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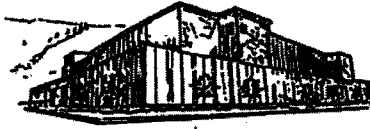
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THE GENIUS OF STONE AND OTHER STORIES

by

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B.A. University of Utah, USA. 1978

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M.A. University of Utah, USA. 1980

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

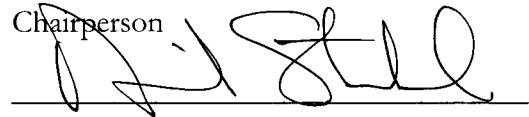
The University of Montana

May 2004

Approved by:



Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

5-12-04

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the Director of the Creative Writing Program, Kate Gadbow, and Dean of the Graduate School, Dr. David A. Strobel, for their generosity in extending the opportunity to me to complete my MFA degree in Fiction Writing at the University of Montana after a twenty-three year absence from the program.

Both Hands

Having the Sears man come to your house, the Sears truck parked out in front, that's a sure sign your dad's not in the picture anymore. Everyone in Langston knows that E. Darren Dallstrup wouldn't have anyone else doing work he could figure out himself with enough of his own tools. I watched the Sears man change the lock on the front door while I sat on the arm of the brown velveteen recliner, thumping my heels against the side. The recliner is where E. Darren usually sits and points out the jackasses the coach sends in from the Broncos' sidelines. "Not that jackass," he'd say, when the camera showed a player running onto the field with sneaky running steps, like he tried to get in the game without asking E. Darren.

With E. Darren gone for good one day and the Sears man at our house the next, it was like having someone come in and wipe the fingerprints off all the things you've touched in your own house. You have to start over making them your own, take a tour of every room to put a hand on all the things you'd hate to see disappear tomorrow, so you can be matched up to them again.

To change the lock the Sears man had to work with the door open, and the gusts that came in pimpled up my shins with frost. I just let it chill me, which seems stupid, but it seemed more right to take the chill than get up and move away. I had to be right close to the door like that, to watch for cars slowing down at our house, especially if one was E. Darren's truck.

“My dad broke in a fielder’s glove for me,” I told the Sears man, then explained how he put a softball inside it, tied clothesline around the fingers and dunked it in a bucket of water for a week. When he pulled the mitt out he rubbed it all over with mink oil, so it would stay soft and folded over. After that, I didn’t take any more interest in playing softball than I ever had. Still, E. Darren had gone to the trouble to make me better at it, and that was something.

That afternoon E. Darren didn’t drive by in his truck and see the Sears man there changing the lock. During the time I spent sliding over the arm to the seat of the recliner and digging my heels into the side to hinge me back up onto the arm, the most I learned is that a Sears man is paid for two hours to change a lock, and Sears gives the repairmen the shirts and namepatches they wear, because I asked. When I asked if he had any kids, thinking he might tell me the kinds of things he does for them that E. Darren did for me and my brother Clay, he only said, “No kids.” Then he stepped outside, pulled the door closed, and turned the deadbolt a few times. I got the idea he didn’t think a mix of men and kids would be any good to anybody. I got the idea I shouldn’t call him Pete either, even though I knew from his namepatch that was his name.

First I noticed anyone knew my dad was out of the house was at BestWay Foods in the checkout line. The checker, Lydia, who has my mom do her hair on Thursdays, she looked smiling down at me like she was a little sorry and was planning some way to make something up to me.

“And how are you doing, Sandy,” Lydia said to my mom, who answered with “Still a ways to go,” without looking up at Lydia to say it. My mom just concentrated on stuffing her wallet into her purse and stringing it over her shoulder. Then, when she did look up to fit the handles of the grocery bags over her fingers, Lydia and my mom both sighed and nodded like people do when they talk about jobs they have to do but don’t like having to do them, so there’s someone else at least who knows how hard it is.

Once we got to the parking lot with the groceries, my mom shot out ahead of me, and I watched her lift one shoulder at a time up to the side of her face to clear her eyes. Several plastic bags of groceries hung from her hands, and her knees bulldozed at them with every step she took so they whipped and twisted, shaking up the Cokes she bought for us. In the car, Clay sat slumped in the back seat, his floppy hair throbbing over his half-shut eyes as he bounced his head to the Barenaked Ladies tape in his Walkman. When my mom scooted the groceries in beside him, he sat up and began pawing through the bags.

“Don’t touch anything in there, it’s for dinner,” she said, and Clay stopped only after she opened her door and gave him a look like he wouldn’t get to his Junior Pro basketball game if he kept it up. I asked, “Can we get a hamburger after the game?” and my mom said she had a perm appointment at two, which was as good as no.

On the Saturdays before E. Darren left, when Clay had his Junior Pro games at the high school gym, E. Darren took us and my mom stayed back to do hair in her basement salon. After the game, E. Darren would get the other fifth grade boys like Clay all revved up to go for hamburgers at the Frosty Freeze by clomping down the bleachers in his cowboy

boots and poking his nose into their last huddle – the one where they put their hands all together in the middle and yell with their piled-up fists pumping away – and he says “Who’s ready for a Super Pounder?” The dads at the game can’t let their boys down once they break out of the huddle, all of them whining that E. Darren is taking Clay to the Frosty Freeze and they want to go, too.

I always got a hamburger those Saturdays, even though I had done nothing to win or lose the game, not even yelling for Clay to shoot or play defense. There were certainly better hamburgers in Langston than you got at the Frosty Freeze, but having the place full of Clay’s teammates and their dads talking about how tall Fitch Denning was for his age, and the promise of speed and quick reflexes starting to show in the boys who played guard, made a routine of the day that I liked. The sure destiny of the boys they worked out combined with the blackberry shake I always ate in backhanded spoonfuls made my Saturdays complete. With my mom driving us to Junior Pro games lately, I’d have to come up with something else to make my day.

Before we even got the car started there in the BestWay parking lot, E. Darren pulled up, his truck still rumbling its tailpipe against the home-mounted trailer hitch like it did on cold mornings he drove me and Clay to school. He lifted a hand to halt us and chugged up to my side of the car. As I rolled the window down, it seemed like his face was all fisted up in confusion about us.

“Hey, kids,” he said and nearly came in through the car window, pecking the dim interior with his hardball head as if he couldn’t remember how many of us there were. Clay in the back seat didn’t say anything, and my mom kept her eyes dead on the lettering stenciled along the side of E. Darren’s truck, reading “E. Darren Dallstrup, Taxidermy” until

her eyeballs must have gone dry. So I said, "We're fine here," and, "We're on our way to the game," to get him on his way so Clay wouldn't be late.

Then craning his head into the inside of the windshield to meet eyes with my mom, E. Darren held up a finger in a mix of reminder and promise, "Tomorrow, noon, I'll pick up the kids." My mom finally blinked away from the lettering and I flattened my back against the car seat to give her room to have a look at him. When he got whatever signal she silently gave him, he pushed off the car and started away but then jumped into a broad, spread-legged stance holding an invisible basketball on his hip. "Don't forget, Clay, triple threat, triple threat," then he switched the invisible ball to his other hip, "Protect the ball." Both Clay and I knew that's what you tell a player who's not much on offense, maybe a good passer and pesky on defense. I could hear the tinny singing from Clay's Walkman as E. Darren pulled away. We waited for my mom's eyes to blink again, and then she started the car.

At the game she sat with Mrs. Denning and kept her chin in her hand the whole time, nodding to remarks Fitch's mom made about the boys on Clay's team to catch her up about who was the leading scorer, who had his father's athletic ability, who usually messed up in a pressure situation. At half time I wandered beneath the bleachers looking for change that might have fallen out of pockets from the high school game the night before. At the end of the bleachers I picked up a stray basketball and, for something to do, tossed it up at the wall of the gym, rebounding like I'd seen Coach Showalter demonstrate to Fitch Denning. E. Darren had shown me how to catch a softball to make sure I trapped it in my glove. You waited under the ball with your hands in the air wrist to wrist, open like the throats of baby birds if you did it right, then you closed your free hand over the ball. "Both hands, April,"

I'd hear E. Darren yell to me from the stands at my softball games, "It's coming your way, both hands to be safe now."

The teams came back into the gym to shoot around before starting the second half, so I gave up the basketball and went back to sit in the bleachers. My mom gathered my hair together at the back of my neck in one hand and just held on. Mrs. Denning next to her was telling the first half's scoring story to her husband who had just come from opening his video store. My thoughts just then were that every dad in the gym who had ever gone to the Frosty Freeze with us knew, for a fact, that E. Darren was no taxidermist.

"I want you to turn the key on when I tell you, and then right back off." E. Darren stood in front of his truck with the hood up. Trailer-trucks passing by on the interstate made the hood buck, and on the rebound the truck rocked around in a hula on its shocks. I could see E. Darren's hands through the little band of windshield that showed the engine, plucking at wires and then pulling away quickly just before he'd tell me to turn the key again.

When he yelled, "Off!" I flicked the key and pulled my hands away from the ignition to make sure I didn't cause E. Darren to catch his sleeve in the fan or worse. Every time I saw his hands dance around the engine, they seemed redder from the cold and his breath shot down over the wires in straight puffs. He was supposed to have had us back in time for dinner twenty minutes ago.

We didn't usually have dinner on Sunday for another hour, but the time got moved up on E. Darren, I think, to make things tight for him. The movie we went to see was an hour from Langston, so travel time alone took up two hours of the six we were going to start

spending with him on Sundays. If he kept taking us to the movies in Twin Falls, we'd probably be spending a lot of Sundays just like this, pushing our luck down the last twenty-mile stretch of highway before turning off to Langston, where the dinner hour gets upped every time we come in close.

As E. Darren danced and stamped in front of the truck, fiddling with the engine, I think it was less the cold and more the time that kept stacking up against him that made him fidgety. When he finally climbed into the cab, the truck started up after a few stomps on the gas, and then he jumped back out to close the hood. His hat shot off in a gust of wind and cartwheeled into the sagebrush, and as big a hurry as we were in, I was amazed to see him slide his hands into his back pockets, stare into the sagebrush, and just stand there mad at his hat.

“Did you see where it went?” Clay wanted to know. He was as anxious as I was to get E. Darren's hat back. We only started to call him E. Darren as soon as he had his name painted on his truck, mostly because we never knew he had a name starting with E until then. That was when he still lived with us, and a few times we tried to guess it by pretending that someone called our house asking for Ebenezer Darren. No matter how we kept at it, he didn't tell us what his E-name was, probably because about then he had to pay attention to the trouble waiting for him when he came home. I'd kept it up since he'd moved into the new four-plex by the bowling alley, but Clay only called him E. Darren around me. The school psychologist had started talking to me every Thursday afternoon and was particularly interested in how I called my own dad E. Darren.

Just before we got to the neon Buckaroo Lounge sign that means one mile to the Langston exit, E. Darren asked us how things were going. Next to the window in the cab of

the truck, Clay settled his elbow on the armrest and said, "Okay." I just kept my eyes on the reflection of the Buckaroo's sign, an outlined rodeo bronc and rider, that gathered its hooves and then kicked out in the reflection moving up the windshield as we drove past.

"What about you?" E. Darren nudged me. "How's school?" The truck slowed on the off-ramp and E. Darren turned his head to check for traffic.

"There's a school psychologist who checks with my teacher and Clay's about our homework, even though we always get it done." I know E. Darren won't like the psychologist being in our business.

"What else does the psychologist want to know?" The truck starts to lurch again like it did on the interstate, and E. Darren spreads his elbows to search through the steering wheel for a readout on the gauges.

"She says, 'You know it's not your fault' to us, stuff like that." I try to make it sound like it's nothing, but the truth is I hate talking to the psychologist when she wants to find out if I'm feeling some way I'm not saying. Besides, E. Darren himself taught me how you feel doesn't get you any closer to what you want, it's what you do about it. So that's what I'm thinking on Thursday afternoons when the psychologist pokes her head in the door, just when we're about to learn French from educational TV at one o'clock. I think, "Here she is again, wanting me to tell her how I feel for an hour, when I should be doing something about it all." I'd rather be learning French so I can say "Passez-mois le beurre," to Tricia at lunch in the school cafeteria like we're French.

As we pull into our driveway, E. Darren turns off the truck and I'm relieved he's going to do the right thing by getting out to explain why we're late. Before Clay can unlatch the door of the truck, E. Darren reaches over and snags the sleeve of his jacket so neither of us

can slide out. “Look, it isn’t that I want things like this, I want you both to know that.” We say “Okay” so we can go, and walking to the front door – which opens as soon as the truck doors click shut – E. Darren reaches his hand to my shoulder and asks “Is Barkley being good?”

“He gets on your chair now,” I say.

“You make sure he gets down,” he says, and then it’s just the two of them outside the front door, their voices overlapping the way summer thunder does in Langston, first thunder echoing back from the ridge, then new thunder on top. Inside the house it smells chemical from an afternoon of hair permanents and I can hear Barkley knocking a pot against the stove in the kitchen, licking up whatever’s left from dinner.

Clay’s already upstairs playing a Nintendo game on the TV in his room. On the recliner here by the door I can hear the “Uuugh!” sounds the Reptilators make when Clay pushes the button that makes the Ninja hero give them a karate kick. I sit on the arm of E. Darren’s recliner and slide over its edge, keeping my eye on the door. Outside, E. Darren says “Chr-rist Sandy!” sharp and clear, then the rest is muffled. Seems like if you were Christ, you’d always be hearing people spitting your name out as if you’d been lost and turned up just when everyone’s about to leave you home. Looking at the door, I think it’s sort of strange I have a key to the deadbolt, and E. Darren standing there outside, doesn’t.

My mom promised to take Clay and two of his best friends to the Frosty Freeze for a hamburger if the Langston Warriors win their playoff game. I’m sure she’ll take them, win or

lose, since this game is a playoff game and losing would be worse if, on top of losing, you didn't get a hamburger.

In the parking lot, Clay dribbles his practice ball between the cars like a madman, he's so wound up. Just this morning, my mom shaved a W in his hair for Warriors, from ear to ear across the back of his head. She let him out of the house without his jacket, so now the papery rims of his ears, his knees and knuckles, are stinging red from the cold.

Clay sees Fitch and the Dennings walking through the lot and dribbles hard up to them, warming up his one real move. Fitch takes a stab at knocking the ball away in the stiff, gawky way he swats at the ball during the games, his mouth stuck open like a trout which seems to be the way to tell when boys too tall for their age are trying their hardest. Clay wags a bad head fake and takes off in a fastbreak for the gym door with Fitch lolling behind. Mrs. Denning notices Clay's W and says, "Fitch should have come over to get one shaved for him, too." We pass E. Darren's truck, parked where he must have been one of the first to arrive, when the gym's still cold and the lights buzz on for a few minutes. On the driver's side of E. Darren's truck I see he's stuck a magnetic sign over the "Taxidermy" that says "Firewood."

I don't know if E. Darren's given up on taxidermy or just added firewood to the things he can do for people. I told the school psychologist about the Taxidermist Convention E. Darren went to in Gillette, and the fiberglass fish forms he'd ordered to learn how to tack on the skins of the steelhead and rainbows he'd caught. The fish forms ended at the gills because, E. Darren said, you were supposed to use the skull of the real fish or model one out of the clay he also ordered. There was a little box of paints, too, he said he was going to use to accent the skins.

His plan was to make some money doing this for sport fishermen. Since he'd gotten the idea from a 50 Great Home Businesses magazine, he kept the magazine close by and turned to it sometimes on the Sundays we spent with him at his four-plex apartment. He got as far as three fish, which he kept on the coffee table where he could study what had gone wrong and work up some inspiration to make them right. None of them looked like they could be saved to me, their skins had turned a greasy gray and E. Darren had started to paint a pink and green freckled ribbon along the scales of the steelhead before he'd realized it wasn't the rainbow trout.

Even though I told him he'd get better at it, he only talked to his friend Bigler about his problems with the fish. To us, he'd change the subject and ask what kind of pizza we wanted to go with the video we were watching at his apartment. If Bigler stopped by while we were there, E. Darren tried out new ideas from the 50 Great Home Businesses magazine on him. They talked outside the door of the four-plex while they smoked. Only thing I knew about Bigler was that he and his family had been on the Family Feud tv show and lost in the final round after leading the whole game because they didn't know any other names for coffee but java. Bigler and his family had been a little proud to lose since they are Mormons who don't drink coffee and aren't supposed to know any other names for it, or smoke either. But now Bigler lived in one of the four-plex apartments which he owned and rented to E. Darren, apart from his family like E. Darren was from us. If he was going to listen only to Bigler about the fish, then it was best that Bigler was the one telling him outside with the smoke from his cigarette shooting out his nose, "You got to be part artist with those fish, a goddam artist for hellsakes." Most times I saw Bigler at the four-plex, he and E. Darren

spent their time like this, their arms dangling over the railing outside the door and their heads shaking like they'd been cheated.

I didn't tell the psychologist a word about Bigler – just the fish – because I thought it showed E. Darren was trying to get a new career going that would raise him up in her eyes. Then maybe I could stay in French class on Thursdays if she thought he was on track as a father. Keeping Bigler out of it was the best thing.

Bigler and E. Darren bowled on Wednesday nights and if they were getting ready for a tournament in Twin Falls, then we'd spend most of our Sundays at the alley so they could practice. E. Darren made the effort to show us how to hold the ball and swing it back as we quick-stepped up to the foul line, but after he got us set up and pointed the right direction, he'd walk back to the curved wooden seat and fall back into conversation with Bigler like we were a kind of timeout he took. This is just the kind of thing school psychologists want you to tell them, but I don't say anything about going bowling, just the videos and pizza. That's enough for her to know, even if she says we should try something new. Something I want to do, or Clay. I say we do what we want to do.

In the gym here at Clay's game, the two of them are easy to spot in the bleachers. Bigler's legs are stretched over the empty rows and E. Darren sits hunched next to him with his hands jammed into his coat pockets. They're on the other side of the gym from us and the team benches, where the janitors rarely pull out a section. We move up to the row behind Clay's team where we always sit, and settle in with the Dennings. No doubt E. Darren knows we're here, but he's keeping his eyes glued on Clay's Warriors team going through their half-court warmup. Whenever a player misses a layup or dribbles the ball off his foot, Bigler's over there laughing it up. E. Darren yells out to the boys who miss, "Follow

through!” and “Both hands to pass!” With all the noise of the balls drumming and shoes squeaking in this gym, I can still hear Bigler’s haw-hawing laugh coming through.

Over on our side, my mom sits up readier than she’s ever been to watch one of Clay’s games. “Come on, Clay!” she’s hollering for him before the game even starts. I get the idea she’s going to keep it up as long as E. Darren’s here. She does things like this around him because she doesn’t want the way she feels to show, and that’s one of the differences they say they have, E. Darren does things instead of feels things, and she feels mostly. That’s what E. Darren’s told us a few times before taking us home on Sundays. Most of the things E. Darren does, though, don’t seem to get him much. Some things he’d keep us from knowing if Bigler could keep his mouth shut. Like his karaoke singing in Twin Falls that Bigler talked about while we bowled. “That’s some singing career you’re passing up, E.D.,” I heard him say while I was getting ready to roll the purple swirly ball E. Darren chose for me. “I thought maybe Elvis really wasn’t dead as good as you were twitching your hips around on that stage and singing into that microphone. You were some hunka hunka burning love.” I only knocked three pins down and E. Darren jumped up to tell me “Nice roll” to cover up what Bigler was saying and might repeat to someone.

Clay makes the first basket for his team, and I start yelling for him, too. Up and down the court, we shout at him – me, my mom, and E. Darren – telling him he’s doing great, telling him it’s okay when someone scores on him. It’s crazy how we’re all caught up in the game, watching the scoreboard and thinking our cheering actually nudges the Warriors ahead. Whether he can hear us or not, he keeps playing his game, running through the patterns of the team’s plays, and I have to give him credit for that, for staying with what he

knows. I think of saying to him later, “Hey, maybe the E is for Elvis Darren,” but then, the E-name’s not really funny any more.

The antelope caught in the barbed wire thrashed so hard as the truck approached that the juniper posts on either side of it bobbed and the wire tightened again. We saw it from the truck as E. Darren drove the two-lane highway to Gooding to drop us with our grandparents until after the divorce. He let his foot off the gas and peered over at the animal, steering to a stop on the shoulder with his arm draped along the top curve of the wheel. Probably a straggler from the herd, clipped by a car in the hindquarters so its leg snapped when it tried to jump the fence. Its eyes were filmed over, not sharp with panic. Its reflex to leap kept firing so that the leg that was broken wagged in the air when he’d try to jump, the bone held by a thread like splintered kindling.

E. Darren told us to get out of the truck, and told me personally to start walking toward a stand of pines we could see down the road with Clay ahead of me, to not look back or turn around until we got to those trees. He got out and waited for us to get a good start. “Just to those trees where the road starts down and wait there,” he gave the instructions to our backs, surely, judging the distance to the trees to be just far enough.

The afternoon sun leveled into our eyes as we walked, and I did turn around, walking backwards to make Clay think I was coming right behind him. In the cold, flinty air I could see the silver of E. Darren’s knife, the white and ash-colored mix of the antelope’s hide, the motion of his arm as E. Darren drew the blade. I hated that he knew how deep and exactly where to place his knife. Some things like this he did, I hated, and wished he could do more

things I'd started to tell the school psychologist he'd done. Selling firewood in Sun Valley one week, and doing taxidermy the next for the fishermen who'd been landing ten-pound steelhead, biggest fish ever pulled out of the Big Wood River.

As he threaded the animal out of the wire, I turned to walk forward and saw Clay far ahead of me, never once turning to look back. A steady, cold wind winced my eyes nearly shut, and I felt colder than I had ever been. We kept walking toward the trees, their pointed shadows aimed at us, the snow-patched shoulder of the road beneath them frozen solid in a dingy sheet. I noticed the shadows of the two pines Clay was headed toward, how they made a V on the road like both your hands waiting in the air to catch a high flyball. Clay walked in the sunfilled pocket between them, straight into their notch and safe.

When E. Darren picked us up and drove back up the highway, Clay and I turned to look at the spot in the fence where we'd seen the antelope. I got a glimpse of where E. Darren had ducked its body beneath the sagebrush, its front legs in two straight lines like an equals sign on a patch of dirt-flecked snow. As the truck shifted gears toward Gooding, the three of us lurched forward all together on the bench seat with the motion of the truck. Then we all rocked back together as the truck gear caught, like people do who are riding along, going the same place, with no relation at all to each other.

A Saturn Aspect

The first time Sharon felt like a speck in the universe she was looking through one end of David's telescope on a night in July, squinting at the filmy rings of Saturn and listening to David tell exactly how many millions of years the dust and ice particles had been swirling around the planet. Later on, smoking her cigarette in David's hot tub, she had failed miserably to come up with the right million year total when David quizzed her for it – more than an eon off and unsure if dinosaurs were or were not walking the Earth when Saturn orbited the cosmos in only half its current set of rings.

There in the tub with the waterjets thrumming against her legs, Sharon's mind whirled with four months of facts and exactness that David had proudly presented to her. Little-known facts that had stuck in his head while watching educational TV or reading USA Today, even facts he had calculated himself such as mileage accrued by defense attorneys pacing in front of juries, and calories burned per hour by laboratory mice scratching at the glass sides of their cages. For the past four months she had participated in his fact habit by reciting his knowledge back to him in their own kind of quiz show. "The categories are: Strange Animals, Undersea Geography, and Household Appliances," David would offer over pizza or while they were driving, and it was up to Sharon to choose one she thought she could answer from all he had told her about subjects in those categories over the previous week.

This miss about the dinosaurs was her first, and she sensed his disappointment. She drew on her cigarette and then took a stab at another answer – "That would have been

during the Jurassic period, right?” – as David hooked his arms over the side and clapped his hands against the redwood, mumbling the pounds per square inch of pressure the wood could withstand when filled with water.

It wasn't until the months following July that she realized how that summer night in David's hot tub, feeling miserably shrunken and wrong for not knowing the correct eon for dinosaurs, had caused her to come up too readily with a yes when David eased closer and snorkeled up her ribs to ask if she would go in on a house with him. He had been eyeing a two-storied brick Tudor, he said, in a part of town where a developer was adding picket fences to older homes, removing the basketball hoops from the garages, and calling the whole neighborhood Garden Park. It promised to be especially nice, David had said, because the attic space could be converted into an observatory-bedroom, the roof could be cut away perfectly for the North Star to be visible from bed, and always there would be one planet or another crossing overhead.

Tapping her ash over the side of the hot tub she had replied, “My financial planner has been advising me to invest in something big like a house to build some equity. But are you talking about a house writeoff, or a house-and-spouse writeoff?”

“We could get married, sure,” David said, settling down to his shoulders in the gurgling water and moving to the center of the tub to paddle himself around in circles with his knees tucked up. “When would be a good time?” he asked.

Only days later the two of them took time off from the research lab, spent a day with the realtor touring the house then a weekend in Reno and back, bringing with them a marriage license in a heart-shaped frame from The Chapel of Hearts. It wasn't until after Sharon had pitched in her savings and lived two weeks in the house in Garden Park that she

thought back to David sculling at the center of the hot tub and wanted to stop him, stop everything and shout out a list of dinosaurs alive at the birth of Saturn's outer ring.

With David underway on the attic, cutting open the roof, and her ankle nearly healed from turning it on the attic stairs while pushing the futon up, Sharon began to have visions like those of people declared clinically dead. There, hovering over her body, she could view over her shoulder the penstrokes that had signed \$15,000 of her savings over as her stake in the house. The difference between her and the people who had actually left their bodies for a time was that Sharon didn't feel exactly like she had come back to life when it was over.

Every morning she awoke next to David, his grizzled face in an open-mouthed sleep just as she had seen him many mornings before, only the sunlight that came through David's roof project squinted her eyes, so that she seemed to watch him sleep from the same distance she felt she stood when signing the house papers, or sorting through paint chips and tile samples for the house, David making all the final decisions without asking her. Since David had swapped out one of his programming contracts for time to work on the attic, Sharon felt she awoke in a construction site that David began hammering away at every morning until he showed up at the lab around noon and worked into the evening tracing genetic diseases on DNA molecules. The futon was usually covered with sawdust and wood chisels that she cleared away every night, alone for a while in the cool air that washed through the attic, alone until David returned from the lab and his database eager to rest and begin again on the skylight in the morning. The time he had already poured into remodeling the attic kept him in touch with the house and his original want of it, while Sharon woke up

beneath the opening in the roof and pushed away thoughts of what would come after the skylight was finished.

The first Saturday that David did not get up and begin working on the house, but showered instead for an Outdoors Club kayak trip, Sharon lay beneath the opening in the roof and imagined herself floating up through it, and trying to calculate some set of facts she could offer David on the science it would take to enable human beings to float. David's voice came up from the landing, "Sharon, if it clouds up you'll need to pull that plastic over the opening up there. I have some bricks out on the roof to hold it down from the outside."

"If it clouds up, pull the plastic over, got it." Still lying on the futon, Sharon gripped the edge of the quilt and pulled it over her head, pattering through sarcastic variations of David's instructions, "If it clouds up, dial 911," "See clouds, send heap big plastic to cover hole in tepee." She stopped and pushed the quilt back when she heard David flick off the bathroom light and the sound of his quick, sure feet drumming down the stairs and out to the garage to load his kayak on his car.

Sprawled on the futon, Sharon thought again how it would feel to float, how it could be like people who claimed to have a life-after-life experience said, that her filmy spirit would go tunneling out of her body and through the roof, drift above the house and into clusters of stars even David couldn't know the names of.

By mid-morning Sharon was kicking an empty drywall bucket down the walk in front of the house, stooping to pull the tall milkweed from the poodled fitzers in the yard and stuffing the broken, runny stems into the bucket. The balled fitzers were dusty and had gone long enough without water while the house had been up for sale that they had browned, the

woody branches scaly and brittle beneath the clumps like an exposed maze of wooden plumbing. The ground cover beneath had grown over the sprinkler heads so that little water reached the bushes but lavished the bruise-colored ajuga.

She had known that buying a house would mean time spent like this. Her sister made a living out of buying old houses and restoring their fixtures to the period of the home, refinishing their parquet floors and oak woodwork, then finishing them off with landscape designs that sold her houses from the curb to the lawyers and banking executives who bought them. For Sharon nothing as perfect as her sister's garden design or work would come of shoveling the fitzer bed out, only something clearer, a first step in getting involved with the house as David had through the attic. The forty years the bushes had thrived there were enough a relic of the previous owners – a retirement couple, the LaRoches, who had sold the house to finance an apartment condo in Phoenix – that Sharon wanted the bushes out, wanted the house to show something for her loan signature, and she began mentally planting the plant beds alongside the house, jamming them thick with red rocket delphinium.

Sharon decidedly went to the garage to find a hose she could use to soak the fitzer roots, loosen their hold on the foundation. The hurry she tasked herself with was instant and furious. She had to get started before David had the chance to get home and warn her about the possible roots circled around plumbing, the foundation crumbling, and cracks in the walls. David's predictable, unspoken warnings floated around her head, and even though she considered he would well know all the how-tos about digging out bushes, she only heard his words like elevator music as she slung a coil of hose over her shoulder and plucked a shovel from the pile of garden tools.

With the water running a steady stream, Sharon aimed the shovel at the roots of a fitzer. With every slice of the shovel beneath the firm push of her foot, she sensed the quickening pleasure of making a decision without consulting David. As she heaved shovelloads of muddy ajuga out from beneath the first bush, the clumsy bees of late summer looped in and out of the bucket of weeds on the walk, testing the milky sweetness that oozed from them. Rows of red delphinium surrounded by clumps of yellow and white daisies, tight-fisted zinnias along the walk – Sharon rested her shovel against the house and planned the garden space in startling, vengeful colors.

When David pulled his Subaru into the driveway, his kayak and paddles lashed to the luggage rack as if her were a suburban Eskimo returning from a seal hunt, Sharon was picking ajuga out of the mounds of mud and stuffing the clumps into a plastic trash bag. The fitzer balls lay piled at the curb, a clump of awkward branches and bowling ball-sized bushes, neatly waiting for the Neighborhood Cleanup crew due the following week.

After hours of shoveling, Sharon had found a rusty woodsaw and sawed each bush off at ground level. The stumps squatted raggedly inside the holes she had dug around them, and her gardening gloves lay palm up at the edge of the last crater where the teeth of the saw had skipped off a root and across her fingers, cutting through and gashing open the knuckles of her left hand.

Sharon shook the clumps of ground cover down to the bottom of the trash bag and tried to swing it forward to move to the next muddied pile. The three fingers she had bandaged in gauze ached as she curled them around the folded opening of the bag. As David stopped, silent, at the edge of the first hole, she kept pulling the clumped plants free

and shaking the mud and dirt loose.

“What made you decide to do this?” David slapped his hands against his legs, his eyes flashing up to the bandage on her hand, then back to the successive holes along the front and sides of the house. “I get it,” he murmured, “these things have been in here for years and years and today is the day they had to come out.” Tagging a sawed-off stump with his foot, David wagged it back and forth, testing its hold on the ground beneath.

“Today was the day,” Sharon said, suddenly alarmed that she hadn’t paid any attention to the sky, the clouds, and pulling the plastic over the skylight. She looked up and judged by the whitish cover of thin clouds that she was safe, there had been no chance of rain. Sharon let go of the trash bag and walked from it toward the house as if it had waged an argument with her she no longer cared to win.

“Your hand okay?” David pointed at her bandage as she passed him, clearly waiting for her to answer before he went on to finish up her job to his satisfaction.

“It was a stupid thing to do, but it’s okay.” She waved her hand in the air and pulled open the back screen, leaving David to study the amputated fingers.

Upstairs at the bathroom window, Sharon unwrapped her bandage and inspected the cuts, then dashed hydrogen peroxide over her knuckles. Below the window at the side of the house she could see David had pulled on her garden gloves and was yanking and struggling with the roots left inside each gouge where a bush had been. With the peroxide fizzing inside her cuts, Sharon’s eyes narrowed to slits as she watched his hands work trying to find the best grip around the roots and stumps, the fabric of the left glove having split wider at the gash made by the saw, the blue and yellow birds printed on the gloves seeming ridiculous on the backs of his hands.

For rocket delphinium to grow it must be nearly spring, the soil should be warming, and the top two to three inches loose under the trowel. This is what Dougan, the president of the Outdoors Club, told Sharon later that evening at dinner as she watched him twist spaghetti onto his fork, sauce speckling the tablecloth beside his plate. The action of his wrist was firm and circled thickly in the same motion she thought of him using to paddle his kayak. Sharon imagined him and David out on the river that morning, their last trip of the year, seesawing their paddles across the boat into the water and David hollering something out of a beer commercial like, "It doesn't get any better than this!" and Dougan not even replying, just giving David a you-said-it nod. Then David wanting to prolong the feel of the river by inviting Dougan to dinner.

"You've got a good start on that garden, though. Getting the area cleared before spring gives you a chance to enrich the soil with table scraps and organic waste," Dougan said just before pushing a forkload of spaghetti into his mouth. "And what contribution have you made to the new house," Dougan said through his mouthful of spaghetti as he pointed his empty fork at David. "I see you don't spend your Saturdays doing heavy yardwork."

"I'm putting this five by five skylight in the roof upstairs so I can set my telescopes up for a look at meteor showers and eclipses without having to leave the comfort of my own home. I just need to sand the frame and set the glass in and it will be done." David stood up as an invitation to Dougan to come have a look. "In fact, why don't you shove the last of your dinner in and I'll show you around the house."

As the two men left the kitchen, Sharon could hear David steering Dougan first to the basement, telling him tales the realtor had related about the LaRoches – shady deals Mr. LaRoche ran out of the basement, first gold ingots and then mail order motivational videotapes of some kind, and Mrs. LaRoche, naked, running vacuum on Wednesdays according to the neighbors. David's voice came up muted through the flooring as he pointed out the way the LaRoches had decorated the basement in a Spanish motif with black velvet painting of matadors on the walls, and over at the bar a pair of goldplated spigots shaped like bulls' heads that were all Mr. LaRoche got and wanted out of his gold ingot sales.

As Sharon heard them start up the stairway, she grabbed a dinner plate in each hand and took them to the sink, scraping the leftover spaghetti onto a paper towel to toss into the garden. As David directed Dougan's attention to the attic, Sharon felt relieved to have the two of them off by themselves. Stepping outside the screen door, she walked along the side of the house, looking over the smoothed dirt where David had repaired each hole. As she launched the curls of spaghetti onto the earth, she felt strangely as if she were performing an act of desecration.

With the trunk of her Toyota lifted open next to the pile of bushes at the curb, Sharon selected a branch out of the pile. She lifted the poodled branch to the open trunk like something dead held out and away from her by one stiff limb. With little struggle, the branch brittlely settled under the lip of the car trunk, spewing its barbs as Sharon mashed it in with one hand, her fingers held out stiffly to keep from scratching her wrists. Even though crews would be coming through the neighborhood to pick up curbside yard trash the following

week, Sharon felt she could whisk away the debris using her car and not have the reminder of her furious effort to do something to the house there every morning until the crews came.

Sharon was turning to select another when Dougan strode out the door and yelled thanks to her for dinner where she stood at the curb. “Thanks for the garden advice,” she said, and he waved it off as he hopped the low picket fence and ducked inside his own kayak-topped Subaru. The evening was growing dark quickly now and Sharon could hear David in the attic, one or another of his power tools switched on, and she went back to packing the trunk with the hacked-off bushes. Though she tried to work quickly, there was no use in trying to clear away the bushes this way. With only three of the cuttings settled in the trunk there was little room to get another to fit. Moving away from the bright light in the trunk lid, Sharon looked at the black shape of the fitzer pile and let her eyes adjust to the cool mid-dark. No sound was coming now from the attic and she stiffened as she checked the front door, listened for the back screen stretching open again, expecting some sign of David coming out to shake his head over her trying to get rid of the bushes. The doors remained blank and dark and then suddenly she saw the clamp-on worklight in the attic click on and flood the leaves of the neighbor’s backyard maple in a blaring white light. Sharon pressed the trunk lid shut and let the light draw her into the house.

Up in the attic, Sharon brushed the sawdust off the futon and perched on the end of the mattress. Craning her head back, she blankly watched David finish up the skylight frame with a square of sandpaper, critically brushing at spots and then tossing the sandpaper into the top of this toolbox when he had done all he could to smooth and ready it for the glass. “I’ll set the glass in tomorrow,” he said. “I’ve had it for tonight.”

David flopped down tired on one side of the futon and waved fine grains of sawdust out of the air, then reached over to the worklight and switched it off. Both David and Sharon focused wordlessly out the window and the wide open picture of stars inside it.

Leaned next to the attic wall were David's telescopes, the long cardboard boxes only slightly misshapen from years of sliding the instruments in and out for eclipses, meteors, and women on other summer nights whom David had taught about the planets and night sky. Sharon wondered if anyone else David had known had felt as small as she had when introduced to the skies. She thought of astronomers leaving their hilltop observatories and shopping in supermarkets, seeing other people and the items they picked from the shelves as graduated collections of matter – a head of lettuce, a woman, the Earth, the galaxy – all of them together making up a single molecule of a dog's toenail in some other realm of existence.

Sharon stood and made her way through the dark and lifted out the telescope she knew fit fully in her hand like a peeled, smooth log. As she pulled it carefully from its box, trying to keep from bending her bandaged fingers, she waited for David to check her aloud – tell her not to look out the wrong end, take care with the adjustments – but he lay still behind her, watching her lift the telescope and aim it into the night.

Panning across the sky she locked onto the moon first, Orion's Belt, then the Pleiades, all the time sensing him matching her path through the skies in his mind, a slight voice coming from the dark saying the names of the moon's craters and the constellations as she spotted them. Her arm started to weaken under the weight of the scope, but she continued to search for the ringed planet she had seen with David. She didn't care to be certain at all now about Saturn's rings – whether gas or ice, string theory or big bang – and as she locked

onto the planet she pleurably freed it from the dinosaurs that dated it for David, all the facts that had been assigned it. Instead, she simply looked at the planet, filling with a sureness that came from locating it on her own. She brought the telescope to rest against her chest and kept her eye on the location in the sky where she could find the planet again, marked its place from the North Star, and then began to aim the scope up for the pleasure of another look.

“What are the categories?” David’s voice came up from the dark behind her, and he lifted up on his elbows mistakenly ready to answer any question she had about the universe.

Relocation

When Russell thinks about his wife Dora and her retreat from their marriage, he blames California. Since moving into their Petaluma condominium, every sighing mention he makes of Montana and the home where they raised four children in Dillon, he has noticed Dora leaves the room before he can finish his sentence. This evening, at the kitchen sink washing the dinner dishes, she arches her brows up into the red tufts of her bangs and lids her eyes over while Russell tells her what Californianisms he's noted for the day – men his age wearing ponytails, others in leather sandals, some at the supermarket in skintight exercise shorts for godsakes. Dora's attention remains fiercely trained on the dishes as he talks and Russell feels her silence as a judgment, as if she would say, "Wouldn't hurt you to be more like them," if she said anything at all. Dora was never like this in Montana. Only since they've lived in California, three months, has Dora tuned him out, shut down on him, left the room when he's talking about the Montana things he loves. Even now, Dora flicks suds from her hands into the sink, dries them on a dishtowel and walks away from him talking in the kitchen.

Last time his son Jeffrey called, he said, "It's been good for mom to move, she's happier," and it made Russell think Dora must be telling their children things she doesn't say to him, that she's happier for one. If Jeffrey wasn't still in college in Bozeman, Russell doesn't know who he could enlist in the family to talk about Montana. The girls all hurriedly ask to speak to Dora when they call. It's as if Dora and the girls have formed a gang focused on complaining about him, criticizing how he's adapting, he's seen women in a family make

it hard for a man like this. Eyerolling, sighing over his recollections of the way things used to be, generally showing a lack of courtesy toward him while allowing him to pay for their plane tickets to California, college tuition, car repairs. But Russell doesn't feel self-pity. Instead, he plans to make himself understood, to have a simple moment in which someone acknowledges he feels a little lost without the mountains, the weather, even the sameness of people from town to town compared to here. With that acknowledgement Russell would feel contentment curl like a small animal in his heart.

Left alone in the kitchen Russell goes to the phone to call Jeffrey. On the extension, Dora is talking to her sister Maureen. Russell hears Dora start a sentence with "He doesn't..." and then stop to say, "Russell, do you need to use the phone?"

"Thought I'd see what's new with Jeffrey."

Dora waits for him to hang up, her breath steady and strong in the receiver. "Russell, I'm trying to follow up on Walt's doctor appointment. Can you hang up the phone?"

For a moment Russell suspects Dora of calling her sister to report on him. The "He doesn't think ..." sentence he imagines ending with "... men should wear a ponytail," or sandals, or exercise shorts to the market.

She would be right. His ideas haven't pulled away from their roots just because he lives someplace new. Russell is aware that he hasn't adapted to much of anything his entire life. He prefers the longevity of his opinions, how they serve him. His thoughts are handy to him like hand tools, worn and aged, but still a hammer to a nail. Even the phone receiver in his hand has a heft that is satisfying, gives him something to grip and hammer down when he hangs up. Which he does just forcefully enough, just clumsily enough, that his action could be taken as irritation or simply masculine. Try that with a cell phone, he thinks as he

takes his cigarettes out to the patio and scrapes one of the iron chairs to the edge where he can sit and flick his ash into the rhododendrons.

For nearly an hour Russell sits with his elbows anchored to his knees, his hands surrendered down between them as his cigarette burns like incense, smoke funneling up. He thinks how he and Dora have been here at Las Haciendas three months crammed in between people they don't know, hardly see. Their neighbors give off enough sound through the walls that Russell knows when morning coffee is heated in a microwave, when they like to shower, what time of day their cell phones ring the most. He knows their faces framed in windows – the woman next door who has complained about his cigarette smoke coming in her window, the neighbor on the opposite side, a man tanned to a walnut color in his sixties who does yoga every morning to a videotape. Unless they plan to play cards with Dora's sister Maureen and her husband Walt, the only person Russell sees regularly is Luis the groundskeeper at Las Haciendas. From what Russell can tell Luis is responsible for keeping things up around Building E of Las Haciendas which is the building that includes Russell and Dora's condo. On a regular schedule, Russell has witnessed Luis mowing, leaf-blowing, planting, repairing sprinklers, and picking up the occasional litter that gets loose from the dumpsters at the clubhouse. A number of times Luis has told him in broken English not to throw his butts into the bushes. Each time, Russell says to him *De nada, de nada*, as if any response in Spanish means he understands. By this time of the day, after six now, Luis and the other Mexican grounds crew members have ridden their golf carts back to the maintenance building and gone home for the day, seven of them to one muffler-impaired Monte Carlo.

As Russell flicks his smoldering cigarette butt into the grass, he knows there's nothing really to do but let Dora have her happiness — or as his daughters put it, her reward — being here in Petaluma. Dora has found the outlet stores, the winery tours, restaurants with a whole page of salads on the menu, and she won't go back. He sees in her new allegiance to this place a ready dismissal of the past and a heady, determined sense of making an adventure of her life that doesn't depend on his willingness to be included. He lights another cigarette, runs his palm over his forehead to wipe the moisture from his skin that he has found comes with living at sea level, and thinks how he has no way of knowing what he can do to join in with Dora, to live here. Oddly, when he glances at the bed of rhododendrons planted around his patio, he takes some comfort that Luis has picked last night's butts from the mulch around them. There is still someone who will cover for him, and Russell thinks, *Gracias amigo, gracias.*

The next morning, the gong that sounds at the start of the neighbor's yoga videotape nudges Russell to bring his coffee to the patio door, check his watch and the level of morning light to see if it's too early for this disturbance. Through the maze of patios and balconies at the back of their building, Russell can see to the clubhouse and the pool. A lone swimmer chugs end to end.

Behind him in the entry he hears Dora, the soles of her new tennis shoes squeaking on the tile as she goes through the warmup stretches she does before meeting her walking group. Dora signed up to be a Las Haciendas Walker at the clubhouse during their first week here, and by the second week she was setting the alarm to join a mix of ladies from various buildings five mornings a week at 6:00 a.m., five loops around the network of roads in the

condominium complex. Now when Russell and Dora are at the market or running errands, Dora says “Margaret told me this was the only store that carries this mustard,” or “That’s the restaurant Susan and Jim went to for their anniversary,” as if he is acquainted with these women, their husbands and families. As Dora pulls her Las Haciendas Walking Club windjacket on and pushes up her sleeves, she asks him if he has made a decision about Jim’s offer.

“I need to let Susan know so Jim can find someone else if you’re not interested,” Dora says, leaning toward the mirror in the entry and knitting her brightly painted nails through her hair to arrange it.

Russell knows he doesn’t want to say yes to a Jim he’s never met. He knows he can’t drag a hose around a nursery and make sure the potted trees Jim sells to landscape contractors are watered and inventoried. Dora turns from the mirror and butts her hip against the entry table, balls her hands at her waist waiting for Russell’s answer. He notices how walking has slimmed Dora’s hips, how a strap of firmness has appeared in her thighs, and he wonders how long it has been since she wanted his kiss to drop inside her knee there below the hem of her shorts. Since moving to Las Haciendas, he thinks, they have not made love once, or even joked about making love at their age. They purchased a new queen size bed rather than moving their old mattress set, but both grumbled about the new bed being too firm as a distracted, poor excuse for not approaching the question of lovemaking.

“Jim’s Nursery is no place for me, Dora. I just can’t see me babysitting a bunch of trees in pots, and then what? At the end of the week Jim comes over and pulls a few twenties out of his pocket for me and the lot boys?”

Dora makes a clucking sound that surprises him. She says, “Guess you don’t see a need to do anything to help the situation here, Russell,” but she says it mostly to herself. The squeal of her shoes on the tile as she turns to leave seems purposely drawn out to him. The shuddering door confirms for Russell that Dora has made his decline of Jim’s offer into something terrible.

The situation? Russell wants to know what she means by this. What does turning down a nursery job have to do with the two of them? He pats his shorts pocket for a cigarette and lights up with one of the colored lighters Dora bought for him at a discount store by the hundred. He takes a stance at the patio door, leaning straight-armed against the frame and holding his cigarette in front of his face where the smoke swirls and makes him wince as he trains his focus on two swimmers now crawling through the pool. Russell forces cigarette smoke from his nostrils, foot long streams that comfort him. If Russell had been the kind of man for the last fifty years who had spent any time at all inspecting his discomforts and finding solutions to them, he would have the means now to shake off the weight he feels settling on him, possibly a collection of patent phrases that reliably result in domestic truce. Russell’s habit, instead, is to backtrack to reasons others want to trap him, gather evidence. If he takes action others suggest to him it’s only to restore a regularity he can live with, and only before he senses a stormcloud of ultimatums coming at him.

Russell remembers when Jeffrey had come to help with the move. While they shouldered the mattress box up the stairs, Jeffrey said to Russell, “Dad, you have to give this a real try or Mom isn’t going to wait around for you,” but Russell didn’t know of a single reason why it wasn’t enough of a try on his part that he had moved. And how could Dora be waiting to go off without him over his unhappiness when she was the one behind this blip in

what had been the steady line of his life? It was only last April, just hours after Russell's retirement party, when Maureen called with news of her husband Walt having a scare of a heart attack and being scheduled for a triple bypass the next day. The two of them had sat up in bed and instantly switched on the bedside lamps, readying themselves for news of a son or a daughter in trouble. But as he listened to Dora's questions and realized who she was talking to, he settled back onto his pillow. As Dora flooded questions and concern into the phone, Russell listened finding it hard to believe that Walt, only a year into his own retirement, could possibly be so sick, possibly dying. Dora hunched herself over at the edge of the bed, her back to Russell as she scribbled the hospital and doctor names down. He listened as she asked how the procedure was done and if Walt had displayed any symptoms. And how again had Maureen found Walt collapsed on the stairs? As Dora began speaking in surgical terms with Maureen, Russell felt himself go a little weak and got up to go to the bathroom. When he returned Dora had hung up and was sitting at the side of the bed staring sadly ahead.

"How's Walt doing?" Russell asked.

Dora shaded her eyes from Russell as she said, "They'll know more after the surgery tomorrow."

"Is he home?"

Dora shook her head then added, "No. Hospital."

Her clipped response was enough for him to back off, respecting what he took as her need to collect her thoughts about what Maureen was facing and what she could do to help. Any questions aimed her way right then would land like a blow on a bruise, Russell knew. There was a time in Russell's work with the Forest Service that he had stood with a new

crew on the fireline, over a dozen men deafened by the roar of the fire and prickly to changes in the wind, throwing their backs into their Pulaskis and clearing a band of dirt, but one man unable to do anything but ask him, “How did this happen? How could this happen?” Ridiculous questions, and he thought his questions about Walt must sound just as hollow. Letting Dora have her worry, he retreated to his side of the bed and then reached to pat her lightly on her leg. She shooed his hand away and sat still with her forehead resting in her palms.

Left to his own thoughts, Russell nestled his pillow against the headboard and imagined the sound Maureen must have heard when Walt slipped on the stairs, how she found him gasping and his eyes lolling up at her plaintively. He envisioned them in their separate, frantic struggles to move to a clear and finally calm moment that would not come, not even with the 911 call and the ambulance lights lassoing the house in the darkness. Russell only sensed relief for himself when he suggested the two of them drive to California, spend a week or two in Petaluma so Dora could be with Maureen. At that moment Dora finally looked at him, anxious and forgiving at once. “It’s such a long drive,” she said, as if offering Russell a chance to back out of a trip she was determined to take.

They arrived the day after Walt’s surgery, and for Russell the sight of Walt strung with tubing and the IV needle taped into the back of his hand, his eyelids twitching in an attempt to lift and see who was in the room, shuddered up a clot of fear in Russell that hung like a bat inside his chest. On hospital visits until Walt returned home, Russell kept himself tasked with offers to get juice for Maureen and Dora, or a newspaper for Walt, avoiding the queasiness that glimpses of Walt’s scar or the yellow ooze of bandages brought on for Russell. After Walt returned home and could sit up comfortably, the women made plans to

leave Russell with Walt while they arranged shopping trips, conspiring in the morning over coffee like teenage girls to escape to the malls and factory outlet stores for the afternoon. They felt obligated to speak in hushed tones as they planned, guilty that here was Walt only two weeks out from heart surgery and they wanted to enjoy themselves. With no resistance from Walt or Russell, their guilt eased and they planned out the last week of Russell and Dora's stay with cooking classes, antiquing, lunch in San Francisco.

Before leaving each day Maureen stopped in at the bedroom to sit with Walt and set out his medications, go over them with him and ask him how he was feeling. From the position Russell took up in the living room recliner each afternoon, he would hear the kiss Maureen left on Walt's cheek and as she stood to go each time she asked if Walt minded her going out with Dora. But Dora, Russell noted, stood eager at the front door waiting like a neighbor offering a ride to Maureen, and once Walt had been secured and Maureen stepped out of the bedroom, Dora only briefly waved at him as she went out the door.

When Walt could sit up longer in the afternoons, he and Russell played a little poker and it was after a run of luck at cards for Russell one afternoon – up a thousand on Walt – that Maureen and Dora came home thrilled with an idea they had for Russell and Dora to look at a condominium. With a place of their own nearby in Petaluma they would have somewhere to stay any time they wanted. The women had stopped to look at the model on their way back from shopping and neither of them could think of a reason why Russell shouldn't go back with Dora that evening to have a look himself.

When Russell thinks about it now, he blames his readiness to buy on his lucky run at cards. The act of looking into the condominium that afternoon and signing the papers was something he could do to keep the sweepstakes feeling going and draw the fading Dora

back. Even getting the free patio furniture for signing the contract was like luck Russell couldn't shake. When they returned with a bottle of champagne to celebrate they poured a sip for Walt against doctor's orders and the two men shared wide-eyed looks of disbelief. A toast to Walt's recovery, to Dora's thrill at the promise of more time with Maureen, and to a universe doling out full houses and straights today, Russell thought.

The truth set in on the return drive to Montana just outside of Reno, Nevada when Russell mentioned that it would be nice to spend a holiday or two in Petaluma each year. Dora sat gloomily in the passenger seat, finally saying, "I don't know about you, but I see no reason to stay in Dillon, Russell," she said. "We're not getting any younger, you know. The doctors and services we'd have available to us in Petaluma could mean the difference between good quality of life and bad when something happens to one of us. Besides this thing with Walt, his heart, makes me sure I don't want to spend my last years a thousand miles from my sister."

For the few days after signing for the condominium, Russell had believed Dora's feelings about him had improved, pinked up like the slabs of Walt's cheeks, that she had gotten over the melancholy of the situation with Walt and could see through to silver linings of their own. Without a word said by either of them, this is what he had come to believe. Now here they were again, with space between them. One thing Russell had learned working forty years with fire crews is how panic can be dangerous. He'd seen men lose all sense of direction in a forest clotted with smoke and head right for the dark maw of it. He had always kept himself from panic by being on the lookout for signs in his crewmembers and being ready to save them with a prearranged word, a reminder that calls them back to safety. He can recall men he nearly lost simply by not saying enough, soon enough. "You want to

move,” Russell said to keep a string of words in the air and allow himself time to scramble up more.

“I want *us* to move there.”

“You should have said that when we were looking at the place.”

“So now I’m wrong for not saying something? Were you going to drive all the way back and go on as if we hadn’t bought the place?”

Russell shrugged and looked out the window at the low hills. A knot of tension tightened his throat and he searched for phrases and words he’d used with his fire crews to pull them out before a fire jumped the line, before a change in the wind trapped them. He reached for the pack of cigarettes tucked into his sun visor, cracked the truck window to draw the smoke, and lit up. He shrugged again though there was no new question to answer.

Now, here at the patio door with the morning sun bellying in the glass, Russell lights up again. Up until the moves, he thinks, his marriage had seemed dependable to him, routine and possibly moldering, but steady in ways neither had complained about. Living here puts him off balance, unable to disarm their occasional disagreements or Dora’s seemingly new ability to find fault with him, tell him how childish he’s acting, how she hasn’t spent the last forty years with him to have him mope through the days of his retirement. He believes she should explain to him what good it does to never look back, how she can believe he can replace the life he knew with a job at Jim’s Nursery, and why is it so necessary for him to step in and get swept along like she has? At the edge of the grass that loops in at the patios of Building E’s condominium units, Russell sees Luis begin his morning prowl for litter and needed repairs.

Never marry a woman from a place you don't want to end up, amigo, Russell silently warns Luis, watching him bend and compact bits of cellophane into the palm of his gloved hand. Luis comes nearer, lifting shrubbery and checking the sprinkler heads for damage. Looking toward the clubhouse, Russell catches sight of Dora's walking group disappearing behind one of the buildings, four women this morning. Russell shifts his focus to Luis, noting how thoroughly Luis inspects the area, how he steps along the edge of the grass and then fades back from Russell's presence at the patio door to keep a polite distance, then moves back in close to the grass edge after passing Russell, intent on his job.

Soon as you retire, hombre, Russell wordlessly tells Luis as the groundskeeper tamps the mulch beneath a rhododendron with his foot, *nowhere you've known your whole life is good enough. Not unless it's next-goddam-door to your wife's sister.* Russell smugly flicks his ash on the patio to punctuate his thought. For Russell, this one-way conversation works fine. He doesn't really want Luis to answer. He wants, in the five or so minutes Luis works here at the back of the units, to silently wring out his complaints to him. Who better than another foreigner in this place for understanding, Russell reasons. *In the end, you're in her house. She's got to make sure you die somewhere she wants to live after you're gone. All it takes is one scare and she's wondering where she will be when you die. Next-goddam-door to her sister is where.*

Russell makes a motion to flick the butt of his cigarette onto the grass but Luis is suddenly holding a hand up to him and unrolling the other to reveal the paper bits and cigarette butts he's collected this morning already. Luis gives a slight shrugging twist of his forearm, a motion asking Russell to make a choice. Russell acknowledges a mock win for

Luis by holding the end of his cigarette up in the air and ducking his head in surrender. *All right, amigo, all right.*

Russell shifts his gaze to yesterday's newspaper sections he left scattered on the patio table. The sound of Luis' maintenance cart starting up echoes off the sides of the building and he watches him drive the path to the maintenance shed behind the clubhouse, rakes and shovels placed handles-down in tubes on the back of the cart, tools clanking. Russell fishes for his pack of cigarettes under the newspaper sections and shakes a cigarette out, balances it between his lips as he pats himself down for his lighter.

After lighting up, Russell lifts a foot and rests it on a patio chair, leans a forearm on his raised knee, his lighter gripped inside his palm. Dora should be back from walking in half an hour, he thinks, then remembering his neighbor's distaste for his smoking he chops at the curls of smoke from his cigarette with a few waves of his hand, trying to scramble its path to the window. He glances again at yesterday's headlines, but nothing interests him.

Boredom prompts Russell to turn his lighter up in his palm, flick the wheel. He approves the flame's steadiness and then lets it go out. He flicks the wheel again. Next Russell turns slightly in his chair and offers the flame of his lighter to a dried rhododendron leaf at the edge of the patio. The leaf smokes and after a moment it is furred blue with flame. The leaf twists and tries to relay the flame to a sheaf of leaves above it. A little line of fire along a branch surprises him when it crackles. He watches a burned patch of the leaf drop and makes sure any live embers wink out.

The sound of a window rushing open reminds Russell of snow sliding suddenly off a roof. Russell startles when his neighbor screams "What are you doing!" from her upper story window, and then raises her voice toward the clubhouse, "Fire!" Russell looks in the

direction she's yelling, but there is only a group of swimmers taking laps at the pool, their heads tilting an ear out of the water every three or four strokes. Russell moves to the edge of his patio, pleading up at her, shoveling his hands in a gesture meant to get her to look, there's nothing to worry about, but she only ducks away from the screen furious at him. Russell takes a look around to see if anyone is coming, glances toward his other neighbor's window, ready to shrug it off to him if he breaks from his yoga and comes to check. Russell hears the videotape instructor dreamily request his neighbor to exhale, no one is coming. He stands a while looking toward the pool and the swimmers, their legs cocked in knots above the water as they flip-turn, and he's stunned just a moment at how far from Montana he's come.

Over and over Dora has told him he needs to get out more, give Petaluma a chance, go down to the clubhouse and meet people, and he hasn't, not once. Today he will go, he thinks, before Dora gets back. He will leave a note that he has gone to check the volunteer list posted on the bulletin board at the clubhouse. He feels rushed to make a move Dora will approve of, something she'll recognize as a shift in him. Upstairs Russell showers and in what seems like seconds after he has dressed he feels propelled out the patio door, over the grass, onto the path to the clubhouse. He has a sense that he has gone too far, just today, too far.

The path to the clubhouse is banked on each side with waist-high flowering shrubs, something Mexican that goes along with the Las Haciendas theme and can hold up in this heat, he thinks. He doesn't try to name them, he's a tree man – Douglas fir, Lodgepole, Ponderosa. There are other trees he wonders if he'll ever see in California, specifically the

cherry trees he and Dora drove to in the spring along the shores of Flathead Lake. They had taken their first drive the year before they had married, driving to Seattle in mid-May to pick up an antique buffet that Dora's grandmother had willed to her, and found the bank of pink blossoms levitating in the early morning fog that had rolled into the orchards. Coming over a hill just as the sun rose, the sight drew Russell's foot from the accelerator and then he shifted the car to a pullout in the road. The two of them had stood wordlessly at the side of the road watching the sun roll back the mist, the trunks of the trees beginning to show through a row at a time. It was that single event that Russell thought had made lovers of them, how neither of them claimed the beauty of the moment by talking about it, how they knew to move on when it was gone and reconfirm it had happened by reaching across the car seat to each other. Every May after months of winter they drove to the orchards to see the blossoms, then back in summer for the cherries. Each orchard with their wooden U-Pick signs standing at the side of the road. Summer after summer, he remembered, Dora checking the bends in the road for her favorite orchard, the two of them eating the Bings and Royal Annes – big as horse molars – as they picked, finally filling the baskets with enough for Dora's preserves, some for eating in the car.

Those summers, when Russell could get a week off from the Forest Service, they always rented a cabin near the lake. He remembered a summer before they had Jeffrey when Dora woke him up, standing at the side of the bed in her swimsuit, and he knew by the moonlight coming in the window he should follow. They had gone in chest deep and stood facing the moon. Dora came closer, sliding her back in against his chest and let him wrap an arm around her to hold her against him, his palm cupping over her breast. When he looked at her he saw the caps of her shoulders shining white above the water and thought of them

as something soft and alive he could fit inside his hands, that would beat there beneath his palms like the bodies of doves. Later, after they'd gone back to the cabin and to bed, Russell awoke to use the bathroom and saw that Dora had hung her wet suit over the shower rod to dry. He remembers now how he reached up to squeeze one of the bra cups in her suit. The spongy pad inside trickled a stream of icy water down his arm and off his elbow. When he slipped back in bed he threaded his wet arm over Dora's side. She had shuddered at the cold against her skin and shrank away from him, and Russell remembers the short pang of alarm he felt at her rejection. But then in the next instant she turned to him, let him make love to her because, he believes, she remembered she loved him.

He knew Dora remembered those times because soon after they had moved to Petaluma, she had come home from a day of antiquing with Maureen and said, "Those old orchard signs, like the one at Banner's Orchard? Worth four, five hundred dollars here." That news had seemed wrong to him. Those signs belonged at the sides of the highway along the lake, to be used every year, with fresh red paint on the cherry clusters, brown stems painted thicker and thicker, their two green cateye-shaped leaves. He had said, "That's too bad," to Dora when she told him. "Too bad?" she replied, "I hadn't really thought about it that way. But I guess you're right. They were better the way we found them. Especially Banner's, and the Clearwater Cherries sign." She came to sit on the arm of his chair and took a few moments daydreaming. Russell watched a smile part her lips as if she were about to ask if he remembered something. She rested her hand on his arm and couldn't help but lightly rub it a little. Then she stood and before she left the room reminded him to take his pills and let her know when he was running low, they'd have to get him in to see Walt's doctor.

Once inside the clubhouse Russell knows the list of volunteer organizations is posted by the vending machines. The doors to the pool stand open and the vending machines hum against the wall near the doors. Two swimmers are still stroking their slow, molasses laps, he hears the sound of their pocking splashes.

On the list Russell quickly dismisses any volunteer needs for driving seniors or delivering groceries to AIDS patients. He looks twice at a call for bird count volunteers and ends up confused about how to know if a bird had already been counted and what kind of people he'd have to spend the day with. Russell moves to a bulletin board where a few index cards are pinned announcing kayaks and golf clubs for sale. So far he sees nothing. Flipping up one of the index cards, Russell finds a help wanted ad for school crossing guards, some shifts in the morning, some afternoons. He removes the ad and considers it, decides to call the number.

At an empty sales desk next to the vending machines, Russell sits down and punches the number into the phone. Spikes of light reflecting from the pool shoot up the walls, across the fronts of the machines. Russell winces as the light spikes over his chest, into his eyes. After several rings, Russell hears, "Buena Vista School District."

"Yes, who can I talk to about a crossing guard assignment," Russell asks.

"Have you been referred by the local police station?"

"No, there's an ad to call this number. I found it here at Las Haciendas."

"That's probably an old ad."

Russell wants this to be easy. "You don't have anything for right now then?" he asks, annoyed and wanting a simple answer, yes or no.

“You can call the police and see if they have anything. Do you have the number for the police?”

“No, give me that number.” Russell pulls open a drawer in the desk for a pen to write the number down. Just having the number will make him feel surer that he has attempted something Dora would approve of. From the desk Russell can see the swimmers still moving back and forth in the pool like shooting gallery targets. Three teenage boys in drenched trunks lounge at one side of the pool, their hair dripping through the plastic bands of the chaises they have tilted slightly backwards, enough to keep their stomachs uncreased and tanning evenly. They keep their eyes lidded against the sun and hold cans of cold soda pop against their foreheads. One of them gets up and twists himself off the edge of the pool like he has fainted into the water, trying to cover the other two with his splash.

For a while Russell watches the swimmers and the boys, giving himself a break before making his next call to the police station. He turns to look around at the furnishings and notes the clutches of sofas and coffee tables in the room arranged for conversation, ready for men to meet here and show off their golfswings, groups of people waiting for buses to take them on gambling trips to Reno.

With the phone in front of him, he thinks of giving the district office in Dillon a call, tell Jones and Pearson they wouldn't believe the goddammedest things he's looking at right this minute. This pool, the hacienda-styled clubhouse. He could tell them about his crazy neighbor yelling “Fire!” at him. They would ask how Dora is doing and he would let his voice spark up, he'd say that Dora's doing real good. *Gets herself out and walks with a group of ladies, and they go chugging off every morning, arms flapping and their backsides wagging down the road like an out of whack drill team.* Russell imagines telling them enough so that Jones sums it up in the

office to everyone afterward that moving to Petaluma has been really good for Dora and Russell, brought them closer together.

Russell picks up the phone but decides to call the police station number while he's at it. Immediately he's frustrated by the recorded message he gets, how he has to listen to all nine choices and still isn't sure which number will connect him to anyone he can ask about crossing guard assignments. The selections repeat and he listens again. He finally punches the zero, the only number that is not assigned to types of crimes to report or questions about fines and bail.

The zero gets him an operator who gets flustered over what extension she can connect him to for the information he wants. She asks him why he's called the police station and he tells her the school district told him to. He snugs the receiver into his shoulder and stares off at the pool where a group of older women, one man, assemble for a water aerobics class.

"I don't know how to help you," she tells him and pauses as if this is the time for Russell to put more of the puzzle together before she will go on. Fitting his fist into his hip, Russell meets her silence with his own, senses his interest thinning. She forwards him to another extension for a department she says might be able to help him. In the next moment Russell listens to another set of recorded messages he must choose to hear in English or Spanish before he can continue. Because he's lost interest, because he's gone as far as he's willing for now, he presses two for Spanish. The only word he guesses he knows is *emergencia*.

No doubt about it, Russell needs a cigarette. The left pocket of his shorts is stretched and baggy from the number of times he has fished around in it for his cigarettes and lighter over the last half hour he has been gone, the morning's pack still on the patio table. Russell

moves to the pool doors and watches the water aerobics students find places for their towels and the shoes they've worn to the pool, amazed that many of them must have walked to the pool in their swimsuits since he doesn't see them slipping out of any other clothes. He leans his shoulder into the narrow wall between a set of doors to the pool where the air conditioning wags the hair at the crown of his head. When anyone at the pool notices him watching he shifts his eyes to the tables the dining room staff is busy cloaking in white tablecloths for lunch. He will tell Dora he's found something about being a crossing guard for one of the schools around here. He'll ask her if she sees any problem with him having the car for a little over an hour. He's waiting for the police to get back to him about his shift. He doesn't know how long she'll believe him.

The water aerobics instructor arrives with her towel and boombox. She is nearly half the age of most members of her class, Russell is sure. He notices the swirls of sunscreen over her arms and shoulders not quite rubbed in, a different tan line from another suit that covers more of her. Russell watches her greet her students as they swivel slowly down the pool steps, getting used to the water. Those who are already in the pool bounce lightly on the balls of their feet, swaying their arms on the surface for balance, and when they lift a hand to wave at the instructor they have to step forward to catch themselves. He watches her place her towel near the pool and slip over the side into the water, then ask the class if they are ready to begin. He watches her move and kick against the water, noticing how taut the muscles in her arms and shoulders are, how strong her heart must beat, how thready his and Walt's pulses would be struggling against the water.

Russell thinks one of the staff members setting up the dining room might have a cigarette on him and he steps through the open pool doors. As he crosses to the dining

room on the other side of the pool, Russell keeps his eyes set on the one man he can see setting out hurricane lamps on the tables.

“Say,” Russell pats at his pockets to show their empty, “you got a cigarette?”

The man looks blankly at him until Russell pinches his thumb and forefinger together and taps them at his lips. The man shakes his head and raises his arm, sights down it to indicate a spot past the pool. Russell follows the direction, leaving the pool behind and finding the maintenance building and Luis’ cart parked in front of it.

Because the man from the dining room has sent him, Russell feels confident about stepping up to the door and walking in. He feels sure he will find a group of men around a grimy table smoking, the men letting nearly dirty laughs out on the breath left at the tops of their lungs for conversation. But inside the building there is more than Russell expected – a card game, and trumpety music coming from the radio of a car parked inside. The half dozen men only shift their eyes to him, then back to their cards. Luis, sitting with his back to Russell, holds two sixes and nothing else. Luis doesn’t turn to see who’s come in until he drops all but the sixes and pushes the cards over the table to the dealer. Luis takes a few seconds to look at him, recognize him, and assemble a smile, unsure if Russell is here on business. Russell comes closer to the table, nodding at each of the men whether they acknowledge him or not. Luis returns his attention to the cards flicked at him, shakes his head softly as he adds them to his hand.

“Poker, huh?” Russell motions to the crumpled bills and tumble of quarters between the men around the table.

“Si, póker,” Luis nods and props his arm over the back of his chair in defeat over the cards dealt him, takes a drag off his cigarette. Russell mimics having a cigarette and Luis

passes the pack and matches the men are sharing to him. Two of the men with bad cards, fold, and rock back in their chairs, start speaking together in Spanish. Music still plays on the radio of the car and one of the men sitting out the game sings along in falsetto Spanish that makes the rest of them laugh.

To Russell, a run of luck at cards with Walt had something to do with the last time Dora had truly been happy with him, her smile full and her attention clearly on him, and he nearly desperately wants to go back to that moment and start again. He thinks about taking this cigarette and going back to the condo, ready to be forgiven, but he is comfortable here for now. Even without a useful word of Spanish to use with the others who are waiting out the hand, Russell stays and smokes the cigarettes they offer. He says *Gracias* so much the men who are out of the game lean back in their chairs grinning, saying *Gracias* to each other over and over mocking him.

At the end of the hand, the men simultaneously get up from the table, one goes to the car to turn off the Spanish radio station. They all move toward the door and outside, back to their work. Something about their group movement, how they give in to expectation and duty signals Russell's sense of difference among them, how he is not included. He will go where he belongs now, where he will have to say he's been hard to live with, he's been hateful, and most of all he's been scared. Scared of the end that Dora seems to be preparing for. Scared that the place he lived so long in has no memory of him. Russell shoulders out the door behind the men, thinking he's something like these Mexican men, knowing the unlikelihood they're winning in this place, knowing they will surely lose in some ways. As Russell steps back onto the uphill path back to the condo, he sees Dora's walking group just breaking up in front of their building. He almost calls to Dora, ready to be introduced in her

group, ready to give in. His steps come faster and he keeps looking up to see where she is now, if she can see him. He draws on the last inch of the cigarette he is smoking and tosses it away beneath the bushes, and then cautiously attends to the thump of his heart against his chest, hoping he has beats enough left to reach her.

The Boy Who Cries Too Much

As the doors and windows in the neighborhood opened in the first weeks of warm weather, the sound of the boy crying gnatted in the ears of the mothers. It vaguely alarmed them, like foreign language radio playing in a stranger's driveway. As the boy cried, the mothers folded laundry or put pots on the stove and tilted their heads toward a window, gauging his need for rescue, his hurt. As the boy cried in the hot afternoon, phones rang in houses, deliveries were made, some televisions were turned up.

The mothers listening knew instantly it was the red-haired boy and not any of their own sons. It was the boy they referred to as the boy who cries too much when they met on sidewalks in the neighborhood and talked about the kids who used the street to race their remote control cars or rode their bicycles past driveways without looking. They knew which boys on the street were small enough to cry over dropped ice cream cones, toys taken away, mothers leaving children with babysitters, and this boy was not one of them. The boy, nine or ten years old, lived in the middle house on the block. He lived in the house where his father had cut down the large trees at the street in front of the house because the leaves were too much to clean up in the autumn. Now the house looked weak and exposed. After the boy cried a few minutes, the mothers straightened their necks and took their folded clothes to drawers, turned the water on in their sinks to rinse crumbs down the drain.

The boy was crying over another boy spraying him with his water gun after he had asked to shoot the water gun just once, trusted that boy at his cross-his-heart word he would let him shoot it, but then the water came in pumping blasts at his face. The boy cried hard with his hands poised helplessly in the air and his hair dripping into his eyes. The other boy

ran from the crying boy, his yellow gun chugging in the air, his smooth, bare torso brown as a paper bag. As the boy dripped on the lawn of a neighbor's house, girls going to the corner grocery walked wide around him, off the sidewalk, onto the strip of grass then back onto the walk, their eyes registering his red hair in stalactites on his forehead. His nose dripped clear, and creases beneath his pale nipples arched in frowns over his round, pinkish belly.

The boy finally slap-slapped his feet along the sidewalk to go home. He stumbled on the squares of concrete that had tilted from the trees heaving up the squares, water-witching their roots to the front lawns. The Mother May I voices of children he passed as he cried his way home grew louder as he passed. His mother with the hose on the lawn turned her back as he stepped onto the grass, the water spraying up and down in waves like impatient foot-tapping and her chin at her shoulder telling him go inside and take a timeout. The boy, hair as red as his mother's, stood behind her tugging at the back of her blouse, crying, *Mother!* *Mother!*

By midsummer, the boy played alone, wandering into yards of neighbors away at work or on vacation. Other children watched him open fence gates and go inside. Some walked quietly down the driveways and peeked through hedges and fence-slats to see if the boy was mowing the lawn or collecting the trash cans for a summer job. But the boy always chose a backyard with a tree he could climb and he would be sitting in the tree where the others couldn't see him. The children dared to come through the gates themselves to look for him. He watched them look and was disappointed when they gave up too soon.

One day he climbed the apple tree in a yard near the end of the street, and plucked green, pingpong ball-sized apples into the bowl he made of his t-shirt and waited for the children to look for him. After a while two boys at the gate dared each other to find the boy,

to go into the yard without knowing who lived there and who might even be at home. When the boys invented other plans of games to play and began to leave, the boy lobbed an apple at them. The apple thunked and skittered down the driveway after them. They came back to the gate and looked into the tree, locating the smiling boy. One left to tell others, and one stayed to guard the boy from getting down.

Children bobbed like pogosticks around the trunk of the apple tree in the yard farther from their own than their mothers wanted them to go. The boy swung his legs beneath the limb where he sat and bounced the tree into a shaky dance. He stripped the clumps of the hard little apples on the tree branches above him and bombed the children with them, aiming at the upturned faces, the gaps of their missing front teeth.

The people who lived in the house didn't know the children played in their yard. When they came home in the evening, there was a spray of the small split and stepped-on apples scattered in the driveway. They knew there were children in the yard during the day. They talked about putting a lock on the gate.

Several days after the people found the apples and added a No Trespassing sign to the gate, the man pulled into the driveway in the afternoon, triggering a race of children out of the yard. Stepping out of the car, he told the running children not to play at the back of his house as they scuttled and dodged by him. He thought of the pruners and other sharp tools in the shed that could hurt them. Parents who could blame him. He wondered if the vegetable garden had been trampled. When he went into the yard, the boy who cried too much was still in the tree. He walked through the garden in his work shoes, checked on the tomatoes, the beans, the basil. The boy watched him and kept his legs from swinging. He

listened for the man to leave the yard. For the car to start up again. But the man went in the house and stayed.

The boy held still for hours. The sound of cars slowing on the street, car doors clicking open and shut, flooded the boys fears and convinced him he would have to stay in the tree until dark, until everyone was home and had gone to bed. Another car pulled into the driveway of the house, the hard apples crunching under the tires. The boy heard his mother bugle his name to come home. A moment later his father went to the street and whistled the three-note whistle that meant Get Home Now.

The boy started to slide down the trunk of the tree, caught his foot in the notch of a branch and thudded hard in the cool earth skirting the tree. His arm was broken just above his wrist. At the bottom of the tree he squatted in a ball, held his arm against his chest and began a shrill crying sound, sobbing harder and harder as the light dimmed. At first the man and woman inside the house thought nothing of the boy crying, used to the noise of children for weeks now, sure that mothers sped to the aid of their children, collected them before too long, before dark.

The father whistled again. Then the boy wailed as if the sound of the whistle harpooned his heart. In their living room, the man and woman put their wine glasses down and went stocking-footed to a window at the back of the house. They rushed out a back door to help the boy up, but cautiously and awkwardly like they had been warned about wounded children. The woman helped him up and moved him toward the driveway where the whistling father might spot him, even know him, and walk him the rest of the way home.

At the end of the driveway, the boy stood under the woman whose palms lightly capped his shoulders. He held his arm straight against his side. He didn't take a step away

from her, but rounded his back into her and hollowed her out so she sheltered him. She felt his wails vibrate in her jawbone. She looked quickly up the street for someone coming and then back at the boy for help in moving him a direction he knew. His chin bled a noodle of blood down his neck. The tears in his swollen eyes sloshed side to side when the woman asked if he could walk home. The boy's chin quivered in rabbity, chewing movements, motorized by sobs. When the woman craned her urgent face near his, the boy fixed his watery eyes to the side and clouded them over with tears and the clear ink of sorrow. He sobbed the word "I" over and over, in hiccupy catches, and said nothing in the end.

When the whistle came again, closer, the boy shifted his eyes ahead. The wet shine of tears bibbed his cheeks, and he looked past the woman to a future moment of his father standing drooped in a doorway. The father who wished for a boy who could come to his whistle healed, not a fool. The boy wanted to cry beneath the woman until he was whole, he wanted to swing his legs from a perch on her shoulders and toss fists of green apples at his mother, his father, and then say he was sorry. He wanted the woman to look at his hurt arm and say she was sorry, so sorry for him.

The Table by the Window

I. The Alexander Party

They wait for their server to come to the table and take their order. The table by the window where they celebrated three anniversaries before they ended their marriage two years ago. Here again now after the wedding of a friend, they stare out the window at the Golden Gate Bridge, their knees tucked from touching beneath the table. Their heads aimed so dearly together that others in the restaurant assume they are a couple. On her cell phone, inside her purse, Peter is listening. Peter, the man she met two weeks after her divorce and moved in with a month later. He has been listening since she thought she ended their call in the parking lot and dropped her phone inside her purse. He has listened to her shuffle her jacket on, click things open and closed inside her purse. Listened to her prepare to meet her ex-husband Andrew, thinking Peter has hung up and is back in the kitchen sanding a cabinet door by now. But the sound of her heels tock-tocking across the parking lot has carried him to a secret love, craving more sounds of her, like her skirt brushing her legs, or the loping sound her jewelry makes against her breastbone when he can hear it. Just moments ago he heard her say “Can’t believe we’re here again,” either to herself or as she met Andrew at the restaurant door. And now, while he thinks they are looking over the menus, Peter listens to them not talking. He hears them silently blame each other for how they can’t come to this restaurant in love like they used to be, how they cannot mystify this restaurant’s oysters as the aphrodisiacs that crazed them for two, three days at a time when they used to meet here for dinner. Peter knows this part of the story of them, he has known it almost two years. She

told him everything after Peter suggested having dinner at this restaurant and she said she couldn't, and she said the reason was that it was her and Andrew's place.

Peter presses the phone into his ear harder wondering if they are saying anything, if she's put her purse on the floor where their words will not reach him. A cab outside their apartment honks and Peter activates the mute feature on his cell phone so the cab, or a dog barking, or their own phone in the apartment ringing won't give him away in her purse. And again he presses the phone hard into his ear to listen. At last the server comes to the table to recite the evening specials and Peter hears, "...bass...caper and cream sauce..." and comes to believe that he and her purse are cradled in her lap where he clearly hears her ask for oysters, where he decides to wait until he hears his name come up as it should there in her and Andrew's restaurant.

There is a part of their story that Peter doesn't know, that Janet has kept from him. Janet and Andrew Alexander divorced shortly after they accidentally hit a child riding a bicycle in Lincoln City, Oregon. That was the incident to which they each tracked the ending, where they discovered the shallow waters of one another, neither one choosing to be heroic or capable at that moment. They had driven from San Francisco that day in Andrew's new convertible, in a hurry to take a parking space they saw in front of a gallery and get to the beach with a picnic and new box kite. The boy on his bicycle had launched off the sidewalk into the parking space, the boy too small for Andrew or Janet to see him from their low seats in the convertible over the parked SUVs. The front wheel of the bicycle ricocheted off the car's fender and shot the boy back onto the sidewalk. Janet heard the thunk of his head on the pavement, then the metal skitter of the bicycle, and she curled up on the seat

and couldn't look. Accidents like this happen. Cars and kids overrun with summer, tourists at the wheel taking long looks away from the road, driving too fast, not expecting the regular traffic of neighborhoods in the towns they drive through.

Still curled, Janet couldn't make herself get out of the car to help the boy, not with the blood she thought must be soaking his hair, the collar of his t-shirt. Andrew, with the responsibility of being the driver, with a history of being a boy headlong in summer, made himself get out of the car and around to the boy, crouching down and down until he knelt at the curb. His hand going out to the boy's knee, Andrew pleading oh Jesus, oh Jesus.

Tourists on the sidewalk shouted to call 911, a man checked the boy's pulse, watched his chest for breath. And once the ambulance arrived and the boy was tucked inside, still alive, and the police were questioning Andrew. Janet rested her head on the passenger door, bleated of belief in him. How puny he seemed. How little he could really do in a situation like this. A man, a woman can give up on love for no more reason than the woman doesn't rise to help, the man begs a boy to stay alive.

Janet watched Andrew answering questions about what happened and what didn't happen. Now that she knew the boy was receiving help, that he would likely be fine, she felt hollowed where the accident, the hurt boy, had replaced her anticipation of the beach, of the undamaged day she had wanted. The prosciutto-wrapped figs, a surprise for Andrew, would be wasted. Even the wind too weak now for kite-flying. There was nothing to tell the police, she thought, other than what cowards they were, she and Andrew.

They drove on in silence to Portland before they knew if the boy had regained consciousness. Before they could meet the boy's father driving like a madman from Tacoma to see his son, the man who might blame them. As they drove, they listened to the radio to

cover the loss, their last moment of believing the myth of themselves, their story paling to a thinness matched by the pale seaside sky over Lincoln City, Oregon.

It is after the server arrives with the oysters that Peter hears his name. It comes in an unexpected way. It starts with Janet stating, “You pierced it, didn’t you.” Then Peter thinks she must have leaned over the table closer to say, “Your foreskin, you pierced it. You used to talk about doing it, and I’m sure I could hear the rings jingling together when you walked up. How many?” Peter thinks Andrew answers “two” and after that he hears his name when Janet says, “It’s Peter,” and then she hums in amusement, “Peter. That’s funny, don’t you think? I mean what we’re talking about and then Peter’s name is Peter.” And then Andrew asks something Peter can’t hear and Janet answers by saying, “Circumcised.”

The heavy flatware of good restaurants clinks on plates around them. They toss the oysters at the back of their throats, the shells poised like sacraments at their lips, and Janet and Andrew let the sounds of the dining room replace conversation. They gaze at the floral arrangements around the restaurant and silently judge them by the flowers they remember there. Both of them sense the attentiveness of their server across the dining room and privately pose for him. When they return their looks to the table, they keep their heads bowed, they tuck their feet tighter beneath their chairs, and when their knees brush they both say “Sorry” at the same time then take long, separate looks at the bay out the window.

Janet presses her finger on the glass and says, “Look at those people under the canopy, it’s like that Rembrandt painting, the Boating Party one.”

Peter yells into his muted cell phone, “That’s Renoir! and it’s The *Luncheon* of the Boating Party, not The Boating Party!”

“Renoir,” Peter hears Andrew say and shifts a momentary allegiance to him, to men and their attention to detail. And when he hears Janet ask, “Did you see it when the exhibit was here? Did I see it with *you?*” Peter is at first relieved when Andrew answers, “Must have been circumcised Peter,” and then he feels compared.

Behind them a man arrives at the piano and circles his cupped hands over the keys like birds indecisive about landing. He drifts them down and lightly plays. For the piano to begin it must be close to six in the evening they think. Peter thinks. More plates are set in front of them and a peppermill crackles. Almost five, six years ago for Janet and Andrew and this evening would have been one they finished with calculated calls from their separate cars, Andrew begging her to tell him what he’d ordered at dinner, what could he have eaten to be so deranged for her. Andrew asking if she would please have mercy and let him in if he drove over now. She was merciful every call.

After the divorce, after Janet met Peter and moved into his apartment, invitations for Janet and Andrew to friends’ weddings kept arriving at Andrew’s address. Andrew would call to tell her about them, leaving messages on the answering machine that Peter sometimes listened to more than once. Janet marked the calendar in the kitchen with the dates, posting them so they were easy for Peter to see. As a weekend wedding approached Janet would tell Peter she would go to the weddings to support her friends and she’d only stay an hour or two. He could stay and work on the kitchen like he wanted to.

She went to a half dozen weddings during the first year of her divorce from Andrew. After each ceremony Andrew walked Janet to her car, saying he wanted to see if she was still driving the Volvo. He would stand outside the car talking long enough that she'd nod him toward the passenger seat. After he'd taken nearly an hour talking, the two of them finally moved to the back of the car. Each time she watched his hands peck a condom from its wrapper and he'd turn away from her on the seat to nervously roll it on, as if he couldn't control the destiny of his hands doing this, his face earnest in apology, that he meant no dishonor to Peter, it wouldn't take long.

Into this second year of their divorce, it had taken six months before another invitation arrived, and when Andrew called Janet said she couldn't go. They could have dinner, Andrew suggested, just dinner after the wedding. She could choose the restaurant. It was only one wedding, it had been a long time, he said.

The restaurant she chose was *their* restaurant, and as long as the wedding was in the city she said they could go to dinner directly after the ceremony, separate cars. It would be good to see how the table by the window felt to her now. There were only two or three friends who had a chance of having a wedding before Andrew would stop calling, and she would begin to wonder how she could go to this restaurant with him, without him, when she would ever see him again. When they divorced, Janet went two weeks and then straight for Peter. At first she thought Peter was noble not to object to her going to the weddings in the first year, even knowing Andrew would be there. He had always asked her how it was seeing him when she came back in the door. When she told Peter she was going to this wedding, he'd asked how many more friends she expected to support.

As far as she knows Andrew isn't seeing anyone, though now that she's detected his piercing she wonders who he has done it for. She wonders what piercings they have decided on between them. As she lifts another oyster to her lips, she thinks of the shell and the quick dash of the oyster into her mouth as a kind of ritual she shares with Andrew. She hopes he remembers their oysters, whoever he must be seeing.

Janet shifts her thoughts, imagines Peter back at the apartment, taking a moment to check through her jewelry on the dresser, see if she'd gone to the wedding without the ring he gave her. She knew he'd done that before. He told her he had, the night he said he didn't see why she was gone so long to these weddings, what happened to the hour or two?

Peter isn't sure he should worry about her dinners with Andrew. A man, a woman can endure far more. He doesn't yet know they can collapse on much less. Still listening, he gets up and wanders the apartment. At a window he watches cars chain in both directions across the Golden Gate. He extends his arm and points the cell phone toward the restaurant only blocks away in the marina where they sit, his gesture a salute to them for holding on to feelings for each other he can't thin out. He switches the phone off and lets it slide over the top of the cabinet he installed this afternoon. He brings one hand to his face and sniffs his fingers, a habit he knows Janet disapproves of. He feels a bloom of shame he likes, remembers the luscious rhythm of her heels across the parking lot. He isn't sure that it is Janet he loves, or that he loves her leaving him, the ceremony she goes through to leave him for these weddings. One or the other is less true each time she goes. He can't believe that this is his life for two years now. He can't believe she doesn't know Renoir.

II. *Seeks Same*

If Petra hadn't left Evie so suddenly two weeks ago – leaving for someone Petra only identified as *The Director of the Art Department* – Evie wouldn't be waiting here at this restaurant now for a woman who had answered her personal ad. In fact, Evie wouldn't even have placed a personal ad with Woman2Woman dating service, would not have taken a step so direct, so desperate she thought, before Petra left. She had met and loved only two women and believed that love entered her life organically from attending receptions or joining associations where people like Petra gathered out of a passion for art or compassion for an AIDS or other cause. And for Evie the first stirring of attraction arose when she happened to catch the posture of absorption or an eyebrow raised before a painting, the stilt-like shape of a woman's slender hand holding a champagne flute. An introduction, then a comment or two shared about the work of artists had led to appointments for coffee, then dinner, then more art exhibits, more dinners. Now, here in this restaurant, Evie waits for a woman who called herself Karen in the message left for Evie at the service. She checks her nails – you can determine so much about a person from their nails, their hands – and recounts the message she heard from this stranger, how she is to meet her at the restaurant in the marina, and to bring along an item of significance to her, something that will help Karen see right away if their *energies* are compatible.

The item of significance Evie decided to bring to the restaurant is a dressmaker's pin with a tiny Renoir painting of two young girls on the head of it. Her father had brought the pin back from France for her when she was twelve, and she thought it was the perfect answer to Karen's request. Evie had practiced what she would say about it, how the painting

on the pin was “Jeune Filles” – two young girls lounging on the bank of a river – and that her father had given it to her in the summer of Evie’s first crush on a neighbor. At twelve, she had taken her father’s gift as subtle approval of her love for the girl who always called Evie’s father Mr. Railing though she knew their name was Bannister. Evie is amazed how eager she is to tell this story of her pin to a woman she has never met. It is six o’clock and she leans toward the entrance to the restaurant, ready to meet a woman she knows she can’t come to love so much as she loves Petra.

When Evie arrived, ten minutes early, she had asked for the table by the window, a good table, and then told the waiter there would be another person joining her who would ask for the Moonsilver party. Evie had given herself the name Diana Moonsilver in her return message to Karen, and regrettably she had included, *We’ll have a table by the window where the light of the full moon will silver the table.* After placing her ad she’d spent the rest of the week asking people she worked with to call her Diana so she could get used to answering to the name. During her department meeting she told the two young marketers she’d hired that she was thinking she needed a more mature name than Evie since she was going to be forty soon and didn’t Diana sound more dignified? Evie shifts the pin on the table closer to her then leans it against the vase of freesia and checks her watch. She wonders if Karen has dialed the service during the week and replayed the message for her friends so they could hear how ridiculous Evie sounded.

Evie is sure the reservation is for six o’clock. In this mid-winter evening the moon is already mid-sky and bright. She can see boats coming and going in the bay, moonlight wavering across the decks. Evie watches the traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge and thinks of Petra going home across the bridge where she lives now in Sausalito. Petra driving the car

that had been waiting for her in the street below their apartment building less than a month ago, the night she told Evie she was leaving. Evie remembers the sound of a hammer in the apartment next door as she watched Petra walk down the hallway with her coat over her arm, not looking back, her black hair tied in a knot that bounced against her neck as she walked to the elevator. A clock softly chimes from another room in the restaurant, and a man in black tie strides in and sits at the piano to play. If Petra knew she was doing this – meeting a woman from a personal ad, calling herself Diana – Petra would take another emotional step away, disbelieving she could have lived six years with someone who could take a chance on meeting women this way. Though Petra would like the name Diana, Evie thought.

Karen is late. Easy in this city to be late, the traffic. Evie decides to hold off worrying that Karen won't come, wait another fifteen minutes. The server comes to the table and asks if she is still waiting for the rest of her party, and would she like a drink. Evie orders a glass of wine she has always ordered, to celebrate the six years of anniversaries, promotions, new furniture she and Petra had chosen for the loft they bought together. At the door of the restaurant a woman enters and Evie watches to see if she looks around the restaurant for her. The woman is shorter than Evie had thought to imagine and when a man steps into the restaurant and lightly presses his hand at the woman's back, Evie is surprised at her relief that she is not Karen. The woman she has imagined as Karen is taller, she realizes, though Evie has tried not to want anything more than someone she would call *genuine* and though she has hoped for green eyes, dark hair, she's worried most about how she might react if Karen is heavy or poorly dressed. The Woman2Woman service is mostly utilized by business

women, Evie's friends had told her, upscale women who are either new to the city or have been "downsized in the relationship department" they said to encourage Evie.

The man playing the piano tilts his head as he plays a classical version of a popular song. Evie thinks it's either Joni Mitchell or Judy Collins. She thinks that without the piano and the music, someone just looking at the pianist's face would think he was enduring a pain at his temple, how his eyes lid over, his head just slightly tilted, and then his brows shoot up.

"Excuse me." A woman's hand is on Evie's chair, a woman who has come from another table behind her, from another room in the restaurant. "Are you waiting for Karen?"

Evie nods and doesn't know what to expect next. She feels immediately ready to accept an excuse for Karen not coming to dinner. She has been bowing to the schedules, the sudden changes in plans, the whims of other women – Petra and her cadre of admirers, the artists Petra represents, the gallery owners Petra charms – for so long she is conditioned to shift her expectations. "I *am* waiting for someone named Karen," she says and then laughs, "I don't even know her last name." Evie wants a moment to think about why she doesn't know a last name, especially since she's taken time since she received a reply to her ad to imagine the look of *Karen and Diana* written on Christmas cards, or the sound of her own friends' voices in their apartments going to the phone as they say, *Let's call Karen and Diana*. But Evie is waiting for the next instruction to come from this woman. What she should do. This woman who is nice looking, who wears a gold band with three diamonds, whose hand on the table is freckled and smaller than Petra's. Who might be Karen, who might not be.

"She called and asked me to find you." The woman holds up her cell phone for Evie to see as weak proof she has received a call. "She'll leave a message at the number and explain."

Whoever this woman is doesn't matter to Evie. She leaves it up to the woman to excuse herself but she is still there beside her, close. Evie grants herself permission to be silent for the reason that it is too soon for Evie to care about anyone else. At this moment Evie feels ridiculous for being stood up, for bringing her Renoir pin, for placing her ad though she can excuse herself for taking a chance. *One of the problems with you Evie is how afraid you are to take chances, risks*, this was one of the reasons Petra gave her for wanting to leave, a trait not found in her Art Director. Evie's real problem is that she loves Petra. She wants Petra not because she's gone now, or because it is simpler to stay in a love, a practiced life, but because her hair slips into her eyes by afternoon, and because she wears her grandmother's scarf over her head like Petra remembers from her childhood in Portugal, and because some days she's beautiful enough that people turn from conversations or from walking by to look at her, but mostly right now for how Evie knows Petra will run her tongue over her lip on foggy mornings and say to whoever is near that the city tastes like silver. There are so many approaches and ways to come to love that it seems wrong to Evie that a route out should be so straight and direct. It's what she dislikes most about love, it's certainty to unbalance you in a single moment after so long believing.

"Did you bring this?" The woman picks up Evie's pin and peers at it through the magnifying lens on the case. When Evie doesn't answer, the woman looks closer. "It's a Renoir," she says and Evie nods. She watches the woman turn the case over in her palm to see if there is a label identifying the painting, and Evie doesn't offer its name. She watches the woman read the gift label still affixed to the case on which her father had written, *Pour Evie*. And when the woman sets the case back on the table and says, *Evie*, says it like she would like to excuse herself, Evie doesn't move, does nothing.

“Evie,” the woman says again.

Evie sits without moving, glances sideways at the woman’s arm slowly retreating from setting the pin on the table. Evie sees the woman's hand at the edge of the table, her fingers pressing hard enough to flush her clear nails with blood. And the woman says her name again, “Evie.”

Petra, Evie follows the sound of her own name silently with this echo. Which is why the days that follow will seem easier. Because this is the name there is for her, that still finishes the sound of her own name spoken, and none other.

III. After the Museum

When Nicholas was this boy’s age, nearly ten years old, Amelia thinks, he would take a bus to the art museum on a Saturday to study the methods, the brushstrokes, the use of light in the works on exhibit on his own. After a visit to the museum in autumn when he was eleven, he announced that he and Hopper painted exactly alike and by the end of the next week he had painted a night scene of a diner in Potrero Hill that she recognized from the route she drove him to school and titled it *Nighthawks II*. This boy here with her in the restaurant, this boy who is the youngest son of a widower she is seeing, who is spending the day with her so she and the man can see how she feels about raising another son, does not paint. He bugles through the rolled program he was given at the art museum and brought with him into the restaurant from the car. She reaches gently for the program to signal Kevin to put it down.

“So what do you think of the Renoir paintings we saw today?”

Clearly Kevin is unprepared to talk about the paintings, not in a habit of having any comment solicited from him about something he has not chosen to see. He rolls his program tighter and watches out the restaurant window as fog swarms the deck of the Golden Gate Bridge, the towers fading in and out of view.

“The artist we saw, Pierre-Auguste Renoir. What did you think?”

“Pee-Air. I think that’s funny. Like you can pee air.”

She waits a moment, thinks how she would like to draw something out of this boy that can be dear to her. “Which painting was your favorite? Look in the program. There are pictures of some of his paintings. Which one of those do you like best?”

Kevin unrolls the program and chooses a painting from the first page. “This one. It looks like they have skateboards or something.”

“That painting is Le Moulin de la Galette. Those are benches they are sitting on. Those are just the backs of the benches that look like skateboards.”

Kevin rolls the program up again.

“Do you like art?” she asks him, and then presses her hand against his shin under the table, “Please don’t kick the table, Kevin.”

“I like Pee Air.”

The server arrives with the soup she has ordered for the two of them and asks if there will be anything else.

“What *is* this.” Kevin frowns into his bowl.

“French onion. I thought it would be nice, something to go along with the French artist and paintings we went to see.”

“How about French *fries*. Don’t they have hamburgers here?” Kevin plops his spoon into his bowl and dredges up a pile of onions. He doesn’t understand why his father insisted he go with Amelia today, there are better things to do.

“You should dip your spoon away from you. It’s not hard.”

“I didn’t say it was hard.”

“You can remember the proper way to eat soup if you think of this rhyme— *As sailing ships go out to sea, I dip my spoon away from me*. I used to tell my son that.”

“Is that for babies or something?”

“Nicholas, please *stop* kicking the table.”

“I’m not Nicholas.”

Nearly a year of reasoning, plotting the events and sorting through years of mistakes she thought had led to Nicholas’ problems made Amelia defensive when asked about her son. The true story is simpler. Nicholas spray-painted cars at thirteen, stole money from the art supply store where he worked at sixteen, and had been arrested for narcotics possession the week before Amelia called the agency that would send two men in the night as Nicholas slept and wrestle him away to a private boy’s camp, a *school* for troubled teens they called it. A place he would be watched, disciplined, fenced in, forced to talk to counselors for the next six months until he turned eighteen. Then she would have done everything she could to help him.

The last time she saw him he was writhing between the men who held his arms and legs as they took him from his room. Nicholas whipping his half-naked body between them. She can’t remember what he was yelling, only that he slammed his head against the wall as they

moved him through the narrow hallway and knocked loose the last school photo she had of him, probably eighth grade. The boy in that photo is who she imagines when she says, “my son.” No one older. No one else. Not Kevin, though she’s tried to think of herself spending other days with him and his father as a family. Nicholas returning for holidays or – if things got better – to stay. Other pictures in a hallway of another house, the three or four of them. Starting from the beginning of her own son she thinks of Nicholas as a baby, the tiny pinenut-like blister on his upper lip from nursing, his panicky need for her those nights and the pink machines of his cheeks working at her breast until he drowsed. She doesn’t want him back that way, that helpless. She wants to see him calm and gentle again, as capable of surrender as children are those moments when their eyelashes barely beat against sleep.

“Why’s he playing the piano in here?” Kevin’s question sirens out.

Amelia looks quickly to see if anyone has turned, disapproving of his manners. The man playing the piano cocks his head toward her, a slight wince pinching his eyes closed, and then he bends back to his music. “In restaurants like this they hire someone to play in the evenings.” Then checking her watch, “Your father will wonder what’s happened to us.”

“Do I have to finish this?” The soup, hardly touched. Kevin teeters the handle of his spoon on the edge of the bowl, lifting and splatting the bottom of the spoon against the thick layer of onion and cheese. Amelia turns in her chair to look out over the restaurant, ready to signal for the check, ready to end this day. She had told Kevin’s father about Nicholas, how she had sent him away. Couldn’t she have told the men to stop, she asked him, as if he knew, as if he could say the fact of a son and a mother made betrayal impossible. And even though she believed he should have questioned then how she could be

trusted with another boy, still he wanted to know if she would try, take Kevin somewhere she wanted, spend some time the two of them.

The server arrives with the check and she turns back to the table to look over the total. She sends the agency a thousand dollars a month. To keep Nicholas shaved, to keep him in a t-shirt with the agency's name printed on it, to keep him from lying more and more about the needles stashed in the pleats of the umbrellas tilted together in the hall tree at her front door. The agency check when she signs it doesn't seem any harder to pay than the electric bill. The photo sent after Nicholas had been assigned a building, a room, a *troop* with five other boys, showed him part-smiling, part weary, she thought. The whitish scar-dots at the end of his eyebrow where he had worn a gold bar pierced through stood out empty in the photo, like punctuation – a colon – followed by the deep brown pool of anger in his eye below.

“Is my dad going to marry you?”

Amelia looks mutely at Kevin. He swings his foot like a pendulum, the leather of his good shoes thumping against the leg of his chair then against the leg of the table. She notices how the soup in his bowl jumps with each strike. Her reflection in the window of the restaurant when she looks is speckled with a few drops of rain that has just begun. She thinks if she blinks she could make them run like tears.

“Is that all you're going to eat?”

Kevin wrinkles his nose at his soup. When he sees her reach for her purse and coat he feels satisfied that he won't be asked to finish. After she leaves money for the bill and they step outside the restaurant, Kevin asks again, “So, is he? Because I don't really need another mother.”

“Stand right here.” Amelia presses his arms against his sides, a little too hard, she thinks as she steps away from him. “I have to call your father.” And though she leaves him on the steps of the restaurant, the rain beginning to soak the shoulders of his small suit jacket, the jacket he constantly swung in a circle on the end of his finger around the museum, she doesn’t turn to tell him to go back inside. She doesn’t see his hair flatten and then drip from the ends onto his collar. She takes a few steps away from him until she is standing beneath the restaurant awning, and she hurries her cell phone out of her purse. When Kevin’s father answers she tells him she is bringing Kevin home and she just wants to drop him off. Not come in. Not stay. Just look for her car, she tells him, and she’ll watch to make sure Kevin gets inside.

“What did he do?” His question catches her, confuses her a little, because it seems he should be asking what she has done wrong. And looking back at Kevin, blinking the rain out of his eyes, standing obediently in the rain where she told him to stand, she understands she will take him home, leave them to the chances of a father and a son.

Photographing Mama

Inside the Space Age Pavilion hundreds of tiny cars race on miniature freeway clover-leaves, and my brother points at different cars identifying them, '61 Fairlane, '62 T-Bird, '60 Corvette. "Everyone in the future will be driving old cars," he says. My father nods to his son's excited talk and lowers me to the ground, tired of carrying me all morning straddled over his shoulders. I am six and carry a Brownie camera on a strap around my neck so that I can bring pictures of the Seattle World's Fair home to the first grade. The shutter snaps against my father's ear when he leans me over his head, and as soon as I feel my feet on the ground I begin to complain that he has made me waste a picture even though I have taken several of my mother already today, the same picture over and over of her holding a paper plate over her head in the Seattle rain.

Hardly a single exhibit in the Space Age Pavilion meets my eye-level – not the rocket that launches and lands on the moon, not the weather-spying Sputniks circling in the talk between my father and brother as we walk from window to window – and so I scuff my shoes along, pouting for lunch. My mother walks beside me, her hand against my back, keeping touch with me as promise for lunch soon. Every few steps she taps patience into my spine, and seems to understand that it is a lot to lose my high queen's seat on my father's shoulders one moment where I wanted to snatch off every man's hat and too much in the next to be asked to pick up my feet. When we have walked all through the Space Age, my mother stops us at the exit door pointing out a route through the puddles to the parking lot. "There's the car right through there," she says, and it seems we'll be going until my father says he wants to check up on what cars Henry Ford has brought to the Fair. The two of

them argue about leaving, Mama needs her pills, their words snap above me like the wires I've seen sparking together in the Science Pavilion so that four people can talk on the phone at the same time, and I circle my arms around my mother's hips and swing around on her as if she were the backyard apricot tree at home.

A man with a hook at the end of his arm comes sweeping out of the doorway where we stand, and when he tries to claw his jacket over his head his hook clips me in the forehead. I lose my grip on my mother's legs and plunk down at her side like a windfall apricot and touch at the goose-egg beginning to hatch over my eye. The man stoops to tell me so sorry, so sorry, and I push out tears to somehow shame him for his hook, how it makes him robot-like, how robots and rockets and radio waves have kept me from lunch so long already.

"She's just tired," my mother says to the man, "she'll be all right." My crying rings louder against the concrete walls inside the pavilion, and when I feel a hard stare from a Fair-goer I lean up against my mother's legs, my throat clotted with discomfort. Her cool hand cups across my forehead, and then she switches hands against my face, touches the backs of them across so that I see the bones rise inside her skin, a fan of spines, before she lightly presses them above my eyes. I feel her knuckles like iced pebbles, her hands are always cool like this. My Mama's hands now pull me behind her and I watch the hookarm man through her legs walk away until he is a small overcoat cricket hopping the puddles further and further.

"We'll go in a while," my father says. "There's just a few more things to see." His hand spreads heavy over the top of my head.

"Isn't there tomorrow?" Mama asks. "She's been going all day, and all of us are tired."

“Maneuvers tomorrow.”

“On Sunday?”

“Any day the Army wants.” My father's voice goes deep like he's talking from the bottom of a swimming pool. “Jesus, Jo, why do you think we're even here? You think the Cubans are going to take the weekend off so we can take our time at the World's Fair??

His hand shoots through his hair and knots itself at the back of his head, and it feels as if I am caught between Mama and him in a space neither of them can clearly see. In the doorway my brother reaches his toe out into the rain and taps the edge of a wide puddle.

On my shoulders now Mama's hands flutter, her fingers thrumming the words she holds in. Then pulling coins from his pocket my father squats just my size to let me choose the pennies out of his palm for me to toss into the Fountain of Peace I can see sending up sprays of water into a huge pool from where I stand. “Looks like three wishes to me,” he says. I pick the pennies from the nest of his thick woody fingers and as he stands he points in the direction of a bench at the pool's end, a white bench covered by an clam-shell alcove, and he tells my brother and me to wait there until he and Mama get back with hot dogs. With my pennies closed in my fist I run to make my wishes, knowing my father will bring Mama back to the fountain as soon as she takes her pill and washes her face clean of Cubans.

“If we have to leave, it's your fault,” my brother says, and thunks back against the sparkle-white inside of the clam shell.

I pretend to ignore him and go to the edge of the pool. There I stand with my head back, eyes shut tight, pressing my first wish to heaven: *I wish my father would piggyback Mama*

like he did last 4th of July, them laughing, him losing his step until both knees jabbed down into the grass.

Then I toss my first penny as far into the fountain as I can.

Second wish, I can't think. My eyes squeeze tighter: *I wish there was no Cuba.* On the throw my second penny slips and plunks only a few feet away from me. I'm not sure if this means the wish will not come true, flubbing the toss. For my third wish I must be careful, throw my penny clear to the center where most of the coins are collected in an underwater island of copper and silver. I shut my eyes tighter than ever and raise my face to the misty rain that is falling, showing heaven how much this wish means.

“How about a swan dive?” A man's voice sounds in my ear, close and friendly as the dentist. I back away from him, pick a spot where I can get back to concentrating on my wish. “A backflip would be easy, and you could land straight up on your feet.” The man again, talking with his lips and tongue nearly washing inside my ear, and I clench my penny tighter in my fist, unsure if he is after it to wish something for himself.

When I look for help my brother is gone from the bench and I can't see him anywhere close for me to call in case this man starts prying my fingers back. There is no one and the rain starts to fall harder and sends all the people inside the buildings at the end of the fountain. “You should come sit inside the shell here, you'll get wet. You don't want to get wet, do you?”

“Maybe.”

“Your mother wouldn't like it if you got your clothes soaked.”

This man knows my mother. “I'm not going to,” I say. My brother still hasn't returned to the bench, and I run to the back of the clamshell calling, “Shaun!” I see the Space Needle like a flying saucer on stilts above me and wonder if he has gone up inside it without me.

When I come back around the man is sitting on the bench, an accordion-like briefcase sits yawned open in the middle of the bench, and he sorts through layers of big brown envelopes. He chooses one and peers inside. "Doy you like pictures?" he asks without turning to look at me, his eyes aiming deep into the bottom of the envelope he reaches his hand into.

I touch my Brownie still dangling around my neck, "I take pictures."

"Maybe you could help me with these then, tell me how you like them."

I sit on the bench to see the picture he pulls out. "The rain will spatter on it so you can't see it unless you come sit right here." He pats the bench. "Come sit here," he says stronger and I carefully perch on the edge of the bench and take the picture. It is a large black-and-white picture and shows a lady naked and looking straight at me, bent over, her lips puckered tight, her hands under her breasts so big like she's serving them at the dinner table. "That's the Dairy Queen picture, because her titties are so big. See her titties? Do you like that picture?"

I cannot say if I do or don't. Why does she look like she wants to kiss? And why does she bend over like that? "No." I say it quietly, unsure of the woman in the picture, why she is naked and puckered and why the man says titties when my brother is not allowed to say it. I feel ready to cry and don't want the picture any more. The man snatches it away from me and the penny I still hold drops from my hand. I watch it roll, my legs too sick and heavy to run after it.

"If you want to come with me, I'll let you see more pictures of your mother," he says, rattling the Dairy Queen.

"That's not my mama," I yell at him.

Suddenly he slides the picture inside his briefcase and claps his hand shut inside with the pictures. A husband and wife hustle past the bench with their coat-collars pulled up over their faces, their arms locked together and bodies hunched into one. The man follows them with his eyes and then says to me, "Sure that's a picture of your mama, didn't she tell you?" He changes how he is looking at me when I wag my head furiously back and forth. A low, clucking laugh comes out of him and I shove his briefcase off the bench, somersaulting it close to the pool's edge. He rushes to save it and I bolt from the clamshell yelling for Shaun, losing a shoes on my way to the Space Needle, my legs kicking out all ways at once, the Brownie galloping against my chest.

The doors of the Space Needle elevators are lost to me, so many people clustering at them for a ride to the top, so many people crisscrossing and coming up from the midway with souvenir hats and drowsy balloons. Gray overcoats pass all around me as if the ocean's whales are on vacation from the sea. At a flowerbed mound I give up running and sit on the brick wall surrounding the circle of flowers that are nodding and blinking from the rain. I check every face for the man's, and growing sure for the first time he is the stranger who offers candy, he is the man without door handles inside his car, he will take you somewhere and make you see the Dairy Queen.

Shaun's hand grabs me around my arm. "What are you doing here? Where's your shoe? You're going to be in trouble for taking your shoe off."

The only thing I can think to say to him is, "My shoe is back there, and my penny." But I'm afraid to return to the clamshell where the man might be standing on my penny, knowing I want it, holding my shoe for me to come get from him.

Shaun pushes me along, his hand clothespinned over the back of my neck. The clamshell comes closer and I start to press back on Shaun, my heels skidding on the wet walkway. I feel my toe tear through my sock, but Shaun keeps shoving me along, wanting to make sure we are there at the bench for my father and mother.

The man is gone and the bench is empty. Rain falls lighter and misty like before. I can't see my penny anywhere. Everywhere Shaun bends looking for my shoe I bend with him like a shadowing animal. When he takes my arm again and says, "It's gone, let's go back to the bench," we turn to the smell of hot dogs and steaming coffee, find my mother sitting inside the clam taking the cardboard box full of food from my father and laying it out according to those with relish and those without.

Relieved I run to crowd between her knees, my hands circling under her legs and hugging them into me. "I lost my last penny, Mama, a man wanted to take it from me and I dropped it somewhere." She is trying to keep from spilling coffee on me, and her face is my good Mama's face telling me to be careful or I'll get burned, telling me she's sorry the penny is gone, and where is my shoe? I break to the fountain's edge and call to her to smile so I can take her picture with my Brownie. "So I can have a picture of my real Mama," I say, and there is a twist of wonder in her forehead as she looks at me, or else her head still aches. And even though Shaun is partly in one picture zipping his fly at my father's command, and in another my father's arm cuts across my mother's lap taking a hot dog, I take the last few pictures on my roll of film as if I must hurry her safely inside my camera, carry proof of her looking her coat-wrapped self at the Fair.

On the Wing

*I didn't come here of my own accord, and I can't leave that way.
Whoever brought me here will have to take me home.*

-Rumi

Her junkie brother lies white as paste, his hair wadded in the dreadlocks of derelict white men, in the newer hospital on State Street that is going out of business. This is the hospital, she knows, with only a few patients who never pay their bills and no other healthcare company is interested in buying the wings of birthing suites the hospital management hoped would be a selling point in this city where it's common to have neighborhoods of Mormon families, men and women who believe they must bring baby spirits from heaven to earth, every pregnancy begun with a prayerful thrust of seed and a baby freefalling from heaven and later that baby breathing first air in the rooms of a hospital like this. Her brother lies in one of the rooms, awash in the noise that is missing from all the babies that aren't crying in the rooms like this one where his machines softly beep. The nurse tells her that the infection in her brother's heart is as big and white and craniumed as a head of cauliflower. The machines are keeping him alive. Her brother's heart blooms vegetables out of his heart valves and he doesn't even know. The paramedics brought him here. The nurse knows more than she does about her brother, that he collapsed at the group home where he was staying and his friend at the home called the paramedics. There are pieces of cauliflower breaking off and lodging in the blood vessels in his brain and that is why he's unconscious, why he collapsed, why he will not likely flap his eyes open and know

anyone again, or check the sky out the window of his room and know what time of day, what weather and season he's missing. This isn't the first junkie they've hooked up to machines at this hospital. She doesn't know anything about her brother's junkie life, where he's been since he was twenty or thirty, up to fifty-something now. She talks in her head to her brother the way she last did, as a girl handing tools to her brother as he works on his car, "What do you want now? Where will you go now?" She wants to say something to him that will cure him a little, so he will know she came here and he wasn't alone, so he may remember something familiar through his webby last life. And she chooses, "I saw a blackbird fly today, so close its wingtip brushed me here," like he used to say to her the summer of his first car, his hands black with engine grease, his thumb leaving a streak across her cheek she discovered later, after she believed – at least the first time – that her brother could charm birds. "I saw a blackbird fly today," she tells him again, "So close." Drawing her thumb across his cheek she feels his moist rubbery skin, sees how thin and rivered beneath in blue.

He won't live long now. Infections, Hepatitis C, HIV. White cell counts in the same numbers as stars in the night sky. The nurse wants to know if there is anyone who has power of attorney, who could say not to resuscitate or to take heroic measures. His heart will arrest, he will never leave here, the nurse is sure. There is only their father, in his eighties, who could say if the machines should shut down, if the son he has lost the last thirty years should be lost once and for all. The only one who can send him back through the skies above this hospital and its heavens of raining babies – if the Mormon rain of babies is true, if heaven is true – the only one is the man who brought him to his beginning with an un-Mormon prayer, an expectant shimmer.

The nurse attends to her brother, so calm in the roar of quiet sweeping around the room. As it is now, she says, the hospital staff has to try to save her brother the next time he arrests. Power of attorney, power to choose when the machines switch off belongs to her father, his father, who will have to be told, will have to choose once the wail of his hearing aids has subsided and he knows what he's being asked. The power to hush her brother's machines is complicated. Even though her own hands are capable and the switches clearly only a step away, there is her father to consider, there is her need for the possibility of blackbirds. As the nurse pulls the sheet away to change it she sees that the sores on her brother's legs have lain unhealed so long they have rings around them, layered like lake beds drying and souring. With a new sheet and the nurse finished for now the noise of the ventilator gushing tags at her nerves, takes away her brother's power to draw and push out his own breath, to hold his finger up to a tree branch and hush the birds there, to hush the squeaking steps of the nurses down the linoleum hallways, to quiet everything long enough to let the unwailing babies that are not in the empty rooms take a breath to begin.

The Genius of Stone

Here and Now – Part One

A cluster of survey coordinates dip into the creases of my brother's decades-old topo map of central Utah. The numbers skate across a pale green plateau in the thin lead of his trademark mechanical pencil. Imprints of erased measurements are still visible, indicating a forsaken start, or – unlikely for my brother – an error in measurement. The most solid number pairs surround an X marking the location of treasure he buried forty years ago between the threads of Sulphur Creek and Sand Creek near Torrey, Utah. Standing on the soft bank of Sulphur Creek, in a September forty years beyond his footprints here, I can't be certain how he arrived at these coordinates – where he sited his transit, what pre-GPS science he used to make these calculations – and so I have little assurance that I stand within a hundred yards of his X. The numbers serve only him, his private pentagram for witching the treasure – a half-ton of petrified wood, a forest of it – from the earth when he comes again to retrieve it.

I have his map in my hands after emailing him to ask about offroad routes through the Great Basin country I'd travelled with him, knowing him to hold in memory a virtual map of the American West and wanting his direction. In a short flurry of messages he told me how poorly the roads into Goblin Valley, Kodachrome Basin, and Cathedral Valley were graded before the tourist glut of the 80s, how tricky they get in weather and how the jeep trails get worse – regardless of weather – in to Hondoo Arch, Death Hollow, the no-name panels of pictographs out there. He recommended right and left turns for me to make that he hadn't

taken himself since the 60s. Then came his final email asking if I needed a map. Believing any map of his would likely be missing roads paved since the Nixon administration, I sent my one-line response -- no thanks. Not twenty-four hours later I found the map tucked inside my screen door along with a request – if I had time – to look for a Volkswagen-shaped boulder on the Sand Creek trail, no more than a mile in, and to see if there is still a survey stake wired to a juniper growing from a fissure in that boulder. After forty years, he was guessing, chances were good no one would have removed the markers he left. And as long as I would be driving through Torrey, he figured, I might have enough time to confirm at least one link in his chain of clues.

He has tried to retrieve the petrified wood himself over the years. His life – now scrambled with a professorship and family – has afforded him few opportunities to get to his decades-old to-do lists. On his first attempt, an early snow and an aging Ford van with a broken heater turned him back. His next approach ended with his wife going into labor as they bumped the van over the dirt roads. There was only time enough to wire a survey stake to the juniper as a future sign – to mark his place for as long as it would take him, as it turned out, to raise his son and then a daughter and return again. And when he did come back he zigzagged for hours between these dry creekbeds, digging a few knee-high holes where he believed his rock forest should lie buried until, again, early snow and his hands numb with cold.

The map in my hands is useless and its X throbs in the punches of wind that rattle and snap at the paper. I fold it closed and urge myself along. I'm not here to dig, not here to see

if some easy luck would have me stumble over what my brother has returned three times to find. I have come here first as a favor to him, on my way to places I last knew I belonged after wandering my life from Salt Lake City to San Francisco and back, to confirm that it's here or not here that I should stay. And what has come to me, what I've gained already from this map and the balance returning to me as I walk over rocks and through sand, is a restored knowledge of the safety I knew as a child in this and other map places of his he took me. I walk the space between Sulphur and Sand Creeks in near homage to him now, trying to divine his treasure beneath my feet, wanting for myself to recognize in this landscape his life-long love for the geological puzzle of the world. How it has shuttled him from morning to dark, no sign of exhaustion, even into his sixties. How I can count on the sure same-blood I share with him to divine what similar vein in me I've let go dry as these creekbeds.

Bedrock

Throughout my childhood I encountered my brother often mute before maps. Fourteen years older, my brother was a college senior by the time I was curious enough to ask about the pins on the maps lining his bedroom walls. He'd answer, "Obsidian," "Moss Agate," "Blue Bingham Fluorite," rocks, gems, and minerals mined in the earth under those pins. My friends with brothers only a few grades or a whole school ahead of us talked about a different breed of brother than I knew. Brothers who tormented their sisters with farts, name-calling, who lived as wild things loose in their houses punching holes in walls and

breaking windows, who they sometimes caught smoking or jerking off to *I Dream of Jeannie* episodes. I thought there must be something terribly wrong with their brothers.

Summer 1960, South Dakota. We are on vacation, my mother and father, my two brothers, and me in the nest of sleeping bags my father made in the back of our Ford station wagon. We have seen Devil's Tower, Mt. Rushmore, and the Mystery Spot where marbles rolled uphill and mirrors showed all five of us leaning sideways though we were standing straight up. My mother has new clip-on earrings of Black Hills gold, though she still isn't happy. To help, my father turns up the radio when Nat King Cole comes on and sings along with *Unforgettable*, stretching his arm across the back of the front seat to cup his hand over her shoulder and squeeze when he sings, *That's what you are*.

We picked up hamburgers and french fries for dinner and ate them in the car on our way to the Pine Ridge Reservation where we have come to watch the Sioux dance the Sun Dance for tourists. There are bleachers set up in the dirt where my mother and father sit. My brothers and I wander around the perimeter of the lodge built for the dance, logs above that splay like the ribs of an umbrella from the top of a huge timber at the center. Inside the low rails of the fence encircling the lodge the dancers mill around waiting for the tourists to buy their tickets and be seated. Bells jangle in a one-two rhythm as the dancers take a step-step on one foot then the other, step-step, treading as if warning the earth with the first press of each foot that they are about to step firmly with the next. The bells are glorious. Feathers spray from the dancers' heads, are gathered in fans at the smalls of their backs, are bundled in twos and threes in their lightly clenched fists. My oldest brother stays with me to keep me from climbing over the rails, and snatches me time after time from the top rail as the drums

are brought inside the dance circle and the men in dusty Levis and workshirts settle around them, the drums faintly quaking and rumbling as the men draw the wadded cotton drumsticks from their backpockets and place them on the drumskins.

We stay at the rails for the whole Sun Dance, my brother and I, and I keep trying to join the dancers, the drumbeating and the hawklike cries from the drummers so surely a language I want to speak, and the dancers in their bells and feathers so surely my new family. The mother and father and middle brother in the bleachers I've already given up, so far from this true family I keep trying to claim by climbing into their circle. My oldest brother is welcome to come with me because he is already there and he already knows why I go over the rail time after time. When the dancers end I am bewildered. When they begin to leave the lodge and I am being carried back to the station wagon, I am inconsolable. All the way to the Pierre hotel I cry and cry as 4-year-olds do over what will not be given. Even after my father checks us in my wails draw looks from others in the lobby as I insist on my protest, my throat raw with the loss of the people I want to belong to. I keep crying, long after my mother has stopped trying to understand what I want by my sobbing, "I want to be a Yindian right now." I am crying still when she gives me over to my brother who carries me up and down the hotel hallway. He tells me close in my ear that I can be a Yindian someday but right now, for a while, I have to be his sister. It is the only acceptable promise.

Looking back, knowing now that by this time in his life my brother had steeped himself in the study of rocks and minerals, was entering college soon on scholarship for how cellularly he knew the time – the eons – needed for basalt to become crystal, I see that he knew what is needed is time for a yearning like mine to yield the desired results. In his calming words to me there in that hotel hallway in Pierre, South Dakota, in a summer in

1960 when I was 4 years old, I learned from him that waiting doesn't mean giving up. I knew it from him in that instant I stopped crying, and as he still held me at his hip in that hallway, I remember looking the urgent language I wanted to speak out of my child's eyes into the clear blue of his hoping he would know I understood him. Just before he turned to take us back to our room, I swung my hand up to just touch his face and he ducked and caught my fingers, annoyed as if I'd tried to strike him for taking away my wish. Stepping back briskly to the door of our room, me bucking along at his hip, I wondered how he could possibly think I would hurt him. As we went I quietly recited the alphabet he had taught me – A is for Anthracite, B is for Boxite, C is for Calcite – hoping to assure him.

Autumn 1966, Wasatch Mountains, Utah. My brother has threaded the strap of a canvas army bag over my head and shows me a specimen of the fossil we will be looking for this Saturday. Any brachiopod found is fair game for the bag but he repeats for me the name of the fossil he wants to collect today, giving me the name of it in the rhythm of pentameter -- *pentacrinus asteriscus* -- so it will be easy to remember. He has explained that the fossil was a tiny shellfish millions of years ago and is named for its star-shape, like the asterisk on a typewriter key. The gray rock he hands me is the size of his shoe with one pentacrinus asteriscus splayed at the rock's edge, just big enough to fit on the nail of my smallest finger. I open the flap of the canvas bag and plunk the rock inside, work at adjusting it so it doesn't thump against my hip or pull the strap too sharply into my shoulder. My brother is already twenty strides off bent to a pile of siltstone in the moraine we stand in, turning the stones over with one hand and inspecting them before placing them in one pile or another beside

him. The stands of aspen below us on the mountain wave their millions of yellow flags against the bluest, blankest sky. The mountain above us is endless with rock.

For the rest of that day I gloried in the chant of *pentacrinus asteriscus*. In finding smooth, colored stones of no consequence. In picking faded Indian paintbrush and streaking my cheeks with the dried red blooms. In carrying a set of beetles to my brother I thought must be conjoined twins, but were only mating and tumbled apart when I lifted them on the end of my finger for him to see. I brought my brother set after set of imprints in my palms of the smocked bark of pine trees I found at the margins of the rockfield. At each of these meetings he would place a few gray stones inside my bag stamped with miniature constellations of *pentacrinus asteriscus* and confirm my discoveries.

These are the Saturdays, the rockhunting Saturdays, I spent with my brother since losing my mother three years before to depression and consequent suicide, and losing the rest of the family – my father and a brother seven years older – to the distances in their hearts they went with her. When the weather changed and the fossil beds and rockfields were covered in snow, my brother sometimes took me with him on Saturdays to his lab at the university and let me graph the rock densities he'd measured for his doctoral studies onto graph paper with his mechanical pencil. Any of the Saturdays we spent together, until I was twelve and he had married, usually ended with a late lunch of 39-cent hamburgers at the drive-in where the car hops brought our food on a tray they hooked over his car window, and root beer the color of garnets fizzed inside the sweating mugs. Between bites of his hamburger one afternoon I asked my brother if he was a genius like I'd heard my father say he probably was. He chucked his head back and one-note hummed his amusement, his mouth still full. He smiled and chewed his hamburger, my genius brother.

“Truth or dare.”

“Dare.”

“Suck on this rock and kiss Ronnie Franks at the same time.”

I do. Ronnie is fifteen and I am thirteen. The neighbor girl who has dared me to kiss Ronnie Franks would like to kiss Ronnie Franks herself. The rock she has decided I should suck on is one she has picked from the new gravel paving on our street, just arm's length from the grassy parking strip where the five of us – four girls and Ronnie Franks – sit on a summer night before ninth grade. The rock is tarry, smooth and oval as my thumbtip, still warm from the August heat. I put it in my mouth and hear it tock-tocking against my molars. Ronnie's tongue flips the rock around in my mouth. He cups his hand around the back of my head and presses his mouth harder on mine and then twirls his tongue around and around my own. I push him away and spit the rock into my hand. I am startled that I have no idea what kind of rock it is I have had in my mouth.

Spring 1996, San Francisco. For several reasons I should have enjoyed living and working in San Francisco. To say I didn't is too irreverent a statement, or too condemning of myself in a culture of Americans who want to stake their hearts there. My restlessness had most to do with my lack of preparedness to navigate a city that crowded, that teeming, that moist, that dirty, homeless-ridden, horizonless.

By the time I tried my hand at a life in San Francisco at thirty-nine, it had been several years since I had been in touch with my brother. It was there, while I was struggling with reasons to stay or leave, that he mailed a poster to me of an unnamed ruin in southern Utah's Canyonlands National Park. When I pulled the poster from the mailing tube there in the post office, I read on the sticky note he'd attached, "So you don't forget." The image was one I knew immediately, though I was unsure whether I had visited this particular ruin, and if I had I was unsure it was my brother who had been there with me. We had sifted through dozens of ruins in the canyons of southern Utah from Grand Gulch to Barrier Reef to Horseshoe Canyon and I knew those places as holy in ways not of religion but holy in color and light, holy in the fragrances of sun-heated sagebrush, sandstone, and – on the most divine days – coming rain. Forgetting them, there was never that chance. What my brother didn't write on that note was, "So you will always remember." Those words would constitute an acknowledgement of having moved past remembered places and on to others more preferable. "So you don't forget" meant clearly he knew I was out of range of places essential to me and he had taken this step from miles away – maybe intuitively to save me, maybe to save the beauty he felt in having stood in those places as well by keeping it sparked in me – to send the same lifeline out he'd offered me in the hallway of the Pierre hotel, "For now, you have to be my sister."

I believe that people of genius invent uncommon means of communication. Maybe superior, maybe not, but as compensation for their frustration at not readily encountering others as eager to mine their interests to the depths and to the disregard of time that they do. This would explain my brother's early childhood friend, Fred, imaginary but intensely

interested in the same excursions my brother took himself on at the age of four around the yard and the vacant field behind the house in search of rocks.

I learned of Fred long after returning to Salt Lake City and spending time with my father, then in his eighties and fluent in story. Apparently Fred faithfully spent hours with my brother sorting through the collections returned from their field work, then through the compartmented hobby store box of labeled gems and minerals my parents bought for my brother before he was old enough to attend school. The story of Fred went on, places the family went with Fred in tow, conversations overheard between my brother and Fred, and at last the story of Fred's fate – the result of my father's impatience with Fred for turning up missing on a day they needed to catch a bus due in minutes and my brother distraught over where Fred could have gone and stubbornly refusing to leave without him. They missed the bus, my father furiously pointing out the ridiculousness of looking for Fred and making my brother go to catch the next bus without another minute spent looking. That afternoon, that searing bus ride to wherever they were going, a canker-like frustration between father and son grew in their throats and my brother made a hard decision about Fred. When the three of them returned home, later than planned, appointments missed, my brother took Fred to the field and left him, fittingly, under a rock. Hearing that story years beyond the pinning of Fred under a rock I realized Fred had re-emerged in me, in the nickname I answered to when called in off the moraines, the aprons of shale, the granary walls of ruins, “Let's go get a hamburger, Fred.”

Here and Now – Part Two

After getting back to my truck and tilting the sand out of my shoes, I watch satellites trundle the night sky from Velvet Ridge to Boulder Mountain. The few lights of Torrey wink along the road below. A moon thinned to a thumbnail clipping hangs in the west. Against my palm I bat a weathered, brittle end of a survey stake I picked from a tangle of wired-together stakes washed into Sand Creek. If the X is out there it will hold another forty years for the man who marked it on this map. The signs have shifted too far for someone to follow whose dream it is not. The map as I fold it closed sifts a fine rain of sand down my arms.

Compared to my brother's maps, my maps – if I had them - would parallel his in the beginning, then shift to become a bundle of distractions that never fold neatly again. They would bear Xs everywhere I suspected there to be treasure rather than knowing it to be so. I would have let marks fade or started a new map when a better X came along. My wandering from a singleminded life has kept me from knowing from the start what I loved most and driving myself in its direction time after time, craning a look to inspect the familiar and know it deeper again. Friends who have heard me lament how long it has taken me to recognize the directions I took away from language look at me with impatience that I could not have known. And when I indulge myself in language – books, writing, the sound of words sung, the eavesdropped loves of people at restaurant tables and checkout lines, in the moments before house lights go down – I lament the loss in years of other directions I've gone. I've wondered if what I've avoided is digging in at my first language X and finding it stale and inert as rock. Not changing enough at each dig to be the draw of my life.

We are led to believe our visions, dreams, passions are most true when come to early and lived long. That they must be grand in nature. That only a rare combination of luck-determination-soulfire can realize them, a handicap in body or privilege a sometimes fuel. I will say – after taking some new steps toward my own – that our passions are just as true if we come to them after all. That they are often for the most of us humble, common as stone. Their genius – in whichever degree of grandness – lies in their ability to home us.

Not long after I returned to live in Salt Lake City I spotted my brother driving the belt route that follows the foothills of the Wasatch Mountains at the eastern edge of the Salt Lake Valley. His patched-together, newly repainted economy car putted along under the speed limit, cars splitting off into other lanes to speed around him. As I came alongside his car I saw that he was alternately checking the road and taking a long look up Mt. Olympus, one of the highest peaks in the range that rises from the valley floor. I lightly honked and kept pace with him as he drove but his attention didn't waver as he took short glances at the road and long looks at the mountain. I sounded my horn again, this time more earnestly, but I couldn't interrupt him. I thought he must have glimpsed a hang glider, or a snowboarder riding the eyelet of snow that remains year-round on the mountain, maybe a rockslide in progress, something kinetic. But the mountain when I could clearly see it was as it had appeared to me many springtimes before. Capped with dirty snow at its top, the hunkered pine and spruce stands on the sheltered side, foothills frothy with new grass. I drove on without catching his eye or discovering what he had seen moving on the mountain.

When I saw him next I asked him what he had been watching that evening on the belt route, and his answer was simply, “The mountain.” A mountain he has lived near, climbed a half dozen times, and driven past for over sixty years. “It changes all the time,” he told me.