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Too Much Horse: Fiction, Nonfiction, Prose Poetry

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Andrew Otis Haschemeyer entitled "Too Much Horse: Fiction, Nonfiction, Prose Poetry." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Michael J. Knight, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Allen Wier, Margaret Lazarus Dean, Daniel Magilow

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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**TOO MUCH HORSE:
FICTION, NONFICTION, PROSE POETRY**

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Andrew Otis Haschemeyer
May 2010

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Some of the works in this collection have appeared in journals and magazines, often in slightly different form. "Old Man Bar," appeared in *TheRumpus.net*. "The Fantôme of Fatma" appeared in *Missouri Review* and was anthologized in *Best New American Voices 2009*, edited by Mary Gaitskill. "The Storekeeper" appeared in *Missouri Review* and was anthologized in *Best New American Voices 2002*, edited by Joyce Carol Oates. "Isa," will appear in *Southern Indiana Review* in 2010. "Those Were the Days We Ate the Knuckles from Our Fingers" will appear in *Southern Indiana Review* in 2010. "The Oxymoron of Liberal Fathers" appeared in *TheRumpus.net*. "Lil' Earl" appeared in *Southern Indiana Review*. "The Soldier as a Boy" appeared in *Stumbling and Raging, More Politically Inspired Fiction*, edited by Steve Elliott. "The Brave One" appeared in *Southern Indiana Review*. I would like to thank the editors of those journals and anthologies for including my work.

ABSTRACT

A collection of fiction, nonfiction, and prose poetry that explores imagination through different shapes in form, content, and genre. Includes award winning nonfiction, “The Storekeeper,” and award winning fiction, “The Fantôme of Fatma.”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. CRITICAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. FICTION.....	11
Blue Triangle.....	11
The Fantôme of Fatma.....	35
Lil’ Earl.....	64
Too Much Horse.....	70
The Soldier as a Boy.....	95
III. NONFICTION.....	109
Old Man Bar.....	109
The Brave One.....	113
The Storekeeper.....	116
Oxymoron of Liberal Fathers	138
IV. PROSE POETRY.....	151
The Poem that Would Save the World.....	151
A day of 1000 Stories.....	152
Isa.....	153
“Flu Season”.....	155
Those Where the Days We Ate the Knuckles from Our Fingers.....	156
VITA.....	157

I. CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

101 Shark Attacks

My mother, a single mom, had a lab at the Marine Biological Laboratories in town. She worked hard and traveled often. You couldn't have the kind of career she had—grants to go to the Red Sea, the Galapagos, and Antarctica, summer research at the MBL and teaching and research in New York City—and take care of two boys, or at least give them the kind of emotional support they would need, something my mother, with her systematic mind, wouldn't have been good at anyway. It isn't that I don't believe science and love don't mix, but they don't.

We had *au pairs*, young Swedish women who would come and live with us for a year at a time, looking after us in exchange for room and board—they didn't have a tremendous interest, had no more maternal instinct than our mother, and no sooner than my brother and I become attached to one, she'd fly home and there would be another. They were interchangeable; their blonde hair was our only consistency. But *Au pairs* had their perks. We showered with one once and my brother soaped her back. Still, we didn't feel loved, relegated to roles as pawns as numerous young men came around, feigning interest in us to get close to the sexually liberated Swedes. In the winter the *au pairs* seemed to spend a good deal of time at the Swedish consulate, and in the summer loved nothing more than lying on the beach.

Often left alone, my brother and I turned upon each other. It might be interesting to conduct an experiment: how would human children behave if they had rules of conduct

but no emotional models? Perhaps we were that experiment. I wanted attention. I'm not sure what my brother wanted. He probably wanted attention too. I wonder now, why shouldn't a child want attention as it signals that someone, a parent, a sibling, a relative, is looking after the child? Attention is love. Of course making "wanting attention" pejorative is convenient for a parent who doesn't want to be bothered, who puts goals ahead of the child. And, of course, second wave feminism supported my mother's career aspirations—which, don't get me wrong, I support. It's just that you can't have both fathers and mothers opting out of children's lives—and for what anyway? From my experience, I remain suspicious of goals: progress, science, civilization, particularly when pursued at the expense of something perhaps not as quantitative but far more fundamental.

So I would "bother" my brother, because in my family wanting love—wanting anything—was a bother. He was older—one year and seven months—just old enough to always be stronger than I was. I didn't know how to love him and he didn't know how to love me. Left to ourselves, I would seek love, and my brother would respond the only way he knew how, by beating me up. Time and time again, I'd pester my brother or he'd bait me, and we'd fight. Daily, twice or thrice daily, we fought. I never ever won.

But that was before. The summer I want to talk about there were no *au pairs*. My brother had attended and been kicked out of Tabor Academy, had recently been "not asked back" to Darrow School in New Lebanon New York. He lived in the basement. I'd be going to boarding school myself the next Fall, having graduated from Wagner Junior High in Manhattan, a place I felt afraid, to a place I fell in love with on my first visit, a place I dreamed about: Buxton, a bucolic heaven of hippy girls and verdant

fields—they pressed cider from apples picked from their own trees, for Christ-sake. I didn't know the word "buxom" at that time, but Buxton evoked a promise close to that, of security and nurture, and that promise inspired something inside me—a just perceptible velocity, a forward lean. Suddenly I was not just living, I wanted to live.

So that summer in Woods Hole, I waited for my new life to begin. An independent but emotionally arrested 14 years old boy, I employed sarcasm to belie my sincere desire to be cared for by anyone. As for my brother, I don't know where he stood or what he was like—running out of choices, I guess, needing to do anything to feel good. He'd come home from boarding school wise to worlds I couldn't understand. That summer we were deemed old enough to take care of ourselves.

~

Just a few months later, that Fall at Buxton, I wrote my first short story—the longest thing I'd ever written at about 5 pages, penned carefully in my cursive script and skipping lines. This was the same English class where into my second week I'd fallen back in my chair on a steel-finned floor-heater and cut my forearm in six straight incisions, scars I still have, and then simply sat there, too embarrassed to say anything, dripping blood on the floor, hoping I wouldn't be called on to read a passage of *Heart of Darkness*. If I'd ever thought of a "short story" before, it was as something etched in stone by dead Gods. I was amazed that the teacher should ask us to write one, but I did. And about a week after handing it in, this teacher—an idiosyncratic guy, a guy who seemed willing to say anything and often did—sat on the edge of his desk, dangled his legs and scratched his balls, and read several student works.

My classmates' stories sparkled with intelligence, touched upon philosophical issues with a nuance of feeling. All seemed to take place in exotic locales. Some involved music or crocuses and these functioned as metaphors that led to profound and tacit meanings. And then he picked up one last story. He began, and I heard, word by word, my own life read back to me. It was absolutely plain and everyday. The place wasn't interesting and the emotions were obvious. Nothing stood for something else. I sat with heat rising in my face, squirming through every word. I knew from the previous stories that the teacher preserved the anonymity of the author. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. And I had a weird feeling that was not obviously good or bad and that I have difficulty describing even now.

After class as I walked alone up the gravel path, past the apple trees, filled with autumn apples, past the fountain and the Senior Lawn to the Main House for lunch, I felt this strange feeling, but it was soon followed by other feelings. Dead leaves lay on the ground. I didn't speak to anyone. My head was down. I looked at my feet. I wondered if anyone would think the story was mine, and if they did, what would they think of me. I had included embarrassing details in that story because they were necessary to the plot. As I walked, I fantasized that I would punch in the face the first person who heckled me. Then I wondered if my artistic sensitivity might lead the girl I had a crush on to speak to me. I'd spent many class periods obsessed about whether she crossed her leg in my direction. When I'd bled on the floor, I hoped she might notice or care. My thoughts oscillated between these fantasies. But, nothing happened. No one asked me about it.

The story had to do with sex—or the lack of it—and my brother stealing my girlfriend, the first girlfriend I'd ever had—but there was a twist: in the story I was glad he did it. It was really a story about the summer my brother and I were friends.

A story, at its most fundamental level, is an unusual event. For me, this was a story because of the unexpected transition that took place between all my known experiences and this one summer—how my brother who had baited me and beat me up all my life suddenly welcomed me. He didn't exactly take me under his wing, but he let me tag along to parties on the golf course, invited me to girls' houses to play kissing games, brought me along to drink warm beer stashed in the bushes. I learned to smoke cigarettes and pot, even some crusty thing someone said was hash. I loved it, sort of. The truth was, his world felt a little out of control. No one explained anything to me. I was 14 years old. I'd learned that feeling anything left me vulnerable to my brother's baiting. I kept a distance, always gauging how far I could approach and, at any sign of trouble, receding away. I felt apprehensive of experience of any kind. I liked to read.

In the story I wrote, I met a girl, a miracle that she liked me, and a miracle that we came together. I was a virgin, of course, and would be for several more years, but the mysteries and consequences of sex lurked everywhere—a terrifying unknown. In some sense, that was what having a girlfriend was all about, and I was in over my head. Then one day, in my brother's basement room, while he lay on his dirty single bed stoned, she and I dry humped until I came in my pants. This “pre-jacking” was the central plot element of the story I would write, a shameful pitfall I attributed to the girl's corduroy pants. I left the basement sure of only one thing: my own humiliation. When I came back I found my girlfriend—sure, not the love of my life but still a girl who for a week

and a half made out with me—in bed with my brother. Then they were together. That was the story.

But what made the story great was the twist, my suggestion that my brother had done me a huge favor. So as the teacher read, I looked forward to this final line, the summation, the tying up of loose ends, except that when it came, it sounded trite, and didn't fill me with the satisfaction I'd expected. In fact, I was embarrassed. Truth was, I see now, it was an intellectualization and a lie, and no doubt what really made the story worth reading was an irony that my English teacher recognized but I did not—that my brother had done me a favor was ridiculous. My brother hadn't done me any favors.

Every writer, it seems, at one time or another, mines childhood for a story, I think because the stories from childhood really stick with us, shock us, change us, and we want to explore what they mean. We have to trust our intuition with this, but at the same time it can be difficult to turn the experiences of childhood into a story that will threaten the stolid and sophisticated sensibilities of a literate adult readership. In a sense, we've all had transformative experiences, rights of passage, and to some degree we see them as childish things that we have outgrown.

Still, every decade I try to write this story again, my sense that it is a story worth telling wrestling with the impossibility of moving anyone with the experiences of an obtuse child subject to the whims of fate. I call the story *101 Shark Attacks* after a book I read with devotion during that period. In that book, in short accounts, people get attacked by sharks page after page, which captures a bit how I felt as a child, and describes, if too metaphorically, what seemed to happen to my brother. I've been working on the current version for eight years, and I still can't get it right. This version follows the same line as

the original except I conflate into the story my first job, washing dishes at the Capt'n Kidd that I held the year before when I was 13, and my brother's psychotic break, which in reality would take place a few months later—not during the summer but in the first snow fall of winter, 1979. Imagistically, my brother's actual psychotic break couldn't be any more different from the one I've been trying to capture in the story. But maybe I'm making it a hot summer day because I need to be there as a witness, to help or to accept finally that there was nothing I could do.

In reality my brother was alone and it was winter and snowing all along the Eastern Seaboard. He was at his latest school in Stowe Vermont, and I had finally arrived at the bucolic school of my dreams, Buxton, in Williamstown MA. Our mother was in Antarctica, studying temperature acclimatization in fish. What I heard of his break was he'd taken acid, which triggered voices in his head.

Scared of what was happening, he hitch-hiked from Vermont to New York City along I87 in the cold snow, at night, to my father's apartment—he was at Cornell Medical School at 69th and York a professor of biochemistry like our mother. I don't know how many hours it took my brother to hitchhike all that way or what exactly he said or did when he was standing at their door. I know that there, at the door of our father's apartment, my brother's crazy talk frightened our stepmother. I know that what he was looking for was not what he got. He was taken across the street to the Psychological ER in New York Hospital and from there committed. He was 16 years old.

Perhaps that early story, written in Sophomore English for an idiosyncratic teacher, was like a snapshot that reminds me of a memory, one that otherwise would have been lost, but I don't think so. I know there is something to this story. Instinct draws us

toward these memories, even if we don't understand the purpose. It is a yearning for a super-narrative, a meaning so complex or simple that it eludes us. For only a moment, after the countless beatings and before the time he'd become not my brother anymore, but something else, a patient, drugged, electro-shocked, walking around on a locked ward of the Payne Whitney, forced to acknowledge, in the diabolical *Catch 22* of mental hospitals, that he was schizophrenic because admitting you were sick was the only way to get better, between what was and what would be, for a few weeks of summer, my brother and I were something to each other, maybe not exactly friends, maybe enemies who after too-long war call a truce, clasp hands before saying so long. What I remember of that ward was that for the first time I beat my brother at ping-pong.

That summer and in those few months that followed, I had no conception of the past, and I knew the future not at all. That future ruined every subsequent draft, ruined every attempt I've made to capture the feeling of that summer, because how could I not have known that something so monumental, so life changing, was about to occur? And how could his psychotic break ever fit into a narrative? His mental illness was arbitrary and meaningless.

That summer's hiatus from beatings felt like my brother cared for me, and after losing my clear enemy, my friend, my brother, I began battling my own self-destructive impulses. At times I experienced suicidal depression. I drank a lot in an effort to release myself from my inhibitions and the suspicion I was worthless. I fought strangers who didn't deserve it. I hurt people's feelings. Some of these difficult times I attribute to my brother's mistreatment of me as a child, and still, looking back, I know there is a story here about love. And I know that love doesn't mean all we think it does. Where was my

mother is all this? To say she was in Antarctica would seem another strained metaphor if it weren't the truth. She wasn't to blame. Who knows what science meant to her? I don't. But any narrative depends on meaning—the gatekeeper of what goes in and what stays out, and I am afraid that this story has no meaning.

My brother turned forty-eight years old this March. He lives with in an assisted-living home in Upstate New York. For more than 30 years he has been in the mental health system. In those same thirty years I've never been able to write this story any more convincingly than when I was 14.

In *101 Shark Attacks* there is a famous description of a WWII catastrophe, where, in the night, countless soldiers, their ship sunk in the Pacific, are attacked and eaten by sharks. One soldier woke in the morning and saw his friend had made it—but when he nudged him, he found that his friend was dead, only his torso remained in the life-jacket. Why one person survives and another does not seems like dumb luck. I count my survival to this: someone told me I was good at something—a teacher who read my story out loud to class. I was embarrassed, but I liked the feeling of my life paraded around. I think most people do well that thing that someone told them they do well.

The night I found out my brother had been locked away in the Payne Whitney, I'd been wrestling with a girl in the snow. Snow had been falling all day and into the night and we were under the corner floodlight on the Senior Lawn in a foot and a half of the stuff. I fought her hard because I did not want to lose—to a girl, to anyone—but I still enjoyed the feeling—I was stiff with it, and she didn't seem to notice or if she did, she didn't care. Then by mistake my hand slipped under her jacket and I grabbed her breast. I froze. I couldn't believe it. It was a mistake, but the action suggested all my longing,

for sex and for love and for nurture, which in turn revealed that I wasn't invulnerable, and I could never ever be vulnerable—my brother had taught me that. When I regained my senses, I walked away. And now I'm going to tell you something: this was absolutely the first time this had happened to me in my life. I was inside the Main House and walking through to the smoking area and the girl ran after me. I turned around. She spread her arms out. Then she sprang forward and hugged me. She held me tight into her cold coat. "You dumb shit," she said.

That night, the English teacher found me and asked me to talk. We went to his office and he told me my brother had a psychotic break. The next day, I took the bus down to New York City. There was snow everywhere—not fresh like the night before, but with the cold set in, the crusty stuff, dirty and soot covered by the side of the road, and I took the bus to Pittsfield and then down to New York. I already felt this becoming a story, the feeling slightly mercenary and selfish. I couldn't do anything about that. And I saw that I could sulk around with it, mull it over, tell it if I was coaxed, the bus, the snow, and later a place called the Payne Whitney. It would be a story about me and my brother. I couldn't figure out if it would mean something or if it ever could, but maybe it would be a story that might make someone, that pretty girl over there, or the girl I had a crush on, someone hold me and tell me I was OK, or at least the story was good, and they might feel sorry—maybe for me, or someone else close or far away.

I. FICTION

Blue Triangle

The larger concern was the seven-year-old. Mattie looked out from her third floor apartment window toward the small blue triangle between rooftops and the thick-leafed Magnolia trees, which grew up from the garden below. That blue triangle was the “Bay View,” and they paid more for it. Jason lounged on the white couch, under his favorite painting, a Rothko-like abstract he’d bought at an art show in Marin.

Mattie said, “What can I do?” Most of all, Mattie didn’t want to be anxious. She was done with anxious.

“We don’t have to do anything. Come up with the menu, and we’ll go to Napa for the wine.” In a moment, he added, “Everyone’s a grown up. They know kids say things.”

“Everyone’s a grown up,” Mattie said.

~

If she thought of her own anxiety at all, she thought of it as scourge visited upon her through a debilitating shyness. Though she might laugh at her own hyperbole, she felt some truth in it as well. Until college, she had spoken only once in public, when she was twelve, and that had been at her brother’s funeral. After that she avoided, “like the plague,” all things oratory: speeches, reports, dramatic monologue. Throughout high

school, she was terrified of being called upon, and in her freshman year of college, she suffered only a week of required Public Speaking before acquiring a release through a doctor's note. The note declared what she could easily display, that she had broken out in hives all over her body. She did talk when she was drunk, however, and then a certain loquaciousness spilled out of her, turning often to sarcasm that verged on bitter misanthropy. If she cornered some unsuspecting boy and he just couldn't get away, she compensated him with sex—next day ashamed more for the words than the soreness and hangover she felt.

Then one day in a PoliSci class, a boy, darkly good looking, not unlike Jason, seemingly brilliant, who sat near the front, his legs splayed, had begun his response to the professor's comment by saying, "When I was in Nicaragua. . ." But he did not pronounce the country's name simply as Nicaragua. Instead he stretched the word out, lengthening it into a guttural slur, rolling the "r" and expectorating the rest, an approximation of the Spanish in his smoky breath, "Nick—a-a-a-a—rrrr—ah—guwa." The teacher had not even been talking about Nicaragua, and Mattie understood that the boy had very much wanted to display the politics of the pronunciation, pack that into the beginning of his little speech. It was absurd, and it was grossly self-involved, but she saw so much more than that, suddenly understanding the world to be filled with such people, so self-involved that they did not have the slightest interest in what she might say—did not care at all. This boy was blowing hot air, filling space, and life was simply a battle to see who would fill the most. That moment she raised her hand to speak.

There hadn't been negative repercussions—far from it. She'd speak and her listener's eyes would glaze over—professor, boyfriend, or parent. It didn't mater. Then

they'd parrot an appropriate response, only becoming animated again when they themselves could speak—and so the cycle carried on. “Nobody cares what I do,” she repeated to herself. It became her mantra. “They think only about themselves.” Through repetition, she overwhelmed all her dissent and worry. And she benefited. As a declared English and PoliSci major, she grew enthusiastic and confident, and she won several departmental awards. Later, she excelled in her professional relationships, and her not-professional ones. She had sex sober and grew to love it. When she took a job at a small non-profit, she found she loved the gossip by the water-cooler and the phone work. She became the go-to-gal for presentations. She would tell people she had been shy, and no one believed her. Then she married Jason, lean and thoughtful, his slight reading in philosophy and a black tee shirt made him seem worldly wise. And they had a child, Emily. Jason was certain it was not right to bring more than one child into the world, if that, and Mattie had agreed. Mattie had taken a leave for the pregnancy, and then, when Jason suggested they could scrape by and she could stay at home, she quit her job altogether, not just because she thought it was the right thing to do, but because everyone knew that was what a good mother did. The non-profit would get along without her. Her co-workers were sorry to see her go, but envied her too. The people she knew were all waiting to make the hard decisions in which they put themselves first.

~

Mattie chose a menu for the party from the caterer, Jason reserved a *Zipcar*, and then he, Mattie, and Em drove over the Golden Gate on the way to Napa to pick out the

wines. Jason had gone to prep school with Penelope Wabash, so they naturally drove to the Wabash Ranch first. “If they don’t have anything good, I won’t buy it,” Jason said. “I don’t have to.”

He always said that—somewhat petulant and childish, a vain proclamation that there was independence and freedom—though Mattie knew they would eventually go home with Wabash wines. Mattie cracked the window for a little air and looked out at the staked grape vines curving up the hillside, an arabesque of *joie de vivre*. She knew the air rushing in was too loud and annoying and she’d have to close it soon just as she knew that because of Jason’s connection to Penelope, the vintner would make the trip into the tasting room to talk over the wines with Jason. It wasn’t simply cause and effect. There was a larger system at work. Sometimes, because Jason emailed Penelope, Mr. or Mrs. Wabash would drop in to exchange a word or two about *Saint Ignatius*, and Jason would tell the same story about Penelope playing *Estragon* in *Waiting for Godot*, pausing occasionally to extol the virtues of the tannins and the finish. For Jason, that was ideal, but usually the Wabashes were on their estate in Belize, and Penelope was, as everyone knew, busy in New York, and Jason could only get a few moments with the vintner, but still it was worth it. Mattie sniffed for a moment’s relief from the new-car smell of the *Zipcar*, then she pressed a button and closed the window.

North of Yountville, the grass was more yellow and the rows of vines seemed even neater, if that was possible, and everything blazed in the sun. Mattie longed for someplace cold, wanted to feel rain or even snow on her skin. Nine years ago, she and Jason had taken their honeymoon in Paris, in autumn, and it had rained every day. She loved being cold and walking along wet streets, retreating into cafes for hot chocolate or

a cheap *vin de maison*. The trip has been ruined, Jason insisted, and in the end she'd stopped having fond memories of it. Instead, she embraced her love of Napa and the Bay. They were the luckiest people on earth, after all. She reached around for a bottle of water and saw Em fidgeting in her car seat. "We'll be there soon," Mattie said. There was a certain point in any activity where the clock started ticking—when Em could take only so much more.

"Why?" Em said.

"Why what, baby?" Mattie said.

"Why are we here?"

"Do you mean in a large sense or in the car?"

"Doing this."

"Daddy thinks it's important to get the best wines possible for our party," Mattie said.

"This is a potent version of hell," Em intoned.

Mattie had always loved that phrase, but Jason didn't seem to notice it.

"Sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do," Jason said.

"Please don't tell her that," Mattie said. "Never tell her that."

Mattie turned back and looked at her daughter, brown hair, a cross between her own and Jason's, a pretty flowered dress. She held the empty cup that she would take with her for her free grape juice, what Jason joked was her alcoholic starter-kit. "It's OK, Baby. We'll be having fun soon."

~

After a long day of hunting for comparable wines at the other local vineyards, they returned to Wabash Ranch and loaded the car with cases of Wabash wines, as Mattie had always known they would. Mattie drove home. Jason, after so much tasting, dozed. Em said, “I know there is more to life than this.”

“Em, it’s fun to be together.”

“It’s insipid,” Em said.

Mattie looked over at Jason. His eyes opened briefly, rolled up to the whites. The traffic was blaring with the weekend flow back toward the bridge, everyone doing just what Mattie, Jason, and Em had done, a day in Napa or Marin. Sometimes Mattie wondered where it came from, the familiar ring in Em’s outbursts, rubbing her like a luffa at the edge of her consciousness, but Mattie didn’t have time for these feelings, verging on *déjà vu*. She had to manage Em in a larger social context even as she encouraged her and made her feel positive about herself. It was a full time job, though no one else would have seen it that way. Mattie reached around her seat and clasped Emily’s ankle, gave it a squeeze. “That’s a terrific vocabulary word,” she said.

~

When they’d first looked at their apartment, the manager had brought them up to the roof and told them the view was amazing. Mattie and Jason agreed. The view from the roof was amazing. So, it was easy enough to call the building manager and arrange to

have the party on the roof, above the fifteenth floor—that was one significant headache out of the way.

On the day of the party, the party-planner, an officious woman in a red pants suit, and two Mexican men tied balloons to the awning on the street and set up valet parking. The caterers were formerly from the California College of Arts and Crafts and the server they'd hired was a student still, a girl dressed in black with a sinuous tattoo that receded from behind her well-studded ear and down her shoulder. She stashed her artist satchel in the corner while the D.J. set up two turntables next to a crate of records on a dolly.

Downstairs, before the guests arrived, Mattie sat Em down on the sofa, under the Rothko-like painting. “You know the difference between public talk and private talk, right?” Mattie asked.

Em looked down and twisted the hem of her dress, bringing it to her mouth to chew. Mattie felt so defeated when Em didn't look her in the eyes. Her intention was never to make Em feel ashamed. “It's nothing to feel bad about. It's just that there are things *we* talk about and things we talk about with other people; secrets we have and things we don't share. Home stuff and not home stuff. Please, Em, look at me. You're not in trouble.”

“Say the first thing that pops in your head,” Em said, sucking on her dress hem.

“No, that's right Em. That's right.”

When Mattie had quit her job to nurse and raise Em, and with no one else to talk to, Mattie took to whispering all she thought to Em, even in those days when Em seemed only to sleep and suck and wet. The constant murmur soothed Em, and Mattie reasoned that of course they should have a close relationship—what relationship was more intimate

than that between a mother and a daughter? There was nothing that Mattie thought or felt that she did not want Em to think about or feel. Mattie did not believe in censoring herself or her daughter in any way. This was life, after all, and it should be unadulterated. And she'd been right to do it. When her daughter began testing, her verbal scores were off the chart. "Just be sensitive. These are the people who work with Daddy."

Mattie had already shared a lot with Em about her father's business, so Mattie knew that Em understood.

~

Jason worked for a video production company in the SOMA district of San Francisco. He had not been part of the original two-man team who founded the business, but had come in later as an audio specialist. The company had begun in community activism; then, they had branched out, through a union contact, taking on lucrative hospital clients. They invested in specialized optical equipment and produced explanatory videos that made people feel good about invasive procedures. Over time, the company expanded, an American dream realized south of Mission. The question was, Jason would say, just how saccharine could he make it? He meant the videos, and there seemed to be no limit. "You can't believe the syrup I dubbed behind this colonoscopy." Music, he said, was the anesthesia. But in time his cynicism faded. It had to, or he wouldn't feel good about himself, and everyone wanted to feel good. Now the production company was a machine that turned out promotional materials for hospitals all

over the world. Jason said, “They think it’s just information, but we’re selling procedures. It’s essential they don’t know we’re selling it.”

All this is not to suggest that Mattie was dissatisfied with Jason or their life together. She wasn’t. She was happy—very happy, as happy as she could possibly imagine being. She did not think Jason was a jerk for working hard and being successful. She absolutely did not equate material suffering with richness of meaning, and therefore happiness. She had never bought into that literary model, not even in college when it was so popular. That was just something she and everyone else studied, like lab animals. She wasn’t delusional. She lived real life.

She and Jason had met in a club on Geary—too loud to talk, but they didn’t need to. He was mixing sound for the band, a hobby he’d picked up in college that ended up paying the bills, and he talked her into staying until he wrapped up his gear. He employed confident fingers on his dials, faders, and toggles, and he turned out to be a very decent person. They ate pancakes at Mel’s dinner and made fun of the ‘50’s kitsch even as they enjoyed it. Mattie would come to feel great loyalty towards Jason’s decency.

On the roof, she moved around the party—a celebration not of Jason’s promotion, though he was now officially an equal partner, but in thanks to all the great people who made his success possible. He couldn’t have done it without them, and that was one of Mattie’s talking points as she chatted with Jason’s co-workers, a diverse group who cruised like sharks on the roof terrace, the young-bloods, as Jason called them. Mattie made sure the young-bloods had what they needed, taking it in stride that when she asked what they did, no one—not one of them—asked her what she did, and maybe she was just

a little thankful that they did not. “It’s a beautiful view up here,” each said. “You must come up here all the time.”

“Not as much as I would like,” she would answer, and they would exchange a sympathetic look. Nobody had as much free time as she would like.

Often Mattie found herself talking about the wine—and thank god Jason had provided a narrative for it. That was what Jason had really done, and he was so smart in that way. So Mattie told the story of Penelope Wabash and Jason’s connection to the Wabash Ranch. She told the story of Penelope Wabash playing *Estragon* in high school, already hints of her future promise. She described Jason’s affable cross-examination of the vintner, and as she drank a little more she began playing the parts of Jason and the vintner, taking on the voices bantering back and forth. The too serious young-bloods, not quite sure of the tone, raised their glasses and agreed the work had really paid off, assimilating the most essential information: connections and a social expertise were necessary in getting ahead, but one said *she* should have been the actress, not Penelope Wabash. He was flirting with her, sucking up, and why shouldn’t he? She was Jason’s wife and Jason was now #3. She laughed and shook her head, taken with it, feeling her hair swishing on her shoulders as she recalled the codes of flattered schoolgirls—those she had never been able to get exactly right.

She’d drunk perhaps a little too much, and overhearing Jason from where he stood near the peanut noodles, his voice caught on the wind—“You think you’re far away, but you’re never too far from the Bay,”—she excused herself and wandered towards her husband, smiling, glancing at the walls around the patio. Plates and cups blowing down onto the gardens below would mean complaints, and she had told the girl with the tiger’s

paw on her neck to keep an eye on that. Tattoos and ear studs did not mean the girl lacked a positive work ethic, Mattie thought as she slid past young-bloods eating quiche and tabouli, and heard Jason's voice drop into a serious and sonorous tone that he jokingly called at home, "*sonirious*." He leaned in. "Every day is a challenge. Every day is different. If you like meeting challenges, then you're going to like it here with us," Jason said.

"I do," said the young man. He was a streamlined and good-looking Asian, dressed in an expensive tennis shirt with an upturned collar. "I love challenges. That's what I live for."

Their daughter Em stood near, in jeans and a zipper sweater with tassels on the sleeves. She had a small plate of cucumber salad. She looked up. "They're all white hands, when they're not wearing green rubber gloves."

Mattie brushed up and put a hand around her daughter's shoulder. "Anyone need anything?"

Jason shot her a look, and Mattie understood that this wasn't Em's first comment.

Em continued, "They use Asians for the operations, in the gloves, because their hands are small and stay out of the way, but they use big white hands the rest of the time, you know, to count the money."

Jason laughed. "We do what it takes." He raised his eyes towards the young man. "The question is, are you willing to do what it takes?"

"Everybody becomes what they despise most," Em said.

The young man made a parting remark, and Jason turned towards Mattie, smiling, but the strain showed in his neck, which was swollen with understanding. Just then Phil

came out onto the terrace. Their conversation, perfunctory as it would have been, would still have to wait. They'd been expecting Phil, "Number One," as he was called, but he was late. Slightly heavy, red cheeked and with a trimmed grey beard, he was accompanied by another man Mattie did not recognize, dark curly hair, wisps of gray at the temple and in his sideburns. In the closing distance Mattie saw large, wide set eyes, a nutty brown. Phil steered the stranger's elbow. Matte cast her eyes down the length of the elegant stranger to his thin-soled leather shoes.

Jason whispered to Mattie, "Just say hello to Phil."

Mattie bent down to her precious girl, tried to communicate through her touch that Em might keep it cool just for this moment talking to her father's boss. "OK, Em? Please." When she stood, she rose along the length of the stranger, who was looking at her.

Phil introduced Gismos, a hospital administrator from Florence. He shook hands with Jason and took Mattie's hand lightly and turned her wrist just slightly upward. He didn't kiss her hand, but she thought he was about to. "Floor—en—cee—ah," he corrected.

"Jason's beautiful wife," Phil said.

Mattie blushed. Phil was a flatterer, but it was the wine again. The wind tickled her neck, and gesturing, turning her head, a poster she'd seen in a café, the famous black and white photo of Italian men on a street corner lurching after a young American girl, rushed in on her. Mattie had gone into the café in Hayes Valley on a whim to buy pastries. "Thank you," she said to Phil. She'd meant to say her name to the Italian.

"You're homosexual," Em said to Phil.

“Em,” Mattie said and pulled her close.

Phil caught sight of Em and laughed. He knelt and stroked her cheek.

“My mother’s homosexual, too,” said Em. “She likes sex with men.” Mattie felt the heat rise in her cheeks. “How about you? Are you homosexual?” Em continued, addressing the Italian.

Phil interrupted. “Well, I am. You’re right. I haven’t had a chance to ask Gismos yet.” He gave a wry smile, looked up at Gismos, and then raised himself. “But I will.”

“I did not know it was that kind of party,” Gismos said graciously in his accented English.

~

Later, loosing track of Em and looking for her downstairs in the apartment, Mattie stumbled upon the Italian administrator in the hallway waiting for the bathroom. Mattie nodded and smiled and remembered he had a funny name, like a mechanical toy, like widget maybe, and then she remembered and felt self-conscious. She did not want to say *Gismos*, but it rang in her ears as a beautiful name.

“You have a lovely home,” he said.

“We’re looking around,” Mattie said. She was going to say something about their agent and moving down the Peninsula, but she realized had taken the wrong tack, needlessly personal, when she was only supposed to say, ‘Thank you,’ and nothing more. Then she wanted to explain she was only looking for her daughter, but she could not

quite get that out either and instead leaned against the hallway wall as if she too was waiting for the bathroom. When the toilet flushed, Em came out and looked at her mother and then at the man.

“You must have an intriguing penis,” Em said. Then she skipped down the hallway, her tassels swinging in counter point.

When Mattie was overcoming her shyness, she realized that to say the right things in a natural way, you must think the right things—that was the way to develop confidence and ease. But Em always said the exact wrong thing, and still Mattie felt thrilled by her daughter’s brashness, wherever it came from and whether Em understood what she said or not. Mattie watched Em skip and then slide into her habitual wide-footed turn at the end of the hall and disappear around the corner. Mattie turned back to Gismos and raised her eyebrows as she’d seen the administrator manage earlier, completely non-committal, without suggestion, and tried to think: *We’re all adults. We know children say things.* But that thought collided with another, the idea, put into her head by her daughter, that perhaps the Italian hospital administrator *did* have *an intriguing penis*—whatever that might mean, and in the end no words came, none sprang to her lips. She remained mute, feeling only an acute and electrified blank.

“You are welcome,” he said.

She parroted the delicious phrase. “You are welcome?”

“You are welcome.” He gestured toward the bathroom door.

She wanted to laugh, or say something witty. Saying anything would have broken the spell right there. She did not end it. She could not. She looked up and down the hall. Then she stepped inside the bathroom, began to close the door—she’d never needed to go

to the bathroom she realized—and then opened it, fanning herself with a light breeze from the hallway, the scent of the Italian hospital administrator from *Floor—en—cee—ah*, his gray temples, his brown eyes. She opened the door wider, cast her eyes from him to the black and white bathroom tile, one of the features of the apartment. She was not speaking or even thinking. It was there and it wasn't—the suggestion that he step into the bathroom with her. He narrowed his dark eyebrows, and crossed his arms, not firmly, but as a bird might raise and lay down its wings, each feather in place. Everything he did seemed light and effortless. He pretended he did not understand, because he was Italian, because he could not interpret her language, but there was no language and he understood. Mattie looked at his thin-soled shoes, the leather uppers just the barest sheath for his feet and long toes. The creases in one smoothed as the those of the other thickened, his weight shifting from one foot to the toe of the other, and the forward most shoe, just the toe, slipped almost imperceptibly away from her, its rasp inaudible on the polyurethaned floor. She closed the door.

What had she done? Then, staring at the mirror, the words for what happened came flooding in on her at once. She had suggested a stranger come into the bathroom with her. She felt physically ill. She gripped the sink. Why had she done it? Her girlfriends had talked about the anonymous fuck, of course. And she had thought about it, but it seemed crazy. She did not obsess about it, like Lisa. It was lurid, went against everything she believed about relationships, and therefore was attractive as a taboo—but that was it. And even now he was just on the other side of the door. She was trapped. Was she a slut? What if she found that out only now, working on middle age, a mother, married, trapped? Would that be the road she would go down, a life of increasingly slutty

humiliations until she died? She looked in the mirror. It couldn't be. Of course, she had fooled around in college and at the start of her professional career, much more than she admitted, even to herself, but so had everyone. She didn't think she was somehow, secretly, sluttish. The other option then, some unhappiness in her marriage, was equally ridiculous. Was she so dissatisfied with Jason? She didn't think so. And then she wondered if she could even imagine someone, say, behind her, the Italian administrator for example, his torso moving, hair running up his belly to his chest? She couldn't even imagine it—she was sure of it, or even want that, and as she looked in the mirror, it seemed that she was looking at a movie of herself, and playing her was Penelope Wabash, just pretty enough but with a more exciting life off stage.

When she poked her head out the door, Gismos was gone. Maybe he'd pissed in one of their potted plants. Perversely, she almost wished it, and hoped weeks from now she would smell the acrid urine and remember this moment and feel horrible about herself. Smells reminded her of things, and she deserved to feel bad. Or maybe she would not feel horrible. She didn't know. Maybe she would just change the potting soil. Maybe the plant would die and she would throw the whole thing out. But she knew for sure that she did not want to see *him*, not just this second, so she darted across the hall and into her daughter's bedroom.

Snapping the door shut slowly, from the other side of her daughter's door, she listened. She moved her feet back from the bottom of the door in case anyone should peek under and see her shadow—childish, but maybe someone would look under the door, and in a moment, she heard the soft sound of leather soles on the polyurethane floors of the hallway. The bathroom door opened and clicked close. Her heart beat hard

in her chest, seemed to thump against her daughter's bedroom door where she leaned against it. Soon the toilet flushed and the faucets ran, and then the bathroom door clicked open again and closed again. When the hall was silent, Mattie retreated from the door, passed her daughter's plastic tea table and little chairs, her shelves stacked with irregular sized children's books—there only for nostalgia since Em was reading more advanced works now—and her few plastic toys, and sat on her daughter's bed, then curled up pulling the pink and blue nylon comforter up to her chin, and she began to cry, not with sadness but sudden exhaustion. Her face was hot and she was thirsty.

In some while, Mattie heard the door, and then saw Em's strap shoes step along the green carpet. Her daughter kneeled at the side of the bed.

“Hey baby,” Mattie said.

“Hey, baby,” Em said and brushed her mother's hair.

Her daughter's fingertips felt good. Mattie never stopped herself from saying anything to Em, and looking at Em's round chubby face, she saw how, just a little bit, Em looked like Henry, though Mattie could not draw up a living picture of her brother and had to rely instead on memories of photos she'd seen. She thought of this likeness and nothing about propositioning the stranger, which had, for the moment, flown out of her mind. Mattie told Em how she and Henry would go to the bathroom together and Mattie would squat and Henry would take out his thing—his penis, Mattie said to Em (Mattie didn't use euphemisms with her daughter), and they would mix their urine together in the toilet. And because of Em's face, how pretty and round, Mattie said, “You remind me of him sometimes.”

“We used to do that at school a lot last year,” Em said. “It was appropriate to our age group.”

“Baby?”

“Baby,” Em said.

“Do you ever wish for a brother?”

“Do you?”

“Please, baby, just say something for yourself?”

When she looked at Em, at her fresh brown hair, her pudgy cheeks, the vibrancy of her youth, Mattie’s frustration melted away. She knew there was no difference between herself and her daughter. They were both an amalgam of all the experiences and ideas they had ever had, the less popular, more ambiguous ideas buried under those they learned to reiterate to themselves daily or those conveniently reiterated for them. This was the sum total of their identities.

Em repeated, “Can you say something for yourself?”

Mattie touched her child’s face. Em looked back at her mother, and Mattie saw that Em was calm. Em probably took care of other kids at school, had that necessary coldness that people took for compassion. People thought the same of Mattie when she was a child.

When Mattie had gotten up to speak at her brother’s funeral, she had been encouraged to say exactly what she wanted. They’d convinced her to do it by saying Henry would have done it for her. So, even though they didn’t go often, she knew the church and the man who usually stood up and the way he talked. She was nervous. She was only a little girl after all, and all the grown-ups knew exactly how to handle grief, it

seemed, and she didn't even know what grief was, but she knew there was something momentous expected from her, that she was supposed to help everybody. She unfolded her paper and dropped it. The paper with her own little paragraph on it in her child's block letters caught a flutter of air from her hand, and as she grabbed for it, the paper spilled away and settled to the ground sliding in front of the altar. She had to step in front of the altar, where no one was supposed to step, and she didn't know which way to face as she bent over. She knew she shouldn't show her butt to everyone in the pews, but she also knew she shouldn't show it to Jesus hanging over the altar and looking down at her. She knew that no matter what, what she was doing was disrespectful and humiliating. She was stuck. She picked the paper up as quickly as she could, couldn't even say how she'd ended up doing it, and hurried back to the podium. When she looked at the paper, it was wrong side up, then upside down. She heard the rustling of the people in the pews. She couldn't focus on them. Her brain seemed to spin in her skull. All she wanted to do was tell everyone the truth about how she felt, but she knew that wasn't what was called for. She didn't know what they wanted, but she knew now that what she had written was not right. She saw her parents with tight smiles, thinking maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. When she got the paper straight, there were only six lines. Her paragraph about the death of her brother was short, but she never got past the first words. "Oh Brother!" she intoned. Everyone in the church burst out laughing.

Mattie's daughter was still a few years younger than Mattie was the moment she ran from the podium and found out that marble was too hard to sink into and disappear. By the side of her own little bed, Em held her mother's hand. "I wouldn't ever want to share you with anyone," Em said.

~

Mattie and Em walked hand in hand down the hall. As they passed the kitchen, Mattie saw Jason. She had a moment of worry. Had the Italian administrator said something? Made a joke? What was her story going to be? Jason turned around, saw them, and smiled. His cheeks were flushed. “Well, I wasn’t going to open this.” His fingers were around the neck of a 2002 Grand Reserve Zinfandel and the other hand cupped the bottom of the bottle. “But I’m having an argument.”

“You chilled it ahead of time just for this,” Em said.

“You know your father too well,” Jason said.

They all walked down the carpeted hall together toward the elevator. Nothing had happened, nothing at all. The stairs were slower, and twelve flights, but Mattie said, “I’m going to take the stairs.” She wanted to be alone. She knew the best way to do that was to ask them to join her. “Let’s all walk it.”

“No way,” Jason said.

“No one is looking at your ass anymore,” Em said.

“Hey,” Jason said, and wrapped a hand around Em’s head and pulled her in. “I look at it.” The elevator arrived. It was old, and Jason told Em to watch her hands as he opened the door manually with a counter lever and then squeezed the safety gate to the side, as if the sum of existence was the preservation of the hands, but Mattie heard what it was: worry—worry that took the place of worry that took the place of worry. It gave him something to say, and he, she, they always needed to be saying something. Mattie turned away from them and started up the stairs. Mattie heard Em say, “Stop telling me don’t.”

And she thought, *Isn't that exactly what life is, learning what not to do, and the constant worry that we might do it?* But even as Mattie thought this, the elevator closed, her family was gone, and the thought was lost, and she began to concentrate on doing: engaging her gluteus maximus on every step. Engage, contract, and step. And she soon thought nothing at all. Steps. She rose higher, back toward the party.

On the roof, she saw that Jason's argument was with the Italian administrator. The administrator and Jason and Phil stood near the caterer's tent and held their glasses up, not too high, and ducked their heads to look through at the salmon-color of the Zinfandel. "If this doesn't change your mind about California wines, nothing will," Jason said. The young-bloods looked out over the Bay, wondering when they could get away to some real fun. The caterer with the tattoo and the stud earrings leaned in a corner writing in a blank book. The D.J. bent over and organized his records.

~

That night Mattie and Jason lay in bed. Jason, still tipsy even after his shower, said, "I mean, she says a lot of weird things." They'd been talking about how great the party had gone, but now as always they were talking about Em. "We were in the elevator and out of nowhere she says, 'I'm gonna leave you.'" Jason rolled up on one elbow and faced Mattie. "I mean she gives me a hard time, but this was, you know, it's going too far."

Mattie thought about that for a second and breathed in a strange smell. The smell reminded her of a long time ago, but she didn't know where or of what. And then she did. "You smell like cigarettes," Mattie said.

"I brushed my teeth."

"But did you have one?" Mattie said.

"I did," he said. "I smoked one with Phil's friend. He had Italian cigarettes."

"Italian cigarettes?" Mattie said. She felt ambiguously about the smell. "It smells horrible," she said. "Like. . ." She couldn't think of what it smelled like. She laid her book over her chest, looked Jason, the faint hint of tobacco still there. And then she knew: it smelled like leaving. And Mattie remembered the mirror, imagined a stranger behind her like a lucid dream she could move around in and manipulate. It wasn't a good dream or a bad one. Someday she wouldn't be there. "It's OK about the smoking. Just don't take it up again, OK?" she said.

"I'm worried about Em," Jason said.

So was Mattie. The truth was, they'd been counting on this promotion. They'd calculated mortgages with a banker. They had the hungriest agent on the Peninsula waiting for their call. That extra money, the bump, as Phil called it, was already part of their plan, had already been spent, and what occurred to Mattie was that they might have to take Em to a psychologist—if Em was thinking of running away, if, God forbid, she was suicidal. "I'm gonna leave you." What could it mean? A responsible parent couldn't take a chance. But where would the money come from? They wanted the nicer neighborhoods and nicer schools of the Peninsula—that was part of their plan for Em, too. Mattie didn't want to even begin to negotiate this anxiety, and so she didn't speak

any of these things to Jason. Instead, she wanted to touch him, as much for the smell of cigarettes as anything else. But it wasn't the right moment for that either, not when they would have to make difficult decisions.

She stroked the spine of her book, fixed her lips, and looked up without a clear focal point, through the air and through the ceiling, as if she were looking through the apartment above and above that, as if she could see everyone who lived above them in the same apartment as they did, different sofas, different paintings, but she did not know them and they did not know her. No one lived a life just like hers.

As Jason rolled over, Mattie breathed in the warm smell of his body and her own smell and bleach and laundry detergent that came from under their comforter. Em was a problem, wasn't she? But Mattie couldn't let herself think that. Her girl. Her daughter. Em was Mattie's own heart and skin. Her concern was too great for words. Hadn't Mattie learned that the best she could do was evolve into the person who could be happy? And wasn't that good enough for Em? Wasn't that what life was all about, to be ready for happiness when it arrived? She reached over and turned out the light, lay back down. She was sure Em hadn't meant anything by saying that to Jason, just as Mattie hadn't meant to make everyone laugh at her brother's funeral. She couldn't have wanted laughter? Em didn't want them to worry. So Mattie would have to be delicate, but she thought she could explain it to Em, that life was like this—sometimes you said things you didn't mean.

Mattie peeled off the comforter and stepped from the bed and out to the hallway. She passed the bathroom—for her, it would be the notorious bathroom for a little while, then it would not be, but the bathroom's black and white tiles would always be a feature

of the apartment. She was not somnambulating, but it was close. Her thoughts strolled just as she did, down the hall, into the living room, dark, except for the lights that shone through the vertical blinds from the city, from the bridge, from the cars passing over the bay, and she stepped in bare feet on cool hardwood floors past the sofa, past the painting, to her window and looked through thick waxy leaves, past rooftops at their one little view of the bay, deep and blue and rushing out to sea and back in again with the moon, not theirs but they were happily paying for it, for the opportunity to see its surface, a beating heart filled with the hope that something extraordinary might still happen.

The *Fantôme* of Fatma

A bell made from one piece of hammered steel hung outside the Chief's door. Inside, they sat on pillows with a silver tea tray in front of them. The Chief wore an embroidered white tunic and black headscarf, had clear eyes and a trimmed gray beard. Miles thought him beautiful, but then felt guilty that he'd objectified the Chief in a way that he wouldn't objectify a white person. But then again, so many of the Malians seemed beautiful. They drank tea together. Miles glanced at Wolfy as she brought the teacup to her lips, wondered what she felt, if she were as happy as he was being here in the intimacy of the Chief's hut. Beyond Wolfy, Deon sat with folded legs under a loose skirt and fidgeted with its hem. The Chief glanced at her often, speaking in a French made more exotic by his sonorous and clipped pronunciation. Miles heard the word *escarpment* and *attention*.

Karl, leaning over his folded knees, gestured with one hand. "He says if we want to climb on the rock, we have to be respectful of the spirits that live there, and respect the ancestors of the people who lived there from before, in villages in the cliffs, and that we should not damage or take anything we find." Karl turned back to the Chief. "Also, he says to have good experiences."

"Ask him where we can put up a new route," Rodney said.

"I don't think he knows about the climbing," Karl said.

"Ask him anyway," Rodney said, flexing his wrist back and forth, stretching his forearm muscles.

Karl asked, and the Chief responded. Karl said, "He says it is all new."

Quietly and away, Rodney said, “Well, we know that’s not true.”

It had been Miles’ dream to come to Mali, and he’d done the research. He knew that the fingers of Fatma had been climbed before, before Europeans, before Dogons, before people who came from elsewhere, before history and names. The people used sticks braced in the cracks to negotiate difficult sections, had villages and sacred places on the peaks to worship and follow the stars, to remain safe from their predators. At that time, the flora and fauna had been more dense. The Harmattan had not yet come and more water fell. But Rodney was concerned with recent history, with climbers bagging first ascents and naming their routes.

They drank more tea. Karl talked with the Chief, and Miles tried to understand. Rodney and Wolfy talked about getting on the rock, what grades they might want to start with. Wolfy was the best climber among them and a large reason Rodney wanted Miles and Wolfy along. Then the Chief addressed Deon. She smiled and then laughed, jutting her chin out. “What does he want?” she asked.

Karl said, “He asks why you are here.”

“Why is he asking me?” she said, laughing again. “Don’t I look like a rock climber?” Karl didn’t say anything, only extended his hand towards her. She said, “Tell him, I’m just here to see.”

The Chief spoke to Karl, and Karl asked Deon, “Are your people from Mali?”

The Chief smiled.

“God no,” she said. “They’re from Oakland.”

When they'd finished their tea, the Chief stood at the door and looked only at Deon. Miles caught the word *fantôme*. After addressing her, Karl interpreted, "He says there is a ghost who frequents the rock."

Driving in a *batchee* to the camp, they commented on the quaint and superstitious Chief of the village.

~

Their first night in the Spaniard's camp, Miles scanned the crags with Rodney's image-stabilizing binoculars. Le Main de Fatma turned out into the desert like four fingers and a thumb, the buttress as the open palm. The Hombori Mountains, the rising escarpment, and the spires of Le Main de Fatma pulled what little moisture there was from the air, and the villagers in Hombori pumped up the ancient waters that had leached into the aquifer. But at the Spaniard's camp there was no water, and they had to bring their own.

Not many climbers came to the Sahel and very few Americans, so they were alone in the Mali desert at the end of the season. Soon the Harmattan winds would blow day and night, bearing the Sahel and the distant Sahara: sands and bones and desiccated flesh. In the center of their enclosure was a platform and thatched hut, and Miles and Wolfy sat on a rock wall, one of a maze of stonewalls set against the persistent evening wind. Miles lay the binoculars down. As the sun set off to their left along the orange desert floor, he whispered, "You excited?"

"Totally," she said. They stared into the Sahel and the hand rising from the sand and scrub brush. Echoing faintly in the wind was the song of the *muezzin*, the call to prayer, and on the road, some distance away, a bus stopped, allowing passengers to exit

and pray under the gaze of Le Main de Fatma. After talking to the Spaniard, Rodney returned to tell them that he didn't think the Spaniard would help them find a new route.

"He wants them for himself," Rodney said. "That's what I think."

"Sounds paranoid," Miles said.

"We're nobodies. That's the thing."

Miles put a hand around Wolfy's knees. "Maybe we can't just come in here and colonize the place," Miles said, looked off at the two-thousand-foot quartzite towers, red and pink with iron oxide. "Personally, I just want to climb."

"That's the way things are done," Rodney said. "The way life marches on. This into that. Colonizing. It's pretty basic."

"Yeah," Deon said, rising from her suitcase on the platform. "Just like fucking."

"I heard that," Wolfy said, imitating Deon's black English which Deon herself imitated. They smiled at each other. Deon took a step closer and they hooked each other's little fingers and pulled them apart.

For a Divinity student, Deon swore a lot, and when Karl mentioned it, she said, "What? I can't believe in God and say, 'Fuck?'" Karl was flirting with her, but Deon didn't notice. She was interested in Rodney. Miles rubbed Wolfy's knee, thinking first that it was nice not to worry about such things, then thinking just of Wolfy's warmth, then of their circle of light and the desert, of Rodney, of the difficulty of doing anything, sand and ancient people and time and of a colossal stone head lying in the middle of nowhere. The face with blunt features had eyes without lids. Once he recognized he was thinking of "Ozymandias," he struggled to recall the words of the poem but couldn't.

~

The next night around the fire, Deon told them that when hiking earlier that day, she'd come to a pass between two boulders when she'd heard a call that she couldn't identify. When she looked around, she didn't see anything or anyone. She put her hand on one of the boulders to step through and then heard the cry again and small rocks scattered about in front of her. This time when she looked up she saw an African boy leaning out from a crevice. She stopped and then the boy came down. Deon said she hadn't been frightened, mainly, she thought, because of the way the boy moved down from the rock and seemed to come toward her. She described his movements as loose. From a distance, he urged her to go around the boulders by another way, gesticulating with hands and the movements of his arms.

Rodney and Karl said they'd seen an African boy climbing on the cliffs, too. Rodney said, "All free-solo. No rope. We trailed him, and then he disappeared. I mean, I saw some of the things he was climbing."

Rather than scout lines, Miles and Wolfy climbed on the western edge of the formation and hadn't seen anything except desert, sun, giant birds hovering in the thermals, and bats, cooing aggressively in the cracks where Miles and Wolfy had to wedge their hands to climb. Miles drank wine from his purple-stained plastic cup. Wolfy leaned her head against Miles' shoulder. He stretched out his stiff legs.

Karl said, "I've seen free-solos."

"Would you do it?" Rodney interrupted, taping a cloth around a stick, taping a carabiner to that, a tool he'd use to push bats further in the cracks.

Karl continued, "He was climbing only in leather shoes."

Later, sharing Tasty-Bites, vegan Indian food in plastic pouches, with their hosts, they asked about the boy they'd seen. The Spaniard's wife, a Peul woman, had cataracts in her left eye that occasionally flashed opal white in the glare of the fire. With a hood over her head, she spoke in a mix of Fulfulde Massina and Spanish, and her husband translated in his lilting English. She said the boy appeared several years ago on the cliffs, that he lived in the old caves, hid at night. Some villagers left food for him tied to a post where the dogs would not get it, or at the base of the rock. Mostly, she said, he survived like the ancient people, pulling bats from the cracks or birds' eggs, taking water from the cisterns in the rock. She said the village people tried to get him out once, but they couldn't, and they saw his presence as the will of God. "Now," the Spaniard said, translating, "he steals in the village and is treated with reverence. It is the rumor his sister is sold in slavery."

Rodney said, "There isn't slavery anymore."

The Spaniard in brightly colored parachute pants crossed his legs. "It is here. It is in your country. Sex slavery. Agricultural slavery. People promise dreams," he said. "If that."

~

Miles was the first one awake and out of his tent the next morning to see the *fantôme* of Fatma crouching on their wall, overlooking their camp. He was folded upon himself, noticeably lean and squat, about the size of Wolfy. His arms were long and embraced his knees, and he wore shorts and a dirty red T-shirt. His toenails poked from the holes worn at the tips of his shoes.

Miles said, "Hello. *Bonjour.*"

The *fantôme* didn't say anything. Miles noted his elastic ease, his dark skin chalky with dust, his thick cracked hands and strong forearms. Miles approached and held out his hand. The boy unfolded one arm and placed his hand into Miles' hand. The boy did not grip with his hand at all, but only let it lie there. Miles felt the dry, calloused skin.

Miles could not discern the boy's motives for crouching there and left it at that. "Okay," he said. Strange things happen, Miles thought. He pumped the fuel canister to start the stove for tea. As the others emerged from their tents, Miles remained quiet and nodded in the direction of the wall and the boy. Miles then fixed a bowl of granola and soymilk and brought it over to the *fantôme*. The boy did not take it, and Miles put it down on the stone wall next to his feet.

The boy remained motionless, taking them in, until Deon emerged. Then, just discernibly, his eyes followed her. "I think he likes you," Karl said.

"At least someone does," Deon said, and laughed. "He probably just wants a glass of water," she said. She poured water into a used plastic cup and rubbed the inside with her finger, tossed the purple liquid out onto the sand. Then she filled the cup with fresh water and handed it to the boy. He took it, watched her, then drank. When he was done, Deon filled the cup again and gave it to him. His eyes showed no emotion, but the corners of his mouth turned very slightly upward.

"You've made a friend," Wolfy said. She approached the boy and then hoisted herself up onto the wall to sit next to him. She ate her granola and then motioned for him to eat his. After she placed it into his hands, he did begin to eat, pushing the oats into his mouth with his fingers.

Karl tried speaking to the boy in French and then Spanish. The boy didn't respond. Rodney said someone should get the Spaniard's wife. "Maybe she can talk to him."

Miles ran to the Spaniard's hut. The Peul woman and her husband were already up and Miles motioned for them to come quickly, used the word *fantôme*. Neither the Spaniard nor his wife seemed interested, but they came along. Back at their site, near their platform and hut, the Peul woman tried speaking to the *fantôme* in Fulfulde. The boy turned his head at a few words. Then she spoke to her husband.

The Spaniard said, "A great many languages are spoken in the Sahel. He doesn't speak her language, she doesn't think so. Maybe he may not speak." Then pointing at scar tissue on the boy's shoulder, he said, "He has come from a war. Straight, deep. A machete."

"He called to me yesterday," Deon said, and she told her story of the boulders. The Spaniard asked a question or two and then said a Mamba snake had a territory between those rocks.

"A black Mamba?" Deon said.

"I brought antivenin," Rodney said. "I'll leave it here if we don't use it."

"A lot of good that would do me," Deon said. "Out in the middle of fucking nowhere. Anyway, I'd prefer not to get bit by a fucking black Mamba."

"But there is no reason to go over there," the Spaniard said.

Deon tilted her head. "Well, I was lost then. Wasn't I? I suppose that's my fault."

~

When they hefted their gear and headed for the col between the two spires, Suri Tondo and Wamderdou, they were surprised that the *fantôme* got up, too, and came with them, sometimes following and sometimes leading as the group worked its way around Wamderdou. Miles trailed, marveling at what was occurring. The boy wanted to be with them, but Miles wasn't sure why. Finally, they ascended a scree field and arrived at the east face of Wamderdou.

The *fantôme* stopped at the base of the rock where a chute led to a chimney and then out to a ledge. He motioned with his hands. Then he began to climb.

"Hold on," Rodney said, but it did no good. The boy slunk up and around the quartzite crack, quartz sand and silica fused under tectonic compression, fine-grained and smooth. He wedged in his feet and ascended, more graceful than even Wolfy, and he did it without a rope. Rodney backed up from the cliff and scanned with his binoculars. "Is this an unknown line?" he asked. Karl looked over his French climbing book.

"I don't see anything," he said.

Rodney looked up. "It's beautiful. A natural." And then he said, "But look at that roof." He passed the binoculars to Karl, and then Miles and Wolfy had a look. Towards the top of the climb a thick slab of rock edged out horizontally from the cliff face. For the climber it would be like a roof edge, and from the base, to Miles' eyes, the roof looked substantial, jutting out maybe fifteen feet.

"What do you think of that?" Miles said.

Wolfy said, "Let's do it."

Miles and Wolfy unpacked their gear and stepped into their harnesses, and Wolfy clipped gear to her loops.

“So that’s it?” Deon said. She took out her Emerson and found a place to sit in the shade.

“You knew we’d be climbing,” Miles said.

“But who could imagine it would be nothing else?” Deon said.

“Maybe tomorrow, after we bag this,” Rodney said, “we’ll take a trip. Maybe the next day.”

The two pairs followed the *fantôme* past a crack and through a bulge. Wolfy led the pitch as Miles belayed. Every now and again, she’d scream as her hand brushed a bat, but she pushed on and finally stopped screaming. Wolfy built her anchor on a ledge some hundred and fifty feet off the ground and tied into it. Miles followed, yanking the placed gear from the cracks as Wolfy belayed from above. Miles could follow this route but the climbing was at the outside of his physical and technical limit. He marveled again at the boy’s grace and his ease at climbing without a rope.

Miles’ pitch moved through a deep red-colored stone. The climbing was less strenuous, hand-sized cracks, larger holds. He moved onto a face with several small roofs, edged between them, and made a solid placement, compressing a cam and letting its wedged teeth expand in the crack. He then moved along and built an anchor with placements of nuts and cams in a flake and a crack. Finally, he rested on a double hump covered in bird and bat shit. When Rodney arrived at Miles’ belay station, Rodney took over the lead. Miles cautioned him to shorten up the pitch when he found a good place to set an anchor. “Three pieces in different features.”

“I’ve probably logged more face time than you,” Rodney said. That was probably true. Though Miles had been climbing for many years and had introduced Rodney to

climbing only five years ago, Rodney had a trust fund and could climb whenever he wanted.

Rodney's pitch and then Karl's were easier still, passing over a black slab mid-afternoon. Above was their first major roof, some six hundred feet above the desert, under which the *fantôme* traversed left, following a ledge that moved away from the roof and around. To see him up so high off the desert floor, climbing without a rope, made Miles shiver. But Miles understood that the *fantôme* knew exactly what he could do and what he couldn't, and he did only what he could accomplish—unlike Miles and the rest of them, trying to accomplish something beyond their ability.

Rodney stood out from the rock, laying his weight against his anchor, clipping pro onto his gear loops. "I've been thinking," Rodney said. "He's taking the escape to the right. We'll go straight up and over that roof. That's the natural line, and that will be our first ascent. Straight up the east face of Wamderdou."

Wolfy was game. She took the lead and Miles belayed. He watched her and then looked off into the distance for a moment. The sun had come around, and the heat rippled off the desert. Above, a Maribu stork floated in a thermal. A dust devil swirled at the desert floor, rising a hundred feet, well below them. Sweat dripped down Miles' back and pooled at his harness. The stork's shadow rippled across the rock, passed over Miles, a moment's relief from the African sun.

Wolfy found a cam placement above in the crack, clipped the rope in the carabiner and then made her way up twenty-five feet and approached the first crux of the climb, a blank section without visible handholds in the shade of the roof. Miles leaned out from the rock so he could watch her, clenched the rope in his right hand, pushed

down and away from the belay device. He fed rope as Wolfy moved, keeping a little slack in the line. If she didn't have the rope just as she liked it, she would have trouble. The hardest moves required perfect technique but also total body control. If a move was hard enough, Miles knew, Wolfy would search for a way to fail. In those milliseconds, if she found something was not right with Miles' belay, she could blame him rather than rely on herself.

Her muscles in her shoulder and back striated then spread as she mantled off an edge, her fingers curled and turned down and away on the small crimp of rock. She extended her shoulder and arm and stretched her other hand to a smooth bulge of stone, blindly finding it with her fingers as her face pressed the rock. Her fingers walked over the bulge, and Miles was aware that her balance shifted.

She'd woven her blonde hair in two pigtails, and they hung down. The crux move was only a question of balance, and Wolfy, if she got her head straight, could do it. Wolfy's fingers hesitated as they tried to gain purchase on the sloping rock. "Watch me," she yelled.

Miles' nerves jumped. She was getting mental. Miles leaned out and shouted into the air, "I am, Baby. Stay focused. Eye of the tiger."

Wolfy yelled, "Are you watching?"

Miles saw she needed to get her core muscles involved in the move and try to gain momentum from the right toe, which she'd left dangling. That was the way to handle the move. Miles was also aware that he'd never be able to make the move himself. He would not be able to follow her.

Once she'd edged her fingers over the sloper, she swung her leg below it and found a toehold. She pulled, stuck her hand into a finger-sized crack, and was up. She set two pieces below the great roof that now loomed over her head, but the sun was getting low and the wind began to come up. A few bats had crawled from the cracks, flapped and squeaked in their erratic spirals. She and Rodney decided to leave their anchor placements and try the roof the next day. Miles would have agreed if he'd been consulted. His legs were stiff with the tension of standing out from the rock. Rodney said he would rappel down from the top to look at the great roof tomorrow, see if there was any way they could get over it.

They took the *fantôme's* escape route right, rappelled one length down the north side of the rock and then down-climbed into the col between Wamderdou and Suri Tondo. They found the *fantôme* sitting with Deon in front of the east face.

"There you fucking are," Deon said. They made apologies, explained their troubles.

"What were you doing?" Wolfy asked her. Miles looked around, saw that the *fantôme* had climbed away.

Deon looked back at them. "He just sat here. I don't know. I read him Emerson."

~

The next morning the *fantôme* was again on their wall overlooking their tents and hut when Miles got up. When he saw him there, he said hello, poured him a glass of water, and handed it to him. The *fantôme* drank it.

When everyone was awake, Miles said maybe they should go the fifteen kilometers to Hombori. This was for Deon's sake. Rodney looked at Karl. They wouldn't be going to town. Miles didn't think he was testing Wolfy, but perhaps he was.

"But we're going to finish that route," Wolfy said. She looked at Deon and then back to Miles.

"I'd like to see a little of town," Miles said. Wolfy said she would go with Miles. After Rodney had checked with the Spaniard to make sure the east face line was new, he and Karl returned to Wamderdou carrying their fixed lines. Like part of the group, the *fantôme* followed Deon, squeezed into the Spaniard's car next to Miles and Wolfy, and closed the door. He unrolled the window. He'd been in a car before.

The townspeople gathered around them, as interested in the *fantôme* as in the foreigners. They walked through the market place, divided between men on one side, roasting meats and smoking cigarettes, and women selling goods laid out on cloth on the other. Wolfy declined meat offered to her on a stick, but Miles ate some. He allowed himself to eat meat if he deemed it culturally appropriate. He passed on roasted bat, but later he had a plate of fish. He threw the scraps on the ground as he'd seen others do, and children ran up to eat from the bones. They knew that, as a tourist, Miles would not have stripped the fish of all its meat.

The sun grew hot. A small boy told them the Chief wanted to see them. They met the Chief in his compound. He wanted to examine the *fantôme*. The boy stood still as the Chief lifted his arm, stroked fingers through his underarm hair. The Chief examined the boy's head and around his ears, opened his mouth and looked at his teeth. The Chief asked Deon and Wolfy to leave. Then he had the boy drop his pants. Afterwards, outside

in the Chief's courtyard, the Chief repeated his name and office, extending his hands to the boy. The Chief repeated this many times, and after much coaxing the boy spoke what they believed to be his name.

Miles could read French better than he understood it spoken, so he asked the Chief to write down his observations. Then Miles read the Chief's remarks for Wolfy and Deon, told them that the Chief believed that the boy was a foreigner from a place far away. But the Chief also believed he might have come from the ancestors, before the French, the Moors, or the Dogons. The Chief said he did not discount the possibility. Maybe his people were formerly here. Maybe they took the camel trains away.

After tea, the Chief arranged for a Land Rover and, with a nephew driving, he took them through the town. They passed the shanties built of garbage on the outskirts, the sick and starving, and drove into the desert to Hombori Tondo. They drove through a boulder field toward a pink sandstone village carved high up in the cliffs. Miles' proficiency with the Chief's French improved as they drove, and he told Wolfy and Deon what the Chief said, more or less. The *fantôme* crawled over the back seat and sat in the back of the Land Rover with his knees against his chest.

They climbed ladders and fixed ropes up into the village of conical mud structures, ancient mosques, and the carved caves of the Dogons and Tellem. They passed through narrows and up over boulders, stepping on depressions in the rock worn by hands and feet of earlier times. The Chief and the nephew helped Deon. At the end of one of the narrows, at the cliff wall itself, the nephew removed a weathered strip of plywood from a fissure and gave the Chief a plastic flashlight from the cloth bag he had slung over his shoulder. The fissure in the rock split down into the cliff and Miles, Wolfy, and Deon had

to step over the fissure and into the cave. The Chief held Miles' arm. Wolfy didn't need any help. Then Miles encouraged Deon, who finally leapt across and into his arms. Miles was momentarily aroused and just as quickly worried about Wolfy's jealousy. Only when they were safe inside did the *fantôme* follow.

The cave was cool, almost cold after the heat of the sun. Light filtered in from the split in the rock above them. Through the slit in the rock Miles saw sky and knew that at night the stars would be visible. They stepped on what Miles soon realized were human bones. The Chief walked with little concern and the bones clacked under his feet. The others did the same, all but the *fantôme*, who walked gingerly and didn't make a sound. The cave smelled of guano and Miles also smelled cool water. The fecund smell and the small sleeping breaths of the bats mixed with the presence of the dead. The Chief beamed his flashlight on figures painted on the walls of the cave in a brown the color of dried blood. He shone his light on several symbols, their outlines etched by sharp rocks. He brought the *fantôme* closer and had him look at the markings. Wolfy slid in close to Miles. Deon peered over their shoulders, her hand on Miles' waist. Miles felt as though he were at the origin of time.

~

Even though the *fantôme* did not seem to recognize the symbols on the cave wall, the Chief held a celebration in his honor that evening. After the evening prayer, the Chief sent his nephew in the Land Rover to inform the Spaniard and his Peul wife and collect Karl and Rodney. The street was alive with music and dancing. *Griots*, the storytellers, played large beaded gourds; others played guitars and drums. The air and ground vibrated with the stamping of girls in yellow skirts, feet marked with intricate designs in henna;

some, the very young, with tight woven braids, smooth brown skin, oval faces and eyes. The Chief's wife wore a rich blue robe and headscarf, huge earrings of red and gold, and a golden nose ring.

Wolfy wouldn't eat the food, and neither would Rodney, who feared getting sick, or Karl who had an intestinal condition and restricted his diet. They had boundaries. There were always boundaries. The skin was a boundary. The lens of the eye. Miles hated that, the separateness, and even though it made Wolfy distant, he ate.

Deon picked at a few things, and the *fantôme* ate slowly and seemed to wonder what it was all about. The *fantôme* knew he wasn't a God or an ancestor. But he seemed to know he was being honored. Miles watched an adolescent girl with pleated hair twirl in front of his eyes, and the old women held hands in front of their mouths and trilled—the gourd rasping, all of it an intoxication, the thrill of sound, the whirling of yellow hems and feet. In the midst of the dancing, Miles thought of the cave full of bones, the polished fissure worn smooth by generations of bodies passing through, returning the dead.

Wolfy said to Miles, “You're giving her a lot of attention.”

“Who is that?” he asked. He didn't know who she meant, but thought she must mean Deon. He'd talked to her about the food, but that was it. Maybe earlier? The girl dancing? He took Wolfy's hand. She let him hold it, loose and uncommitted. She glanced at him and then away.

Miles' mood turned and he saw that the dancing girl's legs were thin as sticks, and he remembered the shanties they'd passed outside of town, and the children eating

his discarded fish bones. Later, when Wolfy still wouldn't speak to him, he said, "I think you're jealous of him." He nodded toward the *fantôme*. "Isn't that what this is about?"

Later, the Chief found a place for the *fantôme* to stay, left with him, and then came back to tell them the *fantôme* had returned to the mountains.

~

In the morning, Miles was sick, and from his tent he heard Rodney insisting Wolfy come back to the great roof. Wolfy poked her head into their tent and told Miles she was going.

"Go," he said.

"I guess it's convenient you and Deon are sick together."

He shook his head. Nausea overwhelmed him for a moment. "Please get out of here."

When the heat was too much, he came out of the tent. Deon emerged from the hut. They wondered together where the *fantôme* was, whether he'd gone with the others. Miles rubbed sunscreen over his face, though not on his forehead, where it would seep down to sting his eyes. He put his hat back on.

Deon said, "I think I'm going to throw up."

Later, sitting on the edge of the tent platform, sipping tea, Miles told Deon he'd go look for the others. He said, "I can't spend too much time with you because Wolfy gets jealous."

"I know," Deon said. She looked at him.

"I don't know what to do about it."

“She and I have been friends for a long time, and just because I’m a total narcissist, doesn’t mean I don’t understand her a little,” Deon said. “She tries to keep everything in its place, but it just makes her crazy. Ordering brings chaos. It doesn’t take it away. What she’s got to do is move in the other direction.” She put her hand on his for a moment. Her palm was cool on his knuckles. They swung their legs and looked off toward Le Main de Fatma.

“Unfortunately I love all of her, not just the parts I like,” Miles said.

Deon lifted her hand, said, “Well, go get her, you fucking sap.”

~

Walking with only the daypack was the best thing for him. He took off his hat, and the sun warmed his forehead. He breathed in the dry air. In the distance, a haze obscured the horizon line. He rounded Le Main de Fatma. It didn’t look much like a hand at first, but as he walked, his perspective changed and he saw the wrist turn and gesture towards the sky. He thought again of “Ozymandias.” These fingers twelve hundred and two thousand feet high were all that were left, and someday they would be gone, too.

When he found the climbers, he saw all the work Rodney and Karl had done the previous day. They had fixed ropes up the first two pitches of the climb. High above he saw Wolfy below the roof. Immediately his gut wrenched. He scanned the rock with Rodney’s binoculars and saw Karl dangling from a fixed line anchored to the summit above. He held a video camera on a sling. Miles swung the binoculars to the right, found Rodney on the ledge, anchored and belaying Wolfy. Wolfy was twenty feet higher and hung from protection, two equalized pieces, wedged into the dihedral below the roof. Miles arranged some rocks so that he could lie down on his back and view the action. For

the rest of the afternoon, Wolfy hung and then attempted the roof and each time she fell, swinging from the rock. Miles saw that the problem was not physical.

Rodney, Karl, and Wolfy came down early, having failed to pass over the roof. When Wolfy descended the last fixed line, Miles got up and found himself, without his knowing it had happened, covered with a layer of desert dust. He greeted her at the base of the rock. She asked, “Where’s Deon?”

Through a complex logic, from meat to Deon to Rodney’s belay to Miles, Miles knew Wolfy held him responsible for her failure. Maybe he was responsible.

They began in the tent, Wolfy not broaching the subject but Miles knowing what she was thinking. Though their sleeping bags were opened towards each other, their bodies did not touch. She read a book with her headlamp on. They ended out in the desert, under the stars, meteors falling, streaking, and burning up in the atmosphere. Miles knew what Wolfy wanted. She wanted him to convince her he was not attracted to Deon. There was nothing rational about it. Wolfy wasn’t jealous of the real Deon. But Wolfy believed that the only thing that would make her feel okay was to have this specter of Deon cast down. And she resented like hell that Miles wouldn’t do it for her, answer her questions in the ways she wanted. Miles wouldn’t. Not only would Wolfy never believe him, but Miles believed it was wrong to do that to Deon or to anyone.

He gestured. “Look where we are. It’s unbelievable.”

The desert winds were up and he could hear the wind roaring as it funneled through the spires of Fatma, worn to thick unmovable sails in the desert. The wind sucked their voices away into the low pressure, the thermal differential, to fly over the

sand, the huts, the villages and into the desert. Miles said, “We’re here but we’re living in your head.”

~

Though the *fantôme* had not come to the camp the day after the party, he was back the following morning, sitting on the wall and waiting for the group to rise. Why he chose not to come and then to return, no one could answer. Maybe he’d also been sick from the village food. Maybe something else. But Rodney had other concerns. He had the idea that Wolfy should try the roof again fresh, but that Deon should come to the cliff, too. If all else failed, his idea was to have the *fantôme* climb the roof.

“He’s not interested in your white route,” Deon said. “A straight line up a rock, like there’s a straight fucking line anywhere around here.”

“Isn’t that up to him?”

“It’s too dangerous,” Wolfy said.

“Anyway, I was planning on doing something else,” Deon said, and cocked a hip.

“Please,” Rodney said, indulging her.

Karl said, “He’ll wear a rope, of course.”

They rigged in the morning. When it came time to make the attempt, Wolfy said she needed Miles to belay. This was an apology but also, Miles knew, a necessity. They all juggled up the fixed lines to the crux. Karl hung from the summit with his video camera, Miles belayed, and Wolfy climbed from the crack and over the first crux she’d done two days earlier. She had those moves wired now and they were no problem for her. Miles looked down, saw the tiny figures of Deon and the *fantôme* at the base of the cliff,

the red glint of the binoculars in Deon's hands. Then she handed the binoculars to the *fantôme*.

Wolfy reached the crux and pinned her right foot out on the dihedral below the roof. She set her hands, began to move upside down in the crack. Miles leaned out from the rock, pulling the taut sling that held him to his anchor, and looked up at her. Just at the edge of the roof, she reached out, swung her right foot to the right, and held a thin edge with the tips of her fingers, grasping with her right hand above for something, anything. Problems were usually footwork or mental, in that order. But the move could be too hard. Those were ideas to keep away from. Her right foot agitated for more purchase. "Watch me," she yelled. Then she fell.

There was a certain terror to watching her fall, knowing the rope would pull at the biner attached to the protection in the rock, the fear that the cam could pull free, snap Wolfy down to be caught on Miles' anchor. He had three pieces in the rock. But after that, there was nothing. In the end, they depended on these pieces of metal and the rock and the rope. If any of them failed, they'd be dead—nothing on earth could stop them from dying. But gear seldom failed. If accidents happened climbing, it was, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the climber's error.

Wolfy jerked at the end of her rope. Carabiners and slings clinked, pulled taut from the rock face. At the other end, the rope yanked Miles' belay device, belay loop, harness and waist. Threaded in the cracks, the cramming devices and nuts bit into the rock. Everything held.

Before lunch, they descended again. In the heat of mid-day, Rodney pantomimed what he wanted the *fantôme* to do. Sweat rose on Rodney's forehead as he tried to get his

points across. The boy remained chalky and dry. Miles helped the boy put on a harness. On the ground, using a crack at eye level, Rodney and Karl showed the boy how to clip into the protection that Karl had placed above the roof—once the *fantôme* got over the roof, if he did. They demonstrated to him that he'd be safe tying his harness to a cam wedged in the rock. They had the *fantôme* climb up and drop onto the gear. At first the boy didn't want to do it. He had to be eased from the rock by Karl and Rodney to convince him. For Miles, the whole thing seemed like a bad idea.

They ate Tasty-Bites from the pouches. Miles gave the boy an extra pair of his climbing shoes to wear. The boy put them on and smiled, looked at his feet. This was the first unreservedly positive expression Miles had seen from the boy. Then Rodney and Karl and Miles ascended up their fixed lines back to their anchors on the third pitch. The *fantôme* followed without tying in, free soloing up the first two pitches. Miles thought the harness was cumbersome for him, and seemed to make the boy self-conscious.

At the anchor, Miles clipped in, seven hundred feet above the desert floor, while Wolfy and Deon watched from below. Miles tied the *fantôme* into the end of the rope. Miles showed the boy how the belay would catch the rope should he fall. Miles wasn't sure what the boy understood. The wind rose. Miles felt his sun-screened skin covered in grit.

The roof loomed above them, casting dark red rock against the sky. The boy began his climb out from the crack. The moves here were likely more difficult than anything the boy had ever done before. He'd never needed to climb anything like this. Deon had said the boy was *loose*. Miles thought the boy was like water. He'd spent years flowing up and over the cracks and crags of Fatma, against gravity. Like water he went

where he could, finding routes by merging body and rock, animate and inanimate. The boy would never conceive of doing a climb like the one Rodney had devised. There was no need to go *straight* up Wamderdou.

The boy moved away from the anchor, spent some few seconds clipping into the bombproof piece above the anchor and to the right of Miles. The boy had understood that much, thank God. Then he proceeded to the first crux Wolfy had negotiated the other day. The boy had watched her do it, and he imitated her, grasping the small edge and pushing off to stretch his arms up toward a sloping handhold. The rope seemed to bother him, and then his leg started to shake.

Miles hadn't seen the boy afraid before. His arms were longer than Wolfy's and he grasped the *sloper* and pulled himself up. Sweat popped on his forehead and stained his shirt between his shoulder blades. His knees still shook as he worked his way up under the roof. The boy didn't stop and consider. Miles knew what was driving him. He couldn't retreat. He had to go forward. He moved into the layback off the crack and spread his arms, one hand upward into the crack, then his feet cut loose and swung.

He would never make it. The boy hung on with one hand, stuck a toe on the rock below the roof, and then reached across his chest with his other free hand. He was perpendicular to the ground now. His right hand reached up and over and out of Miles' sight. Then he swung his mid section, got a foot up on a bulge, and slid up and out of Miles' view. He'd done it. Miles felt the rope pull, and he fed slack along with the even tug. He paid out and then more. From his fingers on the rope, Miles knew the boy was pulling rope to clip it into the protection above the roof. Miles' heart was slowing. He

was filled with elation for the boy. Rodney was talking in his ear; they'd done it. Miles was listening, not paying attention to the belay.

~

The boy was well over his last piece of protection. He'd gathered rope to clip the carabiner over the roof but hadn't clipped it. He fell for no good reason. He fell because he'd already done the hardest part. Listing for a moment at the lip of the roof, he toppled backward, gaining speed. In seconds, the rope snapped through the carabiners and pulled the cams and nuts taut in the cracks and yanked Miles from his anchor. The slings pulled. The cams bit into rock. Then the rope took the boy's weight and elongated, sapping his momentum.

Miles' heart beat hard, but he had the boy locked off and safe. Moments passed as the boy dangled at the end of the rope, hanging in space. The boy didn't move. He rotated. He seemed asleep. His arm moved as if pushed by a breeze. One leg twitched. Miles didn't know what to think. He didn't think anything. After moments, the boy crunched up. He opened his eyes and gazed at the rock in front of him. He reached a hand out towards it.

Miles, Rodney, and Karl helped the boy down the face of Wamderdou. When he'd reached the bottom, Deon and Wolfy hugged him, pulled his small body into theirs. With flaccid muscles, he looked like skin over bones as they compressed him.

Wolfy came to Miles. She trembled for a moment, squeezing him. "That scared me."

Miles stayed at the base, appreciating Wolfy's power as she juggled up the fixed lines, her resolve now set like the tectonic pressures that produce rock. She took a belay

from Rodney, strung out the lead, wedging into the roof dihedral, jamming one hand deep in the crack, bats be damned. She'd seen the boy do it, and she knew she could do it, too. She swung her feet out, cut loose, and pinned a heel on the edge of the great roof. For a moment, her heel and one hand on the ledge of the roof, she let her arm swing down, shook out her arm for a moment. She had it. The sun was lowering and above her a few bats circled erratically. She pulled herself over, clipped in, and climbed to the next belay ledge, set an anchor. The wind rose, howling through the spires. The boy sat at the base of Wamderdou with his knees folded into his chest. At some point he got up and wandered away.

~

The next day, they were clear that the boy would not be returning. Karl, in ominous baritone, said, "He'd never died before. That's why."

Rodney and Wolfy linked the climb. They would always have that together, for their lives, into the future. Karl and Miles weren't able to pass the crux and took the escape route to the top. On the summit of Wamderdou, they stood together. Miles looked at Wolfy, harness, black climbing pants, green windbreaker, her yellow pigtails pleated on her shoulders. The haze of the Harmattan was visible everywhere on the horizon. *Ozymandias*: time. Glory was fleeting, but it was still glory, and Wolfy's was real. She claimed Wamderdou.

When they reached the base, Miles drew Wolfy away. They walked along, took a wide path, circumnavigating the spires. He turned her to face the fingers of Fatma reaching for the sky. He wanted to show her what he'd seen the day he'd been sick and walked alone, he wanted to share that with her, but their perspective was not yet right.

They walked in loose sand, rounding the far side of Kaga Tondo. “Just a little farther,” he said. Miles stayed trained on the fingers of Fatma, watching. Then as they walked, the wrist turned, fingers spun, melded, and spread just so, transforming the spires of rock into a gesture rising from the orange desert. Miles knew it was not a hand but only resembled a hand, and that was enough, a metaphor that any person could see and feel, in this spot, a connection of people and earth, an awakening that could be shared by every living human being on earth, drawing from each awe, supplication, and adoration, those divine impulses that drew to this sacred place nomads, travelers, people of every disposition—the Tellem, Dogons, Muslims and French, those many people of Mali and all wandering pilgrims—to see God in self but also in a gesture of rock against sky.

“Do you see that? Amazing, isn’t it?”

Her pale blue eyes, the sun golden on her skin, the last flits of light in her yellow hair faded. “I guess slave traders pass through here,” Wolfy said. “That boy’s sister was traded.”

“I know,” Miles said.

They walked around Kaga Pamari and over to their left saw Wangel Debridu. Nearing camp, Miles saw Wolfy crying. He pulled her close.

She wiped her eyes but the tears kept coming. “If you died, I wouldn’t want to go on.”

“Sure you will,” he said. “You will go on,” Miles said.

Her tears really started now. He said again, “You will,” and wrapped her in his arms. She sobbed, and he felt the power of her, her force and intensity now serving this

purpose, weeping for his death, her shoulders pulled up and wracked down, the wetness of tears, the remarkable being of her, from her toes to her fingertips.

~

Back in San Francisco, Wolfy would occasionally see Deon, who'd curse her latest fling, sometimes a boy and sometimes a girl. Miles, getting the news second-hand, knew it would be the rare person, of any gender, who could keep up with Deon. Then both Miles and Wolfy went to Sausalito for Deon's student sermon. She stood at a lectern, her fingers curled over the edge. Her voice rang out as she defined chaos as a place without distinction, a place of tranquility. Her words took force as her shoulders drew up with breath, speaking over the crowd of parents and well-wishers, speaking above the confusion of her own life. When she was done and they found each other in the crowd, Deon took their hands and said, "Well, how the fuck was that?" They admitted it was really *fucking* good.

Last Miles heard, Rodney was off to China. He called to ask if Miles had seen his binoculars. Miles said he didn't have them. Miles remembered the boy holding them, scanning the crags. If the boy had stolen them, Miles was glad of it. More time passed, and Miles forgot about the *fantôme* and Le Main de Fatma. Then one day, years later, Miles and Wolfy's baby girl toppled backward off of the sofa. With the instinct a parent has, Miles caught her, and as he held her in his hand, he remembered the boy falling after the roof of Wamderdou—because he'd already accomplished the impossible, on a climb Rodney forever named *Wamderlust* . The boy dangled there, inert, and then reached a hand out toward the rock. And Miles remembered Karl, dressed in black stovepipe jeans, intoning in his baritone, "He'd never died before." And he remembered their last day:

Karl asked Deon if she would like to see the Bandiagard escarpment where many ancient villages were located; Rodney went to town to arrange for a vehicle to take them back to Bamako; and Miles and Wolfy rented a moped and drove to the village they'd visited with the Chief. They arrived with only a daypack. They'd never climbed without ropes, but this last day they did, for fun, foregoing ladders and rope and instead scaling the rock, like the ancient people who had made this their home. From the base of Hombori Tondo, they free-soloed to the cave of bones.

Miles swiveled his daughter down and placed her feet on the floor. She crumpled to her knees and crawled to her striped tiger with yellow plastic eyes. Lives were trajectories and also endlessly conical. Spiraling up or down, Miles didn't know. And it didn't matter. They touched each other. His daughter would climb soon, and he would want to tell her the story of the *fantôme* of Fatma, the story of a boy and sister abducted by traders and transported over foreign landscapes, a boy who escaped, a boy who'd been in war, a boy drawn up into the hand of fate.

Perhaps the boy always intended to leave the spires before the Harmattan came. Perhaps he needed that time to gather strength for the journey ahead, for his assault on the fortress that held his sister. Perhaps he needed binoculars. Or perhaps his story did not take that route.

Miles watched his daughter tug at the stuffed tiger. He thought of a boy in the Sahel. One day the boy counseled a girl with small stones not to pass where the Mamba snake had its lair. He climbed and fell. He died and found himself on the end of a rope—a boy who had forgotten and then remembered.

Lil'Earl

I could tell you how the five of us paid \$46 dollars each in rent, or that the house was between the doctors' parking lot and an empty wing of the hospital. The doctors' association owned the house, and they didn't care what we did—they were going to raze it and extend their lot—and we didn't care either. That was the kind of house it was.

One day, Dan Kitchen said we should nurture something. We checked the paper and drove out of town. By the side of the road, in a pen of chicken wire staked into cold dirt, puppies muzzled through straw and feces toward the swollen teats of a yellow lab. We wanted to pummel the shithead who bred the puppies, but we passed him money instead, picked out the runt. At home, we liked the name Earl best, after Dan Kitchen's father, so that's what it was. We watched Matt. Matt still found talk of fathers difficult, but he liked the name. He made a spot for Earl on the couch.

That night, we partied. Earl looked around with drooping lids, and when Earl lapped beer from a saucer, we broke bottles in celebration. The music was huge and the girls loved Earl, and we yelled, let's call him "Lil'Earl."

Sometime in the gray morning Earl insinuated a moan into our dreams. Then he whined a piercing gush like a squeezed ball. When we woke, we found him bloated on the sofa. He'd puked, nothing new in our house, but a viscous yellow liquid oozed from his penis. Lil'Earl was sick. For something so small, his suffering was intense.

We didn't have money between the five of us, and we'd known Earl for only one day; he'd partied with us just one night, and now he was on the couch puking, yellow

liquid seeping out, none of us knowing what to do. We couldn't do nothing. Even though girls weren't important to us, we sometimes gauged decisions by what they would think.

I had a car, which got me a free ticket to Van Halen at the Carrier Dome up in Syracuse the year before. Matt's father had died that winter, which made him do destructive things, and even though he knew I hit him that one day to make him right, to make him better, things between him and me weren't great. So it was me and Dan Kitchen were elected to go. Dan Kitchen, who once climbed up an electric pole and grabbed the electrical wire was mellow and good in a crisis. We joked that he fried his brain.

We drove through crackling slush to Johnson City where the emergency vet would meet us. My car was a rust-bucket, brown Subaru that I wish I still had—it had wicked front-wheel drive, like glue in the snow even with summer tires. Dan Kitchen held Lil'Earl and Lil'Earl puked bile onto Dan Kitchen, who held the little animal away and said, "Yuk," till it didn't matter anymore and he just let the dog puke on him.

Outside the vet office, frost spread on the windshield. In a little while Dan came back with the vet who was only an assistant vet. He seemed real sad about Earl and had a sad face. He said Earl had a stone in his urethra, but he couldn't remove it. Even a real vet—if he'd been one—wouldn't work on an animal so small. Earl was tiny. Dan Kitchen held Earl in one hand. Earl cried, and little puffs of steam rose from his tongue. The assistant explained he was restricted by oaths and his license. But then something seemed to change in him, like he had an idea that brought clarity

to the situation. He told us we could go to his house: he had a place to work—he'd tell us what to do.

We wanted to crack a beer when we heard that one. We were being called upon to save Lil'Earl's life. Dan, who we believed had ruined his brain with electricity, looked into the middle distance and raised his shoulders and let them drop. That was how we made our decision. Where else was the answer going to come from?

The vet assistant lived with his mother in a ranch-style house. When his mother poked her head out, he told her he didn't want to be bothered. He opened the garage and we moved a lawn mower and coiled a hose. We moved quickly. Each second seemed important. The vet assistant found a leather case and a Styrofoam box that had chemicals—the bad news being the vial with anesthetic was dried up. We set up a table. The vet assistant seemed overly concerned that Dan wash his hands inside, in the bathroom. We made a lot of that later, that the vet assistant loved Dan Kitchen, but we could also understand it, in the tension over Earl and with Dan's fried brain. He wore a pink polo shirt and looked pathetic holding Earl and covered in Earl's puke.

We put Earl down on a table. Dan lit a match under the scalpel blade and it turned black and then white at the edge. We felt around, found the block. Earl cried at every touch. We knew pain was the only route to catharsis. Dan passed me the scalpel. We didn't talk about it, but that was the way it was going to be. With the scalpel in my fingertips, Dan stretched Earl's penis. I don't think Dan Kitchen and I could have imagined anything worse—his fingers in the way of Earl's swollen belly, the fuzzy divot there where his nads would be. His whine was constant and his eyes

rolled in his head. He knew exactly what we were going to do. We didn't blame Earl for being terrified.

Then the vet assistant's mother appeared. She had non-descript hair and freckles. but looking at her face, we saw that she saw something horrible, something that made her stop in her tracks. She held tall glasses of some red-looking liquid, perhaps berry flavor. I was dehydrated and thirsty as hell. I couldn't even swallow. The vet assistant said, "I told you not to come in here."

She didn't say anything. She turned around. She didn't leave the drinks. It was impossible to understand why the vet assistant let us do this. Certainly his actions were meant to be good.

As fur and skin peeled away from the touch of the blade, blood began, clear at first, then all at once the tube and a tremendous leakage and a smell. In another way of thinking, cutting him open was the easy part. Sewing him up would be difficult. But then Lil'Earl's whining and trembling stopped. It didn't matter. The cutting and holding, everything became easy.

~

On the way home, we bought a short-handled shovel at Ace Hardware. We drove into the hills and stopped along the road, shifted through the brush to a clearing where the heat from a stink plant had melted the thin snow. We hunched, sweating beer and soon decided that we'd dug enough and rolled Earl out of the box and into the hole.

That night we raged. We invited everyone. At the door we'd ask if they knew Earl. We'd show a Polaroid. We policed.

“Who was Earl?” we’d ask, throwing out crashers who didn’t know. But others we let stay, or we coached them with the answer—it was arbitrary. And we had beer—more beer than ever. Money didn’t matter. The girls gave themselves when they felt like it and they felt like it more because of Earl. When the music stopped, we yelled, “Earl,” until there was music, pounding boots into the floor, shaking the house, and when someone asked, we said, “Earl loved the woods. He loved nothing more than the woods.”

“Except beer.”

“And to party,” we yelled. Then the music stopped and we yelled, “Earl,” and over that, we yelled, “Lil’Earl.”

Dan Kitchen called the vet assistant and then he was there raging with us and everyone raged. But the story of Earl was not enough. When Matt said we don’t leave anyone behind, he was right. He took my keys, left with Dan Kitchen to find Lil’Earl.

Then Earl was at the party, dirt in his fur, smudged. We cleaned him with beer. We threw beer on everyone. Later, we found Earl hung on the sprinkler—someone didn’t understand. Fights broke out—and then we’d had enough. Everyone who didn’t know Earl had to go. They had to get the fuck out. Then just us went out back to our garage, moss on the sunken roof, water leaked inside. We swung the doors off their hinges, pushed aside the weights and bench and took the steel bar, pounded it into the slab, taking turns. Five of us.

That’s where we buried Earl, under the slab, in the garage, with broken bikes and paint cans around. He loved the woods. He loved beer. Mostly he wanted to be close to

home—now a paved parking lot between the Doctors' Association and Hospital.

Nothing can be imagined there: no history, no hedge, no house or garage, but it is a sacred place, where Lil'Earl partied hard.

Too Much Horse

Anderson runs up the ranch road toward the *tipi* circles, large stones pressed into the dirt of a low hill jutting out into the valley, a shallow basin in the rain-shadow of the Big Horn Mountains—a good place to see herds moving in. Bee follows along on her rental horse, a sorrel mare named Sundancer. The grass is sun-bleached and dead, and heavy snowflakes fall out of the gray sky. He'd like to wish the grass blonde, but it isn't blonde. He breathes hard, not yet used to the altitude, and he has a cold. As he rises, he can see the red blush in the hills on the opposite side of the valley come out of the earth, the baked clay. He hopes the run might force the sickness out of him. Big snowflakes wet his face and sneak down his jacket. He's plenty warm, though, sweating under several layers of clothes. He looks back at the valley drainage, cleaved and dropping away to marshy swales and to the creek, to the prairie grasses and the silver sagebrush, the conical hills, flat-topped buttes, and coal-fired ridges on the other side. His foot slips in the mud and into the rut of the ranch road and then the other slips too. His sneakers cake heavy with mud.

Passing those *tipi* circles, the romantic in him likes to think it, but the hills themselves aren't the same hills the Native Americans knew in the 1880's, the time they were pushed off to worse lands still. Hills don't stay the same because perception doesn't stay the same, let alone the fences and the strip mining, and methane pumping out of boxes all across the Powder River basin, freeing gas trapped in rock by pumping up salinated water into ponds and damned draws, where it seeps into the ground water and the rivers and god knows what this country will look like next. The Indians thought the

white man hated nature, and it's true, he does, because he hates death and to cheat death, he will kill and destroy everything he sees. But Anderson doesn't want to be angry about it—the environment, that is. As a history teacher, he knows there isn't any worse crime than nostalgia. Nothing is permanent—at least that is what he tells himself. For better or worse, life is always new, evolving, and this is what it is now. Maybe it was more unspoiled then, but it is still beautiful, and he wishes Shaney could see it.

The snow peaks of the Big Horns cut snagged teeth into the gray distance, over the grass-yellow and snow-white and black-furrow and red-blushing clinker hills, slouching giants. He climbs further still, off the jeep trail and onto animal track, and below he sees Sundancer amble through the mud, her hunches swaying, slowly kicking up divots the size of tea plates as Bee works her heels into her swollen belly. A nerve pinches in his foot, but he doesn't mind. Feeling his body hurt makes him feel better. Mule deer scare up from a gully, collect in a field above them and watch, crane down together with stretched necks and cocked, black-tipped ears.

In the valley, he can see the winding creek, frozen over in places and white covered and black water in others. At the top of a high hill he stops and jumps to keep warm, spreading his legs and clapping his hands above his head and bringing them back to his sides. He waits for Bee.

Sundancer, her three white socks muddy like the tips of her black tail, finally clops up. “You went fast today,” Bee says, breathing hard from her urging the horse. As Mrs. Odecoven says, “horse don't do more than amble,” and that is why Bee is allowed to ride her out in the field.

“I'm feeling stronger,” Anderson says. “Better.”

There is Bee, red faced, her mother's straw hair sticking out from her riding helmet. She is getting longer and leaner. Anderson doesn't want his sweat to cool, and they'll have to run down hill anyway to the stable. Sundancer flares steam from her nostrils. When Anderson reaches out to stroke the horse, the mare turns her muzzle away. "Shall we go back?" he says.

"I'm going to gallop in the field in the bottom, Okay?" Bee says. "If I can make her."

"I don't know," Anderson says. "I think you should do that with Mrs. Odecoven, in case anything happens."

~

She waits for him. At first, the other teachers made comments, tried to move her out of the hallway, but she ignored them. Now they leave her alone. As students pass, some make barking noises, meaning she acts like a dog or is ugly like one. She can't manipulate kids into feeling sorry for her—kids won't just go along the way adults do, and she knows the kids are right—she is ugly, her chin is too long and her forehead is too wide and her dad lies to her about that and he's stupid anyway to leave everything behind and move here where no one lives like they do and no one has had the experiences they've had. When he comes, they'll go to lunch, out the exit door, fire-exit but no alarm, and rummage through the brown-bag lunch he's made for them. She'll poke through the napkins and the cellophane and examine what's in there, and though he's made the lunch, he'll look in there too like it's a mystery. Probably is. They'll eat together in their car. She tries to study her book. She wants to do well. She looks up and around. Is he all right? Has something happened? Mostly, nothing bad happens. Bad

things don't happen like that, suddenly. They happen slowly so you don't notice. The book doesn't make much sense either. There's this and that—always about things that you can't see, no real places or time. She worries she's not smart enough to go to her father's university. Her mother used to say, don't worry, but Bee does worry, there's plenty to worry about. And anyway, now it's best to always stay near her dad. If she goes there, and he stays here? He said he couldn't be there anymore. He was a professor at that university and even wrote a book, but he took a leave—a *medical* leave. There was nothing wrong with him, he said. But she thought, as her eyes hovered over the words of her textbook, no place, no time, hard hallway floor, that there was never anything wrong that anyone could see, and now he works here where there isn't even a city or interstate, at a school for kids her age, and none of the teachers ever wrote a book like he did, and then she feels it, the kaleidoscopic vertigo that tells her it's all her fault—and that's more than she can bear, so that through the barking, the sound of sneakers on cold tile, the rustle of backpacks and snickering, and through all her anxieties, through it all must come—something—when you've born all you can bear of it, cutting through—desire, which in Bee feels like a passive desire to be saved, like the powerful mythology of a knight on a white horse who arrives to sweep the girl up in an insulating and unconditional love, blotting out, well, reality itself, a mythology that every girl is inundated with, only Bee doesn't know the knight, doesn't yet conceive of that, but only knows the desire. Only desire can save her from this vertigo, but the desire is hers—it is her instinct for self-preservation. Desire is not passive. She saves herself by wanting. And wanting creates its object. So it is desire that creates the horse, a horse she can feel in the phantom pressing of her legs, in her twitching feet, her pulling hands, driving,

steering in her imagination because her legs, feet, and hands don't press or kick or pull because there is nothing there, only the wanting and the hallway and stupid books and waiting. Her father promised her this horse when he needed her to go along, when everyone in the world thought moving to the middle of nowhere was a bad idea. He'd said to her, "I can only talk to you. Do you understand?" She didn't, not at all, but she knew she could turn this thing that she didn't understand to her advantage. And he promised. And now that they were here, when it does happen he'll see, both of them happy, and she can have permission to love in a way that she was told slowly, over time, that she wasn't allowed to anymore—and once she has that horse they can ride off in the fields, and he'll run like he used to, and they'll go up the hills and they won't need food or blankets or anything else and there won't be fences; she and her dad and the horse and they'll be together, the three of them, and he won't look out the window like he is looking at the glass, his eyes stopped just there, and not through the glass to the outside.

In this way, Bee becomes a girl wanting a horse in the most 12-year old girl sort of way, dreaming of brushing its mane, and mostly not being stuck on that fat, slow borrowed Sundancer anymore and told when she can gallop and when she can't. And she thinks, It's OK to bring it up over lunch just this one more time.

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Once, as a child, Bitman and a friend had been exploring the prairie and saw steam rising from up out of the ground. At first, he and his friend thought to investigate, but then it dawned on them what it had to be—a rattlesnake nest, nascent snakes commingled, the heat from the curled slow-writhing mass evaporating dampness from the clay earth and their own sticky breath. Since that time, he's had visions of his death, his

leg caught up to the knee, himself overlooking the great plain, the only thing he'd ever known and the last thing he'd see, while the snakes bite his ankle and calf. Because of that early experience and the auguries that followed, he avoided the untrodden path, which changed the course of his life, but now as a favor to the Principle he finds himself in his truck driving the new teacher up to the old Clarkson's to show him a cave that nobody's heard of or thought of for too long to remember, but he remembered because back from before his mom's friend Ruthie had a café, the only eating place in town and where the Red Dawg is now. In that café had been flaked rocks that Ruthie had collected hereabouts, and he recalled that as a boy he hadn't been interested in them. They came from a time before cattle, and Bitman could not imagine a time before cattle. Later, Bitman's mother and Ruthie sewed together in the quilting circle. Bitman's mother still knows Ruthie's daughters and that was how Bitman came to know the location of the cave, came to be steering in his diesel truck down a long dirt road with the teacher, Anderson, and now came to the place in the drive where he must decide whether he'll walk with the teacher all the way up there along the open fields and such or just sit in his truck and watch Anderson go.

Anderson talks, and though Bitman can glean he is talking over the past, Bitman also understands that it isn't pre-cattle history at all that Anderson seems interested in, still he's talking about history itself as if that were enough to countermand Bitman's very serious and persistent, yet unspoken, accusation that this trip to the cave is no more than Anderson chasing a wild hare. And then, Anderson says, "You see, my wife died about a year ago." Then there was just the sound of the truck tires spitting gravel.

Bitman, himself long divorced, says, "That right?"

“Cancer,” Anderson says.

“That right?” Bitman says.

Everyone Bitman knows died violent deaths before their time, in showers, by extension ladder or hoof, in machinery, by infection, in states of pain or by way of stubbornness or boredom—all except his mother, so there’s no telling how she might go, or he himself, as he’d escaped just such a death way back when he saw steam rising from the ground and fate seemed to offer he should fall into a nest of immature snakes, be bitten to death as he overlooked the plain but that God or devil intervened.

They vibrate over a cattle guard and drive further into the valley, the road running along the creek, curving and shimmering black amongst the box-elder and cottonwood, patches of chokeberry, and against the draught-yellow grasses.

After several uphill miles, Bitman pulls next to a fence-gate still in place where much of the barbed-wire fence line has fallen to disrepair. A lever pulls the useless gate taut. “Well, here we are.” Then he adds, “Up there.”

Bitman couldn’t explain the circuitous route of his thoughts, not exactly reasoning nor deduction, and doesn’t feel the need to say anyway. He points a finger up the field and past the draw about a mile and a half to the red ridge of sand stone and the mouth of the cave. He communicates he prefers to stay in the truck, not by actions but the lack of them.

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Bee’s friend, Amy, swings the saddle onto the sawhorse and tells Bee to get on it. They are deep in the back of the horse barn, in the thick, dank smells, what light there is coming through slats and the wide open doors at the front. As part of Bee’s bargain with

her dad, Bee helps out at the stable, but Mrs. Odecoven's daughter, Amy, only a year Bee's senior and Bee's overseer, is a master of shirking, so that only when it is absolutely necessary, when it seems at any moment Amy's mother, Mrs. Odecoven, will come storming through, does Amy strike to work like the devil, directing Bee with terse efficiency, accomplishing days of work in a few short hours. Amy says that's because her father, now lost to someplace else, was in the Navy and explained to her that was how work was done.

Amy says, "You've got to rock on it, against the swells. And when you feel the feeling, you got to keep doing exactly that. Do you feel the feeling?"

Bee grips the horn and posts on the saddle. She doesn't feel anything and certainly not a feeling, but that her hips and thighs are sore from the day's riding lesson because of that old, fat Sundancer. And her mind wanders to the last weekend when she'd gone out with Mrs. Odecoven to drop off a horse trailer down on the Powder Ranch. There she saw another kind of horse entirely and as she pulls against the saddle horn, the saddle sitting on the sawhorse, she begins to think of this real flesh and blood horse. There had been two of them, white and black paints, but the one with the half black head and the black rump was the one she loved—ink black and paper white. On the way back up the dirt road, the two paints and a red mare ran along the fence line following Mrs. Odecoven's truck, hoping to be fed back at the barn—the black and white, the black and white, and the red mare, along the fence and the field beyond and the river winding below, the Powder river. Bee hadn't even asked Mrs. Odecoven what kind of horse it was because she knew it would be a cutter or a stallion, or some other horse she'd have no business ever riding.

“Sometimes it helps if you do this,” Amy says and she reaches out and pinches Bee’s nipples.

“Hey,” Bee says.

“Did that help?”

Bee doesn’t think so. But then she thinks maybe it did. “Do that again,” she says.

~

It’s getting on dark by the time Anderson has covered half the distance to the cave, and the cold is coming into the air. Distances are deceiving, along with just about everything else. He isn’t even absolutely sure why he wants to go there. The janitor saw Anderson was a fool. But Anderson thinks it has something to do with Shaney. He knows he wouldn’t bother for himself. He has to get better for Bee.

Everyone, all his friends, tried to convince him that he was without blame. And they were right. He saw that he had plenty of sound reasons to excuse himself from responsibility. There were the years of hope and failure, the lingering, and the worst of it—the invasion of Shaney’s body—the things they cut away and the poisons they pumped into her, monitoring and testing, the lies of new technologies—the tortures she endured for him and for her daughter. And the doctors infantilized them with suffering and need, their powerlessness in the face of science—he who had worked so hard to understand history, she, a social worker, who wondered about questions of the heart. After, his psychiatrist said his problem was his theoretical disposition. Another excuse. Anderson told his therapist that day that history was a place polluted with the dead and there was nothing theoretical about it.

Exacerbating the breakdown was his awareness that he was failing his daughter. She'd lost everything too. This sunk him even more deeply into despair. He'd always known that great love had to have a great cost. He knew that even in their happiest days together, he and Shaney and then those days when Bee was first born, and those weeks that followed. But he never imaged he would meet himself so baldly when the accounting came, that the man who arose in his time of trial would be of so little character. The hard red clinker looms in blocks over the steep eroded slope of grass and crate-sized boulders. He is sure the cave will be a disappointment. He stops walking. He's midway and he turns from the cliffs to see Bitman's truck down by the gate, small and puffing purple exhaust the same color as the sagebrush on the opposite hills. He must be late to pick up Bee anyway. Anderson decides to forget the cave, his journey there of no cause or effect.

When he and Bitman finally get to the school and he to his car and out to the stable, Bee is flushed from the heat of the house and having dinner with Mrs. Odecoven, who invites him to sit with them and he does, but he doesn't eat. Mrs. Odecoven is without evidence of a husband, except one dusty, unthumbed photo of an angular-faced man in a Crackerjack on the mantelpiece above a fireplace blocked with beige-painted plywood. Anderson does not want to share the intimacy of eating with her. After Bee helps clean up, he apologizes once again, wraps his daughter in her green coat. Only then he finds out a business has already been concluded and that he will play a part in it. He doesn't have any choice. Anderson writes a check, and Mrs. Odecoven says, "Nuff said." He loads the used saddle into his car.

~

In the weeks that follow, Anderson listens to Bee riding her saddle in her room, sometimes late into the night. He knows female physiology well enough to understand what is going on, of course, and has enough psychology, picked up here and there, to know she is self-soothing. Bee never cried or showed any sign of being upset at Shaney's death, and had, in some ways, seemed relieved—which again made a certain kind of sense. Bee grew up with her mother's illness, and as much as Anderson and Shaney tried to give Bee a normal life, it was anything but normal, abnormal even in the trying. So he listens to the creaking and knows he is dead-set against shaming Bee.

He goes about his business: flips pages of a book, marks papers, cleans up, dusts, even though that was something Shaney said he never did, and he hadn't, but now he can do it and think of her, have an internal dialogue, her voice, his, just about something small and stupid like dusting, which might have been the thing most present between them and the thing he misses most. These are his good days. Other times, he looks out the window at the gray-yellow grass in the distance and gray fence running up the hill and the cloud-gray hills further on, particularly gray when a light snow is falling. In some ways Bee's creaking in the saddle soothes Anderson too. Bee is making herself feel good, and that, at least, is something, and perhaps the best a person can hope for.

~

The patriarch rancher, James Thurmond Hatter, who everyone calls Hat, invites Bee out to the Powder for a day of ranch work because Amy, Bee's friend, is his great niece. He thinks he came up with the idea on his own, but that is not so. Secretly, Amy

and Bee have been conspiring to get Bee on the black and white paint she saw many months ago and has been dreaming of ever since.

At home, Anderson, thinks, while working at a tall fence meant to keep high leaping animals out of his garden, that he should be able to get a run in before Bee comes home, when he hears the phone ring between whirs of the circular saw. He sets the saw down on a board so as not to have it fall in the mud at his feet and goes inside to take the call from the rancher patriarch, Hat.

The Powder ranch is just-down-the-road, as they say, which means about seventy miles, and over those miles, Anderson worries, though Hat has assured him that Bee is fine in every respect—“just emotional, is all.” At the roadside and along the sloping hills of the Clear Creek basin, he sees pronghorn antelope and occasionally whitetail deer, and less frequently cattle. Locoweed and Western Yarrow grow up at the fence line. Out at Arvada he takes the left down the dirt track onto the lower Power River Road.

Bee sits with Amy on the steps of the ranch house, and when Anderson arrives the matriarch of the house leans in the swinging storm-door in saddle worn jeans and a jean jacket, her fist affixed to her hipbone.

“They’re roping and can’t lose a day of work, ya know,” she says.

Anderson asks Amy if she needs a ride back home and she doesn’t.

All along the way home, the yellow buttes jut up in their odd shapes and the road curves along and Bee cries. Anderson pats her thigh and then he lets her alone, figuring she’ll cry it out. He guesses she feels humiliated about something, but about what he doesn’t know, not able to impress, perhaps, those older boys who do ranch work. Bee curls up, and in a little while she seems to sleep. He shakes her awake, tells her they are

home. She still doesn't say anything. He coaxes her up out of the car and she goes inside. He picks up his tools by the garden, spools his extension cord, and puts it all in the shed along with the wood and chicken wire and comes inside when he is done.

He doesn't see Bee so he takes his place on the plaid couch and picks up his book, prehistoric man in the western United States, the evidence of their lives gathered from the stone weapons and tools they left behind. He wonders what it might be like if ancient people were judged by the clothes they wore and the ways they loved. In a moment he hears the creaking of leather and knows Bee is riding her saddle. He reads on about the flaking of stones and the zones of discovery with mounting disgust. A box-elder bug crawls across the pages of his book. Then the creaking stops.

"Bee?" he calls out. He had no conception that he would call out to her before he'd done so, but then there he is. "Can you talk to me?" he yells turning his head to look at her closed door. In a moment, the door hinge squeaks and she looks out. She opens it. He glances over at her. "Come and sit by me," he says.

Her face is creased and puffy red from crying, and she sits next to him on the couch and soon she is crying again, sobbing into his shoulder. He whispers to her that she can tell him anything, and sometime in the midst of this whispering it comes out, leaking through a squeaking voice caught between breaths. Bee was riding with the ranch hands, watching the boys split off calves and rope them and load them into trailers. While she cries, pulling back snot, Anderson gets an impression of the expert horsemanship, the handling of rope in leather gloved hands, of the dust, the cows running and sounding against them, and Anderson thinks he understands—envy is elemental to

the human condition. He thinks he understands, but there is something in her sobbing that tells him he doesn't.

Her face is a stain of red blotchy tears, and Anderson wipes at her gently with his sleeve, and then he sees what she saw too, through the clopping hooves, the sinuous turns of the muscled horses, the high-blood and skill, and the dust—they were wrestling the calves from their mothers. That was what they were really doing. Anderson thinks for a moment, lets that settle in, tries to understand it not from his perspective but from Bee's. He says, "You know your mother never wanted to let you go."

Late that night Anderson wakes to find his child standing beside his bed, and then she sits, and then she curls up beside him. She doesn't speak. Later still, he wakes to find her scootched up and rocking herself on his leg. He knows she thinks he is asleep or maybe she isn't thinking at all. He stays the way he is, not moving, not knowing how to calm her, how to coax her away, soothe her, except to keep still, to breath easy, and to feel the weight of a sadness that presses the very dust out of him, till he isn't human anymore, just the spirit of sadness. After, she sleeps and he holds her till morning.

~

Though she feels ambiguously about the horse, for Bee, the black and white paint becomes an inevitability she cannot resist. Even Mrs. Odecoven, who does not approve of the paint and says she has a horse more suitable for Bee, cannot stay the momentum, brought on by Bee's mother's death, by a new school and the children there, by her father's guilt, by cows and calves, by the horse breeders and cattle ranchers and the necessity of their of industry, even by Mrs. Odecoven herself, her resistance to the horse sounding always a little not-true, because her nature is to calculate her own advantage,

and most especially, and above all, because of Bee, because she can't stand up to herself. In May, Anderson buys the cutter from the rancher-patriarch, Mr. Hatter, and arranges to board it at Mrs. Odecoven's stable.

In the meantime, Anderson has all but forgotten his small dream of seeing the cave until one day, after her Saturday morning lesson, Bee says Mrs. Odecoven told her she's ready to take the horse out on her own and they should really go out—take lunch and some things and wouldn't he like to do that, just the three of us. Anderson feels the hot part of morning on his neck, overlooks the few cows Mrs. Odecoven keeps in a pen, and knows they have the whole day in front of them. Still he might have wondered about it more had “just the three of us” not reminded him of Shaney.

Driving out with Mrs. Odecoven's borrowed trailer behind their car, Anderson recalls the long road Bitman took him to, and he tries to visualize the cliff face and the fence line. Of course it had taken much longer than he thought it would to trailer up Emma Flynn—Bee's paint—and to get lunch together. At the base of Coal Creek Road, Anderson turns the hasp and shoots the bolt back, and they unload Emma Flynn. Emma Flynn doesn't know where she is or why. It is already past midday, the very hottest part of the day, but at least it will be cooling. Bee cinches a leather strap around Emma Flynn while Anderson stretches.

They begin, Anderson running along and Emma Flynn walking behind, occasionally Bee tongue-clicking Emma Flynn to catch up. They head down the creek road, between the west and east facing drainages. The sun is hot, radiating down through the clear air and up off the road, and when Anderson has the opportunity to take some double track up into the hills and avoid the hot red dirt, he turns that way, into the yellow

fescues and vetch, the lupine and clover so dry it crackles in the light breeze—the sage dotting the slopes, and all along the rise of terrain. Anderson breathes easy. Shaney and he used to love to run, along a beach, in the Santa Cruz mountains. Once, before Bee was born, out on Point Reyes, they'd run along the beach naked, then raced, first one and then the other, so they could watch each other completely, sprinting, going as fast as they could and not caring what their bodies looked like, feeling wind on their skin and every part of them, and he remembered she looked strong, all her muscles, in her legs, in her hips, her stomach and shoulders and arms, all contracting and loosing to a single purpose of beauty. Shaney believed, though Anderson doubted the chronology, that Bee was conceived that weekend. Bee was born, and Shaney got sick. Then Anderson ran by himself, and then he did everything by himself, including raising Bee, and then Shaney was gone. The black dirt ranch road rose gradually towards a cleft of hills and boulder fields beyond, fire red cliff outcroppings and narrow buttes. Shaney didn't keep her promise to him—she'd never said it, but she knew like he did that if love existed, it existed as a promise.

He calls back to Bee, “You go ahead,” he says. “I want to watch you.”

Bee nudges Emma Flynn and Emma coils her powerful haunches and kicks ahead.

They run on like this for several miles, and when the road swoops up and over the wrong ridge, away from the creek road, he and Bee and Emma Flynn turn onto the prairie itself, run over cattle tracks and animal tracks, between scraggy sage and prickly cactus, down ridges and through dried wetland and marsh and up ridges on the other side.

They run on, Bee on the black and white brood mare Emma Flynn and Anderson following, over almost white-yellow hills, shining like corn silk, a land in resistance. They run by the western facing bluff and by the sandstone boulders standing on the side of a hill, like ancient bodies looking out, and aren't they that, Anderson thinks. There they stop and take a rest, and Anderson drinks from the water Bee carries. They explore around the boulders. Anderson holds the horse and Bee tries to climb the boulders only to find pieces of the rock break off in her hands. In a depression of one boulder they find a circle made of quartz rocks, white, yellow, and blood red stones.

Anderson walks up with Emma Flynn and Bee asks, "What do you think that is?"

Anderson doesn't have any idea. The horse nudges his head. "Stop that now," he says. He looks over the quartz circle more closely. There wouldn't be any quartz stone in this immediate area—it was all sand, some burned and compacted under pressure like the boulders around them, some soft like the ground wearing away toward the drainage, some hard baked by ancient coal fires. The quartz circle was human-made, that was clear, and he thinks of the *tipi* circles, of course, but these circles are small and filled in, and for some reason he doesn't think they've stumbled onto something old. It is an anthropological find, but whether ancient or modern he doesn't know for sure. He does know one thing, and he tells that to Bee. "It has to do with magic."

"What kind of magic?"

Stopped now, he is sweating. The wind dries salt on his forehead. "Marks a spot, or an altar, or meant to keep something in the ground, a spirit. It's hard to say. It's magical thinking is what I mean."

"What do you think is here?"

The way to know is to dig it up. Anderson says, “What ever you want, but don't tell me.”

“Why not?”

“Because that ruins it.”

“Why?”

Anderson had no idea—those are the rules, he thinks, but he doesn't want to say that. “I don't know,” he says

Bee thinks it over. She says, “Okay. I have something.”

Nothing at all is going on in Anderson's head. Anderson says, “I do too.”

Bee picks up the center rock, a red stone, cleft on one end and tapered at the other—it looks like a stylized heart. Anderson never tells Bee what to do, but he does. He feels moved by the circle of stones. He says, “Leave it there.”

“Why?” Bee asks.

“That way we can believe in it,” he says.

They start out again, and Anderson looks out over the hills and to the Big Horn mountains in the distance and the geology comes flooding in on him, these alluvial flood plains, the water and growth, the life that was here and under the ground. The sand boulders had told him, “Liquid, rock, and particulate, all sand, and once the water drained away, the lightening struck and baked the earth and the rest drained away.” And he and Bee and even Emma Flynn were revealed to the air, driven up. For a moment, it makes a spectacular reverse sense to him. He feels happy.

In the distance, he thinks he sees the mouth of the cave, calls to Bee and points the direction. The cones of baked red rock, the clinker, dot the horizon. In another mile,

he is sure, but once they are below the cave, Bee dismounts but doesn't think her horse can climb the steep slope to the cave. She isn't interested in seeing the cave, she says, and Anderson thinks she is pouting. He didn't let her do what she wanted and now she won't do what he wants. The psychology was simple but also exceedingly difficult, always push-pull, but he needs to do things for himself and needs to believe that she will be all right. That's what his psychiatrist told him. And he is interested in the cave. After all, 9,000 years ago people lived in this cave and overlooked all that he and Bee look over, and it was, in fact, much the same as now, but they thought about it not at all the same, and if Anderson could look out from their home—not even a home, just a shelter against the elements—he might see the land the way they did and feel his life the way they felt theirs, understand their concerns and see his own.

As Anderson walks up the steep incline, his legs, fine till now, wobble. He is tired. He is ridiculous. He will never understand how they thought of the land or their lives. The cave, he now sees, isn't much more than a toothy yawn in the rock. He reaches the entrance and looks in. He already feels the cool breath, welcome relief from the sun. He ducks down and enters, skirting a low rock and then leans down to look into the back. Animal bones lie around his feet, animal feedings, but no sign of human life, ancient or otherwise, which might be expected—the cave had been excavated in the 1960's by Ruthie, the sewing friend of Bitman's mother, and other amateur archeologists and a few from the University. Anderson tries to imagine human beings huddled far back in the cave, under the low arched chamber, but can't. And as he peers in, crouching down to look into the back—if only he could dig it out a little, the silt and wind blown dirt filling the back of the cave, but, of course, there would be nothing to find and even if

there was, those artifacts would reveal nothing: history is, where it's always been, in life lived, he thinks, and that never lasts—he reaches out a hand and places it in a horizontal fissure where a rattlesnake, cool and slow to recognize the threat, comes awake, strikes, missing the hand and hitting Anderson in the face.

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For Anderson, the remarkable thing about a snake pumping venom into his face is that the snake is there at all—hanging now from his cheek, a long band of muscle. Anderson, without thinking, yanks the snake away, whether that tears his cheek or not, he can't tell, and tries to fling it away, expecting great results but getting poor ones. The snake flailing back and forth, drops almost on his feet. Anderson's one clear thought is he does not want to be struck again, while the snake, also, does not want to strike Anderson, having been startled and whipped around and dropped where she might be stepped on by the large animal and crushed. The snake skates away, nosing and curling into another and less favored crack in the rock.

Bee, who sees her father stagger backward from the cave, knows that finally something terrible has happened. Emma Flynn pulls, and for a second Bee thinks to let her go, but she doesn't and she keeps a hand on her bridle. Anderson lurches down a few steps from the mouth of the cave and, his legs hinging suddenly at the knees, sits down. He holds his face. Something streams from that side, but blood, mucus, or tears Bee can't tell.

“Bee, honey, I'm going to tell you exactly what you have to do,” he calls down. He feels swelling. His skin seemed to pull in the direction of the bite.

~

Bee leaves the water, hating to leave her father there, hating to get on the horse, hating the horse in fact—hating Emma Flynn and the High Plains and even her father, hating everything so much, that everything hardens in the fire of that hatred and she feels the veil fall away and the world rendered clearly, where every action becomes set in its moment of perfect execution, her every sense balancing in the seat of the saddle, feeling, fusing with every movement of horse, springing—originating—from her thoughts, to her hands and legs to Emma Flynn’s shoulders and mane, to her haunches and into and down the slope and through the swales and toward the ranch road, toward certainty, the certainty that everything is going to be all right because she is going to make it all right—it’s up to her now, as the horse begins to move in a new way, not in control or out of it, because control is unnecessary in the field that opens wide before her, and she knows Emma Flynn knows about life and love, and the secret she left in the circle of stones, a secret for her father and all her future and the future of the world, all at once, the rhythm of horse under her more familiar to her than any rhythm she’s known, ancestral rhythm, her mother’s rhythm in dry blonde grass, in sage, in western wheat, whispering away at *her* hooves like a cry lost in thunder, like the feeling that comes upon her—light, fluttering like a mother’s heartbeat, her breast, her milk, the milk of tears that wind and heat draw from her eyes dropping the veil again, the horse moving under her and the feeling, her legs thumping, and shivering, and her saddle bumps, and she begins to rise out of the saddle into a middle distance—not rising or falling—no-place, and bumps again, if the horse is in control now, it is in control like water controls the land, shaping, as she rises above the shaping, above the driving-on, rises above the land and the horse.

~

Anderson has nothing to do but wait. There is a lot of pain. His neck pinches up. He knows he has to sit still and try to control his heart rate. The cave hadn't been much, hadn't connected him to anything. He thinks about Shaney. And he thinks about Bee. He can hear the gusts of wind before they arrive, shaking the dry grass. He drinks water. It hurts for him to move the smallest amount and then it doesn't seem to hurt anymore. He is alone. So much is lost. What makes history is history, he knows that, and their own lives, his and Bee's and Shaney's, will be lost in an epoch made not by their acts but by the artifacts that someone somewhere deems important enough to note—likely the technologies of death and the dead they leave and eventually even those will be lost. He can see for miles in all directions, over the hills and toward the mountains. On the southern slope, antelope gather. In the distance a large raptor hangs in the thermal. Those sandstone boulders have seen a lot, he thinks, but they haven't seen everything. They'll wear away too. Flies circle about him. Before him are the alluvial plains, carved and eroding, and all that is buried. He knows he can depend on Bee.

~

Bitman sits at the Red Dawg drinking a can of Miller beer and will have to pay with a check. He doesn't mention this to Laura, the proprietress, or the two other women playing cards, Laura's sister and a friend—all big-boned, blonde women by the corner window that looks out over the parked cars and road and the co-op's diesel tanks across the street, and he certainly doesn't think to mention it to the large boy, Laura's son, only fourteen and already 260 pounds who Bitman knows from the middle school hallways until the last year when the boy went on to the High school. They don't much care what he has to say anyway, he's come to think, not after that day he said, in reference to

methane pumping, that the white man was destroying the land. Bitman, 1/8 Shoshone, sometimes thinks that way, but Laura's father and therefore Laura and her son are all benefiting from land lease to the gas companies.

As Bitman orders another beer, his friend Allen comes in, looking a little more rough than usual in his sheepskin cap that he wears regardless of the hot weather and a soiled shirt that reads *Recluse RoadRunners*. He tells about a good-looking horse spotted out on the road and then a girl up on Coal Creek. "Seems all right. They're taking her to hospital in Sheridan."

"That right?" Bitman says.

"Riding Coal Creek, and we found her car and trailer and everything. Ugly little girl."

"Don't say," Bitman says.

Bitman orders a beer for Allen because he'll have to pay with a check anyway, and they sit at the round table by the photos and the small, side window. He himself has been up to Coal Creek at least within the last year, but he can't remember what on earth would have drawn him up there. Bitman drinks some beer and thinks about it some.

"She from around here?" he says.

Allen adjusts his cap down tighter on his head.

"Round here, you know?"

Allen says he doesn't know. "And anyway, we'll hear the whole story soon enough." And they will.

"*Apache Oil* land up river?" Laura says. "Not BLM?"

“That’s right,” Allen says, and that starts the talk about the Bureau of Land Management.

As it turns out, the girl is OK. At the hospital they understand well enough from her where her father is, and he turns out OK too once they find him—dehydrated and needing the hospital. Some brain fever. Maybe it’s Saturday Bitman hears it. Bitman thinks, a fool up in a cave filled up with rattlesnakes. You get sick and you don’t feel good, but people don’t often die from rattlesnake bite. Rattlesnakes are a good snake, Bitman thinks, cull rodents and stay away from trouble, unless they got stepped on or you fall in their hole.

Later, Bitman hears the girl and her father moved back to California or wherever it was they came from. He’ll lose money on that fancy horse, Bitman thinks, and on his house too, in the forced sale, and Bitman hears there’s a dispute over stable fees and other debts, in all seems for the best, though they say at the school they lost a good teacher. Some days, later on, Bitman finds himself thinking of the teacher, curious at the bad luck that transferred upon him, and about how he’d gotten away scot-free. Bitman thinks this even while toxic ground water, along with liquor and nicotine, kill him.

And later still, Bitman hears the ranch he once worked, over 1,000 acres, one that had been part his by marriage, had sold for over four-million dollars and not a one in the family getting a penny for it, even his ex-wife, which he wouldn’t expect, but none of the others either, though their people homesteaded the property from the time before cattle and built the house out of hewn stone that still stood there through winter and drought. He hears how a movie producer bought it. Bitman drinks from a can of Miller beer and

wonders whether he'll meet any famous people, what they'll do, and what they might say. He wonders whether folks around here will make them welcome.

The Soldier as a Boy

1. When he first learned to shoot, his father said, “Don’t pull the trigger; don’t squeeze it.” They were out in the woods at a special place his father liked to go, and the boy steadied a .22 lever action rifle and pressed the walnut stock against his shoulder, looked over the brass action and a blued octagonal barrel, past the iron sight. His father sat with his back resting against a tree, smoking a cigarette. The boy inhaled crisp air through his teeth. The breath calmed him. Across the clearing, prairie rose and Indian paintbrush grew, snatches of the white blossoms of bloodroot and the green orbs of rattlesnake master. The boy was eight years old.

His father said, “Imagine an invisible string, and imagine that the string is attached right there on your finger.” He got up and stepped over to the boy, taking his hand, opening the palm, and pressing down in the center of the boy’s index finger. “Go on, try it.” The boy stretched his hand and then curled his fingers around the stock. He extended and pressed his index finger to the trigger. As he leaned in, he could smell the cold scent of tobacco on his father’s hunting jacket. “Imagine the string. It’s real straight, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And imagine that it gets pulled more slowly than you can feel.”

Welding his cheek against the stock, the boy imagined the string attached to his finger and it being pulled. His mouth went dry, and he pushed his tongue through his chapped lips. “What’s pulling it?” the boy asked.

His father coughed and dragged his cigarette and exhaled. “Well, I guess I don’t know.”

The boy squinted his eye up the slope, along the first sprouts of prickly grass a short distance to another tree where a soup can hung—he and his father had punched holes and fed string through the holes in the can earlier that morning—and the boy conjured an imaginary string as he aimed down the barrel, not the real string that the can hung on but one attached to the center of his trigger finger where the whorls peaked and pulled back through the heel of his hand and along his forearm and into his shoulder and then just back. The string he imagined was vague, just a suggestion that drew his finger, a force with no origin—even his father didn’t know what was pulling it and he knew everything. So the boy thought mostly nothing at all, just the string, when of its own accord the rifle fired and the bullet was away, and the soup can didn’t twitch though it had been hit clean through.

Towards evening when they got home, his mother poked her head to the window, pulling the curtain aside, and then opened the door for them.

“Well, how’d he do?” she asked.

His father put his thick cold hand on the back of the boy’s neck, just resting it there. “He’s a real straight shooter,” he said. The boy stood stock-still and felt that he was supporting his father in some way. The boy didn’t yet know what pride was, what it was to have it or lose it, that pride could provide service or destroy, but the feeling he had then was derived from pride—he had become of some use to his father.

2. For some in Arkansas, even today, the land over the western boarder is Indian Territory, and folks from over there, like Jeff's father, were viewed with suspicion. And in fact, his father was 1/16 Choctaw, though you wouldn't recognize that in his thin hooked nose and pale white skin. Jeff didn't know if it was his father's Indian blood, or his transplant roots, or because he'd been in the Navy and had more experiences than most, but when they walked into the corner store, the talk would hush, and the group of men in the yellow booth, hunched over biscuits and sausage gravy on Styrofoam plates, would only make a polite inquiry as to his mother's health, make a comment upon him—the boy—and his father would answer with a tight smile. As they went out the door, the talk would rise again with affection, laughter, and warmth.

Mr. Stacey distributed auto parts, and his territory was the border area, his routes threading out and around like the petals of a flower. Mostly he was on the road, and his son imagined him smoking, his elbow out the window. He worked long hours and days at a time, and Jeff knew he would not want to spend time teaching him how to shoot, that when he was home he wanted to get out in the woods. So Jeff practiced.

He built a rest for the rifle, filling sandbags to use as braces. He fired dozens of different brands of .22 bullets. He considered the limitations of the .22 Henry in terms of rifling and sights, but in all, he determined, it was a fine rifle to learn on. He was careful when he cleaned it, protecting the bullet seat, the rifling, and the muzzle. He reduced his role to that of any component part, and spent time attempting to understand his motivations and trepidations. He found he was nothing more than a collection of variables as well, and he worked on each in turn. His approach was sound, and he seldom felt discouraged.

One day Jeff found a box of toothpicks in the catchall hutch by the front door. After he'd done his homework—he'd only really been thinking of the toothpicks—he took his rifle and the box outside along with a roll of tape. He pulled a garbage can from the side of the house and dragged it up to the metal shed at the edge of their property where his father had a sand pile. Beyond the mound were woods: ash in the foreground and birch, poplar, and a few maples further in. He put the garbage can in front of the sand pile, and then taped a toothpick to the rim of the garbage can.

He backed up until he couldn't see the toothpick anymore, and then took one step forward. He levered a .22 into the chamber, aimed, and fired. He went through a portion of the box like that even though his back got sore and his arms ached from steadying the rifle, fifty something toothpicks. He put one or two holes in that garbage can too.

He wore earplugs made of orange neoprene. They muffled the sharpest side of the low velocity .22's he shot but still other sounds seeped through, and he heard the plastic rollers on the glass door. When he looked over his shoulder, he saw his mother step out onto the back deck. He watched her as she closed the door and the screen. She walked toward him wearing a white and pink flowered dress and her brown hair held back by the two hair-combs she wore. Barefoot and her eyes down, she was watching in the grass for rocks and sticks and snakes, perhaps.

As his mother approached, he cocked the lever, ejected the brass bullet, and left the breach open. He wanted his mother to see that the rifle wasn't loaded and that it was made safe. He knew this was the most considerate thing to do when handling a firearm around other people. When that breach was open there was no possible way for that weapon to fire.

“I think that’s enough of that now,” his mother said. “You’re gonna make yourself deaf and dumb by all that.” He told her, “All right,” and laid the rifle on his jacket on the ground and ran up to the garbage can. On his way back with the toothpicks and tape he saw the furrows between his mother’s eyebrows deepen and her face set in a look, as if she’d dropped down into herself and found a sturdy rock to stand on. “Are those my fancy toothpicks?” she said.

She waited for the boy to answer. He cocked a foot. Truth was, he didn’t know if they were fancy or not or if she had other toothpicks. Toothpicks were toothpicks, he thought. He knew better than to say any of this. He kept his mouth shut. She swung his shoulder around. Leaning down, she said, “Who told you to shoot my fancy toothpicks, Mister?”

The bright sun narrowed her pupils to pinpricks in the center of sparkling shafts of aqua, yellow, and emerald greens, colors that only came out in a sharp light. Otherwise, his mother had hazel eyes.

“Nobody told me, Ma’am,” he said.

“Nobody?” she said. By nobody this time, he could tell that she meant his father.

“No, Ma’am,” he said.

She thought about that for a second and smoothed his shirt. “All right then.”

She turned toward the house, and he picked up the rifle and trotted up beside her. She pulled him into the folds of her flowered dress. She said, “Still, those don’t grow on trees, you know.” The boy put one arm around his mother’s waist and held the toothpick box and the tape. In the other hand he held the rifle. Her hip swayed into his side, so he walked along skipping out to the side.

“Well, they do, mama,” he said.

“Do what?” she said, her hand around his shoulder, pulling him up and closer, and running her fingers over his ear.

“They grow on trees. Toothpicks do,” he said.

“Don’t you smart aleck, me,” she said, tugging his ear.

“I’m not smartalecking, mama. I’m just saying the truth. Because toothpicks come from wood and everything wood comes from trees, even paper because paper’s wood.”

“Then I suppose you’ll roll out the dinning room table and shoot that?”

“No, Ma’am.”

They stepped up on the porch, and she took her arm from his shoulder. Then she held out her hand for the box of toothpicks. “Well, that’s what it sounds like you’re saying, mister,” she said. “And if you were saying that, you’d get a whipping you wouldn’t forget.”

The boy slunk his head, only feigning fear. Whippings from his mama were infrequent and not nearly so bad as a sit down with his father. His father did not like to make the boy understand something he should have understood already, what his father called common sense, so the boy worked hard at having common sense. But his mother’s anger wound by other, more curious paths, difficult to fathom or avoid. She was not one for premeditated punishment. The boy knew that even though the threat was empty, he was intended to give in, even if he was right, even if her argument ran counter to common sense. On the subject of the toothpicks and the dining room table the boy was agreeable. “Yes, Ma’am,” he said.

And then, as if it had been too long already, the boy wanted his mother to be impressed with him. Stepping up to the porch, he told her, “You know mama, when I’m shooting, there’s a time when my brain shuts off and that’s when I shoot best.”

When he practiced his shooting, he often related to her the discoveries he’d made, such as a bullet shoots flat over water, or that uphill or downhill, a bullet strikes high. And his mother would generally say about the same thing: “Hmm” or “What do you know?” or “I wonder if your father knows that?” That would be enough for the boy. This time she looked off to the woods, distracted, her hand kneading his shoulder. She brushed the hair out of his face and then leaned down. She pinched the boy’s cheek just a touch and looked into his eyes. She said, “It’s nice to have a man around the house.” Her face moved towards his, and he felt her lips press against his cheek—that was the best feeling in the world. Then she pulled his ear and said, “Come along.”

3. The salve, cooling in the pan, filled the kitchen with the smell of spearmint and pig-fat. His mother scooped it up with a spatula and spread it into a mason jar. She wiped down the jar with a paper towel and handed it to the boy. The salve was an opaque gray, and the jar was warm in his hands. This was the reason that she’d come to get him. She wanted the boy to deliver the salve up the road.

The boy always chose the wood’s trails over the black-top road, so he loped along the trail in the woods with the salve in a greasy, brown-paper bag and the Henry rifle in his other hand, scanning the trees for leafy nests. Squirrels were small and difficult to hit and to find them, he’d start thinking like a squirrel, how they watch out for a threat but also want to go about their business, skirting behind a branch or a trunk and then

venturing out again. Sometimes he would throw a stick to the backside of the squirrel to flush him out, and he always shot with a solid backstop as his father had taught him.

At the far side of a rutted dirt patch where pickup trucks would drive in, he walked along the edge of an old foundation that was said to be full of snakes, though it was only filled with rubble and brambles and garbage, crushed beer cans, broken bottles and an old washing machine that lay on its side. The woods were deserted and quiet, but before climbing up onto the paved road, he heard a rustling of leaves. He stopped and listened, and heard the sound of shallow breaths—not human, but from an animal close to the ground in the tangle of weeds. He knelt down to take a look, but once he'd done so, the boy imagined something coming out of the bushes at him, and in his imagination it made perfect sense to turn from hunter into hunted.

At first the running felt like a release and then like exhilaration. The salve swung in the paper bag and the rifle hung heavily in his other hand and tugged at his shoulder, and he ran further just because it felt good.

Around a curve in the road, he saw Mrs. Wall's old farmhouse set back from the road—further back than most of the new houses, and he lagged to a walk, catching his breath, and the sweat, no longer evaporating in the wind, condensed on his skin behind his neck and the small of his back. Mrs. Walls was what used to be called a granny-woman, which meant she was a midwife. She'd delivered him, which to the boy felt like a fable. His father had wanted a hospital, but the boy's mother insisted, and the father joked that for winning that argument, she gave up winning all others, which wasn't always a joke. That capitulation settled many future arguments. Her family had lived in the area before everything was broken up into subdivisions, the rest of them now gone

off, and she was alone, which was common for granny-women. They were said not to suffer men lightly, and, as they had a way with herbs and roots, malingering, unfaithful, or otherwise undesirable men seemed to disappear in their care.

Chickens scuttled on her front yard. She opened the door for the boy and stood stooped for a moment to get a look at him, and then she glanced at the rifle. “You here to put me out of my misery?”

The boy didn’t know what she meant but he knew the answer was *No, Ma’am*, so that’s what he said.

She bade the boy lean the rifle up on the inside of the door, and then he followed her in. The house smelled of cool mold and the boy recalled the few times she’d babysat him. Lecturing him on the evils of running barefoot, she told him he’d have to eat mud if he got ringworm, and one time scrubbing under his fingernails with a dish brush, he’d said, “If I’m gonna eat mud, what’s the difference if my fingernails are dirty,” and she’d cuffed him for sass.

“I’ve got something for your mother,” she said as they passed into her kitchen.

The boy answered her politely and looked around. The kitchen, colored in a light blue and at the backside of the house, caught the afternoon light. The chrome toaster and the white enamel range gleamed. She had her hand in a cedar box. She looked back at the boy. “Expecting a cookie?” she said. She pulled out a handful of one-dollar bills, counted out a number. “That’s ten dollars for your mother. Put it deep in your pocket and don’t loose it.”

He held the bills for a second and then handed them back. “I may not take it,” he said.

“Yes, you will,” she said.

“We’re not to take money for a favor.” He put his hands on the back of a chair, then took them down and folded them behind his back. If she were to slap his face, it would not be polite to restrain her swing.

“Take the money for your mother,” she said. “A woman needs a few dollars of her own.”

“Ma’am, she wouldn’t want me to take money, and it would just mean that she’d drive me back here and have me hand it back to you.”

She seemed to consider that for a moment. The boy set his firmest expression on his face.

“Well then, take these.” She placed the salve on her counter and handed the boy a paper bag in return. “He loves fresh eggs, don’t he? How’s he keeping?”

This was, of course, exactly how the transaction was supposed to take place. The world the boy knew was full of disguised protocol and hidden tests. “Good, Ma’am,” he said. He looked in the bag of eggs.

The granny-woman looked off. “I could use a little help applying this potion. I don’t suppose you much take to helping people? Your father doesn’t talk to you much about Christian charity?”

“Ma’am, I’m going to have to hurry home,” he said, though it was the idea of rubbing any part of her old body with the salve that really had him in a hurry.

“All right,” she said. “Off you go.”

The boy was glad to escape outside into the cool air and walked with a long stride from her house and down the road.

Once he reached the trail that cut into the woods, he remembered from earlier the sound of the animal and his own staring into the dark brush. He wasn't afraid of anything in the woods if he thought about it, but then again he didn't see the reason to test that theory. He decided to continue along the paved road. About twenty yards further down, he saw dark brown and black smears on the roadside. He'd seen dried blood before and recognized it. The streaks of blood led to the edge of the road and down the embankment. He stepped over to the edge and peered down, his rifle held in front of him. The brush formed a thick dark skirt, and as he inched closer to improve his view, the loose gravel at the edge of the road gave way and his feet came out from under him. The rifle jerked up in the air of its own accord as he fell on his backside and slid down the hill, feet first through the brush to the bottom.

The boy's mind raced through several worries. First, did he scuff his rifle? He was pretty sure that he'd held it up the whole way down the slope. Second, getting the hell out of there. But he couldn't leap to his feet because his hands were full with the rifle and the bag of eggs, and his feet weren't connecting to anything firm, his right leg pushing into the gnarled weeds and brambles and his left into something soft that gave with each extension of the leg. Third, was he bleeding? His pant-leg was wet. And lastly—he got through the first three quickly—what was he stepping on?

The dog was practically in his lap, its back end smashed and hobbled. As Jeff pushed away from it, he felt its mangy fur spiky with blood. He scurried backwards, fearing attack or something, but once he felt safe, he inched closer, leaving the rifle behind but for no good reason continuing to hold the sack of smashed eggs. He moved forward on his hands and knees. It seemed to have somersaulted down the embankment.

The animal's head was cocked up and twisted over its back. Its long tongue rolled out and faded to a blue gray. In the flickering look of one yellow eye, something like disdain told the boy that this wasn't some mangy brown mongrel—the narrow snout and sharp thin teeth, the widening fox-like head. It wasn't a dog at all, and though he didn't think they had any in their area, it seemed to be a coyote.

He should have jumped back again, but he didn't. An injured animal was a dangerous animal—he knew that all right, but he felt too that the animal had no capacity to fight him. Its back end was crushed and the boy surmised its spinal cord had been snapped, thinking it must have taken a super effort for the animal to drag itself off of the road. But the reason the boy wasn't afraid was that its nostrils twitched and its long tongue stretched to the side to lap the egg leaking through the sack, its thirst overcoming its instinctual fear. The animal's attempt was feeble and it couldn't bring her tongue back into her mouth. The blue tongue just lay there touching the wet paper. The boy sat back and thought about that for a moment, sitting with an animal down the side of the road. He felt very alone and it occurred to him that no one knew he was there.

He reached into the sack and pulled out a whole egg. These weren't store bought, and the shells were dirty with feathers, chicken shit, and straw. The yolks, rich from the insects in Mrs. Walls' yard, would be deep yellow or orange, fertilized and with a spot of blood—the embryonic chick. Most of them hadn't smashed when he came down the hill. He pulled his rifle over, broke the egg on the barrel, and separated the shell over the animal's mouth. He had no reason to think the animal was female, except there was something feminine about her. Maybe it was in the one eye he could see, the way she looked at him. When the egg slid down over her teeth, she jerked her muzzle. The boy

pulled back, but just as quickly she lay her muzzle back down. The egg hung over her lips and the yolk broke on the ground between her teeth. Her tongue swelled in her mouth, but she could do no more with it. The boy took another egg and broke that, and tried to open it closer to her throat. He poured the egg over her lips and teeth and the egg slide over her tongue and onto the ground, her tongue swelling, and her lips pulling back. She appreciated him, he thought, and took another egg from the sack. And with each egg that he broke and tried to feed her, he felt a greater sense of isolation and loneliness with this animal. And he felt a sense of dread too. There was only the clarity of acting, of taking each egg and breaking it and pouring in on her mouth. He twisted a small stick from a bush and pushed the egg white and yolks towards her. She could still do nothing with them. And he took more eggs and broke those. If he'd had a thousand eggs he would have fed them to her all night or until she died. He didn't have a thousand. He had one dozen, and in a few minutes he'd broken them all and poured the remnant of the smashed ones and looked at her and then he stood up. He took his rifle, chambered a round, and pressed the muzzle to her head below her ear. Her eye looked at him, but as the light was fading, he could barely make it out. He didn't feel what he'd felt before, that she feared him or held him in disdain. He didn't feel anything from her. He felt nothing from her at all. He felt his father to be there with him, and he heard the granny-woman's prophesy: Put her out of her misery.

But then he felt so alone again. He pressed the rifle against her head, and he touched the trigger. It would take the smallest pressure to make that weapon fire. The bullet would enter her brain and she'd be gone, dead. The smallest pressure and he could not do it.

He put his rifle aside. He covered her face with the paper sack. And then he climbed the embankment. When he arrived home, his mother's worry shifted on her face from relief to anger. Everything he'd been doing seemed to confirm the worst for her: willfulness. Jeff would not tell her what happened to his clothes or to the eggs, which she'd found out about from calling Mrs. Walls. "Worried sick," his mother kept saying as she beat him with one of his father's black leather belts that night, her face contorted, and his braced. But he would not tell her what had happened because he did not want to tell her what he had done. He had allowed the animal to suffer away in pain. Left alone to make his own decision, he could not kill it. She beat him trying to get the devil out of him, beat out the willfulness. Finally, she found the thrashing did no use and she stopped. She and her son adopted an unspoken truce.

She had to believe—though she knew it wasn't true—that she'd succeeded in something. And he did not tell her that she had succeeded only in illuminating him to the gray nature of the world, that he could keep his shame inside as a secret from her and everyone.

II. NON-FICTION

Old Man Bar

I sat there with an 8 ounce beer glass in the semi-dark in a long room cluttered with those often set apart from the herd, either because of their alcoholism—which is a symptom (not a disease)—or their antagonisms, worn down but not altogether defeated—a moot point. In an old man bar there are no expectations. There’s a lot of civility. Nobody bothers you—that’s an unspoken rule. Everyone is there for the same self-contradictory reason: to be left alone with other people. And they are there to feel good—and that’s where the alcohol comes in.

It’s a bright sunny California afternoon in Burlingame—a rich town but this bar was surprisingly seedy. Inside was dark and smelled of beer and cardboard. A few barstools down a man sat hunched over a tumbler. He had long stringy black hair and a beard, wore a loose fitting shirt. Pushing under his shirt, above his belt, his kidney swollen like a thick steak.

I’d been at the Menlo Park VA, volunteering as a recreational therapist, which meant I dealt blackjack to the Vets on Friday after lunch. I loved the vets, and the VA is a great hospital if you can get in, which a lot of people can’t or don’t want to. The man down the bar is “that age,” as they say, and has “that look.”

“You serve?” I ask.

“Vietnam,” he says.

“Whereabouts?”

“Cú Chi.”

Cú Chi meant tunnels, and there was a well-known book about the tunnel rats, as they were called, a book that captured how horrible it was to crawl into a dark hole and face unimaginable booby traps or an inhuman enemy (they are, we are)—you led with your head, no possibility of protecting your eyes, your mouth, or your throat—or sometimes, even worse, you were lowered down, your balls leading the way. Not every war story is true, and people claim a lot that can't be supported by facts. A lot of people say they were tunnel rats because everyone can understand how terrifying that was—it meant you faced fear, that you were probably and (more importantly) legitimately fucked up, which also meant your troubles were understandable—and everyone wants that, a clear cause to their screwed effect—an explanation for their lives, an explanation, if tacit, as to why on earth they were alcoholizing themselves to death in an old man bar when sunny California lay just outside the swinging door. I don't necessarily believe him about being a tunnel rat, but I don't disbelieve him either. Cú Chi was shorthand, like so many things are short hand—a way to tell a story he couldn't necessarily tell.

And maybe he was a tunnel rat. Who knows? At Menlo a lot of guys had done outrageous things. One of the guys was the first to escape from a Nazi prison camp. He was a little guy, and he dressed up as a Hitler youth and rode away on a bicycle. When he came back to the States, he gave talks about it. He liked me to wheel him out into the garden to look at the rhododendrons. Another guy flew helicopters in Vietnam. He had a purple heart with two clusters on it—all received for the same action—flying into fire to get guys out, being wounded and flying in again. He kept flying in. Wheeling him to the bank in the main building one day, he turned and, apropos of nothing, said, “I could tell

you things.” Seeing his eyes at that moment, I believed it. And there were other guys, wounded in trainings, stateside, or doing something without any heroism attached, operating a forklift. One guy had lost both his legs that way and had a thyroid problem to boot—he never left his wheelchair and weighed about 300 lbs. This guy they called the commander, even though he’d never seen any action. He made things happen, like trips to Pacifica or the Botanical Conservancy. And there was another guy who had been raped by other U.S. soldiers and beaten nearly to death—that was in Japan during peacetime. He was in Menlo’s PTSD wing. He managed to pass the VA’s very stringent PTSD criteria. He’d tried to commit suicide.

Most people don’t pass their tests or even want to. The VA is a nightmare of red tape and a lot of worse off guys live on the outside—protecting their autonomy and paranoia, banking on their own toughness as they collect checks or panhandle, sit on corners or in old man bars. I don’t blame them—smart in its way.

So I don’t question a guy’s veracity by asking specific questions. His swollen kidney tells me enough. I bought him what he was drinking, pro quo I guess, for this story: *I was up in the hill country. I was working then with the CIA. I was teaching the farmers how to grow potatoes. We’d used Agent Orange there and they had nothing left. They were starving. So I went village to village and we flew in potatoes and we had to fly in buckets of dirt too. All their dirt was poisoned. Nothing could grow there. I showed them how to do it—cutting up the potato with a knife and putting the pieces into the buckets of dirt. They had no idea what I was doing. They’d never seen a fucking potato before.*

The Brave One

“Miracle ‘train’ baby comes home to grand welcome,”
Hindustan Times, New Delhi, March 28, 2008

“I wanted to see the child who has been bestowed the good fortune by god so I have come here,” Rambhan said, a man who had walked to Swaroopganj to see Jodha, whose name means “the brave one,” born unexpectedly while her mother was squatting over a moving train’s toilet bowl. The baby fell to the tracks below, under the train trundling to Ahmedabad. A boy (perhaps) walking along the tracks, looking for cans (perhaps) found her two hours later—or several hours, or hours and minutes, it doesn’t matter—the girl survived.

“Are you listening?” Zondie’s mother has returned from India (ostensibly to pick up her puppy, Ché, she’d rescued from a dumpster in Chile and left with us, but really to deliver her monologue, what she calls “Air America”) with a wheeled duffle bag filled with garbage now dumped on our dinning room table, articles and clipping she’d collected while traveling the sub-continent over the last two months—few clothes, few toiletries, just scraps.

I pick up a tattered *Fortune Magazine* and read about an American woman who spends \$100,000 dollars a month by way of her American Express credit card. The woman was married to a man who made a “good deal” on government land in Montana, meaning he ripped-off taxpayers, and turned it into a by-invitation-only ski and golf resort—a whole mountain—“Private Powder™” where membership starts at \$250,000, and homes begin at \$2 million. The subject of the article, the Blixseths’ divorce, is

described as contentious, and the so-called “visionary” (the author’s word) *Yellowstone Club* might be lost. Still, Mr. Blixseth describes himself as “a dreamer who was fortunate enough to see his dream come to life.” In Swaroopganj, people like Rambhan who have heard the news of Jodha’s birth bring fruit and toys and other things.

The juxtaposition of all these scraps must mean—or the same old thing—and all the while, “Air America” rolls on, spilling into our house, Judith pulling papers from the pile, shuffling, looking through, for the right napkin, fragment, to piece together a mosaic, evidence (as if we need it) necessary to bring out the glow of her critique—in this case, of Al Gore’s economic summit in India, and Akhtar Hameed Khan’s microloans.

“The farmers commit suicide when they can’t pay back the loan.” Judith’s hair flies off at angles, but of course she’s right. “They had nothing before and now they’ve figured out a way for them to have even less. Why don’t they just *give* them the money?”

Only expletives come to mind, like social engineering, carrot and stick, and accountability, always applied to someone else—and Blixseth. I want to say they’re buying what they’re selling. I want to say it will come to guns if . . .

Of course, someday it will, but instead, I think of an entity, because she wasn’t even “the brave one” yet, falling into this world, to cold train tracks—the undercarriage passing overhead and away, the umbilical cord snapping (I presume), the fluid that would drown her thrust from her sinuses and mouth by the thud of the railroad ties—and the placenta (some believe it to be a jealous twin) carted away for delivery later. I could never imagine it. Not found by starving dogs, she faced extinction without identity.

In the article, Rambhan says, “Don’t you think she is a miracle? She fell from the train but survived and now is absolutely fine.”

It occurs to me that animals don’t enslave each other nor do they have miracles, and that I could give up both in a second. I will never have that choice, and perhaps that is for the best—who am I to take anything away from Rambhan, or Zondie or Judith—or from my daughter. Zondie is pregnant, but we’ve decided not to tell Judith yet—no foretelling how she might react, and nothing fits in edgewise during “Air America,” anyhow. The baby, though, is on our minds. We just saw the sonogram Wednesday, the little body of gray and white, bulging like a fisheye, the technician measuring the skull, the brain ventricles, pointing out the kidneys, spine, and chambered heart. “A beautiful heart,” the technician says. Our baby yawns, drinks, waves her arms. She thinks not a thing—which is incredible, wresting herself from the mystery, no expectation or dread, no sense yet that she will be called by many names.

The Storekeeper

Four days before the UN Security Council resolution will turn Desert Shield into Desert Storm, the team waits for the scouts on the south side of a dust covered washout deep in the Iraqi desert. Their operation is illegal, but necessary. Stacey, the storekeeper, a thin man with pinched, worried shoulders, slumps against a rock. It is a 102 degrees. Across from him, the shade reaches out, but because the team's pale desert camouflage best matches the sun-bright rocks, they sit in the sun. The radioman tells him the temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction, as he does every hour whether Stacey needs the information or not. Humidity can slow a bullet down, but today the humidity is negligible. The wind speed is seven knots—light for the desert.

The rifle lies across his thighs. A beige cloth sticks out the muzzle as protection against the sand and dust. Sand-fleas move through the hairs on his wrists and under the collar of his shirt. He reaches in his pack for more insect repellent, dabs some on his neck. The lens hoods on the scope are down, and Stacey closes his eyelids, too. Sweat runs down his forehead and stings his eyes.

The scouts return. They located an Iraqi observation post a little over a kilometer away. The guys say, "He's just up there smoking cigarettes. They left this guy on a perch."

The CO looks around. "Is there anything else up there?"

"He has a radio and machine gun."

The CO tightens his lips. "Stacey," he says. "Splash the target."

Stacey opens his eyes. For the first time, he is ordered to kill a man.

I got my first rifle when I was ten. It was a .22—a gift from my dad. He was the kind of man who could just look at a gun and tell what's wrong. He'd glance over, say, Son, the bolt's not locked down. And I'd think it was, but when I checked, sure enough, it wasn't all the way locked down. Or, he'd say, The shot's right low—you're pulling.

My father was in charge of auto parts distribution in Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri, and he was often gone. I knew when he was home he didn't want to waste a lot of time teaching me how to shoot. He wanted to get out in the woods. So, I practiced.

One thing I did was take a toothpick and tape it to a garbage can. I'd start walking backward until I couldn't see it anymore. Then I'd take one step forward and shoot it.

We hunted all over the wild country near our home in Sebastian County, Arkansas. My dad always seemed to know where the birds and squirrels were, though in truth he didn't care much for squirrel hunting. He didn't find it challenging. He preferred quail hunting. I thought squirrel hunting was sporting because the squirrels could hide in the trees.

One day, my dad showed me that deer hunting wasn't so sporting. We were out bird hunting. I remember some snow remained on the ground, just in patches where the shade stuck. He held up his hand and motioned for me to turn around. And I did, and there was a six point buck about fifty yards away. I stood there for a second. The deer stood there for a second looking at us. Then it ran off into the brush.

I said, "Wow, that's pretty."

He said, "See why I don't hunt deer?"

I didn't, so I said, "No."

"Could you have hit that deer?"

"Sure, Dad. It's as big as a barn."

He said, "I rest my case." And that's the last we said about it.

The bolt action single shot .50 caliber M88 that Stacey carries was designed in 1988 by a master gunsmith at G. McMillan and Co. of Phoenix, Arizona, to meet specific Navy requirements. It was titled "a special application sniper rifle."

The weapon has an effective range of 2000 meters (1.2 miles). With tactical optics, it weighs in excess of 30 pounds. According to G. McMillan's technical manual, the M88's purpose is to "provide the user with a system capable of a high probability of a destructive first round hit on identified point targets." Stacey's instructors at sniper school called it the ultimate in overkill.

Stacey rests the weapon against his shoulder and takes a small plastic case out of his shirt pocket. He removes ear-plugs and screws them into his ears, muffling exterior sound. He flips the switches on the scope that release the lens-covers and scoots over to a low rock that has an unobstructed view to the northeast. He folds out the gun's bipod and places its feet on the rock. According to the scouts, the target is about a kilometer away. He levels the weapon. Crouching, he moves his right eye to its sighting distance. Because the scouts' directions are good, he finds the man almost immediately.

The man has his observational post in the sharp mountains. He holds a military crest, a ridge line below the actual crest of a hill. He has an excellent view of the low valley spread before him, but he is not silhouetted against the sky. Though a low row of sandbags lie in front of him, his head and chest are well within the reticle of Stacey's scope. He is armed with what looks to Stacey to be an American made M60 machine gun. Above his head, he has fashioned a sun-screen by draping a beige cloth over two prongs stuck into the sandbags behind him. The sunset casts the red sandstone into a deeper red.

Stacey adjusts the split image focus which is the range finder. Green numbers in the lower center of the sight compute the distance as Stacey turns the dial mid-scope. The man's M60 leans against his shoulder. Because the image shimmers with the heat waves, Stacey uses the sharp lines of the gun-barrel to join the upper section—the man with a concave wrap on his head—with the lower, his shoulders and the hands that rest passively on his weapon. When the two halves meet, Stacey sees the range is 1219 meters.

The man turns his head in Stacey's direction. For an instant, they look at each other. Stacey does not move. The man's eyes remain unenlightened. On his ledge, from that distance, he cannot see Stacey. The man puts his head down left and away, lights a cigarette. Then, he returns his gaze to the eastern horizon.

We met in high school. I'd been playing football, been injured, and I decided to take the band bus. I looked back and saw her sitting in the back, and I said, God damn,

that is a good looking woman. She was a majorette. So, I got up and went back to where she was sitting. I sat down and more or less just told her, By God, we're going together. Everything was going according to plan. She was a perfect mother and a perfect wife. For fun, we'd go dancing. She loved dancing with me, she said. She said, she felt like she was in orbit. On a Friday night, we were out dancing, and I noticed a twinge in my left knee.

The morning after my wife and I had been out dancing, my knee quit. I fell on my face. I couldn't stand.

The doctor said, "Looks like you have some serious cartilage problem here. We'll scope it. Two hours you'll be back."

An in-out patient deal. So, we schedule the operation for a Thursday. She was caring for me, perfectly wonderful. They took me into surgery and six hours later I came out of surgery.

Six hours later, I'm in the recovery room. And my wife is standing there, but she is dressed differently. I made a mental check to see when she could have done that. I didn't know the time—that it had been six hours.

"Well, there was a problem," she said.

I said, "Hi, Honey. You look awfully nice. What do you mean problem?"

"The doctor says you'll be unable to walk for a while."

I thought, two or three days. "Well, that's no big deal," I said.

"Here he is. He'll tell you."

The doctor explained that at some point I had my knee cap crushed, and that while most of it healed, some bone chips got between the two bones and acted as an

abrasive. They chewed the bottom off of this bone and the top of this bone. He said I wouldn't be walking for six months to a year.

When he was done, my wife leaned over, gave me a kiss, and said, "By the way, I'm going out."

That's why she was dressed up.

Something happened when that doctor said I was going to be gone, unable to do anything. What I think is she snapped right then and there. She blew a fuse.

It wasn't a full year after that, maybe eight months, she said she was moving to New Orleans, and she was gone for good.

What I didn't realize, at the time, was during those months she was taking care of me, she did it, but she held it against me. That's what I figure, anyway. That's what it must have been.

And I was completely devoted to her and our kids. I always built everything around that premise. That was the way I was raised. That was the way my parents were raised. And, then, out of nowhere, this curve hit me.

The team carries three types of ammunition for the M88: armor piercing DUs, "whitey petes," and exploding ballistic tipped bullets. Because Stacey only takes out targets at a great distance, he does not need much ammo. They carry one box of each type, each box containing twelve rounds.

Because naturally occurring uranium contains only 0.7% of the fissionable U-235 isotope, the process of extracting fissionable U-235 for commercial and military applications creates the nuclear waste, depleted uranium (DU). This is the principal

ingredient of the DU armor piercing round. DU is two and a half times more dense than steel and one and a half times more dense than lead. The density of DU makes it possible to have a smaller bullet, with less air drag, but the same mass as a larger round. The DU concentrates phenomenal weight onto a single point—more initial shock, more destruction. For example, the DU liquefies steel on contact and forces the molten steel out in its wake.

The white phosphorous round, “whitey pete,” is primarily used for munitions and fuel. Phosphorous is packed around a titanium spike, and then the entire bullet is covered in a protective skin. As the projectile travels through the barrel, its protective material wears off, and air friction ignites the phosphorous.

The ballistic tipped round explodes on contact. The lead compresses a core of high explosive. This compression creates the heat which is the catalyst for the explosion. The ballistic requires less accuracy—even in a close hit, the shrapnel will kill or wound the target. For this reason, the Geneva convention outlaws this round—more potential suffering. No one discusses the illegality of the round with Stacey. The ballistic is necessary, like being there before the war starts is necessary.

The armor piercing round is the most accurate of the three rounds the SEALs carry. After this first shot, Stacey will take every other shot with a DU. For this shot though, because he is nervous, he uses a ballistic.

My father called me about plumbing problems, and I went over. He met me outside. He took the grate from the side of the house and climbed into the crawl space. I handed through the toolbox and followed. We crawled along, ducking the girders and

the joists. He led with the flashlight. I brought along the tools. I noticed we were passing the bathroom, but I only got suspicious when we passed the kitchen at the north end of the house. Finally he gets down into the far corner and rolls onto one elbow.

I said, "Dad, why are we here? We're not here to fix the plumbing are we?"

"Son, what are you going to do?"

"About what?" I asked. I really didn't know what he was talking about.

He said, "About your life."

He laid the flashlight down and its light kind of faded off into the dark corner of the house, and all at once, I saw that he was exactly right.

He said, "I've already talked to your mother, and we would be willing to take on the kids."

He'd been in the Navy and recommended ships.

Stacey supports the rifle butt with his left hand. The sweat has all but stopped dripping from his forehead, and he is glad for his eyes, but both his hands are perspiring. He knows he can make the shot, but he is nervous. All the man has to do is pick up the radio. He wants to make sure that if he misses, or the bullet just goes through a lung, it will take him anyway. He gestures toward the ammo box containing the ballistic rounds. A gunner's mate hands him one. Stacey puts the ballistic in his left hand and places his right hand, palm up, on the bolt handle. He rotates the bolt out of lock-down and slides it back.

He shifts the ballistic round from his left hand to his right. The round is nearly seven inches long and weighs one pound. He brings it up close to look at it, one last check for imperfections, and then, without thinking, he blows on it—purely ritual.

Because he doesn't trust using the bolt to fit the bullet, he pushes it with his thumb, feeling it along the way, easing it into place. The shell's case head clicks when it meets the chamber. Stacey slides the bolt forward and locks it down. Then, he taps the bolt handle to make sure it is locked down.

Stacey has his left leg folded underneath him. His right leg is stretched out. He lifts his weight off the left. His movement is almost imperceptible. He rises. The rifle barrel comes down.

Since I'd completed two years of college and had a degree, I went to APG school. About the second week, Chief Petty Officer Pate calls me into her office. Pate was a hawknosed warhorse, a grade-A ball buster. And a wonderful woman.

She said, "So, Stacey, what do you want to be?"

Well, that's a good question. I mean, if I could be anything. And that's how it felt to me, being in the Navy at that time. So, I gave it a little thought. I said, "I want to be God." Pate looked like she didn't get it, so I said, "I want to be the guy they call." She nodded. "You want to be a storekeeper," she said.

Stacey's scope does not have mechanical adjustments for Minutes of Angle and windage that would allow him to shoot dead-on in the cross-hairs because, should the scope go out of whack in the field, it could not be accurately reset, and the weapon's

accuracy is Mission Critical for the SEALs. If the weapon cannot be counted on, then Stacey will not be Mission Critical either—which means he can get sent into dangerous situations because he is expendable. Still more important for Stacey is that he have confidence the weapon will perform the way it always has. Therefore, the vertical range line and the horizontal windage line of the scope's reticle are calibrated with green marks for the DU round, white marks for “whitey pete,” and red for ballistic. Stacey eyeballs his adjustment with the red marks. He is the only variable, and he does not vary.

The ship I was on, the USS Saint Louis, a 557 foot LKA, was in Sasebo, Japan. They were decommissioning the ship and parceling out the people. And me being the rate I was, an SK, I could pick anywhere in the world. I thought, I'll go to the supply center in San Diego. So that's what I did.

A week or two later my captain called me over.

I took my little note pad. “Yes, Sir. What can I do for you?” I figured he wanted cigars. You see I could get anything.

He said, “Stacey, how would you like to be attached to a SEAL team?”

I said, “What do you mean attached to a SEAL team?”

“They need a storekeeper.”

“Where is it?” I asked. “Not Little Creek is it?”

“Coronado,” he said. “2-3 months max. They're short a storekeeper.”

I said, “Great, I'll do it.”

I packed my bags and a week later I was on Coronado. I found out that the previous storekeeper would sometimes take two or three days to fill an order. That's

particularly a problem with the SEALs because they're used to getting what they want when they want it. Twenty-four hours is the rule.

So when I got there, I knew that the first thing to do was teach the team that I can do anything. If they get confidence in me right off the bat, I have the battle whipped. They'll all come to me and say, We need this.

Maybe my third day, the captain of the base, a type A personality cubed, called over and said he wanted Stinger missiles.

I said, "Sure. I can get you anything you want." But I thought, Jesus, Stingers. But I'd be damned if I wasn't going to get them. Now, I'd been to Stinger school. I knew they had them at Pendleton.

I called them, said, "I'll send a helicopter." Whatever it takes to get that captain what he wants, I'll do. I'll send a plane.

They said, "You'll have to come yourself."

"All right, I'll be there."

I ended up getting an old gun ship, a Huey, to pick me up and take me over to Pendleton. Had to sign all this shit. I couldn't believe how carefully they controlled those things. We're back by two in the afternoon. Went over to the captain's office. He figured I was going to make some excuses. "Where did you want them delivered?" I asked.

He looked at me. I could tell he was surprised.

But that was my job. They ask for it. I get it. That's the way to be a storekeeper. There was only one time I didn't get something in twenty-four hours. A SEAL comes in. He's enormous. He asks for boots.

“Sure,” I said. “Right away. What size?”

He put his foot up on the counter. Size fifteen. That was the only time I didn’t get something in twenty-four hours. God-damn it, that pissed me off. I don’t like to let someone down.

The ballistic tipped bullet needs contact with a sturdy bone structure to explode. In humans, bone ossification is completed about the age of 25. The last bone to ossify is the breast bone, the sternum. The target looks about twenty. Stacey would like to take a sternum to spine shot, but the man faces due east. The bullet will be coming from the southwest at approximately a thirty degree angle. He decides his trajectory should meet the target just below the man’s right pectoral muscle. In sniper school, he learned that any torso shot with the .50 will neutralize a soft target from the shock alone. Still, he has never seen that, and he knows a good shot requires an exact target, not an approximation. Stacey believes he can make out a shirt pocket. This is where he wants the bullet. The acceleration due to gravity is 9.8 meters per second squared. His scope has been bore-sighted at 1000 meters. With the M88’s muzzle velocity of 2660 feet per second, the scope compensates for a drop of approximately 10 feet at 1000 meters. Through the scope, Stacey sees this as dead-on in the cross-hairs; one thousand meters is his zero distance.

From Stacey’s zero distance he elevates the cross-hairs for the additional 219 meters. He uses the red calibrations on the reticle to adjust his Minutes of Angle for this added distance. The cross-hairs settle on the man’s ear lobe. Then, Stacey compensates for the man’s elevation which he calculates at 100 feet. Stacey knows that a bullet’s

curved path is dependent on the angle of opposition between the bullet's velocity and earth's gravity; therefore, he sights high. He moves the reticle from ear lobe up and left of the frontal lobe. The man inhales cigarette smoke deeply, glad, perhaps, that the shade has stretched out to meet him.

When I was on the USS St. Louis, I was traveling around, winning marksmanship competitions. I had a specially built stainless steel Colt .45 Mark IV and, of course, I used an M16 rifle, too. To improve, I ordered the classified manuals on sniping—I could order whatever I wanted as storekeeper. I read them, but mostly they confirmed what I already knew. But they did give me more information on mirage.

When I was transferred to the SEAL team, I went where they went. One day, they flew from Coronado to the Navy firing range at Pendleton, and I was with them. They went out to take turns with a type of rifle that I'd never seen before. It was an M88, and they were shooting at something you couldn't even see. Anyway, I ribbed them a bit.

I said, "You need a scope to hit that?"

A gunner's mate had just missed. He said, "You're so good, grandpa, you take a try."

The other guys laughed.

The CO said, "Go ahead, Stacey."

I asked what the zero was and he told me. So, I get down on my stomach and sight. It was a type A1 silhouette—a black outline of a man on a white background. It was near a sign that told the distance, over a thousand meters. And I saw that the problem that they had was the mirage. I read it and fired. The CO said it was a hit.

I said, "I know," cocky. I sure didn't say anything about the pain from the recoil because there's not much that humbles a SEAL, and it's great to shut those guys up.

They were there that day to find a guy for sniper school, for a sniper for Iraq. I didn't know that. I was only there on cross-assignment. They were supposed to cut me loose. And I was too old. And I didn't have the right psychological make-up—I was too logical. But I had to take that shot—to prove that I could do it.

Rising heat waves cause mirage. Late afternoon mirage is worse because the sun's heat, absorbed all day long by the desert, is released. While mirage can sometimes make a target appear to be where it is not, read correctly, it can tell the sniper where the target is, and what the weather is doing at the target.

Because the man is isolated, he is an easy read. His image shakes with the rising waves—he is "scared." Behind him the mirage of the hill, a mirror image of the hill, reaches up and skates off to the north. The hill is scared in the same way as the man, shimmering waves cross both. The left side of the mirage flickers in and out, vanishes. From this, Stacey sees that the wind comes from the left side, moving from south to north. The man's image skates left, too. He sits in a cross-wind. From the angled ascent of the mirage, Stacey estimates a ten knot wind. The bullet's thirty degree approach diminishes Stacey's ten knot adjustment in half. He brings his sight just left, over the man's shoulder.

The man has not finished his cigarette, and Stacey does not want him to. When he finishes the cigarette, he may do something sudden. Stacey knows; he used to smoke.

There were twelve people on the team. Of course, no one was allowed to wear insignia. There was a radioman—RM, Second Class Petty Officer. He was in charge of talking to the people in Scotland, the guys looking at the satellite pictures. That was his job.

We had at least four or five gunner's mates, and they ranged in rate from Third Class Petty Officer to First Class Petty Officer. They carried M60 machine guns. They were in control of all the weapons except my rifle.

Two guys from operations. They were big guys. On a ship, Operations specialists are primarily concerned with radar. They're the guys who write on those acrylic boards backward. Here, one of them was a painter. But actually, in the end, everyone got to paint.

Two CHT guys. On the ship, they would be plumbers and take care of the CHT tanks. Why see them out there as warriors? Well, there again, they had the build, the mentality.

We had a boiler technician. On the ship, his job was to take care of the boiler, obviously. On the SEAL team his job was to kill people. That was his job. The rest of the team was comprised of boatswain mates. In the Navy, the boatswain mates are full time drunk and disorderly. And these guys could shoot. Not as good as me, unfortunately.

Our mission was to paint. We got into a position about a mile away, depending on the size of the target. The laser was a box about a foot long, two inches wide, with a scope. The aircraft flew at thirty thousand feet, above the clouds. From there they

dropped their missiles and bombs—the laser guided ones. The aircraft would be past the target before the things even hit.

But we were there. We were putting down very specific radar information, just for those bombs.

It takes two men. One lights up the target. Usually he's lying down with the bipod set up. The other guy has an infrared reader. The guy with the IR sees what the radar's on and then he says, Stay right there. Even though the painter can't see the laser, he stays right on what's in his cross hairs. The bombs go only to the reflected signal, and we make it big with a spreading device, an aperture in the box.

We radio that we're set up and in position. They acknowledge the transmission. We wait. Then, we get a call that the missile's launched, or the bird's in the air, how long it will take to be there, and what direction it's coming from. Then we paint the target. After a little while, it blows up. And it was amazing because we would be painting a target, pretty close by, and the thing would just blow up. There was no whine from those bombs. We didn't see them. It would just fucking blow up.

The operation of the M88's bolt automatically flips the safety back. Stacey also acts automatically. With a swivel of his thumb, he arches the safety forward.

I knew it was illegal, but I justified it because our mission was to paint specific critical targets. Really important targets. Not scud missile sites, or something. Germ warfare, chemical warfare plants, beginnings of things like nuclear power plant, that can be used to make plutonium. Really critical shit that they wanted destroyed first strike. If

they went in and carpet-bombed the targets, they were going to kill hundreds of thousands of people that didn't need to die. By painting, we were certain of hitting what we wanted to hit.

But as I lined up the shot, the thought that it's illegal didn't cross my mind. The thought that I shouldn't be there didn't cross my mind. The thought that this guy was going to die didn't cross my mind. The only thought that went through my mind was, I can't let this SEAL team down. I would be devastated to let them down.

Stacey's index finger touches the trigger at the center of the pad where his whorls peak. He exhales. He inhales. He is not concerned with remaining still. He concentrates on his projected trajectory. He concentrates on reaching out to his target. Because anticipation might cause him to flinch, he empties his mind of the future, of the inevitable, retinal-jarring recoil. He exhales half his breath and holds—just for a moment. The trigger has a single step, smooth-as-glass pull. Twenty-two milliseconds pass before the firing pin falls upon the primer.

At the blast, he is surprised. The bullet spirals out the barrel as he takes the recoil like fluid into his chest. Involuntarily, he shuts his eyes against the impact. The bullet leaves the muzzle of the M88 at over twice the speed of sound—a penetrating sound, in this case, which kicks up dust in a ten foot radius around Stacey. The others hold their hands over their ears except the spotter who has plugs in his ears and watches the target through binoculars. Some of the team, those who stand in the sound wave's expanding path, feel the vibration in their gut. The sound spreads out and echoes off rock and the opposite bank and the surrounding hills. It echoes in their ears.

Meanwhile, the bullet's boat-tail is reducing air drag and allowing the bullet to retain optimum velocity. Involuntarily, Stacey opens his eyes. The bullet meets the target in one and six-tenths of a second. The man is not surprised. He is unaware because the bullet meets him in silence.

The major destructive force of a small caliber bullet is the result of the permanent wound channel—the circular path the bullet makes as it passes through a body. Because the sniper wants one shot to achieve his objective, he might choose to induce unconsciousness and eventual death with a hit to the vascular organs such as the heart or liver, or by cutting major blood vessels, such as the groin's femoral artery or the carotid arteries in the neck; however, a target might retain consciousness and muscular control for up to ten seconds. Therefore, a sniper prefers a hit on the spine—the higher the better—and best yet, a brain stem shot which requires hitting something about the size of a golf ball that sits at the base of the cranium. Snipers leave nothing for chance. They care only for accuracy.

Yet, for Stacey, it is not the permanent wound channel that causes his target to splash.

The second way a bullet affects a soft target is through temporary cavitation, which is the result of the shock wave, the moving molecules that are the projectile's wake. It is this shock wave produced by all bullets which will cause a full beer can to explode, but leave an empty one sitting peacefully. The wake of the liquid is forced outward by the impact and bursts through the tin can. But because most human tissue is flexible, the shock wave causes only a temporary inflation and cannot be counted on for destruction—in general.

But because the shock wave is proportional to the kinetic energy of the projectile, which is a reflection of its velocity and its ability to retain that velocity—its mass, the prodigious shock wave that accompanies Stacey's .50 caliber ballistic does not allow the tissue to retain its flexibility. Instead, the tissue absorbs the energy of the .50, expresses it through velocity, is forced outward like wake, and does not come back. The target goes splash.

This is what happens to the man: His chest splashes; his spine dents the lead; the high explosive core compresses; the heat acts as catalyst; the solid powder turns to voluminous gas; the lead bursts outward.

The sound wave follows—crosses the washout, passes up into the hills, and over the perch to be lost into the distance forever. Stacey snaps the lens covers down on his scope. He twists his ear plugs out and places them in their case.

Stacey does not cross the washout with the SEALs. The SEALs go up the hill first to make sure there isn't anybody hiding. Then they make a hand motion for Stacey to come up. He goes up and stands on the edge of the site. There isn't a sound. He can tell they are amazed. He thinks, these guys are bad asses—for-real bad asses, and not a word crosses their lips. He knows the assumption is, you have done this, you are proud of it. The man looks like a big animal has come in and destroyed him—that his spine has been taken out like something reached in and took it out of him, laid it off to the side. And there is a strange smell. He knows it is the smell of death, plain and simple. He is not proud.

There is no way to clean him up. So, they leave him.

They move away from the washout, meander north. The red glow in the west sinks. The stars appear more brilliant with the passing moments, moving with the darkness from east to west. The cold comes. They walk three or four miles. The SEALs have their night vision, Cyclops, on. Stacey does not have one, so he follows behind, tracing their silhouettes against the pale dark desert rock. The wind picks up and then dies. For Stacey, the air smells clean, empty, even though he smells his own body odor and the insect repellent heating on his neck.

When they stop, they just stop for a rest. He opens his pack and eats some MRE—Meals Ready to Eat. He stows the rest.

The CO motions, and they cluster for the briefing. Stacey stays on the outskirts. He wants to seem like he is part of the group. He isn't really; his only job is to shoot. The CO talks about where he thinks they should be at the end of the next day. Then he asks the team how they think the day went.

“Well, the old man can shoot,” one says.

Some others agree. Stacey doesn't move. He does not say anything.

Afterwards, he moves off and takes a cleaning kit from his pack. He opens the rifle's breech and takes out the bolt. He has a mirror, like a dentist's mirror, that he places in the breech. Then he shines a red light down the barrel. He looks at the mirror and the reflected light to see if there is any crud. There is. There always is. He pokes a brush through two or three times, then he put down the rod, slips a patch in the slot, soaks the patch with Break-Free, pulls it through. It pulls out twisting along with the rifling. He looks at the patch. He checks the barrel again with the mirror and the red light.

In all, Stacey takes five shots and has five confirmed kills. Each is different, each difficult in its own way: a shot at a moving target in a jeep and through the glass windshield, a close shot at a target on a roof, a shot through a wall. He never misses, never thought of missing. But none were as difficult as the first, not because he thought of missing, or that he would.

Seven years later the navy calls him. They ask if he would like to come back and teach marksmanship. He won't do it. At thirty-nine, he's back in college completing a psychology degree—not on the GI bill. He doesn't want any of that. His oldest daughter will attend university in the fall. His son has begun at military school. His youngest daughter is competing in cheerleading competitions. All is well. But that is not why he won't take the navy's offer. His vain hope is that time will push his memory to the vanishing point. He no longer wants to see so far.

Mirage is real. The light from an image bends as it passes through different air densities. Stacey's dreams are real. Neither is the thing it reflects, but both indicate where that thing is. Many people will dream of moments of fanatical concentration. Stacey dreams repeatedly of the man smoking his cigarette, the man inhaling, perhaps because Stacey is smoking again, too. Then he looks for the lack of surprise in the man's eyes. For some reason that is important to Stacey, that the man didn't know it was coming. But as he watches, the image starts to skate away. That is generally when Stacey realizes that he is viewing the man through a scope, that its reticle superimposes the image—cross-hairs that for years were made from a Black Widow's silk webbing. In this, engineers followed nature. Stacey followed those who believe that through the intellect we might become sublime. Stacey has no natural killer instinct. From over a

kilometer away, there is no need. Instead, Stacey calculates the distance, elevation, wind velocity and direction. He applies intellect. And in a sense, his action is sublime, in that it is perfect. And it is through perfection that we find our closeness to God.

It was when I was flying home that I decided to give up all my guns. My father had died recently. He wouldn't have understood my reasons. He'd say the gun is just a tool. And he'd be right. Still, I got home, I took my son to the gun cabinet and said, "All these are yours now. You take care of them." The Mark IV, the over-under, all of them.

And he said, "I'll take care of them, sir."

I never told my son what my job was over there. A storekeeper, I tell him. He knows what that is.

The thing is sometimes I feel if I had not taken that shot at Pendleton . . . I think that right there was a turning point in my life. Or at least that's the way I've chosen to accept it, that I had no choice in the matter.

Let me put it this way, I'm not going to go to any reunions. I want to start over with square one. Because if what I'd thought before was true—that my entire life had led up to and completed with the Storm, if the first shot I took was the climax of my life—then the rest of my life is an anti-climax, and I don't want to look at it like that.

The Oxymoron of Liberal Fathers

criminals with priests' black benedictions
came by sky to kill children
and in the streets the blood of the children
ran simply, like children's blood.

—Pablo Neruda, from “I am explaining a few things.”

In the waiting room, reading Robert Hass's, *Time and Materials* (2007) I began thinking of Hass, the gray haired man, an intelligent and sensitive man—that is the impression I have from the poems (and the jacket photo)—and trailed off to memories of my father, because that is how my thinking goes sometimes, and maybe because they both seemed like good men, cut from similar cloth, having all the right intentions, maybe because there comes a time when a son must reconcile with his father. My father did his post-doctoral work on the West Coast, at Berkeley, several years before Hass would go to Stanford to pursue literature. My father became a scientist—a biochemist and chemist, and later worked with computers, early on when computers filled rooms and then later when he carried one, as he said, “powerful enough to run a small nation,” from his office at Cornell Medical to his apartment building across the street, intern housing where he lived all his life—because he believed that science would change the world.

My father prided himself on his philosophical detachment and empiricism. He also was alcoholic, and at his bar stool at *Finnegan's Wake* on 73rd and 1st Avenue, he would brag that his corner was the “liberal corner,” while drinking his “RudyMary” (more horseradish, more *Tabasco*). His bar buddies were a tide of conservatism and he

was the bulwark—their drunken companionship always more potent than politics. When we'd meet there and take a table in a corner to eat bangers and mash, he might say, *When I become president of the world*. . . and there would be this or that or some other thing, how science would solve all our problems. And he was right. Damn right! His world would be a better place. But my father's liberalism—while it always made sense, was always so reasonable—never changed anyone's mind in that bar or anywhere else. When he died, I went into that bar and had a *Guinness* in my father's honor—my wake in *Finnegan's Wake*. What his bar buddies said of him: “Your dad never said a bad word about anybody.” My father believed that everyone, all at once, might suddenly and in concert see the truth of reason.

Hass, a decent and intelligent man, a man privileged and aesthetically self-satisfied, also wants to do good. In *Time and Materials*, he sometimes pointedly turns away from image making, abandoning the poetic acts of attention that compress time and enrich life, in order to address a world of generalities, and tries to make sense of a world that seems to have gone mad.

Hass challenges the reader even in the title of “A Poem,” a poem which itself is prosaic, generalized, abstract; it relays fact and figures, tells us, for example, that “In the first twenty years of the twentieth century 90 percent of war deaths were the deaths of combatants. In the last twenty years of the twentieth century 90 percent of war deaths were deaths of civilians.” There is no music in this language, and I guess Hass's point is there shouldn't always be music. A clue, earlier in the collection, Hass writes, “It is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us.” Charm, poetry, beauty in language are a masquerade, a complicity in the face of serious issues—war, death, the wresting of life

from the innocent, done in our name, and in the name of what we believe in.

In “Bush’s War,” Hass writes

Or the raw white of the exposed bones
In the bodies of their men or their children
Are being given the gift of freedom
Which is the virtue of the injured us.
It is hard to say which is worse, the moral
Sloth of it or the intellectual disgrace.

Hass draws our attention to good sense, pointing out our ridiculous and faulty reasoning.

And I say, yes, we do have “moral sloth.” We have “intellectual disgrace.” I agree—very much so. You are right! I see his good sense and I see his good intentions, but, like my father’s pronouncements from his corner in *Finnegan’s Wake*, I see the impotence of the act. Reason is no longer a convincing argument. We don’t live in an age of reason.

In “The Second Coming,” Yeats, wrote that the best “lacked conviction while the worst were full of passionate intensity.” WWI, “the war to end all war” was anarchy “loosed upon the world.” And wasn’t Yeats right? Didn’t he hit the nail right on the head? Dead in 1939, Yeats could not have foreseen history as it unfolded, and what a history. His nail-square-on-the-head poem, one of the best, most incisive anti-war poems of all time, yielded nothing, no change in the future, no end of war—same today as it was in 1917, if not worse.

Advertising is the new poetry; mnemonic, it bombards us with the antithesis of reason. It plays upon our fears, hints at our impotence, threatens us with social exile, even as it advances its most incongruous message: products will make us happy. Let’s face it, we’ve returned to magical thinking. Reason doesn’t reign. We feel powerful when we sheepishly follow the herd. We make war for peace. We acquire debt to build

wealth. We strive to be forever young. We drop smart bombs and depend on military intelligence. All along, our material impotence wrestles with the oxymoronic promise of materialistic happiness. The hawk is a handsaw. Unreason is the status quo.

In the early Greek Dionysian mystery rites, priests used poetry—metered language, easier to remember—to help a fearful populace traverse the unknowable underworld. Through empiricism and deduction, people understood that they would die, but wanting to deny reason, they created priests who would assure them that they would not. The priests recited incantations that would allow acolytes to walk a right path in the land of death, answer the gods correctly, and pass through to an everlasting life-after-death. By manipulating people’s fear of death, the priests solidified power, but it was the people who originated that power, elevating priests and designating potentates—for order, for safety, out of fear. If they paid the priest, in death they might continue to prosper. They would retain an egotistical identity in this hierarchical afterlife—a place where some got in and some didn’t. Along with false security, the people bought irrationality.

These mystery rites rose along with consciousness, from the ether, organically, and were an ingenious economic model.irate customers never asked for their money back—couldn’t. And those who could afford a little extra *dinero* had their poetic, after-life directions hammered out on gold and buried with them. The gold, valuable because it wouldn’t tarnish over time, could be read even by the long dead—an after-life cheat

sheet¹. The elite could bank on one sure thing: people fear death. Those who could afford it willingly hand over their money and their reason in order to participate in the orgiastic rituals meant to simulate death, the Bacchanalia. And from accounts, this was a damn good time. Our modern consumacopia doesn't seem nearly as much fun.

This universal fear of death and the establishment of a hierarchy based upon divisive notions of “us” (those who will live forever) and “them” (those who will not) has been the model for sustaining the high priests' power always—for the Greeks, for the Romans, and now.

In “State of the Planet,” Hass draws our likeness to that of Rome, hoping perhaps for some necessary historical perspective:

They drained the marshes around Rome. Your people,
You know, were the ones who taught the world to love
Vast fields of grain, the power and the order of the green,
Then golden rows of it, spooled out almost endlessly.
Your poets, those in the generation after you,
Were the ones who praised the packed seed heads
And the vineyards and the olive groves and called them
“Smiling” fields. In the years since, we've gotten
Even better at relentless simplification, but it's taken
Until our time for it to crowd out, savagely, the rest
Of life. No use to rail against our curiosity and greed.
They keep us awake. And are, for all their fury
And urgency, compatible with intelligent restraint.

He is right again—very massively right. His equation of agricultural plenty and the narrowing of mind is dead on, and the pursuit of “relentless simplification,” and the

¹ For more on these poetic cheat-sheets, see, Cole, Susan G., “Landscapes of Dionysos and Elysian Fields,” *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults*, edited by Michael B. Cosmopoulos. Routledge, London and New York: 2003 (193-217).

cooption of “intelligent restraint,” yes, right again. And that it was “love” not hate that led us here. He is right, but what good can it possibly do when reason itself falls short in an unreasonable world. In “Bush’s War,” Hass, wonders, “Is it that we like kissing and bombing together?” Perhaps—the juvenile psychology of sex in a graveyard—but Hass seems unable to grasp our oxymoronic quality. Caught in his world of reason, he cannot see that life and death are not distinct, and to talk of one without the other is a disjuncture, a lie of ourselves. What I mean is, we’re scared stupid. What I mean is, he doesn’t see we’re nuts.

Under the heading, “Horace: Three Imitations,” Hass writes in Odes, 3-2,

And say with a shudder: Pray God our boy
Doesn't stir up that Roman animal
Whom a cruel rage for blood would drive
Straight to the middle of any slaughter
It is sweet, and fit, to die for one's country,

The thing I want to tell Hass is, we know we are that cruel Roman animal. We know. We know the irony of “dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.” We know Horace advanced war like a propagandist. We know Wilfred Owen borrowed the line to illumine the fallacy of patriotism. We see that Hass alludes to them both—a line that contains its own contradiction—but what Hass does not see is the line’s implication of a grander, kaleidoscopic impotence of his own anti-war sentiment. The modernists knew—and Hass is one—that sense from a single perspective is at best subjective. Perspective is power. So, the cubist, to fracture power, to challenge fascism, fractured perspective, but look long and hard at a cubist painting and consider its oxymoronic quality. In the end, we view it from a single perspective, right? Now consider this failure in a masterpiece like *Guernica*, which leaves us with a conflicted message: war might be horrible but power

(Picasso's, the art's, the viewer's) is good. The failure of *Guernica* is also Hass's failure because antiwar poetry (and art) is always a failure—to call it a beautiful failure or a necessary one does not mitigate that failure. Keats thought beauty was truth, but we know that truth is perspective. Instead it seems that beauty is power and power beauty. How do you disparage the advancement of power in a line rendered powerfully? Confused, we remain unconvinced. Is war bad? It feels good to kick ass, right? Are cigarettes bad? They make us feel good. Should we not drink quite so much? I might just beat that hangover if I keep at it, and isn't that something? We are just not reasonable. We have internalized a state of oxymoronic imbalance, one of contradiction and roiling blood and heart and a thousand inarticulate tongues we don't speak. But our problem is not nature.

Deadly interspecies conflict is rare in the natural world, even among predators. Tigers don't kill each other. Lions don't. Bears don't. Posture, yes. Butt heads and horns and rear up, but kill, no—male bears do kill their young. Maybe that is something to think about—the male bear killing its young. It wouldn't be too far off the mark to say it is all about sex, and that human violence is about sex, and that this is predominantly a masculine issue. In this men are the same as other species of male animals. We posture, fluff our mane, drive our Hummers, spit on the sidewalk—we vie for power to secure sex. Sure, our feelings of social powerlessness flame our fantasies of aggression. Still, we politely wait on line at the bank. We do not often kill each other. Killing is an expression of grave natural imbalance. But we, like the good soldier, accept the unreasonableness we are inundated with. We learn over and over again how inadequate we are without x and that we can kill y without compunction. There is zero sense to it.

Both are blatantly false constructs. But this is what we believe, because being human means living in a state of unreality, divorced from nature. This is our sole identifying trait, and is it any wonder that we act so ruthlessly to keep our delusions alive even as they act against our own self-interest, against our own species and ourselves? We must not behave like animals? If only we did.

I never understood anything of my father's science. I know he co-wrote a paper on "Electron Microscopy of the negatively stained and unstained fibrinogen"—whatever that is. I know he died thinking science would solve all of the world's problems. He'll be disappointed, I think—at least as long as Yeats, as long as Owens and Hass, as long as all those who believe in poetry or science, in reason and clarity—as long as all of these good men with their best intentions. He believed in science even though he saw the physics of Hiroshima, the chemistry of napalm, saw his beloved computers guide missiles in Iraq, witnessed, toward the end, laser-targeting systems and killer drones, called Predators, of all things, something that sounds right because it rings of the natural, like lion on gazelle, except we are talking about man, surrogate machine, and man—without even the dignity of cannibalism.

My father would sit at *Finnegan's* with his "RudyMary," watch the news, and tell his pals what he would do, if he were President, how the world could be a better place, reasonable and just. Science, he'd say, could take care of the details—not in some far distant time, but now, right now, if we wanted it to—disease, hunger, material suffering of all kinds. There'd be zero population growth, if not negative population growth, euthanasia, and people could work less, 3 days a week, he thought, have more time to pursue the arts and cultivate their spirituality, and everyone would leave each other alone.

Wasn't that what we were striving for, greater equality and justice for everyone? When I was there, he told me these things too. And I weighed: science and poetry, science and poetry. He thought out capacity to understand a world outside of ourselves, to pursue a right path, this was what made us human, and by that he meant humane. He died in time of war.

History has always moved in two contradictory trajectories: one advancing exploitative self-interest and the other egalitarianism. Our genetic impulse, according to the "selfish gene," is one of genetic persistence and our complex social organization is a mating hierarchy. Our world is not unlike other complex social organisms—bees, ants (think of the worker and queen) herd animals or predatory dogs—the individual in large part subsumed by the advancement of the whole, a dispensable part sacrificed without compunction in service of the larger collective organism, whose impulses and destiny are not comprehensible to the individual parts. We might rile against this, but so we are—accomplice to some destiny driven by our genes and beyond our comprehension. And in the big picture we know species surge and decline. We are part of a larger system. In general, for us, so far, so good. It's been surge. Though we'd very much like to last, in the end, that won't be possible.

For all our momentary and individual charms, for all our intellectual good sense, as a species we are a social organism directed by base instincts, exacerbated and amplified by a larger dynamic organism, all the more pernicious for not being organic. This larger system functions at the insistence of sun and rain, in the movement of the planets, in the dissipation of the universe. It is not rational. Nor is it irrational. Its impulse reflects the individual impulse even as it drives that impulse. Both the social

organism and the individual organism want to survive, only the social organism lacks a consciousness and a conscience. Perhaps it is economy. Perhaps it is something else. We are its cells and digestive enzymes. Other than that, it is just like us. It wants. It has the urge to surge. Stupid and afraid, it is a rudimentary organism driven by the same impulses that will inevitably destroy it. Born out of instinct and evolving a conscious intellect, individually we can imagine our own death—we believe this makes us unique in the animal world, but this is not so—our brief moment of flux, the force of life towards death, is the same bloom of life in everything—animate and inanimate, an impulse thrust upon us in the wake of an expanding universe—in a mystery of physics.

And isn't this also the originating impulse of poetry? Our own poetry—not so different than the bird's song or the patterns of wood worms under bark, the textures of igneous rock, helping us negotiate our commingled desire for life and fear of death—developing in us and gaining force along with our use of language, our consciousness. It is overwhelming—the bittersweet irrationality of our temporariness. It simply shouldn't be, but it is.

To think of life as precious is commonplace, but that is what I do believe—the time of it, the verb of being, each beat of it, second and millisecond, more valuable than cars or houses. There is no greater crime against another than taking that time away. I am sickened by it, sickened by the people who engage in death for their profit, to advance their self-interest—even though they might pursue their aims out of fear, because they love the color of grass in fall, like me, want to live, and fear death. I cannot abide them.

War and poetry negotiate the same path, but war is the antithesis of poetry. War cheapens life—boys or girls, women and men, in the factory, in a field, at a wedding,

drawing, considering dreams, ambitious for possibility, filled with jealousy and sometimes despair—obliterating our precious time. War is logistically efficient and reductively statistical. War is fought on the allure of the “higher good.” In poetry, the act of attention is the compression of time, the most valuable thing we have. For poetry, the “higher good” is the enemy.

Just before the spring of the Bush War, I saw my father for the last time. I was on my way to *Cité Internationale des Arts* in Paris to live for a year and write. He’d already had a lung removed and suffered a stroke, which left his speech impaired. He shuffled along, trouble with his left side. A lifetime of smoking and drinking undid him. I think my father knew he would not see me again. He died in the first summer of that war.

That last time I saw him, we went down the elevator to have a cigarette together out on the patio of his building, overlooking York Avenue and the hospital where he would eventually die. He told me he was going to quit smoking and drinking too. I thought that was crazy. Keep smoking, I thought. It’s too late to change now. Let’s get a drink. I was going to Paris after all. I was going to sit in cafes and drink strong coffee or sip *Pernod* and smoke my brains out. We finished our cigarettes and he lit another one, an Ultra-light, but I had to go. I told him so. I had a lot to do. Then he told me something he’d never said before. He told me he loved me.

It is hard to know what your liberal father means when he says he loves you out on the slate patio in front of the building he’s lived in for thirty-five years, my liberal father who wanted to abolish inheritance, wanted to give his money to the Native American College Fund and to the NAACP. Now, if I think about it, I think that liberal love is a dispersed and ethical love—for humanity, for equality, for social justice. It

hopes for the future against its better judgment. It is an idea of love. This was the love he was talking about, because how else could it have waited so long. I understand. Yes, I understand. Liberal love, because of its unstable, slightly volatile nature, drives us just so toward alcoholism, smoking, and other forms of hedonistic death. Liberal love, idealized and platonic, is not a ferocious thing that moves the blood. Measured and proportional, it verges on the misanthropic—because human beings, when we really look at them, are a bit more despicable than kind. Yes, liberal love is reasonable, intelligent, a tad self-conscious, it weighs and balances and makes sense. So, it is hard to know what to think, when, at the last minute, he says something like that.

My father's love, even in the last moment we would ever see each other, was not the selfish passion of those ignorant, morally slothful fathers, Bush and Bush, of Cheneys who shoot their friends and friends who apologize for it, of those who know about loyalty, about a tribe that devours its young—other people's young. My father's love could never be like that. Profoundly ethical, he would never suggest anyone die for something he would not die for himself, let alone sacrifice a generation for a piece of pie. But his liberal love finally was no better for the world, because like the world, love is not reasonable.

Of course, now I think I should have turned back, hugged him, or come up with something to say. But I didn't. I was confused—not the first time or the last time for that. I walked away. Not the last time for that either. And later when I thought about it, I didn't think about love. Instead I thought about him trying to quit smoking. How ridiculous. Even at the end, he wanted to live. I thought, there's no telling what we will think or do once we stare into the mystery.

I am afraid of death, but I'm also afraid to see the world a no better place—no “higher good” ever achieved. I am afraid like Hass and my father and all the liberal fathers before me, afraid of the inherent hopelessness of humankind. I am afraid. I feel the loss of myself everyday. In our modern age, modern “good” health, forbids this consideration, but I am sad that I am dying and can't be happy about it, all that I'll miss, and that may be the only true thing I have—this inexhaustible sadness for myself, and everyone, that I'll miss the birds who also lose what is joyful only in its loss, that I'll miss my family, that I'll miss the woman outside the mosque, the man in the shade of a tree in the *Zócalo* with his little dog, a boy and his *Coke*. I wish I'd done more for my friends, and loved more—Zondie and our dog, and rabbits, and rocks, and worms, bears and tigers, and in Zondie, that second heartbeat, ours, inexplicable, that pounds 163 beats a minute.

III. PROSE POETRY

The Poem That Would Save the World

The world was not ready for it, so she put it in a box and buried it on public ground in a field near her house on the outskirts of the town. She loved nature, so there was nature in the poem, but there were other things too, like industry and economics, and spirituality, suggested, or she might say, conveyed, through the mood of it, and a universal importance that everyone would get. With the most delicate nuance, it touched upon the sublime, and there was a bear, though she couldn't always remember whether the bear had been a real bear or the metaphor of a bear—but the main thing, the thing that was absolutely new, was that it was not a private message, like other poems, a message between honest friends, but was universally between friends, a spark of truth that everyone would recognize and recognize in each other in what might be called a moment of *simpatico*—and this was where the bear came in, or the metaphor of the bear, she couldn't quite remember.

A Day of a Thousand Stories

The letter on my desk. The light on the table leg. The story of the shadow and the chair, a touching geometry. The sneakers in the bathroom. The curtain that stays closed. The window hasp with torn screws. Earlier it was butter and rye bread, bean soup gone sour. Later, lust, Longing. Every dust mote had a story. Today, a day of grit, and absence, and.

It was a day of stories. Paint chips. Kernel of corn. Paper and sponge. I cut that onion. Thought of all those things that don't have names. I bent close, taking the aerated acid onto my eyes as the knife cut the yellow onion. It was a day of a thousand stories, if they ask me what kind of day it was.

Isa

The cattails, saw grass, dunes, the sea, curls of waves, blooms of jellyfish in the water (someone said they'd seen a Man-of-war on the south side of the lighthouse)—this day, Isa and I dug in the sand, dipping our hands in until we pulled seawater from the flattening hole. “Where does it come from?” she asked, and I told her about the water table and that there was always water under the ground, at different depths. “There’s no water table,” she said. “You’re silly.”

I agreed with her but added that at least I wasn’t morbidly depressed like some people. She laughed, threw a wet goop of sand at me. “Yes, you are,” she said.

When we were done with the digging, we built a castle around it and moats. The walls we patted down in a phalanx to break the waves were ridged with our finger imprints. The sea, we imagined, would mount a siege—and in our anxiety, we scooped more moats, built more walls. “Over here,” she’d shriek, and I’d go, smiling, knowing in a way she didn’t that it would be hopeless—nature wins. I said, take this—gathering up seaweed, long and coarse, gel-coat green or amber like mica, some fried black—to diffuse the ocean water as it surged.

Isa laughed, said seaweed floats like girls’ hair—but she obliged me, pumping little legs like a stripper, gleeful and scared—scattering seaweed. I watched her girlish complexity, her panic for safety and hope for destruction. The ocean would not overcome our fortress—not at least in the next twelve hours. The tide was in ebb. And I saw in her and by looking out to sea, that the enemy of imagination was not reality. It is further

imagination. All we'd done was make a hole, ringed by seaweed with grooves and walls smooth as lips—a cunt in the drying sand—I mean, anyone would have said so.

“Flu Season”

“Please—let’s just say, axiomatically, that in a universe governed by the laws of thermal dynamics, mutation is also governed by those same laws. By that I mean mutation is simply a response to the environment, no moral quality. And we might as well face that comparatively speaking, we are a bit lacking in the mutation department.

“Think where you’ve heard it. I mean, ‘Timely mutation carries a distinct evolutionary advantage.’ Right? I’ve heard it over the cosmetic counters at Bloomingdales. I heard it at work. The virus has it all over us. I’ve heard in on the street and in the Job Lot, where I went to buy an extension cord.

“But we’ve also mutated, become more adept—could that be the word I’m searching for? More like us, I mean, surviving (no moral quality), our brains and bodies coping with an environment that is forever changing—and we’re changing it!

“I mean, we’re helped by this brain of ours. I mean, THANK GOD or the viruses would have had us yet. But in the end, we don’t have a chance. In the end, a virus mutates thousands of times in the space of days, minutes, defeating environments and the darkest little things we can cook up to kill them.

“Now, that’s intelligence. (I mean, no moral quality, but we haven’t been arguing that.) So, please, don’t be afraid to look. It happens, whether we like to see it or not. And you might as well put that in your pipe and smoke it, as they used to say, but let’s stop talking about it. Because unless I get to Filenes on time, I’m going to miss the sale. You know—The Sale! And everyone knows the stuff at Filenes, its got only one season left.”

Those Days We Ate the Knuckles from our Fingers

1.

Take, for instance, the radio operator who tuned the dial. Take, for instance, the ventriloquist who animated Bob. Take, for instance, the cormorant who flew against a gale.

2.

When they put me back together they misaligned my few parts and gave me a donkey's penis. I wobbled, felt proud and ashamed but no one spoke of what was between my legs though in the streets I left it hanging out.

My penis would bray at night knowing my brain, unlike my body, could not be fixed with stitching and screws.

3.

Before the terrible accident there was the expectation of a terrible accident.

They'd loaded up the blueberry cart with as many jars of turpentine as they could find from the old warehouse by the millstream. The nettles as tall as Jimmy that year.

4.

Cobbled with fishhooks at awkward angles, I most often think of the cormorant who cannot come to shore.

By Monday, there is no house. By Tuesday, there is no tide. The world overrun with fascists. The cormorant raises its wings, black triangles against green saltwater grass.

I am too stupid to want anything but to live.

By Saturday, nothing so precious as time.

VITA

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