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Welcome to Boomland

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Cebrun Abe Gaustad entitled "Welcome to Boomland." 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.

Allen Wier, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Michael Knight, Arthur Smith, Cary Staples

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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Welcome to Boomland

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

Cebrun Abe Gaustad
August 2010

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For Johnna

Acknowledgments

Some of the stories in this collection were previously published in slightly different form. “Age of Decaying Cities” was published in *Other Voices* and “The Torso” appeared in *Memphis Magazine*.

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Abstract

Abe Gaustad's first collection of stories, *Welcome to Boomland*, explores the lives of disparate characters longing for some escape. Whether a paraplegic blues aficionado or a boy who finds a strange object in the woods, they are each searching for a way out of their stagnation. Yet each character is trapped by their own unique circumstance: some of them by their mistakes, some by ruthless dictators, some by the very notion of death. As they search for their freedom, they find out new things about themselves and manage to wage quiet rebellions against those that would control them. In the end, they earn small victories, but noble ones.

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Introduction: Flights

For every writer there is some embarrassing notebook sitting in the bottom of some dusty closet. I remember a yellow legal pad where I used to scribble stories. I wrote in a scrawl with a red felt tipped pen about two friends who found terrible footprints in the back yard and then worked together to track a mysterious creature.. And I remember my mother finding this yellow pad and leafing through it with a distant smile on her face. I can still feel the embarrassment of that moment even if I cannot recall precisely the room we were in or what she wore. But I can't forget the moment of trepidation as she read my words. I can't remember if I ran to another room or snatched the pad from her hands. She was laughing though. She thought it was cute. But to me it was serious. I didn't have any idea of what a writer was, but I knew I had things in my head that wanted out.

Just as Milan Kundera, in *The Art of the Novel*, sees the reader as completing the creative act of the writer, I see my own writing as an essential component of my life, a sort of parallel universe where I can explore paths that I chose to not take, or perhaps paths that were impossible or even stupid. My narrators are almost always a bizarre reflection of myself.

In Flannery O'Connor's wonderful story "Parker's Back," the hero has a strange attraction to tattoos and spends his money on new and exciting images. To Parker, the ink he receives makes him feel electric for a week or so, but the newness soon wears

off and he must search for a suitable image to make him feel alive again. This search continues throughout the story until he is covered in bright images—except for one critical spot: his back.

The story serves as an inspiration for my writing on many levels. Firstly, O'Connor is a master at symbolism without creating paper-thin characters to carry the symbolic load. Parker is a full-fledged human; despite his depravity, he grows through immense and confused suffering. In fact, it is the search that Parker engages in that makes the story especially memorable. Parker's search is a writer's search. He is on a quest for the true Parker. In fact, O'Connor wrote about her own writing process as a kind of discovery, claiming that she did not know the Bible salesman in "Good Country People" would commit his comic and grotesque act of stealing an artificial leg until a few moments before she wrote the scene.

IN "Parker's Back," Parker finds a picture of Christ that touches him. The description of his reaction reminds me of an ideal reader's reaction to a good story. He feels the eyes of Christ burning through him. The description is wonderfully physical and real in the story, not a mere passing feeling. For me, there is almost always a visceral reaction to a good story. I feel it in the back of my neck and in the skin, just as Parker feels his tattoos come to life.

Parker himself becomes a text in the story, and while he is not an artist, he directs the artists on what to inscribe on him and where to place it. His worst fear is to be misperceived, and this fear causes him some grief and discomfort. The men in the bar think he has become a religious nut, while Sara Ruth mistakes an eagle tattoo on his arm for that of a chicken. As any artist would be, Parker is insulted by these

mistakes. But he is also afraid of how the “misreadings” might stick to him and cause him trouble in the future.

My artistic fears are similar to Parker's. There is a common fear among writers of being misread and misinterpreted, though in my case I worry that it would be my own fault. But more importantly, I see in Parker's obsessive tattooing a journey not unlike a writer's quest. I see *Welcome to Boomland* as a sort of Parker, a strange compilation of stories that take place in different states and countries with very different characters.

Harold Pinter was inspired by a mere peek into a room:

I went into a room and saw one person standing up and one person sitting down, and few weeks later I wrote *The Room*. I went into another room and saw two people sitting down, and a few years later I wrote *The Birthday Party*. I looked through a door into a third room and saw two people standing up and I wrote *The Caretaker*. (qtd in Powtack 32)

At first, it seems that Pinter is being overly simplistic, but he also makes a point that the smallest inspirations—even long since detached from their detail—can inspire stories. The prime example in this volume would be my story “Who is Rios Montt?” I used to imagine that writers would write about a country if and only if they had visited it and had some indelible experience, some epiphany of philosophy or perhaps a torrid, ill-fated affair. It struck me as law that a writer would have had to taste the soil of a land in order to write of its people.

But Rios came to me through an obscure news report. He is a real character from the recent history of Guatemala, and the accusations of the story are accurate,

though I cannot say for sure if he was a guilty man. As a less confident writer—the writer I was before coming to University of Tennessee—I might not have attempted to give voice to a young Guatemalan man of native descent, yet the universality of the Rios Montt story had me hooked. Here was a man accused of the worst atrocities returning to the headlines and considering a return to politics. The world is filled with evil men who return to power again and again and I wanted to capture the feeling of that injustice in the story—the injustice of a known criminal who walks the street and smiles and removes his cap in the sun. Rios Montt is about so many things, but mainly forgetting and the few who refuse to do so.

I recall that as I workshopped this story in a fiction class that one of my fellow students had positive things to say, but wondered if the story was not “pretentious” by having a white, privileged writer deign to explore the thoughts of a poor minority in a foreign country. (I can imagine the objection would be all the greater had that student known I had never been to Guatemala, never seen the blue waters of Lake Atitlan.) I think it's a valid question, but ultimately an ill-posed one. It seems odd to me that accusations of “pretentiousness” are drawn around ethnic, gender or socio-economic lines. I'm certainly sensitive to my own unconscious tendencies to stereotype or otherwise lump together those who are different from myself, and this is a danger that wise writers avoid. But too much political correctness can encourage writers (and subsequently readers) to avoid the danger by avoiding honest engagement in important societal questions.

The first objection to the charges of pretentiousness is that all writing is pretentious. Once a writer decides to create fiction, he creates a world, a simulation that

is meant to enlighten or entertain or explore. Or best, all three. It is equally pretentious to speak for all white people whether you are white or black. And this is the mistake that student made when asking whether a Guatemalan of Mayan descent was an acceptable subject for a white writer. If it isn't, then what is? Should writers not examine the mind of a tyrant, of an addict, of a fly-fisherman?

But an even more important objection is that writers should learn to explore the consciousness of other ethnicities and genders, even—and especially—at the risk of failure. I have yet to hear from a Guatemalan about my story, but I would welcome even the harshest criticism. Even if I fail, I will have learned something that will be valuable in my future fiction, and in the real world as well.

I recall a debate between Richard Ford and Sherman Alexie from some time ago. Alexie didn't think white writers should write from a native American point of view and Ford disagreed strongly. Ford made similar arguments to mine, but it is unfortunate that some writers inevitably feel leery about exploring other cultures.

In his capacity as a psychologist for the VA, my father worked with patients with spinal cord injuries. It was always more than a job to him and he often interacted with his patients outside of the office. I'd sometimes help him on the weekends with patients of his who needed to move or wanted to meet me. It surprised me a little when my dad asked me to take a trip with him up into Missouri one weekend when I was fifteen years old. I didn't really want to go, but he insisted and said that I would enjoy meeting Jack, a patient of his who was into music. In fact, when Jack had found out that I was learning to play guitar, he started sending me tapes of blues players like Jeff Healey and Lonnie

Mack, names that I had never heard before. My dad promised it would be fun; we'd eat catfish at Jack's cousin's restaurant and drive around Missouri listening to music. I probably grumbled, but in the end I said yes, I'd go.

Jack and I hit it off right away, though he was a good twenty-five years older than I was. We did as my dad said, driving from spot to spot in Missouri, visiting a catfish farm and a dam, but mostly listening to tape after tape of Eric Clapton, Buddy Guy and some bluesman I didn't know at all: Roy Buchanan. Jack wasn't surprised I had never heard of him before. He called him the most under-rated guitarist in music. He told me about how he had turned down offers to be in The Rolling Stones and Derek and the Dominoes and how he had gotten famous because of a PBS special in the early 1970s.

When you first hear Roy Buchanan, you notice right away that he is as distinctive an artist as you'll find on the guitar. His music is infused with aspects of country, rock, blues and jazz. For a sixteen-year-old kid like myself, he was something novel and a little strange, or even off-putting. So much so that I can't exaggerate and say I "got" Roy Buchanan on that trip to Missouri. He was just another name then, but one that stuck with me while I forgot many of the others.

What made me remember him was the story of his death, which plays a central role in "Buch and the Snakestretchers." Roy, after a night of drinking, hung himself in a Virginia jail cell just a few months before my trip to Missouri. Jack likely didn't know about it—if he did, he never mentioned it. I found out the next month when a guitar magazine arrived at my house with the controversial story.

Buchanan's friends and family accused the deputies in Virginia of roughing up Roy and staging the suicide. No formal inquiry ever materialized and most people today think that he did take his own life.

In early drafts of the story, the main character was always Roy Buchanan. He was the star, after all, the talent with the tragic fall. He had come so close to a sort of immortality, but succumbed to his own excess and, in my early interpretations of his story anyway, his own disappointment at life. The story was garbage. It was all wrong. I had no feel for Buchanan, despite listening to his music and feeling the energy of his art. My older self “got” him, but in no way did that qualify me to tell his story.

I don't remember exactly when I decided that Roy Buchanan was merely a side note—a theme—and not the protagonist of the story I wanted to tell. I think working on other stories and workshopping them made me realize the power of an oblique approach. The story of Rios Montt is in the poor kids who he affected, and who he petrified. The same was true of Buchanan. His effect was on his fans. And despite the fireworks and Movie-of-the-Week ending, his story is not nearly as satisfying as Jack's.

Once I had a character based on Jack, the story came easily. Of course, the details of the story verge far from those of Jack's life, but had he lived to read the story, I would like to think he could see himself in more than just the wheelchair and the booze of the character I created.

In so many instances when I've come upon a difficult part of a story, I've found that things were getting too externalized. I was thinking more than feeling, analyzing more than imagining. And so it was with trying to make Roy Buchanan the center of the show. I wrote a paragraph about my own experiences listening to Buchanan's music,

and trying to emulate it in my own sloppy way on the guitar. But ultimately I was led back to Jack, and Ronny was born.

Some writers can take the famous and make them human and believable and deep, and I respect the skill and research it takes to do so, but any time I've ever tried to write from the perspective of the famous, I've failed. Writing about Buchanan was only possibly from the outside because what interested me in him was not his inner thought or yearning, but his spectacle. That's not to say that someone else couldn't come along and write a very compelling novel about the life of Roy Buchanan, tragic bluesman. But I'm not that writer. In fact, what interested me about Buchanan was the fact that he was a somewhat neglected talent (though as I later found out, this wasn't exactly true: he went on world tours and sold a lot of albums). Once I realized that about my interest in the story, I realized that Jack was what fascinated me. Here was this man I'd met and felt a connection with in terms of the blues. Yet we had different lives, different politics. In some ways talking about anything but music with him was a chore. But when we did talk music, when we sat back on his couch and went through the dozens of VHS tapes of guitarists he had collected over the years, we were like old friends.

I didn't know Jack well enough to know his story, although I heard pieces of it from my father in later years, about his accident and other things going on in his life. But in terms of fiction, once the character based on Jack became the star of the story, things went smoother. The character of Jim quickly followed, and then Rhonda. And Roy Buchanan took his rightful spot in the story as an ideal and a quest. And not only is Ronny's quest in the story about music and the power it can unleash even in the

weakest minds and moments, but it's about several humans trying to connect with one another despite the constraints put on them by fate and their own flawed souls. In a way—and in a way that I hope isn't clichéd or trite—that's what the blues is about: celebrating the connections we can make and lamenting the ones that seem, in the end, impossible. Fiction has a role to play in such discoveries.

I don't consider myself a realist or a surrealist, a minimalist or an absurdist. I admire the strange universe of a Donald Barthleme story and the more plainspoken world of Ray Carver. All styles are, to me, tools the artist uses to create what needs to be created.

I can't speak for other writers—perhaps their aesthetic comes naturally. Maybe they have etched out the absurd as the only way to describe the world in a convincing manner. But I wonder if some stories are missed because they don't “fit” the mold. I try to imagine an absurdist version of a story like “Guests of the Nation” by Frank O'Connor. The murder of Belcher at the end of the story is absurd in its own right and doesn't need embellishment.

In this way, a locked-in aesthetic can serve to block an artist's objective, and can lead to works that seem self-derivative and repetitive. This is not to say that writers who adopt a particular style throughout their careers are inferior or clichéd. Gabriel García Mārquez, for example, produced many varied works with magical realism, while Ray Carver used minimalism to produce a range of works. However, with the way writers are marketed in the publishing world and the way writers (and critics) tend to self-associate, there is a danger in steering one's self into a formulaic rut. Over-reaction to

this danger through wild and intemperate swings in experimentation can likewise derail a writer's optimal growth. The answer, as usual, is moderation.

A long while ago I wrote a story about an artist who explained his work in a long treatise titled What I'm Doing When I'm Doing What I Do. The story itself is a failure, but one that I find interesting in terms of my early views on writing. The artist in the story is a sculptor who, instead of molding statues, elects to bore out caves and smooth stones. He destroys part of the rock face only to restore it to its identical condition through artificial means. He eschews contemporary theory about negative space and asserts that space is merely neutral. All that matters is disturbance.

Very early in my writing career I was thinking of what writing meant. I still like the idea of excavating and restoring, dismantling and rebuilding. It's the writer's job to take apart life and reconstruct it--not so that it has meaning, but so the meaning that life already has is more recognizable. And it is important that there are no equations left bare on the page. The recognition comes in a chill along the back of the neck, in a character who won't leave one's mind.

Years ago I was on a flight from Raleigh to Atlanta with my wife, who doesn't like to fly. This flight was smooth and pleasant. A man seated behind us talk about cheap debt and how everyone should buy a Porsche. This was pre-9/11 and, looking back, we all seemed so innocent and warm then. As we approached Atlanta, a pilot walked smoothly and calmly down the aisle, a blank look on his face. It was the look of a man at work, oddly reassuring. He moved past me and bent down about three rows behind me and opened an access panel in the floor.

He bent down and stuck his head through the opening; I believe at one point that he halfway disappeared. The cabin was silent: no one spoke, yet all heads were turned toward him. In a moment he got up, returned the panel and strolled leisurely back to the cockpit without a word.

The cabin remained silent, and then conversations picked up. Most of what I heard from other passengers was mundane talk about other things, as if they were content to accept the pilot's nonchalance as proof of the airplane's pristine mechanical status. But my wife held me with a death grip. "What was he looking at?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"Did he look worried?"

"Not particularly," I said.

Within minutes we appeared to be headed for a landing. The plane descended at what I thought then must have a sharper angle than usual. The captain came over the cabin intercom. "Folks," he said in a manifestly calm voice, "we're just going to buzz by the tower and check something out." There was no rush of murmurs from the cabin. The passengers seemed to be content with that shared sense of confidence that comes from not wanting to be the first to panic. My wife had no such fear and she dug her nails into my skin.

"It's the landing gear?" she half-asked, half-declared. I agreed, having come to the same conclusion. "What do they do if they can't get it down?"

I'm sure there are people so scared of flight that they know immediately the answer to this question. I didn't. So I made something up. I embarked on a long, convincing foray into the world of applied fiction. I told her there was a special foam that

they sprayed the runways with. It was like landing in whipped cream, i told her. It would be bumpy—there would certainly be a lot of unpleasant scraping sounds. I went on at length about how we'd all be fine, if a bit roughed up. I peppered in details from a television movie I had seen years before. As I went on, I began to convince myself that it was true.

I held her hand as we smoothly sank towards the tower. As we circled back again, the captain came on and, in a much happier voice, told us everything was just fine. I hope that in those moments of fear, I comforted her some. I hope that the stories that follow do something similar, though I am not as pretentious as to imagine that readers will find a salve for their ailing. Instead, I hope they are immersed for a few moments in another mind and for a moment leave the world outside the airplane window.

A Month of Rain

My brother Pete called me one night when a hard winter rain was clicking on the window of my apartment and told me he had a gun pointed at his dog.

“He’s cocking his head,” Pete said. “He’s looking at me like I’m a god.”

I had the urge to hang up, to abandon my brother—or my brother’s dog—in his time of need. The rain was doing a number on the window, trying to get in to me. “I don’t see what your dog has to do with anything,” I said finally.

“Nothing. You’re right.”

“You’re always bringing in distractions.”

There was a silence from the other end that I expected to be interrupted by a shot. I wondered what the distance and cool static would do to the sound, if I could possibly mistake it for the slam of a door.

“I’ve got to go,” I said. “It’s storming here.”

“You know, I’m holding this gun and I’m thinking that maybe we evolved to love the feel of a heavy tool in our hand. Maybe we need that--that power, or—“

I pushed the END button on my phone and set it back on the coffee table. I imagined him still talking, his words traveling the lines, worming their way to some electric dead end and piling there, unheard.

Pete studied neurology and pharmacology and got a job with some pharmaceutical outfit finding ways to get chemicals to do good things to a human brain.

He wants to be able to change a person with a pill, to make an insane person better with a shot. I've always wanted to ask him if he had thought about a pill that could have changed Dad before he died. Or about a pill to fix his own problems. I always want to say "Don't quit your day job," but I'm too afraid of his reaction, of some noise that I can't handle snaking its way through the lines.

When he was fifteen and I was eleven, it rained every day for a whole month. The ground got swollen. The insects rose up to live with us in our little house on the corner, and I played with them, trapped them in my mother's Tupperware containers and gave them names from my father's books that I started to read but never finished. Portnoy the cricket squirted around my room at night, chirping and wheezing, and I never slept, only watched the headlights from passing cars make bright window shapes flash across the wall. I tried to sleep under those wet sounds, dying for a root beer, wondering how to throw a curve ball or dodge a dodgeball. And how to keep my breath from getting that rotten smell, like I had shit in my stomach, Pete said.

"God, don't breathe on me," he said to me once, "You've got a mouth full of microbes. I can feel them eating me. Why don't you go drink bleach?" Pete: always the complainer, someone who wanted things as right and straight as they could be. He'd clean up the house without my parents getting onto him, while I would disappear into my room and try to make my captured insects fight each other in the golden glow of a flashlight. I kept a hidden record of the winners in a little notebook, along with scores of imaginary basketball games I'd play all by myself in our wet backyard. I was always interested in keeping track, counting, numbering.

Before I hung up, I should have asked him about that month of rain, if it had really happened as I remembered or if it was a flaw in my memory, a tendency to push the bad days together into a pile. Our lives fell apart that month, our family dissolved and ran into the streets, down the storm drain. I tried to remember when the insects flooded in. I could recall clear evenings when the sun would hurry into the horizon, afraid, it seemed, of the black clouds gathering in the violet sky. Storms raged for an hour, then cleared away, leaving everything shiny, wet and new-skinned. Other days the sky was grey and dull, and a mist hung in the air and dared you to breathe it.

My father worked as an editor at the newspaper. Molesting people's sentences, he told me once, until they were nice and repressed. I always wanted to go to work with him, to see the big presses run. He told me he never saw them, that his job was boring—"plain vanilla," he said. He said he had a typewriter, a cactus planted in a McDonald's cup, and a picture of Pete and me. He said no, stay home with Mom.

One of those first stormy nights, when the rain and wind raged against the house, my father phoned to say he would be late. Mom had known by the aching in her joints that a storm was coming. and she asked me to help her make dinner. She had me get the lasagna ready, which I didn't mind. I liked layering the noodles and sauce and cheese, and it gave me something to think about.

"Where do they get the names for cheese?" I asked her.

"Why don't you look it up," she said. She sat in a chair with her legs propped up. She really did have beautiful legs, though they gave her pain. Even Dad said so.

"How many kinds are there?"

"Hundreds," she said, "But your father only likes Mozzarella."

“How do you think they name them?” I asked. She shrugged and winced and then chewed an aspirin, though they weren’t the chewable kind.

“I want to be in charge of naming cheeses,” I said. I liked naming things, and somehow I was given charge of naming all our pets, usually with names from my dad’s books. Our cat was Lena. Our dog, run over the year before, had been Queequeg.

Mom fell asleep and the top of the lasagna got brown. When dad finally came home he said he liked it better that way anyway, but he had a look on his face, like he was mad that his food was burned. He was older than mom, and his wet face looked gray and cracked in the weak kitchen light. We ate in silence, and when Pete and I went to bed and mom to the bedroom, my father stayed in the living room, drinking. I don’t know how long he was in there, but when I got out of bed he chased me back to my room. Then he disappeared back into the front of the house. I must have dozed, because a dozen low voices seemed to come from the front of the house. Something woke me up, and I saw Mom’s shadow pass. The light from the living room stretched down the hallway, spilling a little into my room. I stayed awake for a while, trying to wait until the light went out and their shapes moved again through the hall. But after a long time, I fell asleep. All I could do was sleep, all I could do was close my eyes and know that something was happening in rooms where I wasn’t allowed.

Over the next couple of grey and wet weeks, my insect collection grew. I had hundreds of crickets. I remember waiting up for Dad to get home one night, to show him all the bugs, but he came in late and scooped up my brother and me. He put us in the truck and drove around. He didn’t say anything at first. Then he pulled into the parking lot of a church. The lighted sign said something about going to be with Jesus in your

heart. Dad turned off the engine and the rain made a kind of sleepy music on the roof of his truck.

“There’s no right way to say this, boys.” He was still wet from the rain, drops of water on his glasses.

I looked at my brother. He leaned against the window, his eyes closed. Dad didn’t notice. I stared at the wall of the church and watched the rain sparkle in the headlights.

“Your daddy is going to have to move out.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out a cigarette, lighting it with cheap yellow lighter. I had never known my father to smoke.

The rain hit the windshield and I tried, impossibly, to count each drop.

“You know I love your mother, I mean I care about her and want her to be happy. I want you to be happy too. We’d all be happy if we could make it work. . . “ He went on talking, but I don’t remember all the things he said. He may have mentioned Pete and me helping Mom around the house. He may have said he loved us more than once.

When he finally stopped, I coughed from the smoke that had filled up the cab. He rolled down the window, and the sound of all that water outside came rushing in as if the truck had been suddenly dropped into a lake.

“So I’m going to move in with my friend Jay. But I’ll be around. Whenever you need me.” I looked at him again and he was still wet, wetter than before. He was sweating despite the cool air coming in from outside. I coughed again, even though there was no smoke anymore.

“Any questions,” he asked, like a teacher who had just explained some natural phenomenon, someone who knew all about the process and couldn’t imagine anymore what it was like to be so in the dark. He looked at me and I turned and looked at Pete, who was now staring ahead at the rain. We backed out of the parking space and drove home. I could have asked questions, but I wanted Peter to do it for me, to root out the real trouble between my parents. I wanted him to analyze the situation, to give me some kind of slim hope to wrap around me when I crawled in bed, some word of confidence, some joke so we could laugh it off. But he sat there without moving, without breathing almost. When we got home he went straight inside and to his room without even drying his feet.

My father left that night, but came back over the weekend to get his things. His friend Jay came too and helped, and talked to me while dad was packing up boxes. Jay was tall and thin with an oily face. He saw my container of insects and asked me if I was using them for bait.

“No,” I said. “I’m just keeping them.” The world was still wet outside; you could hear the cars sloshing through the streets.

“You can’t keep them,” he said. “They’re living things.” He looked at me as if I were doing something wrong, as if I were torturing them. But they were the ones that came into my room at night; they found *me*. I didn’t see how it was worse than using them for bait, or squashing them like everyone else.

“I’ll let them go,” I said, but I had no intention of doing it, especially since some of them were already dying or dead. But I wanted Jay to like me, because he seemed to

be a kind of bridge to my father, a way for me to find a way inside the rooms where I was never allowed. When he left, I took off the lid and watched the insects jump around. Some escaped onto my bed, but I was quick to put them back. They crawled over each other, and I thought that was the worst part, how they crawled all over each other. And when I woke up sometimes I could feel them crawling on my arm or up my leg, a light little tickle like I had never felt before. And even when I'd brush them off, I could still feel them, though they were gone.

Before the month of rain had ended, mother began seeing a man who came at night. I first saw him when I went to the kitchen for a glass of water. He was wearing shorts and black socks, and he nodded at me as if we were fellow shoppers in a dim store. When he walked back into the living room where my mother was watching television he tripped over the phone cord, but didn't fall.

When I asked my mother about him the next day, she told me his name was Kirby and that he used to be a fireman, but was now retired because of a bad back. She talked about him as if he were some relative I had never met before. Later, when Pete woke up, she led us into the kitchen and had us sit down. She told us that she still cared for Dad, but that she had to have her life too.

"You'll see him from time to time," she said, "He won't be here much."

"Will he eat dinner with us?"

"Maybe sometimes," she said. We were in the kitchen and she was washing dishes, making circles with a soapy sponge. Then she went on about how we had to help more and I must have stopped listening, because in a minute she stopped washing and said "I asked you a question."

I looked up at her and she asked it again. “Why are you using all my Tupperware on those insects?”

“I’ll wash them,” I said, feeling nervous and breathless, my secret openly discussed in the kitchen of all places. She put the dishes in the drying rack and then she pulled me close and hugged me. She smelled flowery, like the soap she always used.

If my parents talked at all at this time, it was probably about me and my new collection. I worried them in ways that Peter never did. “We’ll have to watch him closely,” my dad might have said, and my mother would have probably agreed. I tried to imagine them talking on the phone back then, but things always got in the way. In my mind Kirby would stumble over the phone cord again and again, ripping it from the wall.

Peter went crazy one day at school. I heard it all secondhand, passed down from friends who had seen it happen and from Pete years later. It was in the lunchroom when everyone was lined up to go back to class. A kid whose name I forget, pushed Peter in the back and said “Are you a fruit, like your old man?” Peter was on him, a left hand full of his hair, a right hand punching his face. Blood ran and bones cracked. My brother was strong. Kids who would have normally formed a circle to watch the fight were pulling my brother away. Instigators urged peace as Pete struggled to draw more blood. The boy slumped in his friends’ arms, unconscious.

“I didn’t see red,” my brother told me later, on one of his trips home from college. “That’s an expression, I guess. I felt more than I saw. Right now I can tell you exactly how his hair felt, how it was a little sticky from something he put in it, a little greasy. I felt

him every time I hit him, and I liked the way it felt.” He loved to tell that part. I must have heard it a dozen times.

Pete spent days in a kind of limbo at school. There was some talk of expulsion, even though he was an excellent student. Meanwhile, the kid he had beaten spent those days at home, recouping. A psychologist came to our house and talked to us, as a family. She was an old lady with strong perfume. She asked Pete about all kinds of things he had done; some of them I had never heard of before. She asked me what I liked best about school and what I didn’t like at all. I don’t remember our answers, but after a while they sent Pete and me to our rooms. In the end Pete had to take classes in controlling his anger. He faked his way back to normal. But at home he was mean to me, a tyrant in jeans. I avoided him when I could.

But he always found me in our small house. “How can you sit and watch television,” he asked me, “When your father’s a faggot?”

“He is not,” I said.

“Okay, Mike,” he said. “Believe that. And while you’re at it, believe that Kirby is just Mom’s drinking buddy.”

My brother hit me hard on the arm; I knew a bruise would bloom under the pain.

That night I watched crickets and roaches devour bits of pizza crust I had given them. I heard noises come from my mother’s room, noises I didn’t know about then. Peter let me know all about it, but I don’t remember when exactly, only that in that moment, under my sheets, I knew that those sounds would keep me from sleeping. I turned on my light and watched the ants swarm over the crusts, seeming to bring them

to life. Those nights held time like a stopped up sink holds water, and the only way I could ever get to sleep was to wonder where Dad was and what he might be doing.

Kirby moved in. My mother let us know the night before. "Kirby and I are serious," she said. "I need him to be in my life." The next morning we awoke and he was there, doing the Sunday crossword. He said good morning and sipped his coffee. Peter and I didn't talk during breakfast; we just hoped to ourselves that the next morning he would be gone. Instead, he became a fixture, as permanent and immovable as the rows of orange blossoms on the faded kitchen wallpaper.

"I'm going to buy you boys some shoes," he announced one morning the next week. He asked for our sizes.

"Better get them a half size bigger," my mother said. "They're still growing."

Kirby wrote down the sizes on an index card. "When I was growing up in Kentucky," he said, introducing a phrase I would hear nearly every day before I moved away to college, "I had to wear the shoes off of dead people. My father would steal shoes from the funeral home where he worked sometimes. It wasn't often when a kid my size died."

That night he brought us our new shoes, a cheap brand. Mine were blue and white and they never fit me right.

"Imagine his bullshit," my brother said as he walked around in the new shoes, trying to get them to stretch. "Dead people's shoes."

"What if the family noticed?" I asked. "What if they saw their dead son's shoes on Kirby?"

“Jesus, Mike. It’s probably a lie. Like his back. That back keeps him home all day and bowling all night.” He stomped around, looked at his feet. “But I suppose you’ve got to like your new pop, huh?”

“He can be *your* new pop,” I said.

“He smells like someone related to you.”

“Yeah, but I’m related to *you*.”

“I’m not so sure.” And later that night, in my bed, I contemplated my parentage for the first time. I couldn’t shrug it off, and have never been able to since. As my brother was to tell me over and over in the next few months, Mom must have had Kirby waiting in the wings for some time. Maybe months or years. Maybe eleven years and nine months. “But I look like dad,” he told me once. “And I’ve got his voice.” Then he would talk like my father and it sort of took my breath away to hear the voice in our house when I knew my father wasn’t there. When no one was around, I let my voice boom in my empty room. But it never sounded like Dad’s. I wondered whose voice I had.

Not too long after Kirby moved in, Dad invited Pete and me to spend the night. Even though he had lived there for a couple weeks, his apartment was still a maze of boxes, stacks of books, and jazz records in wooden crates. The kitchen was a tiny corner of the largest room, and dishes were piled there. It was hard to find a place to sit. My father cleared a spot on the floor and we sat down and ate a pizza he had picked up earlier.

“I want to take you boys to the aquarium,” he said. “You’ll like it, Mike. They have these fish--I forget the name--but they eat bugs from the limb of a tree.” He held his arm out like it was a branch. “It’s real close to the water. And when the fish want a bug, they spit water at it and knock it into the tank.” His fingers crawled on his arm.

“Mike will love that,” my brother said. “Maybe he can take some of those fish home, keep them in a salad bowl.”

“I don’t think they’d let him do that,” my father said, missing or ignoring my brother’s sarcasm. He mussed Pete’s hair.

“I’d like to see them,” I said.

“We’ll go next week. I’ll have some time off.” We kept eating pizza, then Dad put on his favorite record, “In a Sentimental Mood,” and even Peter seemed to enjoy it, playing the piano parts on the lid of a box beside him. We talked about baseball and our classes at school. My father told us about some problems he had been having at work. My brother didn’t say anything about Kirby, despite telling me the night before that he would ask Dad if he knew him.

We moved boxes around later and made Jiffy Pop. Then Dad had us roll out our sleeping bags and we said good night. Before we fell asleep, Peter told me about a kind of fish that could walk on land--for a little while anyway--and how people in Florida sometimes found these fish in their swimming pools. Then he laughed when I believed him.

“You’re one dumb kid,” he whispered into the dark. Boxes loomed above us. It was like sleeping in a canyon.

“Shut up,” I said, but I was slow saying it and Peter just laughed. Soon we fell asleep.

I woke up in the middle of the night and didn't know where I was. I knew that pattern of shadows was not my room. Then I saw a figure standing in the corner, not far away.

“Kirby,” I said softly into the dark.

“No. It's me,” came the whisper, “It's me. Jay.” I realized where I was and I could see Jay, standing in his underwear drinking a glass of water. Suddenly I was wide awake, wondering what had made me say Kirby's name and what Jay might take it to mean. Maybe he knew that was Mom's friend, and maybe he was going to tell my dad. I lay there listening to the plumbing in the building. Water seemed to be turned on from somewhere every few minutes.

After Jay had gone back to his bedroom I got up slowly and put on my clothes and my cheap blue shoes. I went out the door, downstairs and outside. The rain was just a mist, a kind of silver fog illuminated by the buzzing streetlights. I walked, but I didn't know where I was going.

A few cars passed me, moving slowly. Stoplights changed in the distance. In a little while I had walked to the corner of Madison and McClain, a corner I now pass every day on the way to work. I sat at a bus stop, under a shelter, until morning began to sop up the dark edge of the sky. The grocery across the street opened up and more cars hissed by in the rain. I imagined Jay and my father attacking Kirby. I couldn't help but think it, and the more I did, the more violent and tangled the fight became. In my

mind, they swarmed like the ants swarmed the crust. I thought about what Kirby would look like dead. Then Jay, then Peter and my father. Then myself.

While I was sitting there, an old man came up. He let out a rattling cough before I saw him, and it startled me a little. He was on crutches, the lower part of his left leg missing. He dragged himself to the other end of the bench. He stared at me while I watched the grocery across the street, a silhouetted worker moving in and out of light.

“Where’s a boy going this morning?” the old man said.

“I’m resting,” I said.

He shifted his weight, let out a snort. “What do you know?” His voice could barely make it out of his clogged throat.

I wanted to ask him what had happened, how he lost his leg. You always want to know how somebody got hurt, as if it could help save your life.

“You don’t need rest,” he said, “You rest enough.” He smelled bitter, rotten.

“What happened to your foot?” I asked, but when he didn’t answer right away I got up to walk back to Dad’s apartment. I imagined the old man’s missing foot rotting somewhere, insects crawling on it, boring holes, living in it. I saw Kirby scavenging the shoe.

“I had an ulcer,” he said from behind me, and then something else that I didn’t understand. I looked back at him, but he had turned away. When I looked ahead again I saw Jay on the other side of the street, walking fast toward the store. He was like a puppet bouncing down the sidewalk. He didn’t see me, just stared ahead. I watched him cross the parking lot and go inside. The store was still a little dark, but I thought I could

see his form through the windows. I started back to Dad's place. I realize now that I never saw Jay again, and I don't know whatever happened to him. I never asked Dad.

Inside the apartment my father was waiting with Peter. Both of them had glasses of orange juice and there was a third set out for me. Their empty stares were fixed on different parts of the cluttered floor. Years later my brother told me that just before I came in, Dad told him that he liked men instead of women. Looking back on their faces now, I can see it, but then I was oblivious. Maybe I mistook their looks as worry or annoyance, or a thousand things they could have been thinking about me and where I was. Instead they were thinking about each other. But I couldn't notice that then. What killed me was that Dad never told me, not once, not as an apology or an excuse for our distance, or even when he was dying. He could have told me and I would have loved him more, I think. Instead the years ticked away and the space between us grew, and the effort required to bridge that distance grew as well. And neither of us ever made the effort, so that I didn't really talk to my father when we were both men, and never saw him until he needed me to do the simple chores of living for him. And all because I left the apartment that night and wasn't there to hear what he had to say.

So that night not too long ago, after I had just hung up on Pete, I waited in my cold apartment for the phone to ring. I thought about all of us then, how we never spent another night together like that one at Dad's new place. Pete was never around when dad was dying.

Then the phone rang loud and sharp in my silent apartment. I picked it up but didn't answer. Instead, I watched the keypad light up when the ring came in, and I ran

my finger around the circle of the TALK button. I sat that way until the phone stopped. The rain had let up, and when the echo of the last ring died away, there seemed to be no noise left in the world.

I thought about my father's frail body in the nursing home, his knees mere knots of bone above his shins. If I ever have kids, I'll tell them what it felt like to hug him then, how he felt like he was held together by rubber bands. I'll tell them someday about their uncle Pete pointing a gun at his dog. I'll even tell them about the cloudless night that I buried two Tupperware containers packed with half-alive insects in the muddy backyard of my childhood home. There will be nothing half-told; nothing known will go unshared. When they hold my dying body, they will know what once made it hum and live. I won't leave them without knowing who I am.

Taken Apart by the Flame

After we have made love, Axtol tells me there is a river where the full moon crazes the fish. They jump into your boat and flail against the bottom, piles of them churning in silver flashes. We cleave to each other as the workers outside take down the tents. He tells me that he will take me to the village at the edge of this river, that he will marry me there under a wide blue sky. We will honeymoon on an island and watch the fish break the surface as they lunge for the moon. It will be a night of lovemaking and bright splashing, one we will remember forever.

But back in my small trailer he grunts and gets up, and it's as if I've had a incredible dream. He pulls on his boots, and while I'm feeling terribly awake and the shouts of the men folding the circus up into itself come through the thin metal of the walls, I ask him not to go.

"I have to help," he says, but through the tiny porthole window I watch him smoke and stand, exhaling yellow clouds, watching and laughing with the others, swatting away flies with a quick, practiced motion. In a while he moves into the dark.

The next night the new town sees me for the first time, spangled and afraid as I hold the torch to my smile. It's not a burnt lip I fear, for I've been burned a thousand times upon every inch of my body. My real fear is that my brother will say enough is enough and take me with him when he leaves the circus. Then I'll have to bring the fire to the streets again, watch as he watches me, as the smelly street crowd stares. The

only spark those crowds have in their eyes is the reflection of my torch, and when I swallow it at the end of my act, their eyes turn as grey as spent coals.

But tonight the crowd is high class: ladies in expensive shoes, their lipstick ignited by our swirling lanterns and the spotlights that wheel and swing. Axtol moves along the edge of the crowd, his boots making black marks in the dirt. His shiny moustache quivers as he laughs with the men in the audience, shoves his hand into their bags of popcorn and takes sips from their cups. He holds the ladies' hands in his and kisses the pink knuckles, and even though the drums beat and the animal trainers yell and the crowd claps in a steady, simple way, I hear the echo of his kisses, the tiny grunt that accompanies them.

I watch the ladies as they are entertained, and I want to be one of them, to be awed as the giraffe bends and nuzzles them, as the tumblers stack one another to the rafters. These women look as if they have lives of simple luxury. Their husbands point to the dwarves in their robes dancing in the corners, to the lone tiger in his red cage. Their husbands (or lovers) hold them when the clowns perform, laughing at the ladylike fear that hides some unmentionable excitement. It would comfort me to have a strong man laugh at my fear, as if he had never known what fear was. But the way the men look at me—I know I would fulfill only simple needs and never rank with a wife.

I juggle my lit torches on the periphery and wait, always wait until the spotlight comes to me and I move into the middle ring and begin. My mother taught me to eat fire as a child, to stand in the middle of a room and press the hot, bright flame to my lips. I have been seared shut a million times; all my childhood burns have been healed and

reburned. The burning is an old friend. I know its pattern: the first itch before a pinch of pain, and then the dull ache against the sheets at night.

Tonight I do not drop the flame. Some crowds seem bored with my act, but these ladies-- their own mouths so nearly on fire--they gape at me with a sort of envy as they look sidelong at their men. The men—how they lean forward until they almost spill their beer. I look straight upward at the top of the ten above me, the wooden rafters tied together with strong, dirty rope. I lift the torch and bring it down in a slow arc, an invisible fuse burning in the hushed dark. And when I've swallowed the torch and my smile, etched in embers, flashes out at them all, they applaud and turn to one another as if to say "Did you see her?"

They call me out a second time and after I have curtsied and trotted away I see Vilni slinking toward me. He is the tender of the elephant bulls and smells of their dung.

"We might live in this town," he says running both hands through his dirty hair. In the crowd, plastic cups of beer glow amber in the swaying lantern light.

"I don't know if I like the men," I say. Their eyes sift the glitter on my belly.

"You'll like them better than our men," he says with a nod toward Axtol, who has stolen the cigar from a fat man in the front row. He and the fat man laugh in chorus as he exhales a cloud of smoke.

"I don't want to leave tonight," I say. Even this town has deserted streets, dark corners and alleys.

"No, not tonight," he says. He looks up at the rafters, beams the size of elephant legs that seem ready for collapse. The drums are reaching their ecstasy. The clowns move forward now. I recall that when we joined more than a year ago the clowns would

spray water into the crowd, but now they have repainted themselves. Children are not allowed at the night shows and the clowns have added horns and deaths to their act. I want to see how those bright-lipped ladies in the audience will react. Vilni slips away, his eyes wide in awe of the clown's show. They form a circle in the middle of the ring. The spotlight is now a reddish orange, the color of the sun before it disappears, and it swings to and fro as the bass drums boom. The smallest clown, fragile in a white costume, is pushed between his larger companions. "Hurrah"s spring from the men in the audience. A knife shaped balloon is unsheathed (or is it a balloon shaped knife?) and the small clown in white is cut again and again and pushed from one mad assailant to another. The spotlight follows him. Some dark liquid sprays. The balloon-knife looks light and harmless as it sweeps across the small clown's face. Somehow his painted smile melts into a frown. The dark liquid could be showblood or it could all be real. I've never been told how this dance is done.

It's nearly finished—the small clown's head will be cut off at any moment and bound into the dust. I watch the ladies, their mouths open and black, their white teeth, their eyes catching the red-orange spotlight glow. The drums stop and there are shrieks and a hundred well-coiffed heads drop as the small clown's head tumbles and knocks, wood-like, against a tent support.

With the spotlight out they become mere shadows bustling in the near-dark. But the clown's show must be cleaned up out of anyone's view—even Axtol's. Only a few flames, none mine, give any light now. I hear Vilni singing somewhere outside. It's a song our mother made him learn many years ago.

That night Axtol wants to watch me put out flames on my body. He sits across from me in my trailer, a cigarette in his hand, his legs crossed like a woman. I light and then snuff the flame out. I know the progression he likes, the intimate spots that make him shake. He has said that he could crumble before my feet at any moment.

I am burned, and when he makes love to me he passes his thumb over my burns as if he's trying to move them aside. The pain is something dull and far away, like the memory of my first father walking the house in his own giant boots. Once ecstasy has taken Axtol's breath for a few moments, he holds me in his rough, hairy arms. These are the best minutes of my life, when the bed feels as wide as a raft and I almost sleep and dream of drifting away on that river full of leaping fish

The moon is framed in my porthole and we stare at it together as he strokes my hair.

"It's full tonight," I say. "I wonder if the fish are jumping in the river you told me about."

"If you ever leave me," he says. "I'll have to take the flames to myself."

"I'll never leave," I say. The moon is moving as we doze; three-quarters is in the porthole. "The moon is a fat man moving slowly behind a curtain," I say.

"Were you talking with Vilni?" Axtol asks. He does not know we are siblings. He knows we have a past; he saw us together on the street as I did my act. He thinks of Vilni as an insignificant rival.

"Vilni talks to me. He stinks."

"Vilni should become a clown," Axtol says. He moves to get up. As he reaches for his boots, he grunts.

“He is already one, but not in a show.”

I watch as he dresses. The process is slow, painstaking. He always wears a purple cravat. I only see him without one when he makes love to me. He ties and reties it and I watch as he makes it perfect. When I turn back to the porthole, the moon shows only a sliver.

“Yes,” he says as he pulls the handle on my trailer door. “Vilni has the stature of a perfect clown.”

I try to sleep, but now I think that my brother might be right, that we need to leave soon. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this way, since I’ve thought there might be something better hidden from me. These happy crowds have rekindled something in me. I want to be one of the women from the crowd tonight, with fire my lipstick and not my food, with flames dancing in my eyes and not in my mouth. I want to burn things in my own fireplace and not be watched as I burn myself. I want to live so long in the joy and comfort of this town that I forget what it feels like to have flame scorch the flesh, so long that one day as I cook supper for a strong and loving man I touch a heated iron skillet and cry out with a long forgotten pain.

Vilni raps against my door and the whole trailer shakes with a metal thrumming.

“In three days,” he says when I let him in, “We move on to the next town. But when we’re there, we’ll sneak back here and they’ll never find us.”

“What if they do catch us?”

Vilni shrugs, but then he smiles and draws his finger like a knife across his neck. “But that’s just for me,” he says. “You? They will burn you at the stake.”

He sings the song our mother taught him, looks out the porthole and seeing no one, slips away.

The first night in the next town I am given an apprentice. She is young, just run away from home. I've seen her cleaning slop and feeding the tigers. Her name is Paulice. She has brittle arms and a half-crumbled smile.

"Why do you want to eat fire?" I ask her.

"It's better than being cold," she says. She is too thin to hug, and her skin seems permanently stained, dirty and orange. Axtol moves his gaze from her to me to her.

"Aren't you afraid of being burned?" I ask.

She doesn't answer. She is so young and new. I assume she had not thought of the burns before I mentioned them.

Axtol takes her away, his arm around her waist. She walks through mud and puddles without looking at them.

The next time I see Axtol he smells like her, like licorice and some kind of exotic medicine. But I still hold him and light the end of my torch. He runs his hands through his graying hair as I perform. I let the flames linger longer than usual on my skin, until the pain grows unfamiliar and new. He wipes his brow. When he comes to the bed, he caresses me with renewed vigor. His breath escapes him in deep shudders, and before he leaves he throws his handkerchief into the small oval garbage can by my trailer door.

Before he can shut the door on me I ask him, "Will you remember me forever?"

He turns, his face slightly sooted from kissing my burns. "Forever," he says. "Yes, and even more."

The deep aches keep me awake. I feel every thread in my worn blanket as I draw it over me. I wait for Vilni to come take me away, but he never arrives. After hours of waiting, I know the sun will rise and brighten all the dark places where we could hide as we run away.

The night, years ago, when Vilni and I first ran away, my mother brought home our fifth father. He came into our house with an enormous net that smelled like a rock just pulled from damp earth. His name was Gorin and he claimed to be a fisherman, but Vilni said that he had never seen him in any boat, and Vilni spent his days chasing gulls by the sea.

He stood like a stone just inside the doorway. I thought he might run away at the sight of Vilni and me in our ragged clothes, our bones pushing against our skin. We talked uncomfortably for a few minutes, but then my mother brought out my torches and soaked them in kerosene. She lit them with my first father's silver lighter and smiled orangely as she handed them to me. Gorin soon moved farther inside and sat on the floor. His blistered lips parted in wonder.

Later that night I woke up underneath Gorin's net, as wet and heavy as the dark in the room. The only light and warmth came from the fire in the opposite corner. I saw his eyes caked with that light and behind that a certain dark motion. He laughed, and it sounded like an axe sinking over and over into wood. Soon he was on his knees beside me; a smell of something stronger than fish seemed to emanate from his very bones. I pulled and pulled at the net, but the more I did, the more entangled I became. He passed his hand through a hole in the net and searched for me in the piles of blankets. I

screamed and then, when I looked again, I saw Vilni behind Gorin, standing like one of the warriors from his boyhood books.

A blade flashed and Gorin gurgled a laugh into the room. I ducked under the covers, but soon a hand found me. I tried to fight it off, but he pulled and I was free. Vilni grabbed a pillowcase and we ran outside, through the neighborhoods where the dark and crumbling houses seemed ready to fall on us at any time. We moved through the night, past the outskirts of town and into the forest. We stopped to rest just as the dawn began to soak through the edge of the sky. I sat on a large rock, freezing and nearly starved, heart clutching like a dying bird.

“I hope you have food in there,” I said, pointing to the pillowcase.

“It’s something we can turn into food,” he said.

He went to the stream and returned with water in his cupped hands. As he reached out to offer me a drink, the moonlight stroked the water and made his palms glow white. Soon, morning noises began to come to us, animals stirring, and people perhaps.

“Have any of the others touched you,” he asked. He pulled the knife from his pocket, a thin red line of blood ran along the edge. He wiped it clean with the open end of the pillowcase.

“No,” I said. They had looked, their eyes on me as hot as any flame.

“Well, we have that at least.”

He slung the pillowcase over his shoulder.

“I’m starving,” I said.

He reached into the bag and pulled out my torches, then he fished to the bottom and pulled out our first father's silver lighter. He smiled and began to walk away from the direction of our home. I picked up the pillowcase and dropped it again when I found it as empty as my stomach.

I burn Paulice only a little and she screams, metallic and desperate. The tiny trailer shakes and she rolls on my bed. Axtol never told her what it's like because he cannot understand. Axtol runs the performance, a watcher and announcer, but he is no actor. He is too scared of the flame to approach anything but its aftermath.

"It gets worse before it gets better," I tell Paulice. Faces have appeared in the window to watch me train her, but I have tired of their laughter outside. I hang a green silk over the porthole.

"I can't do it," she says.

"You come to this late," I tell her. Across her stomach are red burns grown tight and shiny with pain. I open my last jar of salve and dab each of her burns. They glisten and there is a sound like sizzling in the trailer that must be Paulice breathing. After I've tended her wounds, I lie beside her and stroke her hair, my fingers still greasy from the salve. She whimpers.

"Why are you here?" I ask her.

She shakes and moves to face me. "I'm looking for something," she says.

"You won't find it here."

"What will I find here?"

What is left to find? Here, these people, this is where you go when you've grown tired of finding, when you want to forget that there is something out in the dark world worth hunting for. You accept Axtol's caresses when you know that happiness is extinct, a dead end. You take the fire to your belly when you are done with your search, when the idea of searching becomes a cruel joke you can't believe you fell for.

I look at her prone body, so skinny and young and bright. I could snuff out her hope, leave her with only the smoke of thought, with what could have been if she had never found us. Or I could rekindle her dreams, wet and cold as they are. Which, on this night, would be less cruel?

"Here," I say, "You will find the real world.' And I blow across her burns not knowing if it will hurt or soothe. She shivers and before long is asleep.

Even the clowns fear death. They move in packs, their faces painted white for the day shows and red for the night. Sometimes they have painted-on smiles, but you can always see their real mouths, tight and terror-gripped. A loud noise will send all of them turning. They sleep together in a large trailer, a lone sentry clown always out front, eyes painted onto his eyelids in case he falls asleep. It's rare to see a clown all alone, walking through the camp, but as I come back from leaving Paulice with Axtol, a single clown walks toward me, the red makeup on his face clotted with dirt.

"Hail to the fire-eater!" he says, the voice high and strained, but unquestionably Vilni's.

"So now you're a clown?"

"Axtol offered."

“Why are you alone?”

He shifts in the moonlight, begins to wipe his face with a soiled handkerchief. “I’m rehearsing. I can’t move into the trailer until after the first performance.” He pulls a silver balloon from behind his back, swats it blade-like across my arms and legs as he laughs. His large clown shoes make gritty sounds in the night, like tinny coughs from an unseen audience.

“So we’re not running away?”

He stops. “Why should we go now? I don’t have to shovel shit anymore.”

“Maybe you’re not supposed to be a clown.” He laughs and his head swings back. I see finger-shaped smudges on his neck where he has misapplied his make-up.

Before he looks back, I snatch his balloon away and twist it until it pops.

“I might get in trouble for that,” he says, frowning through his smeared-on smile.

“Then let’s go tonight,” I say, moving in close to him. “They won’t come after us because they have Pualice to eat fire now. Axtol won’t know we’re gone. They’ll forget us by the next town.”

Poor Vilni. He’s always sat by as I juggled my torches. The only light ever cast on him was reflected by me, and now he longs for the red-orange spotlight, for the dense sound of drums, for the hush of the astonished crowd. There’s no stopping him now, with his painted face, with his new and paranoid comrades.

“They said people would try to stop me,” he says and spins on his heel away from me, singing again, an unfamiliar song--and a dark one--as he disappears into the blackness between trailers.

I had worked the street for the first few nights after we ran away from home, but the towns we first stumbled into had no need for a girl who played with fire, so Vilni took to robbing bakeries while I performed for the customers inside. I smiled as they threw me a day old crust, but only because I knew Vilni had swiped some loaves while their eyes were on me. The streets were worse. Fat men with burs in their beards offered Vilni money for my virginity. He robbed a few, sawing at their red hands with the knife. But many times we slept in the same places they did, in cobblestone alleys or on the muddy banks of dark rivers. We fished a few black fish out of those waters and ate the bitter meat without cooking it.

It took a few months for Gorin to catch up to us, probably because he walked with a cane. It was a new moon night on the bank of river just before dawn. Some boats were beginning to move into the dark water when he ripped Vilni from beside me, landed a blow on his back with that twisted red cane.

“So you’re the one who gets to sleep with your sister? I undersand why you tried to slit my throat.” He pushed Vilni down into the sand, landed more blows. Vilni scrambled to a large stone and ducked behind it.

“Leave him alone,” I said.

Vilni pulled out the knife, but Gorin slapped it away.

“Cut me once. That’s all you’ll have.”

I took our first father’s silver lighter and came up behind him as he flailed on my brother. I had the jug of kerosene too. The sparks wouldn’t come at first. I doused his coat and let the flames do their work.

It was a moment before he felt the heat, but as soon as he did, he whipped the coat off and stomped it with the foot on his good leg. Vilni moaned from behind the rock and Gorin stood over me.

“You can have me,” I said. “I’ll go willingly. But not here. Somewhere warm.”

His jagged smile made me want to light myself and burn to ash before he touched me. But then what of Vilni?

Paulice grows more accustomed to the pain, but her face still tenses and tears still soak her cheeks. Tonight I take her with me to perform, another new town where the men are huge and hairy and the women seldom have teeth. They smile blankly at us through the dim light and Paulice and I smile too, standing to the side with our torches, waiting for the cue. Axtol approaches the crowd, but they treat him roughly and he stumbles back into the ring. Some of the huge men who do the heavy lifting for the circus are employed as security. Fear makes Axtol’s smile quiver in the spotlight.

Normally I go on without an introduction, but tonight Axtol senses a yearning in the crowd, a dark longing from their huge, scowling faces. He quiets the drums, hushes the crowd. A single silver light shines on him.

“I know what you want,” he says to them in the near-silence. “I know the urge that seethes under that skin. Oh, you have a smooth enough surface, but underneath you are all crags.” The crowd rumbles in disapproval, but they listen. “I know you want something new, something that shines. I know you want to see what the world has only hinted at.” He points to Paulice and me, and the spotlight swings to us. The crowd roars and stomps and a second, dimmer spotlight is thrown on Axtol. “I’ve been to villages

that soak half the year in fog. I've been to caves where the children grow up blind without the sun. I've been into secluded valleys where the people mumbled in unheard languages. So, for your thirst, tonight we have a new girl, ready for her baptism in fire. We have a novice, a desperate amateur and you will be the first ever to see her perform."

The crowd responds in a murmur which begins to instantly grow frantic. When Axtol snaps his fingers the spotlights go and all is dark. I hear his footsteps, then feel as he grabs me by the arm. "It's her turn tonight," he says.

"She was only supposed to juggle," I say.

"She has to now. The crowd wants her." And the crowd has begun to stomp in the dark, shaking the weak bleachers. Their rhythm grows. All is blackness and the growing stomp of the crowd, as if they were making their hunger and lust audible for us. I turn to Paulice and hand her all the torches.

"I can't do it," she says, but Axtol has already grabbed her by the wrist and a spotlight the color of flame is on them as they move to the center of the tent. He doesn't leave her side, steps back only a few feet to watch her juggle. When she has finished to a weak round of applause, he approaches and tilts her head back, lowering the fire to her lips. There is renewed stomping and chanting from the audience as she opens her mouth and Axtol lowers the flame. Her tears roll, each pregnant with a tiny spark of light, but she is still and does not scream. Because I have taught her that screaming is an invitation to a burn.

Axtol holds another torch to her stomach as the last of the fire disappears into her. The flames lick against her belly, yet she does not move. The skin there grows

grey with soot. She closes her lips around the torch in her mouth and Axtol drops the other torch to the ground. He places his hand in the small of her back and turns her around, showing her even to the people who paid only a few coins to get in. When she completes her turn, she opens up and he lifts the torch, still smoking, from her mouth. She blows on it and the flame bursts out again, this time somehow redder, casting its heat on my face, as far away as I am. The spotlight is killed and the flame is all that's left in the dark center. I turn away and leave the tent as the crowd roars in an ecstasy.

I wander through the black trailers, each as immovable as night. A few of the hands cough and smoke, but they move out of my way. So I have become useless. I find my trailer and crawl under the sheets. They become wet with my sweat, like the night I first slept with Axtol, knowing Vilni was outside in the dust, kicking it with his feet, the blade worn away to the handle and all his power gone too.

The sheets are as wet as water and I long to drown in them, to pull them over me and let their coolness extinguish me.

Gorin led me by the hand. I expected to find a boat hidden among the reeds, but instead he led me along the bank of the river to a small tent by the remnants of a fire. Fish bones were strewn around as if by some animal.

"I knew your father," he said into the darkness of the tent. The flap was open only a slit, and through it I saw lights scattered across the river like stars.

He grunted a while through the shifting of fabric, and I understood that he was undressing. I could only make out a heavy shape near me, smelling of sweat and

raisins, of dead fish and rum. He breathed hard, like some boat struggling against the current. In my hand I still had the lighter.

“Why don’t you show me one of your tricks?” he said. I felt fear, like the night with the net, but it would have been better not to see through the space in the flap to the river. If only it had been the river Axtol told me about, if only I could have seen something flash through that dark and star-scarred surface, maybe I would not have made the deal with Gorin, maybe I would have let him hold me instead of taking the lighter to myself. The idea came easier by knowing somehow that there was nothing under the surface of that dirty river flowing through that dirty town, nothing beyond the shiny surface but the detritus of people, the bones of the animals they had eaten, their waste flung from jars over the sides of party boats. Nothing alive in its depths, just a slick, wet surface hiding filth.

So I told Gorin to lean back and I’d show him. I took off my clothes and sparked the lighter. I wouldn’t let it catch because I wanted the suspense; I wanted the spark to take only tiny bites out of the dark. When I finally let the flame catch, I put on my first real show, the flame against my skin until Gorin was asleep in the darkness. Then the flap was pulled back and Vilni crouched inside. I flicked the lighter again. His face was swollen, his eyes black slits. But he could still see that I had been taken apart by the flame, inch by red inch. He saw that it was somehow worse than the worst he could imagine.

“There’s so much more to teach her,” Axtol says, his smile pulsing. He let his hand fall along my back as we walked. “It’s not that you’ve been replaced.” This was to

be the last night in town, so all the hands were packing up what could be packed before a show. In the morning, all the trailers would be strung together and a new town would be found tucked into a valley, a new town with wild crowds teeming at the tents, teeth clogged with our roasted meat, faces greasy and glistening in the bleachers. Axtol still tells some of the young boys that there are towns full of cannibals, that you can never tell which is which. In this way, they rarely run away.

“You’re the elder girl,” he says to me. “We need you still.”

“I’ll teach her everything,” I say.

Axtol smiles and leans in close, his breath hot and clove-scented. “Everything?” he says with a twitch of his lip.

“All of it,” I say, and he shuffles happily away.

I move my things into Paulice’s old place as she has moved into the trailer. She shared the back of a wagon with a fortune teller who rarely speaks to anyone except her customers from the town. She sits across from me and watches as I lay out some of my silks, presents from Axtol in months gone by.

“Is it bad luck to burn them?” I ask.

She bends her face and looks away.

I sleep for a while and when I wake up I hear the drums in the distance, like some army moving in on our camp. The fortune teller is gone, even some of her things have been taken away. I make my way to the main tent. A rain has fallen during my sleep, and the world is muddy and damp, the air hung with a brown mist clinging to the last of the twilight. The tent bulges with life; it seems to sway to the drums, drunk with them. I move inside, aware of the smell of rosemary smoke and roasted meat left too

long on the fire. I have missed Paulice's show. She looks bewildered as she stares at the group of clowns in the ring, the smallest one being pushed between the larger ones. The red-orange spotlight licks his face and I know the ill-applied make-up of Vilni. He's uncomfortable in his role as the smallest clown; he moves with too much worry of falling down into the ring, of getting dirt stuck to his face.

He's useless now, since his only purpose for Axtol was to keep me here.

I feel as Vilni must have felt that night by the dirty river, lifting the flap of a tent only to see someone he loves so low, knowing all the rivers in the world can only wash off so much, can only hide so much that we'd like to forget beneath their shining, moving waters. What did Vilni think he was saving me from when he finished the job he had meant to do at our home, when he plunged the knife into Gorin's sleeping neck? "It's not the first man I've killed," he said as he led me away that night. We walked along the bone-clogged bank. We moved as fast as bare feet could go on a warm night.

I want to save Vilni from the silver balloon the clowns whip about. The drums halt every few seconds so the crowd can hear the swish of the balloon as its blade cuts through the air. I want to save him the way he saved me, but I have no blade and no sleeping enemy. And the clowns move in on him, slowly, drum-crazed, their faces white, red, leering.

The lights flicker like lightning and after the clamor of drums has resolved to an abrupt silence, I see Vilni's head bound into the dust. His body collapses like a dropped marionette. His head rolls to a dead stop, and the crowd gasps and applauds the trick. Before I leave to get my things I see Paulice, her body dredged in glistening sequins,

her face twisted in horror. I see her knees loosen, but I know she will hold up for at least a little while.

Axtol's voice booms from behind me, the tent thrashes in the dark and I move through the mud to my old trailer. I step inside and watch for them through the porthole.

There was a rumor about Gorin's son looking for us, but we treated it as rumor and ignored it, moving from dim towns by night and forest. Our feet soon grew as callused as our hearts and we loved only one another even as we held our bitter rage and breath inside. Once or twice I wanted to ask Vilni if we could find our home town and go and see our mother, but I never did because I knew he would drag me reluctantly back and they'd find him and punish him. Even mother would help to see him in chains. So we held each other for warmth on cool nights and soon we met a man named Axtol in an alley as he watched me swallow fire. His hands were clean and soft, his voice like some hollow musical instrument played by a master. He took us in and ended up, finally, chopping us apart.

They come in together, Paulice still not over what she has seen so close-up in the dusty ring. He lights the lamp and they see me beneath the sheets. My eyes must be wild because even Axtol takes a step back.

"I'm ill," I say. "A fever." This relaxes them and Axtol sits down and begins to remove his boots.

"You should go and rest now," he says. "It will be hard to sleep tomorrow when we're moving."

“Especially in my wagon,” I say, looking at Paulice, her eyes on her feet.

“Yes, well,” Axtol says. “we’ll find you something more permanent.”

Paulice smells of fire, fuel and salve. The whole trailer reeks of kerosene. The sheets are cold and wet against me and when I come out from underneath them, a cool breeze chills me.

“I’m sorry about the sheets,” I say. “I think my fever broke.” Axtol places the back of his hand against my forehead and looks into my eyes. I’ve got the silver lighter in my hand and I think of how sweet it would be to burn him lash by lash. He drops his hand and grins.

“Something for you,” I say when I turn away from him. I hand Paulice the lighter and close her fist around it. “Be careful. Fire is a jealous lover.” She chuckles, thinking, perhaps, that I am talking about Axtol.

Before I close the door of the trailer they are already embracing, they are already moving toward the bed, groping blindly for the damp sheets, climbing awkwardly between them. In a few moments he will ask her to apply the lighter. In a few moments the kerosene-soaked sheets will ignite, then the rug, the curtains and all the silks he’s given her in the past days. As I grab my bag of belongings from the wagon I hear the first alarms raised, the calls for water, the scrambling hands. I also hear, as faint as breathing under the rush and panic, a sound I’ve heard in my own belly for years: a rumble, a roar, a crackling.

Outside of our camp there is a path into the woods. I take it and soon there is no sound but the wind in the highest branches. But in a while I hear a waterfall and find beneath it a shimmering river, which I follow for miles. This could be the moment; this

could be the last lonely place. I sense it as I look out over the waters. I feel it as the apricot moon climbs above the dark edge of trees. Underneath the endless burbling there is something beautiful that longs desperately to break through, to rise above, to flash. I wait for it in the cold. I will wait for it forever, yes, and more.

Age of Decaying Cities

I told the movers to put the piano in the middle of the room. It was my mother's and she had died a couple months before and willed it to me. But I had no place for it in my apartment. This was at a time when my girlfriend had just left me for a grit who called himself Hobbes. He was one of those guys who can give himself a nickname and make it stick. He wore tight clothes that made his muscles look like slabs of beef under the straining fabric.

I tinkered with the high notes for a while, but got to thinking about the house my mother used to have, but that was now sold. She didn't like being inside so she had tons of windows put in. You could stand outside the place and watch her life as it unfolded cigarette by cigarette. Her last years were boring, as far as I can tell, but I'll admit I wasn't around for the last five or so. She grew tired of my presence, somehow, and we never had anything to talk about but what I should have been doing instead of what I was doing.

I thought about selling that piano, even called a few people to see if it was worth much. Maybe five hundred, one guy said, depending on the condition. Five hundred would be nice for me, but I ended up deciding to keep it for a while just to see what kind of talent I had. I didn't have a job and so I had plenty of free time and nothing to do but drink or follow Hobbes and my ex around on the weekends. I bought a beginner's

songbook and I learned some simple melodies that didn't sound familiar to me at all, but were beautiful anyway. I couldn't do anything with my left hand. It would bang the low notes, out of rhythm, out of tune.

When my buddy Jerry came over he sat right down on the bench and started playing. Deep chords bloomed from the old thing, weighing down the air. I had never heard anybody play like Jerry and I had never known him to touch a piano before. He blanketed the keys with his hands, which seemed small until he spread his fingers out. I sat back and drank and listened to him play for an hour or more. He stopped in the middle of a song and turned to where I was sitting on the floor.

"I used to play in a jazz quintet in New Jersey," he said, "We called ourselves Pothole Spirit."

"When was that?" I asked.

"We broke up five years ago. The drummer, a grade school friend of mine, went to work for a software company. Probably a millionaire now."

"You could've found a new drummer. Drummers are cheap."

"Not like him. But I was bored anyway." He played a light, trembling melody on the high keys. It was effortless for him, with his back to the piano, his arm reaching behind him and his mind reaching, obviously, somewhere else.

"How could you be bored," I said. "Shit. A jazz band, man. That's the life." I imagined the smoke wavering in the dark club, the brushes swishing on the drums, the girls swaying, swimming in the music.

"It got boring. Not the band, but music. Music got boring for me." He played a full, clean major chord and let it hum underneath his voice as he talked. "I had this uncle

who had a quartertone piano. I used to play on that thing when I was a kid. You could play between the notes, you know? It was quartertone. I loved exploring, finding the hidden things nobody could hear, the hidden spaces in music. To you it would sound out of tune, burn your ears like hell. But if you play with it, you learn how to hear. I couldn't afford one of those pianos, I even messed with the tuning on my own piano, but in the end I just quit playing."

He played some more and then he stopped. He told me about this new place that had opened up downtown where they played music that was pretty much shit, but there were plenty of young girls there. We decided to go, but neither of us had a car, so we walked there. It took us nearly two hours. On the way we talked about how we always wanted to know what it was like to fight in a war. Jerry told me about visiting his sister in Alaska and nearly dying in a little two-seat plane with some Inuit guy she was dating. I told him what Hobbes and my ex had been up to. Then something happened and we weren't talking anymore. Instead I was looking up at the buildings and the fire escapes that clung to their sides. I couldn't tell if they were really for escaping fires or if maybe they were there to keep those buildings from shooting up into the sky like rockets or collapsing like the dead. Jerry might have been thinking the same thing because he stopped at one building and looked up at it like he was about to start climbing. Instead he said "I'm thirsty," and we ducked into a convenience store for some beer.

By the time we got to the place Jerry told me about my feet were sore and my hips felt loose. We went inside and there were lots of college kids there and a few underage girls with rings skewering their eyebrows and smiles stapled to their beautiful

faces. They all seemed like they were paper thin and scared of silence; that pounding music kept them safe and alive. Jerry and I had gone through two pitchers when I broke free and went up to a young girl with a leather skirt and tawny skin.

“My name’s Grant,” I said.

“I’m Brooke.”

We shook hands.

“Do you know any deaf people?” I asked.

“No,” she said.

“Because you have quick long fingers that were made for signing,” and in the next few minutes I showed her how to sign her name and asked her if there were any words she would want to know how to sign.

“Fuck,” she said.

So I showed her how to sign fuck by spelling it out and she learned it pretty quick, flipping through the letters almost faster than anyone could see what she was saying. Soon she taught her friends and they would sign “fuck” and point to someone across the room and laugh without a sound.

The place made me feel old. Bodies bursting with hormones clashed on the dance floor; colored lights etched new features onto everyone’s faces. I imagined I looked ancient to them all, like some statue come to life, propelled by alcohol and propped up by the hope for sex with a younger woman. And to me they all looked like newborns, red and glossy in the club lights. I felt visible, gigantic, Day-Glo.

Brooke and I conversed in bursts between songs and learned more than one would think possible. She told me about her summer trip to Hamburg, the band her

brother played drums for out west. I told her about my uncle's glass eye and the fun he'd have with it each Thanksgiving, and about my new piano. When the music played we'd stare at each other. She wasn't what you would call pretty, but she had an authority about her that made up for it. And a body that made up for it too. She was witty and cruel in a way. She didn't dance very well, but that might have been because her shoes looked like prisons for feet.

Eventually Brooke asked how old I was and I knocked off a few years and told her twenty-five. It always seemed like a reasonable age, and if I didn't look it, I was close. I bought her several drinks and she downed them in silence, never getting the giggles, even though her friends were slobbering on themselves as they laughed.

We danced alone for a while and left the place about three. Jerry was lost in the mist of music and light. I wanted to take her back to my apartment and play her some songs on the piano. But somehow I had forgotten I didn't have a car and hadn't had one for a while. It seemed ridiculous to ask her to walk with me or to try and scrounge a ride from her friends or from the drunks heading home to their own lays or miseries. I was about to just let it go and explore the fire escapes I had seen when she suggested I come with her.

"I've got to take my friends home," she said and we walked through an alley to an Explorer with three couples making out inside. Brooke handed me the keys, saying she was sleepy and we herded the guys out of the car, their dicks pushing against their pants. You could see the look of desperate sadness in their eyes as they studied slips of paper with fake names and numbers on them. We pulled away from the curb and I watched them shrink and disappear in the mirror, knowing exactly how that shit felt.

The car smelled like horny teenagers, which brought back the old days for me when my best friend Jim had a Grand Prix we called the Bucket T. Every weekend we'd fill it up with gas and find some desperate girls in need of a night out. We'd drive around the city, finding hidden oases in the desert of concrete and, if we were lucky, the girls might take off their shirts. The next day they wouldn't remember anything, but somehow I never got as drunk as everybody else. Sometimes they would all pass out and I'd drive around downtown and watch people my parents' age stumble to their cars. They looked orange and cartoonish in the streetlights, bloated from surf and turf dinners and half a dozen scotches. But back then, it seemed, everything about the city was clean and new. Even the alleys I'd drive through were pristine, the dumpsters in neat array. Abandoned buildings seemed to have their own artistic reason for being. Eventually someone in the backseat would wake up and ask where the fuck I was going. Then I'd have to drive them all home.

Like I was driving these girls home now, except I felt like an outsider. The girls talked about the guys they had just left by the curb like they were pets that had recently been put to sleep. How cute they used to be! They didn't seem to think I was capable of deciphering their slang, if they cared. Brooke smoked a dark brown cigarette and put in tape after tape, apparently unable to find the song she was looking for or one that would do.

I dropped off the three girls; each belonged to a big suburban house. I imagined their sleep-deprived parents pulling back the curtains and seeing me in the driver's seat, a roustabout with a week's growth of beard, past thirty with vacant eyes. But of course the houses were asleep, the windows blank and dark. The girls were escapees

breaking back into their sheltered lives. They would wake up in the golden morning to warm oatmeal and suspicionless smiles.

When Brooke and I were finally alone, she turned to me and asked: “How many girls have you fucked with your sign language ploy?” The radio thumped out a less tolerable version of the music from the club.

“Including tonight?”

She lit a new cigarette and pulled her feet underneath her, laughing the way people do at unfunny jokes. “Yeah,” she said, “Including tonight.”

“None.” I drove slowly through the meandering streets. There was no garbage by the edge of the road, no junk on the lawns. Everything was in its place. I told Brooke about how I liked to drive around the city at night when I was young, how my friends and I found the hidden spaces in the sea of pavement.

Brooke said something I didn’t hear—I was trying to understand the music, trying to find in its hum the same pitches and rhythms that Jerry managed to get out of my piano. She said it again and I still didn’t hear her. “One more time?”

“I asked where you went to school. You getting deaf?”

“Well, I don’t have the ears of a seventeen year old,” I said.

She flicked her ash out the window. After a while she said, “You haven’t answered my question.”

And I never did, but I stopped short of telling her that it didn’t matter. We didn’t talk for a while. Maybe she was as sensitive about being a kid as I was about being old. Though anyone would tell me I wasn’t old at all, and I would have to nod my head and agree. Imagine being old and used up at thirty. But that’s how I felt, especially when I

looked at Brooke and how young she looked, how smooth. I found it difficult to remember myself at her age.

We had drifted from the gentle curves of the suburbs back into the sharp corners of the city, and I decided to show Brooke one of the places my friends and I had found long ago. I entered a park and Brooke began to laugh.

“Isn’t this the park where gay guys go for a little wilderness sex?”

“Never heard of that,” I said feeling defensive and ignorant as hell for not knowing the gossip. “Once when I was about twelve, my friends dared me to look inside this car parked in a lot around here somewhere.”

Brooke smiled. “What did you see?”

“Well, I expected the car to be empty, I guess. Instead there was a couple screwing in the back seat, or actually I think they had just finished.”

“Did you get busted?”

“I ran like hell back to where my friends were, thinking the couple didn’t see me. But in a minute they got out and the guy looked over at where we were standing and stared knives into my eyes.” I found the place I was looking for, a break in the trees that used to be an old bus lane through the heart of the park. They had put up bollards to keep cars out since I had been there last, but I drove the Explorer over some downed limbs and onto the crumbling lane. A lot of the concrete was gone, and when there was some, tall grass bloomed from the cracks. Trees and grass had begun to reclaim the space. I wouldn’t drive my car back here, if I had one, but Brooke didn’t try to stop me.

“I guess that’s something my generation will miss, what with parental apathy and all.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Sex in the back of a car.” I turned down the radio and we listened to the sound of the grass bending beneath us.

“It’s not that great,” I said, though I was thinking that an SUV would be quite nice to have had, instead of that old Grand Prix that wasn’t even mine.

We moved forward. “I bet this is bringing back some memories,” she said.

“I remember when the busses actually ran through here. They did a good job with it, but I guess people didn’t like the pollution. It was nice to ride a bus through the park back then, when I was a kid.”

“It’s not so nice now,” she said.

I couldn’t get out of the other end of the park, more bollards, but no way to get around them. Brooke and I made out for a while. I’d like to say I remember running my hands along her body, or twisting her hair as we kissed. But that’s not what I remember about that night. First we were locked together with something like passion, and then, suddenly, we weren’t anymore. Then I turned around and went back the way we came.

Brooke excited me because she was strong, a girl I could really have enjoyed seeing every day. She was smarter than me, and knew it. But she respected me too and made me feel better than I had felt in a long while. I also knew that she was interested in me in an archeological sense, and that was about it. Whenever I looked at her she seemed to be looking into my mouth. Finally she turned to me and said, “You’re teeth are rotten.” Even though she tried to say it like it was some objective fact, I could tell she was disgusted.

“I haven’t been to a dentist,” I said, “Since I was younger than you.” I wanted to go on and talk about insurance and how her pretty little mouth didn’t have to worry because of daddy’s HMO. I was defensive again. I drove over the same downed logs and it felt like I had left some other world. That’s how it always felt when you left one of the secret spots of a city.

“I’m sorry,” Brooke said, “I have a thing about teeth. It’s probably unhealthy.”

“Everything rots, I guess. Not your fault.” I realized that even her interest in me as an artifact of some other time she admired (or detested) was waning and I felt trapped, my clothes tight and uncomfortable. I drove downtown, past the club we had left a couple of hours before. We drove past buildings that hung above us like barren crags, past the fire escapes I had wanted to explore, but Brooke was playing with the radio and didn’t see them. I could’ve let myself out and I felt like it. But there was still the slim hope of sleeping with her, although that too was rotting away from the inside.

“Everything used to be new,” I told Brooke. “The shit piling up in the middle of the city used to be new at some time. My teeth used to be new. Hell, I used to be new.”

“You can get new teeth.” She sounded very sorry.

“It’s not just teeth. It’s everything.” Not that she had to worry. You could look at girls like her and sense some kind of natural preservative at work. Not just the beauty, but the attitude. Even if it was prejudiced or immature or spoiled, it was still young. And it made me feel younger, but at the same time aware that the feeling would leave whenever she did.

We drove vaguely in the direction of her house. The car stank of cigarettes and cinnamon gum. Brooke curled in her seat and fell asleep.

The sun was staining the sky back in the suburbs when I saw my mother's old house. I parked and watched it as Brooke slept with the seat reclined. Through the enormous windows, I watched a woman get up and make coffee. She got the paper from the porch and read it at the breakfast table as dawn broke out in the neighborhood. I remembered my mother sitting across from me, reading her own paper and smoking cigarette after cigarette. The dish she used as an ashtray overflowed. This woman drank her coffee and I could tell it burned a little going down. Soon the rest of the family—two daughters and an overweight father/husband—joined her. Bacon fried; Oranges bled their juice. The paper was passed around in an order that seemed common and routine. Conversations, though I couldn't hear them, seemed short, without wasted words. Pets begged for, and were granted, scraps. Perhaps the day's itinerary was set. Breakfast was served and enjoyed and the daughters washed the dishes. Eventually the family split into its separate pieces and the day began. It was positively the most depressing thing I have ever seen.

It is enough to say that Brooke and I didn't crawl into the back of the Explorer and fuck like mad right there in front of my dead mother's house. I would have liked to, and probably--teeth and all--she would have liked to, but the night didn't allow it and now the morning had blued the sky and left me tired and wondering what the sunrise would have looked like from the top of one of those downtown buildings. I wanted to tell Brooke about what my childhood was like, the ice cream and the pain, the thunder and sunshine. At her age she would understand it better than I ever could now. I admit I missed my childhood the way you miss summer when the streets are mazes of ice and the sun seems so far away.

“This was my mother’s house,” I told Brooke when she began to shuffle and stretch in her seat.

“I have to get home,” she said. Her eyebrows, I noticed for the first time, were mere lines above her eyes, like deep crevices.

I wanted to see Brooke’s house, to match a place with a face, but then I would have had to walk home or find a ride. Instead, I drove to my apartment and we switched seats. Brooke kissed me with a sister’s mouth. She thanked me for showing her the oasis and we exchanged numbers for no real reason. I thanked her for a wonderful night and turned around expecting never to see her again.

I hope she will forgive me for lying, but the night was not wonderful for me. I had felt I missed something and that thing wasn’t the sex we might have had or my old house or my mother or even my childhood, I don’t think. No, I think what I missed was seeing something that I could never explain to anyone else. Those nights we used to go out in the Bucket T we’d find things that other people had forgotten about. We didn’t look at the ruins of a downtown building as eyesore. We studied the way the concrete crumbled and fit ourselves easily into corners no one had set foot in before. We explored and expanded. Every weekend we piled life on top of life. Those were buoyant nights that seem to rise always to the surface of my memory, the times that go on even after we’ve lived them.

I went inside and played piano, the same simple melodies, and began to feel better. I made up melodies of my own and thought they could be worse. I wished Jerry were there to show me what notes to play, to unlock some secret place in music only he knew about.

I closed the lid and went to sleep as the noon sun buzzed outside.

When I woke up I noticed the answering machine was blinking. I was hoping it was Brooke, but when I hit the button, Jerry's voice came on blurring and echoing strangely, as if he were calling from the bottom of a well.

"Where were you man? I couldn't find you so I left and on the way home I stopped at those buildings and I climbed them. I climbed them, man. All the way to the top and I sat at the top and looked out at the city and watched the lights blink on and off and the barges on the river. You've got to go with me sometime. We'll climb the buildings, man. Every one in the city before we're through. Are you in?"

The factory installed voice of the answering machine said, "End of message," before I could answer for myself.

Who is Rios Montt?

Acan watched the dark-blue van moving along the road from Panajachel until he could see the driver's face. The van pulled up to a pump and Acan walked over with a rusty ten gallon can hanging from his hand. The driver got out and stretched, looking ahead into the horizon. He was American, a little overweight and bald, with expensive sunglasses covering his eyes.

"How far is Atitlan?" He asked in Spanish, without looking at Acan.

"It's just a few miles," Acan said in English.

The man turned and smiled. "You speak pretty well," he said.

"My mother made me learn it."

"Can I get some gas?"

"We are out," Acan said. "Except for this can and two others for emergencies."

"How much?" The man took his sunglasses off and squinted in the afternoon sun. The breeze blew the thin strands of his hair around. Acan bit his lip and looked back to the road. He shifted his weight before he spoke.

"It's promised to someone."

"You said you've got another can."

"For emergencies." Acan shrugged and looked the man in his soft, blue eyes.

“Is this how you treat your visitors?” the man said. “I’ll pay more. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“No, sir,” Acan said, but in no time the negotiations were over and the bills were in his hand, American money he could use down by the lake, in the tourist shops or to get some wine. By the time the man had driven off toward Lake Atitlan, Acan was ready to shut down and leave. He turned on the pumps and filled three cans which he took into the garage. He had filled them too full; the thin, rusting handles dug into his palms. After he set them down, he covered his face with his hands and smelled them. No matter how careful he was, he always spilled a little on himself.

He washed and changed, got the rest of his money, and turned off the pumps and the lights before he left. He decided to walk to the lake rather than ride his bike since it kicked up dust and dirtied his clothes. As he walked along the road, a car passed going the other way. He wondered if he should have stayed and sold one more can of gas. He wanted more money for wine, more for spending on Zia or one of the other girls who worked at the hotel. He thought that someday he would save enough to rent a room and see what the girls said when they saw him walking the halls as a customer.

A jeep pulled up beside him. Two soldiers were in the front, their green shirts open exposing their bare chests. In the back was an older man who looked a little carsick or afraid. His wide white hat drooped over his face.

“Hey, boy,” the soldier said. “How far to the Palopo hotel?”

“You’re already there, practically,” Acan said. The soldier who was driving gave him a sour look and spit something that flew past Acan’s ear and into the grass behind him.

“If you want a ride, you can shine my boots.” The soldier’s smile was like a wound in his face.

“I walk for exercise,” Acan said. “I have a dark-blue van back at the station.”

The soldier laughed and then sped away. Acan brushed dust from his hair and skin and walked slowly down the hill. Now he was grimy, and easily distinguished from the tourists. He imagined that the dirt was the only thing that separated him from the rest. If he was going to be dirty, he might as well have ridden his bike.

He walked over the last hill before the lake. He marveled at the way the lake changed colors, as if its mood changed with the coming of dark. Tonight it was still a bright blue, though the surface was a blur of waves. There were boats out there too, tiny dots of white.

His friend Jose was not selling rum drinks at his stand yet. Someone else was in his place. Acan walked down the main street looking into the open doors and windows. Brown faces peeked out on occasion. He decided to start drinking right away, and bought a small bottle of wine from the grocer. He walked the streets and smiled at the few tourists who were out. Eventually, he made his way back to Jose’s stand and found him there, his hands buried in his black beard.

“Acan, you can have this place.” He shook his stand slightly, and Acan heard the nails squeaking in the wood.

“Maybe you should stop watering it down, if you want to sell drinks.”

“And you should water down the gas, instead of pretending you’re out,” Jose said with a broad smile. “Besides, there’s more for now.” There were only a few people on the street, but it was still early, the sun had just moved behind Volcan San Pedro in the west. Acan sat behind Jose’s and finished his wine. Some tourists came walking up the hill from their hotel, a group of about seven people. All of them had cameras in their hands or hanging from their necks.

Jose began to juggle his fruits and bottles, and the group stopped to watch him. He missed a lime and it bounded away into the orange dust on the street. “I shouldn’t drink my own supply,” he said sadly to the group. They looked at each other, a little uncomfortable, but then Jose smiled and said, in almost a scream, “But it’s so damn good.” He laughed explosively.

The members of the group laughed and took pictures of Jose and his stand. Some of them fished in their pockets. They ordered some coladas and Jose mixed their drinks, his smile never wavering. “For you,” he said as they handed him new bills, “I don’t water it down this time.” His booming laugh blended with theirs.

Acan watched for a while, happy that Jose was doing so well. Soon Acan was watching the growing crowd on the street, the Mayan women going home with the textiles they had failed to sell, the tourists in their expensive sandals. He was excited to see Zia appear in the midst of the crowd. Her long black hair was not pulled up as it usually was when Acan saw her in her maid’s uniform. He stepped through the crowd and embraced her.

“It’s been a while since I saw you,” she said.

Acan was suddenly embarrassed as she looked at him. He knew he was still dirty and hoped that he had not stained her white dress.

“Let’s get some food,” he said and they found a nice place to sit and eat. He listened to her talk about life at the hotel, the demands of the rich and mostly foreign clientele. She told him some jokes about Americans that other maids had been telling. Acan told about Americans being unable to use the old pumps at the station.

When they had finished dinner and walked once more in the middle of the street, Zia grabbed Acan’s hand and pulled him into the small theater. There was a throng in the dark; the movie had already begun and the flickering light from the screen danced on blank faces. They found seats near the back. The movie was an American film, an action movie with thunderous explosions that crackled from the theater’s worn out speakers. Acan remembered sneaking away when he was only ten and watching movies like this one. One of the storekeepers in his neighborhood had a projector and half a dozen American films. Acan and his friends would pay half a quetzal and watch those movies on a stained sheet pinned to the wall. Then he went home and slipped quietly into their one room apartment, because if his mother found out he had been spending money on movies, she wouldn’t let him out at all anymore.

Zia pressed to him and he pulled the bottle of wine from the bag. They shared sips while a plane hovered in the midst of a city. More explosions bloomed orange; smoke rose in tall black columns. Acan and Zia drank the wine, and he pushed the hem of her dress up and rubbed his hand on her bare knee. Men were fighting on the screen, and a muscular man, whose round face reminded Acan of the American with the van, tried to save his daughter from a dark skinned maniac. The audience, many

with bottles of their own, hooted and cheered and soon the biggest explosions came, and the longest kisses. The daughter was saved and Acan moved his eyes from the screen onto Zia. The reflected blue light dancing in her eyes made her more beautiful. He leaned in and kissed her neck as she pushed him lightly away. The empty bottle clinked on the concrete floor, but did not break.

Outside it had grown cooler and there were more people, so that it became difficult for Zia and Acan to walk side by side. He pulled her behind him and went inside another grocery. He found a cheap bottle and returned the empty he had remembered to pick up on the way out of theater. Zia said something about not wanting to drink, but Acan wanted to keep the feeling he had. Half the bottle, he thought, would last the next half hour.

They found a place to sit at an outside café; lights were strung from pole to pole, and they buzzed in Acan's ears. He kept his hand on her knee, though it was difficult to do. She kept moving away, keeping her distance. He closed his eyes for a moment, and purple flowery explosions like shadows from the movie passed before his eyes. When he opened them again, he saw one of the soldiers from the jeep at the table next to him. The soldier had buttoned up his shirt and Acan could smell rich foreign cologne in the air. The soldier smiled at Acan and Zia, his eyes black and steady. A cup of clear liquid sat in front of him on the table.

When the soldier noticed Acan staring, he said "My leader insists I drink only water." He reached out his cup toward Acan, but his eyes were on Zia. Acan offered his bottle toward the soldier's cup and they tapped them together. He leaned closer, putting his hand on Acan's leg, but his eyes fixed on Zia's face. "I am on duty, you know?"

“Duty,” Acan repeated, almost laughing.

“Is your bottle empty?” the soldier asked, and before Acan could stop him he took it away and sloshed it near his ear. “Only a little left. Allow me to buy you another.” The soldier rose and walked toward the teeming avenue. Acan noticed the pistol in his belt and felt a surge of warmth and respect for the soldier, forgiving him and his friend for making him dusty earlier in the day.

“Do you like soldiers?” he asked Zia.

“No,” she said, “I think we should leave.” She moved her chair closer to him, then hung her arm around his neck. “Don’t you think there’s somewhere else to go?”

“We must defeat the enemy where he lives,’ said Acan in English, repeating a line from the movie. He stood as he said it and felt his legs weaken so that he had to grasp the table. It wobbled under his weight. “After the wine,’ he said and closed his eyes to the purple explosions again.

The soldier returned with two bottles and sat at the table, nearer to Zia. The bottles were open and Acan began to drink from one and repeat lines from the American movie. He said them as the movie’s hero had said them, sometimes standing and placing his hands on his hips. Soon he had rolled up his sleeves to expose his thin arms. The soldier and Zia laughed. Acan sang a song from the movie in a trembling falsetto, and soon his pants legs were pulled up over his small knees as he danced between the tables.

Something happened—his shoulder was bumped—and he sat on the ground for a few minutes, resting under a table. He watched Zia’s legs, the soldier’s hand on them. He closed his eyes and felt the world move in circles around him. After a while he was

on his back in the street, the lines of lanterns swinging over him and voices tumbling into one another. Someone strong lifted him from behind, and carried him a great distance. The world shook with every step, and Acan's head rolled with the motion. He tried to say many things but was only successful in moaning. He was helped into the back of a jeep. More voices slid against one another and he was lifted again, and set in the dirt by the side of a building. He lay there and listened to sounds, the humming of engines as they swept away from him.

Jose shook him awake. From where Acan was he could look down the hill and see bright white clouds gathered around one of the volcanoes on the other side of Atitlan. He recognized that the morning was over. Jose helped him to his feet.

"You're dirty as hell," Jose said, and began to dust him off.

Acan's head thumped and swam. He wiped his face with his hands and faintly smelled the gas he had spilled on them the night before. He and Jose marched slowly down the hill, toward the lake. Acan told him all about the night, the soldier and losing Zia. He told them he had been in a jeep for a short period of time, but that someone had taken him out.

"You know whose jeep it is?" Jose asked, pointing back up the hill. Acan only shrugged. "It belongs to Rios Montt."

Acan remembered the man in the back of the jeep when the soldier had asked him directions, but his hat had covered his face.

"Is he here?" Acan asked.

"Yes, I saw him yesterday at the Palopo hotel. He had on a light blue suit."

Acan whistled and began walking down the hill again. He knew the blue suit. It was a famous photograph from the newspapers: Rios Montt in a light blue, tailored suit, a wide white hat on his head, a smile hanging underneath his thick mustache.

“Do you think it’s true what they say he did?” Jose asked.

“My mother told me the stories. Ask the other Mayans; they all have stories. They all have memories burned into them, though nobody outside of the villages seems to believe or remember.”

“How do you get away with it?” Jose said.

“You hide in the open.”

They walked down the hill to the lakeside. The bright morning sun hummed in the sky, and there were a lot of people milling around. Acan bought a bottle of water from someone he had never seen before selling them from a cardboard box. They both bought pieces of fried fish from a lady cooking over a fire built in a square of cinder blocks. They made their way to the short pier.

Jose said goodbye and went to open his stand. Acan walked for a moment, trying to imagine what had become of Zia the night before. He couldn’t shake the image of the soldier’s hand on her knee.

In a while, he saw the American’s van parked near the pier. The American was taking equipment from the back, various cameras and stands. Acan walked over to him and watched.

The American turned around. “You? Don’t suppose you know how to use a light meter?” he asked in English. He held up something that Acan thought looked like a

phone with a white ball stuck to it. Acan took it and examined the display, turning it over and over in his hand.

“I don’t know anything about it,” he said.

“I’ll teach you,” the American said. “I could use an assistant.” He set down a heavy bag he had slung over his shoulder and extended his hand. “My name’s Luke.”

They shook hands. “I’m Acan.”

“That Spanish?”

“It’s Mayan.”

“Mayan, huh?” He was barely listening, searching through his many bags for the things he needed.

“Thirty dollars,” Acan said. “More if you want me past four.”

Luke looked up and smiled. “Thirty’s no problem,” he said.

Acan helped him with the bags. They walked down to the edge of the lake, to where the pier stretched out toward the opposite side. On the way Luke tried to explain the way the light meter worked, what the readings meant. Acan tried to remember what he heard, but he only noticed that Luke used the word “stop” in a different way.

“You think you got that?” Luke asked.

“No,” Acan said.

“You’ll get it soon. Being an assistant is easy.”

They walked to the end of the pier. Acan had been out there many times, once or twice with Zia. It always seemed to him that the pier should keep going, as if the builders had set out to build a bridge then grown weary and settled for a pier with ragged, untrimmed boards.

“I want to get the lake from every angle,” Luke said. “But I want consistent light, so we’ll try it a few times.”

Luke snapped pictures of the volcanoes rising on the far shore of the lake. He took pictures of the lake’s blue skin and the stretched out reflection of the sun that led to them over the water. He got pictures of the shore, where a few people strolled or watched, and where white buildings nestled into the hill and the orange road looped away into the yellow grass. They spun around, Acan calling out readings that he didn’t necessarily understand, Luke adjusting his camera. Acan watched the small screen on the back of the camera as the world was registered and reilluminated. The camera respun the sun, reformed the volcanoes into dark half-curves backed in an even blue. The two men made the circle eight times, then a ninth. Occasionally Luke would stop to scan through the pictures as if he were looking for a familiar face in a crowd.

“That’s it for the digital,” Luke said, “I’m going to get another camera.” Acan watched as he walked down the narrow pier. On the shore he saw the jeep and in it Rios Montt; his trademark blue suit looked out of place, a paleness that mocked the lake’s deep color. He watched as Luke moved the van next to the jeep, then got out and seemed to have a distant conversation with Rios Montt. Luke raised his camera and took his picture. Acan could see the man in the blue suit lift his hat. His smile seemed a white rip in his face.

Acan looked back to the lake and felt Luke’s steps move the pier, then stop behind him.

“Do you know who that was?” Acan asked, his back to Luke. He waited a moment to turn around.

“The guy in the jeep? Who?”

“Rios Montt.”

“Who’s Rios Montt?”

Acan told the story his mother had told him; Luke sat beside him and adjusted his camera, listening. The summer of 1982, the column of soldiers marching into the jungle like a long, green snake. Guns hung on straps around their necks, and some had red, rusting cans in their hands. They arrived when Acan was a baby, his first tooth a spur of bone gnawing into a piece of bark his mother gave him. They rounded up the men in his home village. They asked if the men knew how to use a gun, said they needed men for the army. Then the soldiers took the men away, through the trees, and that night there was a fire in the direction they had marched that lit the low fog clinging to the hills. Before sunlight, Acan’s mother carried him away through the forest with the other women and children. The forest hid them for a while, and when they came back, their homes were fragile piles of black sticks and grey ash. When the women found the place where the men had been burned, they sent wails into the sky.

After his story, Acan and Luke watched the man in the pale blue suit smoke a heavy-looking cigar. The soldiers appeared from nowhere and laughed with him. Acan thought he recognized the soldier from the night before, but he was too far away to be sure.

“Why don’t they arrest him?”

“He says he never ordered it. My mother said his name was in every soldier’s mouth.”

Acan saw Zia's slim form come down the road with another soldier, her long black hair blowing in the wind so that he couldn't see her face very well. She approached the jeep and turned away from the lake. In a while she got inside and they drove away, up the hill, raising dirt like orange smoke.

It took another full hour to finish photographing the lake. After Acan had helped pack up, Luke handed him a crisp one hundred dollar bill, American. Acan put it in his shoe.

"Do you need a ride anywhere?" Luke asked. "You look pretty dirty." Acan looked down at himself. Smudges hid the true color of his clothes; he felt as if he could lie down in the street and not be seen.

"I'm going right here," Acan said, pointing to a small grey building.

"I've got an old camera you can have," Luke said, "If you want it."

"Sure," Acan said. Luke pulled the camera from a box in the back of the van. He showed Acan how to use it. He loaded the camera with film and handed it over. Acan found Luke in the viewfinder and turned the focus until his hair was clearly outlined against the darkening sky. He took his picture. The film advanced loudly and quickly, like a shot.

"Maybe you can catch that bastard doing something wrong," Luke said. He got in the van and drove away. Acan snapped a picture of the van before it disappeared behind a low row of trees.

The camera hung around his neck.

He found a store not too far from the lake. Men were playing cards on a table outside. "What's with the camera," one of the men said. A cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth.

"I don't speak Spanish," Acan said in English. "I'm a tourist."

The men laughed and went back to their game. Inside the store, Acan found two bottles and paid for them with money from the night before. He could feel the folded bill Luke had given him in his shoe as he walked.

He went up the road, and when he had climbed to the top of the hill he looked back at the lake. The sun was setting, turning thin lines of clouds into layers of flame. The volcanoes looked as if they could burst forth fire at any moment. Acan took their picture, then turned around and held the camera at arms length, his eyes set on the heart of the dark lens.

By the time he reached Jose's stand, the wine was warming his face from the inside. Jose wasn't there, so he sat under the stand so that no one would bother him. He listened to the sound of a few people in the street and took a picture of the blank white wall in front of him. He heard a few cars pass slowly, some voices yelling back and forth in English and Spanish. He examined Jose's coolers, padlocked shut and chained to a metal post that supported the wooden stand.

He could not shake the picture of the soldier's hand on Zia's leg. The blank white wall in front of him acted as a screen for the image, a stretching shadow from an awning serving as the soldier's dark, dirty hand. He stared ahead as if he were deep in the middle of a movie. He remembered the movie from the night before, his closeness

with her. He remembered the hero from the movie dancing a tango with his beautiful wife as everyone left the theater.

He decided finally to stand up and try to find her. The camera on his neck felt enormous, weighing him down. His legs were suddenly uneven, and he walked into the street with a stiff gait. Down the hill, he passed brown swarms of faces, an occasional ghostlike tourist. He was intent on finding the café with the hanging lanterns. The camera bounced against his chest.

He found the café, but Zia wasn't there. He sat at a table by the street. Some people were talking at a table next to him, saying things about Rios Montt and what he might be doing in such a small place.

"I'm with him," he said to the table. He could hear his words slurring and wondered if they could understand. The group of men looked at him, the ones closest turned their shoulders and placed their hands on their knees.

"You know Rios Montt?" They asked. Acan couldn't tell if they were worried or amazed.

"Yes," he said in English, and then he raised the camera. "I am a journalist from Texas."

The men looked at him. One laughed.

"It is my object," Acan said, having to focus hard on each word, "To follow him and document the deeds."

"The deeds,' one of them repeated, but Acan stood and walked away into the street. There were more people around. He raised the camera and took pictures of the crowd.

In a while he had moved down the hill and in front of a restaurant. He looked through the doorway at a fire burning and people gathered around it. A hand grabbed his shoulders from behind and he turned to see Jose's smiling, hairy face. He embraced him awkwardly and leaned on him for support.

"You could be selling drinks tonight," Acan said.

"Tonight, I'm buying them." He had a plastic cup half-filled with a clear liquid. They took turns drinking from the cup, watching the crowd. Jose would occasionally try to stop a group of women as they walked by, Acan laughing and stumbling next to him. The night seemed to grow cooler.

Then came a crash and yelling voices far off. Acan and Jose moved toward the sounds, excited that a fight might be taking place. More voices surged through the dark streets. The two men turned down alleys and side-streets, following the commotion like some call for help. The night grew quiet, and soon they emerged from a narrow space between two buildings to a clearing where one of Rios Montt's soldiers pointed his gun at a man standing by himself. The man was short and ragged, without a shirt or shoes. He swayed side to side in front of the gun. The crowd of people had backed away and formed a semicircle behind the soldier. Acan saw Zia in the crowd, her hands over her mouth.

The man swayed in front of the gun.

Acan saw the other soldier—the one who had been with Zia--sitting on the ground. His hands were around his knees and his face hidden in shadow.

"Don't shoot him," Jose said. The soldier looked at them, then back at the shirtless man.

Acan raised the camera and took the picture without bothering to focus. Then he took the camera from his neck and swung it in circles over his head. "*Periodista,*" he shouted. The soldiers and the crowd watched him. Acan thought the soldier's stare would turn him to ash. Then, like something surfacing from underwater, a smile formed on the soldier's face; he turned the gun to Acan.

Acan ran. He moved the way he had come, through the streets. He ran into a group of tourists, and the camera fell, skittering along the stones of the sidewalk. He left it and ran into a store he knew and out the back. He ran through the grass for a while and found his way to a road. He walked on, listening, but no one was near him. In the darkness he made his way toward the road that led back to his gas station.

He rejoined the road at the top of the hill and looked down on the rooftops of the town. The streetlights danced, but held their pattern, so that the whole town danced for him. He waited for a gunshot to break the silence. For a long while he stood, his hands leaning on his knees, catching his breath. Then he moved slowly into town again, hiding in the shadows and looking down the road for signs of the soldier or Jose. In a while he found himself in a familiar place, the spot where Jose had woken him that morning. In the shadows he saw the shape of the jeep, like some sleeping animal in the dark. He went to it, ran his finger along the cold fender. He checked the street again, then got inside and rummaged through the glove compartment. In the back seat he found a pale blue suit jacket. Further back he found rope and a full can of gasoline.

After a few minutes he was over the town again, looking down at the fire from the burning jeep as it outlined the sides of the trees in dull yellow.

The next morning Acan woke up early with a headache and uneasy stomach. He didn't open the station, preferring to watch the road to Panajachel through the dirty windows. Cars passed now and then, and every time their sound rose out of the still morning, Acan tensed expecting to find a soldier at his door, an outstretched arm and a muzzle flash.

Instead, the cars moved on and silence settled on the small gas station. He was left to straighten things inside and wait. While he was unpacking bottles of lighter fluid and placing them on the narrow shelves near the back of the store, he heard an engine approach and suddenly die. He hid behind a shelf, peeking out to find Luke's dark-blue van parked in front of the dingy pumps.

"You here, Acan?" Luke called, the van's door slamming after his voice.

Acan walked to the door. "I'm inside."

"I want to show you something." Luke said. He carried a laptop like the ones Acan had seen tourists hunched over at the more expensive restaurants. Acan led him through the store to his room in the back. He cleared off a low couch covered in a patterned quilt. When they were seated, Luke opened the laptop and on the bright screen Acan saw the volcano San Pedro rising from Atitlan's smooth blue surface. The image began to move, as if they stood on the pier turning counterclockwise. The sun was a blank white glare in the sky appearing and disappearing as Luke slowly rotated the image. The nearer hills came into view, then the road and the squat white buildings nestled into the hillside. There were places where Acan could see the lines between pictures, some wide apart and others close together. Luke stopped when the image was lined up with the pier as it headed to land.

“Notice anything?” he asked.

Acan looked closer. The picture was sharp and true, the colors matching his memory. He felt as if he could reach in and pull out a rock. For a moment he studied the shore, a worn path, the orange snake of a road. Then he noticed what Luke had done and he leaned back on the couch.

“You took out all of the people.”

“I thought it would be harder,” Luke said smiling, “but it worked out great. The light’s not exactly the same, but I can fix that later. And the lines.” Then he began pointing to small details, explaining how he had cropped one picture after another and fused them together. His pictures were for a website promoting conservation in Guatemala, and he thought it was important to show the land complete, pristine and empty.

Luke showed Acan some other photos on the computer, but Acan had lost interest. He gave Luke some bottles of water for his trip back to Guatemala City and walked him out. A breeze had begun to blow toward the lake, sending leaves and bits of trash down the road. Luke asked for Acan’s address, saying he would send him some prints.

Acan watched the van leave, and then he followed it, walking down the middle of the road. He closed his eyes and let the wind move his hair. In a while he heard a car coming up behind him. He crossed his arms, began to feel a slight chill in the air. The tires on the gravel made sounds like teeth gnashing, and the car stopped just behind him, its engine idling. The driver honked the horn.

Acan waited a moment before he turned around.

The Torso

“I saw part of a man,” Daurie said. We were playing with plastic army men in the dirt.

“Where?”

“In the trees by the river.”

We held our bodies straight up as we went down the hill. I saw the smoke from the factory on the other side of the river. I liked to watch the smoke rise. I liked to sit in the grass and watch the smoke turn into clouds.

The leaves skittered under our feet, and other sliding noises filled the woods.

“Was he dead?”

“It was only part of a man.”

We made our way along the path, Daurie leading, allowing the branches he moved to swing back at me. I kept my head down, looking along the edge of the water where orange and brown leaves soaked in clumps. A boat’s motor zzzzed around the bend, toward us.

We came to a space in the trees and watched the boat pass by. A blonde man with sunglasses drove it, and after he had passed, the waves shook against the bank of the river, sloshing the sheets of wet leaves.

“Here.”

We went down a damp hill, between two pines and there in the needles was a torso dressed in a flannel shirt. The arms of the shirt were empty and flat.

“It’s a torso,” I said. I knew it was called a torso from hearing about killings and from those guy-with-no-arms-or-legs jokes.

“Touch it,” he said. He was daring me.

I went to it. I was afraid and didn’t want Daurie thinking I was afraid. I bent down in front of it and tapped it. Then I touched the chest and pressed my fingers into it.

“Pull up the shirt-tail.”

“No,” I said. I thought about blood and remembered a surgery I saw once on TV. My stomach felt like it could come loose from me.

“It’s not what you think.”

“Is it guts?”

“Pull it up. You’ll see.”

I grabbed the shirt between my fingers and lifted, expecting to see intestines rolling out like snakes. But there was smooth skin where you should have been able to see inside. And there was a small metal knob and a kind of slot. I ran my finger along the bottom of the torso, and it felt like skin, even with little hairs sticking out. I backed away from it. It was real, but not real.

“Is it one of those store dummies?”

“A mannequin?” Daurie said. “I don’t think so.”

“Where’s the rest of it?”

We looked around in the bushes and in the rocks by the river. I expected there to be a head or an arm, but we looked and we didn't find anything but smashed beer cans that had turned white in the sun.

We left it there. We could touch it, but we didn't want to touch it long enough to move it or try to lift it. Daurie said we should bring Miller out to see it. Miller was older, in eighth grade--a year ahead of us. Maybe he knew something about it.

The next morning the three of us walked around it, kicking at the pine needles. Daurie had unbuttoned a few of the buttons on the flannel shirt, brown curly hair there underneath. We looked at the neck: there was a hole, little metal pins inside. Everything on it was soft except for the metal parts.

"It's a goddam government project," Miller said. We got quiet. Miller's dad worked at the national research lab. Maybe he had told Miller stories about the men they were making.

"What's it for?" I asked. "Is it for killing?"

"What the hell else would you do with a cyborg?"

The wind rushed up from the river as we stood there, and got the leaves going. A shiver started in my back. It moved up. Soon it felt like someone was tickling me behind my neck. I even turned around, just to check.

"Well, we can't leave it here," Daurie said. He squatted right next to the torso and pulled gently at the chest hair. I saw the skin move up with the hair when he pulled.

"Should we tell someone?"

"No one," Daurie said.

“We can keep it in my dad’s workshop,” I said. My dad had a bad back. He hadn’t been in his workshop in ages.

We lifted the torso, and though it was pretty light, all of us helped carry it. We walked along the river. The leaves shivered on their branches. My house was up the hill, and we stopped and sent Daurie up to make sure the coast was clear. It was clear, he told us from the top of the hill.

We put it in the corner of my dad’s shop and looked at it one last time. The white light in the workshop made it look fake, but outside in the sunlight it could have fooled anyone. I found a blue tarp and they helped me wrap the torso inside of it. We swore we wouldn’t tell anyone, and then they left.

My dad spent his days on the couch because his back had flared up.

“Dammit. Back’s flarin’ up worse than ever,” he said to my mom. “Bring me something.”

Mom brought him pills and a glass of water. We watched car races and boat races on the television, or golf or boxing, and he asked me to get him things and I ran to get them. Before I didn’t like to get him things, but now he rubbed my hair and explained why some driver was doing something in the race, and I learned lots of secrets that other guys at school didn’t know about yet.

I watched the mechanics putting on tires so fast and thought about the metal knob and the slot in the torso, and I wanted to ask Dad about it because I knew he probably knew. All those tools hung on his workshop wall, all those little boxes were filled with different kinds of screws and hinges. My dad could put things together and take things apart, and when I helped him in his shop before his back flared up this time,

he'd asked for tools I had never heard of before. □ You'll learn all of them before you know it, he told me.

So I hated hiding that thing and not talking about it when we sat watching television together.

That night someone was tapping something metal on my window.

"Brian," said a voice in a loud whisper. "Wake up, Brian."

The house was dark except for the light from the street outside. I went to the window and lifted it. Miller stood outside on the grass.

"Brian," he said. "I don't know the combination."

"What?" I said, still tired.

"I don't know the combination to your dad's workshop."

My clock said 1:17. I didn't know what he wanted in my dad's shop for. There was someone out there with him on the lawn, someone back under the trees. I thought that it was the police, or Miller had brought someone from the lab to take the torso back where it belonged. My heart was wide awake inside me.

"Who's with you?" I whispered at him.

He looked back into the darkness. "That's Jeannie McAdam. I wanted to show her, so can you come open it up for us?"

Miller had never talked to me so nicely, so I said yes and put on my jeans and my shoes and crept out of the house. I walked through the yard and felt the wet grass on my ankles. They were leaning against the door when I got there, close together. I looked at Jeannie and she smiled. She didn't know my name.

"You can't tell anyone," I said to her.

“Shut up and open the damn door,” Miller said, punching me hard on the arm.

I had to spin the combination twice and Miller sighed when I took too long. It was black inside the shop, but I could smell the faint sweet smell of gas from the mower. I could even taste a metal taste in the air that reminded me of a long time ago when I put a nail in my mouth. I stepped inside, my hand out searching for the string to the light. I caught it and pulled and the room lit up and the light buzzed over us. Miller went right over to the tarp and Jeannie walked behind him, keeping away. He unwrapped it and I expected it not to be there, but it was there.

Jeannie looked at it over Miller’s shoulder. “It’s a dummy,” she said.

“No it’s not,” Miller said. “Touch it.”

Jeannie didn’t move.

“Touch it,” Miller said, louder.

She looked at me. I shrugged. Then she moved closer to it and I followed her. She squatted and I leaned in behind her. She smelled like clean, clean sheets. Her hair was up in a ponytail, and I could see the back of her neck, a red-brown beauty mark there. She reached out a hand and touched the torso on the stomach, over the shirt. I wanted to touch her beauty mark the way she was touching the torso right then.

“Feel the hair there,” Miller said, pointing to the unbuttoned chest.

I noticed her shiny pink nail polish as her fingers went through the hair. When she touched the skin, she pulled back.

“It’s warm,” she said. “Why is it warm?”

The night was cool and wet. It should have been cold.

“It’s not warm,” Miller said, reaching out to it. “It’s just not made of metal, so it isn’t real cold.”

In a little while they left. They didn’t ask if I wanted to go where they were going. I went back to bed, but I couldn’t sleep. I smelled my hands, and they smelled metallic, like they smell when I’ve held a wrench in my hand for a long time. I couldn’t go back to sleep, so I watched the dark window until the pink light came through the trees.

“Miller showed it to Jeannie McAdam,” I told Daurie the next day.

“Bullshit.”

“They came over at 1:17 in the morning.”

School had just gotten out and we walked home together. “The last thing we need is girls seeing it.”

“I know,” I said.

“Girls can’t keep quiet. They talk all the time.”

We went to my house, and then to my dad’s shop, but we just sat near the torso without uncovering it. I didn’t turn on the light, so it was pretty dark inside. We talked about anything but it for a while, about the World Series and other things at school. But then Daurie walked over to the corner where it was.

“Do you think it could be aliens?” He asked. “You remember that movie we saw where the aliens were disguising themselves as people?”

“It could be from a UFO,” I said.

“I think I have it narrowed to the government or aliens,” he said. He kept talking about robots and spaceships and all kinds of things like that. I talked about them too, for a minute, but then I got bored. While he kept talking, I thought about Jeannie McAdam.

I tried to listen to Daurie, but I kept seeing her, the way she looked with her hair pulled back. The way she looked squatting by the torso.

Through the window of the shop door I saw Miller coming with his friend Derek.

“Here comes Miller and Derek,” I said.

“We should never have told anyone. It’s like we’re running a damn museum.”

They came inside and Derek said “Where is it?”

“Where’s what?” Daurie said.

I pointed. He unwrapped the tarp and picked it up. Then he stripped it out of its flannel shirt and turned it over, looking at the back. We hadn’t seen the places where the arms were supposed to attach until we saw Derek looking at them.

“Turn on the light,” he said.

I did and he rested the torso on his knee and looked over it. I noticed for the first time that it had nipples. I didn’t want to be the one who pointed it out and no one else said anything.

“There’s no label or serial number,” he said.

“No price tag either, huh?” Daurie said.

“Shut up,” Derek said. He set it back in the corner, but didn’t bother to put the shirt back on.

“They test new planes with those things,” he said. He was older than us, in high school. He walked around my dad’s shop looking at the tools on the wall, and I could tell he knew about them by the way he looked at them. “They need to know stuff,” he said “Like how much oxygen is in the air up there or how many G’s a man can take. So they use these dummies. They’re research dummies. It belongs to the government.”

“Miller says it’s a cyborg,” Daurie said.

“What the fuck does Miller know? He’s thirteen.”

“Shut up,” Miller said, but in a quiet way that didn’t sound like him. I felt sorry for him, but laughed a little anyway.

Derek said that the feds would come looking for it soon, that it might be a national security thing, but if they didn’t, maybe we could sell it on Ebay in a couple months. For a minute I wanted to tell everyone we should get rid of it. It was too risky to keep it. But I kept quiet and pretty soon everyone went home for supper.

That night I listened to the sounds coming from outside, wondering if I was under surveillance. Every crunch of a leaf sounded like an FBI agent making his way to my window. I couldn’t sleep. I thought about what Derek said and decided he was stupid. Why would they put a test dummy in a flannel shirt? Why wasn’t there a dent in it from the fall?

The next day, Jeannie McAdam stopped me outside of school, just after the warning bell.

I didn’t know how to talk to girls. When they looked at me, my teeth felt dirty and I tried to talk without breathing toward them or opening my mouth much. I squirmed when they laughed and whispered. But I also wanted to make them laugh and whisper. I saw some of the older kids hug them. I had seen Jeannie hug Miller in the middle of the hallway at school. I had seen her hand stay on his shoulder.

“Hi, Brian,” she said smiling. “Do you still have that thing?”

“Yeah, I still have it,” I said.

“Can we come by and see it?”

I looked down, then around, at anything but her. "I guess," I said.

She turned to go, then over her shoulder said, "We'll be there after school.

I forgot to ask who else was coming.

I got home fast after school, didn't wait after for Daurie or anyone. I went inside the house to brush my teeth and comb my hair. Dad was on the couch.

"How was school, Brian?"

"Too long"

"Can you get me some ice?"

I got it for him and then went in the bathroom to clean up. In the mirror, my face looked too big for my head.

"Where you goin'" he asked as I walked back through the living room.

"I'm meeting some friends."

My dad smiled. But he didn't say he knew. "Must be some important friends," he said, and sipped his drink.

I waited in the shop, sitting on top of the riding lawn mower. I hadn't turned on the light. I watched through the door and I could see all the way down the driveway to the street. I thought I saw them a dozen times, but it was always someone else, just passing by. The shop was cold, and my hands were freezing. I rubbed them together. I thought about who might be with Jeannie, what other girls. I imagined what they would be wearing; I wished it was summer so that they would be wearing less. I imagined kissing them. I imagined that they didn't really want to see the torso, that they wanted to see me alone. I had time to imagine nearly everything. They weren't coming.

But then they did. I saw Jeannie turn down my driveway; a girl I didn't know following her. They were pretty. They were in my driveway.

I stepped out of the door and motioned to them. They walked through the yard to my dad's shop. Jeannie looked like she was holding in a laugh. I was afraid they would laugh at me.

"Hey," I said when they got close.

"Hey," Jeannie said. "This is Shelby."

Both girls smiled and nodded. "I'm Brian," I said, though I knew they knew my name now. I felt stupid for a second. But then we were in the dark shop and the smell of oil and mechanical things was strong. I liked that I hadn't turned on the light, that we had to sit there for a minute with only the gray light from the overcast skies outside coming in through the door. The girls were close together, like they were scared of the place.

I pulled the string and the light came on.

"You ready?"

"Where is it?" Shelby asked.

"Here," I said, and I walked over to the corner and lifted the tarp.

I had forgotten the shirt wasn't on, and I felt embarrassed that the torso was naked. But a little excited too. The girls giggled and I listened to the way they breathed in when they first saw it, and I liked the sounds they made. I noticed that the shop didn't smell like gas, but like them, like whatever perfume or fruity lotion they had rubbed on themselves.

"You can touch it if you want," I said.

Jeannie said “Yeah. She has to touch it.”

They kneeled on the concrete beside it and touched it and squealed. “It’s gross,” Shelby said. Jeannie touched it too, and even I leaned and ran my hand along the side of it. It could have been a real person, the way you could feel little bumps on the skin in places.

I was going to say something, but I heard the screen door on the back of the house slam shut and I jumped and snagged the light. They were in the corner with it in the dark and they looked at me like I was nuts.

“Cover it up,” I said. “My Dad’s coming.”

They covered it and then they moved toward the door. My dad was on the back step looking toward the shop. He was squinting, trying to see inside. My heart thumped like crazy.

“Brian,” he said. I didn’t answer. “Brian, I know you’re in there. What are you doing?”

I waved the girls to the side of the door so he couldn’t see them. I opened the door and stuck my head outside.

“What, Dad?”

“Who’s in there with you?”

“Just some guys,” I said.

“Well, get out. I don’t want you playing in there.”

“Okay,” I said and I closed the door.

I watched through the window until he had gone back inside. “You have to go home,” I said.

“Your dad doesn’t know about it?” Jeannie asked from behind me.

“No. Don’t tell anyone else about it.”

“We won’t,” she said. They went out the door and I watched them go down the driveway and disappear around the corner.

The next morning we ate breakfast as a family for the first time in a while. My dad smiled as he stretched and said his back felt great.

“All of a sudden, it’s perfect,” he said. “I’m a new man.”

“Don’t go and strain it again,” my mother told him.

“Oh, hell, no,” he said “I’m no idiot. Light stuff for me for a long time yet.”

But on the way to school I thought about him going out to his shop. He had said he would stick to light stuff before, only to be out in his shop with the heaviest tools. The torso wasn’t even well-hidden, just lying there under a tarp waiting for him to find it. I walked to school, sweating and wondering. I sat through my classes and new possibilities would pop into my head. Maybe the torso was a bomb. Maybe it belonged to some terrorist somewhere, and it would explode or they would come to get it and kill my dad because he was in the shop with it. I saw Daurie at lunch.

“We’ve got to move it,” I told him.

“What?”

“My dad’s gonna find it, or whoever it belongs to is going to come back.”

Daurie ran his hand through his hair. The lunchroom was crowded with bodies. I saw Jeannie and Shelby sitting at their table across the room. The bell rang before Daurie said anything else, and everyone got up to leave for class. They had tried a few times to keep everyone from leaving at once, but it never seemed to work. The way out

of the cafeteria was always like a river of bodies. You got in a current and it kept pushing and pushing you toward the door.

“We can take it to my house, I guess. I’ll keep it under my bed.”

We were in the current of the crowd, talking over all the voices around us.

“We should have left it there,” I said. “We should have left it by the river.”

“Whatever,” Daurie said. “It’ll be cool. Relax.”

When I got home I saw the shop light on. A light rain was falling and it was very dark outside, so that the white light from the shop stretched out over the fallen leaves. I knew he had found the torso; I knew he was waiting for me in there, ready with questions. I stopped to listen for the sound of tools from inside, but all I heard was the dripping from the trees. I slipped into the house and went straight to my room. I took off my clothes and got into bed and lay there shivering and waiting for the sound of the door. It took a long time before I heard it and my father’s footsteps in the living room and kitchen. But he didn’t come back to my room. It was gray and blank outside my window, with black wiry branches of a tree there. I listened. I almost dreamed myself to sleep thinking about what was going to happen next.

Then I heard a knock on my door. I didn’t answer. My mother opened it and stuck her head inside.

“What’s wrong, baby?” She asked.

“I’m sick,” I said.

She walked over to the bed. She had a worried look on her face like she did when I was little and sick and the look made me feel better. She sat on the bed next to

me and felt my forehead, then leaned in and kissed me. Her perfume smelled like dry flowers. She put her hand on my bare chest and looked down at me.

“Poor baby,” she said. “What’s the matter with you?”

“I ache,” I said.

“I’ll get you something.”

My dad moved down the hallway, stomping almost. He thrust his head in. “Is this about the leaves?”

I lost my breath. I heard him say leaves, but I was thinking other things.

“You’re playing sick to get out of raking this weekend?” he asked. His smile was warm and usual, but I thought it could be a knowing smile too. He walked into the room and felt my forehead. His hand was scratchy and cold.

“No fever,” he said to my mother.

They talked about their days, right there above me, nearly everything that happened and I kept waiting for something about the torso in the shop, but nothing came up and soon they were gone. I stayed in bed all evening and the sky grew dark and empty. The phone rang and my mother came to the door.

“It’s Daurie,” she said. “Do you want to talk?”

“Yeah.”

She handed me the cordless phone and closed the door.

“What?” I asked.

“Sorry I didn’t come over. But we can’t move it here.”

“We can’t keep it here.”

“Where do we put it?”

“We need to call the police.”

“Are you nuts? It’s worth money.”

I clicked the phone off. It rang again and I clicked it on and listened.

“Don’t do anything with it,” he said. “Maybe Miller could keep it at his place.”

I clicked the phone off again. I didn’t want Miller to hide it. I didn’t want it, but I didn’t want him to have it either.

I waited until the house was black and quiet. I put my clothes back on and sneaked out the back door. I didn’t even turn on the light when I got to the shop, but I felt for it in the corner. The tarp was still covering it. It was still naked. I remembered Jeannie saying it was warm, but it felt so cold up against me. I gathered it in my arms and took it out and down the hill to the river. The moon was bright and the river water looked blue and cold. I made it to the rocks by the bank and set the torso on them. I wrapped it tightly in the tarp and stepped over the rocks to the edge. I threw it as far as I could, but only got it a few feet.

It looked like it would go straight to the bottom, but then it started to float, turning in the water as it went away. I followed it from the bank and saw that it was starting to sink. The water must have been filling it through the holes. It was too close to the edge, but it was sinking and it was going. It wasn’t where my dad or mom would find it.

I walked back to the house in darkness. I took off my clothes and lay in bed in only my underwear. I was a little sweaty from taking it to the river, and out of breath too. I wondered if I would ever feel safe enough to tell this to my parents. Thinking about telling it made me nervous, even thinking about telling Daurie made me nervous. But

when I thought about telling Jeannie or Shelby, the idea made my stomach feel heavy and light at the same time. I closed my eyes thinking about them.

“What do you mean it’s gone?” Daurie asked the next day after I told him the torso was missing. “What did you do with it?”

“Nothin’. I swear.”

He stopped looking at me and looked around at everyone in the cafeteria. “We could be in serious trouble here,” he said.

“My dad could have found it,” I said. “He could have gotten rid of it or called someone.”

“We both know it was the government, Brian. And if you think you can lie to the feds, you’re fucked in the head.”

The rest of our lunch we spent talking about baseball. But I was only half listening. I watched Jeannie from across the room and when the bell rang I got up without looking at Daurie or saying anything to him. Everyone was trying to get out and I was caught up in the rush toward the door. Somehow I made my way to her and when she saw me she smiled and moved the hair away from her eyes.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” I said.

My legs could barely move me, but the crowd pushed us on. There were a couple people between us, but I couldn’t tell you who they were. We passed through the cafeteria doors then turned down the hall toward the stairs. She moved ahead of me a little ways and I followed her around the landing and down. The crowd thinned out and we stopped near some lockers.

“I have to tell you about last night,” I said.

I told it, how the torso looked in the moonlight and how it floated and filled with all that blue-black water. Her eyes were beautiful, wet and shiny. She smiled while I talked. She listened, and then I told her she was the only one who knew what had happened. She was the only who knew where the torso was now. She leaned into me and pressed her cheek to mine. I pressed back into her softness. Her arm swung around and I felt electricity blooming inside and a cool sweat breaking out all over.

“You still smell like the river,” she said.

The bell rang and she moved away, waving. I wiped the sweat from my soaking face and swore never to tell the story again.

Stars on the Wall

Mowing, he recalls his daughter's friend Muriel before she left for St Jude's in Memphis, remembers the bright pink writing on the postcards, "Feeling Fine" in looping, sparkling letters, the way she misspelled Adriana, with two n's and the last name missing. The cut grass bleeds a green smell, the whir of the motor like gauze packing his ears and keeping all other sounds out. Back and forth for the last time, a pattern so familiar, the lawn divided into sections—first the front yard to the north of the Bradford pear tree, then south of it, the sun slicing through thin clouds and stroking out his shadow as it moves over the uneven ground, back and forth, leaving straight pleasant lines behind. He remembers Muriel's mother's voice—the memory oozing through the motor's gauze—her sobbing, the sound of a chair being scraped along the floor in the phone distance, as if he were in the room watching her as she sat, knees together, white crush of tissue in her hand. *Muriel died today*, Muriel's mother said, *and went peacefully*. To him Muriel had long been a shadow, was a shadow before she ever left for St. Jude, maybe even before he had heard the term *occult carcinoma* and the plan to make it go away. Even her mother's voice seemed braided in shade over the phone, a sound under a parasol as she talked about Muriel's last days, the peace of it all. Back and forth, the spinning blade cuts the grass and sends it out in a verdant spray.

Mowing, the motor straining, he thinks of Adriana packing inside, organizing books and pictures, pausing to cry. *Why can't you tell her?* his wife said, *I'm no good at this*, but he insisted, said the lawn needed mowing before they moved, and wasn't Annie the more compassionate parent anyway? He wouldn't know what to say or how to say it. He could clean up afterwards, bag Adriana's pain like so much dried grass and leave it by the curb, stacked neatly as they drove away from this house forever and to a new house, a new city and job. The mower strains, coughs, dies.

He tilts the lawnmower on its side. The grass, long and wet, sticks to the blades, a soft, green mess. He finds a stick and scrapes it from the blades, the underside of the deck. Without the mower, he can hear the wind brushing branches together and noises that could be Adriana crying inside. *You've got to pack*, he said. *You've got to take everything off of the walls: your pictures, these stars*. They did not want to come off; when he ripped them from the wall, they released with a tearing sound. He vaguely remembered putting them up when Adriana was three, lying under them with her and telling stories like his dad had told, of boys who swam in icy caves, finding light just in time to save them, of Shinook winds blowing in and melting all the snow in time to rescue a trapped family from the cold. The wall, with glow-in-the-dark stars, became their night sky.

One day, when Adriana was about ten, she said *I'm too old for stories, Dad*, but the stars had stayed and Muriel began to replace him in Adriana's life and room. And when he drank he heard them talking, giggling. His hands are green from cleaning the mower, and the pull of the cord rips sound into the yard again. His pattern moves him

next to the house, along the south end, back and forth below her window. The curtains are drawn; the room is in the shadow of a tree this time of day.

He began to take the Adriana and Muriel out to watch the night skies. They drove until the city's lights faded and the darkness let the stars through. They found Mars and Jupiter and watched one night as the moon occulted Venus, waiting in the cold darkness until the bright planet emerged from behind the moon's dark half. He taught them the stars he knew: Polaris, Rigel, Sirius. They traced the constellations he could recall, made up others, and Adriana asked for a telescope for Christmas. But when Muriel got sick, Adriana lost interest and the girls spent more time together in her room. Their conversation leaked through, and he heard them, Adriana asking, *Are you afraid of dying?* and Muriel's muffled answer. He drank more in the evenings, worked more on the weekends.

He makes it to the last section of the yard, the back, odd shaped so that he moves in loops instead of lines; each trip around closes, brings him nearer to being finished. He thinks about stars as strings of light from the heavens to the eye, strings of light that cannot be cut, but only interrupted. He remembers how, in his drunkenness the last night Muriel was over, he barged in on the two of them in her bed. He didn't hear their words through the wall, but he knew they were talking about dying and he knew he wanted to stop them. He regretted yelling, but it was too late, his voice was a cone of rage in the dark room. He saw the feebly glowing stars hanging in a pattern on the wall. The two girls were one shape in the darkness, a blank space on the bed that he pointed to with a trembling finger.

Halfway through, the trips around the yard becoming shorter and shorter, he's closing in on himself in a kidney-shaped pattern. The girls are still giggling through the gauze, or it could be Adriana's crying, or Muriel's mother wailing. That night he came into his daughter's room he couldn't tell one night sound from another; he couldn't tell the shadow of something harmless and inert from a shadow with menace at its core, but he resolved to guard the door against any shape. The girls made no sound, and he stood, unsteady and swaying, blocking the lamplight from down the hall. *Since you can't be quiet*, he said, *I'll just sleep in the doorway*. And he got his pillow and a blanket and lay on the floor, the stars shaking, the girls quiet, huddled, dark.

Cutting the grass, gauzing their ears, keeping their mouths shut as he wedged himself in her doorway until they fell asleep. There are only a few more trips to make now; the patch of unmown grass shrinks. His hands are numb from the vibrations of the motor and he remembers tossing the stars from the wall, but seeing their outline, and in the outline's center, the greasy stain of the adhesive that had held them in place for nearly a decade. And he remembers that during the night he slept in the doorway some black shadow, an occlusion, moved between him and the wall's night sky. In his dizziness he never knew if it was his daughter or the dead girl.

The lawn is cut, but there's so much more to do. He remembers a night long ago, when Adriana was a baby. He awoke from nightmares. He stood just outside her room and listened for her breath, but couldn't hear it over an even, spring rain falling outside. He walked in, moving slowly, his hand outstretched to her. He touched her small warm body and there was a long still moment before he felt her chest rise, a moment in which the world could have ended and begun and ended again.

He shuts the mower down now and leaves it in the middle of the yard. Inside he will find Adriana sobbing into her pillow. He cannot stall any longer. He knows that the long, still moment is hers now, that there is nothing left to do but hold her tightly as she cries in her blank and dark room.

Playing Ginger

By the third rehearsal I couldn't say "no" anymore, not if I wanted my part in the play. The old guy playing Mr. Phelps was the problem; his eyes were two wet stones behind the lenses of his glasses. I avoided the scenes with him so I didn't have to hear the evil-sweet words about being together, about age not meaning anything in the big picture. The play was creepy enough without the old man and his dead eyes. But Jim, the director, was tired of excuses. "Let's get out there and do this," he said.

So the guy playing Mr. Phelps and I walked onto the empty stage and did our thing. The boards creaked under our feet and our voices echoed strangely in the empty theater. He said his lines with real perversion, and I responded with fear, most of it acting, but a lot of it real too. Jim said he was impressed, but while he was giving suggestions about how I should hold my arms, I was putting distance between myself and Mr. Phelps.

The rehearsal ended. Before I could get out of there, the playwright caught me by the sleeve. Her name was Denise. She always stood too close, her coffee breath hot and bitter on my face. "I just want to say that you're a perfect Ginger," she said.

"Thank you," I said.

"This thing's been inside my head for a while," she said. "It's going to be great to see it produced." She moved in closer, and gave me an uncomfortable one-armed hug.

I tore myself away from her with some lame excuse and went backstage. I needed to hide out for a while and make sure everyone was gone. There was a little room back there with a stolen street sign on the door: WALNUT GROVE. Inside were piles of rope and props from other plays that had been performed who knew how long ago. There was a hangman's noose draped over the back of a chair. There was one of those antique phones and a few Styrofoam rocks that I liked to sit on. I picked white holes into their smooth gray surfaces.

Soon the door opened and Kelly came inside. She was Jim's assistant and had been cool to me until she caught me smoking pot with Eric behind the gas station next door. Then she lectured me. Mostly it was the usual lecture from an adult, though she peppered it with her supposedly true story, that a few years ago, when she was sixteen herself, she had started smoking and ended up with a guy who was a dope dealer. She told me how her life was shit for a while, how he ended up in jail, breaking her heart. Drugs, she said, lead to "bad relationship choices." I appreciated the advice, but only because it showed she had an interest in me. I wasn't going to change what I was doing. Anyway, none of the guys I hung out with had the courage to deal drugs.

"You did great," she said. She picked up the receiver of the antique phone and held it to her ear, as if she were waiting for some voice to tell her what to say.

"The guy playing Mr. Phelps gives me the creeps."

"Well, it's a tough play."

"What's his name?"

"Gus Swenson."

It sounded right for a pervert: “He looks at me like he’s trying to count the hairs on my head. Or on my body.”

“He’s just acting,” she said, putting the phone receiver back on its hook. “Haven’t you seen him before? He’s almost like a semi-professional theater star.”

“He’s a perv.” I picked at the Styrofoam rock while she stood there over me.

“So,” she said, the way people who think they’re smarter than you say “So” and then ask you something they already know the answer to. “You still hanging out with those boys?”

“Weekends,” I said, getting up, brushing myself off.

“And are you still smoking?”

“Some weekends.”

“Oh, Shawna.”

I think she wanted me to lie to her so she could catch me. I don’t know why I thought that, but either way it was none of her business. She wanted to re-create me because she had screwed up her own life, way back when, just like that playwright wanted to recreate us into her characters so she could replay her life and control it. It doesn’t take a genius to figure this shit out. I’ve got my own problems, and I don’t need to solve theirs or make them feel better.

“So what the fuck?” I said, throwing my shoulders back, fixing an agitated glare in my eyes. Her mouth started to open like some hole appearing in the earth. Then she frowned. She was even frowning with her body, her shoulders down and tight, her wrists crossed in front of her. She sighed and said something softly before she turned and left. I stayed in the WALNUT GROVE, ready to yell at her if she came back. When I finally left,

the auditorium was empty. I stood on the stage for a little while with bits of unfinished scenery around me. I said “So what the fuck?” again, throwing my shoulders back. I thought I said it better the second time, when no one could hear it but me.

That night I went with those boys. We drove down to the old bridge. Eric said he knew a way to get below the bridge, to the place where engineers could inspect it, watch the river traffic, or whatever it was they did. We had to break a lock on the hatch, then we climbed down the metal ladder and watched the lights from the new bridge upstream shimmer on the water, an occasional barge slipping darkly beneath us. There were five of us: me, Eric, Tommy, some friend of theirs, Sam, and his little rich girlfriend. I don't remember what they called her.

We stood on a metal platform surrounding the bridge's support, a red light shining above us. ‘This is so cool,’ the girlfriend said. Eric spat into the darkness below. For a while, we all talked about nothing, but pretty soon Sam and his girl went to the other end of the deck and Eric gave Tommy a look that sent him up the metal ladder.

His hands were in my hair, his mouth on my neck, and before I knew it I was dizzy with his smell. Cars and semis rumbled over our heads on the bridge's deck. There would have been nothing to dropping down with him right there, which is what I knew he wanted, but for some goddamn reason I thought about Kelly and her wrists crossed in front of her, like they were protecting her, keeping men away from her. I didn't want to think about her, but there she was. When I pushed Eric back, his eyes settled on mine and they were as black and deep as the river below.

“I want you so bad,” he said. He came at me again, hugging and pushing and all of a sudden my back bumped into the cold, metal rail. His face pressed into mine, and I felt the sandpaper of his beard against my cheek. I thought I might be falling over the edge. Or I thought he might be trying to push me over. I grabbed hold of the rail and of his collar. I'd take him with me if I went.

After I held my head down and kept his mouth away from mine, he stepped back. The wind was blowing his long hair and he did look beautiful in the soft red glow and darkness. His eyes got big and he looked at me with a crooked smile, like I had something on my face. I wiped my mouth with my sleeve and then he started to chuckle. Then I heard what he heard: the sounds coming from the other end of the observation deck. We couldn't see them; the piling that supported the bridge blocked the view. But we heard a male “humph,” followed by the rich girl's little squeak and sigh. Eric could hardly contain his laughter. We walked around the piling slowly, our hands over our mouths. Sam was on top, humping away. I saw the light fuzz on his ass. He covered her, and her face was away from us. Her knees were scraped; they were little girl knees.

Eric rubbed against me while we watched, and when Sam sent a long and twisted grunt out over the water, we sneaked back to the other side. I held his hand and we dangled our feet over the edge.

“How's your play?” Eric asked.

“It's great,”

“Who are you?”

“I'm a little rich girl on my back over the Mississippi River.” He gave a short chuckle that let me know he didn't know what the hell I just said. The buildings glowed

on the shore. “You know, the river is this darkness that pulls you. And I’m this rich girl helpless and hanging over it. And in the river is Mr. Phelps in a boat, with a big net. He’s waiting to fish me out when I fall.”

He sighed. “Your jokes are hard to get.”

“The good ones are.” Noises behind us, Sam and his girl were back. I looked at her over my shoulder, but I didn’t look up to see her eyes. I noticed her knees again, the scrapes on them and the indentations from the metal floor’s pattern. I made a joke about falling into the river, and I was playing it cool, sitting right on the edge. But I was scared, and I braced myself inside each time a truck rumbled above us.

Eric stood up and I looked back at the city and its millions of lights. Everyone laughed behind me.

“Shawna, you wanna smoke?”

I didn’t turn to see who asked. Instead I watched the other bridge, the tiny headlights tracking slowly across the rushing, black Mississippi. Eric’s hand fell softly on the top of my head. “No. Not now,” I said.

And I didn’t smoke the next night, but I didn’t work on my lines much either, so that I wasn’t very good at the next rehearsal. I wanted to show everyone that I was already lost, that I was far advanced from Ginger’s innocent, weak character. I wanted to show myself too.

Jim pulled me aside. He walked me to the back of the auditorium and we sat in the very last row, watching the stage.

“Are you having a bad day?” he asked.

“As days go,” I said.

“Do you not want to be Ginger?”

“I don’t want to be Ginger,” I said. “I have no problem *portraying* Ginger, but I don’t want to *be* anybody else.”

“You know, you’d be good if you were serious.”

The first thing that popped into my head to say was “I’d be serious if I were good.” And before I could even consider the words they were out there. I enjoyed the childish repetition. I brought the conversation down to my level, where I could dominate it.

“I think you have a lot of talent. I think you could do something. We don’t see a lot of sixteen-year-olds doing so well in professional theater, even if this isn’t New York or Chicago.” He stopped and I saw Denise the playwright turned around in her chair, her Starbucks cup dangling from her hand. “It’s a serious play, a serious character. If you want to keep playing her, you should take her seriously.”

“I’ll take her,” I said. “I want this.”

He left me in the back row where I watched the rest of the rehearsal. They were going through a scene between Mr. Phelps and his wife, a scene where he denies that he’s interested in Ginger, where he begs her to believe him and support him. Mrs. Phelps says something like “You’re not the man I married or the man who said he loved me.” And then Mr. Phelps gives a beautiful speech in his defense. It’s not poetic, but he talks about their marriage, all the mistakes he’s made and how hard he’s trying. In the actual production there will be a lighting change, setting this speech apart from the rest of the play. As I watched Gus run through the scene two or three times, I realized what a good liar he was—the character and the actor. Because in the play he gets Ginger. I’ve

read it in the pages over and over, seen it as we construct it on stage. He gets her. Maybe he hurts himself along the way, but he gets her. I wondered why Denise didn't find a way to stop him from getting her in the end.

My head swam as I watched Gus move on the lighted stage. All he needed was makeup and Mr. Phelps' clothes. I left before anyone else did.

My mother went out some nights, and when she did, she'd leave my supper in clear plastic containers with blue tops. She marked everything meticulously. I came home from rehearsal and found one labeled "Chicken (legs)" even though I could tell what was inside with one look. I sat at the island in our kitchen, flipping through the cable channels. I didn't bother to heat up the chicken; instead I ate it cold and drank a glass of tap water. In a while, Eric stopped by without calling. I let him in and offered him some of my supper.

"I'm not hungry," he said.

We made out on the couch and I enjoyed running my greasy fingers through his hair. When I wouldn't let him go any further, he sat up and turned on the living room TV.

"When's your thing start?"

"My thing?" I said, "I didn't know I had a thing."

"Your play thing." He said, too seriously. Eric wanted so bad to be twenty.

"My play thing? Well, let's see, my play thing starts two weeks from Friday. You coming?"

"No," he said.

"You are."

“I want to take you out after.”

“Out? Like out in the yard?”

He didn't laugh. “No, out of this house. Out to a nice place. And then there's a party. My older cousin has his own place. We could spend the night.”

“A sleepover,” I said in my girliest voice. “Can Jenny and Sue come too?”

“Why don't you take me seriously?” he said.

I heard my mother's SUV come to a stop in the driveway. What was left to take seriously? My parents' divorce and my dad's new blonde wife? The fucking play and the pervert Mr. Phelps? Or Eric and his freckled cheekbones, his longish, greasy hair?

I pushed him down and straddled him on the couch. The side door into the kitchen opened and closed, and my mother's keys skittered along the tile of the counter. Eric tried to get up, but I held him down. I put my hands under his shirt and rubbed his chest. He had a look on his face like he thought I was crazy. My mother's footsteps clicked around in the kitchen while I held him there and looked down into his brown eyes. He grabbed me for a second—I thought he would push me to the floor to avoid being caught by my mother—but then he raised his arms and asked, without touching me: “Can I get up?”

My mother's footsteps moved through the kitchen, toward us. I heard her stop in the doorway, smelled a sweet trace of her perfume in the air. She let out a quiet, fake cough.

“Sure,” I said, loud enough for her to hear. “You can get up now.”

Before rehearsal, Gus was sitting alone in the lobby of the theater. It was where I liked to wait until they called me in and said we were starting. Paintings by local artists hung on the walls and little lamps extended over them. I didn't like the art as much as I liked the way I must have looked to other people as I stared ahead into some barren landscape with black birds stuck in mid flight. I probably looked serious, and that was my new thing. Seriousness oozed from me. I didn't smile at school, and I held my tongue when the opportunity for sarcasm came up. I found it hard to look into the eyes of my fellow students and imagine that they had ever had a serious thought. I never heard anything important, even from the kids who talked about Tibet or Afghanistan or Bangladesh. The next sentence out of their mouths would be about fashion or reality TV.

So when I saw Gus, I gave him a confident half-nod that I knew he might not even notice, and I walked right up to the painting of the black birds and stared into their stretched wings and bodies. He moved over and looked at the painting with me.

"My granddaughter could paint that," he said.

"But she couldn't think it up," I said.

"Who couldn't think that up?" He reached out and touched the painting. I had noticed the texture too; the lamp right above the painting threw the artist's strokes into relief, so there were little ridges of paint and their tiny hairline shadows.

"I don't think you should touch the painting. Human skin is oily." He moved his hand back, and I thought he might reach out and touch me the same way.

"Well, it's just one person touching it."

"What if everyone says that?"

I felt the heat from the lamp and heard him breathing right next to me. I looked at the skeletal tree that the birds were flying away from.

“I wanted to talk to you about Ginger”

“Yes,” I said, turning to face him and crossing my arms, “let’s talk shop.”

“I like the way you play her, but I have a suggestion—if you don’t mind my saying.” I raised my eyebrows to show that I didn’t mind at all, that I was a committed actor, open to criticism. “You need to let her feel more confident early in the play, so that her fall is more of a shock to the audience.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. And to show that she’s partially to blame for what happens. If it’s all Mr. Phelps’ fault, that’s one thing. But if she is partly responsible, that makes the play deeper.” He paused and looked back to me, but I had already turned to the painting. “And we’re thinking instead of smashing the mirror with the hammer, you should stop before you hit it and drop the hammer to the ground.”

“That would be a classic sign of weakness,” I said. The heat seemed to no longer come from the lamp, but from the yellow, yolky sun in the painting.

“Yes,” he said.

“Who’s we?”

“We? Oh, Denise and I have discussed this in depth.”

“Then that’s the way I’ll be,” I said. And that’s the way I was in practice. But that night I was pissed and more determined to play Ginger the way I thought she should be. Even though she wasn’t me at all, even though I would never say anything she said, I felt close to her. I had looked forward to smashing the mirror, to risking my chance with

luck. We had been using a piece of cardboard with the word “Mirror” written on it, except that I had put holes in the cardboard during those early rehearsals, so many holes that it barely stayed together.

My mother took little interest in what I was doing, except to brag about me to her friends. She did take a half-day off of work and took me to lunch with her. We went downtown, to a place she went every day that she thought I would love. They served greasy meat wrapped up with lettuce and tomato.

After I had managed to force down half of my food she asked me about Eric.

“So, are you guys committed?”

“We’re going out after opening night.”

“I can’t believe you have a boyfriend,” my mother said. She grabbed my hand and clasped it to the table. I looked down at her as she rubbed over my knuckles, and I tried to remember the last time my mother had touched me.

“Are you excited?” I asked her

“Yes,” she said.

“What if I said I had *two* boyfriends?” My voice was exuberant. She let go of my hand.

“That’s nice, too.” There was an awkward pause while my mother worked up the courage for something. “Do you protect yourself?”

I laughed. I admit that I enjoyed seeing my mother uncomfortably approaching a subject. She hadn’t been uncomfortable at all when she’d told me they were splitting. She’d actually been happy about it. She’d used the word “freedom” a dozen times. She

beamed and laughed. In a way, I was happy for her, and I had tried to stretch my face into a smile and say how great I thought it was because there was a lot of yelling in our house. But I felt a good cry coming on, my face hot, my breath short and as loud as some engine inside my chest. "I'm so happy for you, Mom," I said the day my life got fucked up for the first time.

So in that greasy Greek place I smiled at my mother's modesty. "I've tried several types of birth control, Mother. Don't worry about me. I'm nothing if not cautious."

We didn't say anything else, only wrapped up the remnants of our lunch and threw them away.

That night she went out again and I was alone in the house. I tried to go to sleep early, but all the noises from outside bothered me. I got out of bed and turned the television on extra loud. I went through Ginger's lines in my mind. I paced back and forth in my room.

My father had called the day before, to say he would try to make it to opening night. He lived far away now so that I hardly ever saw him. I told him on the phone that I hated the big house and how scary it was when it was empty. I'll admit I was acting a little, but I was only exaggerating what I really felt, and not making anything up. That's sort of the opposite of acting: acting is where you crumple yourself up and let someone else's words and feelings take you over.

Alone in my room, I decided to see what it would be like to smash a mirror. I found an old hand mirror in a drawer. Its glass was smudged and dirty; I could barely see myself in it. I didn't know where to find a hammer, and decided anyway that my father had probably taken it with him when he left. I put the mirror on the floor and sat

beside it; I imagined there was a hammer in my hand. I went through the swing slowly, concentrating on the center of the dark glass. My hand moved toward the mirror, and then the reflection came up to meet it. The reflected hand was dark and blurry and didn't look like mine at all.

My mother's knock shook the door of my room.

"I'm home," she said, poking her head through the door. "Let's turn that TV off and get in bed."

"Mom," I said, "Do we have a hammer somewhere?"

"Somewhere I'm sure," she said as she moved down the hallway. "Your father would know."

The week before the show we had rehearsals every day. Jim watched me with a frown on his face and I concentrated as hard as I could, especially during the final scene. I grabbed that hammer, swung it full force against that hole-filled piece of cardboard, and stopped just short. Then I dropped the hammer onto the stage floor and cried the way they wanted me to. Everyone said I played the scene very well. It was the next to last scene, but, as Jim said at the party he threw the night before opening night, "If you nail it the way you have, we might have to end the play one scene early." The others laughed and chattered like a pack of monkeys, but I groaned at his pun. I dipped curled corn chips into some white, garlicky gunk and nodded when it was appropriate, but I was thinking about Eric the whole while. The night before he had come over and we had made out hard on my mother's couch while she slept upstairs. He was talking about his cousin's party as if I'd said yes for sure, which I had not. He hadn't noticed that

I wasn't hanging out with him and Tommy on the weekends anymore. I didn't feel like smoking weed or drinking with them.

The party droned on and on; someone had put on a horrible jazz record with non-stop drumming. Gus' wife smiled at me; Kelly said her usual hello, a certain look of worry making her face seem too heavy for her head. She asked a few questions about what I'd been up to "If I were your mother," she said, "I'd watch you pretty close." Gus and I moved in a circle about the room; I managed to stay on the opposite side of the room for the whole party.

Gradually, people started to leave. Finally it was just me, Jim and his wife sitting together in his living room waiting for my mother to pick me up. We talked acting for a while, then I could tell they wanted me to go home. "Do you want to call you mother?" he asked. Before I could answer he extended their cordless phone to me.

I dialed her cell number and a disembodied voice informed me that she was out of range or had turned off her phone.

"I'll give you a ride," Jim said, and his wife said good night sleepily.

He drove slowly. He had a small MG, an ancient thing with a stick and a new paintjob. When he shifted into third his hand brushed my leg.

It was clearly an accident, but I laughed and said: "Do you know I could tell anyone that you touched me?" I don't know why I said it.

"I guess you could," he said. I liked how uncomfortable his voice was.

"I could say you put your hand down my shirt."

"Uh-huh," he said, and then shifted into a higher gear.

"I could say you screwed me under an overpass."

Jim sighed long and heavy, a sound that seemed to blend with the engine.

“You say I’m a good actress...”

“That’s enough,” he said and slammed his hand on the stick shift. “Shawna, your whole attitude is wrong. God damn, you’ve got so much talent, and you just toss it away on little games.”

I was surprised at the way he acted. The vibrations of the engine settled in the small of my back. The streets looked new and bright through his impeccably clean windows, and I felt like I had just now gotten sober after weeks of drinking. There were only a couple of turns until my street and Jim took them faster than he should have, so that I had to hold on to the sides of the seat to keep from slamming into the door. He stopped in front of my house; my mother’s SUV a big, silver rock blocking the driveway.

I stepped out onto the sidewalk. He said, “You know, Shawna, we all want to see you do well.” His voice sounded tiny and distant.

After I closed the door, he sped away, his taillights disappearing over a hill at the end of my street. I stood on the sidewalk in front of the house, listening to the sound of traffic surge a few blocks away. Streetlights buzzed orange around me, and I felt myself on a kind of stage. I didn’t want to be myself then. I didn’t want to be the girl who had just said those things to Jim. I didn’t know exactly who I wanted to be, just that I was tired of people giving me direction. I wondered which character I should play for my mother: the self-loathing slut, the perturbed princess, something more mysterious, some version of myself twenty years into the future. Should I avoid her, confront her, whine, smile, gripe? So many options, so many ways to trick her into loving me or not loving

me. There are so many ways to be a daughter, to be a girlfriend, to be me. And none of them seems right.

That night I avoided her, got out the key she had given me to her SUV and climbed inside. Her cell phone was in the passenger seat and I used it to call Eric.

“Come and meet me outside my house if you want,” I said.

“Who is this?” he said. His voice was heavy and half-clogged with sleep.

“Can you come, please? Nothing’s working.”

“Shawna? What’s not working?”

“It’s all bullshit. My whole life.”

“Please,” he said “It’s late. Sleep will make it feel better.”

“I’m a scared little rich girl,” I said. “I wanted to fuck my boyfriend in my mother’s SUV. But, you know what? I don’t want to anymore. I don’t want to see him anymore.”

“I can come over,” he said. “You’re mad.”

“It’s too late. I’m in bed already. Good night.”

My mother picked me up from school and drove me to the theater. She told me how everyone was going to be there—except my dad who couldn’t make it into town because of work. But he would be there for the Saturday night show, front row center. My aunt was coming, some cousins I hadn’t seen in a while. “This could be your thing, Shawna. This is the beginning.”

Gus wanted to work on our scene. I told him I was too nervous to rehearse and slunk into the WALNUT GROVE where I sat on my fake rock. There was a hole in it now the size of my fist and a little pile of Styrofoam shreds on the floor. I looked around at

the junk on the wall, the trash on the floor. There was an empty condom wrapper there. I thought about picking it up and dropping it in my mother's back seat.

Kelly found me. She closed the door behind her.

"Are you nervous, kid?"

"About everything," I said.

"You'll do fine, Shawna." She patted me on the shoulder like I was some kind of pet about to go through an operation. I wished I hadn't blown her off before, but I didn't know how to start again with her.

"Your boyfriend's here," she said. "I saw him sitting with your mother."

"I don't have a boyfriend."

"Well, it's the long-haired guy. The one I caught you smoking pot with."

Kelly ducked out of the room and I could hear her talking to someone about the scenery. I had to leave in case she told Eric where I was.

Backstage, I saw all of the actors, some with copies of the play in their hands, their lips moving as they shuffled their feet. I moved to where I could see the mostly empty auditorium. Rows of empty seats looked like so many blank, yawning faces. I finally saw them: my mother, my aunt, Eric all standing near the back. Jim's voice came from somewhere behind me: "We've got one hour," he said, "Where the hell is Shawna?"

Before long, I wore another girl's dress, had another girl's hairstyle. I had a new family and a new neighbor who was going to seduce me. I had a smile pasted onto my face by Jim and the poor, dumpy playwright. I was ready to go.

I said her words, this Ginger, and cried her tears a few times, and I began to feel her fear, a fear different from the kind a new actor might feel on the stage with the audience watching, the sound of their coughing and shifting coming to you from the dark. I felt the fear as if all the light on earth were pouring onto the stage, as if all the eyes in the world were waiting to see something awful happen, something beyond simple tragedy. I didn't fear that I would forget my lines, but that I would never forget them, that I would talk and act like the Ginger they all wanted me to be. That I would be her for life.

Whenever I was off stage I saw Jim grinning, his arms folded over his chest. He mouthed words to me, but I couldn't be sure what he said. It could have been "so good." Seeing him reminded me of what I'd said the night before, of the threat I'd made. I needed a third choice. I didn't like Ginger. I didn't trust myself.

Before long, I stepped onto stage for the last scene with Mr. Phelps and listened as he talked to me in a slow, easy voice. I said what I had been told to say. The hammer lay on the table in the living room scene; it looked too heavy to lift. I picked it up anyway, before my cue, and felt the worn wood against my skin. I looked into the mirror and saw Mr. Phelps standing in front of the dark space where I knew the audience was. I watched his hand gestures. I heard even, muted breathing.

When he was finished I didn't smash the mirror. I turned to face the darkness myself. I knew there was a drop-off and people there below it, and I had a sudden urge to see them. I moved to the front of the stage, got on my hands and knees and crawled to the very edge and looked. Faces surfaced in the black; it was hard to see them through the lights. One could have been my mother's; one could have belonged to Eric.

The only one I was sure about was the face that belonged to Denise, the playwright. Her mouth hung open, and she stared into my eyes as if she were wondering what Ginger was doing on her hands and knees. I was surprising her. More, I was scaring her, and I liked scaring her. I raised the hammer over my head and brought it down onto my hand with a scream.

I cried in front of them all. I heard Gus walk behind me and in a moment he raised me by the elbow, lightly, hardly touching me, maybe because he sensed that I could get up on my own if I had to. He led me off the stage as the curtain fell.

In the car on the way to the hospital, my mother said: "I'm scared for you, Shawna."

"I know."

It had rained during the performance, then stopped, and the reflections of streetlights sizzled on the pavement. I watched the slants of shadows as we moved, watched the darkness crawl up my arm and cover my swollen hand. Then suddenly, my hand was washed in light for a second, appearing false and red—like part of some misshapen, abandoned mannequin—before the shadows caught it again.

My mother breathed and huffed in the driver's seat; the rosy smell of her perfume hung in the car. I closed my eyes and the pain and motion made me feel sick, so I opened them again.

"Dammit," I said, shifting my weight in an attempt to ease the throbbing pain.

"Why don't you recline the seat," my mother said in a voice that seemed pleasant enough for a picnic. "Close your eyes. We'll be there in two minutes."

I didn't recline. For two minutes I kept my eyes open. For two minutes I didn't even blink.

Assisted Living

A long time ago the father took the boy out to the mountains where the green rivers smoothed the rocks and the sharp peaks hung in the sky. They were going to talk to God about the father's sickness and to ask for His help. They brought along the family Bible, and as the car bounced along the gravel road, the boy opened the front cover and read the names of his family: Olas, Salvin, Anders. He said those names to himself, and others names from far back in time: Bren, Ellisif, Helge. He liked the handwritten names in the front cover more than the stories in the book. As they drove along the gray road, the father pointed out places where he had worked, bridges he had helped to build many years before. The boy watched the tops of the mountains come into view. He could look at the mountains from a distance and mark off peaks--Granite, Benbo, Silverrun--but he was too close now, and the large mountains looked like they had just sprung from the earth. He set about memorizing the names written in the front of the Bible.

They came to a gravel parking lot at the trailhead. A few other cars sat empty and cold in the cloudy light. The boy and the father got out of the car, stretched, and collected their lunches. They took a path that followed beside a white, tumbling river. They walked on and on, the father ahead of the boy. In a while the trail split, and the father took the fork that led uphill. He pointed out Indian Paintbrush on the trail's edge

and told about how, as a boy, he had walked this same path with his father when it was time for them to talk to God. The boy remembered the names in the Bible. With the soft crunch of each step, the boy whispered a name: Olas, Salvin, Anders. Olas, Salvin, Anders.

Soon the father led the boy away from the path, up a rocky hill. At the top of the hill they found a cliff, and on it a tower of rocks, standing six feet high in the tall yellow grass near the edge. The stones were balanced and perfectly arranged so that when the boy put his hand to them, they felt as solid as a single boulder. The boy knew the rocks were stacked by someone strong a long time ago.

“Climb up,” his father said.

The boy climbed to the top of the stack and looked ahead. All the way they had come was in front of him; spread out green and gold in the hazy distance. He tried to find their town, followed what he thought was the right river with his eyes.

“It’s time to pray, Colby,” The father said and he laid the Bible in the boy’s lap. “It’s time to pray to the Lord for your father’s life.”

The wind blew the grass around them and it sounded as if people were emerging from behind, waiting and watching. Nothing happened for a few moments, then he felt his father’s hand squeeze his arm. The boy bowed his head and asked God not to let his father die.

The day before the doctor had come to their home. The boy was scared of the doctor’s red face and enormous, blotchy hands. The doctor said the boy’s father was going to die, that nothing could save him but a miracle. The two men—the doctor and the father—stood over the boy and watched him. The boy felt he should do something,

but all he wanted to do was cry. “What do we do now, Colby?” his father asked. The boy didn’t move. “What do we need to do now?” The father’s voice was rough, insistent, as if the boy had left an important chore unfinished. He looked at his shoes. “What do we need to read?” his father asked, his voice loud in the small room. Then the boy went and found the family Bible and brought it to the two men. His father snatched it from him. “Lucky I didn’t drop dead while you were drooling there like an idiot.”

Dark came before they could again reach the trailhead, and the boy was afraid they might not make it home. In the car he checked the Bible for his name, for his father’s. Then it was too dark to read so he watched the rough highway in the glow of headlights and repeated the mysterious names to himself, over and over.

Colby remembers the long afternoon and evening and can still, thirty years later, remember the names in the Bible. His hometown lies in a valley that runs north/south, so that, in the evening, the shadow of the hill on the west climbs the hill on the east. When his father was young—and, too, when Colby was young—he used to race the sun. They’d stand in the backyard and wait for the line of shadow to hit a rock or a certain stretch of fence. Then they would go through the streets behind the last houses, through rusting gates, over the rushing culverts and up the dry slope. Some days they made it the top and the shadow had beaten them. Other days they turned and saw the last of the sun, an orange spark on the far hill’s crest.

It seemed to Colby, as he stood in his father’s house, that the summer had just begun, that he only this week received a call from a cousin he hadn’t spoken to in years telling him about how his father had lost his mind. He told Colby about the neighbors

finding his father walking naked through the streets. He was getting worse, this cousin said; his father wouldn't go to the doctor, didn't recognize old friends and would amble around town with a vacant look in his eye. Colby was needed.

He finished washing the dishes and listened for sounds of his father in the quiet house. Outside the window, the hill burned orange where the sun hit and was a deep blue in shadow.

"What the hell are you doing?" his father's voice came from behind him. He put the dishrag on the counter.

"Just washing the dishes."

"Oh. Okay." Colby respected the way his father hid his failing mind. Though he remembered little from day to day, his father knew that a stranger in his house washing dishes somehow belonged there. Questioning it would reveal the dementia.

"We have to get up early to visit the home, Dad."

The old man slouched and shifted in the doorway. "What home?" he said.

"We're going to see about putting you in a home."

His father ran his hands through his dirty gray hair. "I'm in a home," he said and turned away.

"I can't live with you forever. I can't do this much longer."

"It's one thing they moved me out here to the mountains," his father said. "It's one thing they moved my house, and now they're going to take it away."

His father disappeared into the other room. This was new, this obsession about the house being moved from his father's town to a new spot, up country. Colby

wondered if one day his own mind would go like that, and what it might be like to live in a world where men came in the night and took your house up the mountain.

The boy's father never died, never even grew ill, and the boy grew up to become a man in many ways. He fell in love and married a woman. They lived a long way from his father, in Florida. The boy became a father, and took his son to the beach nearly every weekend in the summer time. They laughed in the foam of the sea while the boy's mother watched from a bright yellow towel stretched across the sand.

Then the son got sick and there was no intricate stack of stones in Florida, no boulder-solid tower of prayer, so the man made one in his backyard out of landscaping rocks. In the afternoons he would take his Bible—a new one with only three names—and sit atop the rocks and pray for his son's life the way he had prayed for his father's. The sky was the same color he remembered. It felt the same to breathe, even if the air wasn't cool like in the mountains, even if the air was heavy and wet.

The son died anyway, and the man's sad, empty wife moved away. The man could see his stack of stones from his bedroom window, shining like some monument to failure in the sun. Every morning he wanted to smash it down. Every night it stood.

Colby left his father standing by the road. He drove a few miles ahead and stopped. He pissed in the river and then ate a sandwich; there was no one on the road anywhere around. The tall mountains were covered in clumps of black trees that looked like tumors. He wondered if he could find the same paths he and his father had taken long ago. He spent some time sitting beside the river and watching it foam and break over the rocks. When he made it back to the car that he had borrowed from his cousin, the light had changed and the whole world was latticed with strange shadows. He got in the car and headed back up the mountain road.

In a while he saw his father sitting on a large stone by the road. When he saw the car, he stood up and brushed himself off, shuffling in the dust.

“Hello, sir,” his father said and leaned into the open window.

“Hello.”

“Well, sir,” his father said, “I think I’ve gotten myself lost.”

“Is that so?”

“Well, sir,” his father said looking up at the blank blue sky, “I know it is so.”

The old man’s face was sweaty, and the dirt from the road stuck to it in large clumps.

“I know I don’t know where I am,” his father said with a laugh.

Colby reached across and opened the door. “Well, I intend to do you a kindness,” he said. His father eased himself inside with a grunt. “My father taught me always to be kind to those in need.

The boy had been sleeping, dreaming of smooth stones bathed in a slick, watery light, when his father came in and lifted him out of bed. The father's steps made the house creak, and the boy heard the dishes rattle in the cabinet as he and his father moved through the kitchen. The air outside was cold, and his father opened the car door and put him in the back seat. The vinyl was cold even through the blankets and the thin fabric of his pajamas. The boy's mother was already in the car, a dark shape in the front seat.

It must have been the very early morning. The boy watched the tops of trees slide by; behind them the sky was smeared in a blue-black light. Wires hung there too, and he followed their shallow swoop from pole to pole as he listened for some conversation from his parents in the front seat. He heard his father say things softly, but could never understand over the noise of the engine and the heater blowing warmth into the car.

In an hour, the sky had withered to ice blue; the car slowed and turned. His father got out and then came to the passenger side to help his mother. Then, for a while, they were gone and the close, warm air began to cool. The engine knocked, and the boy heard voices and cars outside. He never lifted himself up to look out the window. Soon the father returned with a cup of coffee and a cup of orange juice for his son.

"Your mother's in the hospital," he said. "I'll tell you more later. Now I have to drive you to your Uncle Olas."

The father said this in the front seat, without turning around. The steam from his coffee rose in cordlike wisps. The car moved again into the morning.

Colby left his father sitting in front of the television. Bells and canned applause from the game show filled the little house. He lit a cigarette in the kitchen and smoked it, trying not to think about his father or his son. Thinking about anyone but himself made him angry, liable to punch walls, to push strangers out of the way in the street. His only escape was to concentrate on the warm smoke he drew into his lungs, the smell of it and the lingering sulfur of the matchstrike in the air. He only wanted to smell and hear and see without association.

But things moved him: his father's ambling walk at once a reminder of the old man's weakness and of the uncertain steps his son had taken as a toddler. Even the word *toddler*, the word *father*, the word *son*—the very sounds of the words were heavy and weighted. At night his father's dirty face stared at him in the midst of wilder dreams.

He left the kitchen—the layout so familiar from childhood—and stepped outside. A cool breeze had blown in and taken away the heat from earlier in the day. Colby walked through the back yard. He watched the line of sunlight on the hill above town. He sat in a metal lawn chair and waited.

In a while his father walked outside and stood over him.

“What did you do with my money, Colby?”

He didn't answer.

“Someone stole my money.”

“You lost it yourself, Dad. You hid it and I can’t find it. Cousin Jay was over yesterday, don’t you remember?”

“Of course I remember,” his father said. “But you’re tricking me. The two of you took the money.”

“I should have,” he said, “Before you lost it.”

Inside they played cribbage until his father wanted to go to bed. Colby slept on the couch. In the middle of the night he awoke and heard the old man rummaging through drawers in the kitchen, mumbling things to himself. He listened and tried to remember the things his father was saying so that he could tell them to the doctor the next day.

In the morning he had to help his father dress, and it embarrassed them both. They tried to get it over with. His father was having problems with his left side. Colby knew that meant something was happening on the right side of his brain, if it was his brain, but he couldn’t remember which side was the math side and which side was the creative side. They did a dance, Colby asking his father to move his body, to lean on him. It took too long before they were ready to go.

In the car Colby asked, “What’s eight times four?” The two lane highway was a pale, bright line in the sun.

“Whatever it is,” his father said, “I wouldn’t tell you.”

“Do you know or not?”

His father didn’t say anything from the passenger seat. Colby turned on the radio and listened for the weather. Record heat was expected again.

“It’s never been this hot,” his father said.

Colby wondered which side of the brain controlled a weather obsession. His father had been talking weather since Colby had moved in. A surprise July snow had been the highlight of his visit. They had gone outside and made a snowman. But the snow was soft and dirty, and the snowman's face had roots and grass embedded in it. The next day, the snowman collapsed in the sun, but remained for a few days, a white blister in the shade of a tree. From the kitchen window, Colby tried to discern what had once been the head, the broad base. His father still talked about the snowman at times. He repeatedly reminded Colby that now he had seen snow in every month.

After a long wait in a room full of old people chaperoned by their own aging children or spouses, the nurse called Colby and his father back to a smaller room where they had to wait even longer. The doctor, his eyes on the chart, entered the room.

"So what's the problem, Mr. Anderson?"

"He's got a problem with his left side," Colby said.

"Is that so?" The doctor took the stethoscope from around his neck and began the examination. Colby didn't watch and instead fixed his eyes on a diagram of the human brain. While the doctor asked his father some basic questions, Colby read the parts of the brain: Hippocampus, Broca's Area, Fissure of Sylvius. It seemed an insult to hang the diagram in an examining room, to probe the patients' failing brains in the presence of such a perfect and pink example of one. As Colby tried to memorize the various parts, he heard his father say something softly. He turned and saw his father whispering into the stethoscope.

"Now, Mr. Anderson, would a man who's trying to kill you bring you to a doctor?"

There was fear in his father's face. And confusion. Colby straightened.

“He left me for dead in the mountains,” his father screamed, pointing to Colby.

The doctor looked at Colby and then back at his quivering patient. “Calm down, Mr. Anderson. We’re going to check everything out today.”

The father pulled into the uncle’s driveway. The boy was still in the backseat, having moved only when he got out to pee by the side of the road. The father led him inside to where his uncle and cousins were eating lunch. The boy had only seen his cousins at family reunions, and they looked unkind staring at him over their plates.

In a while, his father had gone back to the hospital without ever telling him how long he would be staying. His aunt made him a plate and he picked at the food without eating. His uncle’s house was packed with the cold from outside and the boy shivered at the table. He was still in his pajamas. His aunt gave him clothes that belonged to his cousin, but they were too large and made the boy feel lonely for his own clothes and home.

He stayed for days, began to enjoy his cousins’ company and then, on a bright cool afternoon, he watched his father’s car come up the long driveway, the tires gripping the gravel with the sound of a long zipper closing. His mother wasn’t in the car.

The boy sat in the back again, which made him believe that they would be picking up his mother soon. He fell asleep on the long ride home. When he woke up, the car was in the garage. The air was cool. His father was still and quiet and alone in the front.

Colby's father's house was dark and silent except for the sound of the washing machine rumbling in the back room. It was only eight o'clock, but his father had already gone to bed.

In a while, he heard someone knock on the door. The temptation to ignore it was great, but instead he got up and opened the door to find a group of white-haired ladies holding casserole dishes tented with aluminum foil. They smiled, their eyes bright and pleasant behind the thick lenses of their glasses.

"Hello, Ladies," Colby said.

"Hello," the lady in front said. "We thought we would bring you some food. We heard that Andy wasn't doing so well."

"He's not," Colby said. "But he's not dead either."

"Oh," the lead old lady said, her head bobbing. She was apparently expecting an invitation inside.

Colby made her wait through a few seconds of silence. "Well, something smells good," he said, forcing a smile.

"Just some things we threw together," another old lady said.

"Are you my father's girlfriends?" he asked. The ladies responded with loud laughs and an "Oh, my goodness, no!" and pretty soon they were inside, slicing a pie and trying, secretly, to peek into his father's bedroom. They sat at the dining room table and he offered lemonade, tea and coffee.

Forks clinked against the glass plates and the ladies told stories about his father, things he had done in the past few years. His father had helped when the basement of the church had flooded two summers before, and he had been instrumental in the fight to keep the Warrior as the school's mascot. He had been very active until recently. Wasn't it a shame?

Colby thought that soon the laughing and the conversation would wake his father. They all stole an occasional glance at the bedroom door, a hairline crack of darkness leading inside. But soon the old ladies began to yawn and stretch and say how they needed to be getting to bed. As he looked around the table, he tried to remember their names.

"I think it's time we said a prayer," one lady said.

"Oh, yes," another agreed.

"We've been praying for your father," another said.

"I have too," Colby said. He was lying, but somehow the old lady faces made him wish he weren't. They joined hands around the table and one of the ladies mumbled through a prayer. Colby remembered his father leading dinner prayers, the Norwegian words coming out soft and clear. Colby's own lips moved, aping his father, miming the sounds without needing to know their meaning. Then the squeeze of the hand when they all said "Amen." It didn't matter to him that the hand in his now was old and dry, he could feel the outline of his father's strong hand, larger and rougher than his. And Colby could remember the hand of a child in his, what it felt like to squeeze it and feel the strong and tiny bones inside.

“Get out, get out,’ he said. “You’ve stayed too long,” and he managed to hang a smile on his face to turn his rudeness into a kind of joke. The old ladies moved about, gathering their dishes in silence, not offering to help clean up.

**

The boy and the father visited the mother’s grave on her birthday. The cemetery was down a dirt road nestled into the hills; all around were coolies filled with tall green nettles. Her stone was in a corner, and the boy and the father kneeled and said the prayers that were supposed to be said. As they stood over the grave, a sprinkler in the grass sputtered to life and squirted them with water. They ran away, his father cursing. But as they reached the road and looked down at their wet clothes, they laughed until their breath ran out.

Colby woke up not knowing where he was. His head pounded and he felt ill and unsteady. He found his way to the kitchen, but as he reached to turn on the water, he knocked a glass into the sink. It broke and he cursed.

He decided to leave it until morning, and walked into the living room. The streetlight from outside lit the room in an orange haze. He went to the window and looked out into the yard. The light from the neighbor’s house spread out on the lawn,

turning the green grass white, so that Colby thought for a moment that it had snowed while he slept. A noise behind him made him turn.

A man stood in the dark, and Colby's breath got away from him before he realized it was his father in the orange half-light.

Before Colby could say anything, the old man said, "I know you took my money."

"Dad, it's me. Colby."

His father moved forward. Colby heard the grating of metal when his father stepped on the floor furnace.

"I know you took my money. Now I'm gonna get it back."

"Jesus, Dad. It's just Colby."

"I can shoot you now. You're in my house."

Colby felt a cool chill at the back of his neck. He raised his arms.

"Whoa, Dad—"

"I don't know what hell you've come from—"

The old man was in shadow, but Colby could see he had his arm out in front of him, and something dark there, something heavy.

"Dad—Mr. Anderson. Just--"

"You come for my money? You come to kill me in the night?"

"Look," Colby said, his voice—even he could tell as he tried to control it—full of fear. "I'm your son. Colby. Your son."

"I know who you are," his father said and took a step forward so that the rusty light slanted onto his face. He looked as if he were melting. Colby repeated the names—his, his mother's, his son's. He went back generations, closing his eyes and seeing the

inside cover of the Bible, repeating the names over and over, hoping one would strike a living memory somewhere in his father. He sputtered, and when he had run to the end of his memory, he returned to the beginning.

He opened his eyes again and saw him lower the gun. He ran at him. He hit him hard, sent the gun clattering into the kitchen. They fell onto the floor and he had his father pinned. The old man struggled feebly to get up.

“It’s me, dad. It’s okay. It’s Colby.” The old man began to calm. Colby loosened his grip. “It’s your son,” he said.

His father moaned. His face twisted in pain, the wrinkles stretched black and hideous in the weak light. Some food from dinner still cleaved to the corner of his mouth. Colby wiped his father’s face with his collar.

The old man’s breathing was shallow and rapid. He began to mumble in some other language.

Colby stood at the head of the trail. A wooden sign showed the paths he could take. He hadn’t been hiking in a long time, but since his father had moved into assisted living, he had more time to drive the winding highways, to find the old haunts.

The names of the lakes and paths sparked memories. He could recall a picnic at the base of Hell Roaring Falls, a hike he and his friends had taken over Silverrun. All the names were carved into the heavy dark boards and painted white so that you could read them easily. He found the one marked “Sheepherder’s Monument” and followed that path.

When he had climbed the rocky hill and reached the edge of the cliff, he found that someone had attempted to tear the monument down. A lot of effort had been required—the stones were large and heavy--and whoever had tried to take it apart had only managed to remove a few layers from the top. The rest of the rocks stood, their shared weight holding them together. It relieved him to find the monument there, to feel its steady, upright weight.

He sat looking into the lonely, blue distance. Within months, his father would die, and then, long years from now, he too would lose his mind. Maybe it could begin to happen now.

Boomland

“Ha, ha, ha!” Dylan says and then he tackles me and it’s as if all the mud in the world had come loose underneath us as we slide downhill. Someone vomits between two parked Volkswagens, the wet cobblestones cool my cheek and the barge lights float in the darkness that is the river. We pummel one another and roll.

There are riverboats anchored at the edge of the black water, their gangways up or otherwise blocked. I break free and stagger toward them, hoping to get aboard and sail into the murky night. But a shadowy man in a dark hat draws in on a cigarette and the smoke seems to spell out the word “no” even as he growls it. His lips make slick noises as I turn and slide my feet uphill against the cobble stones, imagining that they are the teeth of vanquished giants pressed into the earth.

Dylan is still laughing somehow, but I know I landed some blows. We're all too pissed to feel it.

Now we’re in the car and I’m trapped by Dylan’s seat pushed against my knees and the pile of plastic bags and hamburger wrappers mounded at my feet. The other cars seem to want to hit us and many times I close my eyes and wait for the crunch and the momentum. The lights on Union are blurred into a dingy haze by the unclean windows, but I make out yellow signs and glowing storefronts and rain-wet metal.

“Pull over,” someone says.

We're near the old high school, and I recognize the parking lot we stop in, light collecting in the puddles from a summer rain. Dylan gets out and I push his seat forward roughly. I forget why we'd been fighting.

Brownie says "Flowers."

"What about 'em?" Dylan says, kicking at a puddle, sending a smear of brown water into the air.

"You could get her some flowers." He points to a darkened flower shop. Inside the fluorescent lights are still on in the back, making the flowers up front look ashy and sick.

Dylan grinds his heel into the dirt of the parking lot. "Steal flowers?" he asks, but not to us.

Kirby--the guy I don't know, the guy who they had talked out of suicide at some party the week before--he finds a metal stand and throws the newspapers to the ground. He lifts it up over his head and pitches it through the window. Brownie can't catch up to him in time. The glass breaks, and I hear a strange alarm. Then I know there's no alarm at all, only Dylan's cackle at the broken glass and the free loot inside. All of us take armfuls of flowers and load them into the trunk. We watch the cars as they move by on Union, but no one even slows down. We're out of there in two minutes, each of us with an arrangement in our laps. Mine has a plastic sign stuck into the soil. Raised purple letters say "Darling, I'm sorry."

We drive for a long time, trade a "Love you Always," bouquet for five dollars in gas and make it home just as dawn is shaking the birds out of their sleep. Brownie and Kirby head inside but Dylan stops me. He holds a small potted cactus against his hip and leans against the car.

“I think we owe each other an apology,” he says, and then waits. This is the opening he offers me, a chance to apologize and regain his favor. I don’t remember exactly what I did, but it doesn’t matter. I live in his dad’s house and Dylan can kick me out any time he wants, since his dad’s tour in Iraq leaves him in charge. I have to say I’m sorry and in a way I want to too, because I’m comfortable as his pushover friend. Even Brownie gives him more shit than me and Dylan and I go way back—back to the womb practically—and people still mistake us for brothers the way they did in grade school.

Follower that I am I say “I’m sorry,” and hang my head the way I’ve seen scolded children do. I hold up the arrangement to him and whisper the word “darling.”

He doesn’t laugh or smile. “I don’t mean to hate you sometimes,” he says. “But you are a lucky shit and I’m tired of it.”

“Yeah.”

“Not your fault,” he says picking at the cactus.

“No. Yeah.” I’m confused and the bruises hidden by the alcohol start dully to emerge.

“Now, let me go and blow you the fuck up.”

I watch him and the others play video games for a while. I get lost in the gun sounds and the rain of blue fire. I fall asleep a few times or otherwise black out, but nothing seems to change in the game or in the way they are sitting, their shoulders slumped forward and their stares fixed above their open mouths. Occasionally, one will frag another and the bursts of laughter blend in with the sound effects of the game. Exhausted, I stumble to my room and just before I fall asleep I remember Shen, the girl Dylan loves and the reason why he hates me, or at least the latest reason. She has a

crush on me and doesn't give Dylan the time of day. As I begin to fall asleep I resolve to push Shen Dylan's way as a sort of peace offering.

The next morning, I'm supposed to clean up. The chores are a way to offset the cheap rent, but I've fallen behind. I haven't dusted in a few months and the hedges outside the window grow like green tumors. Dylan doesn't care as long as he can remind me that I'm an indentured servant. It never matters if the work gets done as long as the relationship is clear. I take the abuse because I'm used to it and it's easier than the labor itself.

The house is filled with the rumbling snores of the drunk. I move some crumb filled paper plates and find a space on the couch. I watch TV for a while and before long there is a light knock on the glass of the door. "Come in," I say and Shen steps inside. The hinges of the screen door squeal and the smell of grass comes in with her.

"This place is disgusting," She says, moving a pile of newspapers and beer cans from a stained recliner. Her thick Asian accent makes it hard to understand her sometimes. She is thin and wears a short flowered dress. I used to hate her short hair shooting out in random spikes, but the more shit Dylan gives me , the more attractive she becomes. "Fuck," she says like it was her favorite word.

"The maid's on vacation," I say

"They taught us to say 'Holiday'," she says, leaning back without examining the filthy chair.

"No one talks like that here."

"What do you call Japanese?"

“You mean insults? Slurs?” I laugh and realize I could turn her off me for good with a few choice words, but I don't feel like doing anything nice for Dylan right now.

“Slurs...” she says like she doesn't know the word.

“Ask Dylan. He'll tell you. He watches movies about the war.”

“He is an idiot. Is this a slur?” I smile at her and she stands up and takes off her dress , then her bra and panties. She folds each item neatly and hangs them over the back of a dining room chair. She stands there watching the TV, her naked body turned blue by its light. The commercials come on and the room fills with music and announcements. The colors change and dance across her thin body and I watch them flash, understanding the fight Dylan and I have had even as the bruises begin their deep, long ache.

“Fuck,” she says at the commercials.

*

My room has pictures of Dylan's mother, long dead from cancer, across one wall. Otherwise it's mine and home to busted stereo and computer equipment, a baseball card collection slowly warping away its value in the humid house and a mattress stuffed into one corner. My favorite picture of Dylan's dead mother is the one of her in a bright pink easter bunny outfit. She smiles down on me every morning and night of my life, her arms crossed around Dylan in front of her. His face is wild with embarrassment, with frustration at a mother too involved with her son at that age—eight, maybe nine. His face is red and greasy; his cheeks balloon out slightly with the anger he's holding in. He

might be wishing her dead at the exact moment of the camera flash. His eyes are black and burning beneath prematurely bushy eyebrows.

I lay with Shen beside me. I play with her hair, trying to make the spikes lay down in some kind of order.

“Did you ever wish your parents would die?” I ask.

She mumbles.

“Sometimes you say it without meaning it. Sometimes you mean in spite of how much you love someone. It’s a lucky thing that we can’t actually *wish* someone dead.” I want to point out the sinister look in Dylan’s face underneath his doomed mother and how I’m sure I can read his thoughts through so much empty space and time. But somehow I still don’t want to ruin Shen for him, as much as I know he loves her. Even as I run my hand along her hip and down her thigh, I regret failing him in his own home.

“You know Dylan loves you, right?”

She sighs. “Fuck him.”

“He’s a good guy.”

“Goofball,” she says.

“His mother died.”

“My mother lived,” she says. “And I wished her dead many times.”

It takes me a moment to sift those words through the mesh of her accent and when I do I can’t think of anything to say to her. Then I remember. “Your dress,” I say.

“I don’t care,” she says. “Now shut up, so I can sleep.”

So much for pushing her his way, as if I could now. My room usually smells of sweat and wet cardboard, but she’s brought a new life to it. There’s a shine and a clean,

deep smell that seems to seep from her pores. I hear a creaking in the hall that might be Dylan. He's barged into my room without knocking many times before—it's his house, he reminds me. I pull the sheet down and expose her, hoping he'll burst in again. My heart races as the footsteps creak to my door. But they move on past without stopping.

*

Dylan is up when I come into the living room. Shen's dress is folded over the chair and I wonder if he can smell that she's been in his house. I wonder if he can smell her on me, even though I'm on the other side of the room. He's watching a war movie I've seen a long time ago, but the volume is down and his lips are moving with the absent dialog.

"We going tonight?" I ask.

"Hell, yeah."

"Brownie's got a bunch of shit to blow up. M-80s, bottle rockets. Wants to blow up a watermelon or something."

"Fireworks are for chumps." He snarls out the words, and it's as if they were written for one of the characters in the movie.

"Old bridge again?"

"Hell yeah," he says. "I love that place."

The year before we had gotten stuck in a couple feet of mud under the old bridge, Arkansas side. He'd said he hated the place, but then he was happier. Now he seemed to want to sink into the mud somewhere. Hence the fights. Hence the explosion noises

he makes with his mouth as some village is bombed to ash in the movie. I pick up her clothes as if I'm doing part of my chores.

“I'll cut your balls off,” he yells as I head back to my room. But I'm not sure if he's yelling a line or yelling at me. I decide to sneak Shen out the back.

*

Dylan and I have been friends since fourth grade, and I remember spending the night at his house a couple of times before his mother died. She was sick then, but it didn't show. She would make us anything we wanted, and it seemed like heaven to me as a ten year old boy to have chocolate available, since it was all health food at my house. But Dylan treated his mother like a maid and, even stranger to my nine year old mind, she obeyed. I'd watch as he ordered her to clean up his mess or fix him a drink. I thought it was goddamn funny seeing this grown women serve a boy just like me. I thought Dylan was a God, somehow able to reverse the natural parent-child relationship through the mere force of his will. I told other kids about it at school and Dylan grew into the role there too, from a smallish quiet kid into a forceful commander. He wasn't a bully—he never had to resort to getting physical. People merely followed him.

So I watched in wonder as Dylan tossed an empty Coke can on the kitchen floor and yelled “Mom, just bring me the damn cake already.” And to see her walk toward us, a smile on her face, the plates in her hand—it made me want to be him, to stick next to him and learn from the master. Everything was so confusing in that time—my own

parents divorce, fitting in at school. If I couldn't control things, I wanted to be with a guy who looked like he could.

But now I live here, and I sleep under that picture of his mother in the pink bunny suit and I feel sick and paper-thin thinking about how, as she carried those plates to us, deep inside her she was being eaten away. And she probably knew it--her only wish in the short time she had was to make her son happy, to do his bidding so he would remember her as a saint, as if somehow his memory only would canonize her or make her live again. To think about that and then to remember his self-satisfied grin, his cocky dismissal of her with a wave of his stubby hand and his dirty fingernails—it makes me want to puke.

*

Brownie shows up just after a rainstorm has wet the streets. So there will definitely be mud again this year. We pile into Dylan's car, me behind him again awash in trash as the radio grunts out metal. And under that is the breath of the wet streets and the tires grinding. We make a few familiar turns and I'm thrown into the cool window, spots of clear rainwater adhering to months of accumulated sap. The movie place,, the campus and a head shop I used to work in and then I know we're headed to pick up Shen. We pull up to her building and Dylan blows the horn. She comes out in the same dress that earlier hung on the living room chair.

"How do Asian girls taste?" Brownie says before she gets within earshot.

“Like your mother’s breath,” says Dylan, and when he insults you, you bow to it, as Brownie does now. Because if you don’t it gets worse, it gets really personal. He’s been collecting your weaknesses since you first met, and he’ll play them without remorse.

She opens the door and crawls into the backseat and onto my lap. “Fuck,” she says. “I thought this seat was empty.”

“It is,” Dylan says into the rear view. His eyes are smoky and tinged with red, like he’s been crying. We lurch toward the river.

First there’s the driving around, the stop for cheap tacos, the ATM slalom and the beer run. Then the night has fallen and the downtown buildings loom glassy and holiday-empty. Downtown the traffic is slow and cops on horseback take long glances into the backseat where Shen has now moved between me and Jake. Dylan kills the air and rolls down the windows so all the street noise can come in on the smell of exhaust. I manage to drink a few beers in between cops and the neon lights buzz and dance as we pass. I squeeze Shen’s knee when I’m sure no one else is looking. Once or twice she flashes her luke-warm version of a smile.

We cross into Arkansas via the De Soto bridge and pull into the gravel lot beside a fireworks tent. The sign says “Boomland” in huge red letters. Cartoon rockets swirl around the name and a boy’s happy face floats bodiless amidst it all. “Welcome to Boomland,” Dylan laughs from the front seat.

The parking lot is busy, and the rain has left it a mess of zig-zag ruts. Fathers hold their kids’ hands and lead them to the tents aglow with strings of lights. An inflatable rocket leans against the tent entrance. Someone has hand painted a wooden

sign: MAKE A BOOM TONIGHT!! Inside there is an excitement running through the shoppers—and I feel it too. Ahead of me, Dylan has taken out his Zippo, and is turning it absently in his hands as he strolls and looks at the piles of explosives, waiting only for a touch of flame. He looks back at me and flashes the lighter as if to show that he could take the place down if he wanted.

Laid across folding tables are rows and rows of Silver Bullets, Whistling Moon Travelers, Black Cat rockets, Roman candles. Dylan picks up a package here and there and weighs it, as if he can guess how much destruction might be wrought just by holding the fireworks in his hand.

“They make these in your country, right?” Brownie looks back at Shen.

“Korean fireworks would blow your little dick off, if you lucky.” she says and I laugh.

Brownie scowls and leans into me, his chest against my shoulder. “Well, how does it taste?” His mouth is as deep as the ruts in the mud outside. He backs away and picks up his own package of fireworks to look at. The sound of the stiff cellophane reminds me of a fuse, and I expect something to go off tonight. Brownie has become Dylan's confidante, a position I used to hold before I moved into his house and before he suspected me of trying to steal Shen away. I know the way Dylan would talk to me about our other friends, the subtle plans he would make to humiliate and control them. We'd intentionally pick them up late or forget to call them back. We'd laugh about their stupidity, refuse to stop when they had to piss.

“Are you buying something?” Shen asks as we walk through the tent.

“I think I've outgrown this stuff,” I say.

"I never understand boys," she says.

As we round a set of tables and head down another aisle, I see Dylan talking with someone near the cashier. As we come closer, I see that the guy he's talking to is dressed in a Boomland t-shirt and there's a plug of chaw bulging in his cheek. Shen plays with my hair as we walk up to them, but I brush her hand away.

"...It's a stupid law anyway," the Boomland guy is saying. He folds his arms with a grunt.

"Sure is," Dylan says.

Boomland looks me over and then Shen. He takes a cup from a nearby table and spits into it.

"This is Ted, my best friend of fifteen years," Dylan says.

"Uh-huh."

"And my beautiful young lady friend."

Boomland laughs hard and wipes his hands on his jeans. Then, it's as if Shen and I aren't even there, back to business. "I got some stronger stuff we make ourselves." He pauses and looks around. "For private considerations only." He's practiced the phrase and is obviously satisfied with it.

"Really?" Dylan says.

"Stuff that could blow an Elephant in half." He laughs and sputters.

Dylan smiles, and just when I figure he'll ask to see it, he says "No, thanks. I'm going to just go with the prepackaged shit tonight."

"Suit yourself," Boomland says "Come on back if you don't get the bang you're looking for, you know?" A wink at us and he's off to find another customer.

I leave them to walk outside; across the river a light brown mist has settled over the city. Even though it's night the heat seems to burn unabated, strangely fueled by the rain from earlier in the day. Each breath is heavier and wetter than the last, and all the ruts in the parking lot are filled with thin, black puddles. The hot, dark forest seems a better place to go than back to Dylan's backseat. One of us left in too much of a hurry; the back door hangs open. Then her hands touch me under my shirt and they're so cold, like she's been handling ice. I let her scratch and she scratches harder and harder and the pain runs in long streaks.

"You're gonna kill me," I say.

"I wanna screw again," she says.

"Dylan's going to kill me then."

"I want to roll in mud."

A car pulls into the lot and lights us up in a glare that seems to last forever. I shield my eyes, looking for Dylan somewhere in the blackness behind me.

Shen and I are waiting in the car when Brownie and Dylan get back, which probably won't help things. But I've decided that I'll make a stand again, like I did the other night when I was drunk. I used to take his abuse, to clean up the kitchen when he yelled for me to do it. I have nowhere to live—except with Shen. The scratches on my back burn and I think maybe she and Dylan are a better match after all.

Dylan and Brownie spend a long time behind the car with the trunk open. I hear them laughing and feel at ease enough to let Shen have a kiss or two. We move apart and the trunk slams, loud enough to make us both jump. They pile in still laughing under their breath. They know we want to know what's so funny, but they won't tell us even if

we ask, so we ride out in silence, back onto the interstate and then back across the Mississippi and into the city. We head south through thick traffic, aiming for the old bridge two miles downstream from the De Soto. Just as we get onto the old bridge, the city's fireworks display begins. Shen leans over to see them and presses her body into mine. Out the window blue and purple explosions bloom against the black sky. Each time a new firework goes off, Shen makes a nearly inaudible sound of excitement. I rub my hand across the back of her legs and listen to the distant booming, the bridge clicking under us the whole way.

But then we leave the light—the lights along the bridge and the flowering explosions over the dark water. We take the first exit in Arkansas and then the access road that leads back to the river. All the light in the world seems to have been left behind until we drive beneath an illuminated billboard three stories high. The wilderness around the sign is ashy and pale in the reflected light, and whitish insects fly in blind circles. The paved road ends and we begin along a rutted washboard road that snakes under the old bridge itself. The car wheezes and creaks under the stress.

“This is near where that kid was killed,” Brownie says. Brownie always says that when we come down here, but this time Dylan doesn't yell at him for saying it. And since this is Shen's first trip, Brownie goes on. “They thought it was Satanists, you know, as if those exist. Arrested those three. The West Memphis three they call them now.”

“Free the West Memphis three,” Shen says.

“They thought it was Satanists,” Brownie says again. He seems to want to continue the story, but Dylan sighs and he shuts up and gazes at the bridge above us.

“Bullshit,” Dylan says. “People don’t need a God to be evil. This world don’t need the devil.”

“You enough devil for me,” says Shen, and Dylan looks up into the mirror at her.

“Never enough devil for you, baby.” And they laugh together, high pitched, almost endless.

We move under the bridge now and Dylan stops and kills the lights. The city rests on the opposite bank, glowing dully. The fireworks go on in a riot, but because of the trees we can only see the highest salvos as they arc and burst. Brownie and Dylan each carry one end of a large, olive-colored box. They huff and struggle while Shen tells them how weak they are. I realize what a self-destructive group this is. It’s nothing but insults and going behind backs. When Brownie’s not around, Dylan doesn’t hesitate to tell me what a wimp he is, and how stupid. It’s those times laughing at Brownie’s expense that we are the closest. It's like we're kids again and he's dominating his mother.

By the time we navigate the mud and reach the narrow beach, the city’s fireworks display is reaching its climax. Above the river, the fireworks explode in bright points within a cloud of smoke drifting lazily toward the opposite bank. Shen grabs my hand and climbs onto a piece of driftwood so that we are the same height. There is a quick rip of sound behind us and a bottle rocket comes screaming past and out into the dark river.

They laugh.

“You could’ve killed me,” Shen yells.

“I could have,” says Dylan through his laughing fit, “But not with a bottle rocket.”

Shen and I move closer to the river’s edge. She looks over her shoulder. “They look in the box,” she says and grabs my crotch.

“Thanks.”

She lets go and we watch a barge as it moves upriver. It is a mass of blackness in the night, but someone is shining the spotlight up and down the shore and it doesn't take them long to find us as they pull even. I wave at them, but Shen extends her hand and gives them the finger. The light stays on us and the boat moves under the bridge, and even though it must be a quarter mile to the boat, I hear male voices come over the water.

“I bet they want to see your tits,” I say.

She plays with the hem of her dress and I wish I could watch from the boat. She's like some strange erotic performer on a wilderness stage. She arcs her back and licks her lips, all the while holding my arm for balance on the driftwood. She runs her hands through her spiky hair and, with her hands on her hips, gathers her dress slowly, subtly up. The cars click and rumble on the bridge deck above us, and there is a sort of primal rhythm in the air. I glance back and see Dylan watching too, with a half-smile that seems chipped into his face by some deranged sculptor. The waters lap in front of us. Then, the light flashes away.

“Come see,” Dylan says to me, and Shen and I wander over.

Laid out on the sand are five hand grenades, as well as a number of large fireworks.

“Let's blow some shit up,” he says with a slap on my back that makes the scratches burn again with hot pain.

*

When we were ten we destroyed our record collection, tossing the Prince and Hall and Oates LPs into the sky and watching them smash against the concrete driveway. We unspooled miles of tape and threw the curling mess into the trees. I put a smoke bomb in the mailbox near his house. And we melted our G. I Joes with lighters, burned the tanks with gasoline and some dismantled model rocket engines. We made a mess of Dylan's yard and when his dad came home late at night he roused us from our sleep and dragged us by our hair outside to see what we had done.

It was a cool night and I stood in my pajamas and listened to Dylan's father lecture us on value and, I have to say now, a good deal of it took. He talked about how much he had done to buy the things we had destroyed, how he had missed time with his wife so that Dylan could have things. He mocked us and asked us if we had ever seen what real destruction was, if we could even imagine it. And when he finally left us alone to clean up what we had done, my cheeks burned with guilt. I turned to Dylan expecting to share a few cusses at how stupid we were. Instead I watched as he took a rock and carved "Fuck you, Dad," into the tailgate of his father's pickup truck. I didn't try to stop him or even say a word. I just picked up debris while Dylan walked away. I didn't see him again for months.

*

As we work our way through the fireworks, I try to find from Dylan where he got the grenades, if they're real and what the hell he's thinking bringing them down here.

Someone will surely notice if he sets one off, and then there's the matter of him somehow losing an arm. Or a friend.

But he won't say much as he lights the fuses of roman candles and whistlers and sends them spraying out over the river. Sometimes they land fully lit in the water and sizzle for us. Brownie is Dylan's dutiful assistant, bringing him new rounds and laying them out as he instructs. I can imagine the two of them in war time, fixing mortar rounds at an enemy, Dylan would be at home in an army helmet, as some kind of twisted leader. But even his dad wouldn't let him join the military. Dylan never told me why his dad was against it.

In between salvos, Dylan points to the water and says "She's on fire." We all look out and see a barge about a mile upriver, heading toward us, with dark orange flames on the far side. The flames reach about as high as the boat itself. But as we watch they grow higher. Memphis police boats drift alongside, but what can they do?. There is an eerie silence to the scene. It's a good twenty minutes before they appear to have the fire under control. Then, the barge heads our way, and as it passes we can smell the burning, and taste it in our mouths. The boat is silent and seems empty. I wonder if anyone was hurt. Maybe we are all wondering that, but we don't say it.

As the barge drifts away, Dylan wanders to the water. The police boats circle. He throws something out over the water and it blooms orange and gold, quite beautiful against the black river and the skyline, but so loud we all jump to our feet. I watch the boats. Surely they heard or saw. It takes a moment, but they appear to turn toward us. When I turn back to Dylan, he's staring at me, another grenade in his hand. He's got the same look from the picture with his mother, like a child ready to destroy something.

“We should probably leave,” he says.

Shen lays into him for lobbing the grenade. “I’m not going to jail,” she screams as we scramble up the bank, through the mud and to the car. I lose sight of Shen and then there’s another explosion behind me, near the beach and all the undergrowth in front of me lights up a dark and brownish orange. I hear car doors open and close, an engine turn over, but somehow I’ve managed to snag my clothes and Shen is screaming my name and her voice is moving away, sliding into the dark along with the sound of the car. When I make it to the dirt road all that’s left are the ruts from his car like wounds in the earth. Behind me the cops are disembarking onto the shore and soon, in a rush of yelling, they have me against the cool ground.

*

The cops are pretty nice about it all. I tell them I just made my own homemade fireworks and added some black powder to the mix. They turn me over to the Arkansas state troopers, but they don't seem interested in figuring out what I did wrong and turn me loose after an hour or so. It takes me a while to find someone to come pick me up, but eventually I do. By the time I get home it's a bright morning and Dylan's house looks brittle in the sun. The paint seems to have chipped even since the last time I took a good look. I stumble to the door and find on the porch the wilted “I’m sorry” bouquet. Apparently the couple next door could see the joke a mile away.

Inside the first thing I notice is the smell of burnt food, and then Dylan on the couch, remote control in hand. His hair sticks to his forehead in sweaty curls and he slouches like someone with pains in the chest.

“That was a class move,” I say.

“Well,” he says without looking at me, “I could have blown your ass up, Ted.”

“You could have,” I say absently.

“I’ve wanted to blow shit up my whole life.”

“Man, it’s your calling.”

He tosses the remote onto the floor. I can’t see what he’s watching, but I hear the drone of warplanes and radio chatter.

“Go ahead and ask me,” he says.

“What?”

“Why I left you there.”

I know its Shen. Does he want me to say it?

“Why?” I ask.

“Everything I love gets blown away. So you should feel lucky that I hate you.”

“Yeah?”

“Everything I care about goes up in flames or worse and so it’s all the protection I can offer, man.”

He looks at me and all I can think is we should be able to undo some of the wrongs, but we’ve been fighting so long about stupid shit that there’s no connection left. We played in the dirt when we were kids and designed our dream houses on sheets of green graph paper—sheets that I would keep for years and years, while he threw his

away. Because he never could see anything rise up from the paper, never see anything beautiful come into existence. It was only tearing things apart and blowing things up and watching as things fell from the sky. He knows it's all going to fall and crumble, and that consumes him.

I head towards my room. "I want you out," he says.

"I got a lease," I say.

"I tore it up. You'll thank me when this is a house of splinters."

*

After I crash for a few hours I wake to find Dylan's dad standing in my doorway in sandy fatigues. He's not moving or smiling, but he stares at the wall where his dead wife's picture hangs. I think it's a dream for a few moments, but then he moves inside the room and says a quiet "hello." He ignores the piles of my crumbling stuff and takes her picture off the wall.

"How have you been, Ted?" he says without looking at me.

"Good, Mr. Brennan," I say. I wish I could remember his rank.

"The place looks like shit."

"Yeah."

"How has Dylan been?"

I sit up in bed and find a few moments by sipping at the cup of luke warm water on a box by my mattress. "Still the same. He likes blowing stuff up."

Mr. Brennan paces around the room and I feel out of place, as if it's time to pack my bags and leave the house for good, to leave Dylan behind in his world of detonation and collapse. Mr. Brennan looks at the photo in his hand and touches the face of his wife lightly, removing the built-up dust. He cleans the whole thing with his sleeve.

“Yeah, people like blowing shit up,” he says and then his mood changes, it seems instantly, and he turns from her picture.”Then you get to dig through the rubble and you find things. I won't tell you, Ted. But you know the things you can find in the rubble, right?”

I'm looking at his dead wife's face through the clear, clean glass and I see the war they've been fighting in the aftermath. As much as I've been a witness, I've been oblivious. There's only so close you can get to a friend—what used to be a friend. There's only so close you want to be when the whole world for them turns to shit. Is that a failing? I sat there and listened to Dylan and his dad yell at each other, packing my stuff, deciding what I never cared to see again and what I had to take with me. Is it a failing that I do not go and try to make peace, to sift through it all, since I am more witness than anyone, except her face behind that glass? But I'm still sort of like Dylan—mermerized by the destruction. It doesn't thrill me the way it does him, but in a way I am glad that Dylan will never find happiness because that means that at least one person who didn't deserve it didn't find it. A small duffel packed, and I'm gone out the back door.

As I move through the side yard I see the young couple next door. Her belly is round. I hadn't noticed before. They are trying to ride a tandem bike, and though it isn't working, they are laughing and giving each other direction. I have always thought those

bikes were stupid. Usually, I point at them, shake my head and laugh in disgust. Usually, I'd be happy to see them fall over.

Buch and the Snakestretchers

Buch makes his Telecaster sing and dip over the low-mixed organ. I play the record before I go, the old player sitting in the middle of the kitchen table. My life, too, is something like an instrumental. Maybe because, like Buch, I can't sing at all, or there aren't any words. Mother is doing something noisy with the dishes, trying not to listen, just like she does every time I play my records. The window over her shoulder is stuffed with clouds. Outside it's cold and the weatherman said ice was on its way. I've got beer in the van already, some hidden, and some carefully hidden.

"Lord, he's here," Mother says, and sure enough the cupboards rattle with the motorcycle's roar. She looks at me and frowns. "I don't want you to go." She's been saying that for days; her mouth is tired of saying it. But the trip is something I've been looking forward to. And unlike the other things I look forward to that she screws up, this time I'm disobeying.

"I'll be back, ma. Midweek."

"You got any dope?" she asks, and already she's grabbed my chair and is searching under the cushion where I used to hide it ten years ago. She gives my pockets a good going through, though she should know I never use them. She breathes on me. God, she doesn't have to breathe her mint tea breath on me. It's like she's trying to infect me with her motherly scent so that no woman will touch me and no man will

respect me. She wants me to stay the same till she's buried next to the car salesman she married last year. He dropped dead eating fried chicken in the backyard at midnight. In nothing but his underwear.

"You done searchin'?" I haven't had dope in years." I spin fast, catch her toe with my back wheel and she cusses me. Then she yanks the needle off and Buch is as quiet as he is dead.

"And no drinkin'," she says as she takes the record into her hands and looks at it as if she can read the sin in the grooves. She's ready to smash that record on the corner of the kitchen table. She squares up her yellow face to mine as if to dare me. Her mouth is tucked into her face and the wrinkles that fold into one another remind of how complex she is on the outside and the inside.

"I got that one on CD now, so do with it what you will." I don't tell her the LP is rare. I've still got the burlap sack it came in. Jim comes in the back door, his feet stomping off mud and mother forgets how much she's mad at me and remembers how much she hates him. She puts the record down and his head scoots around the corner, smiling like an idiot.

"You ready to roll, Ronny?"

Mother grabs her broom and pushes the dirt around the room . "You let him drink," she says, "And I'll get you both."

"No drinkin'," Jim says. "I promise he won't drink. I may have a couple of cases an hour to put up with his sour ass. Might have to mainline some if he gets in one of those moods, eh, Ronny?"

"Where you'll be tonight?" she asks.

“Somewhere in Kentucky, maybe.”

I roll over to Jim, past him and down the ramp to the van. It's burning cold and the air settles like a rock in my lungs. Mother wonders if I can count on Jim, and I wonder too, but no way else am I going to get to Virginia. I had tried to think of other ways. He loads me up, and then mother crawls inside and looks under the pillows on the floor, behind the seats and then, scowling, pulls out the twelve-pack I wanted her to find.

“I can't trust you not to destroy yourself,” she says.

“Yes ma'am. I'm hell bent. Just incompetent, is all.”

“You'll get it right, one day,” she says. “Practice makes perfect.”

“Sure does, mama. I love you, now.” But the motor is already sliding the door closed and she turns around without saying anything else and begins her trudge to the door. Each step she takes seems heavier and more hate-filled. She lifts the lid of the garbage can and throws the beer inside. Jim watches from the driver's seat, and though I can't see him, I hear his stupid low laugh.. He loves it when Mama and I fight, loves to instigate and watch the show. He doesn't move, lets the engine warm up. Then he opens the door and sneaks to the trash can, watching the door for Mama. He reaches in and pulls out the twelve-pack and runs back to the van, giggling.

“I got me some beer for tonight,” he says when he climbs back in. “Too bad it's not for you, Ronny boy. No suds for you, bro. Mother calls the shots, and you know I don't want on that fierce bitch's bad side.”

“I hope you drown in it.”

“Now that's the way we begin a road trip, my friend?” He laughs the van into gear and tears down the driveway. The back windows are covered in felt, but I know my

mother is back there in the shadows, behind the bars of our kitchen window, frowning at us both.

The highway snakes under us, and I relax. Jim has the radio on a country station. I let it slide because I need to win him over so I can get some beer in me later on. Of all the people in the world to have control over me, I voluntarily chose Jim Jefferson. But I had to get away from her, that constant smell of breath. Even the sound of her dress as she walked stifled me somehow, trapped me in its web of desperate whooshing. God love her, but I'll hate her for the moment. Until Jim does something shitty to me. Then we'll see if I crawl back.

We should be headed out of town, but instead we've pulled off the two-lane into a gravel driveway. Jim pulls the van up to a trailer. I don't know whose it is, but when he honks the horn a girl steps out, as thin as air and way too young to take across Kentucky and into Virginia. Her hair looks freshly washed, even a little wet still. Her shoulders are rolled forward and she walks with a slight shuffle, as if she were used to being scolded.

"I thought it was just us," I say. Then she gets in and the smell of stale cigarettes and cinnamon gets in with her and settles in the van.

"I needed more company than some sour cripple," he says to me with a wink in the rearview. She leans over and kisses him on the cheek, opens her jacket and shows him something I can't see. "This is Rhonda, and Rhonda, this is Ronny."

"Hiya," she says, her girl's voice trying to add years with inflection.

I ignore her. "I hope you don't think this is some fun time. I am paying you, Jim. This is no party. I'm working."

“I know. Don’t sweat it.” He doesn’t know how to handle the van, and we bump and jolt back down the driveway and onto the road again. Rhonda chews her gum like she wants it to die, and the noise mixes oddly with the country on the radio. I convince Jim to put in some Roy.

“This is where we’re goin’,” says Jim. “We’re goin’ to see this guy.”

Would she have gotten out if she knew? Would Jim have agreed if I hadn’t made up the story I did about liner notes for a limited edition reprint of *Buch and the Snakestrecthers*? I didn’t want to tell her we were going to go see the jail cell where Roy Buchanan killed himself. Or was killed. And I didn’t want Jim to know I had no reason to go but to see for myself the last thing he saw, the barred sky, the metal toilet. If I’m doing it for money or for fame, Jim understands. But if I’m doing it for myself, I probably earn another trip to a psychologist on mom’s orders. Not that Jim or Mama could ever understand how music fills you up like breath when you’ve got no chance at money, no chance at getting laid or even lighting up a girl’s face the way you used to. “Sweet Dreams.” comes on, those long, sweet notes fold down my eyes and the highway rocks me to sleep. On we go to Roy’s house, the big house, the real house of blues.

We stop at a cheap motel near Elizabethtown, Kentucky. Jim takes some cash from me and heads into the office, Rhonda dragging along behind. We didn’t talk much on the way here, but rest stops and stops for snacks have slowed us down. And they got tired of Roy after only a few miles. Since then it’s been CCR and whatever the local Kentucky stations have beamed our way.

I saw Buch with Delbert McClinton back in '83 at a show in St. Louis. It was a theater performance and they had a small horn section that made the music sound full and alive. The girl I was dating then even got into it. We ground into each other and the rest of the crowd in the first few rows. He didn't play any early stuff, mostly cuts he was working on for the Alligator record. That's the only time I saw him, but I remember his eyes when he would go into a solo, how they narrowed and focused on the strings. I watched his fingers work into and out of knots, leaving hot rosewood and singing frets. I was a bit of a player then, when my arms still worked right, and I remember taking that girl back to my place and for a few short hours. I played like I knew what the instrument wanted me to do. I tried to emulate the licks I had seen, but all I managed was the vigor and the passion. But that was plenty for me. She listened for a while, excited, but then she got bored. I was playing the best of my life and she took off her clothes and crawled under the covers and slept. We split up after that, an equal thing. She told me she didn't want to be with a man who wouldn't fuck her when she wanted it, and I told her I couldn't stand to be with a woman who couldn't hear magic. For a lonely while I regretted not keeping her, but since my accident I've treasured the memory of that night, those notes, the tight breathless feeling of good music filling you inside and bursting out.

When Rhonda and Jim get back we drive around to the room. They help me out and I ask Jim if he'll get the beer out from under the backseat for me.

"I don't want no trouble from your ma," he says.

"She ain't here, and I get pretty mean when I'm sober." I try to smile even though I'd rather yell at him for trying to control me.

"Okay," he says laughing, "but don't spill any, because I ain't washing you up."

“Maybe Rhonda will,” I say before I can think not to say it and he shoots me an “eat shit” look. But Rhonda smiles, embarrassed. For a stringy girl she is pretty and the impression I get is that she just needs to take care of herself a little better, get some nicer clothes, a better hairstyle—a new boyfriend. I’m quick to take my eyes off of her, lest the beer be taken away from me. Jim puts the twelve pack in my lap and we go inside.

Once we get settled down we order a couple of pizzas and watch TV. We all drink, throwing them back hard. Nobody says much. I know my leg bag is getting full and I’m going to have to get Jim to empty it soon. I’ve told him about it before, but now that he’s drunk, I know he’s going to give me hell. But to my surprise, Jim remembers on his own. “Let’s get this crap over with,” he says. In some way I feel more appreciative when Jim does something nice for me. He gives everybody so much crap, but there are times like this when it seems like I’m the only person in the world he would do something nice for. Maybe deep down Jim enjoys mothering me. And of course he knows doing these things—however disgusting or demeaning-- gives him the power to talk down to me too. “Christ this thing is as full as a tick,” he says, and holds it up so Rhonda can see. She bursts out in a fit of laughter that is so lilting and sweet that I don’t even mind that it’s directed at me.

After we eat, Rhonda and Jim disappear into the bathroom together and the shower goes on. By this time I’m spinning in my chair, feeling loose and wishing desperately to have someone there with me to talk with about anything. I have nothing in common with Jim but our shared Missouri roots and Rhonda’s just a kid. They speak in short gulps, make sex jokes that fourth graders would find hilarious. It will be a sort of relief to say

goodbye to them when I'm where I want to be. But now, they are a means to an end, a form of transportation to get me to Virginia, to get me inside the cell where Roy Buchanan's body hung until morning. I've seen it there, in my mind, seen his hands swollen, the fingers collecting with blood. I see a window there, where he must have looked out and seen whatever the last thing he saw was. A metal sink, a cot and bars and bars over everything else.

Why no one has written Roy Buchanan's "American Pie," I don't understand. I was already in the chair before he died, years before, and when I read about his death in a Guitar magazine I thought about what type of song might eulogize him the best. What song would he play at his own funeral? It's a question I become preoccupied when there's no one around, when I'm waiting for mother to help me out of bed. Sometimes I'll go through a list an hour long. Eventually I think about what song I want played at my funeral, and I wonder if mother would let it be played or if she would substitute some souless hymn.

Rhonda and Jim come out, wet and smiling. She only wears a towel and he walks around in a pair of black jockey shorts. His back is covered in wet curls of dark hair. "Ever think of shaving that back?" I ask him.

"The more hair, the tougher the man," he says, "Right, Rhonda?"

Rhonda doesn't say anything.

"Ain't many harrier than you, Jim."

"Ain't any tougher, neither." He begins clipping his toenails. They drop to the floor in ragged, yellow strips. Rhonda watches too and I wonder if she's thinking about

leaving, going back to Missouri. Thumbing rides from probable criminals has to look more inviting than those toes and that back. But, then I've never understood women very well.

"Do you think the maids really want to clean up those clipping of yours?"

"Fuck 'em," he says, and I look at Rhonda and wonder if she's ever heard that the way a man treats his mother, his waitress or his maid will be the way he treats his woman, down the road.

"Yes," I say. "Who cares about them?" We go back to watching TV, but even that begins to bore us. Eventually the beers entertains us all and we end up talking for a long time. Somewhere around midnight, Jim passes out and Rhonda moves over to a chair beside me.

"Who's this Roy we're going to see?" she asks.

"A bluesman. A dead bluesman."

"So this is like a pilgrimage to his grave, right?"

"Something like that."

"How come I've never heard of him?"

"He's kind of a secret kept by fans of the blues. The best unknown guitarist there ever was, though he was known by quite a few."

"I like Stevie Ray Vaughn," she says. She is still wearing the towel from her shower, and presumably nothing else.

"He's good. Roy was better."

She leans forward, points a crust from the pizza we've been revisiting at me. "Some people might fight you for saying that." The smile she flashes is slick and cute as hell.

"Some people don't know shit. Stevie lifted a lot of his licks. He was good. An imitator. But he wasn't an original. Roy was a lone gun. They asked him to join the Stones, but he turned them down. Clapton wanted him for Derek and the Dominoes before Duane Allman. He was a god waiting for his worshippers."

She doesn't know what to say, and I feel I went on a little too long with my obsession. She chews the pizza crust thoughtfully. One of her cheeks is stuffed and it makes her look more real, more there. She doesn't pay much attention to her towel and I watch for it to slip or for her legs to get far enough apart. All of this shows that she sees me as asexual, which is how it's been for me for years and years. I'm the ultimate non-threat, safer than a gay man or a nun to most women.

"Does your daddy know where you are?" I ask.

"Does he care?" She pulls another leftover crust from the box.

"How'd you end up with sleeping beauty over there?"

She looks at Jim and lets out a long, breathy sigh. "He was there when I needed someone to be there."

She leans in close to me and I smell the stale beer and pizza on her breath. "Let me ask you something," she says. "Can you still....you know?"

I know I must be blushing a little. "Yep." I say.

"Really?"

“It’s a closed system,” I say. “If you stimulate, the reaction happens even if I can’t feel anything.”

“Can you...?”

“I don’t get much chance to try. I haven’t since. They say you can. That it’s all in the mind.”

I remember girls like her, full of promise and beauty and smarts. And then they end up with the guy from the trailer park because they’re scared of really looking, of being alone and searching. But solitude is good, I’ve learned. It hardens your resolve. I want to grab her, shake her, tell her to never settle.

“Would you do me a favor?” I ask.

“What?” she says, probably expecting me to ask for another beer or a slice of cold pizza.

“Would you help me into bed?”

We could drag Jim out of his drunken slumber—it would be easier—but I don’t let on how much work it is to get me into bed. I want her to push and shove at me. And waking Jim would ruin the conversation we’ve just had. I move my chair beside the bed and tell her to take off the arm. I can help a little with my arms, but I don’t have much control or strength, so she does most of the work. When we first try the shift, the bed moves and I almost slip onto the floor between the bed and the chair. But Rhonda holds on. her face is cut with determination and after moving the bed back she tries again. This time she uses too much strength and I almost fly off the other side. But a little more pulling and she’s got me right in the middle. As I smile my thanks at her I notice she has

lost her towel. She smiles back drunkenly. "Guess I should pick that up," she says with a smile and what could have been, in the dark, a wink.

And as she wraps the towel around her again, Jim farts. We laugh together and she turns out the light.

The morning kills me. My head is a bell, my brain the clapper pounding at its sides. All I can hear is the constant ringing, the permanent hearing loss that goes with years of playing and listening too loud. It only bothers me when I've been drinking or when I'm desperately alone in a quiet house. I wait and wait for Jim and Rhonda to get up and when I can't stand it anymore, I start to yell at them.

They move slowly, like victims of disaster. They hold their heads in ways that indicate headache and annoyance, but they do not talk to me. As if I am an imbecile I sit there and watch them dress and preen, sort through bags with toothbrushes and deodorant. They disappear into the bathroom and return only to look for more things they need to get ready. I'd like to believe that Rhonda and I made some kind of connection last night. But her body language, the way she avoids my eyes tells me something's wrong. I lay there under the covers with nothing to do. Finally Jim makes his way to me and throws off the covers.

"Good day, sunshine," he says, and then he groans. "Christ, do I have to change your clothes?"

"Forget it," I say. "I'm not changing this trip."

"Thank God," he says and helps me into my chair. The aftershave he uses comes off of him in clouds. It's like breathing ammonia, and my eyes start to water. I can tell by

Jim's roughness with me that he has decided the money I agreed to pay him is not enough to offset the inconvenience. I expect him to say that we're going to head home now, with some lame reason or other attached to give him an out. I can almost hear his brain grinding out an excuse. Eventually they gather all their stuff together and we head for the van.

And we get on the interstate headed the right way. But Jim has decided that further payment will be exacted by being an asshole to me, and probably to Rhonda too. I think for a moment that she might have told him about the towel and that he is fuming. But why would she tell him? I would think it would be no big deal, especially the way she looked at me last night. But then why the dour mood, the dropped eyebrows, the short, curled frown?

The highway seems gritty and hard today, and I think about what mother must be doing now without me to care for or intrude upon. Her life seems more boring to me the more I think about it. She has friends who pay her only minor attention and hobbies that she gets little enjoyment from. She reads the Bible, her only true happiness, and reports to me of what she learns every night at supper. One should learn in church as much as I do at dinner. She tells the stories with a great deal of excitement, not stopping to chew her food at all. Her hands are in constant motion, slow and gentle when she quotes Jesus, clinched in fists when the Old Testament God speaks. She has given a lot of money to televangelists. She tells me that she prays for me every night, not that I will walk again (because that is my cross to bear) but that I will turn away sin. I go with her to church on Easter and Christmas and whenever she cries when she asks me, but I find no refuge from sin there. I envy and lust and wrath from my position behind the last

pew, and the words from the preacher never seem to get past the parishioners in front of me or the ringing in my ears. Even if the words made it, there's no reason to think that my brain would give them any heed. How is that a spiritual life?

But the reason I go on and on about Buch is because, when his guitar plays, no matter how soft, the ringing melts away. He drowns out the feedback of the world. I am obsessed with the sound of an electric guitar strung too tight. I am in love with the anger in the music, the freedom it possesses. I sing along with the solos, my own voice screeching and popping. I miss notes by miles, but my goal is not accuracy. That's for musicians in tuxes. I'm after the soul of it, the fight in it, the scream behind the wall of other sounds. It's desperate—contrary to Christianity's reaffirming faith--and that's why I relate to it. My mother says it's the devil's music and she's probably right about that. But it is my true spiritual life.

We get off at a rest area for them to pee and they leave me behind in the van. It's only about eleven and already I'm craving beer. Outside the weather is sunny, and families walk the macadam path to the squat building and then separate by gender. A man in shorts and sandals smokes a cigarette by the door, waiting for his wife and daughter. A couple sits at a park bench, a cooler between them. There is desperation in the air, unspoken, unsung. There is even desperation in the child who tosses a frisbee into the blank green grass, running after it to toss it to no one again. It strikes me that no one here has found their music, the notes that change them. For a while it makes me feel better that I know something they may never know. Then, finally Rhonda emerges and waits for Jim. The wind plays with her hair. Nobody writes songs about these times, the waiting periods between the changes in your life. But it's there in music anyway, the

silence between songs, that split second between the snare and the kick. If I could play, that's the space I'd cram with notes.

Jim's out, and they lock arms as they approach the van.

"Okay, princess," Jim says when they get in. "Where to now?"

"I don't know," Rhonda says.

"I was talking to Ronny, sweetheart." Jim laughs.

"How about a cold one, Jimmy," I ask.

"I don't think so. Mama's orders."

"She won't know," I say. But she will if he wants her to. This is Jim's sick way of controlling the situation, of pissing me off. He has the power, the key to the liquor cabinet. And all the kids have to play his game if they want access.

"Mama's orders," he smiles at me in the rearview. But no matter how much I want the beer, I'm not playing his game.

"Let's get to Fairfax," I say. "And put on some God damn blues."

This, he allows. Blues but no booze. Rhonda asks what I want, and I say okay to the first name she reads from a cassette. She pops in the tape and Gatemouth sends jazzy vibrations through me, improving my mood and making me think of better times long gone.

Rhonda grows on me. She's strong and polite. I noticed her manner when we stopped for lunch. She helped me eat, spooning chili to my mouth, crumbling the crackers on top, even blowing on the spoon so I wouldn't get burned. Jim sat across from us, some cunning and vexed expression on his face. He must have been half-

jealous, half-grateful he didn't have to lower himself to feed a cripple in public. Had we been alone, he would have made sure I ordered something I could handle without his assistance, some type of food on a stick.

"I'll be back," Rhonda says after she's helped me finish the chili and wiped my chin. I watch her walk toward the restroom, watch her more intently than I should.

"Rhonda's nice," I say.

"Yeah." His eyes are closed, his head leaned back.

"Yes. Very nice. She's got a nice body."

He grunts, and I wonder for a second if I should keep going.

"Nice tits."

Jim opens his eyes and laughs. "What, Ronny? You want to touch 'em? You got enough feeling in your fingers?"

I raise my hand. I can hold things, move my fingers a little bit. The last girlfriend I had called me "the crab." My mother thought it was because of my attitude, but really it was the pinching. "I can get her nipple," I say.

"Look, you fuck," Jim says leaning over the table. "I'm helping you out. I even feel sorry for your crippled ass. Sorry enough to keep emptying your piss bag. But there's no way I'm gonna let you paw all over my girl, you got that? You can look," he pauses, takes the spoon from out of my empty chili bowl and rubs it on my nose. "But don't touch. Hear?"

I could probably get a hold of my napkin and wipe off my nose, but the time and effort it would take would thrill Jim to no end. Instead I sit with the greasy mess on my

nose and wait. I stare at him, at his sunken jaws covered in dirty stubble. Rhonda comes back and sits next to me. I smile.

“Oops,” she says. “Looks like I missed a spot.” As she wipes off my nose I grin at Jim.

“Come on,” he says, “We need to get this crip where he’s going.”

“Jim!” Rhonda glares. “That’s awful.”

“Relax, girl. He calls himself that all the time. Don’t you call him handicapped. Gets his bile all worked up You talk politically correct and we’ll never hear the end of it, right?”

Rhonda sighs and I can tell—I’m not completely stupid about women—that she’s regretting the trip. Likely she’s got a dad or mom at home ready to shoot her when she gets back. And what’s her reward? Getting drunk with an asshole and maybe some awkward shower sex in a dingy hotel room.

And to think, she’s the one who feels sorry for me.

An accident up ahead has the traffic stopped on I-85 in Virginia. We haven’t moved an inch in twenty minutes and many of the drivers have gotten out and are talking to one another. Jim gets out of the van, mumbling something about turning around again. So I’m alone with her and as I look out at the line of cars and semis stretching away in front of us, I feel trapped and afraid.

“I hope there’s not an accident,” Rhonda says from her seat. Her shoes are off and she has her feet on the dashboard. Her toenails were painted quite some time ago and only little scraps of bright pink polish linger in the center of each nail.

“Don’t talk to me about car accidents,” I say. I don’t like talking about my own accident, but it’s been more than two decades and I’ve come to terms with it in a lot of ways. What irks me most is the way people want to know. You roll into a restaurant and—especially in small Missouri towns—people look over. Underneath the thin veneer of pity they throw at you is *The Question*: how did it happen?

The Question must be blooming in Rhonda’s mind; she shifts in her seat, bringing her pretty feet down as if she’s suddenly ashamed of her legs.

“I thought I was dead. You ever been in a wreck?”

“A couple.” She says.

“Bad?”

“Not bad, no.”

“Well, mine was bad.” I let her imagination take over for a while. Jimmy is outside leaning against the fender of a Toyota talking to an older couple. They smile bewildering, bright smiles at him. He shifts and laughs, turns his head and spits out a gob of tobacco juice onto the gray highway. Rhonda’s watching him too, so I pass some judgment.

“Jimmy is one nasty dude.”

She laughs, polite sounding, so I go back to my accident.

“Mine was at night. Lonely dark road. I’d been drinking, but not as much as mother thinks. I was on my bike, speeding like hell, ripping through that night air. It was the fall, so it was cool. There were sheets of leaves on the highways, and I remember the sound and smell. I must’ve gotten caught up in the beauty of it all and I took a corner a little too fast. I made it but lost it again overcompensating on the way out of the turn. I

skidded and flipped and somehow that fucking bike came down right on top of me. The engine died and there was no sound. I was looking up at the night sky, all those stars blinking down at me. And then I notice I can't feel my feet. Maybe the boots are cutting off circulation. My leg hurts like hell where I cut it. My back aches. But then the pain starts to go away. First the leg. Then the back."

Rhonda has turned all the way around.

"Then my chest and up to my neck. It was like being slowly dipped in water. But I didn't think it would stop. I thought I was dead on that dark road, with all the world sleeping just out of range."

Jimmy and the couple have moved to the trunk of their car and spread a map out in the sun. They all stare, looking for a detour.

"How bad did it hurt?" she says.

"The thing is," I say, "You spend your life thinking about getting hurt. You know it's going to happen, that you've not felt the last pain, or even probably the worst pain you're going to feel in this life. But feeling nothing is the scariest. I was going numb and losing my connection to the world and everyone in it. Of course, now I could stab my leg with a knife and never feel it. But my legs still hurt and burn a lot. And sex too. I get horny like anyone else. And I can keep it up for hours and hours but never feel a thing."

I want to tell Rhonda more about the incredible trapped feeling you feel, upside down on the highway in the middle of the night, your legs up above you in the dark somewhere. And then how you wake up, feeling pretty good until the doctors come in and tell you about your spine and you're sure you've seen that bastard doctor before, passed him on the street a long time ago.

She reaches into the back with me and gets a beer from Jim's cooler. She hands me one too, opens it and drops in a straw. And I don't even have to ask.

"Have I told you about my screwed up family?" she asks.

"Is that why you're with Jimmy?"

"That's not all of it." she turns around and pops her own beer. Outside Jimmy folds the map and hands it back to the couple. He moves toward the van.

"Tell me about it later, okay?" I say and then Jimmy opens the door and all the wind and noise from outside comes in. In my day, I could have taken him in a fight, easy. But now I sit in the back of the van like some child in a car seat, strapped down, watching him dangle his arm with the bravest ease out the window. His other hand turns some awful country music way up, then moves to her leg and settles there, dirty nail scratching lightly at her skin.

The sound of engines turning over comes through Jim's window, and for a moment I think we'll move. But nothing happens and then she turns around and looks at me and says, "Okay." Jim takes it for a question and grunts at her, at me, at the cars blocking him in.

At dinner, Rhonda sits next to me, to help and to stay away from Jim. They've been snapping at each other since the road cleared and we made it, finally, into Richmond. Jim's not at all liking the way Rhonda and I have connected. Even though I'm not fool enough to think she's the least bit interested in a cripple twenty plus years her senior, to have her sit next to me and away from him gives me a kind of the thrill that

only music had been able to in recent years. I look down and notice that she is resting her bare foot on my chair.

And then, as the ice cream in front of me melts they leave and outside a storm gathers itself, knotting the clouds until they look as heavy as rocks. I feel upside down again, semi-buried in the fluorescence of the small diner. The waitress shuffles over and calls me “hon” in a detached voice. I wonder what mother is doing without me to keep track of. Where does she amble now that my room is empty and her crippled only son is on the road?

Back when I was hurt I went through the disability money pretty fast, or my friends did. They took me out and we partied and ended up high in second floor apartments with no ramp or elevator. I'd sit hungover and ulcered on some stranger's balcony trying to remember who carried me up that height and trying to figure out who would get me down. A few times it was mama, driving up in her silver VW with the black door, streams of Missouri summer sweat dripping from her tight brow. She'd pull me out of my chair and drag it down the steps as I watched from the cool cement landing. And the noise—the scraping chair on the stairs and her cursing—would bring out an audience of the shirtless denizens. She puffed her way back to me and then scooted me down one step at a time--careful to move me between two cushions so that I wouldn't get a decubitus ulcer--while whole families watched, their heavy stares on me so hot and hard that I wished my legs would fall off and roll away so that I at least wouldn't have their dead weight holding me down like a god-given ball and chain. One step at a time, and even if I closed my eyes I still saw the black kid leaning over the rail on the far side of the complex, a red white and blue popsicle licked to impossible sharpness

dangling from his fingers. And all the while I would beg my mother for a drink—a quarter-bottle to light the shame and burn it off. But she only had Bible verses and half-mumbled cusses for me. By the time she had me in the front seat we were drenched and both of us breathing hard. And they watched us drive away, scores of them it seemed, some laughed from their high place above me.

As I sit and remember those days, I can feel the same stares. Ten minutes turns into an hour. And then two. I'm not far from the cash register so that every group that leaves stands near me and looks and wonders if I've been abandoned there in the diner. I could go, I suppose—though Jim's got the money to pay, but I've been trained to wait until someone comes and gets me, to sit still like a lost child in the last place my caregivers saw me. Not to cry or worry, they are coming just as soon as they can

When Jim and Rhonda finally do come back, only minutes before the diner is set to close, they hold each other with a closeness I haven't noticed before. She dangles from him like piece of jewelry, and though he has a tight, curled smile on his lips, he sags under her, as if he regrets that he brought her along. The manager has already turned off half the lights so that the counter and kitchen area are dark and grey, the silhouettes of the staff move about and the sound of dishes and glasses colliding mixes with Rhonda's giggle to make this place seem the loneliest of all.

“We can drive through and be there by five AM,” Jim says. His hand moves from the small of Rhonda's back around to her stomach.

“Fine,” I say. They kiss loud and wet, like amateurs. The final bank of lights goes out and they are lit in their embrace by the rust-glow of the street.

By the time we load into the van, I am in desperate need of a beer, anything to prop up my soul. There are a few times like this when even the infinite possibility of music doesn't appeal to me

Soon after my accident, I began to hate my guitar. What could I do with it now? The docs said I was lucky for a quad. I could move my chair with ease and hold a few things if they were large enough. I had mother put the guitar in my lap the first night I was home from the hospital. I had her plug it in and turn it up, and even though she always said the blues were the devil's kind of music, there was something pathetic enough about me and my dead legs that made her sympathetic. She sat back in a wicker chair and drank a glass of tea while I moved my hands over the strings. I played along to the rhythm of her sighs, but it was nothing you'd call music. I couldn't even begin to finger a chord, but only scrape at the open strings. It was half a man scratching back at life, pouring an empty soul into that instrument and getting nothing but an empty sound. Occasionally a note would spark out clear and right, but it only seemed to mock me, since those clear notes appeared as often as they might if a child or an animal were playing. I thrust the guitar onto the floor and ran over it with my chair while my mother watched, the ice tinkling in her tea like some remnant of church music.

And I went to her church and all her smiling church friends tried to wrench me from the devil's grasp. Then I thought they did it only for themselves. In the back I do like to hear the singing of the choir and the hum of the organ, but it's not the blues and the blues were my life before and they are my life now.

Just a few days before I left on this trip I could have sworn my mother was humming a Howlin' Wolf song as she did the dishes. So the devil has infected her as well, it was only a matter of time with a fuck up cripple for a son and all his loud complaining. Too much to avoid in a tiny house. So I decided, as I listened to her over the dishes, that I needed to get away from her. Not only because she was trapping me, but because I was bogging her down, clutching her waist as she tried to ascend to heaven. It's what she deserves, if only I could believe it.

We've loaded up Buch again because we're close. Rhonda has lit up a joint and moves from side to side. The song is "The Messiah Will Come Again," and it's one of the only ones where you can hear Buch's voice. One of the only ones he wrote the words to. It's like church music, with a laid back organ and a beautiful melody that could be angels. But the guitar is haunted, like us all. There's a hint of distortion—like sound's own sin—and the lines aren't played clean, especially the fast runs. Buch's fingers are all over the place and there's a tension between the melody and the passion. Something in him wants out.

When the track is over, I ask them to play it again and Ronny does so without pausing. Buch's spoken words are soft, but I talk over him, and they listen.

"There's something you can't teach a guitarist or a bluesman," I say. "You can't teach desperate passion, and the blues is nothing without a strong belief in God and a strong distrust of him too." The smoke is thick in the van, like breathing something that doesn't want to be breathed. I realize that I've never actually listened to what Buch says.

There are words to the song, but they don't matter. The guitar says it all. Still, I try a translation.

“You can't just be down and say you have the blues. You can't just be sad. You have to hate the sadness, and yet love it. You have to want to be happy, but not know how. You have to enjoy being stepped on. Because it gives you cause to scream at the things you can't do anything about.”

Maybe I've talked too much and they aren't listening. I want to ask Rhonda if she gets it. But it's time to leave them, to hope that Rhonda gets out of her shitty life. If she can't, maybe Buch—or someone else schooled in the blues—can show her how to handle it.

“I need a smoke,” I say. “Before we head to Buch's final resting place.”

We are in downtown Fairfax and it takes a while, but we find a convenience store and Rhonda asks what brand I want.

“I want to go inside.”

“Shit,” Jim says, “Just let her buy it, you big baby.”

“Let me the fuck out,” I say.

“I'll leave you here,” Jim says. “I'll leave your crippled ass right here and you can get Greyhound to tow you home.”

“Then do it, Jimmy. You've been talking that shit all the way. Let me out and leave me if you have to.”

He doesn't say anything, but Rhonda opens the door and helps me on the lift. I can feel her watching me as I roll up the ramp and a blond teenage in a Slipknot t-shirt holds the door open for me. His face is wrinkled with the first anger of life—asshole

teachers, girls who ignore him, dogmatic parents. If I were a walking guy in a suit, he wouldn't even bother with the door. As I motor by I say "You might want to watch this for a minute, brother." But he lets the door fall shut behind me and turns.

Inside the fluorescent lights chart out weak shadows. A few customers mill around or wait in line. I find an aisle wide enough and move toward the back of the store and watch myself in the convex mirror on the wall. I find a beer display with twelve packs stacked high. A cardboard cutout of a woman in a bikini smiles down on me. But her body has been faded by the afternoon sun and her skin looks green and sickly. I bump against the display with my chair and the bottles rattle and clink.

Outside in the van, Jim and Rhonda move together in an embrace. Some customer behind me mutters "excuse me" and squeezes past heading for the counter. I back up and hit the display again. This time the woman in the bikini wobbles and loses her balance. She has come loose from whatever is holding her and now juts out at an angle.

I back up a good six feet and then ram the bottles again.

A case falls, but no bottles break. I ram it again and again and the girl falls and more beer clatters onto the hard floor. Finally some bottles break and someone yells from the front of the store, but I can't hear what it is because I'm ramming the display again and more bottles are flying and beer is foaming and hissing in a kind of music as the golden spill covers the floor. I push through the mess, dragging a case that gets caught in my back wheel. The employee meets me on my way to the front, ready to yell and scream, but the sight of me in my chair makes him pause.

"What the hell happened?" he asks.

“Your isles are too tight,” I tell him.

“What?” he looks at the mess and the damage I've done. “You didn't have to do that.”

“I'm sick of you assholes.” I wheel around him, scraping at the shelves and knocking down overpriced boxes of detergent. Then I see a rack of CDs and I take it down with a shattering that is truer music than their prepackaged bullshit. Next a stand of chips goes down and I run over them again and again. The customers move back in fear and the two employees surround me, but they are afraid to touch me.

“Lay one fucking hand on me, and I'll kill you,” I say, my voice somehow even. They move back on their heels, and there is a great satisfaction in their belief that somehow I could rise up and stomp them.

I turn toward the window again and see that Ronny has just noticed the commotion and runs with his long dirty hair stringing in the wind. Rhonda covers her mouth with her hand and walks slowly toward the store. But right outside the door is the blond teenager, a bright smile on his face, his first smile in a long while perhaps. I wink at him. He tucks his soda bottle under his arm and gives me silent applause before shaking his head and going on his way.

If your heroes aren't big names, their death can slip right by you, so I lived for a year without knowing that Buch had hung himself in Fairfax county jail. I read it in a guitar magazine my mother had bought for me on one of our trips down to Memphis to see a doctor about my depression. I rode in the back of the van reading the article as some hawk-voiced preacher yelled through the tinny AM radio. I had been having

problems. It was about five years since my accident and I had lost all my friends by either going broke or being an asshole, and my mother was the only company I ever had. So we bumped along the interstate and I read about the controversy—someone said that Buch had been hitting on a deputy's wife at a club and they took care of him. It wasn't enough that the world had never recognized how gifted he was, but now it was out to get him. Just like it was out to get me. I decided then, that whatever fate had in store for me—fuck it—I was going to be fate. I would exert what little control I had. I thought about flinging open the van door and throwing myself out, but my chair was locked in place. There was nothing I could do without help. And mother was no help.

The tinny preacher yelled of fire and burning pitch and it didn't seem so bad or so different from living.

“So this is the guy who trashed the Circle K?” The young sergeant asks with a smile. He sits beside me, his teeth greenish from tobacco. “What's the problem, bud?”

Before I answer, he reaches over and unlocks the handcuff that holds my one good hand to the chair. “My chips were stale,” I say.

“Uh-huh. And what' brings you to Virginia?” He looks over a sheet about me. I wonder if the stuff from before my accident is on there, the fights and petty larceny.

“I came to see Roy Buchanan's final resting place.”

“And where did he die?”

“In your jail.”

He looks up from the paper and laughs. “I suppose you could have asked for a tour.”

“More fun this way.”

It's not what I imagine, the sergeant talks more and more, asks questions about Buch that I can't refuse to answer and I begin to like him. So I stop answering and he frowns.

“We've got a disability advocate coming down to take care of you.”

“Fuck you. Throw me in a cell.”

He laughs again. “I don't know—never arrested a disabled person before myself.”

“ You can say 'cripple,' I'm not offended. Now, put me in a cell.” I yell. I back up my chair and ram his desk, and pretty soon they have me cuffed again. I let all kinds of expletives fly and the sergeant watches me with a calm face until suddenly he snaps.

“Get this asshole to a cell. I don't care if he sues us.” He pats me on the back in a strange, kind way, and off I go.

And so it isn't—of course—what I have imagined it to be. It's just a cell with no windows. They've not put me in with anyone else, but I can hear the talk from the community cell down the hall. It's a bunch of black guys mostly, and a few whites and Mexicans. Those were the kind of guys I used to hang out with in my Missouri youth. Fighting and gambling and running from the police. Now I need help just to be a criminal.

It's lonely as hell and I want to believe in the conspiracy. I want to believe that Buch was set up by a bunch of power hungry thugs because he had whistled at a deputy's wife. Because a hero shouldn't go out by his own hand, even if he was drunk and the cell made the world seem hopelessly cruel and cold. The metal toilet rises up like some sick altar, and there's even a bible laid out on my pillow. Of course I have no

way of picking the bible up or taking a shit. I have no way of lying down or getting out of my chair, no way to get on my knees if I wanted to pray. I have no way of hanging myself, even if I wanted to. I have no way of doing anything.

I want a harmonica to ring out, but I saw the guys. No one can play. No one in that cell had ever heard the blues, though they surely know what the blues are, what the blues is. But I remember those notes to “Sweet Dreams” and I hum them, softly at first. All the metal around seems to vibrate in unison, so that, somehow, I sound decent, even if the pitch is off. I keep going, louder and louder. I sing the notes that Buch played and wonder if he might have sung a song before he offed himself. I go on as loud as I can, hoping someone will come and ask me how crazy I am.

In a while I have to stop. Lots of inmates laugh and a few applaud. Then, only a few moments later a guard ushers Jim to my cell. His shirt is unbuttoned halfway and he’s got a cigarette tucked behind his ear.

“I talked to mama,” he says.

“She’s praying for me,” I say.

“Somebody ought to, you idiot.”

He leans against the bars. “That your plan all along?”

“What plan?”

“Get arrested so that you could see Roy’s death cell. Hum one of his tunes and then off yourself the way he did.”

“How the hell am I supposed to kill myself, Jim?”

“You’re a determined boy, Ronny. Can’t keep a man away from his destiny.”

I turn my chair away from him. “Night, Jim.”

“How would you like me to tell mama you did it?”

His footsteps echo away from me and the only sound is the chatter from the group cell. What happens when you find out your hero was just a depressed drunk who didn't know how good he had it? And you've been following him too long to know any other way.

Somehow Jimmy was able to bail me out. He didn't say if Mother sent the money or if he did it on his own. Nobody talks as the three of us hit the dark highway again. The radio is silent, so all I hear is the sound of the tires picking up a rhythm from the grooves in the road.

I fall asleep and when I wake up, Jim is rolling me onto the lift. Outside a motel sign is scratching the dark with its red neon. As Jim helps me over the curb I look for Rhonda but don't see her anywhere. We're finally inside room 122 and Jimmy wearily helps me get into bed.

“You smell like a sack of shit, partner” He says in an almost loving way. And then he goes outside and past the window.

I doze, but soon I am awakened by the long sweet notes of Buch's telecaster and someone is pulling at me from below. Only the orange light from the parking lot seeps in, and I see Rhonda toss my pants away. She steps to the front of the bed and dabs my face with a wet washcloth. She begins to clean me, running the cloth along my legs and then my stomach. Buch seems to be playing just for us, long sweet notes with the occasional sour bend just sharp of true. Rhonda leans in and kisses me and she smells like a cool stream.

She continues with the bath. She removes my underwear and washes with the cloth until I am hard. Then she lifts herself and when she leans forward I know I am inside her. The cloth is still in her hand as she clutches my head and it's like all the electricity in Buch's guitar has embodied that cloth as it scrapes against my face. I can feel every rough spot in that cloth, every defect. She breathes ginger ale breath against my neck and the bed squeaks in the dark.

Then, as the first strains of "The Messiah will Come Again" begin, I feel it rising inside. I concentrate on the friction of the cloth and Rhonda's breath and for an instant I feel her warmth somewhere deep inside of me. It's like that night with my guitar long ago, everything is finding a way to join together. Each sound we make blends and bleeds. The feeling builds. I swear I can feel the rosewood of a guitar fretboard under my fingers, Rhonda's breasts against my deadened chest. I let out the longest moan I can remember. She moans too and we rock together in the dark.

I hold her for minutes in the silence. "Thank you Rhonda," I say into her sweet ear. "What's Jimmy going to say?"

"He said it was all right. He said screwing a cripple didn't count to him." She giggles uncomfortably.

I turn toward the window and see a silhouette that I know to be Jimmy's. He smokes and the shadow of the smoke cloud billows around him like a broken halo. I can imagine a half-smile on his face as his shadow appears to turn and look at the window. He drops the cigarette to the ground, claps his hands once and walks away into the night.

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Vita

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