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DANIEL TYX

AS THE CROW FLIES

My son is into birds. Really, *really* into birds. He is riding in the back in his carseat, clutching a voluminous hardback copy of *The Sibley Guide to Birds* in his two year-old hands. He flips through the pages, reciting the names of each finely-detailed painting as the scorched Rio Grande Valley landscape scrolls by outside the car windows. *Great egret. Snowy egret. Great blue heron. Yellow-crowned night heron.* We are traveling in our black station wagon with tinted windows that my friend Martha has nicknamed *la carrosa*, the Hearse. Our two dogs, the elder recently diagnosed with clinical depression, are in the back back. To the luggage rack, my father-in-law has attached a beige Sears car topper, acquired at a Winter Texan RV Park auction. We are the Addams family meets National Lampoon's Family Vacation meets a buddy movie in which one of the leads harbors a pathological fear of truck-stop restrooms.

"You're going on a trip," my son proclaims from the backseat. For whatever reason, he tends to mix up pronouns. *You is I and I is you.* "You're going to Amarillo. You're going to see birds."

I am driving on the two-lane Expressway 83, which one could theoretically take all the way across the country, from Brownsville to Saskatchewan. I avoid the interstates, in part because I have a borderline paranoiac fear of breaking down and being stranded in traffic with my son and two dogs. And in part because I am hoping to see another piece of America, the less-traveled open spaces that the interstates rush on by.

I have lived in the Valley, on-and-off, for nine years, but I have never before found reason to venture this far west. Century-old haciendas crumble down scrub-brush hills into forgotten streambeds. In the lane of oncoming traffic, I spot a crested caracara lunching on the bludgeoned carcass of a mid-sized mammal.

Two months ago, its existence wouldn't have even registered in my consciousness. That was before my son's most recent fascination. It is a carrion bird, but infinitely more beautiful than a buzzard. Its downward-pointing bill is fiery red-orange at the base, powder blue at the tip, its chest emblazoned with a variegated pattern of brown and white, like a hand-woven Mexican blanket. And the name. Just the mention of it—the alliterative “c,” the repetition of the same word—is enough to elicit a sidelong smile from my son each time we turn to its page.

This is the first time either of us has ever seen the bird in the flesh. Eating flesh. I glance back, anticipating the glee radiating from his face. But he is asleep. The upturned Sibley Guide rises and falls on his chest. I try to take a mental photograph of the caracara as we whoosh by, startling the magnificent bird over to the opposite shoulder.

If only Laura were here to appreciate the sighting with me. I wasn't supposed to be making this leg of the trip alone. At the last minute, the high school asked her to attend a two-day training. We're expected at a wedding in Denver on Friday night, and today is Monday. In a former life, we could have made the trip in two-and-a-half days, no problem. That was then, this is now. We bought her and my two month-old daughter a plane ticket to Amarillo. My son and I set off on the first leg, solo. After Denver, our final destination is my mother's house in Iowa City, the place new acquaintances are referring to when they ask, innocently enough, the inevitable follow up question: But where is *home* home?

I glance down at the trip odometer, which I set at zero as we pulled out of the driveway of the house we bought just this year. Thirty-five miles down, a thousand more to go. I pop a Lifesaver mint into my mouth from the jumbo-size bag on the

passenger seat and stare at the road ahead. Two-and-a-half days in a car with a two year-old gives you a lot of time to think.

West of Roma, my son informs me that he needs to go potty. We pull off the highway and look for signs of life. Nine o'clock in the morning and no one is around. Passing through a downtown straight out of my father's spaghetti Western imagination, a gold-leafed plaque informs us that this was the location for the filming of *Zapata*, starring Marlon Brando. I can't escape the feeling that I'm actually on a Hollywood sound stage, a presentiment exacerbated by the many buildings that are only façades, the insides gutted in preparation for some long-hoped-for renovation. Finally, I spot a sign for a World Birding Center visitor center, which sounds promising. Turns out it's closed, but we park anyway. I unload my son and the dogs and head in the direction of a forlorn observation deck overlooking the River. Twenty-five feet downstream, a Border Patrol SUV is idling. I stake out a position on the other side of the only tree in sight, a spindly ebony, and hope the officer doesn't notice my three traveling companions simultaneously doing their business.

When they're done, I hold the leashes in my left hand and my son's hand in my right. We scamper back to the deck. I scan the branches of the craggy mesquites clinging to the crusted embankment, looking for one of the specialty birds featured on the faded signage. *Altamira oriole*. *Green jay*. *Clay-colored robin*. A crumpled-up Whataburger bag has been stuffed between the guardrails through which my son gazes out at the expanse below. Upstream, the river cleaves in two to circumnavigate a large island. The trees there are more expansive, leaves thicker and darker green, perhaps the remnants of the slender swath of riparian forest that used to press against the River's fertile curves, in another century.

El otro lado is a sandy bank with a few benches, the peeling paint visible even from our far-off vantage point. A trio of bony dogs rummages through pieces of litter next to a half-upturned metal trashcan. Beyond, a few semis traverse the international bridge, spouting plumes of thick black smoke into the cerulean sky. Just a few weeks ago, I read in our local paper, nine men were found dead in this city, their bodies dismembered and left on display. How far was that from the spot where we are standing?

"Look," my son says, pointing above it all. I try to follow the invisible line extending outward from his finger into the infinite blue space. "It's a crow." He reaches out as though to touch it. "It's flying to Mexico."

Sure enough, a single crow swoops high above us, its black feathers incandescent in the mid-morning sunlight. By now my son is jumping up and down with excitement. "It's flying to Mexico," he repeats, punctuating each syllable for emphasis, raucously indifferent to my indifference. He is two years old, I remind myself. He doesn't care if the bird is a specialty or not. He loves birds, and the crow is a bird—even if it is, like the caracara, a harbinger of death. And it's flying to another country. True, he chases the same bird around our backyard on a regular basis, but maybe the fact that the crow is so quotidian makes it even more impactful. So familiar, and it is flying to *another country*.

Something else I read recently: American Crows are cooperative breeders. Meaning that their offspring don't leave—they stay with the family for four or five years, sometimes even longer. Siblings raise siblings. Children care for parents. Nesting territory is inherited from parents only when they die. Crow families stick together.

Ever since the birth of my son, my mother has been making not-so-veiled hints. There's an opening at the U of I, colleagues will soon retire at her university in Cedar Rapids. Com-

munity college teaching is such a heavy load. Laura's parents, up the road in Wisconsin, are even more explicit. "Your mother and I just want you to know," my father-in-law says, as we got ready to pull out of their driveway after last year's now-annual Midwest Summer Baby Tour, "that the thing that would make us happiest in our later years is having you closer to home." His sincerity was colossal. Now that my daughter has arrived, of course, things have only gotten worse. "It's hard to feel emotionally close," my mother-in-law tells Laura, "when you're so geographically distant." Only my father, his skeleton pock-marked by metastatic cancer, seems at peace with our decision.

The crow makes a wide turn, traces the River's gently winding path upstream. My son has moved on to investigating a bottle cap nesting between two floorboards. According to the *Sibley Guide*, crows are only partially migratory. Some individuals spend their entire lives in one place. Others travel thousands of miles. *Is this home?* I wonder, as I gather the crew and prepare to hit the road. *Or do you have a long journey ahead of you, too?*

When I see the caracara pair perched on an oil pipeline overlooking Laredo, I know it's time to stop. By all indications, no one has used the gravel road leading up to the picnic area in a very long time. But everything seems to have been built in anticipation of a future date like today, when no one would stop, or make any effort at repair. The picnic table to which I lug our cooler—filled by Laura with enough tuna fish and PB & J sandwiches to last us a month in the wilderness—is a solid hunk of concrete, as is the shade structure overhead, strong enough to survive the apocalypse. Then again, isn't there something already apocalyptic about the landscape: the thorns and burrs of the wind-stunted vegetation, the listless gray-brown of the land underneath, the industrial wasteland of the city splayed out like a corpse in the

desiccated basin at the rest-stop's feet?

The Rio Grande Valley is not a beautiful place, at least not in any conventional sense. The ravaged complexion of the landscape makes no effort to hide hardship, loneliness, pain. "I never knew that I grew up in a forest," Laura is fond of saying, "until I moved to the Valley." When people ask where she is *from*, she does not hesitate in her response. Wisconsin, I, on the other hand, have taken to calling this place home, even if the answer feels tentative on my tongue, and no one believes my answer anyway.

The caracaras watch us with interest, perhaps in hopes of their next meal. Meanwhile my son is in ecstasy. I set down the cooler and sprint after him, bending down to pick up a lost shoe along the way. "A crested caracara!" he exclaims, his expression conveying unmitigated glee. "The crested caracaras are sitting on the pipe!"

I catch myself in the throes of parental pride. It's one thing to memorize the pages of a book, I think, in their prescribed order. It's another thing altogether to be able to identify them in the wild. The jacket of the *Sibley Guide* informs readers that its author, the world's foremost authority on all things birds, began serious study "at the tender age of seven." During my son's last pediatrician visit, we were asked if his vocabulary exceeds two-hundred words. Two hundred words? How about two hundred *birds*?

Laura worries—at moments, for instance, when my son feels compelled to whip out the bird book to demonstrate his ability to distinguish Baltimore, Orchard, Hooded, Bullock's, Audubon, and Altamira orioles to a bewildered fellow toddler—that the intensity of his passions will prove, in the long haul, socially problematic. I'm less concerned than fascinated by the origins of his singular concentration. Why birds?

Like many of the mysteries of parenthood—why does he throw a histrionic tantrum in the backseat any time I attempt a song that is not Raffi's "Take Me Out to the Ball Game?" on the car stereo—I don't totally understand it. I do suspect that it is his parents' fault. His middle name is Byrd; he was named for a family friend who was found, many hours after his death at age fifty, on an ice-crusting Ohio ski trail. Like my son, the friend had been nicknamed Birdy, and names are destiny. My father's friend also was into birds, fascinating me as a child with his encyclopedic ability to mimic the strange click-and-whistle language of their calls.

Cotorrito, Martha calls my son, on afternoons when she comes over to feed us both *hoja de plátano* tamales while Laura is at work. *Little parrot*.

It may also have to do with living in the Valley, apparently the Mecca of North American birding. A sign at the Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge—a thirty-minute drive from our new house—claims that more bird species have been spotted within the refuge's borders than in every state besides Texas, combined. Every winter, thousands of binocular-eyed Midwestern septuagenarians flock south in hopes of catching a glimpse of a *yellow-green vireo* or a *ferruginous pygmy-owl*.

But does all this explain why Birdy gravitated, unprompted, toward the dusty birdwatching book on our shelf—another item in a growing catalog of unrealized projects? Or the fact that, unable to read or consistently construct a complete sentence, he has been able to memorize all four-hundred pages of the novice *Birds of Texas*, to the point where has now graduated to the advanced *Sibley*? What, in view of all the entities to which we could choose to attach our passions—if, in fact, choice is involved at all—makes us love what we love?

I sweep my son into my arms and carry him back to the

concrete-block picnic table. We sit next to each other on the bench, eating sandwiches and drinking cans of Jumex mango juice, mirror images to the pair of caracaras watching us watching them in the distance. When we get up to continue our trip, the caracaras take flight as well, their extended wings propelling them in formidable bursts out over the bluff. We watch them until they are indistinguishable from the dust-hazed outlines of the city below.

I have been worried about the Border Patrol checkpoint since before we left. The topper is my main concern. What if the officers decide they need to inspect it? I struggled for a half-hour to stuff our camping gear into its whale-like belly and secure the elaborate hand-rigged system of U-bolts and clips meant to keep it from disgorging its contents onto the highway. I imagine myself standing in the door frame—screw driver and monkey wrench in hand, my son bawling inconsolably, my mentally unstable dogs snarling at the gigantic drug-sniffing German Shepherds—as my hands fruitlessly fiddle. The memory is still fresh of our last trip, in which a blue-shirted TSA agent seized Birdy's Raggedy Andy doll from his clutches to run it through the X-Ray machine. His reaction was not one I care to have repeated.

The road veers to the north, away from the border. As the miles accumulate on the odometer, the hope buds that there will be no checkpoint on this section of highway, as there is on the now-familiar interstate connecting the Valley to San Antonio. Of course, it wouldn't make sense, but I've seen the border wall. After that made-for-TV amalgamation of second-hand scrap metal appearing only intermittently on the River's northern bank—I no longer expect these things to make sense.

No houses, anywhere. Just one endless, unfenced field of electric green mesquite, and yet, the traffic. A truck caroms by

every two seconds in the opposing lane, shoving us brusquely to the side. More trucks, unsatisfied with my speed—I haven't yet convinced myself that the topper will not blow off—bully their ferocious grilles into my rear-view mirror, demanding that I move over to the shoulder so they can squeeze their way through. No is not an acceptable answer. Where are all these vehicles going? Tracing my planned route on our newly-purchased road atlas, Laura had keyed in on this section with a concerned look. "Looks pretty desolate," she'd said. Unlike me, fearing the crush of traffic more than anything, her greatest fear is being stranded in the wilderness. But who knew there would be so many people in such a hurry to get nowhere?

Billboards sprouting from the brushland begin to advertise corporate housing communities with wi-fi, satellite TV, kitchenettes. Only fifty-five miles to go! In the interim, entire villages of eighteen-foot camping trailers have been set up alongside newly-graveled side roads, apparently in haste. I vaguely recall hearing something on the radio about a natural gas boom, or was it oil? Outside my window, a worker sleeps in a fold-up camping chair, a newspaper draped over his head to shade him from the sweltering sun.

Just as I allow myself to relax, take in the curiosities of the landscape, and forget the impending doom of the checkpoint, a brown sign with white letters warns of a slow-down in a quarter-mile. I glance back at my son. Asleep. Meaning things won't be pretty if he wakes up unexpectedly. Six semi-trailers form a single line in front of me. I turn off the stereo, and Birdy tosses his head from one side to the other. I take a deep breath, thinking about the first time, nine years ago, I had driven north and discovered the checkpoint, tucked away like a hunting blind sixty miles north of the border. A checkpoint inside my own country? It had felt like something out of Baghdad or Palestine, the security ap-

paratus of a military state. Almost a decade later, I can tell I've become accustomed to it. The concentrated anger I'd felt burning in my chest then has been diluted into a generalized feeling of apathetic unease.

The officer who waves me forward is a Latino man who can't be older than twenty-three. His partner, an Anglo man about the same age, holds the leash of a dog, not German Shepherd, but a black dog of no recognizable breed, that sniffs at my tires. My dogs scuttle to their feet, still getting their bearings.

"U.S. citizen?" the officer asks. He has the air of someone with better things to be doing. I exhale.

"Yes, sir," I say. I don't do well with authority.

The sir waves us on ahead. "Have a good one," he says, already looking toward the next car.

I put my foot down on the accelerator, never having felt so relieved to have been the beneficiary of racial profiling. In the back back, the dogs resettle, negotiating their positions in the limited space allocated to them. The same stunted mesquite jungle scrolls past my window. The same dilapidated trailers.

"Take Me Out to the Ballgame," Birdy croaks, eyes still closed. Somehow, even in his state of semi-consciousness, he has managed to apprehend my transgression. I pop another mint into my mouth and wonder what new country I have entered, or left behind.

We spend the first night in Hill Country, at a state park campground so popular that you are issued a number, DMV-style, and line up in a seat-less lobby where a sign flashes—or does not flash, for the first half-hour—above a reinforced wooden door. Our linemates warn us that, although the Texas Parks and Wildlife website boasted over 500 campsites, none will be available. Everyone has made their reservation months in advance. I glance

at my son, on the precipice of a car-fatigue-induced tantrum for the last hour. The next green pine tree and triangle on the map is ninety miles away.

At last, our number flickers. The besieged summer intern behind the window apologetically assigns us a site in the "primitive" section. Relieved, we join the current of silver Civics and burgundy Priuses winding their way into the campground. Apparently, the entire thirtysomething population of Austin and their offspring has decamped here for the summer. I see them on our trip to the camp store to purchase fire wood in the heart of the main "developed" campground. We are in the shadow of a postcard-perfect granite bluff known nostalgically as Old Baldy. Clusters of smiling children frolic carefreely in the Frío River on rented plastic innertubes.

"You want to go home," my son informs me, repeatedly, from the back seat.

"We're camping," I say, attempting to muster up some enthusiasm. I swerve to avoid a cabal of parents sipping Blue Moons from the cup holders of aircraft-inspired jogging strollers, in the middle of the road.

"You want to go home," he repeats, building to a climax of whine as the shrieks of happy children needle into my brain. One of the parents I am edging by says something witty, and everyone laughs. I cringe, involuntarily.

This could have been your life, a voice whispers from somewhere inside my brain. *If only you hadn't been such a burro.*

Shut up, I answer.

You could still move to some place like Austin, the voice intones, ignoring me. *Like your brother and your siblings-in-law. Like nine-tenths of your graduating class.*

I'm not my brother or my in-laws, I think, feeling the heat rise. *Half of my graduating class is on Prozac.*

Someplace in the Midwest, maybe. Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Louis? Closer to home...

I'll pass, thanks. I prefer the road less traveled.

Think of it: Fair-trade groceries, functional schools, well-adjusted children.

I'm happy where I am.

Are you?

Yes. I think so. Yes.

You think so? It's not too late—

Would the children of these parents pee in front of a fucking Border Patrol officer?

"You want to go home!" Birdy cries. His face reddens, nostrils flaring. "You want to go poop!"

Back at the primitive area, he goes in the woods, the pit toilets having been deemed insufficient. Thankfully, in contrast to everywhere else, almost no one is around. I take this as a doubly good thing, since my primary aim for our family camping trip is to not get in trouble on account of dog barking, children crying, or unseemly breakdowns of parental authority.

In search of distraction, I strap Birdy into our thrift-store backpack and set out to explore the campground, a leash in each hand. There is only one other family out of the twenty or so sites. A young Latino father directs our entourage to a path that leads from a campsite down to a five-foot ledge abutting the river. A small waterfall cascades directly beneath the Expressway 83 bridge, still rumbling with traffic. It is sufficiently unpicturesque to not attract a crowd, or anyone else for that matter.

We don't stop to take off our clothes. The water isn't as cold as the name suggests. In the deepest places, it only goes up to Birdy's knees, but the current is surprisingly strong. He picks his way along the uneven rocks beneath his shoes. I resist the urge—really, he resists it for me—to cling to his hand. I unhook

the dogs from their leashes and try to spot him, gymnastics-style. When he falls, instead of screaming, he squeals in delight. The current carries him, legs extended in front of him at a right angle to his torso, quickly downstream.

"You're swimming," he cries. "You're swimming in the current!"

I can't tell if he is laughing or shivering. I don't care. I give thanks to the liquid god that has succeeded where a day's worth of Raffi, Blow Pops, and PB & J has failed. The claustrophobia, the tedium, the potty anxiety, the Mommalessness—it's all washed away, at least for a few precious minutes.

"One more swim, real quick," Birdy says, when I finally carry him, teeth chattering, flowerets of purple blooming across his cheeks, back to the riverbank. "One more, real quick."

The sign reads Paint Rock, population 273. Somebody has crossed out a four in the ones column with a Sharpie marker. The next town is another fifty miles or more away. Birdy isn't going to make it. Since there is no sign of any commerce whatsoever, I follow a sign that reads "Paint Rock City Schools" down what appears to be a gravel alleyway. Until I realize that the entire town is a grid of one-lane gravel alleyways.

Paint Rock City Schools consists of two buildings. The first calls to mind a dollhouse version of a school, as if it were designed in an earlier, pre-vitamin-fortified-breakfast-cereal era, when the land was inhabited by a smaller race of people the size of present-day horse jockeys. Or maybe the people were so small because they were starving, like the emaciated gray steed across the street from the school, nose to the ground as it gingerly scavenges through fields of yellow-needled *nopales*.

This being Texas, the second building, almost twice the size of its sibling, is a brand spanking new gymnasium.

I park and unstrap Birdy from his carseat. It is *hot*. The Valley is one of the hottest places on earth, but it feels hotter here somehow. Maybe it's because we have just stepped out of air-conditioned comfort, or because of the lack of any shade anywhere, or because of the fact that there doesn't appear to be anyone around anywhere, or *anything* even, unless you count the horse that appears to have been left on its own to die.

Except that this isn't true. "Howdy," a voice says, from somewhere on the other side of the car. I squint. A woman, her back still facing away from us as she hangs laundry onto a rusted metal line, looks back in our direction, gray hair blowing across her face. Not only is it hot, it's windy, too. The breeze feels like somebody opened an oven door.

"Hi." If there was ever any doubt about how to proceed, my son has resolved it. He is sprinting barefoot in the direction of the horse, having wriggled away before I could slip his shoes on. The woman turns. She is wearing a pair of short pink jogging shorts and a white t-shirt advertising one of the lesser-known Caribbean islands, the sleeves ripped off. Her skin, dark and freckled, is like another layer of clothing. She could be sixty and she could be thirty-five. She doesn't say anything more, as if my mere presence in Paint Rock is enough of a question.

I explain where we've come from, where we're headed. She nods unresponsively and says she needs to run back into the house. While we wait, I play defense—knees crouched, hands at the ready, *move your feet, move your feet*—as Birdy attempts to grab onto the barbed wire fence separating him from the horse pasture. I have warned him five times not to touch it. The horse approaches us, making eye contact with my son. Its jaw pantomimes a slanting motion of chewing. "He doesn't listen well," I hear Laura saying, on days when I have graded student essays until too late in the evening, and she has reached her wit's end. I

was supposed to call her last night from the state park, but there wasn't any service. I figured I would call her here, at our first stop. No service in Paint Rock, either.

When the woman finally reappears, she is carrying a bag of freezer-section soft pretzels. From out of nowhere, an entire herd of brown and white goats materializes, looking decidedly better fed than their equine counterpart—when I asked, for my son's benefit, if the horse could be petted, the woman had responded with a libertarian shrug. *Not mine.* She hands a pretzel to Birdy. He knows what to do. "I'm having lunch," he screams, as he spends the next five minutes emptying the pretzel bag.

The summertime staff of Paint Rock City Schools emerges from the school, approaching the pasture. In as few words as humanly possible, we are alerted to the presence of a picnic table, a shelter, a playground. The people of Paint Rock have a way of being friendly without betraying any outward indication of friendliness. Before long, we have bid farewell to the goat lady and are set up in unexpected luxury in the school playground. Birdy scuttles up and down a last bastion of lawsuit-indifferent climbing equipment, while I attempt to channel my inner goat and ingest a sopping-wet tuna sandwich by chewing as little as possible.

I daydream about telling Laura, when I finally reach her, that I want to move to Paint Rock. About what it would be like to raise a child in a place where words are so manifestly pathetic in the presence of so much nothingness lurking around their margins. Part of me sincerely wants to find out. I imagine the bemused look on her face, followed in sequence by the moment of recognition—*oh no, he's half serious*—and the knowing *my husband is crazy, but not that crazy.*

Then again, isn't this what people think of us already, having moved across the country to a place that most Midwest-

erners—ourselves included, a decade ago—don't even know exists. Not that the Valley is really nowhere. A million people live there, for crying out loud. Nowhere is a matter of perception, not reality.

A flash of orange darts above me. I quickly scan the sky, blue in name only, like the color of old jeans washed too many times. An oriole! Its breast is somehow more orange than I'd imagined, the color of the H-E-B mac-n-cheese stowed away in the topper for the night's dinner. Before I can call Birdy's attention, though, it's gone.

"I saw an oriole," I say.

"An oriole!" he exclaims, not even needing to see it with his own eyes. The glowing world of his imagination blazes, even if all he has to spark the flames is a word, a coded flicker of the crowded alleyways of the sky.

When I finally get a hold of Laura, we are at a one-pump gas station located at a point on the map where a town apparently once stood. I tell her things are going swimmingly—which, relative to my expectations, has been true. There have been no fully-realized meltdowns, no moments of existential despair. We're doing great!

Five hours later, as the sun inches toward an impossibly flat horizon line, I am still driving, having committed my first critical error of the trip: I have underestimated the inestimable vastness that is Texas. A mere inch on the road atlas requires a full hour to cover, and there are no other campgrounds for a full three inches. My son wakes from his afternoon nap and we begin the slow ascent to his I-can't-be-in-the-car-one-more-instant breaking point. I find myself imagining some alternate map scale in which measurements correspond not to miles but to emotional state. *Quarter inch—optimism. Half inch—doubt. Inch—despair. Inch-and-a-half—I am questioning my fitness as a parent.* And so on.

When we finally arrive at the campground, the sun already

a deep red orb, I commit my second critical error of the trip: I drive an extra twenty minutes to find the perfect campsite. Leaving behind the fair-haired plains of West Texas, we descend into a red Martian landscape of indescribable beauty and desolation. Thousand-foot deep canyons crisscross the earth in tragic, quilt-like patterns, carved by water that must exist only in the conjectures of alien scientists peering down at us through the lenses of telescopes on some distant planet.

"You want to go hooooome," Birdy manages to exhale, between sobs. He draws out the last word with a sloping uptick as precipitous as the canyons walls beneath us. The car performs what feels like several figure eights in succession. Bordered on either side of the ridge by sheer hundred-foot drop-offs, my fists clench around the steering wheel in a death grip.

"Daddy needs to concentrate," I say, unconsciously violating my new-parent vow to not talk in third person.

"Concentrate, concentrate, concentrate," he parrots. And continues parroting for the next twenty minutes. How long would it take someone to find us here, at the bottom of the canyon? A day? A week? A month? Would they ever find us?

In another life, the campsite we finally arrive at would have been perfect, a peninsular outcropping that levitates halfway between the jagged tears of the ridges and the snaking path of the canyon floor. There is no one else at the campground, possibly for many miles. It feels almost gluttonous. All this view, all this solitude, all for us alone.

But there is a tent to be set up, a fire to be laid and then set aside, an inconsolably homesick son to shoo away from the sentry cacti guarding vast chasms of nothing. In the end, we are reduced to me holding Birdy in my arms as we eat a packet of macaroni cheese dumped in a pot of cold water. Birdy snuffles as I spoon it into his mouth with my left hand. With my right,

I hold a stick and draw, at his direction, the outlines of herons and egrets, inscribed in the earth like petroglyphs from a distant aqueous age.

There is no water at the site. Before I put him to bed, I attempt to wash off the layer of clay-dust that has accumulated over his entire body by holding him under the spout of our blue traveling thermos. It is dusk. Without warning, and in a matter of seconds, the entire campground is invaded by a multitude of translucent moths, each beat of their wings a tiny brush of crepuscular light.

The red earth. The tent. The unlit fire. The panting dogs. My son, writhing and naked in my arms. Everything is suffused in this pulsing, other-worldly halo of light. In a former life, I might have been overcome by a sublime feeling of calm, or wonder, or bittersweet awareness of my own insignificance in the awesome sweep of the universe. Now, as I transport my son through a mystical, golden-winged cloud, all I can feel is annoyed. Annoyed and tired. Beauty takes a backseat to potty, toothbrush, story, bed.

By the time he finally falls asleep, the sun has set. The moths have gone with it, disappearing as abruptly as they first appeared. Indistinct outlines of clouds sweep across the fast-darkening sky. I have heard that here in West Texas is the starriest place in North America, on account of our distance from any big city, but tonight there is not a star to be seen. No moon, either, but that doesn't stop the coyotes from baying at some hereditary idea of it. Their howls echo from canyon face to canyon face until there are hundreds of them, calling to us from every possible angle and direction. I had planned to let the dogs sleep outside, tied to the sun shade, but I change my mind and invite them into the tent. We huddle up, the four of us, as the temperature begins to drop. Birdy flings himself around for a little while, then settles

down. The dogs quiver against my stomach—from the cold or the coyotes, I'm not sure which. In the blackest, loneliest night on the continent, I listen to my son's gentle breathing and wait for sleep to come.

At mile 851 of the trip, having returned from the canyon to the great landmark-less plains of West Texas, I reach my breaking point. I decide that I prefer a full-on tantrum to another round of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," which we have now listened to consecutively approximately 748 times. Birdy instantly starts screaming. I loop through a cacophony of Christian stations until I arrive at an orphan oldies station. I jack up the volume and sing along, in full voice, to "I Can't Get No Satisfaction."

We are strong-willed, the both of us. I am certain that the day will come when his resolve will prevail, but for now mine is stronger. After a half hour of this, he falls asleep, tears still streaking down his cheeks. I feel no shame.

Laura is waiting for us outside the airport, holding our daughter Ana Gloria in her carseat. I have never been so happy to see another person in my entire life. Birdy wakes, closes his eyes, opens them again. "I am here," he says.

"Remember the days when we traveled with one backpack between the two of us?" Laura asks, as she finishes installing Ana Gloria's carseat and begins stuffing reusable grocery bags filled with clothes and diapers into every conceivable crevasse. She sits in the front seat, but within five minutes both children are crying sympathetically, straining to be heard over the noise of the other. She manages to exchange places with a pile of bags, wedging herself between the two carseats. "By the way, happy birthday," she says, as she simultaneously offers a breast to Ana Gloria and a box of raisins to Birdy. The din from the back subsides. I've forgotten. Today I turn 32.

The car's trip odometer completes its first thousand miles and automatically resets to zero. "You're going on a trip," Birdy says, as if everything we have endured in the past two-and-a-half-days has been a long dream from which he—or is it *I?*—is now waking.

We merge back onto the highway, and immediately we're passed by an eighteen wheeler. The driver glances down, looks back at the road. "Thank god for tinted windows," Laura says, still nursing Ana Gloria in the backseat.

Somewhere at highway's end, my mother tries to send birthday wishes through a dead cell phone. Meanwhile *la carrosa* flies across West Texas on a minor highway of impossible straightness. Laura reaches up to massage my neck. Ana Gloria is asleep already. "You're going to Amarillo," Birdy says again, though by now we've left it far behind. "You're going to see birds."