

Hammer House

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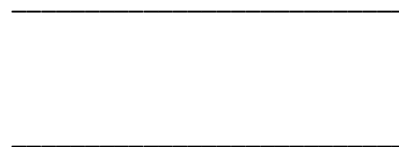


Table of Contents

The Bad, Bad Place.....	3
Queen of the Valley.....	22
The Steward at Long Last.....	37
Bird Calls.....	50
Hammer House.....	72
A Goose Leaves for Winter.....	101
The Firth of Froth.....	116
Heat Death of the One and Only....	140
(Total 160)	

“The Bad, Bad Place”

The baby's coming in May. That's plenty of time to get the house in order, to fix the whole place up. I ask Herb if he feels like helping, having to shout above the vacuum. He's in the corner sulking. He always does that when I roll him away from the window. I'm trying not to feel bad about moving him because looking out the window is all Herb has, but I've got to get the place baby-proofed before the arrival.

He never cared much for me anyway. For years, he refused to refer to me with anything edging on permanence. “This is Richard,” he would say at family gatherings rolling his eyes as if I had mistakenly tagged along.

In the first year he lived with Julie and me, he would call up her old boyfriends and invite them over for dinner, and she would have to call them back and apologize and say, “Sorry, Todd. Yes. I'm with someone. Married. But yeah, sure. Coffee'd be great sometime.”

Julie is, God bless her, still going to work. Even with one good arm, she's unfazed. She says the whole pregnancy has been a breeze, but recently she's been more tired. “Julie doesn't know I took the day off from work,” I say to Herb.

I had put on my suit as usual that morning and gave her a kiss goodbye before leaving, then pulled out of the driveway at 6:45 and turned right as I normally would, going North towards Southern State Parkway via Higbie Lane but circled back around Kimber Street parking behind the Nadraus's truck.

I waited an hour for Julie to leave for work, smiling and waving to Mrs. Nadraus as she stood nervously at her storm door with a hand clasped around the fold of her bathrobe and a phone to her ear.

I really don't think the baby should be around Herb too much. He's always sick and constantly soiling himself. Because he's her father, Julie doesn't recognize the threat he will pose to the baby's health. I'll allow the obligatory picture of Julie holding up Herb's arms so that he might cradle the baby, which I know she will want to take. Predictably, it'll be arranged like the one that she loves of Herb holding her as a baby. After that, I'm moving him to the basement.

After I snuck home and made the call to Nurse Espinoza to say I'd be home with Herb, I changed clothes and went to the Home Improvement Warehouse. Within an hour I'd filled the oversized cart with the hardware that I would need to build the permanent baby gates, plus foam rubber siding, tacks, brackets and sheetrock screws, a crib monitor, a motion detection kit for the hallway outside the baby's room, zip ties, carbon monoxide detectors, room thermometers with built-in alarms, three Happy Legs® escape ladders for the second floor, child-lock knobs, outlet guards, foam floor mats with area rugs for every room in the house, some industrial-grade surfactants and the gram-negative spectrum of household disinfectants.

I made a detour past the door lock aisle to ogle the deadbolts longingly but, after ten minutes of concentrated perusing, I resisted. Julie had put her foot down on this one. She had said "enough" with the locks and as the cold sweat overtook me on the checkout line, I repeated my mantra beside the oddly unshackled line of customers: Head up, heart open.

The remaining supplies had been purchased two weeks before and hidden in an unlabeled box in the garage. Julie hardly ever goes into the garage, which has really helped in simplifying the preparations.

With the furniture moved to the sides of the living room, all table and countertop corners protected in foam, I laid down the floor mats and area rugs, installed safety caps over all available outlets and

replaced the furniture. I have chosen gender neutral coloring for all the additions to the house, not yellow though, never yellow. Cletus's favorite color was yellow. It was the color of the gang he formed before prison.

He made me keep a yellow hanky tied around my arm to show the others we still thought fondly of the gang, and that it remained in our thoughts even though we were 'inside.' Cletus and I lived together for a long time, almost a whole year. Even so, it was gracious of him to include me; the recreation yard can be much more enjoyable if you have an affiliation.

We got Herb the "#1 Grandfather" t-shirt when we found out. Julie loved it and he seemed to respond positively to the shirt, so we got him one of those trucker hats with the plastic mesh in the back to go along with it. Herb hasn't been talking much these days, especially not to me, but he wears the shirt over his old flannel since he's always cold. Julie has had the nurse dress him in it every day this week as a sort of celebration.

If Herb's still bouncing around in that old cranium, I'm sure he'd be happy to hear the news and happy to wear the shirt showing his personal celebration of what Julie calls the "new addition."

I asked her if we could stop saying "new addition" as it flashed adrenaline-soured memories of large, tiled communal showers. But she didn't quite understand, and I can't really demand that she stop saying anything that makes her happy.

"Were you confused when I came home early?" I ask Herb, nudging his shoulder as I hang foot-long strips of double-sided tape to his arms. He's still sulking. I've been trying to include him in my work so that he doesn't feel so useless. Mostly, I just let him hold the tape rolls and glue bottles on his lap, but even that he can't seem to get right and knocks them over whenever he moves his hands. "Julie's going to be ecstatic when she sees everything we've done," I say to Herb, moving him so he can see

the neat highway of electrical cords taped behind the radiator. “We’ve been talking about doing this for months, but it was such a big boring project that we kept putting it off. She’s going to be relieved to have the house baby-proofed.”

By 11:10 am, I have cleansed the bathrooms and kitchen, scrubbed the linoleum floors with bleach, vacuumed all the rugs and sponged away any dust. Once that was through, I took to the floors on my hands and knees and picked up or detached anything that could be accessed, swallowed and choked on. I took all the spare change in the house to the CoinBuddy at the supermarket where I picked up my lunch and dill pickles for Julie, since we typically go through a jar a day.

I bought a dog house earlier in the week for Miles our Wheaton terrier and gave him a stern look as I forced him whining, tail down out the door, admonishing him with some excited pointing and a guttural, “Get, Boy. Get!”

I wanted to show him that I meant business when it came to living outside from now on. I picked up some sedatives from the vet to get him through the first couple of nights and to keep him from barking and waking up Julie in the wee hours. She wouldn’t want me to sedate Miles, or even move him outside, but it’s an initiative I’ve taken upon myself which I know she will secretly, if not guiltily, be thankful for.

Miles means well and is a good boy, but he’s too big. A close sniff, a nudge of the nose could easily knock the baby over. And I can’t possibly cushion everything. The rugs and underlying foam pads should provide an adequate cushion but a baby’s head is so soft, so pliable, that even if the impact did not kill him or her it might cause unsightly deformations. I have his or her’s entire childhood in mind.

I replace Herb at his spot by the window. He seems agitated. I ask him if he wants to keep helping. I roll him across the room to face the large mirror I had been securing. He quiets down, and I tell him it would be nice to have company while I work.

Herb has always been interested in home repairs. He worked for a time as a contractor and housing developer. The first time I met him was in his garage welding on a new rip fence for his table saw. He had offered me a greasy handshake and grasped my unwavering fingers like he was trying to crush bone.

A text message appears from Jim. He is asking if there is any possibility that I could come into the office this afternoon. I text him back, "Sorry, Jim, but cant. Real sick...keeping close to bathroom." Jim has been very understanding. I never expected that he'd be the one to bail me out. He had been working mainframe maintenance in IT for us but left to join the Magnus Group five years ago. He said I'd always been kind to him, but I can barely remember speaking to the man, although I do remember having a good laugh with Janice from sales over his resemblance to a lemur. On my second day back, I got a call from him saying he could put me up in an entry-level analyst position if I was interested. I wasn't, but Julie made me call him back and say I would be happy to join the Magnus Group and work with him. No one knows about my history there. Jim made sure of that.

I draw out a molly bolt from the bucket and hold it in front of Herb's face. He watches as I slide it, with some resistance, through the sheetrock hole. I tighten the machine screw, letting the wall anchors arc and set before removing the bolt. I align the mirror's frame, holding it up with one hand at the top and a knee at the bottom, and insert the longer bolts and washers that will reside in the wall anchors. I look over my shoulder at Herb to see if he is following me. He watches attentively. I check my watch. It's 1:46.

Herb is shifting back and forth like he has to go to the bathroom. I wheel him in and lock his wheelchair so he can lift himself onto the toilet seat. It's the one thing besides eating that he can still do on his own. Every day I think, with some amount of dread, that he is going to become completely incontinent when the baby gets here. That's just what we need.

I try to love Herb like I did my own father, but it is very difficult for me. I never did call him dad as he had asked me when Julie and I got married. I didn't think he really wanted me to call him that but just said it out of some sort of responsibility to her. I tell Herb it's hard to like him when he sulks so much. It's embarrassing to see him like this. It was, if not still, common for Eskimos to voluntarily push themselves onto ice floes when they got too old, but that's not Herb's style; he was a conscientious objector.

I know I shouldn't think these things. Herb has been good to us, but it's hard to deny the burden he's placing on the family at such a difficult time. And now, after six months back, I feel that there is a hardness forming in me. I'm starting to feel like the only true emotion I experience these days is a brand new type of fear, and if I'm not concentrating really hard on something I get winded and my testicles recede into my pelvis.

The anti-drowning toilet locks and bathtub cover turn out to be a bitch to install. With no alternative, I drill through the granite façade to the available studs adjacent the bathtub and behind the toilet. I make sure my ear plugs are in tight beforehand. The noise bothers me, and I stop every ten seconds to listen for boots pounding down an imaginary corridor.

When I went inside it was like I'd taken a deep breath as I stepped off the bus and had held that breath until now. I told Julie I would think of an appropriate metaphor to describe to her the feeling that made me push her so hard. I had only been out a couple months. She was aware that it

might take some time to adjust. The “prison experience” is different everywhere you go, I told her. In some ways it’s unreasonable of her to expect

She still has some more recuperating to do from the fall, but the cast is coming off her arm today. Julie understands that I was just trying to get through the door. At night the door must be closed, and during morning inspection you can’t be caught inside your room—then it’s your own fault. I wasn’t supposed to go downstate, I reminded Julie. They don’t make concessions for white-collars.

I find the wall studs and set the Little Tumbler’s® Safety Net across the basement stairway. Herb doesn’t climb stairs anymore, so it shouldn’t be a problem for him. A yawn leads to a momentary distraction and resulting entanglement while I try to unfold the complicated net. It’s completely tangled now. I spread it on the kitchen floor to pick out the knots. The floor is warm, and I lay out next to the net. Maybe it would be all right if I go upstairs after lunch and take a nap, to catch up on some sleep. I decide against it.

Julie is seeing the doctor after work. She’ll be back at 6, the earliest. That gives me hours but possibly not enough.

I splash some cold water on my neck and collect the bucket of 1/4 inch screws from the garage. The Window Sentinels® for the upstairs window screens require four screws each. There is not much assembly required, but there are eight windows that need to be outfitted. For the first time, I am thankful for having sold the old house. The pilot holes aren’t quite in line with my counter sinks in the door jamb. My work moves quickly, but it takes the better part of two hours, ending around 4:30.

On Sunday morning, after many months of tolerating the thin plywood, I asked Julie if we could please put double-cylinder deadbolts and crossbars on our bedroom door. I’d had another terrible night’s

sleep but she responded with a definitive “no,” that it would scare her to be trapped inside and that she preferred to keep the door open at night.

I told her she wouldn’t be trapped, that I’d keep the key inside the drawer of my nightstand if she needed it. But she wouldn’t listen. I heard her calling her sister, Colette, later as I left the shower running to barricade the old bureau against the bedroom door to change out of my clothes. Colette and her husband, Gunnar, visited later that afternoon, impromptu, with their kids. They told me, while Julie was there, that they were happy to have me back and safe. Hugs as well as the grappling, half-hug handshakes were exchanged along with other kind words.

Later in the evening, Gunnar took me aside at the grill and told me that he had spoken with Julie and Colette’s brother, Ed in Kansas, and that if anything happened to Julie I would be sure to experience, at their hands, pain of a magnitude not worth mentioning in detail but assuredly tremendous.

Gunnar always speaks with bravado—he’s a natural showman—but he’s tiny, half my size. He’d once been a professional figure skater, which made me smile as I thought of the very frightening and overpowering image of my roommate, Cletus Gorman, well-respected amongst the inmates of the third gallery, who once sat on a man who called him a word I will certainly not repeat and pulled on that man’s tongue until it hung outside his mouth, flaccid and immobile from then on. The man tried for many weeks to put it back in, once taking my spoon at lunch and scooping and pushing the thing behind his clenched teeth, but as he endeavored to speak it would inevitably flop out, splattering anyone nearby with slobber. I asked Julie if we could stop eating soup and, when she wasn’t around, would hide the spoons inside a hole I dug in the backyard for this very purpose. The missing spoon situation is something that really bothers Julie, but sometimes burying a spoon just makes me feel better.

The curtains need to be tacked up so they don't drape too low. The baby could pull on them and bring down the whole valance and support bar. It wouldn't take much. I stand on my toes and try to fold the upper part of the curtain, but I lose my hold and drop the tack. As I reach and grasp, I fumble the box in my other hand and tacks scatter everywhere.

I pick up most of them but there are three missing of the 24 that should be left. I search for another half hour and give up. I'll find them when I pull up the rug to put the foam mats down.

If I don't find the missing tacks, I've decided not to tell Julie. She doesn't need the added knowledge of a number of hidden, easily swallowed tacks that would undoubtedly be accessible to our firstborn child. She's been stressed out enough this week. She tries to hide it, but I can tell, the way she looks at her reflection in the pickle brine after having finished another jar, just sitting there and staring at the wavy image of herself.

Julie wanted to talk the other day about the way I was adjusting to being back home. "I don't really have the patience for those questions right now," I said. She said, "Okay," then she asked me if I felt changed after being inside. I didn't know how to answer the question, so I asked her if I seemed changed? After some time she said "No," and asked me if there was anything I wanted to talk about. I asked her if there was anything bothering her? She said she wanted to know if I was ready to be a father. "Of course I am," I said. "I've been looking forward to kids my whole life." She said she only wanted to be sure, and she didn't want her baby to be deprived of a stable upbringing, whatever that means. She said that Herb was like an infant now, and if I couldn't muster the patience in dealing with her own father then how would I treat something much needier like her baby? And as she said it, I gave her the hurt look. She had used it again: *her* baby.

Recently, she'd been forgetting to include me as part of the "we" in the family unit. She'd developed an intense level of attachment to her idea of the baby, as mothers do, but she kept saying

“my,” “my baby,” “my future son or future daughter,” “my little wonton dumpling,” always referring to it as if it was hers alone, and I had to say politely and in a tone of fake consternation, “Well, Honey. I think you mean *our*.” And then I made the pouty face, holding it until she had apologized. I don’t often make the pouty face, but there are times when a situation is grave enough that it must be utilized without reservation or shame.

I finish with the Window Sentinels®, and assemble the Bhopal® caustic spill rinse station at the kitchen sink, moving the drying rack over another two feet along the countertop. The rinse connection is fairly simple and doesn’t need any additional attention. The gasket fits neatly over the spout with a toggle switch to move between the eye flush and decontamination functions. I hang the emergency shower in a crude and temporary fashion with adhesive hooks from the ceiling. I mark my notebook with a list of additional hardware needed to secure the shower head properly.

There is a knock at the door. I lean the unfurled plastic panel for the railing against the bottom of the staircase. I look at my watch: 5:34. Miles is barking from outside. I go to the living room window and see that it is Colette. She unlocks the front door with the key Julie gave her and comes in, scraping her feet on the foyer rug.

“Hi, Colette,” I say.

She reels back and gasps bringing her hand to her chest.

“Oh, Richard. I didn’t think you’d be home.”

“I took the day off. Don’t tell Julie if you talk to her on the phone.”

She looks scared.

“Why not?”

“I’m baby-proofing the whole house. A surprise.”

“Isn’t it kind of early for that?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s nice then. Just came by to see dad.”

She doesn’t come forward to greet me. She steps backwards, moving closer to the wall and looks around the room, raising her eyebrows at me as if she is considering how the work has progressed, but I know better. She is investigating, building a mental case, determining if anything suspicious should be noted.

“He’s in the bathroom,” I say.

She nods her head and moves towards the bathroom.

“Is Elena with him?”

“I’m here with him.”

“How long has he been in there?”

I take a second to think about this. Herb has been in the bathroom for about forty minutes now.

“Fifteen minutes.” I say.

“You could check on him.”

“I’m constantly checking on him.”

“He doesn’t always realize where he is or what he’s doing. You’ll save yourself a mess later.”

“I *always* check on him.”

“I’m just saying he’s not getting any better. He’s only going to get worse and you have to be aware.”

I realize I have forgotten about Herb for some time while I was working. I’m worried. But that’s probably just because Colette brought it up.

“Do you need any help?” she asks.

“No, I should be fine. But thanks.”

“There must be something I can do.”

“Let me think.”

I scan the room for potential tasks.

“While you think, I’m going to use the other bathroom.”

She ascends the stairway to the bedroom bathroom.

“Careful. Floor’s wet.” I say as her feet disappear up the steps.

There are some simple tasks that she could do, saving me some time for the bigger things, but I can already picture her taking a share of the credit. Julie will come home and Colette will color herself a co-planner. Maybe she’ll yell “surprise” when Julie comes through the door. I go to the fridge and pull out a slice of American cheese. I ball it up in my hand and press another canine Xanax into it. I open the backdoor. Miles is waiting at its edge and tries to squeeze his way in, but I nudge him out with my shin. I step out onto the patio and tell him to sit. I walk fifteen feet away and hold out the ball of cheese. I wait, testing his training. “Come,” I say and Miles comes, jumping for his treat. I lift my hand away from him and tell him to sit. He knows he’s supposed to end the maneuver with a “sit,” but he’s too excited. I release the cheese to him.

I set the brackets at the bottom and top of the stairs that will anchor the reinforced baby gates. I find the corner studs and am screwing in the first bracket when Colette steps to my side holding out a small makeup bottle that looks like nail polish.

“What is this?” she asks.

There is an accusatory tone in her voice and I turn, trying to put on my best affronted face.

“What?” I say.

“Concealer,” she says.

“What about it?”

“Julie doesn’t wear makeup.”

Her eyes narrow.

“Never?” I say.

“Never.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“You know damn well, Richard. What did we tell you? What did we say would happen if you ever touched her again?”

I turn back to the bracket and set another screw in the drill bit.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” I say.

“Like hell it doesn’t. I can call your parole officer. Right now. He’ll have you carted out before Julie gets home.”

“Colette. I didn’t do anything. Ask Julie. She’ll tell you.”

“I *will* ask. But even if she goes along with your story, I’m doing a body check.”

“Do whatever you like, Colette.”

Colette has always considered me a bad man. When the verdict came through she didn’t comfort Julie or tell her to wipe her tears away and be strong for Richard. She said, “Good. Now you can get past him.” But Julie knows how hard I am trying to be good. Working for Jim doesn’t pay much, but I also don’t have to worry about any three-letter acronyms bearing down on me.

Even if her family is unconvinced, Julie knows that it was an accident. I was just trying to get through the door. She was in the way and the rules are the rules: in the morning when the door is opened you have to get outside for inspection, otherwise you will lose pillow and sheet privileges. You can’t be caught inside the cell during the day, there is nowhere to run. I tried to get around her, but she wouldn’t move. She was spraying the rug where she thought Miles had peed, and so I pushed her

a little to make enough room to get through. That was it. Julie knows I wouldn't hurt her on purpose. Her arm is almost healed.

Colette is knocking on the bathroom door and calling Herb's name, repeating it loud so he can hear her. She opens the door to look inside.

"Hi, Dad. It's me. You alright in here?"

She closes the door.

"Make some noise if you need help," she says towards the door knob.

I relax.

When Cletus's roommate was sent to the rehab clinic for his TB and mine got paroled, Cletus was reassigned to my room. He wanted the bottom bunk, he explained, so he would know whenever I got up during the night.

He asked me what I did to get put inside. I lied and said I robbed a neighbor's house to pay my daughter's medical bills. It was best not to mention the trading scandal or my brokerage. If Cletus thought I was rich, he might tell his friends on the outside to rob my house or ransom Julie. I asked him what he had done. He told me he was a "lifer" now, and I wondered for an ignorant moment if maybe he was confessing, revealing a truer self, that he was not a maladjusted brute but a man full of hope and enthusiasm despite his surroundings. Instead, he told me to sit down, and under the implication of violence proceeded to explain to me my job as roommate.

Every night, before Cletus went to sleep, I would climb down from my bed and hold his head and tell him that I loved him more than anything in the whole wide world and that I felt the most wonderful feelings when he was around, and that he was a good, gentle boy and I would stay beside him and keep him safe as he slept, promising not to let anything hurt him.

I was to give him a kiss on the forehead once he had fallen asleep and again in the morning to wake him. Because he was my roommate, and a feared and respected resident of the third gallery, I did as he instructed me and every night I would listen for the creak of the bunk under his weight, waiting for him to settle down and become still. Then I'd crawl down from my bed very quietly, and I'd kneel at his side and whisper close to his ear so that the sounds would not reverberate across the gallery. I'd tell him what a special and caring boy he was and that I loved him very much. There was no sex. I was happy about this and after a month I started getting creative. I'd concoct elaborate bedtime stories with him as the hero.

He loved the one about the Very Hungry Cletus who ate all of the mess hall's mashed potatoes. I'd make up tender nicknames for him and discuss all of the things we would do the next day, pretending that I was raising him on a farm in Oklahoma much like where he had grown up. I would bake him pies in the morning, and we'd go for walks out in the cornfields and play board games on the porch, but we wouldn't ever go into the tool shed because that was a bad, bad place where a nasty weasel lived and Cletus had made it terrifically clear that none of my stories should include tool sheds or weasels.

The majority of the baby-proofing is finished. The rest of it is small stuff that Julie wouldn't notice anyway. I can finish it slowly over the next couple of weeks. Colette is on the porch talking to Ed in Kansas. She's pacing and waving her hand. When she comes inside she gives me a dirty look before going upstairs to make further investigations in the bathroom. I was going to take a nap, but I suppose I won't now that she's up there.

I pour myself a glass of water at the sink and drink. It is good. It is so clean and filtered it is almost sweet. You had to drink lots of water with the bread they gave you in the special housing unit. They called it "the loaf." It tasted like concrete mix and dried grass. You often had to soak it in the

sink before eating otherwise you might break a crown. I went to the hole twice, both times for wearing the hanky Cletus had tied around my arm.

Herb has been running the sink a very long time. I knock on the door loudly so that Colette can hear. “Herb, do you need help?” I ask. There is no response. “I’m coming in. Okay?” I open the door slightly and see that he’s having trouble getting his pants on. “I’ve got that for you, Herb,” I say and close the door. I pull his pants up but they won’t reach around the waist. I hear a key enter then turn the deadbolt of the front door. Footsteps reverberate through the walls as Colette bounds down the stairs to greet Julie.

“Hurry up now, Herb,” I say. “Work with me here.” I pull harder, trying to force the pants beyond the place where they are bunched under Herb’s one bent knee. He is putting all of his weight on me. I can hear that Julie is fumbling with the knob but Colette says, “I’ve got it.”

“Colette, hold up. I’ll get the door,” I say through the wood but she is ignoring me. I pull harder again and there is a rip and Herb yells, thrashing at me, and I manage to pull backwards on his pants to keep him from tipping over but there is a louder rip and he falls over, dead weight, not getting his hands up in time, and he hits the floor with a loud thump. He is looking up at me with those scared unknowing baby’s eyes. He is shaking and a weak pool of urine starts to spread from under his saggy and stained briefs.

I hear Colette’s voice cresting above Julie’s racket as she enters and puts her bags down; the words pop with the horrible explosive energy of the C.O. calling the line, racking his nightstick against the rail, as he has found some bullshit infraction and is about to utter his eerie growl but instead says, “surprise!”

I try to open the door, but Herb has wedged himself between the door and the wall and I push the door open, moving aside his legs which are kicking feebly at the wall, and I am crying now because

I need to get him a change of pants before they come inside and see this, and I am so afraid that the door will not open wide enough and I will be trapped in here between the doorframe and Herb, that this will be the image Julie has been told to expect.

Already, I am thinking of what I will say to Julie and her sister and her angry brother who will agree that I did this to Herb on purpose. They think I was a damaged man before I was put away.

Suddenly, I am very tired. I let the door close and sit down on the floor next to Herb ignoring the warm wetness now seeping in through my pants, and I lift up his head, which has a lethargic ooze of blood spreading under his thin hair.

I remember what Cletus told me that first night as I fumbled through the bedtime story, giving him some dry trembling kiss on the temple, somehow missing his forehead completely. “You don’t mean it,” he said as he turned over to face his troubled dreams. And he was right. I didn’t. So, I learned to mean it. I imagined Cletus as Julie crying herself to sleep thinking of me, knowing my desolation at that moment.

I hook an arm under Herb and use the other to settle his left hand, which is grasping frantically at the air for a grip or to push me away. With his blood thinners, we may have to bring him to the ER to get stitched up. I put a hand towel to his head. He resists, but I hold him close, closer than I have been to anyone since coming home. Julie is fumbling with the latch mechanism of the gate.

“Did you do all this?” Julie asks Colette.

“Nah. Richard did it.”

“Richard’s home?”

Colette laughs.

“Is he afraid the baby’s going to escape?” Julie asks.

Herb settles down opening his eyes and I pat him on the chest. “What were you doing in here all that time?” He looks at me sideways, squinting his eyes and panting heavily. I lean my head against the wall.

There is something floating at the edge of my eye, and my head tips over waking me. I am surprised that for a moment I fell asleep. Recently, I have been nodding off in the strangest places. I can't seem to sleep through the night. I dream that Cletus Gorman is in my kitchen standing at our wooden island and in the sanded curve of its center is pounding a mangled and rotten piece of meat with a tenderizer, and eventually I work up the courage to confront him and I fill myself with a rage I've never experienced in waking life and ask him what he is doing here and what is his intent because I am already calling the police and am putting myself between him and my dear Julie and the baby who is already born at this time. But he just keeps pounding away at this piece of meat that lurches to either side of the table in the space between blows, and he tells me it is my soul and that he will be having it for dinner once it is tender. And I am awake, and it is light out and I get up to stand outside the bedroom door at attention. I wait for the C.O. who is the one late now, and I am not actually that scared, only confused as I look down the carpeted hall searching for Cletus.

Julie is calling my name. I hold Herb's head and tell him to please be quiet, but he's muttering nonsense. I reach up and lock the door because there is nothing else to do. She is walking through the house and calling my name. She expects a prompt response, an “Up here” or “In the living room, Honey.” She is asking Colette where I went to, but Colette tells her she thought I was checking on Herb.

There is knocking, loud knocking that cannot be ignored but I do, and the knob trembles in its place as Colette tries to open it. Already, I can feel myself slipping away from Julie, like some

extraneous piece of lint plucked from a sweater. Cletus should be getting back from dinner about now, preparing his bed and settling in for the night with some back issues of National Geographic. I imagine he has found a replacement. I hope the new addition is up to the task. Cletus had become accustomed to a certain standard. He relied on it. Even his lieutenants knew that I was important. They recognized my role and were thankful for my aptitude.

Will his new roommate be able to whisper him across the ramparts, soften the chain links and dull the razor wire? Will the new stories lure safe dreams? Nightly, as Julie refuses my fresh embraces, I wonder if he is being lulled, whether his sleep is deep and worriless, locked in his cell safely away from the weasel in the shed and that bad, bad place.

“Queen of the Valley”

There were typically signs, carvings dug into the sides of telephone poles or stockade fences and hidden among the graffiti upon birch barks. They were hard to spot on foot but placed in easy view of a rail rider. There were hundreds of symbols that marked the passage for us, the inscriptions dug out and smeared with coal ash. A triangle with a dot on top of it meant that it was safe to camp near the tracks; three squiggled lines meant that there was toxic waste in the local water source, and two slanted lines like a squinted brow or a mustache meant that the locals were dangerous and you'd best not stop long.

You could never tell from the look of a town. If I were a typical traveler, a vacationer maybe, I would've said the place was quaint, that the people were friendly and hospitable. But that wasn't what we experienced. We knew these people. They'd left messages for us, too, communicating through shotgun rounds filled with pennies and strapped to gate latches, razor wire threaded through the sedge of a particularly enticing riverside knoll, fishing hooks dangled at eye level along certain rail paths.

You started to believe in the superstitions, repeated them to yourself as you shuffled along the tracks, living like an animal and falling in line with the steel organism that carried you up and left you scrambling for purchase in each new place, scared even in the thickest exhaustion. The fear could lift you up, enlighten your nerves with pure electrical output as you thought of each new danger a town might bring. They weren't all bad but it was better not to guess.

I had an idea of where I was going to end up. I'd seen the blue mountain tips poking over the horizon and thought that maybe I could make it there in a week. The air was supposedly not so bad at those altitudes, but the people wore sunscreen every single day in the thin atmosphere. They stood that much closer to the sun and could mark their seasons by the spread of cloud cover. They had two growing seasons in some of the mountain valleys, one short and one long. With all that sunshine, they could push out a harvest even through the cold.

That's when I was traveling with Calico and the two of us had spent an afternoon climbing the trussed bridge of an intersecting rail line. The bridge had I-beams with lips just wide enough to lie down across. We held onto the heavy lug bolts above us to keep from tipping over onto the tracks and waited for the freight car's slowdown leading to town. When the coal mounds passed below us we hopped atop a pile and ducked our heads, sliding to the bottom of the slope.

The freight car we had chosen was half full, the coal piled mostly to one end, leaving some flat rusted steel to spread our cardboard on and have a sit. Calico had brought his pipe, a lumpy creation carved from sumac and a couple leaves he had plucked from a volunteer tobacco and left to dry on the gravel beside the tracks. Meticulously, he separated the fibrous strips along the vein and packed them into the bowl.

"I'll let you have the first drag since you spotted the plant," Calico said and handed me the pipe.

He lit a match and led it around the perimeter of the bowl, waiting for my puffs and the quick suck of the flame down through the tangled patch. The tobacco was bitter and bit at the tip of my tongue, but I slowed and let it soak into my lungs. I passed the pipe back to him and closed my eyes against the high hum at the base of my head.

We passed through a low forest, gaining speed as we crossed the flood plain and the canopy sealed us away from the sun in a leafy tunnel. Calico switched hands on the pipe and lifted his shirt, bringing his warmed palm down onto a crescent scar in his side that looked as if he had a pocket of flesh sewn there. He told me about when he worked for the railroad, how he'd helped flatten the channels through the Tetons and shred the outland hills into Idaho.

We slept through the midday to keep off the hunger and smoked when we woke up to quench any advancing want. I pulled myself up to the edge of the car and looked over its lip at the corn fields

and dairy pastures passing by far too quickly to try jumping off. The mountain peaks had grown in height since the last time I looked, and the tips were purple now and covered in cloud. I asked Calico how many days he thought it might be before we reached the foothills.

“Not sure,” he said. “We’ll have to get off before then and restock.”

As we slowed before a rail crossing, Calico decided it would be a good spot to disembark and look for food and water.

Calico had a system for the mountain air. As the train gained speed for a new ascent, the air would slash your skin with cold. We were traveling in a grain freighter that time. The vinyl rain cover they kept over the cars provided little in the way of insulation, but we had the comfortable grain and we each took a corner, piled our belongings into a head rest and folded our cardboard over our bodies like sleeping bags.

The freighters move fast through the mountains. The Jackson line charges the towering gap that bisects the first and lowest peak, crossing the ranges in a fury, as if the conductors are too afraid to slow down, that the mountains might finally revolt, lean in and disappear those false canyons to reform their lost peaks.

I’d work my feet through the grain, burying my legs. After a couple minutes it started to feel real warm, and I’d have to sleepily lift my legs out of it to cool down. We were comfortable and dry as the train slowed to a crawl near the rail’s peak, laboring against the cargo that tried to pull it back down the slope. I’d pull open my corner of the tarpaulin and look at the sheer cliffs, the massive icicles hanging from narrow ledges, sometimes cracking and falling from the vibration and there’d be a sound like thunder from the ice collapsing and crumbling against a steel car.

We met a woman laboring in the dairy meadows who worked a valley strip joint at night and would let us sit out by the dumpsters where she'd bring us cold and congealed scraps from their morning buffets. She said her name was Delilah, but we didn't believe it.

"Who watches the strippers in the morning?" I asked her as she stretched out in the grass beside the dumpsters, still dressed in mud caked blue jeans and an old sweater.

"We're dancers," she said and made a show of looking angry.

"Okay," I said.

"They don't get here in the morning. They're here cause they've been here all night. We put up the buffet and wings to keep 'em a bit longer. Plus, everyone's feeling the pain from the night before and some like to take in a few drinks to put 'em to sleep once they get home or to pad the work morning till they can readjust at lunchtime."

She spread out her legs and touched her toes bringing her forehead onto the ground. I could begin to make out the outline of her ass through the taut denim. She still kept her distance from us, not sure what to make of our shambled state and Calico's constant harried look as he scanned the parking lot and backyard, deflecting his attention around her as he listened to the aimless conversation, as if this was a trap, a strategic distraction. He expected the unexpected, the random violence that shaped our lives like water against a river bed. That violence always seemed to be nearby, hovering, threatening to crash through the trees or peel over the gravel lot in tinted floodlit defiance.

Maybe it was because I was new to the lifestyle. I hadn't acquired the kind of trauma that squeezed the whites from the margins of your eyes, the vessels bursting from arrant shock. I could only look at Delilah then, grateful to the point of tears for her aggressive kindness. There was something else, though, that had kept me transfixed. I'd never met a stripper before.

"You can relax. No one'll bother you back here," she said trying to calm Calico down.

"He's not used to easy going," I said.

Calico smiled shyly and retreated behind the dumpster.

“Are you guy’s in trouble?” She asked.

“No. Just used to unfriendly introductions.”

“Maybe if you were more open?” she said in Calico’s direction.

“That’d get us into some trouble,” I said.

“I can see why he might put a bad taste in someone’s mouth.”

“Calico’s good to travel with. He’s got a system. Never stay anywhere longer than six hours, not even to sleep, no matter how safe it seems.”

She took off her shoes and rotated her feet in her hands.

“What for?” she asked.

“For keeping the trouble away. He thinks there’s no one out there who wants to kill him more than he wants to live. They’ll only chase you so far before they give up, unless you give them a reason. So, we keep out of the way, stay hid.”

“Does it work?”

“I suppose. Most of the time.”

“Well, you won’t get any trouble here, unless you look for it. Just stay...”

She stopped her advice. I understood that she would leave it to us. She’d see whether we could keep mannered on our own or would abuse her gracious offer.

On Delilah’s kindness, we stayed in Jackson for a week and lived off buffet scraps and stale biscuits. She even pooled unfinished drinks for us and brought them out in plastic soup containers. We’d sleep during the day and wait for her around sunset. The bouncers were two brothers that worked the farm with Delilah. They didn’t bother us much, but when one or the other would come around the back to smoke a cigarette or unload a trash can they’d remark, not quite indifferently, “You still here?”

Delilah said they were generally good natured, but had gotten to drinking more the past year. They'd scared some of the club's customers off with their tempers and it seemed to me their only redeeming quality was the brutal affection they displayed in their protection of each other. They liked using their fists and more than once, Delilah said, the girls were forced to get between them and a belligerent customer.

Delilah told us that the manager of the club, a skinny feller who walked with a swing in his legs as if he were always dreaming of ice skating, kept one of the brothers at the door and the other behind the curtains of the back parlors. She said that if one of them ever felt the other was being threatened, he'd fly into a rage and wouldn't stop until the other had pulled him from the offender.

We asked Delilah what the manager's name was in case we had to deal with him.

"Don't worry," she said. "He doesn't come out of his office unless there's some shit going down. He only likes to drink and even that makes him so sick to his stomach that he's a miserable turd most the time. But he won't rout you out."

"What kind of management is he?"

"What d'ya mean?"

"He chase the girls?"

"Couldn't if he tried."

"No? I thought it'd be a problem in a place like this."

"He got his balls torn off when he was younger."

"Both of them?"

"Yup."

"From what?"

"I don't know. You should ask him."

"No way."

“I’ve been working here a year and, still, I don’t even know his name. I couldn’t tell if some of the older girls had called him ‘Boz’ or just ‘Boss.’”

“Why didn’t you ask them?”

“I couldn’t. They got canned for giving blowies in the back parlors.”

“That’s not allowed?”

“No, it’s not fucking allowed.”

“Oh.”

Delilah asked if we were done eating. I handed my plate to her even though I wasn’t. Calico shoveled a mound of mashed potatoes into his hand and sprinkled some stray peas on top of it before giving it up.

“Sorry,” I said, but she ignored it and left with our plates.

There was a bachelor party that night. Some bumpkins from the valley over had pooled their week’s wages and sent their buddy and his best man inside while they waited at the far edge of the parking lot, spread across three pickups and drinking from brown glass jugs. The men speculated loudly about what their pals might be enjoying inside as they blasted a static-ridden rock station from one of the truck’s cabs.

After an hour the best man stumbled outside and stood near the entrance, his shirt off and hanging from the back of his pants. He extended two thumbs into the air as a report of their progress and cackled, humping at the air while his friends honked their horns and flashed their high beams laughing with him. One of the brothers left his station at the foyer and said something to the man, looking stern as he held the door open for him. Sheepishly, the man turned back inside, mugging once more for his buddies near the doorway.

Soon, the crew had exhausted the bulk of their booze and patience in waiting on their friends' good time. Without much deliberation, they scrambled into the cabs and beds of the three trucks and sped out from the parking lot to straddle the county road's double lines toward the mountains. Calico got up and walked over to the spot they had vacated. When he returned, he held one of their brown jugs.

"This should put us back a while," he said.

We crawled behind the bushes adjacent the dumpster, worried the men should return for their two friends and lost booze. If they actually had returned or if their friends were forced to leg the fifteen miles across the pass, we didn't notice because we drank until morning and when Delilah came outside and called for us we trembled at the sound.

"Over here," I said, and she walked to the edge of the bank and found us propped against the same tree, our legs on the slope.

"What've you got there?" she asked.

"Leftovers from the party," I said.

"I was wondering where they got it from. I caught the best man with a flask. Camera too. Had to take 'em away from him."

"Wanna sip?"

"No. I gotta keep my edge."

"Off to work?"

"Yeah."

I took another sip and tried to fight the involuntary contractions sliding across my cheeks.

"Don't you ever sleep?" I said.

"When we graze the cows, usually. I can hide in the meadow. I napped a bit last night. A couple hours. I can spread it out and be all right," she said.

“You work a lot.”

“Yup.”

Delilah bent down and pulled her fingers through the dirt. She picked up some of the dislodged pebbles and tossed them one by one towards the river, listening for the plunk above the current’s murmur.

“What do you spend all your money on?” I asked.

“That’s none of your business.”

She reappeared and sat d

“You saving it?”

“No.”

“Got a kid?”

“Nope.”

“Then what?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“You don’t have to. I’m just interested.”

“What would you spend money on if you had it?”

“I don’t know. Those hicks seemed to be having fun.”

“Not as much as they would’ve liked to.”

“They put a lot of money on your show.”

“You think they shouldn’t?”

“No. I think it’s honest enough. But what do you do in there?”

“Don’t want to feed your imagination,” she said and gave me a hard look.

“I’ve already been speculating.”

“Well, keep on speculating. Even if you could raise the money, I wouldn’t let you in the show.”

“Why?” I said, a little hurt.

“It wouldn’t mean as much to you.”

“Why’s that?”

“You don’t really have to be out here. You’re just doing it for the hell of it. I think you could go home at any time. Call your family and you’d be outta here.”

I thought about this. There was some tell in my face. I’d asked Calico more than once, but he couldn’t decide what it was. It didn’t matter where I went, people would ask what I was doing and before I could answer they’d tell me I should go home.

“I probably could’ve, once,” I told her. “I’m not sure now.”

“You could.”

“I wouldn’t pay for your show,” Calico said coming back from taking a piss. “I’ve always been more practical minded.”

“Food’s a better choice,” said Delilah.

“Says you,” I said.

“Says me.”

A horn had begun honking from the parking lot.

“That’s me,” she said. “I told Jeff to bring you two some leftovers.”

“Thanks,” I said.

She turned and headed towards the parking lot.

By mid-morning, bolstered by Delilah’s company, we had finished the jug and began to get giddy. Behind the strip club was a creek and we walked down to the flats to where large and smooth glacial rocks lined the banks. We stripped away our greasy clothes and went for a swim. Neither of the brothers had arrived with any food, and we soon forgot that we’d been waiting as we sunned ourselves

on the rocks far below the club, naked and separated, talking across the flat river's current. By noon we were asleep and woke many hours later to Delilah's cries.

I sat up too quick and my head pounded into action.

"You're burnt to crisp," she said laughing now. "Regular lobsters."

"Shit," Calico said and covered himself with his hand, but squealed at the touch and crab walked himself into the water.

"You haven't moved once since I left you."

"We fell asleep," I offered and looked across my body at its redness.

I moved my arms and felt the skin at the corner of my armpits stretch under a new and painful inelasticity. As I shifted, my penis turned over and it felt like someone had walloped me with a cactus. I let out an involuntary hoot and jumped into the water pushing Calico out of the way. The running mountain water was much colder now and within a minute Calico and I were shivering. We climbed to the riverbank and attempted to clothe ourselves but the fabric proved too severe against our tender parts. Delilah told us to wait a minute as she climbed the bank back towards the club. When she came back she had two pairs of silk underwear, one yellow, the other a baby blue that she handed to us.

"I'm not wearing it," I said.

"It's soft. Won't hurt your dick as bad."

We watched her in astonishment. Calico, solemnly and without saying a word to either of us, took the blue pair and walked downstream past a bend of salix shrubs to put it on in private.

"Are these yours?" I asked her.

"Do they look like mine?"

I spread the underwear out across two fingers and decided that I'd rather not know who they had belonged to.

"I don't know what's worse," I said.

“You’ll thank me for those later. I smeared the front with cocoa butter.”

She didn’t turn around as I delicately slid the yellow panties up my scorched legs, and sucked in a breath as I pulled them to just below my testicles.

The weekend crowd was much different. Delilah’s show wasn’t starting for some hours. She napped in the grass above the creek bed, unbothered by the arriving customers who glanced at her sideways as they walked in. The parking lot was soon overflowing, which forced us to hang out farther down the slope to keep from getting pissed on accidentally. It seemed Delilah was a local attraction, drawing out-of-state plates, and I recognized some of the farmhands she worked with as they debated entering the club, counting their money or trailing bouquets of roadside flowers.

She said that, sometimes, they groveled in front of her. They would get down on the ground, drunk, and stretch themselves over her feet, begging, making themselves vulnerable, and if she wished to, she said, she could have lifted a stilettoed heel and dug it into their necks. She said to me and Calico, “I like you guys. You’re not pussy crazed. Alls you want is food.”

“See what happens once we’re fed,” I said, but she just laughed.

We were still heading back to the line the next day, and I’d taken special care not to wear out our welcome. If I ever came back East, the freight line would not pass this way, but the spot could be reached if you knew where to get off and were willing to endure a day’s walk, Calico had said. Delilah had kept us alive, and I’d think of her touch often, as she would lower a hand to our chests, hesitant as she eased us from a troubled sleep for our first meal at dusk.

“If you can think of a place you’d like to end up,” I asked her towards the end of our stay, “a place that you could actually get to and make it, where’d it be?”

“I’d go out to the salt flats in, I don’t know where they are, Nevada? Somewhere. I’d live in an RV.”

“That’d mean you’d be rich.”

“Well, yeah. I guess I’d be rich, but I’d fill up my gas tank and point the RV to the next station, turn on the cruise control and live at 60 miles-an-hour. You can do that. You can jam the gas pedal and sleep through the whole night not worried about hitting a thing.”

“I don’t know if you can do that.”

“Sure you can.”

“But you’d get motion sick.”

“How do you know?”

“That’s what happens if you’re moving that long.”

“You live that way now, don’t you?”

“Now? Yeah. But it’s different on the lines. You’re constantly hopping off.”

“So, you’re headed for California?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s doing there?”

“I don’t know. Calico said it shouldn’t be too hard to find day work. It’ll be planting season soon.”

“If things don’t work, try the dairy again. They’ve been talking about moving the cows to a pasture they’ve got the valley over. It’s been out of rotation a number of years. Maybe could use help.”

“Thanks for the tip.”

“I’ve got another,” she said and leaned in close.

She told me about a certain wood knot stuck through one of the plywood wall panels at the back of the club’s extension. It had a bent screw twisted in it and could be turned like a door knob and popped out. The room was reserved for Delilah, so she could give her high rate dances in private and put the squeeze on the regulars.

I asked her what changed her mind.

“Call it a going away present,” she said, and the pressure of her hand on my burned arm left pale, tingling finger marks.

I didn't tell Calico what she had offered me and snuck to the hole that night, cringing with each movement and shivering despite the immense heat coming off my skin. I pulled up a five gallon bucket used for spreading salt and sat with my eye pressed against the hole. She had him sitting with his back to me, and was standing behind him, bent over and whispering something into the man's ear. I could make out the edges of her wrinkled asshole peeking past the g-string's border. She straightened up, her ass cheeks pouting, and she shifted slightly to the side so that one cheek flattened out while the other curled up further, taut, ready to burst. She was dragging her breasts over the back of his neck and as soon as I felt the hint of movement, the foreskin unfurling and pushing through the tight channel of silk, I was struck by the pain. I tried to hold back my cry, but the resistance in my throat gave it more force and it released into a high yelp. I fell back and clutched at the spot, but then stopped, my hands hovering above it. I was on my side and tried not to move. I heard Calico wake up in a hurry and run over, cringing and letting out exasperated curses.

He looked at me then saw the red light emanating from the hole and sat down on the bucket to peer through it. He whispered an involuntary exaltation, smacked the side of his leg and hooted softly from the pain, transfixed at the thrill of our friend Delilah revealing her week's salary spectacle. He didn't recognize the pain swelling around his erection until he had leapt up, kicked the bucket away, his eye still at the hole to observe one last second of beauty. Calico gasped and heaved forward, choking on his own spit. He looked desperately to the riverbank and duck walked in tiny steps down to the shore.

That night, we built a fire on the largest rock beside the creek and kept it at our backs as we dipped the soup containers into the cool water and let it drip over ourselves. I thought of the groom

then as he would have walked over that unlit county road, sobering up on the thin mountain air, his best man raving about the night they'd just shared. They would have their shirts open to air out the stench of mixed sweat and dancers' lotion. And when he was supposed to be thinking of his imminent bride, steeling himself for the aisle, he'd forget what it was he was facing, that had brought them out here.

I wondered at his wife. I doubted that there was a girl in those closed valleys who could stand close to Delilah. And this was the time he had to begin removing his past, wiping away his former loves, to forgo a lifetime of sexual possibility. Though before all of this he would, first, have to forget the sight of Delilah, and I wondered about his wedding night and whether his thoughts would stray to her as he closed his eyes against the future.

“The Steward at Long Last”

Fisherman

They tore out his gravestone. In the center of the cemetery, amongst those plots of known corpses, they decided, repeated to each other as they looped the winch chains to the back of the tow truck that they would make this spot a potter's field.

The families, along with the Mayor's Office and the Rotary Club, had gotten together and decided that they had been through enough, so one day they brought the municipal dump truck over to the hill and tore out the rest, the whole cemetery, and piled the stones neatly in a far corner of the landfill, should anyone like to reclaim them.

There weren't many protests. Most of the plots were very old and the families saw it as a necessary precaution; nobody wanted the cult coming around anymore.

But everyone knew where the gravesite was, could tell from the empty gap it had left behind, and his followers continued their pilgrimages to the site, swarming when the numbers were right and roving the neighborhoods to haunt the victims' families. His followers camped and held parties in the open field and pulled out any saplings that had escaped being trampled.

The town then brought in backhoes and dug the land out until they hit the water table. They redirected an off-shoot of the canal so that the hole filled with water and formed a small lake.

His followers were relentless, though. They wouldn't be dissuaded from conducting their rituals. They swam and waded and wallowed in the mud when it was warm enough, and in the fall they would bring boats with them, and soon, the townspeople knew that if a person was sporting the accoutrements of waterbound society: flat soled shoes, colorful pants, clothing with whales and fishing poles and palm trees and alligators and margarita glasses adorning them; if a captain's hat was spied within a crowd, they knew that danger was imminent, violence nearly assured.

I was walking back from the corner store when I encountered the stranger. I complimented him on his colorful pants, and he asked me what I was doing. I told him where I had come from and held out my milkshake to him and asked him if he wanted a sip. He declined and pulled out from his sleeve what I thought was a silver snake but was actually a length of chain that he whipped around his head like a lasso and attempted to strike me with. I screamed out for fear and told him he could have the whole milkshake if he wished.

Viciously, he whipped the chain across my stomach.

“Please,” I told him. “I’ve had enough.”

“Enough of what?” he asked.

“You and your chain whipping,” I said.

But he began to giggle, and from his eyes welled tears of joy, for this man loved whipping people with his length of chain, and I told him:

“You must stop what you’re doing.”

“Or what?” he asked, impudently.

The question caught me off guard, and I thought for a moment.

“What can I do?”

Barnacle

He sat above subway grates. He breathed in deeply as they spewed their filth aloft heavy steam, as if he could not subsist on the thin air the rest of us sucked. He was a crustacean, taking up the thick, unlivable depths where more work was necessary. Each breath was a long labor, and he encased himself in heaps and layers of wreaking cloth to hold the pollution in and protect himself from the sight of us scurrying and hyperventilating across the street, our hearts spasming to pack air through much narrower channels.

His shell of urine-stained papers and reeking cloth was constantly accumulating and growing until those passing by could not see where he hid. Sometimes, the sanitation department would arrive, harried and irate from bearing the complaints of local residents, and after some raking and hauling he would stir and, to their surprise, crawl from the pile.

He would take the day to drag himself a few blocks to another grate. He would not mourn his abandoned shell nor complain of the trip. Along his path, he would snatch up and drag with him any loose papers, napkins and news sheets, or discarded wrappers he came across. These items would get him started towards rebuilding. And once he had found a new spot he would curl up and suck slowly at the exhaust—he only inhaled once a day—and as he did so all the refuse poured through him.

At night he would exhale, squeezing it, pushing it through greasy pores and across rotten teeth and past the steely bristles in his nose, scraping and polishing each molecule until the air was filtered and clean: a sacrament to the small creatures that kept close and fed from him.

Of course, nobody knew his name. He was never given one, or had forgotten it many years before. I wondered when was the last time he might have heard it uttered and how long after that it had been forgotten. He had no papers, no record of his being born or having owned anything. There was no one in the city or elsewhere that would claim him.

I asked him once—he would respond if asked a direct question—what his earliest memory was?

He thought for a long time and said, “I remember a wave crashing down on a beach.”

Some of us had gotten together and tried to convince him to run for Mayor. He would have been perfect, possessing such immense power, though for some reason he chose not to use it. Absolutely no ambition. No motives. He would have been a modern Cincinnatus, an unwilling emperor.

We knew he only kept to small things. And though his scope was large and comprehensive, he couldn't care for the finicky and brooding matters of politics. He might even forget about the city he ruled.

“Why do you let yourself go to waste?” I asked. “You could vanquish these buildings with a bit of mumbling, yet you do nothing. Is there something you need? We can give you anything.”

“I have never needed.”

“Well, is there anything you want? Something you'd like to do?”

He thought for a long time and spoke in a sleepy whisper.

“I already do so much.”

Oyster

They built the shell from mounds of old uranium and plutonium and iridium 192. They heaped it at the bottom of an old quarry full of quartz diamonds, and by the time they had birthed their star from the oyster, the quarry was rounded, shining and smooth. And if it wasn't for all of the radiation, you could slip down the side of it and slide and slide and slide for what could have been hours.

But the vague government warnings didn't stop the desert children who clung to the rocky lip fearful of finally letting go. They had watched toy cars and balls and misshapen rocks race by the handful down its curve, and still, they didn't know—or didn't believe—that they couldn't climb back up. Their bodies, shriveled under that little sun like fly corpses on a windowsill, filled the curve's wide glassy basin.

There is talk of building a stairway or elevator out of the quarry, but it would be such a massive undertaking that no one has really put any work forward. Some say that it couldn't be a stairway, that the children would starve before they reached the top.

“There would only be more bodies at the edge of the desert,” they say, “and we have enough of those.”

“What’s important,” says the government official that they keep at the guard post with his little dog and no communication device, “is that we tried.”

He's also blind, that guard, because he once stared at the little sun until his corneas melted into a slag of irradiated cones. He said there was one region in the bottom right of his eye that shone only bright or dull and let him know—he would be able to tell eventually from the heat on his face, but it gave him the immediate knowledge—that he was standing in daylight.

From his booth, he could hear the giggles and flat-footed steps of the tiny and deformed desert children sneaking past his post to the lip of the bowl.

"They think they know better," he says.

He told me that the state had plans to fill the bowl in, but it's awfully far away from any major road, and they would first have to build the infrastructure to reach it.

"We're hoping those little desert orphans will fill it in for us," the guard says, exposing a healthy grin. "One tiny skeleton at a time."

“But what if you befriended them,” I asked. “They could keep you company. You must be very lonely out here? And you’re very old now, if you could just train them to perform certain tasks for you it would certainly make your few remaining years more comfortable?”

“Nah,” he said and stroked his demented dog, scattering fleas about the hut of the guard post. “I don’t think I’d like that.”

Sun

It was nighttime and the boy sat on a branch far below the researchers whistling quietly as he watched the moon with a great suspicion. The boy did not know that he was being watched. He was

a local, a member of a tribe that had, somehow, avoided contact with modern society for two thousand years. It was very interesting and all quite ridiculous.

The tribe had had their chances, you see, countless times, but theirs was a culture of fear and pliancy. The loggers that had passed through there were considered demons who ate up the forest whenever the tribe forgot to appease them. A typical appeasement consisted of a few slaughtered cockatoos and a bowl of blood mixed with drops from each of the village elders.

Dr. B asked his assistant—a member of a previously contacted tribe who had recently learned to embrace our global culture in his tender middle-age—whether he would like a deodorized chunk of beef jerky. His assistant waved his hand to show that he was uninterested though he continued to smile widely; he had been snacking on ant larvae from an adjacent acacia for hours since they had arrived.

As the morning sun rose the two strained to see an airliner trailing jet streams across the stratosphere.

“What did you think planes were before you met modern man, Suaca?” Dr. B asked. Suaca knew what a plane was. Dr. B had shown him photos, though he’d never ridden in one. He said that he believed they were his people ascending to the afterlife, his former conception of it being a giant mushroom, to which the world was a spore. Dr. B pressed him for more, but Suaca was unsure how the afterlife would have proceeded once he arrived at or within the giant mushroom. To this end, he was unconcerned.

Over lunch, Dr. B told Suaca about snow, but Suaca didn’t believe it. Suaca asked whether the hard water hurt as it fell over Dr. B and his people, burying them in its oppressive whiteness. Dr. B told him, “No. It is as soft as a feather.”

In regards to snow, he marked Dr. B a liar. Though, I should note that he believed in “planes” quite readily.

Dr. B was finding it very hard to explain the scale of things to Suaca. He used maps and a globe, as well as many pictures, but Suaca didn't seem to get it. Dr. B told him that the world was very big, but then Suaca became confused by his quick return from faraway continents. To illustrate the concept Dr. B brought him on a plane ride, and as the sun rose, it obscured the horizon and made the ocean (which he had never seen) and the sky seem as one.

As they ascended above the cloud cover, Suaca grew agitated, and Dr. B asked if there was anything he could do for him. Suaca told Dr. B that he knew all along he was a spirit guide. He said that when he saw the paired plane seats, he knew right away. Each person is guided by his or her personal spirit to the afterlife, which meant that at that moment he had either died or was somewhere dying.

When they touched down, Suaca believed that they had landed somewhere in the clouds. He tried to remember what he was doing just before he had met Dr. B. Dr. B told him he was grinding up rat bones in the forest. Suaca thought it could have been a tree branch falling on his head that did it.

They spent their day eating ice cream and riding trains back and forth across Cleveland and poking at snow. Suaca shivered and smiled widely, continuously hoping to gain Dr. B's favor. "This is heaven," Dr. B said and spread out his arms displaying the frozen farmland.

I met the two of them as I sold ice cream. I slung cones all winter long, which, I admit, is not a great gig when paid on commission.

Dr. B explained to me that Suaca had never tasted ice cream nor felt frozen water before. I watched closely at the shock and tentative looks Suaca gave him as he bit into the ball of "Crazy Vanilla."

They came back to the Dairy Shack three times that day. Suaca seemed hesitant and scared in his assumed afterlife, but I believe he was enjoying himself. To this, I agreed with Dr. B and

haven't attempted to tell Suaca otherwise. I don't want to spoil anything. The thought of it is all too wonderful.

Sea

He stepped over the dune and tumbled out of the desert.

When he looked up, he saw the sea, but it brought him no joy. "Oh, damn," he said to its vastness. With his sun-blind eyes, he thought he saw his love's face reflected on the water. Its waves pawed obliquely at the shore, at him, as if it wanted him to come a little farther and step in. He got up and stepped closer to it. He was so thirsty, so *very* thirsty, but still, he had kept his dignity and bowed to the waves and bent down to pet the foam that wiggled about on the sand.

"You can't do anything for me?" he asked. "You've got all this water, and none of it is of any good?" He cupped some in his hands and lapped at it.

It felt cool on his dry tongue, but as he let it pour from his mouth his tongue felt drier and coarser.

"I might feel better if I popped in for a swim," he said to the Sea, trying to keep from crying. The Sea was as far away as it was near, and all at once, a wave spread itself out on the shore tickling his toes. "I'd like that very much," he said with confidence. "Actually, you're more soft and cool than I remember, and I know that no one drinks from you, but I really would like some."

The Sea grew dark, and he retreated a few steps for fear, but the wind cleared the rogue clouds from the sun, and the Sea became bright and friendly again.

He decided to entreat the Sea with some pleading, "You see...it's that I have farther to go, and this is only a stop on my trip, not that this isn't worth the wait. It's just that I'm supposed to be visiting my fiancée in Alaska, but somehow, I got lost and ended up in the desert. You understand? I

just need a couple sips for the next leg of it.” The Sea receded agreeably. He walked out, and as he did so the waters returned to surround him, and he sunk beneath its waves.

“What’s the difference between an ocean and a sea?” he asked the darkness.

“That was stupid,” he responded. “That’s like asking what’s the difference between my Beatrice and my Wittle-Shmooky-Poo. They are both just names for the same love. It doesn’t matter which one I use. I just spit out whatever comes to mind!”

He opened his mouth and took a gulp, relishing the cool trickle down his throat. The salt water coated his stomach, which wrenched trying to push it back out. He opened his mouth again to let it out, but the sea rushed in and filled him.

I saw the man thrashing in the water and looked about me for a lifeguard or someone who could be alerted to his distress and jump in to save him. You see, I can’t swim, and though I was tempted to jump in after him, it would have done neither of us much good. After finding no lifeguards or able bodies, I yelled to him, in case that he’d seen me, hoping to explain why I was only standing at the shore and not attempting to relieve his struggle.

Hook

He held the brochure to me and said that the stone path would take me to the lighthouse, and if I was willing to pay the eight dollars, I could walk to the top for a particularly good view of the island. I thanked him and said that I would check it out but really had no intention of seeing the lighthouse. It might remind me of my abandoned vantage.

When I made the island there was no thought in it really. It was a drop of paint loosed from my finger. I hadn’t even realized it existed until I pulled out the ole globe and gave it a good spin.

Taking the stone path, I noticed the grasses strewn on either side of me, the ticks leaping for my scalp but still too far away, sandpipers losing their eggs in the sand and a deer whose fur was coming off in large, asymmetric patches.

I still don't know what causes that. It looks terribly itchy from over here.

When I was done, you see, I bound myself to the land: to assume the common form and schmooze around like some sort of guy. I can't get back to that other place. I really can't. Even I have to abide by the rules, and it seems I will have to see this one to the end. And then what? I don't know. I make it up as I go along.

It's okay if they continue their rituals, but they're speaking to an empty chair.

I plucked a minnow from my pocket. It wiggled frantically between my thumb and forefinger. Its mouth gaped open trying to draw in anything but the thin atmospheric wrap.

"It had to be this way," I told the minnow, but it didn't understand me. "You came from nothing, just like me. I'm like the ocean, you know. I've sort of always been that way. I can surround you and know nothing about you or your kind."

I squeezed its sides so its mouth stayed open while I stuck the hook in behind its jaw. When I let go, it dangled from the line and alternated between staying very still and wiggling in its same frantic fashion. I wound up and cast the line into the water.

This was really just to pass the time. I wasn't hungry at all.

I noticed a woman walking towards me on the beach. I typically avoided any contact and made sure that I looked only at my fishing line.

She held out her hand and stroked my arm.

"Achh!" I gasped, but she didn't take notice.

Just then, something pulled on the line, and I let go, allowing the quarry to drag my pole into the waves. I followed the woman to a small shack she kept amidst the dunes. She turned to me and pulled at her blouse showing me her breasts.

“If you like what you see, twenty dollars.”

And for the first time, I realized that I liked what I was seeing.

I hadn't expected this. All this creation, and I hadn't thought to find joy in it.

“Twenty dollars,” I repeated faintly and scrambled through my pockets.

My pants were full of minnows but no cash. I held the dying fishes to her, but she pushed them away and went back into her shack.

Distressed, I looked about me for some way to raise the funds. With the fishing pole gone, I looked to the lighthouse, saw the people wandering about its lip and raced for it.

A woman was looking through a pair of quarter-charge binoculars on the wooden deck beside the lighthouse. I tip-toed over and stroked her arm. She reeled back and looked at me through squinted eyes. Suddenly, I realized how exposed we were.

“I have to show you something,” I told her. “It's urgent”

“What is it?” she asked.

“It's really incredible. Follow me.”

I led her down the steps to the sand and around the back to the dunes. When I felt that we had gone far enough, I turned around and let open my zipper.

“If you like what you see, it's twenty dollars,” I said.

She screamed and turned to run toward the lighthouse, calling for help and yelling someone's name. I ran too but in an opposite direction.

Making sure I wasn't pursued, I hid in the scrubby pines that forested the back side of the island and fell asleep.

“Yoo-hoo,” came a friendly voice wafting me from my dream.

A man stood leaning against one of the pines. He was only wearing his underwear.

I stood up and asked him if he liked what he saw.

He said, “Yes,” so I said, “Twenty Dollars.”

I closed my eyes throughout it. Some of it felt nice and some of it hurt, but when he was done he gave me the twenty dollars and said:

“You should get their money beforehand. Not everyone’s as nice as me.”

“Thanks. I’ll remember that,” I said and hurried back to the shack.

I was so elated that I didn’t notice the line that had formed. Confused, I took a spot behind a man wearing a much too tight t-shirt and shorts. He was greased with oil, and it ran off him like sweat. He turned to me, swiping his greasy arm over my shirt as he did.

“I think it’ll be a while,” he said and pointed to the muffled moans coming from the shack’s interior.

And though I had once lavished within infinity, it appeared that once again, to this humanly wonder, I would not be the first.

Tired, and discouraged from the thumping I had received in the pines, I went back to the water. I cursed the line of people but checked myself. They deserved what they sought just as I did. I had to give myself some credit. This world was a mistake. As confused as I was. And still, they liked what they saw.

“Bird Calls”

For a chickadee to respond in turn you have to strike your call of any semblance of a human voice. Pucker your cheeks in, flatten your chin against your neck in a way that you would never do in public. The birds are used to human voices. Sound travels farther than we think, and they know the natural ambience of a relaxed, open mouth.

I used to sit drunk on lonely park benches in order to revel in the stillness of the late afternoon and practice my calls. Sometimes I would attract a response, though rarely clear enough for a solid confirmation. Usually it was enough that I had aroused the interest of some other species. It felt good to sound the call out right. But even then, I never felt familiar with all the animal life. Once, I sat so still that a bird landed on my knee and planted its thin talons right into my leg. I didn't move. I didn't swat it away. I closed my eyes and felt just like St. Francis.

There are moments like that when you are still surprised. Everybody knows this. And after the bird had flown away I had an unmistakable sensation of fear. It was what the bird didn't feel. I was something ineffectual. I was so benign that an animal which weighed as much as my thumb did not fear me. Ask anyone and they will tell you: there are things that can live off us if they need to. Sometimes, we are not the biggest around.

At dinner, nobody needed to ask who was going to drive us all home. Davis was quitting drinking and had spent six miserable hours that afternoon in the company of devoted drinkers. We were having the best time we'd had in, maybe, three years—probably since Mark and Julie's wedding. We had loaded into his old truck passing ripped cans from a battered six pack Davis's new girlfriend had found after some desperate rummaging amongst the camping equipment in the garage.

The truck had two rows of seats but Julie and I, in a moment of glee, opted to sit in the truck bed, blocked from the wind with our backs against the rear window. Her hair was whipping

all around her face so that I could only see the bottom of her nose and mouth. From my side of the truck bed, I reached over and scooped my hand under hers. She took it without hesitation and held it. Secretly, we nudged our thumbs over each other's, loosening up the others fingers to readjust and intertwine as the truck caromed about the dark back roads. Mark was in the front seat, twisting the music to full volume. It was Elvis or The Misfits, but we couldn't tell. Julie looked at me and said something but the wind swiped the words from just outside her mouth, and I said, "What?" But she had turned back to watch the road fleeing into the darkness beyond the oval field of the brake lights. We relaxed, leaning hard into the glass and felt guiltless.

I sat in Davis's kitchen while he stood at the sink and read off another tiresome revision of the man's broken back. Or, maybe, it was the broken man's back. I didn't remember which because I hadn't been listening, the unfamiliar titles of vertebrae and rib connectors and muscles just pushing me further into a prevailing thought. I'd always marveled at how easy my thoughts could stray. They blur and reconvene into a naked body. Do I know this one? I'm sure of it. Davis lifted his eyebrows. I nodded.

The man was battered in either body or spirit, and I didn't care which it was. I had been lured with the promise of coffee and breakfast. He sensed my withdrawn interest and explained he was writing the essay for some men's journal about a rock climber who'd broken his back in a fall and crawled to the alpine rescue's outpost over the course of three days. Fifty feet from the cabin, he nearly drowned in a snow drift. Davis was making a ridiculous analogy of the man's body as a cathedral.

"Are you listening?" he asked.

"Just keep reading," I said.

Davis has, for some time, held the position as my most uninteresting friend. He is a good friend, this is undisputed, and he is an old friend too. But why should I care if he is or isn't? Why does time give him privilege? He was much more interesting when he was drinking.

I think I have spent more time with assholes like him than with the people I really like. I can't figure out why. There are those whose company I really enjoy. Mark has a friend named Marc with a "c," from college. Every time I'm around this guy I say, "Jesus, I like this guy. I wish we were friends," and then I spend the night ignoring him to still wonder later if we hit it off. Davis was asking me what I thought, and with as much disdain as I could muster I stood up and said, "Enough of this bullshit," and went home without putting my dirty plate in the sink.

I met Elle at a country crossroads, pulled into the tractor path as it passed over a wobbly cow grate and parked in the field. The lights were kept off, and we met in the dark. We knew each other's faces, but I still had to wonder if she was really who I thought.

I got into her truck, and she moved to the backseat. I worried that I hadn't used a condom.

"You're okay, right?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Nevermind."

When it was done we sat with the seat sticking to our legs. It was colder. I reached over to turn the engine on but hesitated. I didn't want to break the stillness that had settled over us and the field. I didn't want anything in the world to know we were there, but Elle asked and I turned the engine over and waited for it to warm before setting the vents open.

"There's almost no gas. We should head back soon," I said.

"Where are you headed after this?"

I didn't know that there was a question about this. I had thought she would come to my place.

"I don't know. Do you want to come back with me?" I said.

"I don't know."

"What were you thinking of doing?"

"I was maybe going to go out."

I waited. She didn't ask me to come along, and I wasn't going to suggest it. I wondered whether tonight there'd be more like me. She relaxed into me with her chin jammed into my collarbone. We fell asleep and when I woke up a few minutes later she was getting dressed and saying she should probably get gas.

Hank said that I should get that branch down before it hurt someone; his wife had been worried about it for weeks. The branch, which was too small and light to push through the limbs of its own weight, dangled. It was too high to reach and at lunch when his wife was wheeled out to the patio, she pointed to it and asked her husband to knock it down. He took a few steps towards it, lifting a broom with two hands clasped at the end of the handle looking like he was praying or maybe congratulating himself. I left my weeding and moved towards him. He took a swipe at it, stumbled, and I caught him. "Here. Let me take that." He handed me the broom and went back to his chair, fell back into it hard. I was a bit taller, but still the branch was just too high even after I jumped. I brought the broom back to him, and he patted me on the shoulder.

"Give it a rest for now," he said. "You can try again after lunch."

Hank stood up to reach the salad bowl. The aide had gone back inside to prepare some more food. He reached forward and planted his hands on the table and closed his eyes like he was in pain.

A belch tumbled out of his mouth and he reached and fumbled for the chair behind him. I helped him into it.

“You alright?”

“Yeah.”

“Want some water?” I poured him a glass.

“No,” he said weakly.

“You really should drink some.”

He dipped three fingers into the glass and let the water dribble down the back of his neck.

Two spots of wet formed and grew under his white cotton shirt.

Before I left that day I found him in his study and asked:

“You have something you wanted to tell me?”

“Yes. I suppose so. What was it again?”

“It might have been about the birds?”

“Birds?”

“Yeah. That’s what you mentioned.”

“Ah. Bird feeder. It’s too low. The squirrels are getting it no problem. You can pull it higher from the roof and tie it off that they can’t climb up the rope.”

“Okay, but I have to get going. I’ll remember to get to it next time.”

“One more thing.”

“Yes.”

“Those peonies along the drive are being overrun. Could take the weed wacker to it.”

“I’ll remember it for next time.”

“You’re out of time today?”

“Yeah, I have to get going.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll write a note for myself, too.”

He asked me what the date was and wrote the check out.

“Who’s that man?” I heard his wife ask him as I passed the kitchen window on my way out.

“You’ve met him before,” Hank told her. “He helps with the garden.”

I was watching Mark as he had some minor revelation. He was holding a bottle almost sideways in his hand, smiling and looking around with his hands out to say, “Did anyone see that?” He saw me watching him and approached, feeling he had to explain himself.

“Look at this,” he said.

“What is it?”

“The expiration date. Look at it.”

I read it. The beer had expired three years ago.

“How does it taste?” I asked.

“It tastes great. I took a sip and was like, “This is one of the best beers I ever had.””

“Taste it again.”

He gulped another inch from the bottle.

“Just as good,” he said.

“I think you’re onto something.”

“Fuck yeah, man.”

He went to the cooler and pulled out some of the other beers from the pack. He handed me one, but knowing the expiration date I didn’t drink it.

“Try it,” he said.

“You have it.”

“No. I need confirmation. Drink it.”

“No.”

Annoyed, he took the beer from me and walked to where his wife was standing near the grill and asked her to drink it without giving an explanation. Julie puckered her lips.

“It tastes weird,” I heard her say.

Mark was shaking his head. He took the beer from her and went back to the cooler and pulled out some of the others.

Later, Davis and his new girlfriend were saying they had to get going. Julie said, “We should be going too,” and then someone else said, “Yeah, it’s about that time.”

Mark came around the side of the house looking dejected. He stood near where I was sitting.

“This doesn’t feel like summer.”

“Because you haven’t gone on vacation?”

“No, I went to the Outer Banks, remember.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“It just feels different. I don’t know. I’m not a fan of Davis’s new girlfriend. What’s her name again?”

“Cheri.”

“Yeah. I keep forgetting.”

“I like her.”

“Can’t you fucking agree for once?”

“Nope.”

“She just has this attitude.”

“I know what you mean. She has that sort of sour look.”

“Yeah. She seems hard to please.”

“I don’t know. I think it was bad timing to meet Davis when she did.”

“You just want to disagree.”

“I just said that I like her.”

“Of course you’d say that.”

“You’re the one looking to argue.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“What did Julie say about the beer?”

“She didn’t like it, but she’s been against me all day.”

He spit some of his beer onto the grass.

“Everything all right?” I asked.

He turned away.

“I need more sex,” he said.

“That’s what everyone says.”

“No,” he said and looked gravely over the expanse of lawn. “I really do.”

There was something cryptic in the way Hank spoke. I was on my knees again, pulling lamb’s quarters and thistle and nameless plants that had become weeds as they overgrew his daisies. He was talking to me about Birmingham. Between us, I kept an eye on the ground hornets leaving and returning to their nest, somewhere under a border log. I had been stung twice that year to little effect, but like my neighbor the beekeeper had said, a couple times and then you have to watch out. Your body builds antigens and the next one might cause a reaction.

“I couldn’t get my classes canceled, but I did send a couple sleeping bags down there.”

A hornet clung to his pant leg.

Hank was particularly moved by a student of his who received, in her third week in the county, half a round of buckshot through her left arm. She was recovering for a year.

I clipped a gnawed and dangling daisy. The whitetail must have been scared off mid-bite. It looked strange, like something prepared for a fast food commercial. The bite was arranged as three equal little arcs.

The previous summer I mowed a broccoli field that had been left too long and had gone to seed. Bees swarmed the tractor, and I was forced to flee into a hedge row. In two weeks the florets had stretched and bloomed into tiny yellow flowers. The uncovered tractor was dusted in pollen and the small yellow petals. I was surprised to see this. I really don't know what I thought a broccoli head was but a young flower.

Hank was pointing out plants I'd missed. He liked the garden to be wild, favoring certain volunteers as they sprouted around rocks or in the shade of larger plants. I pulled an unknown and he cringed.

"Did you get stung?" I asked.

"The perovskia," he said and strained to crouch next to me to recover its roots.

The hornet launched, hovered above his calf and spiraled into the bushes.

"Your lungs will swell and choke you from the inside," the beekeeper had said.

He talked sometimes of grandchildren though I had never seen any. And I was there every weekend.

He only made mention of a son once.

"He had his fun. But as it goes, he was bound to get it," was what he said one afternoon.

All I know is that he had lived in Chelsea. There were connotations with that neighborhood back then.

Some sicknesses can move very quickly. There are jungle viruses that can kill a person in a day. They can melt your insides and make you vomit all the blood you have. As if there's no other way to

spread. Nature has stockpiles of them stored away. Anywhere that people are scarce it holds organisms that, as far as our bodies are concerned, could be from another planet.

I don't naturally think of the frontier when I think of disease. I think of crowded cities, public restrooms, Chinese commuters wearing face masks. When I think of nature I think of parks. I think of grass as something that is short and cool under bare feet. The only bears I know rely on trash, rarely breach cars or well-guarded houses.

We waited in the parking lot as Davis acquired hotdogs and hamburgers from the supermarket. I could see down a whole aisle past the registers and watched him as he passed by with his plastic bucket leaning against its weight. The milk through the tint of the windows looked blue behind him. I looked to Cheri, and she rolled her window up and asked if she could put on the air. We had been to this supermarket before the last barbecue and had seen him stop at the cooler just past the milk.

"You have to work tomorrow?" I asked her.

"Yeah. We're the only place open."

"I thought that everyone's supposed to be closed."

"I guess not."

Mark's work friends, a couple from Lansing, were on the phone in the back seat attempting to direct two other work friends to Davis's place.

"You know where he'll stop, right?" Cheri said as if she was accusing me of something.

"He's just looking," I said.

"Eyeing all those cases."

"He's been good. I think he feels better."

The evening air was cooling down, and I opened the window. Cheri opened hers and pulled her knees into her chest. She was small, had feet the size of my hand. She shivered with the arrival

of the slightly warmer air. I watched a high school kid guide a train of shopping carts back to their pen.

One of the work friends said into his phone, “Don’t worry about bringing anything. We’ve got it all.”

Rocks are pounded into gravel. Water flows through pipes. The wind is cool.

The cautions of summer don’t seem to apply anymore. They are for risk takers, idiots and lost children. A man gets pulled off his mountain bike by a mountain lion and I shake my head, pulling up an afghan against the air conditioning. There are some things that just don’t happen anymore.

“He might feel better,” Cheri said, “but he’s driving everyone crazy. He wakes up at 6 am every morning.”

“Six?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s unheard of for him.”

She looked at her phone.

“I just remembered I need to pick something up at CVS.”

“O.K.”

The open door sent a rush of warm air into the car. She walked under the shade of the strip mall overhang, disappearing and reemerging behind the brick columns. At the automatic door to the pharmacy she turned and slid behind one of the brick columns. Davis came out and asked where she had gone opening the back door to pile the frozen patties and dogs on the laps of Mark’s friends.

“She’s down the way at the CVS.”

“Oh. Is she ready yet?”

“I don’t know.”

“We’ve gotta hurry. I forgot to leave a key at the house. Pull up.”

I pulled the car in front of the entrance and exit. Cheri stepped from behind the column with a phone to her ear. With the window down we only heard her say, “I’ve got to go. Talk to you later.”

“Hey, babe,” Davis said from the passenger seat as Mark’s friends lifted grocery bags to accommodate her.

“Hey,” she said briefly and began to text furiously. Eventually, Davis asked her who she was talking to and she said, “Maggie,” while turning off the built-in typing sound that had betrayed her urgency.

After a solid attempt to stay by the fire pit, the mosquitoes forced us to retreat inside. We sat around in Davis’s kitchen splashing cold water over our bites and mixing more ambitious cocktails.

“Tomorrow, I’m going to bug bomb the backyard,” said Davis, looking tired.

Cheri shivered underneath the central air vent and drew Davis closer to her.

A person would have to be truly reckless, I thought, to die of cold in their own home.

“One of my problems is that I have boring dreams,” Julie was saying. “Usually I am either at work writing some simple story for the paper, or I am on my way to work. It’s like a more inactive version of my day. I get to the crosswalk, hit the button, wait for the white walking-man signal. I cross and I walk the mile and a half to work. I sometimes get a coffee, which never really hits the spot, but I consume it with great enthusiasm. At work nothing is out of the ordinary. I’m writing a piece on the Home Owner’s Association. There are people who come by asking things of me. Sometimes these things are normal requests: make copies of something, call an editor on vacation, entertain a small class of uninterested school children. Other times, the request is something else, something really boring.”

Mark was asleep next to her on the couch. I had to get going or I'd end up sleeping on their couch.

"Should we put this sleepy guy to bed?" I said as if Mark was our little son.

"Yeah, he's pooped," Julie said smiling at him.

I bent down and, with Julie on the other side, picked Mark up to carry him like a baby across the room. We couldn't stop giggling and Mark, who was not actually asleep anymore, began to giggle too. There was movement behind his closed eyes. He relaxed into us, making himself dead weight in our arms.

"Shh. Go to sleep," Julie said and stifled herself as she laughed harder.

"Go to sleep, you little shit," I said.

We dropped him on the bed, and I said goodnight to both of them.

I used the bathroom before I left, and as I walked back past their bedroom, Julie was pulling a night shirt over her bared breasts. The shirt was tight, her nipples looking like they were going to tear out of it. I hurried to get to the door and yelled back to them that I was locking the door knob's button as I left.

The next time I had arranged to meet with Elle, I went to her apartment. I knocked first and let myself in. I called her name, but she wasn't there. A friend of hers was waiting at the computer in her room, sending someone an email. I asked if she was expected home soon but the girl said she didn't think so. She had dark eyes that seemed to swirl as if her corneas were liquid. They were like wet slate, a weird contrast to her blonde hair.

"You can wait in here," she said and smiled.

I sat on the bed and looked through my phone for any messages or missed calls. There were none. After some time, I told the girl I had to get going—I didn't like being played with—and if she

could let her friend know that I had stopped by I would appreciate it. This was the last time I would agree to meet with her. As I stepped towards the door, the girl said, "Wait," and moved towards it closing it in front of me.

"What is it?" I asked.

She seemed nervous and was making me uncomfortable.

"I have to tell you," she said. "She asked if I wanted to come here in her place. She showed me a picture, so I said yes. I was going to pretend like nothing had been arranged and we'd see what you would do, but I couldn't do it."

"Do what?" I asked.

"Come on." Then, "Oh, just come over here."

She led me towards the bed and sat me down next to her. We stayed that way for a couple minutes until she began to look bored or maybe angry. I still wasn't sure if this was some sort of test, so I asked the girl if she wanted to go downstairs and get a coffee while we waited.

"It's too late in the day for coffee," she said.

"So where do you think she is now?" I asked.

"I don't know."

We sat for a minute or so longer, and she said she had to use the bathroom.

I waited ten minutes and went to look for her.

The bathroom door was open, the light left on. I was alone in the apartment.

Relieved as I was, I felt I should probably have taken whatever opportunity had just been presented.

I got a call from Davis that night asking me if I wanted to hang out.

"Cheri left," he said.

“Wait. Really?”

“Let’s have some fun tonight.”

“Are you drinking?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that a good idea?”

“Better idea than calling you.”

“O.K. I’ll be over in a sec.”

He was watching the Simpsons and had wedged himself between the two big pillows on the couch.

“How’re you doing, man?” I asked.

“Not good, man.” And after some time, “It was just hard getting sober and seeing to her too.”

“I mean you’ve only been together a short while.”

“It felt longer.”

“You can’t get too down. It just feels worse because of the timing.”

“I know.”

“You want to go for a drive?”

“Yup.”

We got into my car, and I rolled the windows down as we climbed route 89, pine forests on our left, the lake on our right side lit up under the moon. He asked me to stop at a gas station mini-mart. I did and went inside to spare him the embarrassment of navigating the store with his treadmill legs. I went to the cooler and found what I recalled as the most heinous of the malt liquors. I wanted to make sure he would feel the pain in the morning. I was going to give him a mind-crushing hangover.

“This will show you,” I said as I unveiled a bottle of Hurricane. “Make sure you drink all of it.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

He finished it with ease and threw the bottle at a passing tree hoping for a spectacular shatter, but the bottle bounced off and spun in cartwheels down the road.

“Shit,” he said and stuck his head far out the window to watch it. “It’s unbreakable.”

He stuck both hands out and let them float on the rushing wind.

“All limbs inside,” I said.

“Whatever.”

“If you don’t pull them in, you’re drinking another Hurricane.”

He leaned farther out and laughed defiantly.

“Here we go,” I said and pulled back into the gas station mart on the way back.

With the second Hurricane in his hand Davis began to fade. We passed a Sheriff’s truck, and I took the bottle from him. I capped it and jammed it under my seat. The truck pulled out. I checked the speedometer; I was going the speed limit. Maybe the cashier had called him.

We passed Cass Park headed towards town with the truck close behind us, lights off. Once we reached the bridge over the canal the lights came on, no sirens. I pulled over. There weren’t any other cars on the road. The sheriff took his time walking to the car and asked for my license and registration. I had to push Davis out of the way to get to the glove box. The sheriff shined his light in Davis’s face.

“You been drinking?” he asked.

“He has. I’m his driver tonight,” I said.

“Is there any alcohol in the car?”

“No, sir.”

“Could you step out?”

“Sure.”

He shined his light at the floor and onto the back seat.

“Come with me,” he said.

After some hesitant strides, I passed the sobriety test. He told me he was going to breathalyze me.

“No problem,” I said.

I knew I'd be fine but wondered if I was going get a ticket anyway. The sheriff read the meter.

“You're all good,” he said. Then almost hesitantly, “It's good you're here to drive him. Make sure he gets home okay.”

Inside the house, Davis went to the fridge and scoured a cold jar of Tostitos queso dip. He ate it with potato chips. When he had finished the jar he looked very pale, and I thought that maybe he was going to throw up. He heaved forward onto the table.

“You O.K.?” I asked.

He pulled himself onto the table top and nearly fell off.

“I don't have anything,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I've got nothing.”

“You'll be fine after a while.”

“No. I've used it all up. I only have this one small love inside me. *Had*. I was afraid that if I let it out I would have nothing. Nothing. Nothing. But I've always had nothing. No one. Not one thing. And I've never given that nothing to anyone.”

He was muttering to himself, and I moved closer to hear him. His little dog was up on the table standing next to his head. He spoke louder.

“A someone wouldn’t want a nothing,” he cried. “Maybe there’s someone who wants it?”

He worked himself into an exasperated mumble.

“There are people,” he said, “who stand in the desert at night and whisper cold secrets to themselves. There are people who cling to rock faces to feel unreachable. That’s not me. I’m in plain view, and I can’t be touched. There’s so little to me, another person could barely find it to slurp it all up. It’d be a shot of cheap liquor to them. They would be used to oceans and springs of love. If I had just a bit more, I’d spread it out.”

He crawled across the kitchen table, knocked over some silverware, and swiped at his fleeing dog. He landed on his chest, his arms dangling off the edge of the table.

“I would kiss everybody I saw. Every body. Men and women all around would get a taste of this.”

He propped his chin on a coaster.

“But there’s not enough. Just for me.”

I called Elle up. She answered in a whisper and asked me what I wanted.

“I was just seeing what you were up to,” I said.

“Isn’t this a little weird?” she said.

“What is?”

“You’re calling me up in the middle of the night.”

“I was wondering if I could come over.”

“No. You can’t come over.”

“Why not?”

“Because I fucking said so.”

“Oh.”

“You know, you don’t own me.”

“Just wanted to see if you wanted to hang out.”

“Why would I want to hang out in the middle of the night?”

“I wasn’t trying to upset you. You know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean. And I’m saying, ‘no.’”

“That’s fine. That’s fine. I won’t call anymore.”

She hung up, and I couldn’t tell if I was the one being an asshole.

Hank had his arm stuck through the hollow of his mulberry tree. He had a gauntlet on, stretched to the elbow and was holding something that emitted a long hiss.

“I found the yellow jackets,” he said.

“You might not want to spray that so close to your face.”

He pulled his hand out and a pile of gray flakes came tumbling out along with some dead leaves and a stash of acorns. On closer inspection I saw that the flakes were dead stinkbugs. Around there, you’d find them everywhere. I don’t know what might’ve killed them, but you could leave the office for a weekend and come back to find a small pile of them strewn across your keyboard. Once, I found about twenty of them, their legs like kinked staples, on their backs inside my coffee mug. I thought it was some sort of prank, that someone had collected them around the office and deposited them there. I don’t think anyone dislikes me that much, but you never know. Lots of people have hated me for no reason, but the ones that had a right to rarely took advantage of the opportunity.

I took the can of Raid from Hank and moved back as a few hornets dropped into a lazy flight out of the hollow.

“Did you get stung?” I asked him.

“No. They’re fazed it seems.”

I waited until he had walked farther up the lawn past the border of his fuzzy periphery before making a show of spraying the hidden nest without actually going that near. The sweet candy corn smell of the Raid made me spit in the hope that I could expel what I had breathed. Later, with a popped lawnmower tire in my hand, I asked Hank if he had a patch kit. He walked back with me to the garage and searched for fifteen minutes to no conclusion. He felt for his wallet among the four pockets of his pants and drew out a five dollar bill.

“That should do it,” he said.

Sometimes he would sit in his lawn chair to talk to me as I worked. He did this as I pulled the tire off the rim with a crowbar and patched the hole. He only had a hand pump which took twenty minutes for a proper inflation.

“What you need is an air compressor,” Hank said about ten minutes in.

“Do you have one?”

“No. I had one for a time, but I sold it.”

“It would be nice, you’re right.”

“Nice? It would be useful.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“Clarity.”

He lifted off into a recounting of some time he spent in India.

“The tigers around there don’t growl. They laugh instead--sharpen their teeth on rib cages they’ve picked clean. And nothing works as it is supposed to. Water explodes from the ground and

shoots high into the air. The air is thick like a slime, and it is hard to sleep from all the work it takes to drag it through the lungs. The ground is neither rock or mud or fluffy earth but a thin sand that grows nothing but razor sedge in certain of the, uh, marsh-y floodplains. Everything is grown in narrow mountain valleys and hiked down around boulders under deceitful, smiling macaques. They look evil when they smile. I wish I could tell you what the women looked like, but I couldn't tell them apart and had been lifting robes in vain for two months before I gave up. Mostly, I was treated like an oddity. At lunch a crowd would form to watch me as I assembled my sandwich from some goat's meat and their bitter cheese between slabs of a dense bread they make from sprouted grains. I would say nothing to them. They would say nothing to me, but they would watch until I was finished eating then return to their homes or work. Things were bad then. Though then again, not bad enough that I did anything about it. I probably stayed for longer than I should have.

He leaned forward in his chair.

"I had forgotten about that," he said. "It was just before we lost Julian."

"He was your son who lived in Chelsea?"

"No, that's Garrett. He's healthy now."

I lifted the lawn mower and pulled out the four by four I'd used to prop it.

"Once, later, I found a dying elephant in the jungle."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing really. I didn't know it was dying until it was dead. I watched it for some time. I thought it was maybe waking up from a nap."

He leaned back again and tilted his floppy hat to block the sun.

"When I was certain it had stopped breathing, I took my swiss army knife and tried to saw off one of its tusks with the little saw tool."

"Too thick?"

“No. I probably could have done it, but it was about a month after the funeral, and I was thinking that I would mail it to him, but then I remembered.”

I haven't told Julie yet, but I've been having boring dreams too lately.

The difference is they seem more like nightmares. I'm usually sitting somewhere, waiting for something. Sometimes I am standing in a field outside of a forest where there is a faint glow coming from deep within the woods. Other times I am stuck in my office with nothing to do, just looking out the window. Regardless of the setting, I am always scared. Scared to death. Of what? I'm still not sure. I wait for it, but nothing ever happens.

“Hammer House”

We had an hour to walk onto the mud flats and pick at the trash and discarded junk. There were shallow pools spotted across the sand which held minnows and sunfish dying slowly as the water warmed with the sun. There was no wind, and it looked as if the fish had been placed under glass for special viewing. Jerry found a car here last year buried in the sand. On its side, he said, he'd mistaken its window for a puddle.

“Did you look inside it?” I asked.

“Of course. But it was full of water. I couldn't see.”

“You think there was a body in there?”

“I don't know. I hadn't thought of that.”

The first wave came only a few inches high, and we tried to outrun it. Careless with my steps, I lunged sideways and plunged a boot into the muck. My foot lodged beside something hard. I pulled it out and reached down to push the sides inward to release the suction.

“That boot's gone,” Jerry said and walked past to the pier.

Another small tidal wave passed through my legs and filled the empty cavity. I went on without my boot. We climbed the bottom rungs of the pier's ladder. I was careful not to slip on the algae and gash the foot on a barnacle.

A boy was propped against the railing while his mother picked up one of his feet and shook talcum powder over it. She rubbed vigorously between his toes with a towel. Sand and clumped powder fell onto the splintered wood boards.

“Now put on your sandals.”

She watched as he slid his toes around the thong.

“Good,” she said and wrapped the towel over the boy’s narrow shoulders. She had a picnic spread over half the bench. She noticed us coming up the ladder and said, “Go get Dad and tell him that the tuna is ready.”

“But you said peanut butter,” the boy said.

He began to whine and bob up and down. Nervously she grasped the towel.

“Yes, there is peanut butter for you but tuna for us. Go tell him.”

The boy threw off his towel and ran down the pier.

Jerry nodded to the woman as we passed by, but she looked away.

“We have another hard-case,” he said not totally out of ear shot.

“Just leave it,” I said.

I wasn’t sleeping much then and had the foggy impression that every person I passed was whispering to those near and gesturing with pointed glances. “They looking at us?” I’d ask Jerry, but he always said no. I had an off-shore accent, but that wasn’t particularly novel on the island. It was actually nice to stand out from those lilting and dainty voices. They didn’t feel genuine, like a new coat worn at the wrong time of year. The main problem was that most of the time no one could understand what I was saying.

Jerry edged closer to the father as he walked with his kid back down the pier. The man moved over to keep Jerry from rocking into his shoulder.

“Watch it,” Jerry said as the man grazed past his arm.

“So sorry,” the man said and hurried his kid along not looking at us.

“The best thing,” I explained, “was finding someone in a group. He had to be aware of me. If I riled a couple of guys who all knew me, it wasn’t that great, but it was still reassuring. They’d say something nice, pay a compliment, and dodge out of the way. But what was always best--what we

looked for when entering a room--was a guy or a couple of guys who knew us, mixed up with a group that didn't."

We walked along the shore and dug our hands into the sand where it was saturated and dense, abrading the paint from our fingers. The bay water had arrived. A wave spread out on the sand, receded, and I stuck my finger into one of the bubbling holes and tried to scoop out a hermit crab.

"That way you could go over there and make some excuse to talk to them," he said, trying to finish my thought.

"Yeah. Pretty much," I said and wiped my hands on my pants. "I'd chat up one of their girlfriends or something. The guys who didn't know me would inevitably start to cause a fuss, and their friends would have to get them to shut up and tell them what was actually going on."

Jerry smiled.

"Must've been awesome," he said.

"If the guy just whispered into his friend's ear, that meant he was embarrassed by the whole thing. Otherwise, he would say it out loud, for my benefit, informing his friend that I was someone that he should take note of, while also letting me know that if a transgression had indeed just taken place, he was presenting himself as not accountable—that he was conscientious of my status and was applying due respect. Inevitably, he'd hope that I'd categorize him as something, you know, separate from his friend. But I don't know which I liked better: the whisper or the out-loud."

Jerry looked at his watch.

"It's about that time," he said.

Jerry backed the van up the sand path of the hill that overlooked the pier. The bay was starting to refill, and we opened the back doors to sit and eat our lunch as the ferry arrived. This was a ritual of

ours, waking up at 5 and working until the afternoon ferry, which was the only transport arriving in a particular day, came around 1. Once it was unloaded, we'd walk down to the pier and hand Peters an old paint bucket with a six pack inside and some paint rags covering it up. The island was small enough that we could monitor every arrival and departure, just by sitting on the old dune and eating lunch, watching. We were told by Peters when he arrived each morning if he had seen any new boats moored off of the buoyed anchors set for visitors in the cove.

This was really a vacation town, where half the houses sat empty in the winter, weekenders stumbling off the ferry in a springy show of radiance Friday afternoons. They would grip the railings on Sunday, staring into the choppy bay to concentrate and keep their breakfasts suppressed, laboring under the burden of hangovers and energetic youngsters.

“On behalf of the Chamber of Commerce,” old Peters would say into his speaker system. “We are proud to welcome you to our island. We wish all here a wonderful stay.”

The church bells pealed to a frantic tempo, wobbling in the spire like two windblown flowers. After all these years they were still being pulled by massive ropes which hung to the ground floor. The church had commissioned a slow local boy to pull them, and he did so with such enthusiasm that I'd seen the Pastor, sitting at the café with a cup of coffee, falter over his Bible and bring his hands to his head, fearful that the bell yokes might be rocked from their stone supports. On windless days, Peters said he could hear them out by the trench, coming across the water as if he were motoring right underneath the church. I really don't know why, but this consoled me somewhat whenever I worried about the ferry and our watch and decided if I could really count on such a plan.

Jerry had his pair of binoculars out sitting back in the shade of the van and described each passenger in detail, naming the ones he was familiar with. I wrote down what he said on a little

notepad. This step was probably unnecessary but helped to keep around at night when I was scared and wondering what details I might have missed in our tally.

I had met a guy out in Wonderland, just before moving to the island, who demonstrated an important concept to me. This was on the mainland, up the coast a ways where the cars could pass unobstructed since the storm, and there was trimmed grass and clean jobs available. I had been strung out enough that when he approached me, holding out his arm like he was displaying merchandise, I couldn't tell what he was doing until he shook my hand and handed me a glass of iced tea. "You look famished," he said. I asked him, "What the hell did you say?" But he pretended not to hear and began talking to Big Joe, who had hired me under some false pretenses to help him paint. Big Joe was explaining to the man his business scheme. Big Joe had a simple job, one that he refused to make concessions about.

"We can do blue," Big Joe told the man.

"I was thinking of doing sort of a seaspray gray on the shingles," the man said, pulling out a catalog of colored squares, each a different hue of gray.

Joe took a step towards the man.

"We don't do but two colors."

"I'll pay for the paint and pick it up if you want, but I don't want blue."

"All I'm telling you is that we don't do but two colors: blue and double-blue."

The man turned to me.

"Can *you* paint this for me?" he asked.

"I paint what Joe wants," I told him.

Gently, Big Joe closed the man's catalogue.

“Now,” he said, “if blue is something that you can get behind then we’re a goddamned love story. Anything else, and I have to pass.”

The man didn’t know what to do, how to argue with such absolute conviction. Big Joe liked to paint in blue; any other color, and it made him depressed. There were enough people around, usually in the pine neighborhoods of West Branch, that wanted the two shades he offered and he got by. The man looked at me to see if he was joking and shook his head.

“I don’t know what to say,” he said.

“Say you’ll take blue,” said Big Joe.

We headed off to another job.

I know now that you can’t force a man into an unnatural state. Joe understood this, but I think few do.

There might something else to it that I’m figuring out. A man can transform himself. With some willpower, pretending can be the same as living.

Big Joe had been helping me out, keeping a close eye on me and letting me sleep in his garage. It was warm and dry, but I hated hearing the clicking of the lock as Big Joe’s old lady shut me away, took the precautions in case I was to slip up, rob them in the night. She had her reasons just like Joe had his colors.

It had been nearly a year of this, eating lunch with Jerry, taking down the details of everyone who arrived. We had learned to hate holidays—Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day—days when the ferry was filled to capacity and the cove needed a harbor patrol from the mainland to direct the traffic of visitors jettying to and from their moorings. During those times we pitched our tents in the hills, typically on an edge of farmland adjacent to the State Park. I knew the land owner, had painted

his house, and explained that we just liked the peace, free from the late-night bonfires and drunk vacationers tripping over our tent stakes.

I was still surprised that Jerry was—after all this time—still tagging along. It had become a game for him, the constant suspicion, the ritual. It had given him some kind of purpose, and I think he enjoyed the snooping whenever some disembarking passenger raised a red flag.

I had outlined a very vague, but personally specific, criteria that we looked for. Jerry was fascinated by it, the simplicity of the signs. I repeated it often as a reminder, though I suspected Jerry feigned some of his forgetfulness to keep me talking.

“It will most likely be a man,” I told him. I had never heard of them contracting a woman, though there were always firsts. “There shouldn’t be any attempt at a disguise. He will wear the kind of clothes he normally would, possibly ill-fitting, usually cuffed by a tailor so that the pants hover and sway above the shoes. They like clear nylon socks, but these often cause sweating, and they might resort to cotton given the weather. Due to the destination and length of travel they might come in twos, if they drive, but rarely threes. They will treat this like a vacation and will probably dress as such. Be wary of shorts worn with dress shoes, driving loafers, or sneakers. Sandals represent a non-threat. They’re aware that they might have to give chase, or flee, and won’t bother with sandals. They’ll be light travelers—not that most the real visitors won’t be.”

I was just describing the guys as I knew them. They wouldn’t contract out of house. There was no need to hide where it was coming from. To Jerry, my criteria was confusing. It wouldn’t be useful to him, unable to imagine my vague descriptions, but it was difficult to explain that I’d know it when it was here. You can’t keep the familiar from triggering some sort of recognition. I was far enough from home that the few times someone local arrived there it would be, our home, encrusted all over them.

I was working under Joe's banner, and though he preferred to see only blue, I was able to branch out into the colors he couldn't bring himself to paint, and we had been doing pretty well for ourselves. Jerry was cousin to Joe, and we worked as a team, keeping our cost of living down by camping out most of the time.

"These bats are really fucking me up," Jerry said.

Swarms of insects pulsed about every streetlight. A couple of seconds, and we'd see a dark streak and the angular cut of a wing as a bat dove through and, for a moment, parted the gnats.

"Don't look at them then," I told him and speared a hotdog with my fork.

That summer I think we had eaten our weight in hotdogs. Already sick of the dog/bun combo, we had begun cutting them up into little bits and scattering the pieces around our instant mashed potatoes and beans or throwing the whole mess down into a can of creamed corn. We had given up beer to stay alert and spent most of our time fishing out of other people's boats, those who kept vacation homes, or surf casting from the wrecked bulwarks that littered the Northern shore.

Jerry lifted the lid of the kettle and added a couple ounces of coffee crystals.

"It doesn't have an effect anymore," he said.

"What?"

"The caffeine. I drink so much coffee I can drink a whole pot and still go to sleep."

We took off the kettle and replaced it with our small washing pot. We boiled our clothes with a little lye to keep the paint from clumping.

"I forgot to tell you," Jerry said. "Peters spotted a deck boat."

He pointed to the edge of the dark cluster of moorings barely illuminated by the buoy's red signal. "It's on the west side."

"Why didn't you tell me before I cleaned up? I'm ready for bed."

"I thought it was fine. We can check it out in the morning."

“It’s better if I just take a look now.”

“Don’t bother. We’ll take a look tomorrow.”

“It’s got to be done now.”

I left Jerry to his coffee and walked the beach until I was as close to the visitor moorings as possible. He was right; blocked behind one of the local’s was a deck boat, possibly of the older Hurricane types—a wide open deck and no awning—rotating slowly about its front tie.

I stripped down and got into the water. It was a quarter mile to the moorings and half that through the local boats to get to the visitor’s section.

Night swimming always exhilarated me. I went at a slow pace to keep from splashing too much and stopped periodically to tread water and get my bearings.

When I felt I was close enough, I held onto the back ladder of an adjacent yacht and rested. Some visitors liked to sleep in the open decks when the weather was nice. Better than that, Jerry and I had spent quite a few nights climbing the towers of boat bridges and convertible canopies to watch couples screw in the open air. The deck boat was a hundred feet away. I watched it for movement.

It was familiar. I knew the make.

Paoli had a boat like that.

Even so, I doubted that he would come himself. He liked me enough that he’d send someone else to do it. Just then, I couldn’t help but feel a bit embarrassed. Being away from anyone who knew me, I had allowed myself certain affectations. If someone from home could’ve heard me they’d say, “You’re sounding just like Paoli.” It was true. I still admired him, and he had a way of speaking that I was desperately trying to emulate.

It was that his language was free of ornamentation. It was the same with how he handled himself. He might get playful, even excited, which you could see through his widening eyes. But he was never theatrical. When he walked, it was as astonishing as seeing a brick wall begin to slide

uphill. He had a hidden weight which he concealed with sports jackets and dark shirts. It made his steps heavy. The last time I drove him, it was to a job in Staten Island. I could tell then that whatever it was he had to do, he wasn't happy about it. He seemed tired and had spent the whole ride with the talk radio blasting, reclined in his seat so his eyes could see just above the dashboard. He concentrated on the lines of the road. I heard him saying something to himself. "We ain't too pretty. We ain't too proud." He repeated it. Like a chant, he tried to sound it out with varying emphasis.

I was driving his car. We pulled into a Hess Mart, and he told me as he got out, "You're gonna want to drive pretty fast until you get to the Verazzano."

"You need me to pick you up?"

He looked back as if he didn't hear what I had said and shook his head no.

That was the last time I saw him.

I was expected to meet him at Bayonne in the morning. Instead, I drove his car to a bus station that night and gave his keys to some ratty kid—which I still feel kind of bad about. I hope that dummy drove it west. God knows what Paoli would have done to the poor kid if he saw him, in that car, gliding down one of his blocks.

That was it. I spent some time wandering and then got into painting. I would have just as soon crept up north and visited my dad, but I needed the rest. Eight hours of sleep or I get a sore throat, laryngitis, and then strep.

I did a quiet breast stroke over to the boat and caught the outboard motor to lift myself up. The deck was empty and I moved faster, allowing the water to drip and scatter more loudly. I rested again and looked over the back at the name and home port. None. It might've been a rental or in a boat yard long enough that they skipped over registration. I tried to get inside, but the small cabin was locked tight. There was a receipt for gas tucked under one of the cushions. The station was in

Benson, north of the city: disquieting but not necessarily significant. Before I cooled down too much, I dove back in and made for shore.

I had been telling Jerry about the neighborhood where I grew up. When I was old enough, I dropped out of high school—nobody was going to tell me to finish up. I lived at home, with my dad. My mom had moved out just before high school. Dad was a plumber and part-time exterminator, but mostly he dealt cards at one of Paoli's poker games. He could do card tricks, too, and if goaded would stick a cigarette filter in his nose and smoke it all the way through.

Ours was an old neighborhood, with most of the foundations laid in the 20s. So many of the homes had foreclosed by the 70s that every third house was abandoned. There was one in the center of the block and directly across the street from mine. It was an abandoned colonial, perched on a tiny hill above the rest and framed within a stone retaining wall. Of course, the neighborhood kids said that it was haunted. Sometimes a couple of guys would arrive, usually with a third in tow, and they would trudge up the steps to the dark house and go inside. There would be inexplicable sounds. When we were little, we thought that maybe he was a repair man or a lazy contractor who'd done a bad job and was being brought back to the house, a fixer upper, to do the job right. We imagined him fixing the nails that had been set to hang old paintings or doing some quick repair work after a shoddy spackling job. There would be some loud knocking around like they were settling nails into the wall studs or knocking some sheetrock out. Whatever it was, the work wouldn't be long, and within a couple minutes the two home owners would walk out shaking their heads. I believed that this was what Dad was referring to when he described union labor. "They'll take a month, and a crew of eight, to fix a pothole," he'd say. "A truly beautiful arrangement."

What I had to consider later was that this house held a debt. As long as we stayed up, we never did see any third man leave.

In the morning, just as a pin of light poked through near the horizon, Jerry lifted the previous night's coals atop a buried grate and blew until they were ruddy and their encasement of char crumbled into the sand.

Everything was cast in the uniform gray of twilight. We didn't move far from the fire. It was hard to pick out details until the light gained more ground. It was the time of day when accidents were most common. Our teeth chattered, and we stamped our feet as we paced, circling after each other.

This was something we had learned in the winter: keep moving, you won't get as warm as you'd like, but it will be enough to keep the blood flowing.

"Stand up," I would have to order Jerry. "Your veins like the gravity."

Water was boiled for coffee. Once we could bear to venture away from the fire, we crossed the road and took our morning dump. We had decided to deal with the ticks and poison oak to shit in the dunes on the other side of the road. The bathrooms were kept open all night, but we didn't want to be mistaken for the blowjob boys. Morning was their busy period, and it seemed there was always someone trying to squeeze in another rendezvous before work. The woods allowed us some privacy.

We found Peters at the Chowder Bar eating his breakfast, dry eggs blackened on both sides. He poured ketchup over the yellow clod until there was no egg visible and sprinkled some pepper flakes around it for show.

"I've been wondering," Peters said. "You saving for something? You made some bank this summer."

"Just looking for the next move," I told him.

"You're gonna leave the paint business?"

“I don’t know. I’m just saving.”

“For what?”

“I told you, I don’t know.”

“Saving for savings. That’s horseshit. Save for something to spend it on.”

“I’m gonna buy a ferry and run you out of town.”

“Don’t joke like that.”

Peters grunted and dug into his eggs. I ordered two coffees to-go.

“We were wondering if you saw that deck boat that came in yesterday?” I asked.

“Yeah. That guy’s got some funny ideas ‘bout right of way.”

“How many were in the boat?”

“One.”

“Just one?”

“Yeah.”

“Anything else?”

“No, it was too quick. I think he had dark hair. That’s all I got.”

“Cheap ass boat. He’s probably headed to West Branch,” Jerry said.

“Okay, thanks,” I told Peters.

“Where you off to today?” he asked.

“We’re up in the hills,” said Jerry. “We’ve the politician’s house to paint.”

“You’re gonna want a dolly for that. There’s no road for a ways from the end of the drive to the house.”

“Everywhere you go here there’s a complication,” I said.

A yellow crust quivered on Peters’ fork.

“People need to remember this island wasn’t made just for them,” he said.

There was a tree bough overhanging some of the hedges which seemed to have cracked in the storm. I had Jerry climb up and stand on it. He grasped the limb above his head and stomped down until the limb tore off the trunk and crushed the hedge. He almost came down with it and hung for a second until he was level and dropped down.

We didn't have a dolly and didn't want to lug all the cans up to the house, so Jerry drove slow, using the fallen bough as a cover for the crushed hedge. Up and over the hump, he almost turtled us on the running boards. We drove across an expansive lawn and pulled onto the patio. It was the end of the season, with fewer visitors every day. The politician and his family would not be back until next season.

We felt that relief was arriving. The nights had cooled off, but the days could still scorch. We wore straw hats for the sun and sunglasses against the glare of the white paint.

Jerry led the way with our primer. He liked the primer best because it could be sloppily applied as long as everything was covered.

"How'd you guys just stay in one place and get away with all that shit?" he asked. "They had to be watching all the time."

"We got by. It's easier staying in the same place, going about your routine. You're able to see what's different. If you're moving around all the time you won't necessarily notice when something is wrong."

"But you knew you were under surveillance."

"Listen, we didn't have to discuss business openly. We restricted ourselves. There was no open talk, no unsanctioned movement. We were so close that you could say something like 'the thing in the house with the new guy and his hat' and right away they'd know that I meant, 'the coke

in the condo on Minerva Street with the guy we met from the pet store who won't stop calling us by our first fucking names.”

“It must have felt good.”

“What?”

“To stick it to them.”

“We were just lucky to get by. Let's leave it at that.”

Jerry rattled his can like a drum.

“Can you shut the fuck up?” a voice yelled.

We looked up. A girl was looking down at us from what seemed to be the bathroom window.

“We're trying to sleep,” she said and disappeared back into the house.

“I thought no one was home?” Jerry said.

“I'll take the van back down to the road. Don't let them get a look at the lawn.”

I drove the van back to the road and parked it hastily. Walking up the lawn I kicked at the depressed grass blades to set them upright. At the patio, Jerry was gone. I looked across the grass to see if our path was noticeable. It didn't seem so.

I found him at the front door, talking to a curly-haired boy of about eighteen. The kid was standing there in his boxer shorts and folding his arms so we couldn't see his nipples pop in the breeze.

“When do you think you'll see him next?” the kid asked Jerry.

“Oh, I don't know,” he said and shot me one of his looks. “He said he was probably gonna be by next week to check out the work.”

“I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention you ran into us.”

The kid handed him a couple twenties and Jerry, like a good boy, kept his hand out until the kid went back into the house and found him another.

“How do you know Mr. B?” Jerry asked, stuffing the cash into his back pocket.

“He’s her uncle,” the kid said and gestured through the door at no one.

Jerry laughed at this.

“Shit,” Jerry said, “I don’t care that you’re here. But how’d you get the keys?”

“We have a copy, but he doesn’t want us using it without her parents around.”

“Oh come on. You’re not relatives. What is she, the nanny?”

“No, man. I told you, she’s his niece.”

“Whatever. How long are you here?”

“We’re leaving Friday.”

“What did the kid say?” I asked him, but didn’t receive his answer. Jerry was watching him walk through the threshold and close the door behind him. We couldn’t see it, but the door would be locked. One way or another they’d shut us away. He would stand out of sight behind the door frame and turn it slowly so we couldn’t hear about our exclusion. This was not to protect us from the shame of it, it would be for fear of our wrath.

We crawled onto the roof to get the eaves and shutters. I noticed a skylight, and we crept over hoping that she might be showering, but the bathroom was empty.

Jerry asked, “Do we look like guys that can be trusted?”

I laughed. He asked because he had gotten it into his head recently that the best criminals are those that are naturally gregarious, who can engender a crowd, who can convince a stranger that they are in love.

The kid came back out, a shirt on this time, and asked us if we knew the island and, once we had said 'yes,' asked if we knew where they could buy some weed.

"Do we look like guys that would know how to get that?" I asked Jerry and feigned offense.

"Sorry, I just thought I'd ask," the kid said.

"You know," Jerry said, "you've got some fucking mouth on you."

The kid took a step back.

"We could get you some," I said. "We'll set it up, but we're not coming to you. If you want it, you'll have to meet us at the toll gate of the state park. There's a dirt turnaround."

Jerry wrote his number on a piece of paint tape, and added below it, "If needed."

He looked at what he had written with what seemed to be admiration. Jerry had moments like that when he would pause suddenly and take on a dreamy look, his eyes unfocusing until they settled on something that was neither far nor close. Every piece of his day that felt like poetry was committed to a personal tally, as if he was curating his own life, cataloging his early obscure years. He was the grand persona waiting to be recognized.

"Where's the park?"

I pointed to the hills between us and the sliver of cove in the distance.

"Is it safe there?" the kid asked.

Jerry smiled and said, "I don't know what you mean."

I had agreed to meet a customer the next day on the mainland to discuss, over coffee, our painting some prefab houses in a new development. I had left Jerry to do the tally and rode with Peters to the shore that morning. The customer worked in the city, so I said I would take the train in and walk up to her office. I didn't like the idea of leaving the island, but we knew that work was going to be slow

that fall; there were only so many houses to paint on the little chunk of land. On the platform I received a text that she had a half day which meant we could relocate to a cafe closer to the station.

Now that I was in the city, it was only an eight hour train ride home. I was thinking about my father.

I'd gotten out. Not everyone can say it, and this alone had been a triumph. Some don't have the common sense to just leave. I thought that maybe they were more afraid of being in a new place, to deny that what was coming was, actually, coming. But I don't think that's right. I had promised myself that I wouldn't be like those other schmucks who thought no one would mind if they came back into town for a quick visit. But I had to see him again. I couldn't keep waiting, wondering if maybe he'd had a heart attack or stroked out, and I wouldn't even know it.

I'd driven by once, just down the Palisades until I saw the bridge, but then kept going. I'd thought there might have been a car following me. Without even thinking about it, I would sit by the pay phone at the beach bathrooms and pretend to wait for his call. I'd remind myself that this wasn't so hard; I could dial his number at any moment.

In all likelihood, Paoli gave up looking for me long ago.

If I ever did visit Dad, I would cross the bridges at night, have Jerry drive and lay low in the back of the van. We'd park the next block over, and I'd hop the fences into his yard. I'd have to break in. Knowing Dad, if I knocked and let him grab the pistol in the sofa before answering the door, there might be an accident.

I noticed that the guy next to me, a stout fireplug, was angling over, looking at me like he might be recognizing me.

I nodded to him with no reciprocation and pretended to check the bus map. He looked at himself in the glass of the bus stop's shelter and adjusted his terrible fedora.

The night before I left, one of Paoli's guys had dropped me off per usual at the end of the block. I shut the door without saying goodbye but felt that might have been the wrong thing as he pulled away, and I turned to wave. My last night with Dad was uneventful. I had been meaning to tell him in-person but ended up leaving a note to explain what was going on.

He was sitting in the kitchen watching TV on the little screen and eating stale tortilla chips.

"Hey, buddy," he said. "Did you eat?"

"Yeah. What are you watching?"

"Bob Melbo is striking against the Sanitation Workers' Union."

"Where's he now?"

"In Pennsylvania."

"How does he hear about these things?"

"It's his job to know."

"What's his real job?"

"What's his job?"

"Yeah."

"Man of the people. He's helping everyone get a fair crack at it."

"Like what?"

He sipped some cold coffee.

"Life, I suppose."

When the news broadcast was over he rolled the empty portion of the chip bag and jammed it into the cabinet under some crackers where it wouldn't unfurl.

"Those are stale, right," I said.

"They're fine, but I'll go shopping tomorrow."

He opened the back door and stood on the steps for a couple of minutes looking around. There was a pitiful flame tree that he would sit under when he had some thinking to do. I followed him out.

“Smoke tree,” he corrected me. “It looks sort of like it’s smoldering smoke. Red maples in the fall look like flames.”

He was quiet for a long time, so I climbed onto the smoke tree and sat on one of the branches.

“What’re you thinking about?” I asked him.

“Not thinking about anything,” he said.

“You can’t think about nothing.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“You can’t stop thinking. Your brain thinks no matter what. Even when you’re asleep. You have to be estherized.”

“What?”

“When you’re having surgery. The sleeping gas.”

“Anaesthetized.”

“Yeah. So, what are you thinking about?”

“I guess I was thinking about Bob Melbo. He’s getting ready another strike in Paterson.”

He bent down and scratched very slowly at a mosquito bite. Dad was obsessed with Bob Melbo. He said that sometimes he’d think about running into him at the diner and the two of them would hit it off and have lunch or coffee together. He’d think about what he would say to Bob Melbo. When he felt bolder, he’d imagine himself as an advisor or confidante. When he received phone calls late at night from the card room, he said that sometimes he’d half-dream it was Bob Melbo, finally calling him up to say, “We’ve got a problem, Ray. What do you think about this one?”

And Dad would say, “Jesus, Bob. This really is a pickle. Where do they have him?”

“In questioning.”

“I’ll call Werner and see if Representative Haley can get his ass down there to do something about it. Don’t worry, we’ll take care of this.”

Then Bob would say, “Thanks, Ray. I’ll see you in the morning.”

And Dad would laugh and say, “It *is* morning, Bob,” and hang up not saying goodbye because he saw Bob so often there was no point in saying farewells. This was just part of an ongoing conversation. He’d be on the phone with him every half hour until they met at headquarters around daybreak.

While fleeing along a central avenue and leaping puddles across the wet asphalt, I looked over my shoulder and watched the man swipe his hand over his head to confirm, with some confusion, that his hat had been taken.

I ducked around a corner and pocketed a piece of loose brick in case he should give chase. I had swiped my hand at him not thinking quickly enough to even close my fist. What I grasped was the hat. I held onto it.

That my violence had stunned him was really just luck.

Waiting for the developer at the cafe, I placed the hat on the booth’s table and watched it for a long time. I watched it like I suspected it might have some life to it. I turned it over to view the sweat stains. They were greasy under my finger. There was also a twenty dollar bill tucked into the inner band along with a note written on a neon-pink post-it that said, “Whenever you want it,” and signed with a heart.

My possession of the hat didn’t seem to be any great loss for the man whom I had taken it from. He had read the note. Otherwise, it would not have been folded so carefully into the band.

The money was just walking cash. I didn't intend anything against him. He was a stranger, but I had to look after myself. There were certain operators who roamed the streets looking for dreamy-eyed floats hauling their fattened selves across town. This one seemed to be on point. He had a chain strapped from one belt loop to the other. It held nothing. It was just there, jingling and jangling, letting the world know where he was walking.

I washed my hands of the head grease that had coated my fingers and tossed the hat in the garbage bin. I bought two coffees, one for me and one for the customer but then realized that I didn't know what she would want and swallowed the second order in three large gulps. When she arrived she had a stack of pictures, renderings of houses that had yet to be built. I gave her our standard rate and got out of there in a hurry.

On the morning that Bob Melbo died, I was with Jerry, fishing at the beach. We found out one afternoon, while Jerry was shifting through the receiver looking for some AC/DC to provide the soundtrack to our lunch. He turned it to a squeaky public station, and we heard the news: we were two days late.

We heard from the report that there had been riots, some were still going on, and people everywhere were searching for the man who killed him. Whoever it was that got him had used little imagination. He beat him with a piece of scrap wood. The murder was labeled as a vicious attack though another reporter claimed he was only hit once, in the temple, and that the perpetrator didn't seem to have had the purpose.

We pitched our tents on the cove's beach earlier that afternoon, just as the sun slid above the hills. I went through the day's list, checking off those that Jerry had named as locals and checked the details for the rest. I broke up some of the stale weed we had and put it in a new zip lock.

The couple met us near the closed toll booth at the park's entrance and pulled over to talk to us. The kid tried to do it all reaching through his window, but I told him to get out of the car. I explained that I wanted to show them a spot only the locals knew about, an ideal place to smoke. He asked how far it was, and I said that it wasn't far at all. I liked giving the tour and walked ahead, while Jerry hung back to check the girl out, explaining what Peters had told me about the island's history. It involved pirates, Indian clashes, a fort from the Civil War that had since sunk beneath the waves. We followed the forested trail and came out into a cultivated meadow that sloped towards the cove. There was a shadow under the surface of the water just beyond the inlet, like a huge shark pacing the entrance. I told them it was the remains of that Civil War fort.

It was getting towards sunset and the kids lit up while Jerry went to look at a dead deer propped against a big oak at the treeline.

"Hey," he called over, and I thought that he sounded funny.

"What?" I asked.

"Come here, goddammit."

I trotted over and saw what had stopped him: a man was lying against the tree, his head loose and hanging towards the side, one leg bunched under him. There was a dark black hole to the left of what would be his belly button.

"Shit," I said. "Do you recognize this guy?"

"He's not a local."

I walked back over to the kids and told them to put out the joint.

"Get back to the car and call the police."

"What is it?" the girl asked.

"It looks like a suicide or hunting accident."

I gave them the right number, so they wouldn't have to mess with operators. They hurried back through the path towards the cars.

Jerry stood looking at the man for a couple minutes. We didn't have to say it, but we were proud that we could find a body and not be afraid of it.

"I guess I should check his pulse," Jerry said and bent down to feel at the man's neck.

Jerry sprang back.

"He's alive."

I crouched to look at the man carefully and corrected him.

"He's not alive," I told him. "He's dying."

"Damn."

"Stand back. We don't want to be included in any evidence they might take."

"Yeah, shit. You're right."

"But don't worry, the kids can vouch for us."

"I'm not worried."

We took a couple steps back and sat down as we waited.

"Have you ever seen one like this," Jerry asked.

"Not exactly like this."

"Should we do something?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know, put pressure on the wound?"

"This guy'll be done in a couple minutes. For sure."

We stood up and walked to the other side of the clearing where we could pace and not disturb the scene.

It was getting cold. Fall had finally arrived, and a steady ocean breeze wafted through the hills. The trees swayed and a huge crack rang out from in the forest. I shuddered.

“It’s from all the flexing with the wind,” said Jerry.

“I know. It’s fucking freezing.”

“I’m gonna check him again.”

Jerry walked over and tried the man’s pulse.

“So?” I said when he came back.

“He’s dead.”

“I told you.”

I crouched by a tree and surveyed the woods.

“What’s taking so long?” asked Jerry.

“Relax.”

“I am relaxed. I’m just wondering.”

“The Sheriff’s probably on the water. It’ll take him a bit to get back.”

I told him the story Paoli had once related to me as we watched a kid lug a huge saxophone case across the street. I’d told it before, but this was our trade; I would tell Jerry stories and he would keep me company.

Halfway through it I had to stop.

“You see,” I said, “the things I did were not exactly criminal but occupied that vague boundary that came with associating with a certain type of guy. I associated heavily with that kind of guy. If you asked me straight up, I would say, ‘Yes. This is maybe unlawful,’ but I couldn’t tell you what law we were breaking or what the statute of limitations was for picking up a guy from the barber’s shop, driving him five miles under the speed limit into Nassau, over the Meadowbrook and crisscrossing the Northern state then back to the Wantagh and across to the Belt Parkway and the

airport, walking him inside, making sure his tickets were in order and then waiting around to ensure he hadn't doubled back. Often I'd deliver a bunch of guys to a car that I'm sure was stolen, would be used later for something heavier, but I was never involved directly. I knew guys that had probably been knocked off, but then again, I couldn't be sure and could only guess at the guys who might've been involved. Because everyone acted like they knew what was going on, like they always had a line going.

"Okay," said Jerry, acting uninterested.

"You see," I told Jerry, "Paoli considered me like a son, but what did that mean? If I'd stayed anything could have happened."

"I don't feel like hearing about Paoli right now."

The light had receded so that the body appeared to move under the shadows.

"You love hearing about it all fuckin' day," I said and rubbed my hands together, "but as soon as we get into something a little rough you shut down."

"I'm fine. I just don't want to hear it again."

"If they really knew that I was here, they'd collect as much information as possible before resorting to a sweep. If that's the case, though, there would've been signs left all over. If there's a mailbox at a house they've already checked, they'd scrape the paint of the bottom right corner. If not, they'd come back at night and spray paint something at the beginning of the driveway, something that would look like graffiti a kid might've done. They would know that I was aware of these signs, but that didn't matter. The point was that I knew. They would try to scare me into leaving, would flush me into some bottleneck."

"Are you worried?"

"Nah. At this point, they've probably given up looking. These people are economical. Time is money."

A whistling came from the path that had led us into the meadow.

“What the fuck is that?” I asked.

“It’s a bird, probably.”

A man stepped off the trail onto the clearing. We watched him look around and extend the legs of a tripod for what looked like a camera. He tilted the telescope upwards and looked down into its view finder.

“Hey,” I yelled out to him.

He looked up and squinted in the dim light to find my voice.

“Hello,” he said.

I walked over to him.

“Listen, buddy. We just sent a couple of our friends back for the Sheriff. We found a body over there near the treeline.” I pointed. “We’re trying not to move around too much to disturb any evidence.”

“Jesus,” the man said.

He looked behind him at the trail, already dark.

“Was it a suicide?” he asked kind of hopefully.

“We don’t know. We’re waiting on the Sheriff.”

“He’s on his way?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll go to my car and wait for him.”

I looked at Jerry then across the meadow at the back of the man’s head and his stretch of neck.

“I’ll go back with you and see what my friends have to say,” I said.

I waved to Jerry.

"I'm gonna check what they have to say," I said.

He waved me off and crouched down by the tree. The man left his telescope and followed me back through the trail

"You don't sound from around here?" I asked him.

"No, I'm on vacation."

"Oh, yeah? I thought you were a local. You look kind of familiar."

"Nope. You?"

"I've lived here all my life."

He stopped.

"What're you doing?" I asked him.

"Trying to locate the trail."

"We're on it."

"You sure?"

"Definitely."

The path wound on much longer as we had to take smaller steps in the dark.

"This is crazy," I said trying to reassure the guy.

"Yeah, it's terrible."

He searched through his pockets for his keys.

"I hope the Sheriff comes soon," he said. "All of a sudden I could use a beer."

"Agreed. Though I'm not drinking anymore."

"Some coffee, then."

The words came out flat. He clipped his lips against it, had suppressed a hidden intonation.

His boots had thrown me off but there was something there. I pretended to fix my shoelace and picked up a rock.

When I stood up the man asked me if I was all right.

“Yeah. Fine.”

There was a damp crack to our right like a stick trod under foot. I stopped.

All the breeze was a whisper.

I could feel the stupid days of my childhood welling up, when even walking across the room was difficult and my memory wasn't all that reliable. There were summer afternoons when my Dad had paid me a quarter an hour to sit by my baby cousin and swat away the cluster flies that massed around a hole in the ceiling and threatened to crawl down his throat. There was a spot illuminated amongst the haze of new thoughts: my father bringing his shovel down on a black widow scrambling from a rock pile. It bled red blood. I would hide in a closet to keep from going to school while my mother screamed herself hoarse. I had worried about my father, what Paoli would do to him, whether he'd lose his poker game. I knew that my father was alive somewhere. I had always assumed that I could go back and see him. He had loved Bob Melbo, just like the rest of the world did. But it felt like Bob really was my dad's special friend. I could picture him watching the evening news at that moment, shaking his head in silence. He was not the sort to run into the streets and join the arsonists. His girlfriend—if she was still around—would offer him a coffee, and he would wave his hand, ‘no.’

“How can I drink,” he'd say, “when Bob ain't got nothing at all.”

“A Goose Leaves for Winter”

In Margoline, my hometown, the red death began during the October harvest moon. There are no streetlights in the country, and that was the first time you could see the cows at night, lying where they had grazed, bloated like great pimples ready to burst. The dairy men would post forty yards away and shoot a couple rounds into them to release the pressure. Even from there you could get the smell, see the red mist floating above their exploded stomachs.

The rendering trucks scoured the valleys at all hours, and still, Jansen rode his bike at night, no light, his chains oiled silent to creep up and spit on anyone who would give him the chance. He's the dog of Chenango County; he never remembers where he's been, but he always knows where he's going.

Sipping their kettle whiskey and tea, the porch-bound farmers would yell to each other, “Hide your livestock,” as he passed. They would start to laugh, unable to really get into it before the coughing overtook them. They believe that what he has is an acquired taste. But those of us who made it through high school know that he's just crazy.

She would say it as if I knew what she was talking about.

“A goose leaves for winter,” she'd repeat and laugh to herself.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

I was earnest. I had been kind, too. But, I never did receive an answer. It was just something she liked to say, a private joke that held meaning to her because it was hers alone.

“I can take you anywhere you want,” I told her, but she said that couldn't be far enough.

When she threatened to move away I said I'd follow.

“You won't even notice me,” I said. “I'll be a fly on the wall of your life.”

I explained that most people only have themselves to get along.

She would wave me away as if I was not capable of fulfilling a wish, making a woman happy.

I told her again that she had to believe me when I said, "Anything."

I told her not to touch me, but then held her and made every promise I could think of.

When she had heard it all, I thrust my hands against the exposed foundation in our bedroom, so she could witness the extent of my devotion.

"See?" I'd tell her, bloodying the concrete. "Can you see what this is like?"

She'd comb her hair at night in the window with the lamp beside her, and I'd say, "Close the blinds if you're going to stand there naked," but she would turn and press her ass against the glass to give herself a shiver.

When we visited Buffalo we stayed in the Hilton which overhung the highway. Early in the morning she woke me up from across the room, yelling at the traffic below.

"What are you doing?" I asked, half asleep, and she pressed herself against the whole pane, headlights bursting through the early morning fog to swipe across her body.

"I'm fucking the whole city," she said, but there was nothing to do about it.

There had been two accidents. All those other cars were squeezing around the wrecks, their drivers speeding to work now, blinking hard and trying to remember the details of her standing there.

This is what I remember from that time:

Candles. Loads of candles.

Her gloves always missing.

Unplugging the refrigerator.

Sitting stoned and watching a leaky spot in the roof form an indoor icicle.

Welling's tool shed, mysteriously aflame. Neighbors standing away, asking questions but then moving closer, enjoying the warmth. A bottle passed silently around.

Breezes passing through what I was sure were solid walls.

Cruising Crest and Main hoping to run into a friend, but really just hoping to run into anyone.

Trees that looked deformed, possibly evil, without leaves.

Using the same mug for everything: coffee, water, beer.

The deer newly unafraid, walking past us onto the porch to nibble at the top of our pathetic azalea. Kicking at them to leave.

Always pacing.

Knowing that movement meant warmth but sweat was to be avoided.

A salt block, propped on a pylon, with divots licked into it by former cows. It looked like a block of swiss cheese carved in marble.

Her truck's loose exhaust pipe rattling as she pulled in front of our home.

Optional streetlights.

The city opened up.

Merchandise moved out, families packed away to unsullied regions.

Cows dyed red from iodine washes.

Gray skies.

The clouds would darken before dusk, and you'd think it was night before there was a break in the cover and a sliver of sunlight poured onto a distant swath of pines—like god was favoring some fallen animal.

A new kind of excess. The massive shopping complex on 20 housing a single storefront. Three empty silos for a bushel of approved grain.

Quiet roads.

Out of nowhere, a strange warm day and the smell of sugar beets rotting in their fields.

Betting whether I could lie in the road for a half hour, just before our blind turn, and not be hit.

Lying down in the road. Hoping she would think to say, “stop that.”

My mother’s driveway blocked with snow. She got it all, it seemed.

The bedroom door blown open by a change in air pressure. Arguing who would close it until we had both fallen asleep shivering.

Even after we fought, we would huddle close for warmth. The house was so drafty that it forced us back together. She’d come in late at night and say, “We are not a couple, but this is too cold.”

Perpetually making tea to feel the warmth of the heating coil.

Taping her hair dryers to the wall to ease drying after a shower.

Mac and cheese for every meal.

When she was younger, she told me, she would steal her mother’s lingerie. While the house was empty, in a room where she could see the driveway through the slitted horizontal blinds, she took bobby pins and wrapped the panties, twice her size, around her hips. She’d tie it first in the front, turning in the mirror to see what her butt looked like and then in the back, kneeling on the floor, bending, posing.

“We knew he had something devastating lined up,” my Uncle told me. “He said, ‘Get Cheri over here. I want to tell her something.’” My uncle said that his grandfather—my great-grandfather—had called his wife to his bed as he was dying to tell her that all their life together he had been unfaithful.

“Holy shit.”

“Yup.”

“Is that true?” I asked.

He sliced off a piece of apple.

“No. It wasn’t true,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“I went to him just after, when my grandmother had left the room. I was kind of angry he’d ruined this nice moment. I said, ‘Did you really have to tell her that?’ ‘It’s not true,’ he told me. And I asked, ‘Why would you say it then?’ He was tired of everyone feeling sorry for him.”

There is no forgetfulness. Every memory is held in place. We choose which to push to the front of the mind—our collage of life.

They said that what killed the cows was still in the soil, that the county had put a hold on livestock acquisitions until a few winters had passed. There were superstitious folks who wouldn’t step on bare earth. They kept away from the tillage like it was going to reach out and grab them. The grass was gradually accepted for walking, though still with a good deal of suspicion. There wasn’t any milk either, which was fine. We drank creamer and water.

She was explaining it to me over dinner.

“Love should be a bottomless pit,” is what she said.

“Of what?” I asked.

“Of affection.”

I swallowed before I could speak.

“Like you fall through it forever?”

She held my hand.

“Yes,” she said.

“That sounds ominous.”

She returned to her salad, and from under her breath I thought I heard her say:

“It is.”

I imagined finding her at home with someone else in bed. Then I could be sure. I could say, “That’s that.” No chance of error. It would be a pristine moment. It’s the fantasy of being righteous. Sometimes I thought about doing a vanishing act. With all my stuff left in place I would disappear, but I feared she wouldn’t seek after me long. We felt sudden waves of compassion for each other. Periodically, she would say something like, “We’ll go to the Caribbean and set up a little stand selling coconut juice to tourists. We can live on the beach and clam with our toes. We don’t have to come back. We can befriend the wild animals so that they’re calm with us and let us pet them. Once they’re comfortable enough, we can have meat anytime we want. We could pull out our knives and stick one. There’d be venison and pork and whatever else they have down there, chickens and other things.”

We had an old mutt that was infuriated by wheels. Skateboard wheels, bike wheels, tractor wheels, car wheels. I’d hear Jansen by day, screaming to himself as he rode along the road and feared that the dog would get his neck caught in the spokes. Our dog—what I should say is that she really considered it mine—was not quick, but he was clever and knew all of the shortcuts in the area. He’d hear a sound and squeeze himself under the fence through one of the rabbit troughs and would run

along the cemetery wall before the neighbor's property, headed toward the road, not knowing what he would find. Eventually he got better until, finally, he caught one.

On that day, he simply clamped his jaws and held on. I imagine he felt he'd won. I think it had to have been quick.

Seeing that nothing could be done, she left him in the street hoping I would come home soon to retrieve him, but our neighbor had picked him up before that, wrapped him in a towel, and placed him in a spot that she thought we'd like to bury him.

The last time there was a scare like this, I was standing in an orchard under my father's ladder. There had been rumors going around about the dairy then, and when he saw me pick an apple off the ground and bring it to my face, he leapt down, nearly on top of me, and slapped it from my hand. I cried for what felt like hours. He lifted me over one shoulder and carried me home. My mother scolded him, "Did you have to do that? You could have yelled at him." He was ashamed, and I know now that he had just been scared. But for a long time I felt that in his depths my father was a violent man.

She would wake me up in the middle of the night to tell me things she knew I would be too tired to respond to. She would sit next to me and shake me until I opened my eyes, and she would say, "I don't think I could ever love you more than my family," or "The best sex I've ever had was not with you," which was fine because it seemed true. I knew that everything she did was meant to wound, but I couldn't be sure how much it was meant to.

Then one morning I woke and found a bull, stained red, standing silently on our porch looking toward the road. When I opened the door it turned, its horns scraping the paint, creating small punctures in the soft pine. It faced me, this bull from hell, and that was enough for me to say,

“That’s that.” I went back inside and told her. That wasn’t quite it though. It took another month, and she ended up being the one who had to do it.

Once that was done, we lived together for two months more—mostly because of the weather. This time is the most vivid. It was exhilarating to think of a new future, without really having to endure her absence yet.

We covered the windows in our bedroom with seat cushions, table cloths and extra pillows, taped them and tacked them together to insulate us from what was outside. We would take a flashlight into the sheets and use a short dowel to prop up a canopy to make it seem as if we were camping. We made confessions to each other. We were newly freed, and none of the words felt as if they had any weight.

“I think of other girls sometimes,” I told her, “most of the time, when we’re fucking.”

“That’s okay. You know, I’ve had other guys while we were together. So, that’s not so bad.”

“Who?”

“You wouldn’t know them.”

I laughed. I couldn’t stop laughing.

“Callie made an offer once,” I said and pulled her closer. “She typed it on her phone, while you were asleep on the couch and showed it to me. It said, ‘I’m too drunk. Say you have to drive me home. It’ll be fun...I promise.’”

“When was that?”

“New Year’s Eve.”

“What did you say?”

“I said it was very tempting, but I couldn’t. She made another pass after you had gone to bed, when I brought her a pillow and a sleeping bag.”

“You should have done it.”

“I know.”

“Half the time I tell you I’m coming, I really just want you to finish up. Maybe more than that.”

“I sort of suspected that.”

She kissed me lightly.

“No you didn’t.”

We shivered though we had already warmed up. She was giddy, and it was infecting me.

“When you say you’re sore, I go harder so that you’ll feel it later.”

“I can’t look in the mirror when we’re going at it. Your ass looks like an old man’s, and it makes me think of your penis as this shriveled little sausage. It’s terrible. You’re good from the hips up, but below that is really ugly.”

She reached down and tugged hard on my testicles. She was whispering right into my ear so that her words were amplified, a whistling in her teeth blew through me like a wind tunnel. We tried to shock each other. We made up new pasts for ourselves, exaggerated what was almost true.

“This was in high school,” she said, “when I lived in Buffalo. I worked for this guy. I’d met him in a café and told him I was eighteen. He paid me to meet him at a hotel once a week and have sex with him. I think he was a banker. He said he’d had lots of them younger than me. I had a friend who would cover for me.”

“Oh. Did he have green eyes?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Your mother came on to me. I didn’t know what to do, but I wanted to see what you would be like in thirty years. So, of course. It was all right. That extra fat on your hips actually has a nice effect, it doesn’t look like it’s connected to the rest of you, it moves freely like it’s held on by a thin tissue.”

She put her hands on the sides of my neck to warm them. She moved her thumbs over my adam’s apple, pressing lightly.

“I considered killing you once,” she said. “You had pushed me into such a state, and I could see everything lined up, you’re brother asking after you, going into the police station to confess or maybe fleeing to South America, the rest of my life dissolving.”

“What kept you from doing it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Laziness?”

Then, just before she left:

“Do you have everything?” I asked one more time.

She didn’t turn around.

“I can’t see what I might have left that I actually need.”

I have a theory for just about everything. Even when I’m wrong I’ll stick to it because someone told me convictions are important regardless of whether they are right. That’s what sets us apart somewhat. As a species, I mean. We can do what is unnatural.

She called a few weeks after that to prod me, to see what I’d been up to.

“Ask me where I’ve been,” she said. “I’ve done something. You can tell, I know. I’ll tell you, if you ask nice. I haven’t left at all. You didn’t know I can be two places at once.” Then, slowly, “I know what you’ve done.” She paused. “You know you can’t lie to me.”

I cultivated a new look for myself. I had bought a suit secondhand and paired it with a shirt, some black shoes that I shined to obsidian pureness. I was navy blue now. I thought about what colors I had represented before. People would remember me in brown, grease-stained indigo, every part of me scuffed and embedded with dirt, discolored from wear.

After she had been gone a week, I drove into Culvert City and walked around amongst strangers to test out the change. I knew that if I was going to stick with it I couldn't bear any ridicule, and so avoided friends, acquaintances, neighbors' kids. At the first crosswalk, I wished that I had brought something to hold, a store bag, or a briefcase, even a newspaper. I put my hands in my pockets but felt obtrusive in the new look. You know from a young age that it feels most right to keep your head down and blend. I was drawing invisible lines in the air, signposts for strangers to look at me. I wished that I had worn it from the beginning, that it would be common for me to put on such a suit, and no one would ask, "You gettin' married?"

It was cold, but I moved fast, pretending like I had somewhere to be. From the back of a restaurant bar, which I suspected was pricey given the absence of prices, I stared at the women who came through and tried not to look lonely but soon wished I had brought something to read.

I didn't think to get gas in Culvert and had to stop at the local BP on the way home. I was hoping to just fill a couple gallons worth and get out of there, but I fumbled the zip code and had to go to the cashier.

"How much?" he asked.

I was embarrassed to say 'five.'

"Twenty," I said and handed him the card.

Bud McKenzie was hanging around the beverage window, picking out a six-pack for himself, and stepped out to see what I was doing.

“Where you going dressed up?” he asked.

“I’m going home.”

“Oh, where’d you come from?”

“I was meeting a woman in Culvert.”

“That’s what you wear to pick up pussy?”

“No. She was an old friend.”

Someone had jammed their pump lever while they shopped and gas flowed onto the ground. An attendant ran outside to pull it out. Bud pocketed a bag of almonds. The smell of gas in the cold air took on a sharpness. In the summer it would be spicy, intoxicating in its loftier billows.

“You look like you’re coming from the catholic school dance,” he said.

He started again but then saw my face and stopped. He smiled, and I felt like going to the pump and lighting the station on fire.

“This is what I wear now,” I told him, “so shut up about it.”

I had to retake my operator course. Everyone was telling us to be ready, though nothing was going. They showed us photos and videos from the local fire department and first responders. They were emphasizing equipment safety. There was a video from the Sheriff’s dashboard. It showed a pair of converse sneakers standing at attention beside an active combine. The class moderator told us that the legs, and everything else that came with it, had been severed clean above the ankles. I asked if this information was going to keep me from tripping and taking a dive into the rakes? They said that if I didn’t take the course seriously I wouldn’t be cleared for driving, but I checked later and there weren’t any state certifications pending. We were already good for another two years. Lots of the guys had been complaining, I think, and I honestly felt that they had brought us in there just to display some real horror.

Jansen was in a festive mood that whole month. He'd stopped scaring pedestrians and had taken to laughing wherever he went. You could hear him for a half mile before he arrived, laughing his big belly laugh. What was more was that it wasn't forced. It was genuine emotion, and I wondered whether he had actually done it, caused the sort of cataclysm he had been hoping for all that time sneaking about, scaring people.

In the spring, I met a girl who was kind enough to fall in love with. It was a fantastic time. I felt as though I was being army-carried to safety. She had slung my limp body onto her back and brought me to a soft place where I was warm and well-fed, where blowjobs were not rationed, where she took as much pleasure from my body as I did from hers. I felt like I had been taken deep into the wilds, but she, too, had no sympathy for animals, and it didn't last long. I was telling myself that true love was a service. It is a life of solitude, given to someone you believe deserves that kind of attention. I thought this, wrote this, but never spoke it. And when I received a call late at night asking if I could come pick her up, I would tell her that I was sorry, but she had made a mistake: "I think you have the wrong number."

Bud took me fishing most Fridays on his boat on Oneida Lake. He said that a day in the cold air never failed to make one hungry. It was a time for reflection. I drew my self-portrait in a tangle of fishing line; I saw my counterpart in the lowest of creatures. I didn't have an image for the proper stand-in, but then I found it. It was out on the line, a solid weight that did not change, and I thought that we'd snagged a boot or a piece of trash until we pulled it in, the fish not putting up a fight, so still we thought it was dead on the hook. On one side of its mouth was a jagged hole where some previous hook had been torn out either through its own effort or a fisherman's hand. On the other

side was mine. Its gills flexed open. Its mouth gaped. Without struggle, I didn't think it would make a good meal and so threw it back. Bud laughed and said, "That was so easy it didn't seem quite worth it." I had clipped the hook's barb and slid one of his lures onto the line. Bud popped open another can, letting the foam drizzle onto his pant leg. "You think that's what Darwin had in mind when he thought up survival?"

If you have lived through one of these seasons, you remember the dirt distinctly. There's no avoiding it. It is crisp from a layer of frost, but once that is broken there is soft ground underneath. This is at the end of October before it gets really cold. You really remember that dirt. It is a treat to walk on, like a vast *crème brulée*. Punch through and feel the softness underneath.

I kept walking, knowing that when I got home I would dip my boots in a pot of thinned bleach. The cows don't know this. They feel it, and they stand still. It forms a warm pocket if they stand there long enough—the only part of them that's warm. They remember it. It is forever under their feet.

We walk from bar to bar now, searching. We stay until morning. Even then, we don't go home until we hear Jansen coming down the street, roaring hysterically. He's going to die of laughter. Like that Mongol general who watched his drunken donkey roll in the dirt, trying to get at his bowl of dates.

I caught sight of a woman across the bar who smiled at me, and when I smiled back she turned her head because I just happened to be in the way of something she was looking at. Bud was leaning against the jukebox. He nodded his head to the music, though it wasn't in rhythm. And I realized he wasn't listening at all but entranced, watching the ceiling fan turn round and round and round. We are the dogs of Chenango County.

Out on the street, it was warmer than inside. A goose flapped by, and I started to run. Bud yelled after me. I felt a laugh welling up, the kind that puts the insane in motion, propelling them along like jet fuel, and I chased it all the way home.

“The Firth of Froth”

Bedauern. I was suprised to find that he had a word for it, tucked in a capsule under his tongue. He sprang it on me like it was a weapon, but still he smiled. “What does that mean?” I asked him. “It's a German word,” he said. “It doesn't mean anything.”

When we brought him in for good, he thought that he was going to the dentist. It's the only doctor he'll see, so that's what we say. When he got his heart surgery, he went to the dentist for it.

Whenever he was put inside MRI tubes it was the dentists that ordered it. He puts all of his trust in them though most of his teeth aren't his own, and he's got at least three roots pulled. This is just one of the things that he's made up for himself. Sometimes I have to ask him if he knows what is real. “He knows,” he says. I told him that he's never let me down. Just when I think he will never emerge from his dreamworld, he surprises me, so I know that he's been here the whole time.

Every thought was once an ant climbing into its mound. They will arrive with sugar held before them. They know the difference between saccharine and the real thing. We can't see the difference. They're counting on that.

I can't imagine what he does when I'm not there. I don't think this is selfish. I think he really does sit there and wait. He's always telling the other patients to shut up. Every time they speak or sing or mess up their faces and cry into spaghetti, he waves his hands to get them to shut it while he listens. He doesn't know that his phone is in his room at the end of the corridor, that a nurse can show him the way if he just thought to ask.

There are two brothers who come every day to sit with their mother. One is tall and fat while the other very short and so thin he seems to be wasting. Everyone speaks to this one as if he only has a short while, but I think that he's all right health-wise. The two flank her to help out with

the feeding or holding the picture pad in place while she colors in spastic circles. If she locates something interesting, they turn their heads with her to see what she is looking at. They don't really talk but just sit.

I introduced myself once, and they were congenial enough and shook my hand, but kept quiet when I asked what they did. I asked the nurse who only said that they're there most days. I wonder what breeds that kind of loyalty. To offer up your good years for someone who's not even whole anymore. I've been squeezing around their chairs for a couple years now, and I don't think that it's for love. She's into them for something. I can't be sure what. They're quiet in the way that you don't see them half the time you look at them. They keep her busy. Maybe they're trying to keep her quiet too.

I received a call a few hours after I left him. I heard someone out of breath. Then his voice came panting between words; he wanted to know that I had gotten home okay. I couldn't believe it. I said, "Yes, Papa." And though I was just sitting in bed with my jacket still on, I told him that I had lit a fire in the fireplace and was heating up some water for tea. I had oatmeal cookies with me, I said. I'd try to bring some the next time I was by. He liked that. He said he'd like some. I told him that I was reading a book and asked if he'd like me to read it to him. He said okay, and I told him to lie down on his bed, that he could bring the phone with him. For a minute there was a scraping sound as I imagined him gripping the railings or nightstand to push himself onto the bed. There was no book with me so I recited Hadrian's poem. I told him that it was a girl instead of the boy that Hadrian loved and who drowned in the Nile. "What?" he asked. "THE NILE," I said. "Not to be confused with denial." "Oh," he said, but I didn't think he quite understood. When she left he had statues of her sculpted and placed at every gate of the city, so that if she returned she would know that the entire empire knelt before her. She never saw it and for years many people were confused who this

young woman was. He said, "well" a number of times but didn't go on. "You should close your eyes and try to go to sleep, Papa. I'm okay." "Okay," he said. "Goodnight." "Goodnight." With the phone connection gone I tried to imagine what he was doing but couldn't. All this time that I had been home he was searching for the note with my number tacked clearly to his wall. We didn't have any hope of him finding it. It was a feat, an olympic trial recomposed into a simple impossible task. But there he'd been, on the other line, finding his way through the dark without any help from me.

Shabriri.

Briri.

Riri.

Iri.

Ri.

You don't have to repeat it.

You just have to get it right once, goddamit.

The house, dedicated to dwelling, all cooking done beyond its perimeter, stuffed with clay and straw and mortared to a robust thickness with clay brick, would be his preferred refuge. It changed a bit since he left but all the necessities were in place. He would see no difference. There will be one floor with a mud patch and religious devotional just inside the doorway. Squirrels and rock doves will populate the attic. Raccoons will test the boundaries for open pathways to stored goods. Within proximity of the last day of spring the river will storm its banks and a flood will flow across the fields. For this reason there is no basement. When we hear it coming we open doors up, scrub soap across the floor and sleep in the attic with the nesting types. In the morning, we shine, and the sun lights our way.

I met the little Český my grandfather had mistakenly written to.

Papa had written to many people just before we brought him in. God knows how many addresses he placed correctly.

I waited at the bus stop for the airport coach and spoke his name at four separate men before he walked up at my right and tapped me on the shoulder. He had a buddy with him, one bag held between them. It was clear that he was a relative. He had the family forehead.

“Jan,” I said.

He nodded and I walked them to the car. I unlocked the trunk and felt another tap on the shoulder. I turned around. It was his friend.

“I will be telling you what and that he says, and him to you,” said his buddy.

“Okay, good. I was afraid that you were both mute.”

I opened the trunk for them. They looked inside it suspiciously and then went to the back seat, sliding the bag between them.

“Did you get my letter?” I asked them.

The friend translated. Jan shook his head.

“I don’t know what my grandfather said,” I told them. “I can’t pay you anything.”

This was translated, and they both looked at each other and whispered quietly.

“You don’t have to whisper. I don’t know what you’re saying.”

The friend held up a finger for me to wait.

“What will we do?” he asked.

“I don’t know. You can stay in the field house. We’ve got enough to eat. That’s all I’ve got.”

More whispers.

“We will stay.”

Not a week before, the cousins and I had been plucking onions from the side of the creek, then the horseradish tucked farther down in the muck lining the creek bed. We were wrapped up in the plentiful days at the end of summer. There was some time between the brassicas and cucurbits and our days were full of grain. The black dust of ergot rose over the combine to settle in our hair and sting our eyes. We walked to the creek to wash off and collect some of the seasoning for dinner. I liked the onion flowers perched high on their stalks, suspended like fireworks frozen post-ignition. When I was a kid the favorite plants were the strangest looking, the kohlrabi, the purple-dipped turnips and candied red radishes that launched themselves out of the soil. We imagined creatures that lived below the ground, scrambling through caves and pushing up their goods to us for the water that we seeped down to them. My grandfather called the seeds his tokens. It was known in the family that he tended to forgotten gods. My father thought he was a pagan, but we all thought he was good fun and enjoyed his claims to an ancient magic.

We followed the combine, torching the stalks so that they crumpled onto the ground. It would rain tomorrow and the ash could still be taken up. The combine halted and Peter stepped out from it and yelled down to us. It seemed there had been a call from home.

Again, Papa was lost.

He told me that he thinks he has nothing left to learn. "Except that one thing," he says and winks. "I'll tell you what I've learned so far, but it almost doesn't matter. You won't believe me until you see it for yourself."

I tried the old familiar spots, the ones that held a special gravity to him, but realized that as his mind softened he might not recognize the paths, the cuts through the treeline. I didn't bother with the

ponds. He didn't trust the water—even small pools that you could stand in. A boat had taken him on its blind path to Europe and had brought him home again three years later, full of metal and crushed bone, marrow seeping out like a slow leak in the plumbing.

I found him standing at the treeline, behind a rotted and crumbling oak and looking out onto the field. The slippery stream rocks had brought him to his knees because his pants were soaked through. He heard me behind him.

“All the bloodied fields in this county, there was no fight on this one,” he said.

“This is Cornelia field. Hagel field is behind us. That what you mean?”

He looked back at where I had come from.

“Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“Then I am being misled.”

“It's all you, Papa. You're old now.”

“That's not it. Something led me here to press tokens in the wrong place.”

“That's all right. Let's go back to the house.”

I led him through the woods and back to the cart that I'd driven out.

“Is this it?” he said and pointed to the field.

“Yes. That's it.”

“Good. I won't be misled long.”

He licked his finger and stuck it into the envelope of seeds then, slowly, bent and jammed it into a spot of relenting ground.

Where there is no more thought. Where is there no more thought?

We were moving. Papa was thinking hard. I could tell. He let go of the rail, and I told him to hold on. He listened and felt around for a proper grip.

“How do you know that no one died here?” I asked.

“As far as anyone’s told me, as far as the histories go, there’s nothing.”

“But you and they can only see so far back. Someone must’ve died here.”

“You mean the memories have never reached us?”

“We just don’t know.”

“No. I don’t think so. I would’ve seen the signs.”

“It’s just a field.”

“It’s a refuge.”

“For who.”

“Who do you think, you idiot?”

“Oh. Yeah, of course. Let’s get you inside.”

I helped him change out of his pants into dry ones and seated him by the fire to warm.

Ginger lifted up on bubbling oil as the garlic and onion were set in a separate pan to sauté. I left the pan open, allowing the gases to spread through the open door so that there would be no doubt for Papa of the tastes that were coming his way. He picked at a dried flower and noticed the folks walking home from work. We let them use the roads between our fields.

He waved to some of those he thought he knew.

Before he went to sleep I assured him that the doors had been locked, the trap lines wedged beneath the sitting room windows. He said he wouldn’t forgive himself if one of them got in.

There are boys that run through this country at night. They are mischief makers. They are thieves. They tip ashtrays onto feather quilts. They throw cow shit into drinking wells. They string dead animals from the windows of sleeping children. If you can catch one you have to make yourself known, scream to the rest of them that you have captured one

of their number and will eat him alive. Then they will make you one of them and you will live forever and run across deny fields in their dance of destruction.

When I returned home from dropping him off that first day, I found a man sitting underneath one of our shade trees, planted for the cows near the edge of the wheat. He sat in my grandfather's lawn chair and was looking up into the branches at a bird or some squirrel moving around. There was a glass beside him with a book resting on top of it. A bee crawled about its lip testing the way out. I knew this man, but couldn't begin to think why he might be here.

"Hello," was all I could think to say.

He turned but did not get out of the chair. He held an air as if I had just disturbed him in his own home.

"Well. I haven't seen you so often," he said. "I almost didn't know who you were."

"Yeah. I thought I recognized you."

Though I already knew it, I asked him to remind me of his name.

"Roger," he said. "Do you remember me?"

"I think so."

He encouraged play amongst the boys, liked to tape their hands in old rags and tell them that they were monsters sent to destroy the cities. I only met him a couple times. His son said they played this way every day. You could hit anyone you wanted except in the nuts. He said the game was good because it let you know who was who. If you punch a guy he'll punch you back. If you hit him in the ear or in the nose he's going to wail on you. My cousin Mark was a bit different. If you as much as tapped him he would hit you in the nuts and beat on you while you were down. Once monsters was done he wouldn't stop. He'd wait till later and knock you out when you weren't expecting it. Everyone was afraid of him, so we made him our leader. Mark was his son.

“I hear that your grandfather’s been put away,” he said.

“He’s at the home if that’s what you mean.”

“He made plans for paying me what he owes?”

“I don’t think he owes you anything. I’d know about it if he did.”

“Isn’t that perfect? He’s got a couple year’s salary waiting for me.”

“Did you come here to hustle us?”

I stepped closer to him. He got up from his seat and came towards me.

“So what you’re saying is that I’m not going to get what I worked for.”

“If you were owed something, I’d pay it. There’s no agreement that exists that says I should give you anything.”

He sat back down making himself comfortable.

“Now, that’s not right, is it?” he said. “You can stand there and flaunt your property. You’ve inherited everything you’ve got. You’ve got that on me. But I bring you down and you’ll see there’s only a couple breaths between you and nothing.”

“You think you’re being clever.”

“Don’t cast aspersions. I know what you are.”

He leaned far back in the chair and let loose a playground grin. Slowly, he stood again.

“In all my wanderings and in all I’ve seen,” he said, “the world never stopped for a moment of astonishment that something like me could exist. The ground isn’t impressed with your standing on it.”

With that, he left almost satisfied.

He knew there was no money for him, but he wanted to have a reason to hate me, even if he had to make it up.

I had the Českýs with me digging drainage tiles. They've been alarmed by the bones we pull up with the rock picker. I showed them the old well, and we tossed them down. Slowly, it's getting fuller. It's been some time since I last heard a splash. Hopefully, I'll be an old man by the time we've filled it up and have to look again at what we've collected.

With Papa looked after, I realized I could stop by and see May whenever I wanted to.

I'd been waiting for the bus to take me to the auctioneers when the number 8 came by, completely empty, as if it was sent for me alone. I got in and was dropped off twenty minutes later a few blocks from her and John's place.

When I walked up to the house she was waiting by the door to let me in. She knew the bus schedule, and I wondered if she was hoping I would show up. The bus driver was a cousin. Maybe she got him a case of beer to show up a little early.

"Tell you what I think," she said.

"What?"

"You're making a habit of this. I had a feeling you'd be by."

"Am I that predictable?"

"You're all predictable. You think your dick's some sort of divining rod. And now you're here as if you didn't know what it was you were doing that whole time."

I was embarrassed and wanted to make a point that I had not just come for sex.

"I thought we could go see a movie. Or go for a walk to the Breckheim."

"I've got work to do."

"So do I."

She tied a knot in the trash bag and left it outside the door.

"It doesn't have to be long," I told her, "or we can stay here if you don't want to be seen."

“You think I care about that?”

“Yes.”

She blinked.

“Well, sure, but not like you think. Anyway, things are only going to get worse between us from here.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“For what we’re doing, the first time was always going to be the best.”

“We’ll go for a walk then.”

“Okay. Do you want to bring something to eat?”

“Sure I would.”

She opened the fridge and pulled out a block of crumbly cheddar. She buttered a couple rolls and filled their centers with the cheese and some honey to seal it.

“Now that I’ve smelled the food, I don’t know if I can wait.”

“You have to. I’m not eating my sandwich alone.”

We took off through their backyard into the state forest. Every yard around had a small trail that led to the major trailhead which would link up to the Breckheim overlook. I let her go first as she knew the way better. She led me around brambles, pointed out the poison ivy tangled and hidden amongst other foliage.

“When I was little,” I said, “I was never hungry. The smell of cooking made me sick to my stomach.”

“When did that stop?”

“I don’t know. When I was like twenty-three.”

“That means you’re going to be fat in ten years.”

“It’ll be a sign of my wealth.”

At the overlook I asked her what I had come to ask:

“What about when you get pregnant? Are we gonna stop then?”

She didn't answer for a long time.

“I don't know,” she said. “Probably. Can't you entertain yourself without me?”

My dreams are taking on their own peculiar life. I have nightmares all night long, and every morning I wake up feeling that I have spent a lifetime in those dreams. Last night I dreamt of May. She was doing what she usually does in those dreams. I didn't even have much of an attraction to her until she and John asked if I would help them have a baby.

We went to the doctors and saw how much it would be, so they elected for the natural way.

John's been taking it hard, but they want kids and know that I am a good friend with the right intentions. They'd rather it be me than spend all the money they've saved for the kid.

May's been watching over my dreams like some gargoyle in lingerie. Each day I get closer. I feel like I am becoming a second husband. I really had no interest in her before, but now that I've been asked to do this, I'm crazy for it.

I brought the Českýs over to see Papa. I asked if they wanted me to tell him something, but they shook their heads. I explained who they were--the Bohunk cousins he'd written to--and he nodded as if I were telling him that they were the angels of death. They stared at him and him back at them until he fell asleep.

Doctors are saying that they worry about him, but I try to tell them that they're getting it all wrong, that the things they've marked in their logs are traits he's had his whole life. As far as I've known him. He doesn't recognize the important details in events. A good deal of what he says seems to be without context unless you know the meter of his voice, can attribute common feeling and

connotation to the rhyme of his words, the softening of his palette under certain patterns of repetition.

If he was to go and see a baseball game the only thing he would remember would be the sound of the urinals between innings flushing in rapid sequence. He would look at the sky and know only the promise of night. Long ago, he might have taken a woman home, would know that she is gentle, only to feel the spring of bristles and the harsh scrape of her hands moving through his hair.

He has felt many things through the vibration of his teeth. He has taken his approach slowly, accumulating small explanations that can only be rectified under this new knowledge—his massive burden of creation.

The first time I'd met Roger I was very young, almost too young to remember. He was amongst the laborers coming in off the fields who settled around the fountain to relax and smoke before the convoys took them away. He approached me while I was playing in the yard. He sat on our porch and pulled me over to sit on his knee while he explained who he was. Before he got a chance, Papa lifted me off and kicked him into the dirt. He kept kicking until Roger crawled away and took off.

“Don't go near him,” he said to the man's back. “Do not speak or look at him.”

When he had calmed down I asked why he let that man work the farm.

“I pay him half what everyone else gets,” he said.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“A relative.”

“What kind?”

He didn't answer that and went back to his chores.

Later, he said, “Don't feel bad for that man. If he gets near you again you come right away and tell me.”

That night he gave me a neck knife to keep in my boot.

“If he gets you down,” he said, “you pull this out and swing at whatever he’s got in his hand. Don’t look. Just swing it. Then run.”

My grandfather has his Lore of Dust. It is a meticulous guide to the rituals and modes of appeasance that are necessary to get across our piece of property without upsetting the forces within. When I was young he would bring me to the creek and tell me to press my face up close to the sand. I would flex my eyes until they could see clearly the grains and it would look like a whole landscape. Without something as a stand-in for size, it could have been a panorama, miles across a desert.

“See how little you know,” he said.

“What am I looking at? Where is it?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been there.”

“What do you think it is?”

“It’s probably someplace terrible. Be glad that you landed where you are.”

Stupidly, I asked him, “Where would you live if you could live anywhere?”

His eyebrows narrowed over his nose.

“I’ve got the run of the world,” he said. “Do you think I’d be here if I didn’t like it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Most things you don’t have a choice of. But that doesn’t make them bad.”

When he got back from the war, he stopped learning what was presented to him. He could not believe how the world had shown itself, that every little school child had fangs. He made his life’s work rendering it into something he understood. For a time we kept animals at the farm, those bred for slaughter, but he gave them away, said it was dishonest to raise the pigs to trust you.

He was redefining the world, molding it and pressing it to fit into the brand new scheme he would decide for it. He kept a book that held all his incantations and the rites of the seasons.

“The Firth of Froth” is what he called it. It was full of tricks, illusions that he could use to coerce those brooding and catankerous forest spirits to spare him some suffering.

I told May and John that I would do this for them but wouldn't take it any further than that. I said that it was hard for me too, since they were such good friends. I'm not sure if that was believable.

May was right about the first time. I thought about it probably five times a day.

It had been the middle of the day, which just made it better. Right away she went into the kitchen and asked me if I wanted some tea or a beer. I told her a beer, but when I saw how shaky she was I suggested that she have one too.

“Where did he go?” I asked.

“He's at the cabin,” she said.

Her parents had a summer house on a small lake. I'd been there enough to know that the roads would be hard to get through. They were dirt or gravel for the last forty miles or so and wouldn't be plowed. I relaxed a bit. There was no rush now.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“He thinks that if he was closer he might come back to stop it.”

“You guys asked me to do this.”

“I know.”

“I just wanted to say.”

I asked her how she wanted to start, but she wouldn't answer. I offered that we should sit on the couch very close to each other and just watch TV for a while. She nodded to that, and we took our beers to the living room. She handed me the remote, and I handed it back.

“You pick something,” I said.

She turned on the TV. It took time for it to power up and load the stations. We were on opposite ends of the couch. There was no courage between us. We sat that way for a while, staring at the TV but neither of us actually watching it. When I went for another beer she said to bring a bottle back. “Of what,” I asked. “Doesn’t matter,” she said, “but bring something to take it with.” I brought her gin and some sprite, put it down with two glasses on the table. She was lying on the couch like she was about to go to sleep.

“Lay down behind me,” she said.

I did as she said and put my arm around her so it passed through the ravine between her breasts and rested on her shoulder. I arched my back away from her so she wouldn’t be able to know what I thought of this. She was treating it like a duty, and I believed that she was only pretending not to be excited.

“You can tell him whatever you want,” I said. “but if you want this to work we’re going to have to do it again.”

“I know,” then, “I don’t think he’ll be able to go through with it again.”

“You can tell him whatever you want. He’s already agreed to it one time. It’s the same as if we did it four.”

“Four times?”

“You know what the chances are like.”

“Yes. I know. I’m just thinking of what it would be like.”

“Is this so terrible?”

“No. But I get the easy part.”

“It’s not like we’re having an affair.”

“I know.”

“It’s with consent. It doesn’t matter what we...”

“...please. We haven’t done anything yet.”

“Right.”

We’d lain there for some time. I thought about what it was that made me like this. What did I know? At this point in my life, I tried to think of the things I was certain about. You could never be completely certain but you could get pretty damn close.

I had an erection and began to move my arm slowly, feeling the parts of her that could be touched between friends: a shoulder, her waist, stomach, the outside of her leg. I wanted to keep it going, never moving in until it was unbearable. I grazed a breast and saw her nipple stand up against the fabric of her shirt. I put my mouth against her back and let my breath warm the spot between her shoulder blades. She tried to turn over but I held on tight. When I finally pressed against her she pushed back, slightly, but it had such an effect that I felt I should give up then. It would never be better than that brief moment of pressing against her and feeling her, waiting for the movements that would show how she felt. I wanted her to enjoy it so I could enjoy it as well.

She got off the couch and began to pace before me.

“We have to talk about what we’re doing.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Go stand in the kitchen.”

I got up and walked into the kitchen.

“There was a party tonight,” she said, “and we’re the last two left. John’s gone to bed and you’ve been waiting for me.”

I went onto the porch. There was a small pond in their backyard and it reflected a single dark raincloud moving from the hills beyond their property. I tasted ozone. The wind had stopped

and for once it was pleasant to stand outside and feel the chill that could only lap lightly at your cheeks. A dog's tongue kind of chill.

I walked back inside and asked her where John had gone.

"He's asleep," she said.

"Why didn't you go up with him?"

"I wasn't tired."

"Oh. Do you want a drink?"

"Sure."

I went to the fridge and pulled out limes and doused two glasses with tequila. She stayed in the threshold to the kitchen and leaned against the border. I took the drinks and moved to the bottom of the staircase.

"Where you going?" she asked.

"Upstairs."

"You can't."

"Why?"

"John's up there."

"Oh."

She turned to the living room. There was a newspaper fire starting to catch the logs. A sleeping bag with a fat downy quilt had been placed before it.

"I made up your bed."

"Thanks," I said.

It was Papa's suggestion that I should sleep outside whenever I could. You have to tuck your shirt into the gloves so that when you stuff your sleeves and shirt with newspaper it won't fall out. If

you're good you can do it with half a newspaper. It makes you look bigger, like a lump of stone when you lie down. If you remember to stay still whenever you wake up, the deer won't realize you're even there. They'll nibble the grass surrounding your body so when you finally get up the blades will be longer where you slept. The coyotes won't bother you. They'll take a bite at your foot or arm if it's stretched out from you a ways, but that's just to see if you're dead.

The worst thing I ever did was one morning at the start of sixth grade. I was walking the last flat mile to school. I'd been going about my normal route, following the County Road until the country turned into suburbs. The lots were forested, the houses close together and thrown into shade by the thick canopy. I had to zigzag around the tight islands of development to get the shortest route. I cut through the Baptist church, checking first for the janitor's truck as he always ran us off from trampling the grass, and I saw Papa up ahead. He was waiting at the corner a block up, just standing there looking around. He didn't normally walk this way, and I figured he'd taken the route so he could see me before school. I didn't say anything. I stood behind the hedge and watched him for fifteen minutes, checking my watch nervously, knowing that I would be late for school but also knowing that I couldn't meet him. I don't know why I just stood there, watching him as he looked hopefully in my direction, but I felt like he was some sort of sentry that I had to slip by. Eventually, he crossed the street and walked back towards home, stopping a few times to look around, maybe afraid he would miss me at the last second. What kind of love is this that makes you regret your whole life for one moment of peace? What kind of love won't let you call out the names of your own?

When I went away to college, I think that Papa took it hard, but there was just no talking to my parents out of it. A real estate woman had come by when Dad was first thinking about selling our plot adjacent to Papa's. She met me and I told her a bit about what I did around the place, how

we kept the nematodes off. She told my parents that I could do well to enroll in the state college. Dad took off his hat and regarded her with a kind of shock that was not at all pleasant to witness, and the agent knew immediately that she had made a mistake in this mention. What others might've understood as a simple pleasantry—a way to keep someone's attention or a passing remark of good will—held a significant weight to this man. The consideration was unprecedented. He leaned on his shovel and smiled, embarrassed to say, "If that's what you think." He then asked her if she knew how to do it, to put me in the school. "I don't know," she said. "You'd have to go up to the school and see. Or give them a call." I told my parents that she was just being nice, but my mother gave me a look that meant I was to shut up or I might spoil the opportunity.

There has always been shade over our house.

And this shadow is to mark us that our days will be short.

And the shadow is an animal made from those who came before.

The day before I brought him home, he asked me to say a prayer for his worn out heart. He pointed out an altar on the map, a place where sacrifices had been made, but was now in open air, overgrown, and hadn't been used in years. He said that miracles were granted there. He cautioned that it wouldn't work if someone was watching. I had to be alone. He asked me if I loved him. I told him that I did. I asked him if he wanted to tell me something, but he didn't like the idea of making a confession.

In the time when I was supposed to be raised by someone, anyone, I lived with my brother, and we lived alone in a wilderness that we thought held nothing like us. We were wild for many years. The religion we had was made up on

the spot and held more weight than anything we could be told about the stories from Jerusalem, of a baby that we could not picture, in a desert we would never see.

I'd tried calling May whenever John was at work, but she'd stopped answering. I went to the house and knocked on the door. It was John that answered. He asked what I was doing but then stopped me and said that he figured he had an idea. He said that they were thankful for what I'd done and that May was finally pregnant. I asked if I could talk to her.

“I'd let you, but she doesn't want to see you.”

And that's how it was. Now that she was family she wouldn't see me.

Discouraged, I went to the home to visit with Papa. He was uncomfortable. He said something was hardening inside him. Just below his rib cage, against his side, it felt like a clenched ball of muscle had torn off from the rest of the tissue so that it simply hung in place, swaying as he moved and causing pain as it did.

He used all his powers. He invoked the Enduring Geneva, the Shell of Chantilly, the Bigueferandoo, all of Jacobson's Harries and whichever of the Be-and-shees he could remember.

The Českýs were gone by then. Roger had gotten to them some time after they arrived. He'd been telling them that I wouldn't ever let them leave, that I had the money and still wouldn't pay them. Like I had done with him.

He said in the end that it was like the illness had made him healthier. He felt trim and economical, like it had rotted away all the extraneous portions of him. He said at night the pain was more like a coldness, that a slow wind was coursing through the starlit desert in his chest. It was not totally unpleasant, he said, though it made him lightheaded, and if he got too excited he would just pass out

and wheeze until he woke up with his eyes bloodshot. Night is a lonely time, he said. “It is when I think the most. There’s no sunlight getting between me and my thoughts.”

Not hearing and knowing that there is sound all around him. He can feel it moving, the voices, a car moving past, a breeze tangled in the branches of a fresh bloom. He has come to know the absences. Absence marks the time between remembrance. When he thinks, he thinks quickly, frantic even, as if he was searching in the darkness for a light switch that he’ll never find. When he asks how I will get home I tell him that I will drive. He has forgotten that I drive, have driven for twenty years and suddenly he is afraid of the prospect, coursing the roads on my own. He foresees a crash and tells me that he will pay for a train. He doesn’t have anything left, but I tell him to save his money. I will be fine.

Roger intercepted the nursing home Chaplain who had followed me home after the burial, and I was thankful for that if nothing else. He’d been waiting on the porch for me to get home. I think that he was impatient with having to wait for what he’d come to say.

The Chaplain was talking fast. He was concerned with how the final rites had gone.

“He didn’t believe in that stuff,” I told him.

“We can all be saved,” is what he said.

Roger said: “Bullshit.”

The Chaplain turned to him and tried to make another appeal.

“Let the lord in and he will show you the way.”

“I don’t let anyone in after 6 o’clock. That’s a rule we have around here.”

“God is not some night-bound bandit.”

“Then what’s he want to get in for?”

“To win your soul.”

“He can have it for fifty bucks. How much do you have?”

“That wouldn’t be a true transformation.”

“Shows how much you know.”

Roger led us to the knoll studded with rocks. He put me in front of his son and told me what I had to do. You’re learning, he said when I caught his son on the cheek. Mark was so much bigger, he got on top of me and wouldn’t stop. I looked to Roger but it was clear he wouldn’t stop the fight. I was afraid he was going to kill me. I kned him in the nuts and rolled him over. Roger came over and pulled me up by my shirt. “When are you going to learn?” he said.

I hold the memory of the words. His voice was sanctified in death. When the words mean nothing it is the sound, the familiar wind, that becomes scripture.

Six months later, I was riding the train back from visiting my parents. There was no diesel motor running at night, only a small electric one that was slower but very quiet. As I was trafficked across an unseen ground, I took out the thermos that I had packed, hot with tea and a wedge of apple bread to slow its course.

I was comfortable and tired and thought of my grandfather. I shared my tea and treat with him, and he accepted gladly. We sat and ate and watched the glassy surface slide under us. I was engulfed in so much love that I wanted to tell the conductor a lie as he ripped my ticket, that I had said the words, alone, and my grandfather would soon heave himself across frozen ground to drink tea with me.

Loyalty is not something you chose; it can't be helped. I can't figure out why I did not say his prayers, why I would not grant him such a simple wish. But that is love. It is something that should be beaten out of a person because it erodes all sense and care.

“Heat Death of the One and Only”

There was going to be a parade.

When the news finally reached us, it was canceled. It had been a full day after the actual announcement, and the local officials and city council members were scrambling to prepare a response. They called NASA first but were redirected to a private company that, it was determined, was actually funding the expedition. *A response was needed immediately.* The best they could come up with was, “We’d be happy to.” No one knew what this new title would entail. All that was known was that our town had been chosen, and we would be asked to supply an exhibition of sorts, of life in our community to be sent in a capsule aboard the interplanetary beacon. Our mayor, Mayor Sheila, called the marketing department for the expedition to ask how we had been selected. Amidst the exaltations and the fears of the more ignorant, it was agreed by all that it was “about time” someone made note of the town, even with such a vague appreciation.

We all liked it fine here, which seemed reason enough to be chosen.

But after someone asked for an elaboration, Mayor Sheila admitted, “It was of nothing we’ve done, except that one of the astronauts was born here. They’ve chosen the hometowns of all the crew.”

This astronaut business was really a surprise to everyone; the astronaut had been born here, raised and schooled, even went through a few semesters at the community college. A meeting was called. The mayor asked the teachers from the high school if they could spare a few remarks, really the more poignant memories of the astronaut as they remembered him: a child and a student. No one came forward. “Did any of you have him as a student?” she asked the block of teachers seated at the front right column of chairs. They looked at each other, shook their heads. He was a

prominent athlete as well and excelled on the football and track teams. “I’m looking for a story that might show ‘we who didn’t know him’ his personality, his person, so we may honor that in our capsule. Maybe one of his coaches could give us a few stories from his time on the field?” The coaches kept still. “He wasn’t here very long ago,” she said, “surely you remember him?” They remained still. She figured that they were new, but Jim “The Wrench” Bailer, our football team’s head coach, cleared his throat and stood. “I didn’t know him. I don’t know who would if not me. I’ve been coaching for 34 years. I viewed his plaque earlier today to see if anything might come to mind, but I don’t recall him, though he holds the school record for most yards in a game.” He paused, “Really, I’m embarrassed. One of the finest players to pass through our halls, and I’ve forgotten all ‘bout him.” The mayor appealed to the dairy farmers. He had been a farm hand some summers. This was reportedly where he’d first developed his strength. None stood. No voices offered a memory of the man. “There must be someone here who knew him,” the mayor said. The town was well represented. This was certain. “No friends? Family?” Later, they checked the yearbooks and found his name but no photo, having missed the school photography day. A group picture of the boys’ track team had him listed amongst those standing in the back row, though the count of those pictured turned out to be one less than the number of names provided. In a photo of the debate squad a picture labeled with the astronaut’s name turned out to be mislabeled. It was actually a photo of my friend, Bud, who I was surprised to remember had actually been on the debate squad.

The meeting was moved to a local dairy, the cow shed temporarily evacuated to accommodate the large crowd. Under the enclosure, coffee was handed out for warmth. The floor had been washed but continued to waft the stale scent of cow shit.

The mayor had a large dry-erase board set up behind the officers' seats. Her hair was slightly askew, some of it matted to one temple.

"Let's everyone get a seat, so we can begin."

She turned to the board and wrote, *Ideas*, in a hesitant cursive. Below that she wrote the number 1.

"For all of you, I want you to think of some things that would represent us as a town, and I'll list it up here."

Right away there was a hand.

"Already got an idea, Rick?"

The postman stood to show everyone who was speaking.

"I think that it might be good to start with what we think stands for us as a people, you know, before we get to the town."

Mayor Sheila thought about this and held the microphone as she asked a question of her secretary who shrugged and raised her hands in uncertainty.

"Okay, so for anyone who didn't hear that, Rick suggested that we should start with what might represent us as Americans first."

Rick stood again, and gripped his belt as if for support.

"Not Americans, I meant as people, in general."

"Oh, like people people. Well that's awfully broad isn't it?"

Marge, who owned Pizza Amore stood.

"How big is the box?" she asked.

"That was directed at Rick," said Mayor Sheila. "Let's stay with one person at a time."

Rick stood again.

"I'm not saying that we shouldn't put town stuff in the box..."

“...just to interrupt a moment, Rick. For those who might be showing up late, the capsule is a capsule, not a box.”

“All right,” said Rick. “I’m just saying that we can make this about us or make it about everyone.”

“What was the prompt?” asked someone from the back.

“Pardon me?” said Mayor Sheila.

“What did NASA say they wanted?”

“Before I answer that, two clarifications: the expedition is being funded through a, uh, company, named NexSpace, and there was no prompt.”

“What did they tell you?”

“They told us the dimensions of the capsule.”

“Can you elaborate?”

The mayor sighed.

“It’s about this big,” she said and held out her hands approximately shoulder-width apart.

I could tell that some of the dairy farmers were getting restless. This was extending into their bedtime.

“We should fill it with cow shit,” said someone undoubtedly teenaged.

“I’m going to pretend like I didn’t hear that, Tommy,” said Mayor Sheila.

A group of the evangelists arrived with the Reverend Geller and stood in the back, shaking their heads in disagreement of the proceeding.

Ellen Broadlea swung her wool hat as she raised a hand, losing her hold and sending it into the crowd. “Can someone hand that over?” she asked. “Mayor Sheila, I didn’t want to have to bring this up, but you’ve left me no choice. The parade was canceled; that’s fine, we have a big

responsibility here and not a lot of time to get into it, but when is the parade going to be rescheduled? By the time we get to it, the dogwoods might have already bloomed, and then what?”

“Ellen, I let you run the steering committee, let’s appreciate that for a moment and move on. We have to consider,” began Mayor Sheila again, “that the most important part of this is how we choose to reflect the town. The world is going to wonder what we’re putting into space.”

A guy who had once worked our farm raised his hand. His cheeks flushed red, so that his work shirt, buttoned to neck, seemed to be choking him.

“I can’t tell for sure, but I think this might be a trick,” he said.

“I’m not sure what you mean, uh. What’s your name, sir?”

“My name’s Gary. I just think that we can’t trust whoever it is that’s asking us to put things in this capsule.”

“I don’t see any way that they might be trying to trick us or fool us or whatever. There’s nothing they could gain from our selections for the capsule,” said Mayor Sheila.

“That’s what I’m worried about. I can’t figure it either. One second no one cares what we do, the next second we’re assembling this space box for some space company, and I don’t like it.”

The school psychologist turned around and waved to Gary.

“Maybe what you’re afraid of, Gary,” she said, “is the idea of sending things that we…prize as a community into the void of space?”

“I don’t think that’s it. I’m just thinking about how they can turn this against us. I mean maybe they’re trying to figure out what we care about? What are they using the info for?”

“Who?”

“This space company. Who knows what they want. I don’t think we should do anything until we find out more about them.”

“That’s an understandable concern, Gary,” said Mayor Sheila, “but I really don’t think that they would have us sort through a collection of items for the capsule for any other reason than as a gesture, a symbol, you know, for how far we’ve progressed, this far, technologically speaking, as a people.”

“What can we expect in terms of news coverage?” someone asked.

“I’m assuming that we will be receiving a variety, the local networks, you know, and most likely a few national stations. In terms of internet articles or international stuff, I have no idea, but we can begin to think...”

Funny the way thoughts stray once a point of attention is reached. I looked about the crowd, saw the range of familiar faces, some nameless, others I could not recall but confident I would know them in my dreams. I dozed, crossed my legs and draped an arm over the crotch of my pants to hide the sleepy erection that was forming. My head tilted over, and I woke up with a start. Blood flowed into my face making it hot.

“Let’s take this time to get any of the big questions out of the way,” said Mayor Sheila.

“How big is the box,” Marge asked again.

“One moment,” she said.

Mayor Sheila turned to her secretary and bent down to discuss something. The secretary left her seat and motioned for one of the farmhands who headed the dairy. They left towards the house. The mayor and her officers deliberated for some time about how to proceed. A snack break was declared and the cookies and coffee ransacked within a few minutes, so the rest of us were redirected down the street to get a coffee and perhaps a doughnut before reconvening.

“This sure is something,” said one of the farmers, thoughtfully, in line at the doughnut shop.

“Sure,” said Bud. “I guess this is one of those things that we won’t be able to help but tell the grandkids about.”

The farmer turned.

“Are you trying to get a rise from me?” he asked.

“No. I believe that,” said Bud. “I can’t even imagine what we’re supposed to send up there.”

“Oh,” the farmer said and laughed. “I was talking about the shop. It’s nice havin’ it open this time of day.” He went back to perusing, “Wish it could be like this all the time.”

The sun was beginning to go down and trashcan fires were lit at intervals around the cow shed, which took up a 70 yard length of land. I asked some of those warming their hands what they thought should be put in the capsule.

“Why’re you asking?” said a small woman with a blanket wrapped around herself.

“I’m taking a sort of personal survey,” I said.

This was not really why I was asking. I had a vague idea of what I wanted to include in the capsule: an item that could communicate the essence of being human.

An impatient city council member hurried everyone back into their seats.

“The point of this meeting,” Mayor Sheila said, “is to settle some ideas about what we’re going to put in this capsule. Now we can either elect a committee to do the picking or have everyone bring something in that they think would be their first choice and pick from there. Now can I have a show of hands who’s for selecting a committee?”

Some hands went up. Those who had their minds on bed left their seats and walked towards the field where they had been told to park.

“So it looks like we’re going to have everyone come back here tomorrow at 7 with their choices for the capsule. Sound good?”

A sound, ambiguous in its level of approval bellowed from the crowd.

Mrs. Shouler, the librarian, raised her hand and asked, “What are the restrictions for the box and when will we be voting on the next parade date?”

The mayor turned to her secretary who was no longer in her seat.

“NexSpace has asked that no electronic equipment, and I don’t think that I really have to say this, but explosives, batteries, or radioactive material of any sort be included. The weight limit is 50 lbs.”

Gary stood again.

“We can tell them whatever we want,” he said, “but what we put in the capsule is completely different. I really think that it’s important that we choose something good.”

“Of course, Gary. We’re going to put in whatever best represents us as a community,” said the Mayor.

“Ehh,” uttered Rick, raising his hand.

“And how we fit within the greater community of the world,” she added quickly. “Because, yes, this is a global matter. Aside from the proud people of Chenango County we’re representing earth.”

Rick adjusted his seat, pleased.

One of the dairymen asked, “When’s the box coming back?”

“From where?”

“Space.”

Mayor Sheila furrowed her brow.

“It’s not coming back,” she said.

“Then what are we sending it for?”

“It’s for the aliens,” said a woman in an aisle seat, a heap of crocheting yarn on her lap.

“It’s just a gesture,” said Mayor Sheila.

“For what?” asked Marge of Pizza Amore.

“It’s a symbol. Of our achievements as a human race.”

“But why are we sending it into the space if we don’t want it to ever be seen again?”

“Well, we have to think about that. What’s the ideal situation for this? Like, what is the best outcome that we could hope for? Suggestions?”

A few hands raised.

“Aliens find the capsule, and they come to Earth not to kill us,” offered a stout man in the front row. His thick black eyebrows twitched furiously above his glasses.

“We can’t put anything in the capsule that would show them where we live,” said a youngish man sipping a diet coke.

“Then what’s the point of sending out a probe at all?” said someone else.

“One voice at a time,” said Mayor Sheila. “We can’t think of why we’re doing any of these things if everyone’s talking at once.”

A man in a beat up denim jacket stood up.

“We need three things in this pod: A bible, a pack of matches and an iPad.”

“All right, sir. I understand the bible, but what’s the purpose of the other two items.”

“You kidding? It’s our technological advances, the three ages: biblical age, the age of fire and the internet age.”

“They said no electronic items.”

“So we can break the iPad beforehand.”

“Anyone else?”

From an old man in the back, “We can freeze a head and put it in. It’ll stay cold in outer space.”

“A human head?”

“Course. There’s cadavers at the state college. The aliens can see what we look like, and then they’d have a brain too.”

“I don’t think there’s any way that that’s going to happen. Something more realistic?”

“Seeds, a container of water maybe, some soil.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” said Mayor Sheila. “After all, we are an agricultural community.”

“Ah, but that’s just plants,” said someone. “We’re more interesting than plants.”

The President of the Chamber of Commerce stood, waiting until the other voices had calmed down.

“Yes, Roger?” said Mayor Sheila.

“Thank you, Sheila. We’re looking at a tremendous opportunity here, and I think that all of our commerce members would agree, that there’s plenty of room for some advertising space. This capsule is going to be photographed and shown all over the world, who’s to say that we can’t throw a couple of stickers onto it, boost some of our internet trade, mailing sales?”

“Yes. That is a fantastic point, Roger. We have to consider that this capsule could benefit us in ways more than just the metaphorical. What are you proposing?”

“Well, I’m thinking we choose 20 to 30 businesses in the area to print out adverts—we have a guy in Canada who does most of our billboard adhesives who I’m sure will jump on this opportunity to test his line of products. Looks good for him too.”

“What if it confuses the aliens?” someone asked.

“The chance of our capsule encountering any aliens is almost none. Now if we place 20 to 30 prominent advertisements to be circulated around the globe in the form of photos of the capsule then we could see a huge boost in the popularity of our interstate and international commerce, which let’s be honest, is pretty much nonexistent.”

The Chamber of Commerce members gave Roger a standing ovation until Mayor Sheila quieted them down.

“Now some of you are probably going to be thinking about a possible ethical issue here, but I agree with the Chamber, we can’t let this opportunity just go. If this is a chance to better our community, to make some real change locally, economically that is, I believe we should take it.”

“But what about the aliens?” asked a thin woman standing beside those seated. “They find this thing, and they’re gonna be looking at it forever to figure out what it means, and when they come down to it, all they get is some fucking doll house furniture ad—no offense, Carla.”

Carla seemed on the point of fury.

“Like I said before, maybe it’s best if we all go home, think about it, and tomorrow you can each bring one item that you would like to go in the capsule. The best course of action is to think about it and reconvene tomorrow.”

A sound more like annoyance.

With nothing left at the snack table, the crowd dispersed quickly. There was a minor traffic jam at a spot of mud just before the cow gates which led onto the County Road. The honking swelled to a din, and one of the farm hands had to run out, using a couple road flares as semaphores, to keep everyone moving and civil.

I met bud at the McDonald’s to sort out what we’d be doing that night. We ordered our burgers and settled into one of the booths to eat and take stock of our options.

“We can go to the Rocking Horse,” he said.

“I have to be honest: I’m sick of it. I’d rather get a fifth and just sit somewhere.”

A skinny man in a trucker hat walked over to us and knelt beside me.

“Can I talk to you?” the man asked.

I looked at Bud who shrugged.

“Sure,” I said.

“Thank you. I’ve been hoping a kind face like yours would come by.”

“Just kick him!” said the manager from behind the cash register. “Kick him hard and he’ll get.”

She laughed.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “People don’t care much for discussion around here. These lot only care about soft drinks. If it was up to them all of our corn would go to sugar.”

Someone hurled a gnawed french fry in our direction, and the man deflected it away from his head. He looked sideways at those seated throughout the restaurant.

“I’m going to be honest with you guys: I don’t think we should be sending out this box. I know the guy who’ll be getting it, and let me tell you, we don’t want him back here. He came down in ’84 when I was still working mines. Is it okay if I sit next to you? I’m tired of kneeling.”

Before I could answer, he pushed me over with his hip. I moved down on the bench seat to accommodate him. Bud turned away from us and looked out the window.

“He arrived as one, but he was many. Many minds in one, you know. He was tall—I’m calling him a he because that’s as close as I can get to describing him. And when he came to my camp he chose me and asked me to guide him. Not the supervisor, not the mine owner, just me. He wanted me to introduce him to the crystals. So, I brought him down, and I showed him the quartz we were extracting.”

“I’m sorry, but I think you told me this story before,” I said.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” He stood up and half-turned away but looked back at me. “We haven’t met, you know. You know this?”

“No, I’ve definitely met you before. I remember you told me that story.”

The man looked agitated.

“If you don’t want to speak to me just say so. I asked you politely. You told me I could talk to you.”

“I agreed before I knew which story you were going to tell me, and I’ve already heard this one.”

“It’s not a story, you fool. It happened. I showed him the crystals. They have no interest in us. He thought that the crystals were the source of our knowledge. He thought that their order and complexity outshone our abilities. You wouldn’t believe the names he called us. It seems their kind have very little respect for the human race. But once he’d met the crystals, he moved on. Fickle, you know.”

“I am sorry, but I’m not up to talking to you right now. I’ve had a long day.”

“I am sorry, but you don’t know what’s good for you. You need to hear this.”

I closed my eyes and tried to pretend like I was sleeping, but he moved closer and spoke directly into my ear, and I pushed him away until he stood up and sat the table across from us looking dejected and eyeing me sideways like some scorned lover.

“What’s your problem?” he asked.

“I don’t have a problem. I’m not the one bothering people.”

“Can I just finish, and I’ll leave you alone after that?”

“Depends on how long the story will take.”

“Not long, I promise.”

He was sitting on the edge of his seat tapping his toes in a never-ending drum roll.

“Okay, get it over with,” I told him.

He slid back over.

“Once he was done with the crystals he wanted me to show him around town, which I did. I introduced him to my family and my friends. People recognized immediately what he was, and I was noticed by a lot of people. They were all wondering why he chose me. To me, it was fairly obvious why I deserved to be chosen. I know how much potential I have, and the alien was just what I had

been waiting for. I've always thought of myself as pretty interesting, but I'm really shy so people don't normally see that other side of me. But they knew after the alien took an interest in me. They knew that I was multi-faceted, that of all the people at the mine, the town, the whole world, he chose me as his guide, so obviously they knew that I had some important things to say."

"What did you say to him?"

He turned and stared off towards the condiments, his face seeming to grow loose and droopy in distress.

"Hardly anything. I didn't get the chance," he said.

"But you were with him showing him around."

"He wasn't interested. But he liked my sister. She's kind of loose. He had sex with her next to our tool shed," the man shook his head. "He didn't even know to take her inside, out of sight. He just did her right there."

"How did he do her if he was an alien?" Bud asked.

"It was really horrible. If she wasn't so drunk, I don't think she would have done it. From across the yard, I could barely stand the sight of it, but up close would have been intolerable."

"What happened then?"

The man turned away from me and placed his head in the palms of his hands.

"I'd rather not say. It was terrible."

"You're the one who wanted to tell me this. I don't care if he fucked your sister. Finish the story."

"It's not a story. It was real. He really did have sex with my sister."

"I'm sure he did."

With that the downtrodden man left and disappeared somewhere behind the dumpsters.

"Jesus," said Bud and got up to refill his soda.

We decided to put off any thinking of our own until an appropriate level of drunkenness had been reached.

“The question comes up,” Mayor Sheila began, “of how we’re going to instruct the aliens what this is we’re sending them.”

“Shit,” said a man unwrapping his buttered roll. “*We’re* gonna need a user’s manual. If I can’t make any sense of what’s in there, how is an alien?”

“This is the trouble,” she said. “We’ve never encountered this kind of thing, let alone the sort of, um, universal translation that’s needed. I think it might be best just to look at this as an assortment of artifacts, no agenda, just a representation of life on earth.”

Some agreement.

“So, let’s begin the presentations.”

A microphone was set up in the aisle between the city councils panel and the crowd.

“In order please, starting with the front left row.”

Solemnly, the front row lined up beside the microphone and presented their choices. The first in line was Jan Preis. He turned towards the city council with an unsure look.

“Do we want to pick a rain date for the parade before we begin?” he asked.

“We’re doing item presentations now, Jan.”

“Right. Okay.”

By the time half the room was done naming and showing their items, two hours had passed. Naturally, crosses and crucifixes, with the accompanying bibles, were the primary items selected by those clergy and active congregants who worried God might be underrepresented. There were favorite novels, history tomes, a phone book, dvds, blu-ray disks, taxidermied mammals, photographs, scrapbooks, a snow baby figurine, a golden bracelet, cremated remains, a felt hat, a vial

of blood, an identical vial of a whitish fluid that was pocketed quickly afterward, a detached microprocessor, bifocals and, inexplicably, aquamarine tissue paper. Regrettably, I hadn't thought of anything in time and so brought a rubber band ball for its merit of bouncing through an eternity of ZERO-G.

Additionally, someone offered up their grandfather's WWII service pistol, ammunition included, to place in the capsule.

"Do we really want to show them this? What is it to represent?" Mayor Sheila asked.

"World War II, Sweetie."

"It would be for the American segment," added Mr. Jenkins. "Let them know we're the best on Earth."

There were some hoots of approval.

"This is a good point," said one of the high school teachers. "Do we want to show them the good and the bad of human nature all out there for them to make their own judgment? Or do we want to put ourselves in the best light possible. We can say, yeah, we've been fighting each other for all time, but we usually feel bad about it and regret all the, how do you say, life lost and so on."

"You've brought us to a troubling point, Ms. Nappi," said Mayor Sheila. "We probably want to paint the best picture of ourselves as possible. Not to scare them away."

"We also don't want to look like the kind of people that can be pushed around," said someone. "Maybe it's good that they know we have some firepower, that they can add physical respect to our list of accomplishments."

"If we send them a gun they'll be able to study our firepower," noted Gary.

"Gary, please, it's a handgun," assured the man next to him. "Everything else is under wraps. They'll have no idea."

Mayor Sheila stepped into the aisle.

“I think it’s safe to say that regardless of your views on arming the capsule, I think we can be assured that NexSpace will be monitoring our choices with intense scrutiny. Let’s not screw this up, okay?”

There was some contention over how people might be depicted. The high school biology teacher had included a laminated copy of a photograph of a naked man and woman, next to the outlined circulatory, nervous and endocrine systems with their associated peripheral organs.

The evangelists, in order to communicate their distaste, shook their heads in a slower though more robust motion. The Reverend Geller spoke on their behalf.

“I have to say I find it unconscionable that what an alien civilization might see first of our culture is pornography. People wear clothes. If an alien arrived tomorrow, this is how they would view us.”

“We can show both, dressed and undressed, but I think the anatomical photograph is necessary.”

“It’s disgusting. I won’t allow it.”

“One moment, Reverend,” said Mayor Sheila. “The city council has the final say. Let’s have a show of hands for the naked pictures.”

An overwhelming indifference.

“All right. Jay, maybe you can get a drawing for it instead?”

Mayor Sheila pulled out a sheet of paper.

“Before I forget: an important note from Prof. Rhys at the state college. According to him, if we’re talking from a philosophical standpoint, we want to show ourselves as a placid, but undoubtedly defensive, advanced civilization with a focus on knowledge accumulation and a stewardship towards the maintenance of general ecological functioning, altruism within the limits of

population control and a predilection and openness with regards to the intangible or unknown, most notably what we term the spiritual. Is that fine with everyone?”

A general mutter.

“Moving on. We have a scale and a milk crate which is our best approximation of the box’s, *capsule*’s, size. Let’s stick to one item when there are duplicates present.”

While the items were examined and arranged for the capsule, a booth had been set up in one of the vacated veal sheds. It was a red wooden construction with roofing, just large enough to fit two people if they ducked their heads down. Most of the crowd went back to the table to bring provisions for the line that had formed. Those at the front stood closely to one another, delineated their places with wide stances and surveyed the surroundings for cutters. Some held handwritten sheets of loose-leaf that they practiced, mouthing their scripts to themselves. Others anxiously asked those standing beside them what they planned on adding. Each person was allowed one minute of speech. The audio guy was hooking up a car battery for power. I recognized him from the guitar store that was above the tobacconist. He wore a tight black turtleneck that accentuated his weight.

Mandy Holtzau, who stood in front of me, turned and said, hello.

“What are you gonna say?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I figure I’m going to decide in the moment.”

“Oh. I thought you had something important. It looked like you wanted to get to the front of the line really bad.”

“I just don’t want to be here all night.”

“Busy day tomorrow?”

“Not really.”

When my turn arrived, I crouched to enter the shed and was guided to my seat by the audio guy's flashlight. His turtleneck made his head look like it was floating. He refused to say anything but held up three fingers, then two, then one, and pointed to me.

“Um, okay. I think I've known for a while that I have some very important things to say. I've had this feeling all along that I was crafting a message for you that would say something about myself, personally I mean, while also communicating something about the world, of people, you know. I was going to tell you what my ideal is for a person, what I'd like to be, and then what I'm actually like. That best type of person is confident but not arrogant, fierce but not an angry person, loving of all people, nice to kids, a quick learner, has a well-rounded grasp of many things like science and art and what people are like, is able to fit in with all types of people—even if they're not of similar background—physically strong, unembarrassed by doing stupid things—though he rarely does them. He is meaningful in every action. No moment is wasted. No opportunity lost. I was going to make this speech sad but also funny, and I was going to be as bare and open as I am capable of being while not seeming too fragile or desperate for an audience. I wanted to present the world through my particular sensibility, which I think is a proper balance of skepticism and acceptance.

The audio guy held up two hands to show I had ten seconds. I spoke quickly trying to fit it all in.

“But that's not exactly what I'm like. That's the ideal. I'm a lot different, but I'm trying to, like, attain...”

The red light turned on to show that the recording was finished.

“Can I just finish what I was saying?” I asked.

“No, man,” said the audio guy. “There's a line. I don't want to be here all night.”

The crate was filled and volunteers began to hand out pamphlets for the “Sounds from Home,” a recording produced during the twenty four hours since the previous meeting. Whatever sounds they couldn’t find around town, they pulled from the internet. The record would be included in the capsule with a spring loaded crank record player, already poised for play.

I took a seat. Mayor Sheila cued the sound guy who inserted his CD copy of the recording.

The lights were dimmed and phones turned on to read the tracklistings in the pamphlet as the album played out. I closed my eyes.

It starts with an owl quietly hooting, an image of darkness comes to mind, night birds perched on a tree limb, but that wouldn’t mean anything to the aliens; it could be two wet rocks squeaking together. The animals are restricted to a large cross-section of birds (the council had some difficulties in finding a database for other noise), mammalian growls and purrs of affection, then crickets overtaking a backyard, a 17-year cicada brood and accompanying crunch as a truck rattles by, flies swarming what might be feces or something dead bees fickle in their choice of flower, what could be sand dropping through someone’s fingers but which is listed as an ant colony. Sounds of mating, of fear, intimidation. The terrestrial markers of feed padding over dirt with pebbles, short grass, tall grass, crunch of snow, scrape of pavement, slow suck of a foot caught in mud. Next we get sounds of splashing, of the sea, waves, modulated surf, a storm rumbling on the horizon and the itinerant whack of distant thunder, a downpour, rain against a glass pane, the swish and closing streak of a squeegee on a windshield, a faucet pouring into a sink, now a glass, a pebble dropped into a deep well, there is giggling, someone has highjacked the track because there is laughter all around, splashes, cannonballs executed in the background. We gave them the sounds of combustion, wood cracking under heating, the exhaust from a bunson burner, a jet engine, explosions (nitroglycerin, dynamite, gel ignite, napalm, atomic blast, cluster bombs), rocks blasted out of place, the gentle

whoosh of atmosphere oxidizing, air pocket differentials extinguished causing unseen bodily harm. There is wind, echoes, a sandstorm, a snow storm, gale force winds, a tornado, a frail spring breeze with the rustle of many types of leaves. There were clips from movies, sections of dialogue, a fight between lovers, an interval of passionate sex, an interval of reluctant and begrudging sex, the moment of reunion, the moment of defeat, a war cry, a mourning of kin, a hoorah, a hooray, a toast, a cheer, an applause from a crowd, a golf clap, stereo surround, mono, low then high fidelity, the progression from clogged cough to a hysterical wail performed by a newborn, Gregorian chants, death metal, a descent into the quietest murmurs of earth noise until all that is left is the ambience of open spaces, of a desert, the Pacific dead zones, Hungarian cave systems and finally space, the toneless vacuum. One song was included at the end, a rendition of Silent Night by the children's choir of St. Basil's, apparently a favorite of Mayor Sheila.

We sat silent as the lights were once again raised. A hand stretched out, first mistaken as an exaggerated yawn but then accepted as a question; it was Ellen Broadlea, who asked what was the nearly universal sentiment of all those gathered:

“That was very nice, but when will we have our parade?”