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SOMEWHERE AMONGST THE ASHES

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SOMEWHERE AMONGST THE ASHES

By

Keith Rebec

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

SOMEWHERE AMONGST THE ASHES

By

Keith Rebec

This story collection explores how human beings deal with loss. Whether the loss stems from death, the loss of personal innocence, or the loss of love, the characters within are forced to make decisions that he or she wouldn't make if given the choice. Some of the characters, in an effort to prevent the same or a similar type of loss from reoccurring in their lives, desperately seek ways to avoid the issues altogether, which further complicates their troubles. Others, unbeknownst to their impending loss, must make split second decisions that will change their lives forever. No matter how well the characters prepare for, or even try to avoid, some potential loss, it always catches up with them and affects each in unexpected ways. Drug abuse, death, and poverty in rural settings set the backdrop for these characters and contribute to whether or not they rise above the challenges and become extraordinary or just fall into the never ending state of being lost.

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Keith Rebec

2014

DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Joseph Rebec and Judy Mons, for giving me life to pursue all of my dreams and goals, and for providing the needed support and encouragement along the way so that I could obtain them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis director, Jennifer A. Howard, for her willingness to read and provide critical feedback on my writing, whether a workshop piece or not; she was always there for me, even during the most hectic times of the semester, to share her feelings and advice concerning my craft, and her help and endless support gave me the needed push to make my writing stronger. I'd also like to thank her for the opportunity to work at *Passages*. It was the internship at *Passages* that led to the start of my own literary journal, *Pithead Chapel*. I'd also like to thank my thesis reader, Matthew Gavin Frank, for encouraging me to get in touch with my lyrical side, and for helping me believe that I could make it into some of my dream publications if I continued to work hard and focus on those venues. John Smolens, Matt Bell, and all the faculty at Northern Michigan University, thank you for always being there for me when I needed help; I couldn't have gone to a better university or learned about writing from any other group of stellar writers: all of you truly care about teaching and your students' success, and for that I'll be forever grateful.

Lastly, I'd like to thank the publications where the stories in this collection first appeared: "Looking Out for the Dead" in *Split Lip Magazine*; "Going Ringside" in *Cleaver Magazine*; "Fading the World to Black" in *Wilderness House Literary Review*; "Down at the Doll Plant" in *Fiction Southeast*; and "Somewhere Amongst the Ashes" in *Underground Voices*.

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INTRODUCTION

While working toward the completion of my graduate degree, I was fortunate to publish fiction and nonfiction widely. Much of my success can be attributed to Northern Michigan University's faculty for their endless encouragement and guidance during my struggles at attempting to learn the craft; however, in between writing and taking classes and learning the writing process in and outside the classroom, I decided to take the education a step further and found my own literary journal.

The journal, *Pithead Chapel*, was established in May 2012 and was open only to fiction submissions—my passion and graduate degree concentration—during the first year. My plan initially with the journal was to give back to the fiction writing community and gauge what other writers were submitting, and to evaluate my writing progress based on the quality of their submissions. This plan at the least, I believed, would provide more understanding of where I stood with my writing ability and my chances at publication when submitting to the various literary journals from around the country and beyond. What I discovered from founding the journal, however, was more than I had envisioned at the onset. The collaboration with authors in regard to editing their accepted submissions—along with the day-to-day operations to keep the journal functional—exceeded my initial goal and this collaboration has become paramount to my writing and editing approach since. Furthermore, the influence *Pithead Chapel* has had and continues to have on my writing and editing process, namely with this thesis collection, changed my views on how to craft stronger, more concise work and better prepared me for not only my graduate studies but also how to become a publishing writer for the rest of my

life.

In my thesis collection entitled “Somewhere Amongst the Ashes,” one example of how *Pithead* influenced my work concerns the way I struggled with each story's beginning, middle, and end, though not always all three in the same story, a similarity shared with many of the journal submitters in some degree. Like many submitters, the actual story within my stories typically started too late in the work, say on page two or three, or the story would lose steam somewhere in the middle, or the endings felt abrupt and incomplete. Often, before the creation of *Pithead*, the problem was I didn't really know my stories well enough—specifically the characters, theme, and conflict and how all should fit together—and I would write a story in a day or two and make a few minor edits and feel it was done, a masterpiece, and send it off to journals with the expectation that it would be published quickly. But I was wrong to believe in this approach. What *Pithead* has taught me is that well-written stories take time to finish. Once in a while we get lucky and the beginnings, middles, and ends come close to being right on the first or second try, but the complete meshing of the story, the really getting to know the story's inside and out to make it memorable, in other words creating a story that is publishable, stems from editing and discovering what is or isn't right for the story and looking at the work from multiple viewpoints until everything in the story fits together like a puzzle. This knowing whether or not the story is right, this getting comfortable with its completion, begins by reading and studying the forms and techniques used by others, regardless if the studied work is already published or not, and by practicing others' techniques or approaches in our work, in the attempt to get the work as close to perfect as possible before we send it off into the world. This recognition—the understanding or the

knowing of when a story is complete—is usually developed over a long period of time and with practice and patience. Sadly, I lacked each of these concepts, most of all patience, and sometimes still lack it, and what many of the *Pithead* submitters continue to lack, too, is the ability to recognize whether the beginning, middle, and end is a natural fit for the story, along with the willingness to get accustomed to the practice and belief that more work always has to be done to make our stories more memorable and thus publishable.

Further, during the first several months of reading, declining, and accepting submissions for the journal, I began noticing many similarities in my work with the declined submissions, especially their beginnings, middles, and ends. The *Pithead* submissions that really struck me had tight, polished sentences, and the stories immediately began with at least a hint of conflict. Hence, I then went and evaluated the stories that would eventually make up this thesis collection, and what I found was most of my stories lacked the same polish and immediate conflict that was found in the accepted stories. After recognizing that my stories weren't finished, I went back to work on my collection, rethinking the vision or aim of each story, their conflicts, and edited until I felt I knew everything about the worlds and lives therein and how everything fit naturally within each story. In “Looking Out for the Dead,” for example, I noticed the beginning of the story which focuses the main character, Eugene, had too much backstory and not enough immediate action, so I rewrote the first two pages and put Eugene into action in the first sentence, weaving the best of the original backstory deeper into the story and cutting the rest. As a result, the story became much more alive, much more immediate, and thus more engaging, and, ultimately, from the continued editing and polishing and

rewriting, was likely the deciding factor that led to its publication.

Another influence gained from the journal has been recognizing and avoiding reoccurring story lines that are often viewed as cliché, especially in beginnings and ends. I have read countless stories where the main character wakes from a dream in the first sentence and their world is turned upside-down, or stories where the protagonist immediately cries in an attempt to invoke sympathy in the reader over some unforeseen loss that the reader hasn't had the chance to fully embrace and care about yet, or, it was all just a joke at the end stories, or, worse, stories where the protagonist looks into the mirror and sees a different view of him or herself and the world and tells or shows the differences through the mirror. While each of these story lines have been done well, I have learned to take a different direction and embrace and focus on the odd situations, the uniqueness, of everyday life instead in discovering my own stories. By doing so, I believe, when a reader approaches one my stories for the first time, he or she will be stuck by the immediate conflict and the odd scene and thus will be hooked for at least the first few pages. It is my job, after the reader begins my work, to make him or her fall into my created world and become compelled to see it through. Editing, and knowing each of my stories well, of what literary elements or techniques to use to create stronger work, is how interest is sustained in the reader and kept alive until the climax and resolution are reached. And, hopefully, the created power of my work will remain with the reader long after the story is completed. In my story "Look Out for the Dead," for instance, oddity and uniqueness are found in the protagonist's profession as a road kill specialist and the actions he takes while on and off the job. The same goes with "Far from Oxford," where two characters encounter a window peeper, and when the two characters walk over and

confront the peeper to see what all of the fuss is about, both discover something that will change their lives forever.

With all six stories in this thesis collection, the reader will be presented with situations he or she would most likely never wish to find themselves in. In my story “Fading the World to Black,” two unemployed friends come up with a plan to strike it rich but strike something entirely different: a new form of hunger. As is the case with each story in the collection, the situations found within would never have been reached or discovered if I had followed my initial story ideas and didn't edit and rewrite them several times to get at the real heart of the story. In fact, if I hadn't had such wonderful faculty guidance, and hadn't started *Pithead Chapel*, I am not sure I would have learned or understood the importance of editing and reworking every story we write: I hadn't in all the previous years before graduate school in my attempts to write fiction; and I am not sure how long it would have taken to learn the process of evaluating the work of others in regard to my own and how every piece submitted should be the best that it can be, period.

Before learning the importance of editing and producing the best work no matter the time spent or challenges faced in the process, I took the easy road, the lazy road, and submitted work that wasn't the strongest I could do only to encounter more rejection or, every once in a while, another publication credit. But now I have to live with those sloppy stories being out there in the world, and the stories are always there as a reminder of why it is important to not only be a hard working writer but a ruthless editor—for others and yourself—and be determined to always produce and publish the best work possible. That being said, *Pithead Chapel* is continuing to grow every day and so is my writing. In August of 2014 we created a small print press and began accepting fiction and

nonfiction chapbook manuscripts with the goal to publish at least two chapbooks per year in 2015 and 2016, and perhaps after a few years of publishing chapbooks, if the venture is successful, we can move on to publishing novels and nonfiction titles. If the journal and small print press fails like many do, I will at least gain a greater understanding of how publishing and writing works as a business, career, and hobby, and I am excited to take the next step and see what the future holds over the course of my career as a writer and publisher.

LOOKING OUT FOR THE DEAD

Eugene shifted the flatbed Chevy into third and crawled up Sawmill Ridge. He turned Robert Earl Keen up a notch and surveyed both shoulders of the road. The dispatcher, Deidra, had said the accident was just over the hill, and that the roadkill wasn't pretty, or so she had heard. She said the victim and the police were at the scene. When he reached the apex of the ridge the lights of a police car flashed behind a blue Volvo sedan. Down from the two vehicles, an officer and a man stood along the highway looking over the dead. He swung the truck in behind the police car and set the handbrake, got out with a pair of gloves in hand.

"There's the animal guy," the officer said, pinching his hat brim. It was Stuckey, the recent transfer. He stepped up to Eugene. "It took you long enough. We got another creamed critter. If another five minutes went by we'd have put a red bow on it for you."

"That's a baby there," Eugene said, staring at the brown fawn with white spots. Its bloody tongue hung from the corner of its mouth, and its front and rear legs were bent like upside-down handlebars.

"It might look like a miscarriage now," the man said. "But it sure left its mark on my Volvo, took the headlight and grille out." The man loosened his neck tie and pointed at the hole in the front end, at the crinkled hood. "The insurance company is going to stick it where it hurts and I don't even get a meal out of it."

"You could always take it home yet," Eugene said, "get something. A few backstraps maybe."

The man unbuttoned his navy blazer and shook his head. “How would I get it there?”

Eugene shrugged. He scratched his wrist. “As little as that thing is you might get it in the trunk.”

The man frowned and walked toward his car. On the way he reached for a broken piece of grille and held the plastic mesh in his hand, then rubbed the Volvo emblem with his thumb.

Stuckey moved behind him and kicked the other pieces into a pile. “Make sure you pick this trash up too,” he said.

Eugene nodded. He waded through the knee-high grass into the ditch and grabbed onto one of the fawn’s broken front legs. A green bottle fly scampered across the fawn’s snout, and clung to a cloudy eyeball, as Eugene dragged the fawn toward the shoulder of the road. When he reached the truck, he took a leg in each hand and swung it over the truck rail. Air escaped the fawn’s belly and it bleated as it landed.

“Well, I think that should do it,” Eugene said, and tossed a broken headlight in with the fawn. He straightened his orange protective helmet and tried to give Stuckey a wave.

Stuckey had a notebook in his hand. He leaned down next to the hole in the front of the Volvo and wrote something. When he was upright again, his body started to convulse—abrupt spasms of his arms and head as if he were having a grand mal seizure. He stopped jerking and made a winding gesture around the side of his head and pointed in the direction of Eugene. Then Stuckey nudged the man on the arm and the man laughed.

Eugene shook his head and climbed into the cab, and before he could get the truck turned around his phone erupted. It was Deidra again. As she described another pickup location, he pictured her at the courthouse, in a tan skirt and a sleeveless white v-neck, hunched close to a glowing monitor as she ran a finger along a map. Two weeks ago, at Deputy Halverson's retirement party, she asked him to swing by and remove a dead raccoon in front of her place, and he learned then that she had a young son. She even joked with him afterward and sent him away with a bag of store-bought apples. Later, one of the gals in the office said she was single, so he planned to ask her out, maybe take her and the son over to Roy's on Michigan 66 for some home-style cooking. But ever since someone at the office complained recently about him coming in there smelling of sour death, to talk and fill out his time sheet, with blood and guts smeared on his uniform, he now had to stay out in the service garage.

He rolled the window down to get some fresh air, to allow the July morning to push through. It wasn't long before the cab filled with the scent of fresh cut grass and honeysuckle, and he slapped the steering wheel to the beat of the radio, to the squeal of tires eating corners and swallowing small hills. Within minutes he arrived at the new location on Bunker Hill Road, and a man in blue jeans with a feed cap stood next to an opening in a barbed wire fence with a shotgun in hand, about ten feet from a russet-colored cow with large, bulging eyes and a crooked leg.

Eugene got out and gave a nod. "Howdy there," Eugene said.

"Howdy yourself," the man said. "Some asshole hit my cow here and took off."

Eugene turned. Two skid marks squiggled along the gray highway. The cow had limped off the road and positioned itself next to the fence. Blood trickled from a knee on

its front leg, and the knee had swelled to the size of a football. A wet rumble came from deep in the cow's throat as it tilted its head.

“Do you know anything at all about who might've hit it?” Eugene asked.

“Hell, son, your guess is good as mine. I don't suspect people right care much. Not now days.”

Eugene lifted his head to say something but thought better of it. He straightened his hard hat and tried to get next to the beast, to get a look at its injured leg. In a perfect world he'd put his hands around the swollen knee, shift the cartilage and bones into place with his thumbs, and wrap it. As he got closer, the cow veered to head him off and bellowed. Eugene stepped back, and the man reached into his pocket and pulled out a couple of shells. He stuck them both in the breech and snapped it shut.

“Whoa, hold on,” Eugene said. “Can't we save it? Besides, you can't do anything with that gun until an officer gets here. Standard procedure.”

The man took one of his hands off the shotgun and pointed a finger at the ground. “Is this your land? No. It's my goddamn land, who you to tell me what I can or can't do?”

“Listen,” Eugene said, “I'm not here to tell you anything. I know it's your land, so please don't get mad at me. I'm just trying to do a job. I don't want any trouble.”

The man turned the barrel upward and rested the gun against his shoulder, and Eugene went to the truck to call dispatch, to make sure an officer was en route. While Eugene leaned against the hot fender and waited for an officer to arrive, the man circled the cow and cursed under his breath.

“Don’t understand how someone can hit a son of a bitchin’ cow and keep right going. Don’t folks these days give a shit about anything? Bastards.”

Eugene understood. It’s what got him to want to be a roadkill technician in the first place: the caring. When he was in the 5th grade, some negligent driver hit Bob, his chocolate lab. Eugene rode the school bus home unaware of Bob’s death until the bus driver told everyone to sit tight and thudded over an already dead Bob to drop him off. Abandoned, with a dog tag that flashed in the sun like a discarded beer tab, Bob lay on the side of the road next to a blood stain. No courtesy. Ever since then Eugene had a desire for helping animals, whether dead or alive, get the respect they deserved. He never understood how people could live with the guilt after running down someone’s pet or livelihood and not care, to shrug, maybe sip a coffee or a beer, and keep going.

The police car arrived. It was Stuckey again. He hit the lights and talked into the mike. He looked at the man and the cow as his mouth moved. Then he clipped the mike on a hook and stepped from the car, unlatched his gun holster. “Sir, could you please put that firearm down? We can’t do anything until that gun is put away,” Stuckey said.

The man shook his head. “Jesus Christ,” and spit shot from his mouth. “My cow, my land, my gun, and now it’s my goddamn fault. Where’s my rights?”

“I understand,” Stuckey said. “Please put the weapon in the grass and we’ll talk rights. I’d hate to have a stray bullet take someone like Eugene down.”

The man sighed. He leaned the gun against a wooden fence post and stomped toward Eugene and Stuckey. His face was red.

“Thank you,” Stuckey said. “Do we know who hit the cow?”

“Well it sure as hell wasn’t this boy, I don’t reckon,” the man said, and pointed a thumb toward Eugene. “Beats the hell out of me who it was. I got a call from a neighbor up the way, said someone hit a cow, that’s all I know.”

“Okay. You don’t think there’s any way to save it do you?” Stuckey asked. “I mean, if you can’t nurse it back to the pasture, we’ll have to put it down.”

The man looked at the cow. He lifted his cap and ran a hand over the stubble on his head, then slipped the cap back on. A procession of vehicles idled past, and the exhaust fumes deadened the air, as more and more rubberneckers stopped and setup folding chairs along the opposite side of the highway. One man had even climbed onto the roof of a Ford pickup to get a better view. He sat up there with his legs dangling over the driver’s side door, clutching and sipping a Pepsi. Down from him, two children in bathing suits shoved each other on the tar and chip blacktop over a red candy stick.

“No, there ain’t no saving her. She’s good as gone,” the man said.

Stuckey motioned for the people to move back. He brushed his starched gray shirt and tugged on the loops of his uniform pants. He stood in the gravel along the shoulder of the road and faced the cow. He dug grooves with the heels of his polished shoes, looked behind him again, and wiped the sweat from his forehead with a free hand. A young girl had a sucker going in and out of her mouth and her lips were red; she stood behind Stuckey without blinking. Stuckey pulled the black 9 mm from his holster and aimed the gun. The first shot missed and the spectators gasped. The sucker disappeared into the girl’s mouth and her hands covered her ears.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” the man said. “The county has two children at large, one shoveling and one shooting.”

Eugene shook his head and guessed Stuckey didn't want to get up beside the cow in the first place because blood might have splattered and stained his uniform. Then Stuckey inched forward. He raised the gun again and held the aim longer. On the second shot the bullet struck the cow in the head, tearing the roof of its skull off. The cow shuddered, then turned its neck and eyed them before the ass of it crashed to the ground and the front came with it. The cow's legs jerked. Blood spilled from its head.

Stuckey ambled up to the cow and nudged its neck with his foot. He stared at the tip of his shoe and rubbed it in the grass. "First shot got away from me, must have been the sun," he joked.

Eugene and the man didn't laugh.

"I'm gonna get my tractor. It can't sit long in this heat," the man said, and he started making his way toward a red, gambrel-roofed barn in the field.

"Eugene will help you until you get it off the side of the road," Stuckey said as the man walked away. "That's why we pay him." He slapped Eugene on the shoulder. "Good luck, Genie. Hopefully somebody else gets called and has to see you pimply face next time."

In less than twenty minutes Eugene and the man had gotten a chain around one of the cow's rear legs. Then the man revved the tractor's engine and pulled the cow through the ditch. The cow slid with ease through grass and smoke and the man didn't say thank you. The burning sun glowed like a branding iron and bore down on Eugene's neck, on the truck bed where a tornado of flies swirled around the fawn. All the spectators had left except for the man on the roof of the truck. The guy even had the gall to ask the owner of the cow if he could have it. Nothing surprised Eugene anymore. He had only been on the

job a year since graduating from high school and had seen it all. When he got into the cab, he grabbed his phone off the seat. He had eight missed messages, all from Deidra. “Christ,” he said, “will it ever end?”

*

Eugene spent the rest of Friday afternoon working through the different location messages Deidra had left. On Kidder Road he picked up another deer, a bloated spike horn. By the elementary school he used a flat head shovel to scrape up a calico cat that looked like it had been run through a meat grinder. In between stops he replayed Deidra's messages. A few times he thought he could sense some flirtatiousness with the way she started sentences with “would you please” or “could you please.” He just didn't have enough time to get through them all. The rest would have to wait until Monday.

After he'd finished dropping the carcasses at the compost station—and covered them with soil, so they could be born again someday through vegetation—he drove to the service garage. He pulled the truck in the shade and dragged a hose over to wash the bed out. As he sprayed the truck, to drown the stench and clear the maggots, he watched as the office gals exited the courthouse. He wanted to catch a glimpse of Deidra. Maybe he could stop her before she left and ask her out to dinner? Her silver Toyota Camry was nosed up to the chain-link that skirted the parking lot. He stood spraying the truck, waiting. Finally she came out. She was talking with another gal. He couldn't help admiring her long, slender legs and her heels that clopped over the asphalt. A moment later a truck swung in next to her, and Stuckey got out wearing a white T-shirt and blue jeans. He strutted over to the passenger side of her Camry and placed an arm along the roof above the door, leaned in, and started talking. Stuckey smiled, told some story with

his hands. Some of the words sounded like cow, gun, and Eugene. Then Deidra and Stuckey laughed, and Deidra reached over and gave him a piece of paper. Stuckey looked at it and stuck it into his pocket. Then he tapped on the roof of her car and gave a wave.

Eugene tried to wave to her too as she zipped by, but she didn't look his way. He stopped spraying the truck when Stuckey pulled up.

“Hey, Genie, why don't you wash my truck next time? It could use a good spit shine.”

Eugene wanted to tell him to go to hell, but gave a fake laugh instead. “Keep dreaming.”

Stuckey grabbed a lever next to the steering wheel and pulled on it.

“Hey, what's the story with you and Deidra anyway?”

Stuckey's truck clunked as he got it into gear and held it with the brake.

“Wouldn't you like to know, huh, buddy?”

“You two an item or what?”

Stuckey smiled. He leaned close to the rear view mirror and ran a hand through his crew cut before turning back to Eugene. “Come on. You don't actually believe you got a chance do you?” He shook his head. “Look at yourself. You shovel dead shit all day for Christ's sake. You're not in her league, man. She thinks you're a chump, forget about it.”

Eugene gripped the hose nozzle and it hissed. He wanted to jam the nozzle into Stuckey's mouth, squeeze the damn thing full bore until an eruption spewed from his nose and mouth and he choked like a yard sprinkler. See how almighty Stuckey acted

then. “You know, I’d like to buy into the hype, but the more I learn about you the worse it gets.”

Stuckey shook his head. He let out a laugh and seemed to enjoy the attention. “Just stay away from her. Then we won’t have any problems. And if you’re lucky, when I’m through, you can have her. That’s if there’s anything left.”

*

On Saturday afternoon Eugene loaded his camping gear into his 1978 Ford Ranchero. He found a Coleman cooler in the shed and filled it full of Busch Light. Abby, his English setter, ran around the yard with a stick in her mouth as he loaded gear. When he had everything stowed away, he got Abby into the front seat and drove through East Jordan. Now that he wasn’t allowed in the office anymore, he wished he could run into Deidra somehow and ask her out on a date. Maybe she would bring her son along to the river for a picnic? He swung by Murphy Field to see if Deidra was there with her son, throwing a ball around. He drove over to the beach in case they were spending the day there. Children screamed and filled the water. Mothers in bikinis rested in the sand with magazines draped over their faces. A few stood in the shallows and adjusted their tops before grabbing a hold of a child’s hand. He circled along the beach road once more, peaking over the embankment of beach sand, as Abby panted with her head out the window. If he spotted Deidra, he’d put Abby on a leash, walk her over, and say hello. He’d be a man for once and tell her he’d been hoping to find her, but he didn’t see her anywhere.

Out near the city limits Eugene pulled over and fished a beer out of the cooler. He’d take the scenic route toward Graves Crossing and set up camp along the Jordan

River. Spend the rest of the afternoon tipping beers and listening to the radio, watch Abby plunge in and out of the cold, clear river. When he reached Timber Ridge, he wondered why he hadn't stopped by Deidra's to pay her a visit, ask if she'd like to come along, get away from it all. She lived just down the road. He might try tomorrow if the weather was nice. With what Stuckey suggested, though, she'd probably say no anyway. Why did that guy have to be such an ass?

*

Around seven o'clock Eugene had a little fire going and had filled the dog's food dish. The sun wore him down earlier, made him feel more buzzed than he wanted to be, so he had put his chair in the shade and turned the radio up. Before long it was night and he threw a few more maple logs onto the fire. He tried to stop thinking about Deidra and what it would be like to feel her body touching his, to be able to wake up first and cook her breakfast. He leaned his head back, rubbed Abby behind the ears, and closed his eyes—listened as Bob Seger's "Roll Me Away" cut through the blindness and over the lull of the river water, deep into the night.

When he awoke it was morning, and the sun pinched between the trees. A pile of Busch Light cans lay fallen around the chair and his neck hurt. He stepped behind a bush to take a leak and heard Abby's dog tags rattle out from underneath the Rancho. Maybe after he got the cans picked up he'd drive by Deidra's, see if she would like to come back and have breakfast. After he finished cleaning and got Abby into the car it was nine thirty. He pulled onto M-66 and eased the throttle down toward Deidra's. He pulled the visor down to block some of hell's curtain burning low to the ground, and wondered what he might say to her. She'd probably say thanks but no thanks to whatever he said. He still

couldn't see, and he tilted his head this way and that to watch the road. When he got close to her house something white flashed in the ditch. It broke from the tall grass and jumped in front of the car. It looked like a possum. The animal made a *thump thump* as it scraped against the floorboard and shot out the back. He pumped the brake and pulled onto the shoulder of the road. About twenty yards behind the car an animal shook, half pasted into the asphalt. He got out and hustled over. It was a dog, a beagle. A thin piece of bone jutted from its crushed skull and its tail still wagged.

He looked at her house across the highway, a white single story with a swing set in the yard. A leather ball glove lay in the driveway. "Shit," he said. He dragged the beagle into the grass and ran to the car. Abby danced on the seat as he opened the door. He thought about saying the hell with it and driving off. But what would she say? Was he still drunk? He couldn't just leave, so he grabbed his hat off the seat and turned back. When he reached the beagle again, it was already dead. Eugene pulled his animal control cap down to conceal his face, and he scooped the beagle into his arms and walked across the road. A few cars rumbled past, and the occupants had their heads pasted against the glass, watching. He didn't know how this could be happening.

He walked through the front yard with the warm dog in his arms. He laid the beagle on red and purple petunias in the flower box next to the porch and took a deep breath. The flower blooms and the dainty earth made his mouth water. Her son appeared in the bay window. He had blond hair and a round face. Eugene stepped onto the porch and knocked, but the boy didn't move. He wore Spiderman pajamas and he rubbed an eye with the ball of his fist. The door opened.

"Eugene, what are you doing here?" Deidra asked.

She wore a thin white robe and the end of it stopped in the middle of her thighs. A flash of nausea shook Eugene as if he had been kidney punched. He started to sweat.

“Well,” she said, “what is it?”

Eugene looked at his primer-splotched Ranchero idling up on the road and almost made a break for it. “There’s been an accident,” he said. “I was driving and—”

“Are you okay?” she asked, and stepped out on the porch. A light breeze lifted the ends of the robe, revealing more of her thighs, and the boy remained fixed in the window.

“Actually,” he said. “It isn’t good.”

“What?” she asked, and crossed her arms.

Eugene turned and pointed toward the flower box. “I’m not sure, but I might’ve hit your dog.”

Deidra hurried down the steps and slipped onto her knees. When she bent forward, her vanilla-colored panties became visible. Eugene shook from the guilt and averted his eyes to the dog. Deidra poked it with her finger as if it were a child’s belly, as if it were still alive. She petted it. She cooed to it and lifted its head. Then the boy came out the door.

“Mommy, what you doing?” the boy asked.

“Just go back inside, honey, Max is sick. Please go back inside, okay,” she said.

The boy inched closer. He tilted his head over the iron railing.

Eugene came off the porch. “I messed up,” he said. “I’m an idiot.” Eugene tried to block the boy’s sight and was about to place a hand on her shoulder when Stuckey stepped out. He didn’t have a shirt on and his chest was shaved. He held a plastic spatula in his left hand and some egg clung to it.

“Jerry,” Deidra said, “please take Allan inside. Eugene hit Max.”

“Genie did what?”

Deidra made a twisted face and shooed at Jerry to get her son away. “Just take Allan into the house.”

Stuckey took Allan by the arm and helped him inside. When he closed the door, Deidra stood up. She tightened her robe and gave Eugene a disgusted look as she rushed up the steps and went into the house. Stuckey leaned against the railing and stared down at Eugene and the beagle.

“Hell, if I’d known this would happen, you might still be favored at work. God, I hated that fucking dog,” and he scratched his chest.

“What?” Eugene asked.

“You deaf? None of that really matters now, does it? You did yourself in this time.”

Eugene stood there for a moment; then he stepped closer. “Why couldn’t I’ve missed the dog and got you hung up under the car instead? Then I could’ve scraped you out like shit from a boot.”

Stuckey smirked and looked off at something in the yard, and behind him Deidra’s son held both of his little palms against the bay window. A few times the boy stuck his lips to the glass and mumbled something.

“You know,” Stuckey said, “there are two kinds of people. Those that help others and those who fuck things up so others have to help. I don’t think it takes much now to see the side you’re on.”

Eugene hesitated. He didn't know what to say. This time he had screwed up, and he wished there was a way out of it. He wished he could've seen the road a bit better. He thought about asking Stuckey to step into the yard, to see what he had, but the boy still watched from the window.

Then Deidra stepped out wearing stained sweat pants and a T-shirt. "Thanks, Eugene. I trusted you. Of all people, why did it have to be you?" She got on her knees and wrapped a towel around the dog, then cradled it and stood. "Please go, Eugene. We can handle it from here."

She turned and headed toward the field, and Stuckey came off the porch to follow her. Eugene walked with them halfway around the house before Stuckey turned to stop him.

"You heard her. I think it's time for you to vamoose. You've already caused us enough pain," Stuckey said, and he hustled to catch up with Deidra.

As Eugene lumbered across the brown lawn toward the highway, the boy came out of the house and tottered down the concrete steps. He ran toward Deidra and Stuckey, and Eugene could hear both of their voices telling the boy to stay back, to go play as they helped Max. When Eugene reached the Ranchero, he turned and watched Deidra trudge through the waist-high grass with the bulging towel in her arms before she vanished. He got in the car and Abby whined. He grabbed the steering wheel at noon and three and sat there for a minute; felt the car lift and fall each time a vehicle moaned past. He thought about leaving Abby tied to the mailbox or to the front door, but Deidra and the boy probably wouldn't want her. He slipped the Ranchero into drive, did a U-turn, and pulled onto the highway. Deidra worked a shovel now in the high grass and her brunette hair

glistened in the sun. She stopped shoveling and wiped her forehead on her sleeve; she pinched her shirt and fanned herself before thrusting the shovel handle back and forth again. Along the edge of the field, Stuckey stood clutching the spatula, and next to him Allan crouched with the ball glove in his hands. They both turned from Deidra as Eugene mashed on the accelerator, as he gained speed and shot past the blood stain, and headed back in the direction of the river.

GOING RINGSIDE

Elmer was in the kitchen, fixing himself two eggs over easy, when he heard shouting outside. He turned the burner down, went to the window. Out near his mailbox, where the children gathered to board the yellow bus, two girls argued.

Elmer waited. He tried to decipher the voices and gauge the threat. It sounded like one of the girls said *you bitch*. At first the spat seemed normal, natural. But when the girl in the pink dress struck the girl in the blue dress over the head with a tin lunch pal, Elmer'd seen enough.

He stepped out onto the cool concrete, barefooted. "You girls end it right now," he said. "Or I'll come down there."

The girls had dropped their lunches, and each now clutched a fistful of hair. With locked bodies they jerked, cussed. Then they both fell to the grass and wrestled, arms twisted, before the one in pink got on top, continued slapping and pulling hair. Behind the girls a group of children, ranging from first to ninth grade, crowded around; the mob coalesced, blocking the fight from view.

Elmer hustled to reach the children as fast as he could. He had a bad back from years of block laying. When he finally got there he pushed his way ringside. A little blood dripped from the bottom girl's nose, and the girl in pink still straddled her, kicking ass.

"Come on, break it up," Elmer said, and he placed a hand on each girl's shoulder, pried them apart.

Then Yolanda, the neighbor across the street, stepped out her door with a sheet wrapped around her. “Ellie,” she said, “don’t take that shit from her. If she’s still picking at you, you better finish that little bitch.”

Ellie, the sufferer through the ordeal, managed to stand at the sound of her mother’s voice. She wiped the blood from her face with an arm, then latched onto the girl’s hair, dragging her to the ground.

Now, Elmer had a problem. The children pushed, roared, cussed; foam formed around their tender mouths like wolves in drought. “Move back, step back,” Elmer said, and extended his arms to corral the children. The two girls still rolled in dirt, trading blows with clenched fists.

Before Elmer could separate them again, Yolanda hustled across the street to the huddle, silk sheet still draped around her. She pushed to the front.

“That’s it, Ellie. Come on, girl. Hit her good goddammit.”

“What you want to do that for?” Elmer asked. “They’re kids.”

Yolanda gripped the sheet above her breasts, ignored him, continued yelling. One of the middle school boys, with a dog collar around his neck and orange hair, went to his knees. He scooted under Yolanda, stuck his head beneath the sheet.

Elmer leaned down, took ahold of each girl’s arm, and started to lift them. Then he felt a sharp pain in his lower back, an explosion of numbing sensations that branched into his arms, his neck, his checks.

“You touch my daughter again you bastard and you’ll find yourself on the sex list,” Yolanda said.

Now the school bus rumbled up the block and a few of the other neighbors had stepped out onto their porches to see what the commotion was about. Three houses down from the melee, Carol Varney stuck her head out the door of her colonial wearing an apron, presumably looking for her daughter.

Meanwhile, the children rooted and Yolanda coached. At times the girls traded places on top, though both were losing energy, momentum, and their movements, their blows, became slower, less forceful over time.

Elmer flinched whenever a body crawled over him or a shoe landed beside his face. He felt paralyzed from the waist down. Through the tangle of legs, he could see the girls, weak and beaten. Then Carol pushed her way into the group.

“That’s enough. You kids know better. Debra, stop, get up.”

“Oh, so now Mrs. Riches needs to throw her dollar in,” Yolanda said.

“Throw what?” Carol asked.

“You heard me, bitch,” Yolanda said, and grabbed her, hit her in the eye.

Carol went down, and Yolanda pounced. During the sucker punch Yolanda’s sheet fell off. She was bare-breasted and the children turned their attention to her, to them, in pure hysteria; the orange-haired boy had resorted to shoving first and second graders out the way to capture it on his phone.

“Somebody help me,” Elmer said.

The mothers and daughters, in their separate snarls, proceeded to fight.

“C’mon, dammit,” Elmer said, and tried pushing himself up but couldn’t.

The bus slowed to a stop alongside the ruckus, hit the lights. Elmer watched as the innards of the bus ignited—the motionless shadows of children finally awakened—into a

shove fest. Before the woman driver, who also substituted as the school's wrestling coach, could get the door open, the children all wedged to one side, rocking the bus. The bus windows clunked and miniature arms and faces emerged through parted glass.

The bus driver unlatched her safety belt and stood. "Everyone remain in their seats and no looking by golly."

Elmer said, "Hey, driver," and waved to get her attention.

She must've failed to see him because she grabbed the sheet, threw it over Yolanda, then lifted her in a bear hug. Yolanda kicked. The bus driver whispered into Yolanda's ear, and Yolanda quit thrashing. Carol remained on the ground, unresponsive. The bus driver then shooed the kids onto the bus, returned and lifted Carol and carried her on.

"Hey, dammit, hey, what about me?" Elmer asked.

Yolanda nodded and the driver nodded back before the bus doors closed.

As it rolled on, Elmer yelled but nobody came. He rubbed his belly and counted the cinder blocks that held his place, a foundation of stone and blood he'd once set alone; though all he could do now was wait for someone to stop and help carry him home.

FAR FROM OXFORD

“What you think’s wrong with that paperboy?” Albert Albert said.

I was crouched at the rear of my ’78 El Camino, struggling to get a mag wheel on. I pinned the tire against the brake drum with my boot, finger-tightened a lug nut.

“That boy done became a window peeper,” Albert said.

Sweat seeped down into my eyes each time I tilted my head to level the tire, so I used my shoulder as a rag, looked over. Albert’s ass was in the way, and his white gut hung from the bottom of his tiny t-shirt. “I can’t see anything,” I said.

Albert moved a foot to the right, lifted his Pabst. Across Michigan Street, a red-haired boy stood on Ms. Jenkins’s porch with a gray messenger bag slung over his shoulders, his hands cupped around his eyes, leaning against a window.

“I don’t know why anyone would want to peek on Ms. Jenkins. Shit, she’s got to be pushing eighty,” I said, and reached down for my beer. “Get a look at that naked and you’ll be strange on women.”

Albert fired up an unfiltered Basic, blew a cloud of smoke that hung around his head like a dim halo. “I reckon,” he said, “that boy’s already different then, if he keeps looking in like that.”

I got up from my cinder block stool and walked over to Albert Albert. He stood like a sentinel in the thin, brown grass along the driveway and his right hand rested around a beer that he’d perched at the crest of his gut—the dew from the can forming a bull’s eye. The boy was still up against the window. “Hey, boy,” I called, “move away from there.”

The boy shot us a look. He adjusted his messenger bag and leapt off the porch, the papers slapping against his side as he darted across the lawn.

“Atta, boy, run, run,” Albert laughed and lifted his beer.

I mean so what if the boy was eyeballing her? I thought. Who hasn’t window peeped as a kid for Christ’s sake? It ain’t hurting anybody.

After the boy sprinted off I went to the cooler, and before I could even pluck the top on a cold one Albert was out in the middle of the street, with a smoke and a beer, directing traffic. He waved at a passing Toyota with the hand that held the beer, and two children in car seats swung miniature arms back.

“What the hell you doing?”

“I’m going to see what the fuss is about,” Albert said.

When I caught up to him, he was already on Ms. Jenkins’s porch, with his hands curved over a pane, peering.

“Just a lady in a blanket?” I asked.

“It’s Ms. Jenner, alright,” he said.

“Ms. Jenkins.”

“Whatever,” he said, and elbowed me, “I don’t think it matters much now.”

I moved under Albert’s shadow, stuck my face to the glass. Ms. Jenkins sat in a ratty brown recliner. She wore a blue nightgown and a clear plastic bag was pulled down over her head. The TV blared some game show.

Albert dropped back and looked toward the vacant street, then turned and rapped on the window with a thick knuckle. “Ms. Jenner, you all right in there?”

The TV didn’t get turned down none; she didn’t move.

“I don’t know, man. Something’s not right?”

“I hear that,” Albert said. “Ms. Jenner looks deader than a wet towel.”

Albert stepped for the front door, twisted the handle, and I found myself right behind him. The house smelled of joint ointment and vinegar, and the TV switched from a commercial to a trivia show where a college girl rattled on about her experiences at place called Oxford.

Albert stuck his lips close to Ms. Jenkins’s ear. “Ms. Jenner, you ain’t playing are you?”

A man in a yellow shirt now talked on the TV, and his silhouette projected off the plastic suctioned around Ms. Jenkins’s head; she was dolled up with lipstick and facial powder. The milky residue from her skin had rubbed onto the polypropylene, made her look cloudy.

Albert asked, “You think she done herself in with just the bag?” He reached down and placed a hand on her shoulder, tried rocking her forward but she was too stiff to bend.

I shrugged, motioned at an oxygen tube that ran limp across the carpet.

“Damn,” he said. He stomped past me into an adjacent room, then stomped right back out, wide-eyed. He brushed past me straight toward the rear of the house. “Come on,” Albert said. “We got to get out of here quick.”

When I reached the back door, Albert was halfway across the backyard, running in slow motion, toward a chain-link that skirted the lot. Then he tried to swing himself over, one handed. The crotch of his jeans caught the fence, and when he tumbled forward his jeans ripped out and his beer spilled all over.

“Where you going?”

Albert got off the ground and stuck a hand into the hole of his jeans. With the other he tossed the can into a parched bush. “There’s a dead guy in the bedroom, Chris,” and he turned, ran off down the alley.

I was standing on the bottom rung, unsure really of what he said, so I went and found the bedroom window, stuck my face to the glass. A man lay stretched on the bed in a blue, polyester suit. He had dead flowers scattered around him, and the cracked skin over his cheek bones looked like dried elephant leather.

Then I heard voices and turned from the window.

“That’s him,” the red-haired boy said to the policeman, “that’s the guy right there.”

I lifted my hands, trying to formulate some excuse, and before I could even say anything the cop tasered me, then knocked me over the head with a club.

FADING THE WORLD TO BLACK

When I arrived at the construction site again last Thursday—to ensure work hadn't resumed without me—I had no idea I would run into Flem. He and I worked as grunts humping steel I-beams until the contractor squandered the project money months back and we were laid off.

Flem scooted from a stack of plywood left for ruin and made his way toward my pickup, placed both hands on the driver's side door.

“About damn time, Dale,” he said. “I got us a plan to hit it rich. Nothing illegal.” He lifted his hands, turned them front to back. “Pristine.”

I gave his calloused hands a once over before reaching for my thermos. The morning clouds lingered like dark bruises, and Gretchen probably watched the same floaters from our kitchen waiting on my return with the infants' Tylenol.

“Any word about starting here again?”

“Hell,” he said, “boss man's getting a trial, prison, hopefully a raping. Say can you work a camera?”

I nodded.

“Good, grab what you need and come on.”

“Hold up, Gretchen and the baby's sick and—”

“We'll drop by there unless you're good on money.”

Flem had me. I was tired of not being able to snip the umbilical cord of government cheese and rice. And as long as his idea wasn't stealing or drug peddling, what could it hurt?

As soon as I got into his truck, he grabbed a hand-held police scanner off the seat, pressed a button. Immediately, a dispatcher radioed about a possible breaking and entering, then another about a domestic dispute, each coming from within the Sterling Heights area.

“Yesterday,” Flem said, “I was first on the scene of a utility worker being electrocuted.”

“Did they die?”

“Hell yes they died. When I got there the guy hung from a power pole, still smoking, charred like a pig in a blanket.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I know.” Flem pushed a camera across the seat. “No matter what always get out and take pictures, even if it’s only a fat guy stretching a penny.”

I lifted my Towlson Construction cap, ran a hand through my thinning hair, and slipped the cap back down. I fumbled with the camera; it wasn’t heavy. “How’s this gonna make us money?”

“Listen,” he said. “Celebrity chasers get rich following people. We’re doing the same except we’re taking pictures of accidents, bad decisions, the unfortunates.

Afterward we’ll call those news places, sell to the highest bidder.”

“And what do you need me for again?”

“So I can focus on being the getaway driver while someone else gets their hands dirty.”

I wanted to tell Flem that his idea was crazy, that it wouldn’t work, that nobody sought to pay hard earned money for pictures of people in a state of grief or all torn up,

unless it was a celebrity. Not to mention, the only person I felt comfortable seeing in compromised positions was my wife, and sometimes I didn't even feel comfortable with that.

We turned onto Ironstone Drive, got a mile or so from my place, when another call went out. The dispatcher mentioned a possible homicide on 17-Mile Road.

"Shit," Flem said. "That's real close."

I could see the brown lawn and rusted swing set at my place when he did a U-turn. "Can we drop the baby medicine off first?"

"Hell no," he said. "We only have a few minutes to get there before the police do."

Flem sat up on the wheel; we passed station wagons and Amish buggies, a school bus. Along 17-Mile, a scrawny girl in a tattered dress stood in the ditch, shin-deep in water. She squatted and worked a poplar branch into the mouth of a culvert.

"Bingo," Flem said. "I'll keep the truck running while you get out and snap pictures. When the sirens get within earshot, we'll roll out of here."

I slipped the camera around my neck and stepped out. A van slowed and a bearded man spat from the window. I turned toward Flem. He flailed his arms, hit the horn. The girl was on her knees now, fiddling with whatever she'd found.

I waded into the chest-high grass toward the girl. She looked no older than ten, and the water had turned the lower half of her dress green. When I reached the water's edge, she stood.

"He's been kilt," she said, and wiped her hands on her dress.

A nude body floated at her feet, facedown.

“Come on, get away from it,” I said.

“Why?” she said, and bent down again, took hold of an arm. She grunted and shifted her feet, trying to flip the body.

Flem laid on the horn while the girl struggled, and more vehicles swung in behind his pickup and people had gotten out of their cars. Off in the distance, the faint sound of sirens wailed.

As I positioned the camera to capture the girl wrestling an arm, she turned the body over. It was a male, maybe mid-20s, with a quarter-size bullet hole in his forehead.

“Let him be.”

She ignored me and continued to tug on the body. Then she lost balance and fell and the man floated into her arms. She became frantic and kicked at his head. Now, the sirens screamed and Flem revved the truck, spun onto the highway.

The girl thrashed until the man no longer touched her. She shimmied up the bank, leaned her head back. I moved through the ankle deep sludge, dropped the camera, and lay beside her.

“My daddy left us,” she said, “‘cause me and mama ate too much.”

“Things’ll get better,” I said, and took her hand; we stayed, with fingers entwined and our thin necks against the bank, until the corpse was dragged from the water, until an investigator, with a mustard stain on his white button-down, shook the change in his pocket and told us to let go.

DOWN AT THE DOLL PLANT

Gill was our extricating specialist. Whenever somebody at the doll plant got a hand or an arm caught in a compression mold; or a piece of clothing wound around a spinning shaft; or a lock of hair pulled into a fan, Gill appeared ready for action. Last Thursday, little David Tuttle (we call him little because he's short as hell, about five feet) got his uniform caught in a roller on a conveyor belt. It pulled him in and shot him out, sucked him in again and pinned him against the belt. He let out a scream and his shirt smoked, made the plant smell of burnt fabric. Mary Berry down on the line said it was strange that Tuttle started doing hip thrusts at the passing dolls before lunch but knew he was stuck when Gill arrived.

Last month, minutes before the Coponen girl had her arms crushed, Gill leaned against the cold steel of the second-floor railing, blowing on his coffee, black, surveying the plant. When the dolls head pressing machine, Big Bertha, ceased production, Gill perked up. Then a forklift driver left his vehicle, a solid no-no, and a woman down next to the dolls leg press jumped up and down, swinging her arms and putting one of her hands in her mouth. Gill hustled over.

He probably wasn't sure what he'd see this time—a crushed hand maybe, a burnt palm, some severed fingers. A few people had pushed their red emergency stop buttons on their machines, gathered to watch. The girl was young, maybe twenty, with a skinny waist and a brunette pony tail and she was stuck underneath the press's yellow security gate—how, we still don't know.

Gill motioned for the people to move back. He leaned close to the girl's ear. "Just relax, honey. Gill's here now."

She closed her eyes though appeared to remain semi-conscious; the grip from the upper and lower cavity plates of the mold held her upright. Gill stuck his head down next to the gate. Then she passed out. It had been two or three minutes since her arms got caught, and they were still caught. Gill slipped a small, steel block between the press and her arms. He popped the machine's emergency stop, reversed it. Ms. Coponen's left arm came out flat, the right was too except it hung, partially severed, from a thin layer of bone. Later we heard her arms were spared, but she never did show up again at the plant.

About two weeks after the Coponen mishap, Jerry Basil strode into the plant one morning with a hangover. As he changed a tire on a forklift at 6:25 a.m., using another forklift as a jack to save time, another damn no-no, it slipped off on him. We had no idea of the accident until Gill ran past with two men from the front office. When we got to the scene, Jerry squirmed, tried to jerk his legs free with his hips. The wheel drum on the front of the lift pinched both feet to the floor. Dale from maintenance got on his knees, wrapped Jerry in a bear hug to keep him from moving.

Gill remained calm. He found one of those high-pressured air mats and slid it under the frame, flipped a switch. After the mat inflated and Jerry was pulled free, the front halves of his feet were severed, the boots and all. One of the men from the office gagged, hurled scrambled eggs onto the concrete. But Gill didn't. He dug fingers into each boot, plucked chunks of flesh with toes and dropped each into a plastic bag with ice, and handed the remains to paramedics from the air ambulance. Betty Monks said

afterward that she'd heard Jerry was out until 2 a.m. that morning, drinking and dancing, at The Hole in the Wall.

On most days, though, we don't see much action in the injury department. It's only the steady slap of steel on steel, the lines of men and women moving their arms to keep up with an assembly line or press, as the tow motors rumble by. Once in a while somebody gets a forearm stuck to something hot and has to peel it off, cuts a hand with a utility knife, or crushes a finger, but other than that it's usually quiet.

When Cole Hume asked Gill once how he always made it on the scene seconds after trouble struck, Gill said, "I'm always willing to help. It's what God asked me to do."

But this morning that changed because of Louise Hershka. She's Gill's cousin, a school teacher of eight years who recently got laid off, and had little choice but to join him at the plant. As she dressed the dolls—a cake job—and packed them into fancy boxes, Robbie Haskins stood sixty feet above her on a platform fixing a broken truss bolt. Apparently, he was having a fuck of a time getting the new bolt in the hole and dropped it. The twenty-pound bolt fell like an anchor, struck Louise in the head and knocked her silly. When Gill arrived, he moved his fingers through her hair and found a skull dent, began yelling. A few of the workers stood around joking.

We did our best to get help, though when we returned she was gone. Yet Gill continued to pinch the wound together until the paramedics showed. After Louise was covered and wheeled outside, Gill stripped to his skivvies and ambled to the grassy area in front of the plant, laid down. We pulled the main electrical switch to kill the machines, asked the men and women to file outdoors. The eighty-six workers formed a circle around Gill. Mary Berry kneeled, began singing *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*. The rest of

us kneeled behind her; we all sang until our throats hurt; we sang until a bigwig from the front office came and took Gill away.

SOMEWHERE AMONGST THE ASHES

Graham watched as the gray sky passed kidney stones, small compressions of snow and ice the size of a baby's fist. Out in the pasture his sole Guernsey trudged toward the barn to escape the beating, and Graham hoped his daughter, Beth, had enough sense to do the same. He shook his coffee cup, brought it to his lips. It had been two weeks since he heard from her. On the day she left, she stomped from the house, her brown hair a mess, her fragile bones carrying a blue duffle. He now resented giving her an ultimatum: to live with him until she could get off the dope and find a job or to pack and get out. He no longer wanted to witness another slow death—the second woman to spiral into a heap of drug-rotted flesh under his roof.

“I ain't ever coming back,” Beth said that morning. “You don't understand me.”

“Beth,” he said. “What's there to not understand? You ain't but a year from high school and already you're killing yourself. I'm trying to help. Why can't you get that?”

Beth turned and lifted a middle finger as she marched toward the highway, and he waited there, half expecting some change of heart, until her thin frame blurred along the asphalt.

Graham got up from the table. His dog, Breaker, came off the couch and moseyed over, nudging Graham's hand with a cold nose.

“Should we find her, buddy? Bring her home, try one last time?” The dog looked out the window and wagged its tail.

Graham went to the closet, tugged his wool hunting jacket from a hanger, and dug around on the top shelf for twelve-gauge shells. He knew Beth hung with a long-haired

fella out in Skandia, the one who stunk like cat piss and had sores around his mouth. He figured if she wasn't there that fella might at least know where she was.

When he got out to his Chevy pickup the hail weakened; only a few chunks struck him, stinging the back of his neck. He checked to make sure his shotgun was behind the seat, and he got Breaker into the truck. At one time, Breaker was the best damn bird dog he'd ever seen. Even as a pup he'd never been afraid of gunshots and could sniff and flush the birds out. Now, Graham hoped he could at least sniff and flush Beth out if she was in one of these places.

Graham cut onto Michigan 35 and passed a mining dump. Small mountains of black soot skirted both sides of the highway, and large chunks of its blue belly had split and pooled within the ditches. He veered right off M-35 toward Abraham Lake. He knew the fella had a place not far from here. About a month back, Beth called after the lowlife had tossed her out. She was cold and wet, tired and in the process of walking home. He never said a word, at first, only went and got her. Like now, he didn't know if she would recognize that he was trying to help, that he was trying to save her from the ruination.

The morning hail had turned to snow, and a thin layer blanketed the gravel road. The truck bucked and rattled as he passed a mobile home where a teenage boy stood in the yard. The boy cut his eyes toward Graham as he leaned against a rusted station wagon without a jacket on, fingering hotdogs straight from the package and into his mouth. Graham shook his head. When he reached the end of the seasonal road, it gave way to a two-track that snaked up a hill; he killed the engine and listened to it tick.

Graham placed his arms on top of the steering wheel, looked off at the trees. It had been a rough go since Mary died four years ago. He'd done the best he could since

then, or so he believed, with trying to raise Beth. After Mary fell in the barn and the doctor prescribed those damn people-killers she never was quite the same. Then one morning, after he'd fed the Guernsey, he came in to see how Mary was doing with getting Beth ready for school. He found Beth sitting on the edge of their bed, humming, as she brushed Mary's long, gray hair. Mary had spit a reddish fluid at some point onto the pillow and she was stiff already.

Around the truck a bunch of tire tracks split the earth and trash bags filled the ditches. Graham pulled the shotgun from behind the seat, and Breaker leapt off the road and began sniffing at pseudoephedrine boxes and old refrigerators that were charred black and rusted. Christ, he thought, walking along the road and looking down the ravine at paint thinner cans and car tires partially covered with snow, who's going to clean this mess up? He slipped two shells into the breach and snapped it shut, continued to hike up the hill. Breaker had moved away from the debris to looking for birds with his nose down, locking onto scents that weaved between trees and bushes. About halfway up he could see a cabin, and no hint of wood smoke hung in the air. He stepped from the two-track and bent down, rubbed his fingers together to get Breaker's attention. He pulled a leash from his pocket and thought about tying him up, but he didn't want Breaker to bark as he made his way closer.

He let Breaker run, and he would just say he was hunting birds and was lost, if need be. At the edge of the clearing he stopped. The shack's windows were painted black. He bent down on his haunches and listened. Water trickled off the eaves, a slow *blip, blip, blip*, as chickadees jumped from branch to branch and chirped above him. A ratty camping trailer with an orange stripe and flat tires rested a few feet from the cabin, and a

pile of firewood was heaped next to the trailer. He lifted his gun and moved toward the trailer, to make sure Beth wasn't frozen to death inside under some thin blanket.

He grabbed the trailer door and pulled it open, steadied the tip of the gun at the entrance. The trailer was dark inside; a strong mixture of ammonia and paint thinner poured from it like the mouth of a factory stack. He reached into his pocket for a handkerchief, placed it over his nose and mouth, and stepped inside.

The trailer had been gutted. Makeshift tables of sawhorses and plywood lined the far wall. One table had a rusted propane tank with a green garden hose connected to the nozzle that ran over to a plastic jug. How the trailer hadn't exploded and rocketed into space yet was beyond him. Once, when he was reading one of Mary's gossip magazines, he saw a picture of a trailer like this. It was engulfed in flame and some dark-haired, male celebrity stood in the door, looking out, as it shot over a playground where a handful of kids played. When Graham looked closer, the kids looked like the celebrity.

He stepped on a discarded light bulb and it broke. He leaned against a table that held Mason jars, lighter fluid, and coffee filters with red stains. The chemicals burned through the handkerchief, stinging his throat and eyes, and he gagged, staggered outside.

When he regained focus, he tried to locate Breaker. He whistled in light, short bursts, but nothing stirred. The shack still remained lifeless, vacant, so he inched toward the door. An opening in the clouds allowed the sun to cast its glow over a corner of the shack, the foundation split and broken. He stepped onto the concrete blocks and knocked. If someone or that same fella answered the door, he probably wouldn't remember Graham anyway. He wondered what would happen if he did? Would he have to shoot

him? He hoped not. Graham didn't notice any movement, and he knocked again, harder. Still nothing. He reached down and turned the handle, forced the door with his shoulder.

He held the gun stock against his hip and entered. No pictures hung from the walls, no clocks, no shelves. Wiring had been pulled from the walls and formed uneven squares that reminded him of plot lines seen from an airplane. Food wrappers and empty beer bottles covered the counter top, were lined around the missing sink. He touched a half-eaten sandwich, the bread rock hard. He sighed and his breath exploded around his face. When he got into the main room, a mattress was spread across the floor with a heap of blankets piled on top. He moved closer and nudged the pile with the tip of the gun. After a couple of pokes he hit something soft. He stabbed at the pile again and a face emerged. It was a girl; she looked about Beth's age. She had blonde hair, dark rings under her eyes, and penny-like scabs on her face.

"Who are you?" she asked, and delicately ran a finger around a scab at the corner of her mouth.

Graham looked her over, then the room. "I'm just trying to find someone," he said.

"Who?" the girl asked.

"My daughter."

The girl sat up and squinted. Maybe she thought that Graham was her own father at first and decided against it, or maybe she thought he was a cop. He couldn't tell.

"I'm the only girl here," she said with a giggle. "Say, why the gun? You wouldn't have a smoke would you?" She twitched a couple of times; a quick spasm shot up her

neck and lifted her head upward. When the spasm ended she smiled, revealing a fence of chipped teeth.

Graham found a milk crate and plopped down. He looked at the adjacent room, the closed door. “You alone?”

The girl picked at a scab again, unfocused; she remained still except for the picking.

“You,” she said, still staring off, “don’t want to be here if you don’t know him. He doesn’t like people.”

“Don’t worry, I know him,” Graham said, and leaned the gun against the wall. “He’s friends with my daughter, Beth. Do you know her?”

The girl got up. She wore tiny shorts that barely covered her waist and PINK was written across the buttocks in rainbow colors. Her legs were as thin as a frog’s, lean on fat and muscle. She scratched her side through a stained white tank top and walked over to a wooden stand and grabbed a glass pipe. She pulled a small clear baggy from her waistline and pinched it above the pipe.

Graham could see small chunks of crystals falling in, and he readjusted himself on the crate. “I wouldn’t do that,” he said. “I won’t be able to help you if something bad happens, God forbid.”

She let out a laugh, shook again, and plopped down on the mattress, cross-legged. She flicked a lighter and brought the flame under the pipe’s glass belly, and she moved the flame around until the head of it glowed. Then her eyes rolled and she blew a thick cloud toward Graham.

Graham coughed and fanned the smoke away. It smelled like a burnt shower curtain. He wanted to yank the pipe from her hand, tell her she best get her shit together before she ended up dead. Instead, he sat there in awe over how the world seemed so far away to her, on how it floated around somewhere, lost, in the emptiness inside her head. It reminded him of the past, of home and his deceased wife, of how Beth acted afterward.

Then out of nowhere she said, “Oh daddy, please, just take me,” and she leaned back with her arms spread out.

Graham grabbed the shotgun and racked a shell. “Get up,” he said.

She didn’t move. She just laid there and looked at the ceiling with her arms spread out. She clutched the pipe in her right hand, and with her left she touched her stomach. She slipped a hand under her tank top and revealed a cage of rib bones. “Why be that way? Don’t you want me?” She ran her index finger higher, circled around a small breast, and tugged at a nipple.

Graham reached down and grabbed her arm. He lifted her up and pushed her toward the bedroom. She tried dragging her feet, but he kept moving her forward.

“You’re going to put some clothes on,” he said. “We’re taking a little ride.”

He thought about waiting in the hall to give her some privacy. Instead, he followed her in. She fell to the ground and crawled toward a chair. A naked man sat in it. He had a rubber strap tied around his right arm. Graham raised the gun. The man was blue and purple. His head was tilted back; the skin stretched around his sunken cheek bones, his penis limp within a dark mass like some kind of slug.

The girl crawled to the man; she held his leg and ran the other hand through his pubic hair to his belly.

“Get up, Johnny. Get up,” she said, and shook him. “Please, wake up.”

Graham wasn't prepared for this. All he wanted to do was find Beth. Now he had to do something, but he didn't know what. Would this send him to prison, the being here and seeing this? Where was Beth?

The girl had now slipped up onto the man's lap. Her hips rocked back and forth and she wrapped her arms around his neck, hugged and kissed him.

“Get off him,” he said, pulling at her arm. “For Christ's sake he's dead. Get off him already.”

“Don't touch me you sumbitch,” she said. “Let us alone.” She turned back and tried to rock the man alive again with her hips, and the wooden chair creaked under them.

“Listen,” he said, “I only want to know where my daughter is. If you tell me where she's at I will leave you two alone. I will be good as gone.”

“Go away. Get the fuck out of here,” she said. “I ain't telling you nothing.” She smacked the dead man on the face. “Johnny.”

He gritted his teeth. The girl at that moment was as helpless and acted similar to how his wife, Mary, had acted just before her death on pain pills. Oblivious. How people could become so dependent and fall so low was beyond him. All it took for Mary was an injured back. As far as Beth was concerned he didn't know.

“Listen, either you tell me what you know or I am taking you to the police,” he said. “The choice is yours.”

The girl leapt off the man. When she did the man fell to the floor. He was still bent like the chair, and a dark, crusted paste the shape of a half moon stuck to the back of his thighs.

Then she lunged at Graham, swinging her arms in long arcs.

Graham took a few slaps and then pushed her down. “Don’t make me tell you again,” he said. “Put some clothes on and let’s go.”

She got up, breathing heavy. She slipped on a green coat with burn holes down the front, some sweat pants and socks, along with a pair of red galoshes. She dropped the pipe into her jacket pocket and stepped outside. The sky had grown darker; the snow that fell was as thick as ash.

“Come on. My truck is down the hill,” and he touched her at the elbow to guide her along.

Breaker crawled from under the trailer. He had a frozen rabbit in his mouth, and when he came closer the girl shrieked.

“It’s alright.” He scratched Breaker behind the ears, and Breaker laid the gray rabbit at Graham’s feet.

“I don’t like ‘em,” she said. “Once, I knew this girl—”

“Save it. We have other things to worry about.”

They continued to make their way down the hill, and the snow had filled Graham and Breaker’s tracks from earlier. The girl slipped into a rut and fell. She rocked a few times on her knees before she found the strength to get up. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the pipe, and she struggled to get her fingers to work the lighter. She kept stoking on the unlit pipe. Finally she got the flame going, and he reached down and snatched it from her mouth and chucked it into the woods.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” she asked, and dropped to her knees again. “Now I got to find it. I have to. I ain’t going anywhere without it.” She crawled into the ditch and dug her fingers around in the snow.

Graham tugged on the hood of her jacket, but she wouldn’t budge.

“Get up,” he said.

“No, I don’t have to.”

Graham didn’t want to hurt her. He planned to help her if nothing else, so he reached down and took hold of one of her ankles and dragged her toward the truck. She kicked a little before giving up. He turned a couple of times and her eyes remained fixed on the sky, on the snow falling. A few times her head bobbed over a snowy bump, and she didn’t seem to pay it any attention. He wasn’t sure if he should take her to the police or the hospital. He figured the law would know best what to do because he sure as hell didn’t.

Snow had covered the pickup. He opened the passenger side door and lifted her into the cab. He stuck the gun behind the seat and told her this would all be over soon. She began to shiver, and Graham cranked the heater when he started the truck.

“It’ll be warm before you know it.” He handed her a blanket that covered the seat. “Put this over your legs.”

The girl just faced the windshield as he covered her. Breaker had placed his head on her lap, but she still wouldn’t touch him. For a while they bumped along the gravel road, with only the engine hum and the mud slapping against the wheel wells cutting between them.

“Your daughter,” she said, “is a brunette.”

Graham slipped onto the other side of the dirt road. He straightened the truck and turned back to her. “When did you see her last?”

“A few weeks ago she came by for Johnny. Said she was going to Florida.”

“Florida? What the hell is in Florida?”

“The ocean,” she said. “The beach.”

Graham wondered if she knew what she was talking about. A few minutes ago she tried rocking a dead guy to life; now, she had enough sense to talk oceans and beaches.

“Do you know how she planned to get there?”

The girl shook her head. She curled her hands with the bottom of her coat and turned toward the window.

Graham had many questions, like who was she with? Was she taking the bus or getting a ride? Did she get drugs from Johnny before she left? But he figured those answers might come after he got her some help.

The truck hobbled from the seasonal road onto the highway. The heater puffed warm air into their faces, yet the girl still shook. Every few minutes a moan would escape her, in between the clatter of teeth and the licking of lips.

“What is your name?” he asked.

The girl said nothing, only rocked front to back. She dug in her pockets, pulling out pieces of paper and lint before trying again. She panicked.

“I have to go back,” she said.

“We ain’t going back.”

“I have to,” she said. “I must.”

Graham shook his head and looked off at the houses along the highway. One had a nativity scene in the front yard, and Joseph had fallen over. “You know, maybe after—”

The girl pulled on the door lever and pushed it open. The wind rushed in and blew her greasy hair around, and she dangled her legs over the moving asphalt. He tried to reach over Breaker and take hold of her arm, but she jerked away.

“I’m going,” she said, and jumped.

Through the rearview Graham watched as her body bounced and skipped along the shoulder of the road like a stone across water.

“Goddamit.”

Graham pumped the brakes, swung off the highway, hit the hazards. He left Breaker in the truck and ran to where the girl lay in the ditch. Her body was bent, the arms and legs twisted in unforeseen directions, as if in another life she had been a contortionist; her eyes seemed a soft blue, and her thin, cracked lips were stretched into a partial smile. Before he could try to help her a van stopped. Then another car. Within minutes the police arrived, an ambulance. More people converged onto the scene, to give advice, to lend a hand in case the officers or paramedics didn’t already know enough.

Graham couldn’t take his eyes from the white sheet slung over the girl. A few times the wind lifted the sheet as if she was moving, and an officer would reach down and pull the sheet over her again. Still, the outline of her body, the bent neck, showed beneath it. One officer motioned for the people to move back, another joked about one less addict and asked Graham to take a seat in his car, and Graham did. As he waited a potbellied paramedic slipped onto his ass in the icy ditch. The man stood and brushed himself off; he tucked part of his loose shirt back in and helped another man load the girl

onto a gurney. One of the girl's red galoshes had slipped off and was left there. After they had slid her into the ambulance and pulled onto the highway, with no lights flashing and headed north toward town, Graham studied the white line that went south. He wondered how long it might take to reach Florida and whether or not Beth would be found along a highway somewhere, abandoned, ready to come home.