attached, straws winding out of the openings for easy access.

Kale wanted to leave and find the right place for the ashes. Shirley had specified that she wanted to be forever a part of the north woods, to be spread amongst the pines. They would take the ashes to Hogsback Mountain and give Shirley her wish. Then Alden would pack up and head back to Chicago and nothing between he and his father would have changed.

There were more pictures of the woman, some with Al and some alone, in a box hidden away in a secret compartment above the coat closet. A historian, an expert on Capone, told Alden that there were always stories of buried loot and secret safe houses. Some people thought Chicago gangsters, on vacations in the north woods, buried money and evidence and even bodies among the trees. Alden did not tell the man why he was interested in Capone's history. He asked about mistresses and women Capone associated with. The historian had nothing. "Has anyone ever found any of these hiding places, any of the buried money?" Alden asked. Nothing had ever been found, the historian said. No one knew for sure if any of the stories were true.

Alden drove while his father drank. The urn rested on the seat between Kale's legs. He sipped from a flask.

"Have you ever heard of Capone stashing money up here?" Alden asked.

"Everyone's heard about Capone," Kale said.

"But, what about that, specifically?"

“There’s zero truth to that.” Kale shifted in his seat. He took a long drink. Basalt rock and birch trees speed by in the windows. “When I shaved your mother’s head, getting a jump on it before the radiation could take it in chunks, she said it was one of the most sensual things we’d ever done together.”

Alden mentioned the photograph, but Kale had opened the window and stuck his head out, letting the wind stream over his face. They passed a rafter of turkeys milling around off the highway and Kale started squawking after them. He turned and watched behind them as the stressed turkeys ran about behind them.

“I wonder if we’ll see the ghost out here,” Kale said. The old man believed completely in superstition and myth, engaged in flights of futile treasure-hunting, and yet he ignored Alden or simply did not care. Once, after two separate claimed sightings of mermaids on Lake Superior, a local doctor offered ten-thousand dollars to anyone who could provide evidence. Kale and a friend spent weeks in a kayak with cameras and beer, searching.

“There’s no ghost,” Alden said. “You shot a moose. It died. That’s it.”

“You don’t know.”

“You’re just holding onto nonsense. A fairy tale. I think you’re in denial.”

Alden regretted, instantly, the statement. His father was grieving. He sat silent and Kale did not say anything.

As they pulled into the gravel lot at the head of the trail, Kale said, "Your mother knew who I am and she never questioned it. She was fine, happy."

They began down the trail, heading into the woods, towards the mountain. Kale's knees would not allow him to climb, so they would spread the ashes at the base. They walked slowly. Alden milled over apologies and quickly suppressed them, feeling like he had nothing to be sorry for.

"I looked for Capone's loot once," Kale said as they crossed a muddy stream, walking on two wood planks placed over the water. "There was a story, an old journal, claiming he hid some kind of box full of money in copper country. We, your mom and I, thought it'd be fun to look for it."

"But you didn't find anything," Alden said.

"We found dirty, abandoned mattresses and sinks and even a bicycle."

Alden looked at the picture of Capone and the woman. His father's knowledge of the man was elementary at best, based only on stories that allowed him to be an adventurer. He wanted Kale to know something of the woman, to reveal to him what no one else had been able to tell him.

They came to a rock outcropping and Alden saw the peak of the small mountain, rising up through the trees. A red-tailed hawk flew overhead. The first signs of fall started to appear in a few of the leaves. Muddy coyote footprints ran over the rock. "This might be a good place," Kale said. He opened the satchel

hanging from his shoulder and reached in for the urn. The flask was there, a bottle of whiskey clanking against it as he shuffled the contents. He crouched and searched deeper, through letters and rocks from the lake shore and bones.

“You lost mom’s ashes,” Alden said. He turned away from his father. This was expected, not a surprise.

“They’re here, they’ve gotta be,” Kale said, searching again and again, finding nothing. He mumbled to himself, rose, and walked to the edge of the rock, wiping tears from his face. Alden watched him. His heart raced. He could leave his father there and find the urn himself. He didn’t need the old man, had actually been hindered by him. He began to walk away but turned to see Kale broken down, sitting and crying into his hands.

Alden headed back the way they had trekked in, searching on and off the trail. He came to the wooden planks and looked downstream, hoping the urn fell in and drifted, catching on a group of rocks. He began thinking about the picture of the woman. This woman had been important to Capone, enough so that he had all these pictures of her, all this evidence of their relationship but no one knew who she was. No one remembered her. She was lost.

He continued on until he reached the place they had started, the sun gleaming in the car’s windshield. He bent to the passenger side window. The urn

rested in the passenger's seat. It never left the car. Kale hadn't lost the urn. It was an oversight, something briefly forgotten.

Kale was still sitting on the rock. He had stopped crying. Alden handed him the urn. "You should do it," he said. Kale opened the urn and tipped it over, letting a bit of the ash spill and be caught on the wind. As Alden watched his father spread more and more of the ash, he felt different about the man. He felt he'd reached a new understanding, as if a long-standing argument had been cleared up, as if old wounds had healed. He didn't need to worry about what the man believed or the stories he told. Nothing mattered. Not how his own son might turn out, not whether Kale drank because his wife was gone. They would be fine, he realized. Kale handed him the urn. Alden released more of his mother's ashes. Kale watched him as he let more and more go and Alden thought about his mother, about the woman in the photo. He would remember them, would remember his father in that moment, exactly as he was, happy, with his son, remembering the woman they had lost, watching the clouds of dust dissipate into the air.

THE POISONED OF THE LAND

The old dog, all gray and dirty fur with a bad leg that he limped on walking around in circles, tried to find a spot on my lawn to evacuate his bladder. He hobbled around, sniffing patches of grass, until he chose a spot to piss. Then, lifting his bad leg, he strained and strained, producing nothing. A glass of over-sugary lemonade sweated in my hand and suddenly the color gave me nausea. Still, the dog was persistent. He looked over at me, one ear lowered and the other missing a chunk of skin, as if to say, "Hey, man, I'm sorry, but you wouldn't believe how bad I've got to go." The dog looked around, one way and then the other, leg in suspended animation. Finally, he gave up and wandered back to the double wide trailer of his home.

Dharma Vanderbilt was a cranky, vile facsimile of a woman. All devil's spit and brimstone and all that. The dog was hers and this game of chicken between the mutt and I had been going on too long. At first, I would go outside and shoo the creature away, but the more he had trouble pissing, the more I felt sorry for him. Still, Dharma. I set my lemonade down and followed the dog home, across the perfect lawns (why do people who own trailer homes insist on perfect lawns?) and abandoned children's bike and toys, tripping over a pogo stick on the way to Dharma's place.

The dog watched me as I went to the door and he sat down in the dirt, whining, droplets of urine in his leg fur glistening in the sun.

He tried to bark. The sound eking from him came out as a wheezing grunt.

Dharma opened the door, wearing a loose, green tank top that showed off more of her sagging, wrinkled breasts than it should have. Her hair, bright white and unwashed, was tied back. She stood looking at me from her door, hands on hips.

“Come to talk to me about the dog?” Dharma said.

I said that I had and she disappeared inside, the door wide open. I looked at the dog. His leg rested in a pool of urine. He had not moved. Dharma had not returned from inside.

“You coming in or what?” she asked from inside.

There was a photograph of Dharma working in shorts and a bra, drilling for uranium ore at a closed digging site in the fifties, on the mantelpiece next to a photo of her dead husband, Budgie. I’d never met the man – he died in the eighties – but I had trouble imagining a point at which Dharma was desirable, fertile. She was like a walking husk, all skin and bile.

“The dog’s gotta piss when he can,” Dharma said, returning to the living room with a bottle of whiskey, an ashtray. She sat and lit a cigarette without offering either the whiskey or a cigarette (which I would not have taken). When I

forced a cough to show my disdain for the smoke, she laughed. "Most days, I have to massage his bladder."

"Could you just keep him off of my lawn?" I asked.

The dog attempted a howl outside, probably at a cat that he's too blind to see is actually a tire in the grass.

"I'd really appreciate it if you could leash him."

"I bet you'd like that," she said. "He's a dog. He don't understand, 'go here, don't go there, piss here, don't piss there.'"

"I didn't really intend this to be a big deal," I said. I picked up a yellowish rock sitting on the end table.

"Uranium ore's in there," Dharma said. "Probably radioactive."

I put the rock back.

Dharma laughed, then coughed with the phlegm-filled hacking of a smoker. "You're kind of feminine, ain't ya? There's nothing radioactive in that rock."

"I just don't much like the idea of it," I said.

"Your wife still planning on protesting that new mill?"

"I'd rather get this thing with your dog settled," I said. I stood and walked to the door. Outside, the dog chewed on his tail.

“Alright, Fletcher, I’ll see what all I can do about the dog, about corralling a wild animal,” she said. She poured herself a whiskey. I raised my hand to wave goodbye, but decided against it. I walked out and the dog raised its head, searching for me. As I walked back, I looked back to see Dharma, kneeling in the dirt with her hands between the dog’s legs, pressing into his bladder. She blew a puff of smoke in the dog’s face, but I think he was so content with the massage, the relief of pressure, that he just laid in the dirt, tongue hanging out.

Muriel sat at the kitchen table, reading her newest issue of some save-the-world-from-itself magazine, drinking her organic coffee and eating her tasteless bread. This was how every morning started: me, rolling off of the couch (we no longer slept in the same bed), wandering into the kitchen to sit at the table and wait for her to start in on me about my lack of ambition, her worries about my cholesterol, and how I need to find my place in life. We were more or less living in spite of the other’s existence.

After a few minutes of pretending I wasn’t there, Muriel looked up at me. She attempted a smile, but it appeared more as a twitch, an involuntary salute.

“What are your plans for the day?” she asked. She had set out a cup of coffee and breakfast for me, but it must have been sitting there for a half hour before I arrived.

“No plans,” I said. “Maybe I’ll go play in the old mines.”

“There’s radiation down there,” she said, as though taking me seriously.

“Airplane attendants receive more radiation in a flight than what’s left in those mines.” I’d started an argument. It was the only way to tell that Muriel was paying attention any more.

“So, you think my work here is useless?” she asked. This was our way. I say something vague and meaningless and Muriel turned it into an attack on her. We had been happy once, but she had long since out-achieved me, now working as a conservationist, surveying projects that were potentially harmful to people and the environment, giving \$3000/talk speeches, teaching classes at universities. Somehow her success had made her spiteful of my lack.

“I didn’t say word one about your work,” I said. Muriel went back to her magazine.

I had taught Latin American history at a university once. I was passionate about revolutions and the realization of a peoples’ singular voice. I think this showed in the classroom and in my relationships with students. I had one graduate student, a mentee, who I fell in love with, Gianna. She was writing about the place of women in political activism in South America during the second half of the twentieth century. I took her passion for the subject to mean a

passion for me and had invited her to my office one day. I'd read her a love poem I'd written in Spanish and asked her to come away with me.

"Where? Why?" she asked. I told her I loved her, that I wanted to start a new life. "You love the idea of me." Gianna left the office and I'm sure told all of her friends. I was asked to resign at the end of the semester.

There was a knock at the door and I saw, through the kitchen window, that it was Cassie, Muriel's graduate student assistant from the University of Colorado. Cassie was short for Cassiopeia, like the constellation, a name meant to be as beautiful as she was. The sight of her, her presence, improved my chances of not throwing myself off of a mountain.

Muriel invited Cassie in and offered her coffee, said she'd make a new pot (which she had not offered me). Cassie sat down while Muriel attended the machine.

"Got any plans for the weekend, Cassie?" I said, smiling. "Any hot dates?"

Cassie smiled, a wide-open bleached white grin. "No dates, Dr. Fletcher."

"Just Garrett," I said.

"Stop hitting on my student, Garrett," Muriel said, and Cassie laughed, covering her mouth.

"I'm just taking an interest," I said.

Muriel turned to Cassie. "I think my husband wants to fuck every woman he meets," she said.

"There isn't a man that doesn't," Cassie said. She smiled at me. Muriel brought a fresh pot of coffee to the table and poured Cassie a mug.

"Garrett thinks it'll make him feel young again, is the problem," Muriel said, "like the damn fountain of youth. He thinks if he sticks his thing in some young girl, he'll, poof, be twenty years younger."

Muriel placed the coffee pot back on the burner and turned it off without asking me if I wanted any. She picked up her backpack and camera tripod and went to the door. "Starting the car. Try not to make Cassie feel like uncomfortable."

Muriel vanished. Cassie sat at the table, blowing on her coffee to cool it down.

"You're still cute, in that old guy sort of way," she said, winking. She sipped from her mug.

"Thanks, I guess."

"Are you worried about the radiation and the mill and all of that?"

"No, I suppose not. The damage has already been done. Not much more we can do to kill it."

“Muriel is real worried. She says the science is all there, proves how bad it’ll be for the people and their health.”

“Everything can kill you somehow,” I said.

Muriel called from outside and Cassie rose from the table. She waved and smiled.

“Come back,” I said as Cassie approached the door.

“What’s that?” she asked, turning around.

“Come back any time.”

Dharma Vanderbilt pounded on my door, waking me from a nap and a sex dream about Cassie and Muriel having their ways with me. She shouted my name again and again.

“Get your lazy ass to the door, Fletcher,” Dharma said. I pulled on a t-shirt and went to greet Dharma.

Dharma was wearing makeup, but only on half of her face, as though she had been getting ready for the day and, in a moment of senility, forgot what she was doing and abandoned the task.

“Where’s my dog?”

“How would I know? I don’t keep tabs on the thing.”

“You are awfully interested any other time.”

“When the dog is pissing on my lawn, yes.”

“I need you to go look for him.”

“The thing about dogs is, they always find their way home. Better at it than we are.”

I drove out to the old mine site, a whole wide section of valley that was cordoned off with barbed wire fencing and signs that read “Radioactive Material: Keep Out.” Dharma had a theory that something about the valley, about the old mine, attracted her dog. I parked the car at the fence and stared down into the ridge, into the green valley marked with abandoned shacks and small houses here and there, a broken and leaning windmill.

“Don’t see your dog out here, Dharma,” I said. She sat on the hood of my car, sopping sweat from her armpits with a t-shirt. I’d never seen a woman sweat so much. It was humid and sticky, too hot to be messing around, especially in a radioactive wasteland. “Guess it’s time to move on.”

Dharma shook her head and crossed her arms. She nodded toward the valley. I walked away and down the ridge toward the remnants of the old ghost town that still remained. The dog was not there, I knew, but I could not handle a moment of Dharma’s rage. There were old gravestones, some children’s toys in the dirt, some sort of animal skull on an old fencepost. The buildings were gone, destroyed and the rubble shipped away in the eighties when Chernobyl freaked

everyone out. The mill had been closed and condemned, though many of the people believed there was nothing wrong with the site, that the people were healthy, that the land was not poisoned. There were plans to build a new mill, one that would revive the town, and this made people like Dharma ecstatic, like a two-year-old discovering his penis for the first time.

After thirty minutes of pretending to search for the dog, I returned to the car. Dharma was smoking inside – something I had specifically asked her not to do on our way to the site.

“Nothing down there,” I said.

“Budgie used to take the dog’s momma down there when she was a pup and he was dying, to show her around.”

“Guess we should head back, find your dog.”

“Whenever Budgie was gone and the bitch had a chance to escape, she’d always find her way to this old place.

“That’s an interesting story, Dharma.”

“Guess I thought the dog might have had some of that same instinct in him.”

“Keep driving,” Dharma said as we approached her trailer.

“Dharma, I have things to do,” I said.

“You’ve got about as much to do as a blind man at the movies. Keep going.”

We drove out on the highway, down every street in town. We entered every shop and restaurant. Dharma was not going to give up and she wasn’t going to let me, either. If I had found that dog without her around, I’d have put it on a bus and shipped it far away from her just on principle.

As we drove back into town, I saw Cassie walking alone on the sidewalk. I slowed down, rolled down the window.

“Hey there. Going somewhere?”

“Get your ass moving, Fletcher, and stop chasing tail,” Dharma grunted from the passenger seat. I wanted a meteor or piece of broken satellite to fall from space and smash her.

Cassie smiled and I forgot, for a moment, that Dharma was there. “Just going for a swim,” she said.

“Get in, I’ll drive you where you’re headed.”

Dharma leaned over toward me and stared out at Cassie. “Not the type I’d of thought you’d be into,” she said. Then, “Get in, sweetcheeks, you can help us find my dog.”

“Lost your dog?”

“I ain’t lost him. He just went and misplaced himself.”

“Sure, I’ll help you. Another pair of eyes can’t hurt.”

Cassie climbed in the backseat and we drove along the road. I looked at Cassie in the rearview mirror. She smiled. I wanted to put a muzzle on Dharma and leap back there with Cassie. I wanted, suddenly, to ravage her without abandon.

“What does your dog look like?” Cassie asked.

“Like any dog, just worn and old and broken,” I said. “You see a dog that looks like the embodiment of the Bubonic Plague, that’s him.”

“Fletcher ever tell you his ham pole don’t work anymore?” Dharma asked. She turned and looked at Cassie. In the mirror, Cassie blushed and looked out the window.

“Goddammit, Dharma. You can’t say that shit.”

“She’d of found out soon enough.”

“What’re you trying to say?”

“This’s a small town, Fletcher. Your wife gets pretty loud hollerin’ about the mill and her sex life at the café.”

“I don’t listen to gossip,” Cassie said.

I fixated on Cassie in the mirror, on her cleavage and a small tuft of hair hanging in her face, and blocked out the world, let Dharma fade into the

background. I lost concentration on my driving, too, and veered off of the road onto the sidewalk, smashing the car into a planter. I slammed on the brakes.

“Good God fuck all,” Dharma said. “What the hell did you go and do that for?”

I opened the car door. “I wasn’t aiming for the planter.”

Dharma stared at the damage on the front end. Dirt and flowers were scattered on the concrete.

“You couldn’t have nailed that thing better if you *were* aiming for it,” Dharma said.

“Everyone’s alright, though?” I asked, though I meant it only for Cassie.

Cassie nodded. “Your car’s all messed up,” she said.

The few people on the street gathered around to watch the spectacle.

“You’ve attracted a crowd, Fletcher.”

I bent down and righted the planter. Kneeling, I started scooping the dirt back in, followed by the flowers. Cassie came over and started helping while Dharma lit a cigarette and made herself useless. Cassie moved closer to me. She leaned close to my ear. “If you really want me,” she whispered, “you can take me.”

“But, Muriel,” I said.

“Hey, what can you do being tempted by a hot college girl? She wouldn’t blame you. You’d be like Odysseus with the Sirens. Unless she tied you down, you couldn’t help yourself.”

Dharma stamped out her cigarette. “Would you all stop the foreplay and let’s get moving? We got about a half hour of sunlight left and that dog still isn’t home.”

Cassie paraded around her living room in her underwear, sleek little black panties and a bra, her slight amount of flab in the middle poking out, her hair tied back in a ponytail.

“I won’t lie,” she said. She walked into her kitchen and brought back two drinks. I took a drink and felt the instant burn in my throat and nostrils, all rum with little soda.

“Lie about what?” I asked.

She looked lost for a moment. Her green eyes, the display of partial nudity, set my groin on fire. “I have daddy issues,” she said.

“Don’t we all?”

“That might be why I’m seducing you. In fact, it’s a pretty good possibility.”

I sucked down the glass of whiskey. I scooped up an ice cube on my tongue and whirled it around in my mouth. "I don't know what to do with that."

"You don't have to do anything. You probably should just forget me."

I rose and moved toward her, putting her face in my hands and moving her lips toward mine as if about to drink from a chalice. She put a couple of fingers between our lips.

"Slow down, desperado," she said.

"I thought that was what you wanted, underwear and all."

"I don't know what I want any more than I know how to get it."

I thought about Muriel then, the whole trajectory of our lives. The thought of my real life made me cold, uninspired. I pulled back, watching the movement of Cassie's toes curling in the carpet.

"How about another drink?" I asked.

Cassie went into the other room and returned with the bottle. "This work?"

I chugged from the bottle, hoping to relieve my trepidations. On top of the thoughts about Muriel suddenly flooded thoughts of Gianna and my life as a professor, the wasted opportunities at success. I drank again, holding the bottle to my lips longer.

Cassie pulled a sweatshirt from a hamper and put it on. As quickly as things began, they were dwindling just as swiftly.

“Do you ever feel like you don’t know where you are?” Cassie asked.

“You mean being lost? Of course, now and then.”

“No, it’s like you’ve been somewhere or seen something a hundred times before, but something just tells you that you’ve never been there.” Cassie reached for the bottle and I handed it over.

“I think I should go home soon.”

Cassie raised the bottle up to her lips, drained a good portion of the rum. She sat down on the floor, crossed her legs beneath her. She leaned forward, stretching to get the bottle back to me. “I feel like I’m a different person than I was supposed to be,” she said.

“I think everyone feels like that most of the time.”

“But it’s more like I somehow jumped out of my own life and into someone else’s,” she said.

Muriel came home later than I did, having worked late. She smelled of alcohol, just like me. She dressed in her pajamas and crawled into bed as soon as she walks in the door. I lay down next to her, running my hands along her smooth stomach and down just inside her waistband until she told me to get off

of her. She was not feeling well, or maybe it was the stress of seeing the community allow the mill to be rebuilt to poison the land, she said. She turned out the light and turned away from me.

“How do you fail to find a dog that can barely stand without pissing all over itself?” Muriel asked after ten minutes of silence.

“It’s not like the dog’s sitting in one place awaiting our arrival,” I said.

“And it’s not like he’s exactly gamboling across the plains, either.”

“I hung out with Cassie tonight.”

Muriel sighs or laughs, I can’t tell. “Just tell me you didn’t.”

“I didn’t.”

“I mean, it’s not like you haven’t tried.”

“I didn’t.”

“I feel like, at this point, it wouldn’t matter a bit if you did.”

This opened it all up, the proverbial levees bursting. I told her that I had been unhappy for years but only with myself; for the ordeal with Gianna, for my lack of ambition and my inertia. I told her I wanted to go back in time and start over. I told her I wished we had never come to this hellhole, despite the worthiness of the cause. I told her that I wanted Dharma Vanderbilt to disappear in a sinkhole.

Muriel turned the side lamp on and turned to face me. She did not touch me or cry or initiate sex as I hoped she would. She lay staring at me for a long while. "We're all exactly who we meant to be," she said.

Muriel had already left by the time I rolled out of bed in the morning. There was cold coffee and a plate of eggs and toast waiting for me, also cold. I stepped outside with my coffee mug.

Dharma answered her door wearing a sweatshirt with wolves on it. She did not smile and simply stepped aside, ceding the space.

"I won't stay," I said.

"Then what do you want, Fletcher?"

"Did you find the dog?" Dharma shook her head. I turned and headed back out the door and across Dharma's yard.

"Where are you going?" she yelled after me.

I got in my car and drove all over town, determined to find the dog. I didn't owe Dharma a thing, but something made me feel like the act might be redemptive somehow, like it would right the imbalance of the world, of my life, if I could just find the mutt and bring it home.

After an hour of searching, I remembered what Dharma had said about the old mill site and headed in the direction of valley. It was already hot and smelled

like it was going to rain. I parked at the top of the ridge and started down the hillside. Far off in the distance, I saw something moving and thought maybe it was Dharma's mutt. I couldn't be sure, but whatever it was moved slowly. It disappeared into a small group of trees and I lost track of the animal. I started running down the hill, tripping now and then against rocks and loose branches. Then I broke into a sprint, my lungs burning hot already, breathe heaving in my chest. I felt the familiar ache of a cramp in my left calf, but I pushed against it, running as hard and fast as I could. It was Dharma's dog I chased, but it was more than that: everything that I'd let slip away, Muriel, my career, a youth I had spent so much time trying to regain through other women. I knew then that I'd chase that dog all day, maybe forever, until I found him and returned him home.

LET THE DEAD RIVER CARRY YOU AWAY

They had spent all day wandering along the Dead River, looking for a spot to fish, but Carson still had not received a sign. "Gotta wait til the Lord tells us we've found the place," he had said. Carson had wandered out into the river, thigh-deep and naked except for his hat, and stood with the water rushing by him, his fingers brushing the surface. "Can't just stick your line in anywhere you damn well please," he said. This struck Bogey as some sort of euphemism, but he had never known Carson to pepper his words with sexual innuendo.

Bogey walked down the bank of the river carrying the tackle box. The sky was blue and clear but, as with any day, he half expected it to turn black and electric any moment.

"You oughtta stop staring at that sky," Carson said. He splashed water on his face, dipped his hair in the river. "If it's gonna come, it's gonna come." Bogey feared the lightning. He ought to; he'd been struck twice in his lifetime. It was a fate less likely than any possible combination of probabilities, he figured, but still it had happened. He knew a third time would strike him down and so he had not stayed in one place for long in years.

"I told you about the first time the lightning hit, right?" Bogey said.

“Only about six hundred times, every chance you get to tell me or anyone else who don’t have half a mind to run away before you start jabbering,” Carson said.

Carson stepped out of the water and Bogey turned away. “Can you please put your fly-fishing rod away?” Bogey asked. He sat down on a group of rocks, removed his shoes and socks and placed his feet in the cold water.

“I don’t think this is the place,” Carson said. He dried off and put on his clothes.

“We came halfway across the damn country ‘cause you said this would be the place.”

“Oh, it is, boy, it is. We just got to wait.” Bogey had been travelling with Carson since 1996, when they met in Chicago. Carson had been a panhandler there and he had claimed he could make upwards of one-hundred thousand dollars each year if he played people right, but to this point Carson had never flashed much money at all, much less paid for a breakfast or a warm room. “All the fish in the world goin’ to be ours. Too much we have to start giving it away.”

“Then why are we leaving? If the fish ain’t here, where are they?”

“Oh, they here, we just wait til they come to us.”

“All this wandering around’s making me hungry.”

Carson had a woman back in Omaha, a Serbian prostitute he called Poppy and every day he said he would make it back to her. This was a destination, a final resting place as it was, to Carson. He carried Poppy's picture around like a beacon, something to help him find his way home. Bogey had only met her once and they stayed at her apartment, Bogey on her couch, for a few days. Poppy had come to him in the middle of the night and he woke to her naked body straddled over him. "I'll make you see the stars and all the cosmos for a hundred bucks," she had said. Bogey shook his head and pushed her off of him. A couple days later, an argument between Carson and Poppy's ex-boyfriend had caused them to leave Omaha, hitchhiking wherever anyone would take them. Still, Carson would return to Poppy and Bogey believed, if nothing else, this was as true as anything.

The makeshift tents, many long branches arranged in a cone just large enough for each man to sleep inside, would stay together as long as there was no wind or rain or much else. The humble beginnings of a fire crackled and black smoke wisped into the air as Carson sat reading from his bible. The book no longer had binding and was missing many pages. Masking tape held the book together.

"Anything in there about how we're going to eat tonight?" Bogey asked.

“Not a word. I’ll tell ya, though. If you want to know how to find your way to the sky above, it’s all in here, boy.”

Bogey rolled a joint from the marijuana they had scored from their ride into the north woods. “Does God have anything against paying for a ride into town with drugs?”

“If he don’t, he’ll send up a sign.”

Bogey took a drag on the joint, shook his head. Just like the fish. How about seeing about that ride?

“You’re so focused on where you’re headed,” Carson said, “you don’t take the time to appreciate where you at. “

Bogey stood on the side of the road waving down cars as they passed. Carson stayed back in the trees. Any car that’s going to stop will be more likely to do so if there’s just one of us, Bogey had said. A car pulled off the road ahead of Bogey and lights flashed.

“Mind if my friend comes along?” Bogey asked.

“Hop on in,” the man said.

The driver, Isaac, was thin with a thick, bushy beard. He looked over at Carson in long glances as he drove, taking his eyes off the road for what seemed to Bogey to be dangerous stretches. Isaac noticed the bible in Carson’s lap and

started talking about his childhood living in a religious commune in northern California.

“All snake charmers and polygamists,” Isaac said, smiling. His face was weathered, travelled. “Just fooling. We were all just one big loving group, but I just had to get out, you know? See the world.”

“Bogey here loves traveling, never stays put in one place,” Carson said.

“We come up here for the fish,” Bogey said. “Only, there doesn’t seem to be any around.”

“Oh, there’re fish all over,” Isaac said. He nodded to himself. Bogey rolled another joint and lit it. “We’ll find you those fish.”

The harbor was filled with boats, yachts and schooners, owned by rich men that did not live in Marquette. An old ore dock, like a hallway to some invisible palace, stood out in the water. Gulls circled and called to each other and one dove at a mother duck and her chicks in the water. Isaac led the men to a hut on the docks, a small white building with weathered wood and chipped paint. Isaac knocked on the door and an old man emerged, wearing coveralls and a Detroit Red Wings cap.

“Hey there,” the old man said. “What can I do for ya?” he asked.

“These men are looking for fish,” Isaac said.

"I've got plenty. Cod, salmon, even some lobster and oysters."

"We aren't looking for frozen fish," Bogey said. The water was the brightest blue he'd ever seen in a lake. He could not see to the land on the other side and he imagined, though he knew of course that there was land all around Lake Superior, that the water was endless, that he could take a boat and row forever and never find land.

"Then what're you looking for?" Isaac asked.

"We were hoping to pull 'em out of the water ourselves," Bogey said.

"Why didn't you say something?" Isaac asked.

"You didn't ask."

"Getting a bit late in the day to get in any fishing anyhow," Carson said.

The three men bid the old man goodbye and walked away down the docks. Isaac hummed what seemed to be the Battle Hymn of the Republic, but he mismanaged the tune so that it sounded improvised.

"You know, we could just buy some fish, enough for dinner, and fish all day tomorrow," Carson said.

"What good would we be if we just took the fish that someone else already caught?" Bogey said.

"I say we get a bottle of something good and head back to your camp," Isaac said.

"I just want to catch some fish and eat my fill," Bogey said.

"Tomorrow," Carson said. He flipped open the tattered bible. He always did this when some difficulty presented itself, unable to comfort Bogey with any advice or wisdom not handed down from the heavens. "You can suffer in the name of virtue all you want, but I'm getting a cheeseburger."

Carson was dying. Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, the doctor at the clinic in Omaha had said. It was still the early stages, but Carson said he could feel the scratch of it inside him already. Bogey had watched him smoke and gain weight the whole time they had traveled together.

"It's alright," Carson had said after he found out about the diagnosis, "no one dies peacefully anymore."

"You can beat it," Bogey said. Quit the smoking, eat better. Bogey went over all the things the doctor had already told Carson.

"Something's going to catch up to you eventually," Carson said.

"When I die, I want to be dropped on a mountain or deep in the woods so the animals can carry parts of me away, so they can carry me home," Bogey said.

Isaac pulled a case of beer and a pizza box from the trunk and headed with Bogey and Carson along the river. Night was settling in, the fresh pink spreading

across the sky. Carson had to stop every few moments to catch his breath. When he breathed, his entire body heaved with a shuddering force, as though a powerful motor buzzed inside him.

“What’s wrong with you?” Isaac said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Bogey said.

“But he’s sick,” Isaac said.

“I said, don’t worry about it.”

“Look, man, I’m just concerned.”

Carson regained his breath, stopped coughing. He stood, stretching his arms toward the sky. “Alright, fellas, I’m ready,” he said.

They walked on down the river, Bogey listening to the hushed motion of the water. The makeshift tents were as they had been left. Carson took a beer and toasted with Isaac and the two drank. Bogey headed off into the trees to gather kindling and stones. He wandered, thinking back to the first lightning strike, in 1985, sitting atop a stalled Ferris wheel in Oklahoma during a rain storm. He had lost his memory for six weeks following the accident. The second time, Bogey was dressing a fresh buck he had killed in Colorado, sitting on an old, forgotten railroad track that had overgrown with weeds. The lightning had traveled through the rail and knocked him through the air. He woke up on his back, still clutching the hunting knife. Roy Sullivan, he knew, had been struck seven times,

the record holder. Many sustained serious injuries, mental and physical, but Bogey had somehow, despite the memory loss, evaded serious injury. One lightning strike was extremely unlikely, but two meant the world was out to get him.

Bogey emerged from his daydream, realizing he had wandered far away from the camp and could not hear the other men's voices or see the smoke from the fire. He turned in the direction he thought he had come from and began walking, trying to locate anything in the landscape that might jog his memory, a sign that might show him the way back.

Isaac and Carson passed a bottle of bourbon back and forth as Bogey made his way back to them. The fire was high and danced in the wind. Isaac told a joke that only he laughed at.

"You sure you should be drinking?" Bogey said.

"My heart's not going to get any worse," Carson said.

"That's not going to make it any better."

"How about you stop the mothering and come have a drink?"

Bogey sat down in the dirt next to the fire.

"I always wondered what it'd be like to give up everything and just wander the world," Isaac said.

"Is that what you think we're doing?" Bogey said.

"You seem well-to-do, like you could be doing something else if you wanted."

"I suppose that's a possibility. This ain't the glamorous life, though."

Bogey always felt his homelessness to be somewhat self-imposed, the result of a tragic spiral downward after his teenage daughter died fifteen years earlier. After he had been evicted and lost his job, he had simply decided to not cling to anything any longer. So much of the world was left to chance.

"I always wanted to ride the rails," Isaac said.

"We don't do that, either," Bogey said. Carson smiled and took a long pull on the bottle of bourbon.

"But if you ride the rails, you're never in one place very long."

"That's sort of the point."

"Always on the move," Isaac said.

Sunlight burned through Bogey's eyelids. The morning was already hot, sweat caking his back and neck against the ground. Carson and Isaac put together a tackle box and assembled fishing poles.

"The fish are calling us," Carson said. "God wants us to get to the river."

"Is that right?" Bogey said.

"I can feel them out there, like we're linked somehow."

"And you figure that's a sign from God?"

"If it ain't, then I don't know what to do about it."

The men finished packing and headed out through the woods. They wandered along the bank of the Dead River looking for the perfect spot. At a flat patch of grass along the river, they set up for the day. Isaac passed the bottle of bourbon to Carson. "To a good day of fishing," he said, and Carson took a drink.

Bogey and Carson spaced out along the bank and began casting their lines. Isaac sat on the bank getting drunk. He hummed another mishandled tune to himself. He picked up a stone and flung it into the river.

"Hey, do you mind not doing that?" Bogey said.

Isaac looked up, covered his mouth. "So sorry," he said.

The river was quiet and moving peacefully. For a long time, nothing bit at the line, nothing snagged. This allowed Bogey to sink into a sort of meditation, his eyes closed. As he sat longer, he started to forget about Isaac's need to always be talking and Carson's disease, about his daughter and the places he had left behind. The lightning strikes, the prostitute back in Omaha. He saw himself then swimming in the river, surrounded by schools and schools of salmon. He would swim and swim until his body was fatigued. At that point, the salmon would take over, the school enveloping him like a newborn child, and carry him downstream

and continue on through the lakes and rivers until they reached the ocean. All the good things he had left behind or were lost to him were out there somewhere and the salmon would carry him, hopeful and relaxed, home.

NEBRASKA

People don't know we raise ostriches. We raise them for their meat, just like steak but much more lean. This is western Nebraska, the land of corn and beef. Now and then, people come looking for Starkweather's buried loot, but they never find a thing. Last year, some transient ran into one of our ostriches in the middle of the night. It kicked the shit out of him, but he lived and made it to the road where a farmer picked him up and drove him to the hospital. The sheriff had asked if we wanted to press charges for trespassing and we said no, that man's been prosecuted enough.

I've tried to imagine just what some stranger might think wandering our lot at night, not knowing what's coming for him until the giant birds emerge out of the darkness. I half think that'd be enough to make a man lose his mind.

Step-dad woke me to tell me the perimeter fence sensors had been going off for an hour. He wanted me to check it out, make sure there weren't any bandits trying to find all the buried money. *If there's money out there, he said, it's on our property and belongs to us.*

My step-dad, Biron, is an old dog, the kind that's just so old and mostly-blind and unable to walk farther than a few steps before he has to lay down, all

energy spent long ago. I work the ostrich farm because he can't anymore. He's on his way out, he says, just a matter of when God gets around to calling.

Charles Starkweather killed eleven people across Nebraska and Wyoming in the late fifties. Some believe he buried his stolen money in the panhandle before he was caught in Wyoming and some think it's on our farm. Biron believes it, probably more than any of the hoboes or teenagers or treasure hunters that come looking for it, shovels and flashlights and cases of beer in hand.

I've never gone out to look for the lost fortune, but now and then, when the sensors go off in the middle of the night, I'll go to Biron's room and check on him. Some nights he's not there and I imagine he's out there digging and refilling holes, chasing something he can't find.

I drove out to Biron's prized garden at the western edge of our property. Something or someone had gone at his blackberries again, the bushes trampled and smashed blackberries all over the ground.

Clarissa joined me, too drunk and horny to fall asleep or do much else.

"Those your dad's blackberries?" she asked.

"Step-dad's," I said. "He'll anger like a hornet when he hears something's been at it again."

“Make love to me,” Clarissa said. “Take me right here in the garden.”

“You’ll get blackberries all over your clothes,” I said.

“I’ll be naked, stupid,” she said.

“And, the thorns?” I said. “Besides, there are ostriches all over the place.

They kick. They’d cave your skull in if they hit you.”

“I’m not afraid,” she said and started to work at the button on my pants, too wobbly to make quick work of the job. I pushed her away. She whimpered and sat in the dirt and blackberry mush and watched me as I walked away to finish the job I’d come to do. Something about being all the way out here away from everything makes people half-wild or half-crazy. I’m not sure if Clarissa wasn’t both.

Sometimes it’s not even people trying to find Starkweather’s prize. Thieves have made off with some of our ostriches in the middle of the night before. People think rustling is an artifact, some trope of the West, like Billy the Kid and brothels and stampedes. If Biron had his way, he’d get justice from the ostrich thieves the way they did then, with a Smith and Wesson and a whiskey-fueled courage.

I came to Biron’s ranch in 1998, after my mother died. He was getting older and slower and needed a younger hand to take care of the day-to-day operations.

I intended, then, to stay on for a few months until Biron found a full-time hand to manage the ranch. Ten years later, I was no closer to moving on than when I started.

I met Clarissa soon after I moved to the ranch. She had graduated pre-med but had a bad coke habit and moved home after a stint in a rehab clinic. We settled into a routine and talked of leaving. We had lists of all the things we wanted to do, the dream jobs and places we wanted to live.

“Find anything out there?” Biron said, sucking on a piece of bacon the next morning. I shook my head. I didn’t mention the blackberries. He wasn’t mobile enough to get out to tend them, anyhow.

“You know, I been thinking. You should move on and find yourself your own plot and life somewhere.”

“I can’t do that. I’ve got to help you out. There are things that need doing around here.”

“You could become a forest firefighter, like your dad,” Biron said.

“Dad died fighting fires, fell from a tree and broke his neck,” I said.

Biron stabbed at a mound of potatoes. “Still, it’s a noble profession,” he said.

“Whatever doesn’t kill you,” I said.

Clarissa and I drove to a honky-tonk in Laramie, her dressed in the whole costume: unbuttoned plaid shirt showing off cleavage, a cowboy hat, shit-stomping boots. She asked me to dance with her and, like always, I declined, content to watch her move from afar while other men her age swarmed and plotted their seductions. I half hoped that one day, one of the suitors would be impressive enough to steal her away and take her to a better life.

A frat boy groped Clarissa's breasts and she pushed him away. He tried for a kiss and she kneed him in the groin. She walked over to our table and stared at me, arms akimbo.

"Aren't you going to defend my honor?" she asked.

"You were doing a mighty fine job of it yourself," I said.

"Some cowboy you are," she said, sitting on my lap. She took my beer from my hand and finished it.

"Never claimed to be," I said.

She bit her lip and frowned. "You work on a ranch in the middle of the prairie. If you're not a cowboy, what are you?"

My dad died when I was ten. I never knew my granddad. He worked on the film crew of *The Conqueror*, this big-budget, Howard Hughes-produced picture about Genghis Khan, starring John Wayne. The film is supposed to be

atrocious and Howard Hughes supposedly bought up all of the copies to make sure it would never see the light of day, until 1974, when Paramount reached a deal with him.

Granddad died of cancer, just like the stars, Susan Hayward and John Wayne. The film was shot downwind of a nuclear testing range in Nevada and there's some speculation as to if that was the cause of the illnesses.

John Wayne died a few years before granddad passed.

"Your grandfather always said that John Wayne should have died like a hero," my dad told me when I was a young boy. I believed it, then, but I'd wondered later, alone at night with my thoughts, *how exactly should a hero die?*

"We should have a baby," Clarissa said, hovering over me in bed. She was naked, her bare breasts hanging in my face. She patted her stomach, puffed it out to imitate a pregnant woman.

"How about a dog?" I asked.

"My bio clock has been howling at me lately," she said. "My uterus is going to be all dried up soon."

"You're twenty-nine. You're still a baby machine."

"We'd make some cute kids."

"Babies are just bandages," I said.

Clarissa looked down at me, searching my eyes. "For what?" she said.

In the middle of the night, I woke and lay in bed, staring at Clarissa, naked, next to me. Some urge drove me from bed and out to the blackberry patch. I took the truck out, gardening tools in the bed, and went to the garden. I set about removing the dead or destroyed plants and soon there were few stalks left.

I listened to the sounds out in the night, the ostriches moving about and the locusts in the trees. The wind whistled in the grass.

I dug and tore at roots until there was only one plant left in the ground. I stared at it, at the desiccated leaves and berries in the dirt, and something immense and sad took over in me. I sat down in the dirt and watched the plant sway in the wind.

I felt helpless and alone. I stood and grabbed a small hand axe from the truck. I went back to the bush and hacked at the base of the plant and at the branches, cutting them apart. I dropped the axe and started tearing at the branches with my hands. My palms and fingers stained. I was frenzied and soon the ravaged remains of the blackberry bush lay all around me.

A man Clarissa had slept with while we dated showed up at her door, wanting to make her his wife. They had not spoken in months. He had said he

had some sort of vision that made him realize she was the one he wanted to be with. Clarissa laughed at him.

“Something about him made me want to ruin him,” she said, telling the story as we sat on the perimeter fence eating lunch. “I said, ‘I’ve got a failed marriage, a stint in rehab, a sex drive that rivals a piece of driftwood. I’m all broken and useless, like some old tractor. I wanted to be something once, but then I faced reality.’ He looked shredded,” she said.

“Why did you say all that to him?” I asked.

“I would think you would have wanted me to get rid of him for good?”

“Not like that.” I took a bite of my sandwich and put the rest back in a bag. Clarissa watched me, I suppose waiting for some revelation to emerge from my lips. I jumped off of the fence and walked towards the ostriches. They milled around and some watched me.

Clarissa ran up behind me and turned me around, running her hands all over my face.

“If you won’t give me a child, somebody will,” she said.

“Someone’s been digging in the earth again,” Biron said. He stood against the fence staring out at the birds eating from the alfalfa bins.

“Still out there looking for Starkweather’s millions,” I said.

“Those fools will keep on coming and digging as long as there’s hope to it,” Biron said. Our birds, hundreds of them gathered together, were out of place. But, they had no idea they had come so far from where they’d been. This world seemed as natural to them as the one they’d left behind.

“Thought any more about selling the ranch?” I asked.

“I told you before I don’t have anything else waiting for me,” Biron said.

“You could retire, make some nice head-start money.”

“There ain’t nothin’ keeping you here.”

“Not exactly anything dragging me away, either,” I said.

Clarissa and I watched *The Conqueror* from the couch, her head in my lap with hands stroking her exposed belly. In one scene, Wayne/Khan tells his mother he wishes to have the child of the union between his father and his father’s slave. The whole thing is supposed to be set in Asia, but Wayne’s cowboy twang beats through every line.

“This is really bad,” I said.

There was no way Wayne could have been sick then, if the fallout theory is true, but I watched him, trying to find some sign that his illness had started to take over.

“You could just be a donor,” Clarissa said. “You could knock me up and just be done with it.”

“Let’s not talk about this again,” I said.

“It’s our biological imperative, our reason for living.”

“I said I don’t want to discuss it.”

Each time I watched the movie, I tried to find evidence of the beginnings of Wayne’s disease: in his face, the way he walked. I was witnessing the beginning of the end of John Wayne, of my grandfather. They had no way of knowing it then, of course, but the air around them was poison. Would they have even left if they knew what was coming for them?

After my father broke his neck, I sold most of my belongings – a bed, movies and music, a collection of comic books, some clothes – and took what little I had left and packed it all into my car. I started driving, hoping to make a new start somewhere, to find a purpose for my new life. But soon I’d moved from city to city to city, hooking up with confused, hypersexual college girls and drinking and wasting money only on hotels and booze and food.

I’d returned to Nebraska because whatever wide-open promise the American Dream offered eluded me.

Clarissa wanted to go back to the honky tonk in Laramie and I went along, restless and eager to get away from the ranch. I sat alone and got drunk as I watched Clarissa dance. Men surrounded her, their tongues practically hanging out of their mouths. She invited and craved the attention, all a ploy to lower my defenses.

As I became more intoxicated, the boldness of the men started getting to me. I was agitated, feeling a small sort of adrenaline rush each time some dude's hands brushed her breasts or when a man tried to thrust his pelvis into hers on the dance floor.

A man walked onto the floor and headed straight for Clarissa, parting the sea of people and the men surrounding her. He whispered in her ear and she smiled, ran a hand on his shoulder.

I downed a shot of whiskey and rose unsteadily to my feet. The smell of bodies, the man's stupid cowboy hat, Clarissa's silly game. They all fueled me. I went to the man and knocked his hat to the floor, grabbed his shirt.

"What gives, man?" he asked, his arms raised up in confusion. "What's the problem?"

I wanted to hit him, to beat his face raw, but I couldn't answer his question. I looked at Clarissa. Her eyes told me she wanted me to destroy this man and his cowboy façade. She wanted me to be the kind of man who would fight for her.

“Hey, get your hands off of me,” the man said, too drunk to defend himself or move away.

I let him go and backed away. Clarissa lowered her head. I walked away and back to the table. I paid the tab and asked the bartender to call Clarissa a cab when she was ready to go home and I bought her a hotel room for the night. I wrote her a note telling her as much for the bartender to give her. As I drove away from Laramie, I wondered if Clarissa would come see me in the morning once she made it back to the panhandle. If she came to the door, I wasn't sure I would answer.

Biron pounded on my door, yelling for me to get out of bed. The alarms sounded all over the perimeter. I rose and dressed and we drove toward the opposite end of the ranch.

“What the hell's going on out there?” I asked.

“Sounds like the end of the goddamned world,” Biron said.

Fences were destroyed, trampled and shattered, splintered wood laying all over the land. Many of our ostriches lay prostrate, some huddled together. There were two shovels on the ground, a single boot speckled with blood, tire tracks. One of the ostriches had been shot and killed. We figured later it had to have been treasure hunters coming upon these strange creatures in the night, both man and

bird equally terrified. One man had to have fired at the bird and spooked the hundreds of others in the area, causing an ostrich stampede. The men managed to get away, but many of the ostriches were injured or dead.

Hundreds of ostriches scattered throughout the blood-soaked battlefield. Tears worked down Biron's face. I almost came to a breakdown myself.

The ranch was finished. Over the course of months, many of the ostriches had to be put down due to injuries and dwindling health. They would not breed. Truckloads of the birds carried them off to a processing plant.

"What will you do?" I asked Biron, watching the last of the trucks carry the birds away.

"Forced retirement, I guess," he said.

"Maybe this was the opportunity both of us needed."

"I don't have much time left for opportunity."

"You'll be fine. We both will be."

Clarissa had moved to Albuquerque and had sent me postcards when she heard about the stampede. After that, she sent a letter every couple of weeks, updating me on her life. They rested, unanswered, in my truck's glove compartment. She had moved on and now it was time for us to do the same.

The last truck started away, kicking up a whorl of dust and dirt in its wake. Biron shook his head. "If it isn't the one goddamned thing that gets you, it's the other," he said. He put a hand on my shoulder and I patted his back.

We watched until the truck disappeared from sight. I wanted to start over, but I still hadn't figured it all out. Starkweather's buried money could have been somewhere on our property and it was possible that, if found, we could start new lives. I knew Biron had already considered the possibility. Finding that lost money could change the world for whomever dug it up. I looked around the vast prairie surrounding us, empty of the birds we had raised. Gone, too, were the fences and the whole wide world was open as far as I could see.

WHAT THE CROW DOES: A LYRIC ESSAY

I.

Chinese mythology tells a story of the crow in the birthing of the world. Ten sun crows roosted in ten different suns orbiting the Earth, where they perched on red mulberry trees, with mouths opening up at the ends of their branches. Each day, one sun crow would drag a carriage across the sky, driven by Xihe, the mother of the suns. The crow would return and another would depart. The crows would descend from the heavens and eat two types of grass they particularly liked and would be gone from Xihe for long periods. She became jealous and blinded the crows so they could not fly to the earth, digging their claws into the rich dirt, eating the grasses. Blinded, the crows became confused and all ten flew out from the mulberry tree on the same day, dragging their suns behind them, burning the world to ash. Xihe dispensed the archer, Houyi, and he shot down all but one of the sun crows.

II.

The crow, long before humans walked the earth, surveyed the world, observing and evolving to fit perfectly in their ecological niche.

We have spent a lot of time, recently, trying to know the crow. The crow, in many ways, is *like us*, insofar as we have conferred humanness onto its skills and intelligence, imposed a certain likeness to us that we find both admirable and detestable.

Some species of crow top (human-created) avian IQ tests. The hooded crow, of Israel, may take to a lamp post or the end of a dock, a piece of bread in its mouth, and begin to shred the morsel with its talons, dropping bits into the water. As small fish come to the surface, the hooded crow will snatch them out of the water. The crow is intuitive, inventive, like us. It persists.

The crow fashions tools. Scientists studying the Caledonian crow found that a captive female, confronted with the task of retrieving a small bucket of food from a vertical pipe, will bend a piece of wire into a hook and remove the bucket. The crow learns and adapts. It finds a way.

The crow identifies human faces that appear harmful to it and warns members of its group. Researchers, led by wildlife biologist John Marzluff, went out onto the University of Washington campus, wearing caveman masks, and captured crows and released them. When those scientists emerged again, wearing the caveman masks, seven birds scolded them as they walked along the same paths as before. Then, thirty percent of the crows recognized and scolded them. Then, nearly all adult crows recognized the danger around them and sounded their cawing alarms to each other when confronted with the presence of these caveman faces, a desperate attempt at preserving lives. A threat emerges and the crow perceives, remembers, and warns other crows. It sees us for what we are, what we leave in our wake. Who better than the crow, a synanthrope, an animal that has evolved to coexist with us, an animal saddled with the reputation as Death's messenger, to scold and remind us of the dangers we wield?

The crow will engage another crow, midair, in a kind of joust to establish hierarchy. The crow takes and stores food away for the winter season. The crow will make knives of wood and will drop a nut in a street and wait for a passing car to crush the shell so that it may be eaten. The crow uses us, our Toyotas and Hondas and Fords, our Michelin and Goodyear tires, our tired feet pressing gas pedals, our distracted minds driving between work and home and work. In the world of the crow, human toil does not matter. All our sweat, iPhones, salaries, soccer practices, pictures of our children playing in sandboxes, kisses stolen from lovers, broken fingernails, broken tibias and ulnas, lip gloss and mascara and male anti-balding products, time spent waiting in DMV lines, time spent turning grey hair black or brown or blonde, time spent hiding wrinkles and burning away fat and keeping the heart beating, beating. We, like dangling bread crumbs and hook-bent wire, are tools. All our lives, for the crow, amount to one crushed nut on the pavement.

An authorized crow hunt in Albany, New York, aimed to reduce the 25,000 to 50,000 American crows roosting in the city trees, calling and talking to each other, thousands speaking all at once, leaving their waste behind, taking up space, encroaching on the land, like us. “Sometimes we don’t like the animals that have the same qualities as us. We don’t like crows because crows are opportunistic and so are humans, though. Crows are invasive. Crows will do all sorts of things that humans do that we are not particularly proud of doing,” Louis Lefebvre, biologist, says.

Why do we spend so much time studying the crow, trying to learn its behaviors, map its intelligence? Why do we observe, categorize, compartmentalize, explain and experiment with the world around us? So much is unknowable, so much outside our understanding.

The crow does not need to understand any more than it simply *exists*.

III.

The Chinese tell the story of the crow in the birthing of the world, the Greeks tell of the crow as the harbinger of death. It is said that Apollo left the crow, once white, to watch over Coronis, his lover. The crow witnessed Coronis in bed with Ischys and flew to inform Apollo. Upon hearing the news, Apollo distrusted the crow and turned all crows black. When Apollo found the story to be true, he sent Artemis to kill his lover (while some versions have Apollo doing the deed himself) and made the crow sacred, an animal that would forever be marked with the task of announcing death.

IV.

The crow is inventive, adaptive and, in the stories we tell, prophetic, but there is one thing the crow does not do: it does not join a murder and fly about, this way and that, stressed, heart pumping harder than it should until finally, all at once, the entire murder dies midair, a sudden collective killing of an engine, falling to earth like some terrible rain, hundreds of oil-black bodies littering highways, backyards underneath clothing lines, the roofs of imploding barns.

In January 2011, officials in Stockholm reported 50 to 100 jackdaws lying in the snow-blanketed streets, broken and crooked legs pointing upward like winter-bare tree branches, beaks cracked and agape, feathers strewn about the road. “This is unusual,” one Swedish ornithologist said. The same thing happened to other bird species, in greater numbers, in the United States earlier that week.

Seven hundred turtledoves dropped from the sky in Faenza, Italy. Turtledoves crushed in the streets by cars. Turtledoves in flowerbeds, in the beds of trucks, hanging from trees and rooftop gutters, clogging the sewers in the streets. Turtledoves in water glasses and on dinner plates at a streetside diner patio. Turtledoves, like garnishes, in antipasto salads. A stray turtledove eyeball next to a green olive at the bottom of a martini glass. The New York Post claimed it was Hitchcockian. Officials put forth the theory that the birds’ bodies were found near a distillery and chemical plant, the mass of birds having been poisoned, at once and together, culminating in an exodus from the sky, downward to the ground. Barry Lopez has said that “we blame ourselves, with a lack of humility, for every animal’s demise,” a guilt-ridden attempt to explain the unexplainable through our own misdeeds.

Scientists cited New Year’s Eve fireworks as the culprit for the mass death of thousands of blackbirds in Beebe, Arkansas. Then, 125 miles away, over 100,000 drum fish washed up in the Arkansas River. The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission’s Keith Stephens claimed that a collective disease was to blame. “We don’t believe it’s environmental,” he said, “because it would have killed a lot of other fish.” What is common to the drum fish

and the blackbird that makes them susceptible to mass deaths, whether we are to blame or not? And, why not the crow?

The crow has evolved to live with humans, to survive us, to learn from our mistakes and press onward. The blackbird has not learned to cope with fireworks and explosions. The turtledove, unlike the crow, does not know to avoid the distillery plant. The crow is not like the drumfish.

An abnormally cold December sea was blamed when over 40,000 devil crabs washed onto the shore on the Kent coast in England. 60,000 ducks died in the Baltic Sea in 1976 after landing on an oil slick. Perch fell from the sky over Australia in 2010, stolen into the air by a storm and strewn far away, over land, far from open water. A deluge of frogs in northwestern Serbia in 2005. Fish in Brazil and Florida. Grackles, redwing blackbirds, starlings and robins in Kentucky. This is normal, scientists said. This happens all of the time. As though the normalcy of this event is enough for us to not be startled when it happens.

Paula Mooney, of Examiner.com, disagreed. "This strange occurrence can't help but lead this Christian writer to remember the beginning of that 1988 movie 'The Seventh Sign,' wherein signs of the apocalypse-as outlined in the Book of Revelation-seem to be coming true," she said. How curious is it that the deaths of so many animals, by the hundreds or thousands falling from the heavens or washing up on beaches, signal some impending

Apocalypse, when it has been the crow, for hundreds of years, that has come to represent the harbinger of doom?

This jump to the Apocalypse is typical in these instances, this rush to call unexplained phenomena signs of some impending destruction. The ultra-religious – and even those with only mild, “I go to church on Sundays and that’s enough to save me” tendencies – looked for reasons in these instances to believe the end was nigh. On the other end, scientists scrambled frantically to compile theories for the deaths – storm stress, collision with a semi, confusion caused by stentorian noise, poor eyesight – and to explain, in logical, concrete terms, how this could happen. One side begs for reunion with the creator, the other attempts to explain it away.

Hogue Prophecy, a blog dedicated to the prophecies of Nostradamus, said: “The Antichrist will be the infernal prince again for the third and last time. so many evils shall be committed by the means of Satan, the infernal Prince, that almost the entire world shall be found undone and desolate. Before these events happen, many rare birds will cry in the air, 'Now! Now!' and sometime later will vanish.”

V.

The origin of the phrase, “eating crow,” is uncertain, though it seems to have something to do with the distastefulness of eating a scavenger, a picker of carrion. Festering bodies with open bullet wounds and severed limbs on some battlefield, any battlefield. The crow, sleek and black, watches from the trees, waits for the bodies of the still-alive to signal their

terminal breaths. At the right moment, the crow lifts from the trees into the air and lands lightly on the ground, delicately surveying the dead. It prods and carefully picks at bits of flesh, tearing and rending sinews and muscle. We think of the crow as the pronouncer of death, the omen of doom, but the crow does not know of the role we have thrust upon it, nor does it care. The crow simply survives. The crow steadies upon the chest of a soldier and gazes into a lifeless eye. Soon the wolf will come for remains. The crow picks at the eye, the flesh of it soft, fragile, in its beak, and pulls at the eye, stretching and breaking the tissue and muscle attached to the eye, finally removing it from the socket, blinding the dead in his journey through the afterlife.

VI.

What if, though it seems human arrogance to believe, the all-at-once mass deaths, the Rapture-like exit from this place, signals some sort of end, when plagues of locusts will fill the skies and humans blink into an eclipsing sun as the world crumbles around them? Surely, some religious folk (of whom I do not count myself) see this end in sight while scientists attempt to find causes and answers for the dead, for us. To either side, this means something, this mass death event, a symbol of some greater meaning we have yet to realize. The crow, however, will surely adapt with the end, with whichever of our manifestations of the Apocalypse occurs, and will find a way to carry on, fashioning tools out of bone, feasting, the eyes of the dead in their possession.

VII.

The Bible tells a different story of the blackening of the crow's feathers. Following the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, the crow, at one time a bird with vibrant, multicolored feathers, takes to eating carrion and is paid for its sin with black feathers, the color and majesty stripped away. Some believe that, in the end, the crow will return to Paradise. The crow will once again display feathers of green and red and blue and yellow, singing harmoniously with its brothers and sisters in praise of God.

But the crow does not require redemption. The crow does not care about these things. As with the traits, the things that make the crow *like us*, is it that we find a need for redemption in the crow as a mirror of that need in ourselves? Barry Lopez, taking Joseph Campbell further, said that we create our gods and animals. What if, in one more step, our animals create us? The story of the crow as the tale of humankind.

In the end, the crow will join its brethren and they will rise into the sky, ever closer to the light of the sun, telling each other the story of the world.

ALL THE WAY DOWN BELOW

Even in the January summer, temperatures in Antarctica rarely reached above zero. Researchers and support personnel at McMurdo, Marshall included, had to make their own fun, sometimes heading to Gallagher's, one of the community's three bars, to attend talent shows and concerts performed by residents. Most of the residents were there as support, most of the people having left behind their lives in more welcoming places. A woman, McMurdo's only contortionist, took the stage.

Marshall joined Titus at a table. Ice caked his beard, eyebrows. Numbness in his fingers. He still felt the bombardment of Antarctic wind in his skin. No climate on Earth could compare to this place's cold and isolation, Marshall thought as he warmed up, rubbing his hands together. People didn't realize Antarctica was a desert, that the snow-reflected glare of ultraviolet light caused sunburn.

The woman on stage folded her body into the most impossible shape, her legs behind her arms, bent at the knees. She held a pint glass of beer in her feet. She rocked back, balancing with her hands on the floor, and tipped the pint glass back. The glass emptied, down her throat, in sixteen seconds. Marshall and Titus

applauded, their arms opening and coming together in wide arcs as if they played accordions.

In Antarctica, Marshall thought he would be lost. No one would care about his research on mantis shrimps and cuttlefish. He wouldn't have to give talks on the current trends in marine research. In Antarctica, he wasn't a tenured professor of invertebrate zoology at Nebraska, didn't have to make excuses for his daughter. He would be alone, something that appealed to him greatly. Even among the others, many of whom were also there to get away from something, Marshall could go about his business unnoticed.

Marshall nudged Titus, pointed to the table of Russian scientists not laughing or clapping in the corner of the room.

"Assholes," Titus said.

"Too busy destroying things," Marshall said.

The Russians, Yury and Kirill, noticed them staring and both threw up *bras d'honneurs*, their equivalent of the middle finger. They were part of a group of scientists drilling down into Lake Vostok, a glacial lake that had not seen sunlight, had not experienced an Antarctic gust of wind, in twenty-million years. Scientists wondered what new life-forms they would find two miles beneath Antarctica's surface, what the lake would tell researchers about Jupiter's moon Europa, what it would feel like to conquer the planet's last frontier. They had begun using

kerosene and Freon and other chemicals recently to assist with the drilling, causing alarm and controversy among the others at McMurdo Station.

The woman on stage balanced a running chainsaw on her chin. Yury appeared to tell Kirill a joke, to which he slapped his chest over and over, laughing.

In Antarctica, Marshall didn't have to answer questions about his daughter's progress, didn't have to drive fifteen hours in the middle of the night to rescue her. No one consulted him about the three new species discovered in the Ross Sea that day, the reason for the celebration and drinking and the show onstage.

"Have I told you that there's a type of sea urchin that has a parasite that thrives living in its anus?" Marshall asked.

The woman on stage left to applause and the Russians stood up. Yury opened a large instrument case and removed an electric bass while Kirill carried a Fender guitar to the stage. They sat on stools. Yury plugged the bass into an amp and started his sound check.

Marshall had not told anyone he was a PhD, that he was an expert on invertebrate zoology. In Antarctica, he was a maintenance man. He was Marshall, the middle-aged, single outcast, adrift in the world and temporarily at the bottom of the Earth. He had left Lincoln and sold handmade pottery in Oaxaca for six

months. He moved on to Lima, where he chauffeured a Communist general who gave Shakespearean monologues about his plans for taking the presidency, speaking Spanish, believing he would not be understood. He was a carpenter in Chile; worked a rodeo in Argentina.

The Russians finished their sound check and announced their pleasure at performing for their friends there in Antarctica. Yury ran his fingers over the strings, creating a lulling, ominous sound, sped up slightly, a crescendo, and Kirill, placing his fingers in position, waited.

Marshall had first realized that there was something in him that made him want to be anonymous when he traveled to Cairns, Australia, to study box jellyfish. Cristina, his daughter, was just seven years old. Diving in the reef during off-time made him relish being away from home. He would write Cristina and tell her about the acetic acid found in vinegar and how it was effective against a jellyfish sting, though folklore often claimed urine would do the trick. He wrote that the box jellyfish stalks (do you know what *stalk* means?) and hunts its prey rather than drifting through the sea. Beaches in Hawaii have been closed down when, seven to ten days after a full moon, hundreds of jellyfish wind up near the shore, ready to spawn. A letter arrived in response, written by his wife, writing, *your daughter could really use your help doing her research paper on frogs. She, your daughter,*

has chosen the poison dart frog. When Marshall returned home, he brought college zoology textbooks, the sections on the dart frog bookmarked. At the park in their neighborhood, Marshall and his wife sat on a park bench, one of the books opened to a picture of a sea cucumber on his lap, as Cristina waved at him. "She can't read these, Marshall," Vera told him as Cristina knocked over a young boy's sandcastle as she ran to a slide. "She's seven." From the top of the slide, ready to show off, Cristina waited for his eyes to lift from the page.

Marshall worked with Titus on the maintenance crew at McMurdo. When Marshall first arrived and saw McMurdo, it reminded him of mining towns, tractors and construction sites and bulldozers dotting the muddy landscape. The town itself seemed like any other, though the world outside it was unlike anything he had experienced. In the yoga studio, Marshall supervised the building of a meditation studio. They spent the day putting up drywall. Titus cursed the job repeatedly and took frequent smoke breaks. Marshall remained mostly silent, finding a sort of catharsis in the mundane task.

"I could stay here forever," Marshall said.

"Everything, everyone, is here temporarily," Titus said. "Nothing's permanent."

“But, what is permanent is that everyone coming here has fallen out of the world,” Marshall said. “They come here because there’s nowhere else to go.”

“I came here to see penguins,” Titus said.

“Female Adelie penguins, when they’re building nests, will often trade sex for the rocks in a male’s nest.”

The snow, that night, swirled, taken to the air by the harsh winds, and blanketed the world in whiteout. Marshall stared out the window of Gallagher’s. He could not see anything, no one wandering around outside. The door blew open and two people stumbled in, covered completely with ice and snow from top to bottom, snow blowing in and filling the air. Yury and Kirill.

“Usually, the rats go where the people are,” Marshall said to Titus.

The Russians walked by their table and Yury tipped his New York Mets hat to Marshall. Days earlier, in the same bar, Marshall, drunk, spoke to the room about the dangers of using the chemicals the Russians used in drilling into the ice. Yury had been there and came over to Marshall. Marshall asked the room who was with him, stumbling from his stool. He leaned forward, pressing a pointing finger into Yury’s chest. Others turned and watched, waiting for a fight. “You Americans think your ways are always the right ones,” Yury said in thickly-accented English, “but you can’t see that some other way may be just as good.”

Yury tried to help Marshall back to his seat, but Marshall pushed him away and sat down, the Russian walking away.

Because the community was small, about one thousand people, and because everyone generally spent a portion of their downtime in the bars and the coffeehouse, Marshall knew all about Yury. He had heard the stories of the Russian's tenure in Iraq, long after the height of the fighting had subsided, driving a truck of scientific instruments across the country to a settlement in Kuwait where scientists researched the social and mating habits of green tiger prawns in the Persian Gulf. He had heard about a father attempting to negotiate a sale of his thirteen-year-old daughter to Yury in Baghdad. A gang of teenagers attacked his truck on the highway, mistakenly assuming him to be shipping food. Ghost stories in Fallujah. Cockfights in Basra.

Marshall realized he knew more about Yury than he knew about his daughter. He looked across the bar at Yury and wondered if he had a daughter anywhere, if he had more and more trouble imagining her face as time passed, if he was able to tell anyone the girl's favorite type of ice cream, if he could describe the birthmark on top of her right foot.

Drilling over Lake Vostok ceased the next day as the whiteout continued, the world outside devoid of shape or color. Marshall and Titus and many of the other

crowded again inside Gallagher's, passing the time without work to do. Marshall, bored, longed to be outside despite the danger. They waited for news on the storm, on a sign of its end. News of a fire in the coffeehouse came over the radios. Everyone was safe, but pastries had been lost in the flames.

By noon, the bar was mostly out of peanuts and hundreds of crushed shells carpeted the floor. Marshall switched from water to whiskey. After four straight games of pool, Titus gave up playing and curled up on the floor and took a nap. Alone, Marshall drew a picture on a bar napkin of a giant squid engulfing a Russian submarine. Conversations lulled. The jukebox played "You've Lost That Loving Feeling" for a third time in a row.

"That is a very nice drawing," Yury said, standing across the table. "But, we don't use the hammer and sickle anymore."

Marshall realized his distrust of and animosity for the Russians was based solely on a misunderstanding, a difference of opinion, but he couldn't get over it. He wanted Yury to explain to him exactly what made his team think it was a good idea drilling into an untouched-for-millions-of-years lake, home to so much potential new life, using chemicals that might kill undiscovered life.

Yury gestured for the napkin. He tried his best to erase the old Soviet logo and drew the Russian flag on the sub. He drew Russian men trapped in the squid's tentacles. "In Baghdad," Yury said, "I meet a man who battles chickens.

He has twenty, or thirty, of them. One loses, he kills it, chops off its head, if it's not dead already. Right there in the arena, as you say."

Marshall swirled the whiskey around in glass, downed its contents. He drew another giant squid swimming with mermaids.

"I think he is a monster, you see. Killing these chickens. I go to a fight. It is barbaric. I am drunk and I steal the chicken before the fight. I run away."

"That is probably not a great idea," Marshall said.

"But, I am wrong. This man, he is no monster. His son, he is very, very sick. The chicken fights pay for the doctors."

Marshall drank the rest of another glass of whiskey. "This story doesn't change what you're doing."

"We will drill down to that lake finally. It has taken twenty years."

"Still, I'm missing the point."

"You see. We will reach the water and discover many great things. There will be no damage to the lake or the life there. We will reach the lake after all this time and everyone will forget how we got there. The people and the scientists, even you, will think this is a very good thing. We will do this."

The first time Cristina was arrested, at seventeen for possession of marijuana, Marshall knew it was coming. He tried to trace the events back to a source, some

identifiable point where everything went wrong. Vera asked him to talk to Cristina, to try and get through to her. Marshall said he didn't think he could do it. "I've spent so much time with animals, I don't know how to talk to people anymore," he said. The more Marshall had studied box jellyfish and sea cucumbers and other animals, the more he felt that humans were not special, had no real advantage over other things. Bees use the sun as a compass. Octopuses identify and remember shapes, sizes and colors. Humans routinely acted against their best interests.

While in Morocco on a research expedition, later, Cristina showed up at Marshall's hotel. Vera had sent her. He tried for three days to formulate a speech, something he could say to show her the exact path she needed to take. He opened a sealed envelope with his name on it Vera had sent with Cristina. *This is your job now*, the letter inside said. *Find a way. Be her father, not her science teacher*. By the end of the trip, Marshall had come up empty. Everything, every speech he wrote in his head, seemed wrong. He hoped Vera would show up and save him, talk to Cristina, that she would arrive and tell Cristina all the things he had no words for.

The wind worsened. Marshall and Yury were drunk, throwing peanuts across a table into empty plastic cups. No one spoke. Many people slept on the barroom floor. The bartender passed out free shots to everyone. At nine, calls came in

asking if anyone had seen Kirill. After reports all came back that he was missing, Yury stood up and got ready to head out.

“Whoa. What do you think you’re doing?” Marshall asked.

“He is a friend. I must go out and find him,” Yury said.

“And where will you go? Out there, you won’t know which way is up or down. You will put your hand out in front of you and you won’t see a thing.”

“It’s still a thing I must do.”

“In this weather, exposed skin will frostbite instantly.”

“If that happens, at least I will know I’m still alive.”

When Marshall received the phone call from Vera saying that Cristina was expelled, having been caught dealing weed at her high school, he stood in front of his invertebrate zoology class, the students dissecting octopuses, labeling the mantle, the posterior salivary gland, the gonad, and each of their three hearts. He hung up without responding to his wife. He stood speechless and watched the students. Cristina had all these problems, the drugs, difficulty connecting to people her own age, fights with other girls, piercings and tattoos Marshall couldn’t understand. The octopus he understood. He knew how it mated, what it ate, how it behaved in stressful environments and situations. He imagined his students examining Cristina at their stations. What conclusions about her would

they make? When his daughter was born, and as she grew up, Marshall figured having a professor and a spinal surgeon as parents would guarantee Cristina success in life, but she wasn't like the octopus, her trajectory was unpredictable. He didn't know her at all.

The Russians resumed drilling the next morning, the snow and wind receding. In the night, Yury had wandered in the whiteout looking for his friend, but had gotten no farther than a couple buildings away from the bar.

Vera wrote Marshall an email from the States. He needed to come home. It was time for him to come home. Cristina needed him, so did she. *You aren't untethered*, she said. *You have people whose lives you are a part of. The animals will find a way without you, they will mate and feed and survive without your interference. Your daughter will not.* Marshall left the letter open on his desk and opened his laptop to write back. He stared at the blank page, the cursor blinking, taunting.

Titus came to the door. They were forming a search party for Kirill. Marshall and Titus took snowmobiles and headed north. Marshall feared what he thought the others must have already known: humans – Kirill - weren't made for this world and couldn't make it out in the elements alone.

By midday, they returned to McMurdo, hoping others had more success. Perhaps Kirill played a joke and was fine, tucked away in some basement.

Marshall passed Titus a bottle of wine. It was fifteen degrees outside, balmy for an Antarctic summer in late January. Marshall took a box of pictures from his closet. There were photos of fish in Thailand, the Australian reef, the Opera House in Sydney, various species of squid and snail. A stack of photos of Cristina, rubber banded together. He put each photo in a line, placing them chronologically according to when they were taken. He returned the other pictures to the box. Lastly, he placed the photo of him and his daughter, taken the day before he left, at the end of the line. On the backs of each photograph, he composed short narratives of the moments captured, documentation of a life.

This is you and I before I left. I didn't know where our lives would go then, how we would change. I didn't know when this picture was taken that I'd wind up in Antarctica, at the bottom of the world. Your mother took this picture and we were all together and neither of you knew I would be away for so long. Someday I will understand you, but now I can tell you I don't know who you are, what's happened to you. You might not ever discover new life anywhere the scientists here are about to find. You might never forgive me. I don't know.

The search for Kirill was suspended for the day. Marshall found Yury at Gallagher's. He sat down and ordered shots for the both of them. Yury told stories of his friend, about their time in Antarctica. Soon, other people in the bar

began to listen to the stories. One woman cried as a picture of Kirill and his family circulated around the room.

Marshall returned to his room and again stared at the computer, trying to write something to his daughter. After an hour, he had only written, *This is your father, writing to you from all the way down below civilization*. He tried to reason out what he meant to say, how he would say it. The one sentence remained.

Eventually, he would have to return home. It had been three years since he'd touched his wife's pale skin, since he'd driven over the flat Nebraska landscape, since he'd given up trying to be a father. He had tried to find answers in his books, in research, but his child was more complex than opening the octopus up, searching for and identifying all its component parts.

Two days later, Marshall awoke to Titus knocking on his door, calling for him to get up and come outside. "The Russians have finally made it to the lake," he said. Marshall left his room and went with Titus aboard the Terra Bus. Nearly everyone at McMurdo headed to Lake Vostok. When they arrived, the Russian scientists were drinking rum and coffee in paper cups, celebrating. The flat white sheet of ice and snow stretched toward the horizon all around them, the research buildings and machinery the only other things in that landscape. Marshall and

Titus found Yury and they congratulated him and his people. They drank together.

“This is a very good thing,” Yury said.

More people, scientists and maintenance workers, arrived. Music played from speakers on the buses. Marshall decided he would call Cristina when he returned to the station. He would tell her the news of the lake, the drilling, and the great human achievement he had witnessed, all the new life they were sure to find beneath the ice. He would tell her he would see her soon.

Yury stepped away and answered a call on the radio. The celebration continued. Marshall saw Yury standing alone and walked to him. He offered him a drink. Yury hugged Marshall, wrapped his meaty arms tightly around him.

“He is alive, my friend,” Yury said.

“Kirill?” Marshall asked.

“He is alive, I just got word. He is alive and we have done something very good.”

“This is a great moment for you.”

“For all of us,” Yury said. “We all have done this together.”

People slowly began to gather together and make their ways back to McMurdo where the party would continue. Marshall would forget about the concerns he had about the chemicals used to aid the drilling into the ice. Marshall

and the others returned to the base camp, Kirill awaiting them. Kirill would tell of wrecking a snowmobile as the whiteout began and digging a shelter in the snow, hidden from the intense winds. Cristina would receive word of the breakthrough and would call her father the next day. He would tell her he loved her, he would say, *we will all be together again soon.*

In the morning, Marshall left his room with the stack of photographs of Cristina. At each residence, he left a photo with an anecdote of her life on the back. He gave Yury a photo of Cristina as a child in a dance outfit, *She, sometimes, comes to me in my dreams, dancing,* written on the back. He put a picture of Cristina in scuba gear in Hawaii in Kirill's mailbox. To the contortionist woman he gave a picture of Cristina at nine, her nose bloodied and her face scratched up after running her bicycle into a tree. He wanted everyone to know who he really was, what lives he was a part of, what life he had created. No one really knew him and that made him, in that place, feel incredibly alone. He took the photo of him and Cristina, the day before he disappeared, and kept it for himself, to be returned to her when he finally got home.

There was still concern about the methods used to drill into the lake. In Antarctica, Marshall could have been useful in analyzing the life they might find the following summer, life deprived of sunlight or oxygen. He could write papers on the things they found beneath the two miles of ice. He could participate in

researching the life in the lake to begin formulating ideas of what life might be like on Mars. Marshall could stay in Antarctica, so much more to know about how life worked, but he had Cristina at home and he wanted to know everything about the woman she had become since he'd left. He would stay through the season and come up with a plan. Nothing was certain – about Vera, about his daughter – but he could not stay in Antarctica.

That night, the celebrations – of the lake, of Kirill – continued. The contortionist bought Marshall a drink. Kirill and Yury played music. Titus got drunk and left with the glaciologist from New Zealand. People Marshall had never really talked to approached him and talked about Cristina. They gave him back the pictures he distributed. One by one, people came and shared a drink and told him of their own families and friends and stories scattered elsewhere in the world. He rubber-banded the pictures together.

“Are you going to stay with us?” Yury asked.

“I don't know,” Marshall said. “I might leave, but I could be back eventually.”

“And you are going to return to your daughter?”

Patrons goaded the contortionist to get on the stage, offering to buy her drinks. She declined, laughing and covering her face. A few people picked her up,

holding her above their heads, and carried her to the stage. The crowd chanted. Outside, somewhere, Marshall figured, groups of seals swam in the McMurdo Sound, beneath the ice, calling to each other. Penguins built their nests. The endless daylight of summer would come to an end soon.

“And my wife,” Marshall said. “I am going to return to both of them.”

“We will all leave this place soon, as we must.”

“The winter will be here in no time.”

“And we all have other places to go.” Yury cupped his hands around his mouth and hollered as the contortionist shifted from one shape to another. “This is not our home. We all have other lives,” he said.

The fall was coming and the Antarctic weather would become increasingly volatile, violent. Besides the scientists, no one belonged in this place, but they had not really fit in anywhere else, and that’s what brought them together. Eventually, Marshall had to return home. Eventually, he had to talk to his daughter.

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