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# The Back Road to Murfreesboro

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*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Ashley Scott Moser entitled "The Back Road to Murfreesboro." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Alan Wier, Mike Keene

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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

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Carolyn R. Hodges, Vice Provost and  
Dean of the Graduate School

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THE BACK ROAD TO MURFREESBORO

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Ashley Scott Moser

May 2008

Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,  
Time held me green and dying  
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

- Dylan Thomas  
"Fern Hill"

## **Acknowledgements**

Whatever it takes to make a writer, whatever grit and resolve and perspiration, I owe in large part to two outstanding professors, Michael Knight and Allen Wier. This collection, and my belief in myself as a writer, would not exist without their counsel, critical and creative, over the years. I thank them both for the enormous influence they unknowingly had on me.

I would like to thank all my friends over the years at the University of Tennessee, old and new, especially those who stuck by me through the difficult times. You, too, have made an incredible impact on this collection and on my life.

Finally, I would like to thank my family: to my mother and father, I love you both; to my brother, Paul, you are my hero; to my sister, Melea, and brother, Glen, I'm so proud of you both, and if as adults you live up to half the promise you've set for yourselves as children, anything can be yours – dream big.

## **Abstract**

This project was conceived as a multi-form, multi-media piece in which each work of fiction, poetry, or photography is fully intended to both stand on its own and contribute to an overall feeling for the entire collection. It is in the juxtaposition of these various works that the audience can gain a greater appreciation for the entire collection as well as for each individual piece contained within.

This collection explores the dissatisfaction and alienation of contemporary life, and depicts characters, objects, and settings that are all in some way disconnected or empty. The overall stance is negative, of frustrated desire, in the hope that it may serve as a warning call against what is shown.

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## Introduction

My parents divorced when I was three and my older brother five. For the next five years, until she remarried, my mother struggled to raise two rambunctious boys on her own, working full time and taking college courses on the side. Thinking of them in hindsight, I see now how truly formative these years were. I don't know whether it was something he learned or if it is some trick of his genetic wiring, but my brother has always been a storyteller. I, on the other hand, have always been a questioner – one reason why I pursued an undergraduate degree in philosophy is because I fell so naturally into it – I've always wanted explanations for everything. Our mother worked incredibly hard to provide for us, but this also meant that she could not spend as much time with us as she wanted; most of my time was spent with my brother, and consequently most of my questions were directed to him.

My brother struggled with our father's absence in his own way, and part of his response to it was stepping into that vacuum for me. He was a child himself, and had no more answers to my questions than I did; pair a natural storyteller with the questions of a precocious child, and the result was that from an early age I was exposed continually to a fanciful view of the world and how it works. Why there are shadows, where ants go when they crawl underground, how roads are made – there was an answer for everything. It may not have been true *necessarily*, but I think this is partly where my aesthetic developed: what is truth, who defines it, and why does it matter so much? “Objective” reality has never been one of my utmost concerns, because no one's experience of it is ever objective. I experienced these fantastical explanations as truth, believed them

wholeheartedly, and that is what mattered.

My brother wasn't lying to me, he was providing an answer – not *the* answer, because that wasn't important. And so I learned at a very young age that the world is not – or at least does not have to be – a simple matter of how things are. I loved science and its ability to provide answers, excelled at it, in fact; but I also recognized that there could be more to an understanding of the world. In other words, though I wouldn't be able to articulate this until much later, I began to view reality as a person's experience of the world, not as a concrete thing in and of itself. This, I believe, is why religious experience is valid, why adherents find it so validating – it is an experience of truth, a transcendence of humdrum, everyday life. Exploring this space and all its possibilities is what writers do, is precisely what makes character-driven writing so powerful.

Those five years were of utmost importance in my development as a writer. I did not learn to read until first grade, was embarrassed that all my friends and classmates already could. The next year the elementary schools in Polk County, Florida held a reading contest; excited by my newfound ability to do something well, and driven by some deep-seeded competitive spirit and the desire to impress my brother and mother, I read nonstop. I read every children's book in the school library, and many others that were far too large, too dense for a seven year old; I did the same at the public library, with Scholastic book catalogs, at book fairs. I found books everywhere I could. I became pale and put undue strain on my eyes – my eyesight began declining around this time and has been ever since. But I won the contest, beat the second place winner by nearly 300%. This, too, was quite formative, because for an entire school year I existed

almost as much in authors' imaginings of the world as I did in my own experience of it. It was not long after that I wrote my first story, a twelve page new adventure of Jack (of beanstalk fame) that my teacher confiscated and, after perusing, had me read to the class. I have been writing in some form or other ever since.

I don't share these experiences to brag or inflate my image – although one can almost see the performative aspect of it: “this is why *I* was predestined for this tortuous path” – rather I offer it as one explanation, an example of how a child's obsessiveness can, like a train switching rails, make an incremental change in trajectory that deviates farther and farther from other possibilities, closer and closer to what he becomes. Was I born a writer? No. Was I made one? No, I don't believe that either. But I am one, I know this with as much certainty as I can muster for anything in an uncertain world.

There have been times that I have doubted the entire enterprise of writing, dismissed it as a certain type of egotism. After all, what is a writer saying when she submits a piece for publication but “this is how *I* see the world, this is *My* unique vision that you should attend to”? It's as though we writers feel that we are privileged to a special insight, a secret knowledge of life, and that everyone, for their own good, should listen to us. It can become a type of prophetic madness, and there are writers out there, incredible writers, who nonetheless fall victim to this. When the self doubt sets in, which I believe all writers at some point feel, and I ask myself what is so special about me that makes me think I have something worth saying, the obvious – and honest – response is nothing at all, nothing more special or unique than anyone else. So why do it?

I believe very strongly that there is something inherent in each of us – I hesitate to

use the word *essential* due to all its baggage, but that is something like what I mean – that wants to tell and be told stories. There is some indefinable quality to the sharing of experience, whether it is our own or a character's, which connects people. A story offers an analog to our own lives, and also provides a representative of something larger. Who is Huckleberry Finn but the prototypical American boy? Arthur but the ideal English king? Siegfried but the ideal Germanic hero? Characters in stories teach us things, things about the world, things about society, about virtue and vice, about what it means to be human. Their travels and travails, failures and successes, speak to us. Storytellers of any form, whether it be recited, written, or acted out, are not merely engaged in offering diversion, are not simply agents of escapism; they are actively engaged in the creation and dispersion of meaning.

As something of a fledgling philosopher and a creative writer at the same time, I certainly feel the tension between the creative world and the analytical world; and while a certain philosophical undercurrent can be seen in my writing, my loyalties have and always will remain in the camp of creativity and subjectivity. Much of the work that theorists do is for other theorists; they offer incredible, learned insights into the human condition and have their own right to be studied. As mentioned above, I studied philosophy as an undergraduate, enjoyed it immensely. But I have turned from that field because, for me, and most people for that matter, I think the large majority of it is unnecessary and unimportant – it offers no appreciable difference in my life, in my experience of the world. I have enjoyed studying theorists from Europe and the Americas, as much as one can enjoy their convolutions, and while they have provided an

arsenal for the scholarly dissemination of texts, they have not enhanced my pleasure of reading – quite the opposite, actually – and they have not enhanced my life. But writing, the kind of writing that I attempt to engage in, does have that ability. There is a distinct difference between being told what your dreams mean and seeing a character struggle with his dreams, between being told what language is and does and seeing a character struggle with the pitfalls of speech and thought.

Joseph Campbell, a theorist I greatly admire and have taken much from, explains the appeal of the suffering Christ on the cross – the weakness of the mortal is something one can identify with, feel sympathy for, whereas the perfect, infallible God is unlovable precisely because he is so beyond comprehension. For me it is the same difference between what critical theorists and creative writers provide us: the first tend to offer, if not meta-narratives anymore, something akin to them, rather inflexible explanations for how we are who we are; the latter, on the other hand, at least the writers I enjoy, tend towards examples rather than explanations, offer individual experience and expression for individual interpretation. I have often found it the case that with some of my more favorite works – the novels of Charles Dickens, E. M. Forster, Richard Brautigan, and J. R. R. Tolkien and the short stories of Ernest Hemmingway, J. D. Salinger, and Richard Ford, for example – my understanding of and feeling for a certain piece does not quite line up with those of others who have read the same pieces. This ability to mean different things to different people is a large part of their power. What is the meaning of the endings to “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” and *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, for example? More importantly, how do we as readers feel afterward? This is the seduction of

literature; this is what I strive to create; this is why I write.

Having extolled the virtues of individual interpretation and meaning and attacked those who offer explanations of works of writing, I'd like to spend the remaining space offering some explanations of the issues I see my work dealing with. (I reserve the right to be contentious and contrary; like Emerson, I always mean what I say but don't mean it always.) Were I asked to describe my work in a single sentence, at various points in my career I would have given different answers: I write about people dealing with issues of love and loss, I might have said; or perhaps I would have said I try to write the untold stories, to give voice to those who lack one; at one point I might have claimed that I write ideas, or that I write moods, or that I write senses of place. None of these are false, but none are quite accurate, either; they simply describe how I felt about what I was working on at the moment. Having spent so much time reflecting on my work recently, I believe that I have come to a fuller awareness of the particular rooms I have been stumbling through, for the most part blindly, up to this point. In other words, however absurd it may seem, it is in some ways possible to talk about the "vision" of the work of Ashley Moser over the past several years. As I develop my own sense and style of writing, that vision will be a terrain to explore, to mine more fully, but also a plateau that ultimately ought to be transcended.

What is that vision? As my professors and workshop peers have pointed out again and again in exasperation, it is seldom plot-driven. This does not mean I don't find plot important; depending on the story, it means I either felt that the plot was not what the story was trying to impart, or else I struggled not very successfully at uniting a sense of

plot to the more salient elements of the story. Plot is one of my weaker points as a writer, for two reasons that I can see: first, having read enough page-turners, I realize that this is not the paramount concern of my aesthetic, and in this sense my turning from plot could be viewed as an attempt for novelty or a rejection of the dominant paradigm, though I think this is only partially accurate; secondly, I find it difficult to wrap my head around the intricacies of a complex plot when they extend beyond a dozen pages or so. Perhaps it is another example of my preference for the particular over the general, but larger plot questions have, in the past, usually fallen under the wheels of the mood of a particular scene: how the characters feel, how the readers should feel, and how the story elements contribute to this seem to be larger concerns during my writing process. I view this as both a strength to be utilized and a weakness to be overcome.

I mentioned mood as being an important element, and I strongly believe this. Stories like “Troglodytes” and “The Back Road to Murfreesboro” are very much mood driven pieces for me; very different stories in their own rights, but both deal with storytelling, with the relationship between two male figures in unequal situations of power and authority, and both make heavy use of setting to evoke feeling. And, along with the other stories and poems in this collection, they are thematically linked as well. The characters are searching, for what they do not know, but they are dissatisfied – with love, with life – and have a profound sense of being directionless, in many ways lacking autonomy. Loss, melancholia, alienation, the transience of life – these are what they face, while love, reconciliation, a sense of communion with each other – these are what they seek, and rarely obtain. Thus the mood of most of my work might be described as

something like a quiet angst, a dis-ease, a desperation born from the actions and inactions of the characters on the world and the world on the characters.

Why do I consistently write about such people, about such emotions? There is no single explanation, but after reflecting on the pieces in this collection I have begun to see some similarities that I think approach something akin to an explanation. I did not fully appreciate these connections until recently while teaching a freshman composition class on mythic worlds. We were discussing *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, and I was attempting to explain the overarching mythic narrative of the film when something I said struck me as descriptive of my own work.

In the movie, Indy is asked to join in the search for the Holy Grail. Jones, the scientist and skeptic, refuses to take part in the quest, partly because he doesn't believe in what he considers mere legend and myth, but also because he is still angry with his father's obsession over the grail. When it is revealed that Henry Jones has been abducted, Indiana enlists, embarking on the father quest. Once Henry is rescued, Indiana could return home, but he doesn't; upon finding his earthly father, the mythic nature of the movie switches, and Indiana's quest begins to prove the existence of the grail and thereby, of God – in other words, to find his spiritual father.

Joseph Campbell has written much concerning the importance of the father figure in myth; the quest for the father is one of the most common mythic forms. In many ways the quest for the father is the quest for one's own destiny. Lacan's discussion of *le nom du père* links with Campbell's notion of how the name of the father confers a sense of history, of power, of identity upon the character; thus many Northern European heroes



announce themselves as the son of X son of Y, because it tells their opponent *this is where I come from, this is who I am, this is why I have a right to be here*. It is a space to be filled, but also a shadow that must eventually be overcome – this is the trajectory of the hero, and one might also say that, for the male, living up to and then transcending the shadow of the father is the progression from childhood to manhood.

In Campbell's vision, for a boy to grow up without his father is, mythically speaking, to lack a sense of place, to lack a sense of history, authority, and identity. I've come to believe that my inquisitive nature and my brother's storytelling were allowed to develop as they did precisely because we lacked that foundation. Around four years ago my relationship with my father became much closer, and we now get along very well; also around the same time, I became much more certain of my faith, finding a destination for a spiritual journey I had been on for nearly a decade. It is no surprise to me that it was exactly around this time that I began writing fiction in earnest – having established a more meaningful relationship with my father and a meaningful relationship with my faith (in Campbellian terms, having completed the father quests), I transferred the concerns I used to face in my own life into my fiction and eventually poetry. Thus my protagonists, and generally the other characters as well, struggle with issues of identity, of direction, of a sense of belonging; even in stories such as "Roadsong" where there is no obviously present or absent father, the characters exhibit these traits. These characters feel that they are constantly being pushed and pulled by the world, that they lack control over their lives, that there is something missing though they don't know what it is. They generally either look to or reject older male figures, but in either case are defined by that absence.

How they negotiate this terrain is a large concern of these works.

I recognize that this seems to present my writing as dominated by males and male concerns; a cursory feminist reading would make short work of my creative writing, though I believe a closer look would reveal much more complexity; and, similarly, queer theory and Sedgwick's notion of homosociality could easily find much to say. This doesn't overly concern me, and it certainly doesn't affect the way I approach my writing. I don't write with the intent to please everyone; I don't write with the intent to appeal to everyone. The works in this collection that enter the consciousness of a female, the story "Lapis Lazuli" and poem "What She Thinks One Year Later" for example, are a slight deviation from what might be considered my standard *modus operandi*. As some of the most recent of my writings, I think they hint at a new direction for my work, or, barring that, at least a shift in what I attend to most as a writer. Ultimately, the concerns my characters face are issues I feel every one faces. In my view, then, what I offer, from an authorial perspective of a man raised in the South, are quiet moments of contemporary life.

Setting and place are the final elements of my fiction that I feel link the pieces in this collection together. Shortly before I turned eight my mother remarried, and not long after we moved to a small town in middle Tennessee. McMinnville is its own peculiar place, very like and yet very unlike other small towns in the South. As the "nursery capital of the world" it has a large population of migrant workers – legal and illegal – who work in the fields, and ethnic tensions are a daily reality. It is a town dominated by churches and farmers, but also a town attempting to shake off its sleepy roots. It is a

town of sinners and saints, of hypocrisy and faith. It is a town that I despised while I lived there, and felt a certain fondness and nostalgia for once I left. It is both home and not home, *heimliche* and *unheimliche*. Much like the place itself, my relationship with it is contradictory, complex, full of an odd vibrancy.

The stories in this collection do not occur in a recognizable McMinnville (though “The Back Road to Murfreesboro” comes close), but they are set in a place *like* it, peopled with characters like those who do live there. This is why I have included pictures within the collection. As shots of a revitalized downtown they depict the quaintness of life there; yet the emptiness of the images suggests a sense of isolation, of a viewer who is set against the world. I feel they help to expand a terrain in which the stories can exist, as well as enhance the mood of the overall collection, uniting the pieces along a central axis. Much like Thomas Hardy’s Wessex mythologized and approximated the region of his youth, in a much less systematized and recognizable way these stories are set in an area somewhat similar to that in which I was raised. In that sense this collection is both an homage to and an indictment of the place I consider my hometown.

I began this essay with a story that attempted to provide, not the answer, but one answer for why I write. Were I more concerned about building an authorial image, I might claim that it is something I am driven to, even compelled to – that I *have* to write. But this isn’t quite true, and I don’t believe anyone who makes that claim. The truth is that I can live my life without writing; I won’t wither into nonexistence if I lack a pen or a keyboard. There are times – and they come more frequently with the more I focus on my work, the more I view the world as a writer – when I feel a definite urge, a mood that

I can only describe as a writing mood, in which I want very badly to sit down before a fresh sheet of paper. What it is and where it comes from I couldn't say, but I do know that this is where my best rough material is generated from. These moments of discovery, of re-visioning the world, are part of why I write. There are many other reasons – my love of music, of the music of language, of language's transformative power, to name a few – that I only hint at here because, in the end, what is more important is what I write, not why.

Ultimately, this collection represents a certain aspect of myself, one individual's vision of and response to the world. I make no apologies for it; it is what it is. It is something to be proud of, but like all good work worth doing, it is something to work past, to improve upon. Behind every story there is always another story, waiting to be found, waiting to be told. Find them, every one of them, and share them.

Knoxville, Tennessee

May 2008

**Time and Distance**



## Troglodytes

“I see now why cavers like it so much,” Andrew said.

Nathan fumbled with the latch on the geo-cache, saying nothing.

“Nothing makes you feel more like a man than crawling into the earth and wriggling around in the mud.”

Nathan didn’t laugh, just shook his head, the light from his five watt LED head lamp cutting bluish-white swaths through the dust.

Andrew was always trying to make jokes out of everything. A girl once told him it was because he didn’t want to face the world, was always filtering it, distancing himself from it, or it from himself. He couldn’t remember which. He no longer saw her.

Nathan pried the rusted hinge open on the old ammunition box and Andrew peeked inside, where an assortment of objects littered the bottom: an old pocket knife, an unopened deck of playing cards, a bouncing ball, a plaster figurine of Tigger.

“What’s all this?”

Nathan lifted out a pocket-sized spiral notepad and flipped the cover back. “Geo-cache. People hide them, then put the coordinates online. When you find one, you go to the site and log it on your profile.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” He turned the page. “See: I brought Cooter and Junebug in here two years ago.” All of Nathan’s caving friends had names like that: Rabbit, Ugg, Tweeter. Andrew wondered how long it would be before he got one. They had to be earned, Nathan had told him. This was Andrew’s fourth trip in six months. Each trip had kicked

his ass, but Nathan had called them “tourist” trips. Andrew didn’t have high hopes for any new name. “Last trip they ever went on. Never made it out.” Just like that. No melodrama, no search for understanding or empathy. Everyone knew what happened to Jim and Brent; Andrew just hadn’t known it was this cave. And Nathan simply stated it, like the weather, or that he was hungry; like when Andrew asked him about the accident that left Nathan in a wheelchair for three months, all he’d said was, “Fell,” and that was that.

“Some people,” Nathan said, already moving on, “this is all they do. Travel all over searching for these. It’s a contest to see who can log the most.”

Andrew lifted the box and aimed his borrowed single watt lamp inside. “What’s all this stuff?” he asked, lifting a keychain with a model of the world dangling from it.

Nathan looked up, blinding Andrew with his lamp. “You take something and you leave something,” Andrew thought how once again it was like a relationship with a woman, but he kept it in, “and record it all in the logbook,” Nathan continued. He took a folded up dollar out of the chest pocket of his coveralls, wrote the date on it and drew a moustache on Washington, then put it into the box. They took the playing cards. “In case we get lost. Give us something to do.”

\* \* \*

The crawlway into the main passage was little more than a fissure in the rock wall, and took someone who knew what they were looking for to find it. Then it was a two hundred yard trek on elbows and knees through a dusty passage before a small basin, where a spring disappeared out of sight. They paused there, Andrew breathing hard,

Nathan scarcely breathing at all. Nathan turned off his light, and the room grew much smaller, as though the light had been holding the walls up.

Andrew followed the trickling stream with his light down the muddy slope above them to where it fell and formed a small pool. There was no drainage. “Where’s it all go?”

Nathan made a motion with his hand that looked like a diver hitting the water. “Water table fluctuates. We’re above it now, else we’d be dead.”

Andrew shone his light into the water. It was cloudy with minerals and he couldn’t see very far. He wondered what undiscovered rooms, even animals, might be just under their feet.

“Turn your light out.”

He did. “Why’d I do that?”

“Just listen,” Nathan said.

Andrew tugged the sleeves down on his thermal undershirt and sat very still. At first he heard nothing but his own breath. Slowly he began to pick up on other sounds: the trickling of the stream down the mud wall; the steady plunk of water droplets into the pool; the low baritone of the mountain itself; his hair scritchng against the nylon straps of his helmet with each heartbeat. His breath, too, was different. More aspirated, once he finally exhaled, but muffled, and it reminded him of hearing his breath pass through a snorkel.

“Feel that? Just a bit of a breeze.”

Andrew did feel it, now that Nathan mentioned it: the faintest stirring of air.



“Hooo!”

Andrew switched his light back on. “What the hell was that for?” He didn’t want to admit how much it had startled him.

“Shh,” Nathan said, then “Hooo!” He listened. “Hear that? You can tell by the echo what’s ahead.”

Andrew wasn’t sure he could tell anything. “What *is* ahead?”

“Another narrow passage.” He pointed up the mud wall. “Up there.”

Andrew turned out his light. It was like being in a small room with a giant bat for a friend. “You can tell all that with a ‘Hooo’?”

Nathan switched his light on, and the walls fled back to their proper places, water gleaming. “And because I know that’s the way.” He shouldered his red canvas pack and began to climb.

\* \* \*

Andrew liked to think of himself as an outdoor kind of guy, even if he didn’t actually go out all that often. He told people he liked hiking, though his five year old boots were only slightly worn-in. When he did hike, though, his favorite part was bouldering. Something about climbing, leaping, the balance and split second judgment it required thrilled him; he was always the fastest, picked the best routes. He prided himself on it. But underground, all the rules change. Low light and the unsteady terrain left him scrabbling for purchase, sliding constantly, uncertain, hesitant. And the largest trick is that confidence and speed are worth as much as skill and intuition. Hesitate, and you lose your edge.

“When the river left this passage long ago, it deposited all this sediment,” Nathan said from somewhere above. “That’s where all this clay comes from.”

Andrew didn’t quite care where it came from, or how many thousands of years ago it had been laid down; it was slippery as hell, at a nearly vertical slope, and though he didn’t know how far they’d climbed, he knew the floor had vanished long ago along with the sound of the water falling into the pool.

Nathan’s light disappeared. The ceiling was now tight against the face of the mud, which provided some purchase if Andrew arched his back against it; he’d rather be sliding in the open, however, because the sheer presence of that much rock so close to him, pressing him into the clay, was almost unbearable.

A light blinded him. “There you are. Thought maybe you’d fallen.” Nathan helped Andrew up the last few feet and onto a ledge that opened into another, larger passageway ahead. “Bad idea, that. It’s about a hundred feet down.” He tossed a rock over and they listened to it thunking clay for awhile before the sound was swallowed in darkness. “Trick is to SMEAR.”

“Smear?”

“Came up with it myself. Sudden Movement Emergency Arrest and Recovery. Basically, instead of falling and bumping into every projection, you smear yourself against the slope, increasing friction and slowing your fall. It won’t stop you from getting hurt, but it might save your life.” Nathan should know. He had survived a fifty foot fall eight months before. It left him in a wheelchair for awhile, and half his fingertips had been burned off by rope friction, but here he was, back in a cave.

“Smear,” Andrew said, not liking the mental picture.

\* \* \*

Nathan started forward again. It was more crawling; some parts Andrew had to belly forward, his pack held in front of him, pushing with the toes of his boots. Nathan spoke back to Andrew while he crawled. “Caves have been sacred to pretty much every culture on the planet. In Greek mythology, Zeus was hidden and raised in a cave so his father, Cronus, wouldn’t eat him. The entrance to Hades is a cave. The cave is both the scene of beginning and ending. Watch this rock up here. It might kill you.”

“Which one?” He didn’t like the idea of a rock doing anything.

“The one that looks like it might kill you.”

Andrew was ready with a retort, but then he rounded the corner and saw what Nathan had described. A rock shelf, several feet thick, slightly bigger than a soapbox car, rested precariously on top of some smaller, melon-sized stones wedged against the wall.

“That rock.”

“Don’t bump it,” Nathan said from up ahead. “It’s liable to fall.”

Andrew held his breath and inched forward, twisting his body sideways as he passed, careful not to even brush the death rock with his feet. He didn’t breathe again until he was beyond it.

“You see similar stories from India, Japan, China, aborigines in Australia, Irish myth, Jewish folklore, Germanic legends, on and on and on – hell, look at the paintings at Lascaux and Altamira; but my favorite is from the peoples in Central and South America. Mankind is formed from the mud inside a great cave, and birthed out of it into the world.

There are still caves sacred to those who hold to the old ways; the caves are guarded, and to enter means death. They're the holy grail of the caving world, huge caves that go for miles and miles and have been inhabited since the dawn of time, and none of us can ever see them."

"Surely there's *some* way."

"There is no way while those people still live."

\* \* \*

The passageway opened up, and, for only the second time, Andrew found himself walking upright over piles of breakdown. Andrew tried not to think about the size of the rocks he was navigating through; every one of them had at some point fallen from overhead. This was more familiar to him; rocks still shifted in ways that seemed unnatural to his above ground sensibilities, but for the most part it was just like bouldering. Bouldering with a half mile of mountain overhead.

That was what got to Andrew the most. Like being at the bottom of a swimming pool, yet somehow different. Underwater, the pressure increases tangibly; you can count it: one atmosphere, two atmospheres, three atmospheres. But underground, with that much earth above, it's different. The pressure rises slightly, but not that one can measure. It is more the sense of pressure, the feeling of the world, literally, on your shoulders that is so oppressive.

In the larger passages, Andrew could almost ignore it, if he thought about something else. But in the narrower defiles and crawls it became all but impossible. And the biggest danger comes not from the mountain, but from dwelling on the mountain.

Pupils dilate, blood races, palms sweat, chest constricts, breathing becomes more difficult: a full blown freakout. It also means that muscles tense; you become thicker and get wedged into the rock, unable to move forward or back, which only increases the panic. “Good thing is,” Nathan explained, “once you pass out you become limp again and you can usually be pulled out.” Andrew had heard all this before, but knew it was more about the telling for Nathan than the listening for himself, so he didn’t interrupt.

The large passage was narrowing again, at a particularly inconvenient time, considering the topic. “Once though, guy got stuck and couldn’t be pulled out.” This was a new story for Andrew, one he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear. “Luckily he was in front and no one was trapped ahead of him, cause they didn’t get him out. He died, dehydration or heart attack I dunno – doesn’t really matter I guess. I was there when they extracted him. Had to take him out a piece at a time, in garbage bags.”

Andrew was beginning to understand how Nathan could be so blasé when describing tragedy. He wanted to grab him by the shoulders and scream “Why the fuck did you bring me down here?” but instead he just unshouldered his tag pack and took out a liter of water. The bottle had largely collapsed in on itself. He didn’t remove his gloves and got mud all over the cap, but didn’t care. “Water?”

Nathan shook his head. Now that he thought of it, Andrew hadn’t seen Nathan drink anything yet, and his own bottle was half empty.

“What’s interesting about many of the cave myths that involve creation,” Nathan said, “is how naming figures into it. When Cronus hears the prophecy, he tries to counteract it, only fulfilling it. Naming Cronus’ demise caused it. In many others things

are actually created by being named. Animals and plants, even ores and minerals, come into being because they are named into being. Happens a lot in Native American and Asian myths, but you also see this in the Bible with Adam in Eden. And Jewish folklore says that after Adam's first wife, Lillith, was cast out of Eden she hid herself in a cave. The dark places of the world hold many secrets, to our past and our future."

This all sounded like some totalizing theory that put caves at the heart of everything to Andrew, but he had to admit, like any good metamyth, there was something to it.

Nathan looked around for a moment. "Smell that?"

Andrew sniffed the air. He had stopped paying attention to smells because it had been the same dusty, attic smell for so long. But now that he focused on it, he *could* smell something. "Cigarettes?"

"Could be. Smells linger in caves a long while. Could have been an hour ago or a month ago." Nathan tested the air again. "Smells more like sulfur, though." He looked around again as though unsure where to go.

It looked simple enough to Andrew – there was only one way forward. "Sulfur's poisonous right? Comes out of volcanoes."

"You'll be all right. Besides, this kind's probably man made." Andrew was going to ask him what that meant, but just then Nathan crouched down and peered below where the mound of breakdown met the cave wall. There was a white X marked in chalk that Andrew hadn't noticed before. "Here it is," Nathan said, but he was almost whispering and Andrew barely heard him. Nathan picked his way down the slope, put

his hand into a crack in the wall near the X, and disappeared.

\* \* \*

Andrew found the passage; what looked like a natural fold in the rock was actually a narrow opening just wide enough to slide through sideways if he removed his pack. The floor dropped and widened while the ceiling lowered dramatically: more crawling. Up ahead he could hear the muted thuds of Nathan shoving his way through, then an echoing “Hooo!” A few seconds of silence, then, “Almost there.” Andrew could see the faint glow of Nathan’s light around the bend, but his voice sounded thick, like he was talking through a pillow into a bullhorn. It was a curious sensation, as though the sound was far away and up close, ahead and behind. Andrew could see how it was so easy to become lost. And he didn’t want to think about what the effect of all that muffling dust would be on his lungs.

And then he was standing again, shining his light straight up and watching the darkness swallow it. Andrew spied Nathan some ways ahead, kneeling beside an enormous outcropping of rock that stuck straight from the breakdown like the prow of a stone ship. Nathan had removed his pack and taken something out. As Andrew scabbled closer he saw that Nathan was shuffling through the deck of cards.

Nathan stacked several rocks together into a small pyramid, then wedged the ace of spades and ace of diamonds between two of the rocks on top so that the faces pointed out. “The cards will reflect an LED light pretty well. Should make it easier to find.” He stood and patted the rock like one might pat a dog on the head. Nathan pivoted away from Andrew so that he couldn’t see his face.

So this was it. This was where Jim and Brent – Cooter and Junebug – had died. Everyone knew the story. A massive rock had dislodged from the ceiling, crushing them instantly. No goodbyes, no moment of surprise, just instant, silent nothingness. For them, anyway. Nathan had been found by search parties sometime the next day in a passage between the third and fourth rooms, a good five hundred yards from the entrance, his light long since run out, his hands caked in blood and dirt. He wouldn't leave the cave, refused to tell what happened, until someone gave him a light and let him lead the way. At the funeral the caskets were filled with mementos – notes, caving gear, photographs – because there was nothing else to put in them. There was simply no way to move or break that much rock that far into the mountain without dynamite, and that much dynamite would have liquefied whatever remains hadn't already been turned to jelly; that was hardest on the mothers. Cooter and Junebug were still there, mere feet from Andrew. All that separated them was a few feet of rock and the entire world in between.

Andrew thought he should say something. He didn't really know Cooter or Junebug, had only ever seen them at school in the way that underclassmen see seniors but aren't seen by them, but he still felt some connection with them at this moment, in this place. When Andrew looked back Nathan was disappearing into the crevice they'd emerged from. The mountain groaned overhead, and Andrew hurried back to the passage.

\* \* \*

They backtracked for over a half hour in near silence. Nathan had been talkative,



explaining rock formations, pointing out sinks and domes, describing how caves form and the changing composition of the world around them. But the only sounds Andrew heard from him now were the thud of his boots and the abrasion of his coveralls slithering over rock. No grunting, no talking out loud to himself as he searched for a passage; Andrew couldn't even hear him breathing.

Every caver Andrew had ever met had at least one or two stories, not of just close calls – everyone has those – but of actually seeing death, especially cavers like Nathan who were driven to push new passages, explore new holes, discover new rooms. It was an obsession. Caves that are frequented regularly are relatively stable; an undiscovered area, though, could easily be in a very precarious state of equilibrium. Put a couple people in there, shifting rocks around, talking, even the humidity from their breath and steam from their bodies, and it can upset this balance.

The caving world is small and close-knit. After all, most people think they're crazy, and cavers view non-cavers much like sailors do those who never venture on the sea. In the unlikely event that you haven't caved with a fellow trog – troglodyte, a cave dweller – you know someone who has. Andrew was beginning to understand how Nathan could seem so stoic about it; he treated injury and death as commonplace, because they were.

Despite this common thread tying them all together, cavers are also fiercely protective of knowledge. Andrew had never understood that either, chalked it up to the fact that many cavers are withdrawn packrats who keep things to themselves just for the sake of it. But this was starting to make sense, too. Knowledge is power, and beneath

the surface that knowledge is often gained at great risk, occasionally with great tragedy; its power is emotional as much as intellectual. The fact that Nathan took Andrew to that room, one he and Junebug and Cooter had been among the first to discover and explore, must have meant a lot more to Nathan than Andrew had supposed.

They had taken a new passage, shooting off their backtrack. Andrew was surprised he noticed, because until then he had thought that everything underground looked the same. But it must mean he was learning if he could distinguish one passage from another. The narrow defile they were in widened out, a large tunnel pointing almost straight ahead.

Nathan finally grunted, "This is the way."

"To what?"

"What we're here for." Had they not come to pay homage to Junebug and Cooter? Andrew didn't feel so privileged. "See this?" Nathan indicated the tunnel before them. "Called a bore hole."

"I thought that was a mining term."

Nathan shrugged. "I'm not a miner. That's what we call it 'cause it looks like something bored through, like a giant earthworm."

It wasn't that Nathan was a luddite – he used an ensemble of high tech gadgetry, especially when exploring and mapping new caves – it was the artificiality of mined out passages that bothered him. Comparing that with the natural world which he found so beautiful was to him akin to blasphemy.

"We might as well stop here." Nathan sat down, unshouldered his pack, slid off

his gloves, and actually took out his water bottle, but only took a small swig before replacing it. Then he flicked the magnetic switch on his head lamp, and once again the room shrank. Andrew wondered if Nathan had arrived at his conservatory habits that long night he'd spent in the cave with no light, water, or food. He knew that Nathan now carried an additional 12 hour battery and several small emergency flashlights, because Nathan had gone over all that, "Just in case," he'd said. At the time Andrew had thought, in case what? but he had a good idea now.

"What time do you think it is above?" Nathan didn't ask the actual time, because underground time has no meaning. There is no sunset, no shift in temperature, only the chill, echoing dark.

"2:00?"

Nathan laughed. "3:15. We've gone about two and a half miles if you include the backtrack." Two and a half miles in five hours. "We can get out in two hours or so. Always quicker on the way back."

Andrew looked in his pack. He'd already eaten two out of three energy bars and there was only a couple ounces left in his water bottle. And he was wore out; his neck ached from the weight of holding his helmeted head upright and keeping his lamp trained forward. "Two hours? That's good." He looked around the bore hole. It was bone dry, and dust motes reflected his lamp like bluish white beacons in the dark. "What is it we're here for?"

"I heard some people were poking around back here, might've found a new passage."

“There are still new passages?”

“Passages open and close all the time.”

“Knew a girl like that once,” Andrew joked.

Nathan’s head swiveled toward him. In the low light it was hard to read Nathan’s face. “Sure you did.” He felt hollow.

\* \* \*

Andrew had been duckwalking a couple hundred yards and was beginning to feel the strain, but the ceiling was just high enough that he didn’t have to crawl, and keeping his head erect put the weight of his helmet on the bones, not the muscles. It also slowed him down. Nathan’s light disappeared ahead, but Andrew didn’t hurry. He had fallen into the mechanical drudgery of it: shuffle, step, slide; shuffle, step, slide. His steps and breaths were all timed to the beat of his pulse, and everything seemed to dissipate, float away, until his mind blanked; he did not consciously register where he was moving, or even that he was moving. Shuffle, step slide; shuffle, step, slide. Fatigue and endorphins hit his brain like a flash flood, and all was well with the world.

And then he was lying on his side in the dirt, looking at the dust swirl up in the beam of his headlamp. It slowly came to him, like water sieved through thick canvas. He had hit his head. He heard the crack of high impact plastic against rock, felt finally the jarring sensation of helmet on sandstone, like being rammed in a bumper car. Piggybacking onto mental clarity came physical clarity, and all his aches and pains, including a new ache in the shoulder he’d fallen on, came to him as well.

Andrew rolled onto his knees and crawled forward. Around the next bend he

nearly ran into Nathan, who was sitting back on his haunches. Just ahead were some clear indications of human activity: plastic washbins caked in the mud they had been used to excavate; what looked like an old ham radio; a half empty spool of cable. “What’s this?” Andrew asked.

“Smell it?”

Andrew tested the air. There it was again, the same odor they’d noticed before. He realized it had been present for awhile, he just hadn’t been paying attention. Nathan seemed to have honed in on it like a hound, followed it to the excavation site. “Sulfur,” he said and Nathan nodded.

The wire connected to the radio-looking device fed down a slight embankment and disappeared into a crevice. “Wait here,” Nathan said, leaving his pack beside Andrew. He picked his way down the slope after the cable and squeezed into the crack. Andrew could hear the reverberations of his efforts, thumping and grunting and sliding, growing fainter and fainter, and then nothing. He removed his helmet, relieving the tension in his neck once more; the beam illuminated what looked like a pair of swimming goggles. He picked them up. The lenses were made out of a fine wire mesh instead of plastic or glass, and were, like everything else, caked in mud and rock fragments. Andrew replaced them and settled down to wait. He turned off his head lamp and was swallowed by the dark.

The air was moister here; instead of the smell of dust, it was now clay and the acrid mineral smell of the dripping water that births rock formations. But underneath it all was the undeniable scent of . . . spent fireworks? It smelled like the Fourth of July,

gunpowder smoke clinging to the dewy field outside his family's Tennessee farm at age twelve: bottle rocket wars; they were encouraged, partly because his stepfather could purchase two gross for a quarter, and partly because the thrill of the hunt, the pain of being struck, the competition – all were considered manly pursuits. Funny how that came to him now.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting, but realized that he'd pushed the sleeves of his thermal undershirt back down his wrists. He must've been there some time, because he was beginning to feel the constant fifty-four degree chill of the earth. He'd be stiff when he started moving again.

Andrew heard the familiar sound of thumping and scraping, then the faint morning glow of a head lamp rebounded off the walls. The faint light grew stronger and refracted in the minute water droplets that covered the walls, shining like eyes. Nathan emerged, and though his face was lost in the shadow of his helmet, Andrew sensed something was different. Nathan was out of breath, and moved with a measured lack of the concern and determination he always displayed underground.

Andrew flicked on his head lamp, pointing the beam several feet in front of Nathan so it would illumine his face without blinding him. Nathan looked paler. "What is it?"

Nathan took Andrew's helmet from his hands and placed it on his head. "We should be going."

Andrew fastened the chin strap and shouldered his pack. "What's down there?"

Nathan was already crawling into the passage. "Dynamite".

“Live dynamite?”

“It’s generally not a problem if you know what you’re doing. But this stuff’s set and wired. If you’d messed with the controller while I was down there I’d be dead.”

“Why would someone wire dynamite to blow and then just leave it?” Andrew realized the answer before Nathan supplied it for him.

“Because they’re not leaving it for long.” He looked back again. “It’s not a big deal, but we don’t want to be here when they return. We’re a very long way from the surface.”

\* \* \*

Nathan kept up a grueling pace Andrew found difficult to match. But the thought of running into a dynamite wielding, surprised caver pushed him forward. “It’s kind of like when Tom is trapped in the cave with Becky and sees Injun Joe,” Andrew said.

Nathan paused. “What?”

“You know, *Tom Sawyer*. He sees Injun Joe, but Injun Joe doesn’t see him.” Andrew laughed. “Maybe we’ll find gold too.”

“I doubt that.” Nathan resumed his pace. Andrew was beginning to wonder why he hung out with Nathan.

After another period of time, which could have been ten minutes but felt like forty-five to Andrew, Nathan stopped and removed his pack and gloves, then flicked off his light. “We can break here for awhile. We’re far enough that if we came across those guys it’d be cool.”

Andrew slumped down and reclined back.

“Careful,” Nathan said, and when Andrew looked behind him he saw only empty space. “Pretty big sink right there. You’d be stuck here for awhile, *if* you survived that fall.”

Andrew scrambled over beside Nathan and sat on an uncomfortable, but substantial, rock ledge. “Didn’t even see it.”

“Happens. Get tired, stop paying attention, and then wham!” he slammed his fist into his palm, “lights out.”

“What were they doing with that dynamite?”

“Trying to blow into a passage. It was packed into a crack that had a nice breeze coming out. Something pretty big is back there.”

Andrew thought of all the times he’d slipped, tripped, and slammed into rocks that day. “Isn’t it dangerous to carry dynamite into a cave?”

“Bear shit in the woods?”

“You ever done it?”

“Few times. Gets pretty hairy when you’ve got a dozen sticks on your back and you bang into something, even when they’re in a hardcase.”

Andrew removed his helmet and set it down beside him with the light pointed towards the pitfall. “Why’d we come here today?” The planning was always left to Nathan. Andrew knew almost nothing about caves or where to find them; he had never cared that much for caving, anyway, and let Nathan take care of the details.

Nathan shrugged. “Haven’t been here in awhile.”

“Not since. . . ?”



Nathan took off his helmet and studied it in the dim glow from Andrew's lamp. "You know why I like caving? Lot of people talk like it's all about pushing yourself, proving yourself. They're all nubes. We call them spelunkers, and what's funny is they think it's a compliment. Sometimes we call them flashlight cavers. They think they're lumberjacks, the manly men of the underground." He flipped his helmet around and dug at some mud with his thumbnail. "Turn off your light."

He did.

"Listen." Nathan held the silence in his hands like a mute baby. "That's what I love about caving, that's what makes you a caver. There are no jet engines, no satellite waves slicing through your body, no car exhausts, no refrigerators or air conditioners buzzing, no televisions or cell phones or whining electrical gadgets that fill every moment of our lives above ground. Down here you can actually remove all the distractions and exist."

Andrew could hear, not just feel but hear, his heart beating, and if he held his breath thought he could hear Nathan's as well. "Do you ever sleep down here? Seems like it'd be so peaceful."

Nathan said nothing, didn't even stir.

"Byron once said that in solitude we are least alone." Andrew didn't feel very confident saying that – it was something he'd read on a dorm poster of one of his friends who actually made it to college, and he didn't know if he had the right poet – but realized it didn't really matter. What mattered most was the communication of the idea, the notion of a completeness derived from removing all the extraneous things in life.

That was what he wanted to say, but Nathan shattered his expectations. “Who’s Byron?”

“Some dead English guy.” They sat in the silence.

\* \* \*

They were working their way over a pile of breakdown, and even though there was the constant threat of twisting an ankle on a shifting rock, Andrew much preferred it to crawling. He looked around; the room was just like any other, nothing remarkable about it. “How do you remember the way?”

“Just do.”

“You ever been lost?”

“No. Turned around? All the time. But never for very long. You usually see something you remember.”

“What if you don’t?”

“Then you go back until you do.” He stopped and shone his lamp ahead. “Here we are.” A short climb and the gaping hole of another passage.

Andrew remembered sliding down it what seemed like a very long time ago. “I remember this.”

“See? Trick is to just keep going. Wait there until I get over the lip. Don’t want to kick any rocks down on you.” Nathan clambered the wall easily and disappeared over the edge.

Andrew tried to remember where Nathan had put his hands and feet, and thought he had the holds right, but he couldn’t quite stick to the wall and his boots left muddy

smears down the rock. He took off his helmet and held it low, shining up. Every nook and projection highlighted in shadow, and he traced a path in his mind. He wished someone had seen him figure it out, but he was alone. This time when he attempted it he left some skin behind, but he managed to pull himself over the lip and onto the dark ledge.

Andrew thought perhaps Nathan had turned out his light, so he called out to him. Silence. He tried again, louder. Nothing. He switched off his own light, and up ahead could see the faint dawn glow of Nathan's headlamp. Andrew tracked it to the edge of a pitfall and peered down it. The light was pointing up from about twenty feet. "Nathan," he said, louder than before.

Andrew heard something finally, and at first he wasn't sure what. Then he realized it was laughter. Nathan was laughing.

"You alright?"

"Depends on how you define 'alright'," Nathan said, his voice deep and throaty.

Andrew shone his light around the rim of the sink and saw a place he thought he could climb down. He took off his pack and lowered himself over the edge. "No," Nathan said. "Stay up there."

"Why?"

"Someone has to go for help, and that'll be difficult with both of us lying down here."

Andrew lifted himself back out of the pit and peered down it again. Nathan had turned his light off, and if Andrew shone his own directly toward him, he could just make

out Nathan, a shadow in the gloom. “What happened?”

“Fell.”

“You smear?”

Nathan laughed again. “Still talking ain’t I? It’s not too bad, just twisted my knee something fierce. Can’t climb up, much less crawl to the surface.”

“What should I do?” Andrew felt awkward and uncertain, like the time his father’s dog died. It was old, had choked on holiday turkey, and took several minutes to pass. His father had been hysterical, his stepmother even more so, both of them lifting and massaging and crying. Andrew had simply sat there feeling useless. He was mesmerized by the haze that slowly spread over Baxter’s eyes.

“Get out. Use the phone in my truck. Call Rabbit.”

This was something he could do. He had a mission, a goal, and it gave him a sense of determination. “You need anything? I’ve got an extra light, half an energy bar.”

There was some rustling below. “Take these.” Andrew heard a grunt, then a white blur passed through his light and landed near him: the deck of cards.

“Nice throw,” he joked.

Nathan laughed, but it sounded like resignation.

“How do I find my way out?”

“Intuition, guesswork, luck.” Nathan paused. “Just kidding. Keep going the same way we were headed. It’s a straight shot. No pressure, but if you don’t make it I don’t make it.”

“Thanks. Appreciate that.” He put his pack back on and tightened the straps.

“You going to be all right down there?”

“Not if you don’t get the hell out of here. Go.”

\* \* \*

Andrew was surprised at how it seemed to come back to him as he went along. He recognized rooms, passages, climbs – even remembered the tricky part of a particular slope. In every room, before every turn, and by every passage he built a small pyramid of rocks and left a playing card with the face pointing the direction he was traveling: a two of clubs in the fourth room, jack of spades near a stalagmite that resembled Elmer Fudd, the queen of hearts halfway through a muddy, treacherous crawlspace. Each time he had to build the pile then remove his gloves and place the card so he wouldn’t muddy the white face; it took time he didn’t want to spend, but he did it anyway. He knew what it felt like for Hansel marking the trail back to his father’s house. He wondered whether he were leaving stones or breadcrumbs.

Andrew was marveling at his pathfinding abilities, feeling confident in the fact that he was drawing ever closer to the entrance - he didn’t even mind that he was crawling again – when he rounded a corner and slammed his shoulder into the death rock. In less than a second, less than the time it took his heart to contract for the last beat, he knew he was dead. Neurons work faster than gravity. He clenched his eyes shut and the felt, not regret that Nathan would die, but embarrassment.

Then he opened his eyes. He wasn’t dead. The rock hadn’t fallen. He flattened himself and inched forward slowly by his toes, scarcely daring to breathe. The death rock remained in place. And then he was through.

\* \* \*

Andrew stumbled and sat down heavily. He'd been pushing hard to make it out of the cave; he knew he must be close, and around every bend in the passage he expected to see the opening; instead he saw more rock. Andrew had never been alone in a cave before, never completely felt the chill dark. He switched off his headlamp.

Once, on a dare, he had gone to a graveyard with his friends on a cloudy night with a new moon. They had left him there and taken the flashlights. He watched the light circles bobbing into the distance until they disappeared. He had tried talking to himself at first, but the feeling of being overheard silenced him. He hadn't lasted very long, was soon yelling at his friends to come back. He had to pay them each twenty dollars.

Andrew didn't talk to himself now. He did nothing but feel helplessly small. What had terrified him the most about the graveyard hadn't been the buried bodies – he didn't believe in ghosts – but the quiet darkness, the sense that in the whole world nothing remained but himself. He could feel it lurking now, hiding in the thin stream of wind, falling with each droplet of water, pressing down with all the weight of the mountain. Then he heard something.

It was hard to discern at first, but it was a scratching, slithering noise, like a duffel bag dragging across concrete. A faint glow appeared ahead, and he noticed the familiar thump of boots on clay. He shone his light around him, careful not to let the beam strike ahead too far. There was an outcropping down to his left. He clambered down and crouched behind it, then shut his light back off.

He had simply acted, not thought about it, but now that he did he wasn't sure why he was hiding. He felt the delight of a voyeur, gazing upon the pair of cavers as they drew closer. They held flashlights and wore jeans. Spelunkers, Andrew thought to himself, and suddenly he felt enraged. What were they doing in here? This was a special place, a secret. They drew closer and Andrew moved to his right to keep them in sight. He could creep up behind them. He could scare them. He could hurt them. Who would know? Accidents happened in caves all the time. His hand brushed against a softball sized stone, his palm molding around it. He felt powerful.

Andrew lifted himself into a crouching position as they passed. They were young, perhaps only fifteen. Boys really.

“I think we should head back.”

“You already said that.”

“Because I already felt that way.”

“Stop being chicken shit, we've only been in here for fifteen minutes.” So the surface was close, Andrew realized.

“What if our batteries die?” The complainer was slight, walked behind his friend, hunched as though he had a great weight on his shoulders. Andrew, his heart racing, watched them shuffle past and out of sight.

\* \* \*

Andrew rounded another bend in the passage, and up ahead through the gloom saw the outline of the cave mouth. He turned his light off, even though he could only see the silhouette of his hand when he passed it before his face. He took his gloves off and

pulled the deck of cards from his pocket. He shuffled what remained of the deck twice, cut it, and looked at the card. He wasn't sure what he was expecting – a joker? a suicide king? – but he could just make out a five of clubs or spades. He made a small pile of rocks, but then didn't stick the card into it.

Andrew leaned into the wall, his bare palm flat against the damp, grainy surface. He had made it. Beyond the entrance, a hundred yards down the trail, was Nathan's Jeep. Probably whatever the two flashlight cavers had driven as well. He could take either vehicle. He could take neither vehicle, just walk right out of the woods and hitch a lift home. He chewed his bottom lip and looked behind him: after a couple feet the gray glow of rock vanished in the dark.

Andrew unfastened the chin strap and took his helmet off. He rubbed the tense muscles in his neck, his fingers cold and wet from the wall. A shiver ran down his spine and he felt the hairs on his arms prick up against his shirtsleeves. He thought of Nathan, alone with the dark, married to it, counting every passing second. He thought of the caves in Central America, wondered just what secrets the guardians would kill to protect. He started forward.



**The Space Between**



## The Back Road to Murfreesboro

It was one of those Tennessee winter nights that can't decide whether to freeze or melt, and it might flurry or mist or fog or all three at once. I was fifteen, on the back road to Murfreesboro, and my older brother was rolling a joint.

I'd smoked pot before, in eighth grade when my girlfriend's mom gave us some in a cigarette box and told us to have fun before she rode off with a new guy in an old Camaro. But this was different. This was my brother. Adam is three years older than me; he went to state that year on the soccer team; he went to all the best parties and had messed around with at least half of the varsity cheerleading squad – some even said half the freshmen squad. People knew me because I was his brother.

“Chris my man, this is the good stuff,” Adam said, steering with his knee while he folded up the long side of a rolling paper. “Not that seeds-and-stems shit you kids smoke and then act high on. This here's premo imported dank.” He flicked on the interior light. “See the red hairs?” He looked across at me, and I nodded my head appreciatively, pretending to know what that meant.

“Shit, man, you got no idea do you?”

“I've toked before.”

“Toked?” He laughed. “You been watching too many movies, dude. I'm gonna have to school you in the finer things in life.”

I was instant messaging friends earlier that day – tedious, since we only had dial-up – when Adam came home from school. I heard him in his room on his cell phone for awhile, then he came out and stood next to me.

“What you doing tonight?”

I didn't know what he meant by it, and thought he may have been setting me up for a joke. He teased me about always being on the computer, said I would always have a floppy drive if I didn't get out and actually meet girls; so when he asked me, I gave him the only safe response I could think of. “Nothing.”

“Not anymore little man,” he said. “Let's go for a ride.” I thought about it for a minute. Last time he had said that I ended up crawling behind him in a cave for five hours without a flashlight, trying to keep up. Actually, that wasn't so bad. I shut down the computer.

The tires of Adam's canary yellow Ford Ranger lurched off the side of the road into gravel and Adam nudged the steering wheel back with his knee. The truck had been a gift from our father two years before, as though it could make up for a decade of absence. “This is hydroponic,” he said, as though nothing had happened. “It'll get you so high you won't know your own dick in your hand.” I tried to look relaxed while gripping my leg with one hand and the door handle with the other. He laughed. “Ain't scared are you?”

We were doing seventy-five on a road with no lines and so many rises and twists that anything could be just around the next bend, and we were doing it in the confined cab of a tiny truck while my pothead brother steered without hands. There could be a tractor trailer on our side of the road just over the next hill. I said so.

\* \* \*

“A semi? Out here? Shit.” Chris was always saying dumb shit like that. I rolled

the strawberry paper up with my thumbs at either end; Turtle called it counting money. It was fat, so thick that after I licked the edge and pressed it down, the paper barely reached all the way around. It was a thing of beauty, made all the other joints I'd ever rolled look like the creek behind our house up against the Caney Fork River.

“Look at that,” I said, handing it over to Chris. “Stuffed a whole half a quarter into a 1.5.” I knew he didn't know what that meant, but he's a sucker for little details like that. He took it from me like it was some fragile tube of diamonds that might burst apart any second, and said, “Wow.” The neon green dashboard lights turned the pink paper orange, and it smelled pungent, like rich compost – the mark of good weed. And it was tight. “You get somebody who can't roll right,” I said as I took it back, “and it'll be fat in the middle and narrow at the ends – called a whalebelly. I don't do that shit.”

We topped a rise and headlights blinded us. I jerked the wheel over, and the truck shook as it roared over the gravel while the side mirror whipped the tips off the withered roadside grasses. A white Dodge dualie roared past. “Stupid fucker! Cut off your goddamn brights.” We eased back onto the road and I accelerated again. I heard Chris exhale slowly, and realized I had been holding my breath too. I let it out quietly so he wouldn't hear. I could feel my heart pounding against my eardrums. “Fucking rednecks,” I said. Years later I used the same tone after a particularly large cockroach skittered across the floor of my apartment and the girl I was trying to get to stay over screamed herself into standing position on the couch. “Fucking roaches,” I said, like it covered everything. And maybe it did.

\* \* \*

“Where were we?” Adam looked over at me and held up his creation. He was back to steering with his knee, not even looking at the road. I glanced at the speedometer: eighty. “Ah yes.” He passed it under his nose. “I don’t think I’ve ever rolled anything so sweet before. Big as my thumb.” He held it up to his thumb as proof. Adam was always measuring things by his thumb; “Thick as my thumb,” he’d say, or, “Crooked as my thumb.” He got our father’s hitchhiker’s thumb; mine was slender and straight as a rail. Our father left when I was four and Adam was seven, but we still saw him. Summers, Christmases, occasionally on a birthday. Just enough to know we had a dad, but not enough to know him, Adam claimed. All the benefits of children without any of the burden, our mother said.

“Hold the wheel.” He ducked under the steering wheel and rifled around on the floorboard. The truck drifted toward the left shoulder before I grabbed the wheel and brought it back. The road curved sharply ahead.

“Adam. . .”

“There’s a lighter here somewhere.”

“Adam slow down.”

“Threw it here just before we got gas.”

“ADAM.”

Adam popped back up, pressed the brake, and we glided around the turn. He held up a neon green Bic. “See, told you.” He guided the wheel with his knee again and lit the joint.

The cab filled with smoke. By the time I’d choked through my first hit, the

windshield was cloudy. When I passed it back Adam laughed, took a deep hit, and held it in. “See,” he said, his voice a squeak as he held his breath and talked at the same time, “you gotta let it in deep.” He passed it back. I choked less on the second hit, and Adam nodded at me on the third. Looking through the windshield was like peering through pillowcases when I was little. We would play ghost, Adam and I, and I always wondered if that’s what the world looked like when you were dead. Soon I could no longer see Adam, only the red glow of the cherry as he passed; then the dashboard lights disappeared.

“I can’t see through this smoke,” Adam said somewhere far away.

I rolled down my window halfway, and he yelled at me to roll it up. “I’m pulling over,” he said, “but keep that damn window shut. This shit’s expensive.” I felt through the seat the rumble of tires over gravel, then the truck stopped. We were somewhere after Centertown and before Woodbury, where the path goes up into the hills and houses pull farther and farther back from the road.

\* \* \*

“Skynard or Floyd?” I asked. Such a stereotype, but that was me back then.

“What?”

“Skynard it is.” I turned the radio up and sang along: “All I want for you, my son, is to be satisfied.” I noticed Chris was holding the joint, staring blankly at the dashboard, and the blue light of the radio’s faceplate made him look like a corpse. I turned the radio down just long enough to say, “Quit Bogarting that thing and pass, man,” before flipping the volume back up and singing through the chorus as loud as I could, trying to get some

life out of him.

By the time we'd smoked half the joint my eyes stung so bad I would have cried if the sockets weren't too dry. Chris must have been feeling it worse, because he kept his eyes shut, mumbling something that sounded like, ". . .hands reaching for my face." Two thirds through and when I passed it over, he grabbed my shoulder, felt down my arm to the wrist, then brought my hand up to his face and knocked the jay out with his forehead.

I smelled burnt hair and something like melted plastic; Chris started giggling.

"You're stoned man."

"No I'm not."

"Have you ever been high before? I mean really high?"

He turned his face toward me, still with his eyes closed. "Hey. Man."

"What?"

"Quit Bogarting."

I laughed and shoved him up against the door. I imagined that's what it would feel like to share your son's first beer with him; that's as close as I'll ever get, anyway.

\* \* \*

"You're sixteen now, right?" Adam asked

"Fifteen."

We were in the truck bed, his head against the rear window and mine against the closed tailgate.

"I remember fifteen."

"Yeah." I said it like I imagined Paul Newman might in *Cool Hand Luke*, as if

that one word meant a lot. I'd watched the movie the a few summers before at our father's house, and was awed by his self assurance, the unconscious coolness of his actions.

"I'm old, man. An old man."

"No you're not. I'm almost as old as you."

"You'll never be as old as me."

"Yes I will. In two and a half years."

"Then I'll be two and a half years older, stupid." I must have looked confused because he said, "Nevermind," and put his hands behind his head. "Hey, I ever tell you about the party at Brandon Cantrell's?"

A meteor shot across the sky, and I felt proud for knowing it wasn't actually a star. "No," I said, even though I'd heard it a few times before. I loved listening to my brother tell stories; ever since we were little he'd always told me stories. Most he made up, but I would believe every word of them. I got in trouble at school once for claiming that Franklin, the only black boy in class, was black because his ancestors were always sitting in the shade trees to escape the heat of the African sun. It was the shadow that crept into their skin, Adam told me. But even after I realized his stories weren't always true I loved hearing them. We never really talked – we still don't – but once he got started telling a story it was like everything about him changed, and, for a short time, everything about us changed.

"I was fifteen, and it was the end of my first season on the soccer team. . ." I located the three stars on Orion's belt and tried to figure out whether he was right side up



or upside down. I'm still never sure which is which, but it doesn't really matter anyway.

\* \* \*

I was fifteen, and it was the end of my first season on the soccer team. We had done all right that year – not like this year, not by half, but still pretty good considering we'd lost a bunch of seniors from the year before and had a new coach. It was the weekend of the last game, and Brandon Cantrell's parents were going to be in Alabama for something. You believe that shit? Who wants to go to Alabama? Skynard says he likes it, but I think he just hated Neil Young that much. Alabamans don't want to be in Alabama.

Anyway, he decided to throw a party. I was a second string striker, and barely played that season, but Jimmy Barton tore his ACL before the half and I scored the third goal in a 3-2 game. It was a long shot, twenty-five yards out, easy. You sure I haven't told you this before?

Well, it had a hell of a spin on it – I didn't even know how to put a spin on a ball back then, it just happened, like fucking Ronaldo – and it dipped down at the last second, right underneath the Oakdale goalie's hands. You should have seen his face when the ball dropped: he looked like some fucking orangutan or something.

So Brandon comes up to me after the game, puts his arm around my shoulder, looks at the field and says, "Dude," he says, "how'd you do that?" "Well," I said, trying to play it cool, "it's a little bit of practice and a whole lot of skill." He grins at me real big and tells me about his party and says I better be there, that there'll be tons of horny chicks and if I got a girlfriend I better break up with her by tomorrow, "Because," he

says, “a gentleman never cheats. And if you’re coming to my party, you’re gonna get laid.”

Brandon Fucking Cantrell, the guy who’d tied for the most goals in a single season the year before, was team captain, and dated Miranda Dannel, the hottest girl in school. Still the hottest girl I’ve ever seen, hands down.

I was dating Jamie Powter at the time – you remember her? Real cute, great legs, best laugh you ever heard. I broke up with her that night, told her straight to her face I didn’t like her anymore. “No, there’s nobody else,” I said, “we just aren’t compatible.” Compatible, what a hell of a word.

She cried and I didn’t even put my arm around her. Just left her there on the steps of her front porch, all hunched over and shaking up and down like she was choking, but not making a sound. I still couldn’t drive, and the guys were honking in the front yard.

This was during the time that Mom and Jim were fighting a lot, just before they split; she should have never married that bastard. Anyway, they never noticed when I came or went. So the next night I said I was staying at someone’s house and got Turtle to come pick me up.

We get to the party and it’s a freaking madhouse. It’s in this big ass shed behind his place, like a barn but nicer. There’s a band inside on some kind of stage, and there are trucks parked all over the place. I’d never been to a real party before, and the first people we passed on the way in were a bunch of guys from the team cheering while Hiroshi, the Japanese exchange student, threw up all over the ground. It was sweet.

And the girls, man. Everyone was there, and all wearing short skirts and shorts

and shit, all blonde and tan and looking like they never did at school.

Somebody gave me a plastic cup of beer and somebody else passed a jay. Then I took a hit off someone's glass piece – I'd never heard of a choke before. They had to show me when to hold it and when to release. It was a hell of a night.

Dude, are you asleep? Quit sitting there with your mouth hanging open, you look like some kind of fucking retard. Who gives a shit about stars?

Anyway, towards the end of the night, everyone is filing out, and I'm told Turtle left with this Sarah chick. He's gone, and I'm like, "Fuck." You would probably have freaked out because you're a pussy, but I marched my ass back into the shed and grabbed another beer, then went outside figuring I might as well watch the sun come up with a drink in my hand.

I find a great spot on top of this woodpile behind the barn. I get settled in, and it's perfect: not too cold, there's this mist rising off the fields like ghosts from the grave, and just over the tree line the sky is the color – you ever seen blood wash down the drain in the sink, the way it mixes with water and is all red and pink swirls? It was like that, but with a blueberry shake around the edges and blackberry cobbler filling everywhere else – and it's just this moment when you feel yourself align with the entire world, not like your heart is beating with it, but the world is beating in and through you.

I never told this to anyone before. Maybe I was afraid they'd laugh. It's some pretty New Age sounding mystical crap. I knew you'd get it though. That's why I brought you out here.

So I'm feeling like I could die and be all right; but then I hear someone crying. I

don't do nothing at first, hoping it'll just go away, but it doesn't. "Well, hell," I say to myself, "I better see what's up." I slip getting down the woodpile and knock a bunch of shit over, and the crying stops, but I seen who it was anyway standing against the wall. You know who? Miranda Dannel, hottest girl in school, and, as it turned out, the now ex-girlfriend of Brandon Cantrell. Found out later some tight little sophomore told him she wouldn't go past second if he had a girlfriend, and that was that. Miranda saw them walk up to the house together. He never could keep his beer down and his pants up. Dumbass.

I'm not too good at making people feel better. I don't know the right words, and my arms don't know what they're supposed to do. But it didn't matter 'cause she buried her head in my shoulder and wrung on my shirt like a dish towel. I let her cry for awhile, just standing there, but her hair – her hair smelled like some kind of fruit and spring and fresh towels and it was dark, looked black though I knew it was really more like coffee in daylight, and I put my arm around her shoulder. She stopped crying so hard and let loose her hold on my shirt and smoothed it out and I ran my hand up and down her back – kinda like Mom used to for you after I beat you up

Did I kiss her? What the hell, man. You want to tell this story? Shut up and listen.

She stops crying altogether then, and her hands smoothing out my shirt press down harder; one goes to my waist and the other goes around my back and she pulls me tighter so I squeeze harder, too. And I'm not shitting you, she looks up at me and I can just make out her eyes and her lips are parted like she might say something any second but doesn't. The very tiniest sliver of sun peaks in between the trees, and the barn glows

pink, like a strawberry Starburst, and just like that she reaches her hand up to the back of my head and pulls my face down to hers.

She stops when our lips are a hair apart, and her nose is cold where it touches my cheek under my eye, and she's looking right into me, not into my eyes and then stopping, but through them and into me, as though she can see me falling down the slide when I was four and breaking my arm and crying, as though she's picking me up and speaking softly to me that it'll be all right. Her breath is warm and fruity like homemade wine, and it catches in her throat just before she pulls me the rest of the way in.

\* \* \*

“And just like that,” I said reaching up and out with my arms to demonstrate, “our lips touch and magma rushes into my veins.” I put some extra flair on it for Chris's sake. He's such a sucker for stories. He wasn't even looking at me; it was like he looked past me to a field with mist hugging the ground and a sun just out of reach.

I saw it too, while I was telling it; I could see the barn like pink candy and the tumbled woodpile and Miranda Dannel with her arms around me, only I turned into my brother, and her face was just a millimeter from his, not mine. It was always like that when I told Chris stories, as though somehow he became a part of them. They became real for him in a way they never were for me, even if they were my memories. That's why I never told him about what happened at basic training later that summer; I don't want him to see everything.

I realized I was still holding my arms in the air, so I dropped them and exhaled loudly. Chris looked like he was in some kind of trance or something, and I wanted to

make sure he wasn't having a bad reaction to the pot. Our breath steamed out of our noses like the reindeer in Scandinavia I saw on some stupid nature show Chris was always watching, or like the time I went deer hunting with our old stepdad, Jim. I kicked Chris on the leg. "And then I fucked her."

"Nuh-unh."

"No shit, man. Right there against the back of the barn, wet grass and tree bark all over the place." I hopped out of the bed. "All right, let's go."

\* \* \*

Adam started the truck before I got all the way out of the back, and I hurried into the cab thinking he might drive off without me. When he did press the gas, we moved with a funny hump every few feet, like the truck was dancing a redneck hop-step. "Shit."

Adam jumped back out and ran around the hood. He disappeared for a second by the passenger headlight, then hobbled to his feet and pounded his fist on the hood. Flat tire.

He opened my door and told me to get out, then leaned the seat over and rummaged behind it. The wheel rim was in the gravel, rubber splayed out around it like biscuit dough in a just-popped can. "You see any gashes in the sidewall?" I bent down and couldn't see anything so I ran my fingers around it to feel for tears. "Usually happens when you ride on rims," Adam said. I always hated how he acted like I didn't know anything. I knew about flat tires. "I can fix a hole, but if it's a rip you gotta get a whole new tire."

"I don't see anything."

“Well, either way we have to put on the spare. Here.” He handed me a long metal bar with a perpendicular arm on the end, like an L with a ridiculously long foot.

“Let down the donut under the tailgate.”

I walked around the back of the truck and looked under the bumper. I had no idea what he meant. He popped the hood then slammed the door. I could see the tire stored beneath the bed when I peered under, but there was nowhere to put the bar. I realized I was on my hands and knees in gravel, with what must look like my head stuck up a truck’s ass.

“What’s so funny? What are you doing on the ground?”

I tried to explain, but all that came out was, “. . . truck’s ass.”

“Get up.” In twenty seconds he had the spare tire out and on the ground. He banged around under the hood for awhile, swore a lot, then slammed it down and looked behind the seat again. After a few moments of searching, he clambered out. “Looks like we’re stuck here till we get a jack.”

Adam called Turtle, then told me to settle in since it would be at least a half hour. “But stay out of the cab, we need to keep weight off the front.” I nestled into the bed up against the tailgate and looked at the sky. “You know,” I said after he climbed in, “I never could see a face in the moon.”

“It’s just a big ass rock.”

“You told me once it was made out of cheese. Pizza cheese, you said.”

“And your dumb ass believed me.” Had I? Maybe so.

“I am so hungry right now. Out of nowhere. One minute ago I was full, and now

I feel like I could eat the moon.”

“Dude, shut up.”

There was a wide halo around the moon, and it looked like it was shining under water.

“Hey, remember when your bike was stolen when you were eleven?” Adam nodded. “Well, it wasn’t really stolen.”

\* \* \*

Well, it wasn’t really stolen. You remember that big pond in our duplex neighborhood? This kid, Mikey, told me at school he had built a ramp right on the edge of that pond. He told me I was too scared to ride my bike off of it, because I was a Mama’s boy with no dad.

That was the only time I ever got into a fight besides with you. I just started hitting him, like I could see myself doing it but didn’t know how to stop, didn’t want to stop. I was so scared waiting in the principal’s office for Mom to come get me, and she was pissed when she showed up. She didn’t say a word until after we got in the car and drove for a few minutes. I could feel my heart thumping against my eardrums. She asked me what happened, and I told her, and she didn’t say anything else till we got home.

We got there, and she bent down in front of me to look me right in the face, and said it didn’t matter what people said about me, that I had to do the right thing regardless. She walked me down to Mikey’s house to apologize, and when he came to the door he was holding a bag of frozen peas up to his face. I remember they were in a white bag and



I could see the nutritional information between his fingers. His mom gave Mom a look like it was all her fault for raising little hellions, and told Mom now she knew why boys needed an authority figure.

I wanted to punch her too, but Mikey was staring at the ground like he didn't want to be there either, and I remembered what Mom said, so I just apologized. He looked up at me then and said real quiet so only I could hear, "Still chicken." They made us shake hands and I tried to grind his knuckles together and break every one of his fingers like you always used to do to me, but harder.

When we got home I got out my bike. The chain had slipped off and was rusted, and I couldn't get it back on, even after flipping it upside down like you showed me. So I took yours. I couldn't sit down and reach the pedals because the seat was too high, but I could stand up and pedal. I rode straight down to the ramp at the pond.

No one was around, and I got a little scared looking at it. It was probably only two feet high, but it looked huge and ended in space just above the water. I thought of Mikey standing in front of his house with a bag of peas over his eye saying I was too scared, so I rode as fast as I could and hit the ramp like one of those motorcross guys on TV.

All of a sudden the whole world slows down, and I see our house, and Mom through the kitchen window washing dishes. I want to wave but she's turned around. I see Mikey's house, and I want him to be at the window, I want to flip him off and say, "Fuck you," and mean it, like Dad once said we should. Instead I just look down and see the mosquitoes flitting across the surface, and my reflection coming up to meet me. It

was after sundown, and though it was still light the moon was already up, and the last thing I saw before hitting the water was the front wheel plowing through the big dark spot on the moon.

I wasn't ready for how dark and warm and deep it was. I got scared and left your bike at the bottom. I ran home and took my clothes off in the garage and snuck through the hallway to the bathroom. I took a shower, and when I got out, Mom said, "Oh, there you are. Dinner's almost ready," and she gave me this look like don't worry about the fight, it'll be our secret.

\* \* \*

"All during dinner I was afraid you'd tell Mom you were going to ride your bike afterwards," Chris said.

"I remember that," I said. "The next morning you looking at me all chicken-shitted and saying 'someone took it' like you knew." I laughed. "I bet it's still down there, you little bastard." For some reason, I felt proud of my little brother. I would have probably kicked his ass back then, but things were different now. I had enlisted in the Navy that afternoon, and I guess I was feeling like he was going to be the man of the house soon.

"Anyway, sorry about your bike," Chris said.

"You should have ridden right over that little punk Mikey. His brother Mitchell was a year older than me and stole my girlfriend. I hated him." We sat there for awhile, and he looked back up at the stars. He was always doing that. I never knew what he saw up there.

A cloud passed over the moon and lit up like a neon light.

“You remember our old house in Georgia, before the duplex?” he asked

“Yeah.”

“There was brown carpet in the hallway. And I fell in the pool.”

“I pushed you in.”

“Oh yeah, that was you. I could have died.”

“I would have pulled you out,” I said, but I couldn’t tell if he believed me.

“The front of the house was yellow with brown trim,” he continued, “and had a driveway leading up to the brown garage door. But I don’t know if I really remember it or if I remember photographs of it.” He turned his face down from the sky and looked me directly in the eye, something he never did. “What was it like?” he asked.

“All the walls were off-white, and there was linoleum in the kitchen that matched the puke green stove and refrigerator. There was a mini banana tree by the front door, and we planted pineapples in pots on the porch railing. Come Christmas, Mom put the tree in the den, which had wood paneling and a window that looked out at the pool.”

“I know all that. What was it like?”

I didn’t know what he was getting at. “Well,” I said, “we had peaches and cottage cheese on the back patio in the summer, and in the winter we ate applesauce with pork chops that Dad grilled.”

He nodded his head and his breath came out slow and thick in the cold night air. I remembered the brown plastic booster seat he used to sit in, and I smelled the pork chops. I saw our father’s gold chain necklace with the Indian head gold dollar. I smelled his

cologne thick in the air.

“Why did Dad leave?”

\* \* \*

Adam was silent a long while. His chin was on his chest like it always is when he thinks hard about something. I got cold waiting for him to answer, and shifted position. Beside me on the rubber mat of the truck bed was something heavy and metal, and I picked it up. Something clicked in my head, and I knew what I was holding but couldn't connect it to the right word.

“He used to come home really late, piss-ass drunk and swearing like a sailor. One night, the summer I turned seven, he threw a snow globe at Mom's head, missed, and put it through the kitchen window. She told him to pick his partying or his family.” Adam's breath poured out like steam from an engine. “He came back a few days later and grabbed some clothes. You were asleep. Before he left he crouched down in front of me and put his hands on my shoulder, and I still remember exactly what he said. ‘Adam,’ he said, ‘you'll learn one day that there are times when a man can do what he wants, and times he has to do what he must. You figure out which is which and you'll be a better man than me.’ Then he left.”

My eyes were stinging like earlier in the truck, the moon was blurry, and the hungry feeling in my stomach was burning a hole through my gut and leaping around like some crazed animal. I felt incredibly alone, like the entire sky with its billions of stars was staring down at me from far away. I had wanted to believe, indeed made myself believe for so long that my dad left because he had to; the details were always vague, but

surely some inescapable and all-powerful thing had made him leave. It was the one story Adam had never told me, and I always knew he had a good one for it. But instead our dad was just a lousy drunk, a dead-beat who could have stayed.

“Hey, you found the jack.”

The jack was cold and heavy in my lap, and I gave it to my brother.

\* \* \*

Soon he had changed the tire, called Turtle and told him to not bother picking us up, but he could meet us at Waffle House if he wanted. I had three orders of hashbrowns, and laughed while Adam told the story of the enormous joint and how high I got, but I felt like it wasn't me laughing, like I saw Adam and Turtle and me all laughing, but from across the room, and the me that was watching us was neither happy nor full.

Some time later, just before he left for Navy basic, I asked my brother about that night and why he took me with him. He said he had just enlisted and he didn't want to be alone; I think he told the truth, but only part of it. I asked him whatever happened with Miranda Dannel. “The best kiss I ever had in my entire life, and I've kissed a lot of girls.” “But,” I said, “you told me you ‘fucked her’,” and “fucked” came out funny in my mouth and quieter than the rest of the words.

“Dude,” Adam said, “you'll believe anything,” and he punched me on the arm. He enlisted to get money for college, but he didn't last long in the service – I'm not sure why. He used a knee complaint from soccer to get a medical discharge. He moved away not long after coming back, just before Mom married for the third time. Neither of us went to the wedding.

**Modern Life**



## How to Keep Your Distance

I was twelve when my brother shot me.  
“Close your eyes,” he said  
“Turn around.”  
Stubbled grass crackling  
under heavy feet.  
“It won’t hurt,” he yelled  
from across the field.

Sagging barn yawning against  
robin’s egg sky,  
and through its mouth I could see  
another world, another field,  
another brother.

Then, the shotgun blast.

Not the sharp retort of a rifle  
they trained him to love so well,  
but the echoing *boom* of  
flashing powder, white hot pellets  
rushing through twelve gauges of  
searing steel.

The sound traveled to the barn and  
back before the shot  
exploded against me like hail  
the summer we chased tornadoes.

He said it wouldn’t hurt  
that I would be just fine.  
Our father said the same thing once, too.

## Reconciling the Future

We sit atop a limestone cliff.  
Billions of insignificant creatures,  
little nothings that created mountains.  
Our feet dangle over empty space,  
sway like sailboats,  
the seven-year-old sun setting  
just before you left.  
People used to say we had the same eyes –  
I wear sunglasses a lot –  
but can you see me,  
can you see a billion nothings  
creating a man?  
I want to tell you how it was:  
the days and the nights,  
revolving time, static time,  
a hundred thousand possibilities  
leading to this day, this hike,  
this limestone ledge;  
the people I could have been and  
the person you became,  
past and future, setting sun and  
blooming dogwoods.  
I want to tell you all the little nothings;  
I want to tell you I needed you.  
The wind swirls through the valley below  
and you ask me what the trees are saying;  
a game we used to play.  
I don't want to tell you  
I'm not a child anymore.  
I say nothing at all.  
The sun falls behind the ridge,  
falls, but rises on someone else.



## You Can Never Go Home Twice

I was three when you shot out  
The living room window.  
You were too drunk to aim properly  
And she lived to take us away.  
Did you look for us? After the hangover  
And the window repair-man  
Did you try to find us? Or did you  
Let us fade from memory until  
Fifteen years later a heart palpitation  
Gave you a concern for legacy?  
*Here I am*, you wanted to proclaim  
But we only knew you from  
Where you weren't. Familiar with your  
Absence we had no room for  
Your presence. There was static on  
The line, but I agreed.  
It was sunny, cold, noisy. We  
Shook hands in a parking lot.  
I wanted my car to backfire like a  
Gunshot, wanted you to remember.  
Life has a funny way with these things.  
I drove and drove and drove.

Modern Life 2



## Lapis Lazuli

The sky is lapis lazuli, brilliant and empty and cracking apart. There are no clouds. The sand at Folly Beach is white and hot; sea oats bend from the weight of the sun. Cole and Elsie lie on their backs on straw mats, Cole propped on his elbows watching the horizon – a sailboat, only, separates sky and ocean – Elsie laid flat, black bug-eye sunglasses hiding her face. Cole looks at her every few minutes, squints through the glare, but can't tell if she sees him. If it weren't for her toes shuffling she could be asleep. Four inches of white sand separates their mats.

Cole is young, maybe eighteen, maybe twenty-five. He is short and pale, for which he can thank his Scots-Irish heritage. His eyes are normally green, though in the sunlight they bleach to autumn gold. Elsie is slightly taller than Cole, though in the past she used to say she wasn't, and only pictures can tell that her natural hair color is mousy blonde. Today she is chocolate brown, which is not a good look for her; Elsie has olive skin, but is pale in that just-after-winter, washed-out kind of way. At the moment she's working on earning her hair color with overpriced tanning oil, SPF 1. Cole wears SPF 45 and already turns pink.

They are not alone. Locke and Prater drift in the water. That two people who prefer their last names would find each other should be either very improbable or very fitting; perhaps both. Locke is tall, toned, tan; girls notice him. Elsie notices him, though she doesn't want Prater to know. Prater knows, but doesn't mind; after all, Prater's the one fucking him. Prater has kept her natural hair color, which normally suits her well, but right now the hair model blonde is wetted to a clumpy green and brown. But she's

not thinking about her hair.

Prater has her arms around Locke's shoulders; the water comes up to their necks, and out of habit they bend their knees between waves to ensure it stays that way. They're both twenty-ish and as in love as twenty-somethings can be; they should be brushing against each other, letting the dark water cover their indiscretions, but unfortunately their thoughts either never left the beach or have since ghosted their way back there. It's a conversation they've had before, but one that still excites their interest, confusion, and pity. "Why do you think he came?" Prater always starts it, though Locke has been mulling it over too. Currently they're a good match, Prater and Locke, though they weren't always; these sorts of things rise and fall, regular as the tide. Locke shrugs in an it's-obvious kind of way. "Cause it was already paid for. Prove a point." Locke isn't as certain as he lets on, but he and Cole go back, and as a guy he's supposed to understand his friend. Which he does, to what extent it's possible, but the few conversations he's had with Cole are celebrations of indirectness: "What the fuck, dude?" as they sit at a bar a block from the hotel. Cole shrugs, sips his beer, exhales. "I know. What the fuck," which, as a statement, says everything.

Back in the ocean Locke spins Prater around; they don't want Cole and Elsie to *know* they're talking about them. "Why do you think *she* came?" he asks. Prater suspects it's so Elsie can be certain she made the correct choice, even though Prater thinks she hasn't, but Elsie hasn't actually talked of the situation without clamming up. "I can't explain it," and, "I don't know," have been Elsie's fall-back phrases lately. She and Prater are not as good of friends as they used to be; because, Prater tells herself, Elsie

has changed, but also because Prater likes Cole, thinks Elsie treated him like shit, which is mostly true, and she's imagined all the what-ifs. Prater hasn't yet realized her attraction to broken men, but she will. She shrugs. "Elsie's somebody I don't know anymore."

"But why do you *think* she came?" Locke thinks Prater must have some secret, womanly insight into the mysterious, illogical workings of the female mind. Prater feels the pressure to uphold the feminine mystique. "She wants to make Britton jealous." Britton is the guy Elsie's been seeing for twice as long as Cole thinks she has: he believed "time apart" meant time apart. "She's using Cole," Locke affirms. This is the point where the conversation usually dissipates like so much smoke. Prater says nothing, sensing a betrayal of womanhood, like usual, and Locke thinks *bitch* but says nothing, like usual. He dated Elsie once, too, and liked her more than he ever had the courage to admit. This was before Prater, but mended bones still hurt when the weather drops.

Cole is too hot, too bored, too uncomfortable with Elsie's silence and joins Locke and Prater in the ocean. The water is dark green and cool and the soft sand opens to his feet. The water soothes his skin, and Cole enjoys the sensation of drifting.

Elsie begins to stir on the shore; now that she's finally alone she can get back to phone tag.

Cole doesn't want to be a third wheel, and Prater doesn't want to highlight Cole's loneliness by being too near him with Locke. Locke succeeds, for the moment, at hiding his eying of girls on the beach. Prater will notice, but she won't care when she does; she's a practical girl, not given to jealousy, and knows that although Locke enjoys

looking at beautiful women, he's too much of a coward to ever cheat on her.

Cole drifts away from them. He looks for the Morris Island lighthouse, but can't see it anywhere.

\* \* \*

Prater lies on a beach towel next to Elsie. Elsie looks at her out of the corner of her eye; Prater can feel her gaze, see the enormous round sunglasses shift in her direction; she doesn't respond, but instead stares at the empty sky, which through her sunglasses has become the yellow-brown color of smog or the peculiar stillness before a storm. It must be above ninety degrees, perhaps pushing close to triple digits, and the sun bakes Folly Beach like chains. For the moment, though she is sweating, the heat comforts Prater, and she considers taking a nap.

Elsie props onto her elbows and shifts towards Prater. She isn't sure what she wants; she feels the tension between them, misses the easy confidence they used to share. Tanning oil pools into Elsie's navel, and she fingers it absently. She wants to talk with Prater about their friendship, she wants to talk about Cole; instead she says, "Remember the time in fifth grade when your dad wouldn't let you stay over?" "We said we'd run away," Prater replies. Elsie presses on. "Run away and train horses to do tricks for the circus. Wouldn't that have been something?" "Well, we were just little girls." Prater rolls onto her stomach and turns her head. Elsie looks at her friend's perspiring back, the half moon tattoo on her left shoulder blade. When had she gotten that? What happened to their friendship?

Cole and Locke are children in the surf. They busy themselves with simply being

alive: the cry of gulls, the crash of waves, leaping and splashing and yelling just for the sake of it. But, eventually, as always, the present demands recognition. Cole and Locke both sense this and, seemingly as one, put on the disguise of adults once more.

“This is nuts.” Locke cuts right to the chase; Cole appreciates this, and nods. “I think *I* might be,” he says. A pelican inches above the surface of the water, wing tips beating down wave crests. Locke ignores the comment. “Honestly, I wouldn’t have come. Fuck that.” The pelican flaps, climbs, then wheels in midair and plunges into the water. It is the fourth day of the week-long vacation, and Cole has become ever more distracted, as though he is watching his life tick by around him; the world whirls through space at thousands of miles an hour, a fact that only becomes clear when we feel most alone. Yesterday he saw a little girl, only five or so, cut her foot on a shell; she wailed and blood spurted until sand got into the cut and clotted it. Cole didn’t feel compassion or sympathy; he didn’t have the gut wrenching vanity of wondering how it would feel if he’d been cut; he didn’t even feel annoyed. He had felt nothing beyond a fleeting sense of curiosity about what may happen next. “You think I’m cracking up,” he says.

Locke in fact had been thinking that for some time. The first two weeks after the break-up no one heard from Cole. He didn’t return phone calls, skipped class, missed the weekly tradition of bluegrass Thursdays. When he reappeared he had cut his hair short, lost a dozen pounds, and reminded Locke of a balloon that, once tied off, loses half its air. He was a wreck, but it was almost better than the few weeks that followed. Cole went through a complete reversal; rather than shunning every living thing, suddenly he couldn’t stand to be alone for even a few minutes. The Elsie-shaped vacuum consumed

everything, and even Prater was irritated at Cole's constant presence. Though he'd never mentioned it to anyone, the possibility of suicide occurred to Locke more than once.

Worse still, there was a time or two that Locke wished Cole would go ahead and do it.

Locke, not knowing what else to do, offers a half-hearted laugh and lets the current take him a few feet. "You need to go out tonight and go home with someone. Show Elsie you can." They're not close enough to shore for Locke to clearly make out the tanned girl in pink bikini walking along the shore, but he's got a pretty good eye for these things. "Yeah," Cole says, but his heart isn't in it. Truth is, Cole hasn't ever really been single since he first started dating. He moved from Tara to Nora to Elsie without any downtime in between; which means that Cole, who lacks Locke's eye-catching features or Prater's confidence and charisma, cuts a pretty poor figure at sharking.

The pelican dives again, resurfaces; impossibly, a fish leaps from the bird's beak, flashes white and silver as it whirls through the air. "Did you see that?" Locke didn't, but follows Cole's pointing finger to the pelican flapping away. "Oh, yeah," he says, "cool." "I bet that fish never felt so alive," Cole says. For the first time in weeks he feels something other than ennui; he envies the fish.

\* \* \*

The Charleston City Market on a summer day is hot, crowded, noisy; it smells of horse dung and sweetgrass, candles and the sweat of plump tourists. The overhead fans' only job is swirling around the sickly heat. Basket weavers sidle up against knock-off sunglass sellers, greasy food stalls against refrigerator magnets, plastic jewelry, ceramic plates covered in poorly done paintings. It is late afternoon now, and the vendors droop



like flower arrangements left too long in the sun, no longer even bothering to swat at the lazily droning flies. The throngs of people dwindle as the dinner hour approaches, and only a few handfuls of customers remain to poke halfheartedly at the wares.

Elsie picks up a ceramic bird on a branch, a robin, something she thinks her grandmother would like, then remembers that her grandmother died two years ago. Cole was a pall bearer.

Prater and Locke watch the basket weavers who, after years of honing their craft, treat it as more of a diversion, something to occupy their hands while they gossip. Locke can't look away from the loose, heavy sway of breasts against brightly colored dresses, is repulsed and oddly fascinated at the same time, like watching an elderly couple kiss or beetles swarm over roadkill. "They don't even acknowledge we're here," he says quietly to Elsie. "They just keep doing their thing, like animals in a zoo." Like many Northern men, Locke believes in his veil of tolerance, something Prater can't stand about him. "They charge out the ass so idiot tourists like you can have a centerpiece for the coffee table, pretend they've had an 'authentic' Charleston experience. Really 'lived' the South. Joke's on us." She moves on. Locke lingers, watches the women work.

Cole is not the sort to be interested in open air markets and he idly passes tables and booths until one catches his eye. "Elsie, check this out." She is a few stalls down and, though slightly annoyed, she replaces an embroidered dish towel and walks over. A few strands of hair stick to her lip gloss. "What?" Cole waves his arm over the table. "You love my mom's turquoise. Look at all this." Elsie picks up a pair of silver-rimmed earrings then tosses them back onto the black felt. "They're OK." Out of habit Cole

slides Elsie's hair back from her lip, smooths it behind an ear. She swats his hand away. "I was just being nice." She wants to look over the jewelry, but can't now, and is irritated at Cole for finding it first. The difference between kindness and annoyance is often simply a matter of perspective.

\* \* \*

It is eleven o'clock and the city is hushed. The occasional car, rust eating its edges, drives by under a night sky purpled by city lights. The carriages ceased trundling long ago, the horses stabled for the night. Streetlights shine on would-be revelers, but even they are muted, as though the city generates the same impressive aura of a library. Locke and Prater lie in bed in the double room, watching television.

Elsie talks on her cell phone in the hall.

Cole sits on the edge of the other bed, kicks his sleeping bag. He and Elsie never lived together, but for three years spent most nights at each other's places. And now a sleeping bag on a hotel room floor. "I can't believe she's still making you sleep on the floor." It takes Cole a moment to realize Prater is speaking to him. She sits against the headboard, rubbing a callus on her palm. "We agreed before the trip," Cole shrugs. "It's just a bed," Prater replies.

"Yeah," Locke says, "if it's such a big deal I'll sleep with Elsie and you can stay in our bed." He laughs. Neither Prater or Cole do; both their stomachs leap involuntarily. For a few seconds the television is the only sound. "Or you guys could sleep together," Prater finally says. "Yeah right," Locke says at the same time Cole murmurs, "The floor is fine." Cole sits on the bed for a few minutes, staring at but not

seeing the television screen. He steps into the hall. “I just think it’s stupid,” Prater says into her hands in her lap. Locke changes channels and turns up the volume.

The Andrew Pinckney Inn is one of those old buildings that has been completely renovated yet attempts to maintain some historic integrity. The staircase, for example, is clearly old, if not original. But the newly tiled halls and sheetrocked walls say otherwise. Much like Charleston itself, the inn is a bewildering blend of old and new. Locke finds it quaint, but he’s attracted to modern comforts and old South elegance – his family has some money. Cole finds the bridge between past and present to be too much of a stretch, inauthentic, empty.

Elsie is not in the hall, and Cole decides to have a look around. At the top of the stairs he hears her – she has always talked too loudly on the phone. He takes his phone out, cycles through the contact list. There are two girls he could call, but he calls his mother instead. She asks him how he’s doing and he evades the question. They talk for less than two minutes, then hang up. Cole’s mother was never good at communicating with him; he reminds her too much of his father. Cole keeps the phone to his ear in case Elsie steps around the corner. He thinks she might be talking about him, but doesn’t want her to know that he’s eavesdropping. If Locke were there he’d say “fuck it” and walk right up to the corner, then openly admit what he’d been doing once he got caught. Cole is glad Locke isn’t there.

Elsie is not talking about Cole. She’s only grown more irritated with him the longer the trip drags on. She thinks he’s an asshole. He may not deserve this, but thinking it helps Elsie create the necessary distance. Elsie is talking to her roommate;

they discuss the city, how Prater is being a bitch, how alone Elsie feels – but they tiptoe around mentioning Cole. That kind of absence is always a presence, though, and at the top of the stairs Cole hovers between their words. Elsie’s roommate likes Cole, too, though not as Prater does. She thinks he was a better choice than Britton, but she can’t say that – she has to live with Elsie for eight more months, after all. Conviction usually falls to convenience given enough opportunity.

Elsie hangs up. It is time for Britton to be off work, but he doesn’t answer his phone. She wants to curl under a blanket and feel the world swallow her. She rounds the corner and sees Cole at the top of the stairs.

Cole talks, giving appropriate pauses, as if speaking with a friend. As Elsie passes him he puts the phone down on his thigh. “Elsie, can you wait a minute?” Elsie nods though she doesn’t want to; Cole wrote her a ten page letter the week after she left him, full of everything one expects from ten broken-hearted pages; she hopes this isn’t another one of those.

It isn’t. Cole meets her before a fountain in the atrium. This is something he’s been wanting to say since Prater looked through Elsie’s phone the day before and saw her texts: they described what Elsie wanted to do to Britton, how she couldn’t wait to be back, how Prater was a bitch and Cole was an asshole; Prater told Cole only that Elsie no longer cared for him and he had to get over her. To do so he feels he has to declare himself to her, and this is the best he came up with:

“I’ve been thinking a lot about this lately, and I’ve come to realize something.”  
“I’m really tired, Cole, is this going to take long?” The irrational tenacity required to

soldier on despite all good sense is something we share with certain beasts; it comes from the inability to recognize what Napoleon called acceptable losses, and look to the next battle. Cole had lost the war, but this was a matter of pride, of identity. So he jumps right into the thick of it. “You’ve treated me like shit. Not just these past three days, not just the past five weeks, but for the last year.” Elsie tries to speak, but he raises a hand. “No, you listen for once.” She clenches her mouth shut; he feels powerful, and it feels good. He takes a breath, savoring it. Elsie checks her cell phone. “You have been unkind, uncharitable, and untruthful.” He likes the alliteration, the feel of it on his tongue. “I’ve tried for the past month to make this work, to give you space, to see that you needed to know what it was like to be without me.” This isn’t what Elsie needed at all, which Cole now realizes, but at this point it’s far more important *that* he says it, not *what* he says. “I’m telling you now that I’m done. You don’t respect me, you walk all over me, just because you can. That ends now. No more.”

There are tears in his eyes and his hands shake. He feels he must look sadly beautiful; he hopes it breaks her heart. She says “Ok,” nods her head too many times while staring at the ground, then walks away. Cole leans against the wall, hears her close the room door. He doesn’t cry; he thought he’d feel relieved, but he feels something less than numb, something more than nothing. He sits on the floor.

In the room Elsie sits on the toilet, runs the shower, and cries into a towel.

\* \* \*

Charleston in early summer is pleasant, moneyed, white – a WASP family vacation dream. But beneath it all is the unmistakable presence of poverty, of dirt, of

minorities – a darker history of the city is palpable beneath the veneer of fresh paint, in the stones and mortar of the streets and buildings smiling tourists walk through. Once the fourth largest port in America, Charleston has always been a milieu of ethnic and economic differences. Gullah is still spoken here.

It is just after midnight and Cole looks for the underbelly of Charleston, the part of the city that has always existed just out of sight. The problem is, Cole doesn't know where to find it. He walks down Calhoun St. towards the harbor, takes a right onto Bay St. Jewelers, cigar shops, Italian restaurants, all lighted down and locked up for the night. Farther down Bay he steps over a burger wrapper discarded on the sidewalk. A cat slinks down an alley. Music and orange light spill into the street ahead. He thinks he must be getting close.

A man plays guitar in the corner window. He looks and sings like shit; but the sign above the entrance includes the word Pub, and there are dartboards in the back, so Cole enters. It's too bright and there is a No Smoking sign, but the bar top is dark wood and a game is on the television. It will do.

Locke sleeps.

Elsie finishes washing her face in the bathroom; Prater slides in and closes the door behind her. She flicks on the vent fan for noise. Elsie towels her face dry and looks at Prater in the mirror, waiting. "What are you doing?" Prater finally says. "Washing my face." Prater turns the tap on, tests the water temperature. "You know what I mean. Why are you doing this to Cole?" She doesn't look at Elsie in the mirror, doesn't want to give anything away. The tube of face wash is cool in her palm. "I'm not doing anything

to him. He wanted to come.” Prater scrubs her face, speaks through the suds. “Of course he wanted to come, Elsie. You’re playing him, and it’s not right.” Elsie is tired of tiptoeing around everyone, tired of trying to be nice. “What do you know about it?” Prater drops her towel and turns the water off. She looks at Elsie in the mirror. Their faces are red from the sun and the coarse hotel towels. “You’re just making it worse for everyone.” “Fuck you, Prater.” Elsie leaves the bathroom and crawls into bed.

Cole orders a shot of Jameson and a pint of Guinness. He wants to feel Irish. He likes the cool of the whiskey on his tongue, the fire in his throat, but doesn’t want to start too strong. The problem with drinking to find something is that it’s always at the bottom of the next glass, and Cole has recognized in the past how easily bar glasses flow through his hands. He strikes up a conversation with a man next to him, which isn’t his style, but he’s on vacation in a bar by himself – there’s no better place for reinvention. They talk sports. Cole enjoys soccer and college football, but he’s never had a head for statistics; the man wanders off. Cole orders another round.

A girl sits at the bar, a seat between herself and Cole. She’s cute in an experienced sort of way. Her eyes appear glued to the screen, but Cole sees her glance at him in the mirror behind the bar. Cole knows he should say something; his palms sweat; he tries not to look at her. He wants something. To scream, to smash the bar mirror with his fist, to walk off the end of the pier and drift into the Atlantic. The girl has eyeliner on, but no other makeup. She wears a T-shirt. “Bullshit.” She looks at him, hand pointing at the screen. He follows the smooth curve of her arm. Soft hairs glint in the harsh light. A basketball game. A coach argues with a referee. The girl smiles at him,

her hand raised like a beacon.

\* \* \*

She fumbles with his belt. Brown leather with a floral pattern hammered into it; could be a man's or woman's. It is his favorite belt, one he'd bought from a street vendor in Florence who'd said it was handmade by an artisan of the Firenze school. It probably came from a factory in China, but Cole likes it. She fumbles with the buckle.

How had they ended up in the bathroom? He bought a round, then she, then. . . There was talk – she had a dog named Kingsley? a brother? a teacher? – then he went to the restroom and she followed him in. Seemed natural enough. Cole is too fractured, too inexperienced, too drunk to recognize a girl on the prowl. The light flickers dimly in its fluorescent tube and the green and red walls glare like a demented holiday. There is an aluminum trough with two pink sanitation cakes, the smell of which Cole tastes on the back of his tongue. There is no lock on the door. His pants are button-fly, which he waits for her to discover; when she does, he wants to laugh. Outside in the bar frat boys throw darts and call each other fags. A spider in the corner stops spinning, waits.

Elsie silences her phone and texts Britton in the dark.

The girl takes Cole in her hand and her face is so close he can feel the heat rise off it like stones after a campfire has burnt to ash. He looks at her hair, the way her thighs jut all akimbo from where she rests on her heels. She has dandruff. “What’s wrong with you?” she asks. Her hand stops moving, the heat of her face pulls away, and she looks up at him. He can’t read her eyes; they flash and dull alternately in the flickering light, and remind him of the glass eyes taxidermists fix to their trade: a semblance of life, but for



that all the more a mockery of it. He burns, seethes, doesn't understand where this emotion comes from but wants to crush her nose in his fist, to stamp her head into the tile until those eyes glow blank. He gathers his pants and leaves. She says something as the door swings to, but he doesn't hear her.

\* \* \*

Cole thinks many desperate thoughts on the walk home: the water so close and cool and calm; the taxis rumbling along streets cobbled with gray stone; the stable where the carriage horses are housed, all that dry hay; the window to a jeweler's, thin and clear as a pane of sugar. He could do anything; he would.

But his feet won't obey his furious thoughts, and he finds himself standing on the other side of the hotel room door, shuffling in place, looking at the knob.

Cole enters the room.

Prater and Locke sleep, Prater softly snoring.

Elsie feigns sleep, not willing to admit even to herself that she has been wondering where Cole is, has waited up for him.

Cole looks at her, the blanket slowly rising with each breath. There is a spare pillow on the bed, and for a moment he thinks – but no, that was last year. How did it come to this? He sighs himself down into his sleeping bag on the floor.

Prater and Locke dream the dreams of imagined contentment, the dreams of the afraid.

Cole falls asleep almost instantly, and dreams nothing. Elsie lies awake for most of the night, and when she eventually sleeps, her dreams are full of jarring colors and wild movements; when she wakes she thinks she dreamt she was happy.

**Remembrance of Things Past**



## **The Trouble of Forgetting**

*for Richard Brautigan*

I want to describe the way  
sunrise touches her sleeping cheek  
I want to tell of small hands on  
the hot of my midnight back  
I think driving, walking, flying,  
moving and moving and moving  
Her bed, neatly made, the shadow of  
myself still on it.

But that was last year

## Cleaning My Grandfather's Coat

I rub oils into the leather, working out  
the mildew and the damp age that settled  
these three years since he passed.  
The lining is hopeless and will  
have to be sent to the cleaners –  
why go to the trouble, my brother asks.  
But for now there is leather like caramel  
and the smell - of what? camel skin,  
shifting sands and heat lines on the horizon?  
cattle and open range and wind-whipped snow?  
or is it shit and piss and pipes and plumber's glue?  
The elbows are worn thin from the  
oak topped bar at the VFW.  
The only war you ever fought – your father  
fled Italy to escape one – was with your son  
and his sons, but still you drank  
as though it could fend off whining  
metal engines, roaring earth.  
Tenuous as tissue, the elbows still hold a resilient  
pull like a book's binding in the hot sun,  
what binds a father to his son despite the silence  
and the years. After the leather cures I  
work the cream over and over in small circles,  
over and over until the coat shines  
like a burnished shield, like new copper plumbing,  
like love.

## Learning Philosophy, pt. 1

### Respect for Elders

My grandmother, dying of emphysema,  
wore weight-lifter's gloves to  
protect her hands from the wheelchair's spokes.  
At first she rarely used the tank,  
then while she was sleeping, then always.  
She smoked with the mask on and we  
waited for her to erupt in blue flame.

St. Anselm wrote in 1079 his famous proof,  
the ontological argument for the existence of God:  
*That than which nothing greater can be conceived.*  
Since *it is greater*, Anselm writes, *to exist than not*,  
that we can conceive of a perfect being must mean it exists.

When American soldiers invaded Japan  
entire villages leapt off cliffs  
for family, for honor, for contempt,  
preferring the unknown beyond to the enemy marching uphill.  
A writer described the Jewish pianist who  
played showtunes for Hitler: there sat the  
aging Fuhrer, tapping stockinged feet, delightedly  
wringing spidery, blue-veined hands.

My grandmother, dying of emphysema,  
didn't wait for her lungs to give out,  
left the van running in the garage.  
*It is better*, Anselm claims, *to exist than not* –  
well, he wrote that a long time ago.

## For You on St. Valentine's Day

### I.

Next to nothing is known of Valentinus.  
Old Gelasius ripped the church from the  
hands of the state for a thousand years,  
expelled the heretics who believed in a  
single, divine Christ,  
and numbered humble Valentinus  
among those whose names are justly revered among men,  
but whose acts are known only to God.  
His parents hoped he would be worthy.  
Perhaps they longed for a different valor when  
they buried his battered body along Via Flaminia,  
the road that brought wheat and Caesar  
to hungry Rome.  
Some blame Chaucer and a bird's innate drive  
to *cometh ther to choose his mate*,  
others the French and courtly love  
for making a pious man's dying words so lovely,  
for the poor martyr's ill fortune to die  
on a day when most think of romance,  
red hearts and dark chocolates  
and the clang of cash registers.

### II.

There are seven saints named Valentine,  
two buried along the road to ancient Ariminum  
where Roman soldiers dripping of Rubicon  
marched for love of Roman honor.  
Legend tells of a Valentine who defied Claudius  
and married young lovers in secret.  
The golden lover performed a miracle on  
his jailor's daughter, left three plain words that  
were enough to immortalize his name, but  
not enough to keep his head.

In 1076 the Holy Roman Emperor was  
declared unholy, excommunicated over an  
issue Gregory thought Gelasius had settled.  
James Cook, stabbed to death in the surf once  
natives decided he was not invested as a god.  
Chicago saw a pinstriped massacre,  
the fire-bombing of Dresden commenced,  
and an author was put under fatwa.  
But before all this, before the saints, there was a faun and  
a fertility festival and young men with  
strips of goat hide dipped in sanctified blood.  
There was a lottery, there was a pairing  
just like Chaucer's birds.  
Then a worthy man suffered for love,  
and economy became passion until  
passion became the economy once more.

## Transience





## Ode to What Could Have Been

The smell of cabin: smoking wood  
bacon grease and something damp  
In the spring the doors  
left open to the world

mud and dust tracked in by dogs  
who curled around the stony hearth  
Flash of trees: magnolia  
hemlock, dogwood, birch

And you, trying to sleep on a couch,  
but the dogs and I won't let you be.  
Slanting sunlight, sleepy smile  
breath of possibility –  
all that's left now      a photograph

## Hibiscus Buttons

The man pushed open the door, spotted the woman, and sat down beside her.

“Took you long enough.”

“What’ll you have?”

“I already ordered.”

He tried to catch her eye, but she stared at the balls she was rolling from a shredded napkin.

She shrugged. “Didn’t think it’d take you so long.”

“Only a matter of time.”

“And what’ll you be having?” The man started, then located the speaker: Ruby, the waitress. She was missing the shirt button closest to her belt, and he could see a patch of doughy flesh.

“Two eggs, poached – ”

“Poached?”

“Poached. Wheat toast, no butter. Hashbrowns, plain. Chocolate milk.”

“Small or large?”

“Large. And a glass of water. No lemon.”

Ruby departed with a tight smile.

“She doesn’t like you,” the woman said.

“Oh?”

“Too particular. If the cooks screw up, you blame her, take it out of her tip.”

It was the man’s turn to shrug.

“And you ordered two drinks.”

“Listen, we need to talk.”

“You’re a two drink guy.” She smirked, and balled another piece of napkin.

“Jess, look at me.”

She looked at him. “There’s nothing to discuss, Jonathan.”

“But what about – ”

“My mother? God, why are you always bringing her into this?” She took a sip of her water, spilling some, and paper napkin balls unfurled like snakes.

Jonathan straightened the fork and knife on top of his napkin. “I was going to say, ‘What about us?’”

She barked a laugh. “Us? What is there to talk about?”

“Well, don’t you think that I – ”

“Here you are, darling. One full stack of blueberry pancakes, one ham and cheese omelet, extra cheese, and two pieces cinnamon raisin toast, extra butter. Is that everything?”

Jess nodded.

“Yours will be right out, honey.”

“My drinks?”

“Right out.” Ruby disappeared into the kitchen.

Jonathan raised an eyebrow, and Jess paused in the middle of syrapping her pancakes. “I can’t seem to get full these days.”

“I talked to Bill, and he said – ”

“Bill, your lawyer friend, Bill?”

Jonathan nodded. “And he said that if – ”

Jess frowned around a mouthful of pancakes.

“What?”

She pushed the food to one cheek and her face bulged. “Bill can go fuck himself.”

“He said that if you wanted to handle this quietly he was sure – ”

“No.”

“ – a settlement, a few public appearances. . . .” Jonathan spread his hands, palms out, as if to say *anything’s possible*.

“Money?” She choked out, this time around a wad of omelet.

“Take it easy. It’d be a shame to go out on a ham and cheese omelet in some shithole diner.”

Jess stuffed another bite of omelet in her mouth. “No settlement.”

“If you need some time to think about it, go ahead.”

“Are you fucking – ”

“Here we go. Large chocolate milk, glass of water. Food will be right behind it. Cook had to find out what a poached egg was.”

“You don’t know nothing about anything,” Jess said, once Ruby left.

“She probably shouldn’t have told us that. If you were a waitress would you tell your table the cook had no idea how to prepare their order?”

“Server.”

“What?”

“They prefer server now. And I *was* a server. My father said it would build character.” The jacket she wore had wooden toggles carved in floral patterns.

“That so? Maybe you *were* a server, but in a place like this where they don’t even know how to poach an egg, you’d be a waitress.”

“See? You’re already docking her tip, just because the cook’s a fuckup.”

“Jessica, we need to talk about this.”

Jess smiled crookedly as Ruby reappeared. “Two poached eggs, plain hashbrowns, plain wheat toast. Everything look all right?”

Jonathan nodded.

“I’ll be back after awhile to check on you.”

Jonathan speared an egg with his fork and cut a slice with his knife. Jess smirked.

“We will. But first I have to use the little girl’s room.” He looked her in the eyes. She looked down. Her napkin balls were a sodden heap of disintegrating paper. “It was a *lot* of food.”

Jonathan peppered his egg slice – eyed the salt, but did not pick it up – put the egg on a wedge of toast, and took a bite while he watched Jess enter the restroom. As he ate he thought about why he was in this place, in this town. Jonathan was the right hand man of Jess’s father, and now, at the height of a state senate election that wasn’t supposed to have been close, as if Jess’s DUI hadn’t been enough, she’d disappeared days before the arraignment. He’d managed to track her across state lines, not far into Tennessee; good looks and a neat efficiency had earned him his position, and he knew Jess’s habits well enough to guess which direction she’d head and how quickly the novelty of escape would

fade into the fear of being alone. She'd bolted once before, and he'd found her in two days. This time it had taken him five.

Jonathan wiped his mouth on a clean napkin and picked up the few bread crumbs that had fallen on the table.

“Your check, honey.” Ruby again; Jess hadn't returned.

“My friend. . .” He gestured to the empty seat.

“She said you'd pick it up.”

“She what?”

“Yeah, left nigh on ten minutes ago. Thanked me, gave me a tip. Said you were a bad tipper.” Ruby cleared the plates and left.

Jonathan checked the bill: \$18.46. He pulled out twenty-seven just to prove Jess wrong, then thought that was what she'd want him to do. He left a twenty.

A few minutes later in the kitchen, Ruby showed the cook the bill. “He left a twenty. Can you believe that?”

The cook shook his head. “Poached eggs. What the hell?”

\* \* \*

Jonathan checked the door number: 117. He could see the neon sign for The Palms Motel reflected in the curtained window. It quivered when he knocked. As an afterthought, he covered the peephole with his thumb.

“Open.”

Jonathan stepped in. The television was turned to a news channel, a single twin bed opposite. There were clothes everywhere – a skirt draped over a chair, socks on the

floor, a blouse hanging off the back of the television set. He had seen that blouse before, neatly pressed and tucked. She'd worn it two years before while her father campaigned for a colleague.

"Thought I got rid of you." Jess stood over the sink with her back to Jonathan and looked at him through the mirror.

"How did you manage to get settled so quickly?"

"Was it the desk clerk? I got a vibe from him, like he was some kind of pervert or something."

"It looks like you've been here for weeks." There was a pair of cotton panties on the floor, inches from the toe of his shoe.

Jess turned around, wiped her face with a towel. "What did you offer him?"

"There are only two hotels in town; this one's cheap and doesn't care who checks in."

"So what, you just knock on every door or something?"

Jonathan looked out the window at the parking lot; beyond a hedgerow car lights streaked past. "You would want the ground floor, facing the parking lot. I asked him which rooms were occupied because I'm a light sleeper and didn't want to be disturbed."

"That's not true."

He picked up a Gideons Bible lying on the table. "A little light reading?"

"You're not a light sleeper."

"Sometimes a little lie is necessary." He had lied to her once before, had been afraid her father would find out, and at the time he thought he loved his job.

She folded her legs underneath herself on the bed and rested her elbows on her knees. She wore boxer shorts and he could see she had nothing on under them. She put a pillow in her lap. “What do you want?”

He flipped through the Bible, but replaced it without stopping on any particular passage. “Do you ever think about what’s next?”

“No.”

“I mean after you die.” He sat on the corner of the low dresser and folded his hands in his lap. He felt calm, and a little surprised by that.

“Some of us’ll go to heaven, some’ll go to hell.”

“You think so?”

“Sure, don’t you?”

“Which group do you fall in?”

“Don’t know. Guess I’ll find out, won’t I?”

He picked at a cuticle. “You usually leave the door open?”

She looked at her hands.

Jonathan reached over and turned the volume down on the television set. There was a war going on somewhere. “Expecting anyone?”

“So what if I am?”

He sighed. It wasn’t what he had expected. “I can’t say I’m not surprised.” He had dug too hard at the cuticle and a small bead of blood appeared. He sucked on his finger.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”



“Don’t I? You’ve been gone five days, Jessica, and you’re already staying with someone. You’re amazing.” He wasn’t angry, but he knew he was raising his voice.

Did he want her to think he was angry?

“I gotta eat don’t I?”

“And once you do you’ll just up and leave, right?”

“She’s my friend.”

“She?”

“Is everything all right in here?” A woman stood in the doorway, plastic bag of junk food swaying from both hands before her.

“Fine, Casey. This is Jonathan.”

“I see.”

“Talk about timing,” Jonathan said.

Casey shut the door behind her and set the bag on the table. “They didn’t have Ale-8 so I got Sundrop instead.”

Jess waved her hand as if to say, *whatever, that’s fine.*

“I guess you guys want a little privacy.” Casey had her fingers on the door handle, but she didn’t turn it.

“Yes, actually –”

“No, stay. He was just on his way out.”

Jonathan crossed his arms and hooked one foot over the other. He adjusted his pants leg so the crease crossed the middle of his kneecap. “Not until –”

“We talk, ‘Not until we talk’.” She leaped off the bed and paced an L pattern

between the bed and the sink. The pillow lay unnoticed on the floor. “I’ve already told you – there’s nothing to talk about. I’m not going back.”

“But your father. . . .”

“Fuck my father.” She stood over the sink and propped herself up with her palms, looking at him through the mirror.

Jonathan sighed. Casey leaned against the door, frowning. Jonathan picked the bag off the table: Sundrop, peanut butter-and-cheese crackers, a bear claw. “Dinner?” He crinkled the cellophane packaging on the bear claw.

Jess ran the water and splashed her face.

Jonathan still held the bear claw; Casey put her hand over his and slowly took it back. She spoke low, just for him. “It’s what she wanted.” Casey set the pastry on the table.

Jonathan realized her other hand was on his shoulder, that his arm was still held out. He dropped it. Her palm was warm.

“I’m done with this. You better be gone when I get out.” Jess shut herself in the bathroom. A moment later the shower turned on.

“Why are you here?” Casey spoke softly. Everything she did was soft and slow, as though she measured every word, every movement, before releasing it on the world.

“How do you know Jess?”

Casey pointed to the bed and he sat down on the corner of it. She sat in the chair, careful not to lean back and wrinkle the skirt thrown over it. “Jonathan, why are you here?”

Casey wore the kind of cotton pants women exercise or sleep in. She hadn't tied the strings in front and they trailed down into her lap. "To find Jess."

"You found her. Now what?"

"I haven't decided." He picked the Bible back up and flipped through it idly.

"Her parents want her to come back." It wasn't a question, but Jonathan nodded anyway. "And there's the arraignment." She said it as though the word tasted badly in her mouth.

"She could have killed someone."

Casey shrugged. "But she didn't."

Jonathan wondered how much Casey knew, or, for that matter, where Jess had found her. He felt he should take control, force this strange, hypnotic woman out if need be, but instead found himself saying, "They can turn this around. A few appearances, a little contrition. People love a black sheep, helps them identify."

"We all screw up."

"Something like that." A square of yellow paper was stuck in one of the pages: Isaiah 3. The chapter heading stated something about the daughters of Zion being cursed. He wondered about whoever had placed the marker there, why they had decided to place their only marker at that spot; or perhaps they'd just stopped reading on that page. He shut the book. He never was much of one for scripture.

"You tell Jessica that her father will only win if she comes home and she'll only be more determined not to."

"That's so selfish."

“Is it?”

“This is about more than Jess getting back at her father. It’s bigger than that.”

“Is that why you’re here? Bring Jessica back? Save the day?”

“You think I want to be a hero.”

“Are you bringing her back for her father or for you?”

Jonathan looked her in the eyes for the first time. They were open, that was all. Almost blank, like the eyes of a plush doll or an elk mounted on the wall.

A few minutes later Jess stepped out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel. She looked around. “Gone?”

Becca had turned the television to a nature show. Salmon were spawning while bears snatched them from the water. “They eat only the skins.”

“What?”

“The bears. They’ve eaten so much that they eat only the skins off the underbelly and throw the rest back into the river. They just keep doing it, over and over.”

“Did Jonathan leave?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Is he coming back?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What did you say to him?”

“That’s what you wanted isn’t it?”

Jess sat down on the bed. The polish on her toes was chipped. She hugged her knees to her chest and watched the bears.

Outside Jonathan paused, one hand halfway to door 117, take out food held in the other. He stared at the inverted reflection of the motel sign for several minutes, waiting for something to happen, to know what he should do. After awhile he turned and walked away. The take out he tossed in the trash.

\* \* \*

Jonathan placed his wallet on the nightstand, keys on top the wallet. The television was off, and his reflection in the curved glass was distorted, wider in the middle and tapered at the ends. He sat down on the bed.

The message light blinked on the room phone.

His reflection stared back at him and he turned the television on. As an afterthought he muted it.

Jonathan checked the message, but dialed another number. Three rings and then:

“Laura, hey. Yeah it’s me. No, everything is fine. I just wanted to call you.” He propped the pillows along the headboard and sat up against them.

“The campaign’s going well. People are really responding.” He hadn’t told his wife about searching for Jess. She didn’t know his history with Jess, but he’d told her he was campaigning anyway. He crossed his feet. “Of course Bill wishes he could be here, but he can’t visit everyone in the state. That’s what I’m for.” On the television they were covering the war again. Didn’t they ever talk about anything else?

“No, no word on his daughter. I’m sure she’ll turn up in a few days. You know how she is.”

There was a floral border patterned along the crown molding, and Jonathan

counted the hibiscus flowers from the door to the bathroom. He got bored and stopped at fourteen.

“I know. Listen, I’ve got to get off of here. Don’t want to have to explain a forty dollar phone bill to the stiffs in charge of expenses.”

He started to fold his legs under himself, but he still wore his slacks and didn’t want to ruin the crease.

“I love you too. I’ll be home in a few days. A few speeches to make, babies to kiss, you know the drill. It’s like this every two years. It’ll be over soon.” The thought occurred to him that he didn’t love his job, that in fact he never had. “I’ll call you tomorrow.” He pushed the lever down with his finger to end the call, then held it there.

Jonathan stared at the popcorned ceiling. There was a cobweb in the corner by the closet, but no spider. He wondered what happened to it.

Jonathan dialed, then waited for a response.

“Bill? Jonathan. I just got your message.”

He changed the channels rapidly, and for some reason stopped on a history show about the button. He’d never thought about the button as an idea before. He turned the volume on low.

The program explained how, even though the first buttons appeared around 2,800 BCE, they were merely decorative; the first functional buttons wouldn’t be invented for four thousand years.

“No, I didn’t find her. I’m sure she’ll turn up. She always does.”

Bill sounded genuinely concerned – about his daughter or appearances, Jonathan

wasn't certain – which Jonathan found quaintly frustrating. Disingenuous, that was the word his opponent had used to describe Bill. Jonathan almost pitied him.

“I'll be sure to let you know as soon as I turn over any stones. Don't worry, it'll all sort itself out. We'll get her back.”

Jonathan held the phone to his ear until the dial tone sounded. He toed his socks down past his heels and kicked them off the bed. He thought of all those people sporting all those shiny, useless buttons.

Jonathan turned out the light, then the television. The screen faded into a gray haze, then black nothing. He didn't set the alarm.

## Before

Before we never spoke again  
Before I wept for the very last time  
Before you begged me to kick your belly  
And solve our problem  
Before I did it  
Before we would fight, and fuck, and fight again  
Before I broke a promise  
Before our first kiss  
We stayed awake all night  
Your head on my shoulder  
Too afraid to sleep, to move  
And I put my hand on your navel  
Still soft and young then  
Felt your breath being born  
We stayed awake all night  
Dreamed of growing old  
Of being content  
Of bliss  
Yes, we dreamed then  
Before we grew up



**All Roads Lead to Rome**



## **Ablution**

Ryan pressed the shutter button down halfway to engage the autofocus. The image blurred on the LCD screen while the camera configured the proper aperture and focal length, then solidified into crisp clarity. He snapped the photo; yet another image of arborvitaes. The dogwoods, pears, and cherries had already bloomed and shed their petals, so there was no point in capturing them. Customers were interested in the flowers. Arborvitaes, on the other hand, always looked the same, and Ryan's job was to find the healthiest looking specimens or a few long shots of row upon row of the green potted plants.

The pots were ordered with military precision in large rectangular sections pushed up against the road. An irrigation sprinkler system automated watering. Because it was so hot out, even at 8:30 in the morning, the timer's frequency had been increased to a few minutes every half hour, despite the danger of the sunlight scorching the plants; the small drops of water resembled dew, and by changing the preconfigured shooting modes Ryan could tone down the harsh sunlight, mimicking a sunrise shot without having to wake up early enough to actually take one. The problem was, Ryan had to be careful to attend to the tell-tale sound of water surging up the pipes. There were a few seconds to move back before everything within a forty foot diameter was soaked.

Ryan climbed atop an abandoned piece of equipment, a sprayer that Arliss had likely unhooked at the end of the workday and left in the field where he had been working. From his vantage point he could lean out and angle a diagonal shot of arborvitaes down to the road. He pressed the shutter button to engage the autofocus;

when the image cleared, he saw that a house across the road would ruin the shot. There were several children playing in the yard, one with a bright red shirt. Ryan zoomed in all the way. The picture jumped wildly, but by holding his breath and being very still he could stabilize it enough to see the children. There were two shirtless boys with short black hair and brown skin, and a small girl in the red shirt. A woman sat on the steps before the front door braiding her hair. He saw a pair of white shoes peeking out from under her dress, like the canvas kind nurses wear. Keds, Ryan thought. They were popular once, but since they had fallen out of fashion the price had dropped and now they were worn by many immigrant women.

The house was small, but brick, a rarity among nursery workers. It belonged to Ryan's father and was rented out to those workers who could afford it and had been with the nursery a long while. Probably one of the team leaders, then. The land around Warren County nurseries is full of these rental houses; the workers live close to the job and away from the attention of city police, and the owners get back some of the money they pay the men. One of the boys pointed towards Ryan, and he heard the shrill voice carry across the distance. Then all the children were standing, looking at him. Ryan realized how conspicuous he was, a six foot white man standing on top of farm equipment. He waved. The woman in the doorway said something to her children, and the boys ran inside. The girl in the red shirt waved back before rushing inside as well.

A loud gurgling issued from the nearby irrigation pipe. Ryan leaped off the sprayer and pocketed his camera. He had enough shots for the day, anyway. The mist from the sprinklers carried on the breeze and wet his arms, chilling him enough to make

the hairs stand on end.

\* \* \*

9:15 – midmorning break. Ryan sat beside Arliss on the lowered tailgate of a rusted field truck. The regular hands had been in the fields since 7:00, working in teams of five and six, long sleeves and ball caps with flaps covering their brown skin. It was already over 90 degrees.

Arliss was whittling a toy tractor out of spruce for his grandson’s second birthday. He nudged Ryan with the toe of his boot; wood shavings stuck to the muddy sides.

“Look at ‘em.” Arliss nodded his head, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. The field workers trudged towards a nearby trailer with a lean-to porch, their allotted break area.

Arliss set his block of wood down, whipped his cigarette out of his mouth and spat. Ryan slid further away and brushed wood shavings off his thigh. Arliss cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hurry up boys, clock’s ticking.” He resumed his work on the wood. “Lazy fucks.”

Ryan shifted his seat again as the first of the workers lumbered past, black eyes downcast, head lowered. Their hands were caked in soil from pulling weeds or digging trees, and most of the men bore heavy sweat stains. Ryan had showed up sometime around 8:00 and took a few photos; Arliss arrived just before 9:00, and since it was so close to break time, they smoked a few cigarettes and hung out by the trailer. Ryan had fluctuating responsibilities and took advantage of that flexibility; Arliss was Arliss.

Arliss slid off the tailgate, brushing his pants of wood shavings as he stood.

“What you looking at, wetback?” A few of the hands grumbled in Spanish. One darted a glance at Ryan as he walked past. “Ought to learn you some English.” Arliss settled back down beside Ryan. “Can’t let them get out of line. Start acting like they own the place.” Ryan’s father Chuck owned the place.

Ryan shrugged. “Maybe he was just looking.”

Arliss turned his head. “He can damn well look somewhere else.” He spat again before retaking his seat and picking up his block of wood again.

Ryan took a long draw off his cigarette. He had been working summers at his father’s nursery since he was twelve, six summers over which he had become well acquainted with Arliss’ sentiments on immigrant workers. Most people said things like “Immigrants are taking our jobs,” or “They don’t pay taxes,” but that wasn’t it with Arliss. He wouldn’t pay taxes either, if he could help it, and, as he’d once told Ryan, Arliss didn’t see any white people lining up for field labor. Arliss flat out didn’t like Mexicans, which for him was a universal term that applied to all Latinos. “They stink,” he’d say. “And their food smells like shit. Live like animals. Move into a neighborhood, and ‘fore you know it there’s a hundred per house with trash and cars all over the front yards and a thousand little brown bastards running in the streets.”

Arliss stared at him. Ryan guessed he’d been asked a question. “Huh?”

“I said, ‘how’s it feel to be a graduated man?’”

“Same as every other summer so far. Guess it’ll be different when I leave for college.”

“What you want to go to college for when you got your daddy’s farm?”

His father had asked him the same question. “I figure it’ll help me run things later on.” Arliss nodded, just as Ryan’s father had. Truth was, Ryan didn’t want to take over Fouch Nursery, didn’t want to deal with the Arlisses of the world for the rest of his life. More than that, he wanted out of his hometown, wanted out of a town known for producing trees and meth addicts, wanted to live somewhere that church leaders weren’t also the politicians, banning alcohol sales in the county while drinking in secret. He wanted a real city, wanted to be lost in the shuffle and the faces. He wanted to be in a place where the name Fouch meant nothing.

“We’ll be waiting,” Arliss said, as though college was like 4-H camp and he’d be home two weeks later. “See that?” He held the block of wood to Ryan. “Little Braden is gonna love it.” Arliss was always whittling something for his grandson: a train, a tractor, a bulldozer. Ryan had seen Braden a few times when his mother brought him out to the nursery, but he never had any of his wooden toys with him. Ryan had never seen Arliss’s son; he didn’t think they spoke much.

Ryan took a last draw off his cigarette and blew the smoke down across his pants.

\* \* \*

Despite quaint renovated downtown areas and the rustic appeal city people romanticize, small towns aren’t very exciting. Like most young people in small, southern towns, Ryan passed the time experimenting: with drugs, with sex, with the realms of possibility. Since his father was well known, a forged license was out of the question. Ryan had a contact, a twenty-four year old, overweight, unhappily married factory worker. Unplanned pregnancies and poor diets came with the territory: there was little

else to pass the time but eat and sleep around. Jeremy worked a factory job that was being shipped to Mexico soon; he kept a belt handy for his five-year-old girl; he had nearly two hundred Playstation games and twice as many DVDs. Jeremy had a pet lizard. And all Jeremy asked in return for running to the store was enough change to get a couple 40s and forget about life for awhile. Ryan visited Jeremy's dumpy apartment near the low income housing on his way home from work.

It was sometime after 8:00, the sun had set a half hour before, and Ryan's 4-Runner was parked in the middle of the river at Flat Rock. Ryan and his buddy, Ben, sat on the roof, a small Igloo cooler between them. Flat Rock was at the end of a trail that wound through the woods and crossed a wide creek where an enormous, submerged expanse of rock made a crossing possible. But there was a trick to Flat Rock - one couldn't drive directly across. The Rock was peppered with several hidden, deep holes that had sunk many an inexperienced driver's vehicle. It was a favorite spot for highschool guys to bring their beers or girlfriends or both, because the middle of the river was secluded, provided an excellent vantage point from which to see anyone coming, and the crossing route was only known by a select few. Legend had it a constable had sunk his Bronco a few years back trying to catch a couple dopers. But that was just a legend; as Ben put it, "cops got better shit to do than drive out in butt-fucking Egypt - like sit on their fat asses."

Ryan and Ben had each thrown their third empty can into the current and were feeling the familiar tingle: fingers and toes, then arms and legs, all light and airy and begging to be moved.

“Going to Kentucky, huh?” Ben asked.

“Yep.” Ryan nodded his head to the music floating up through the moon roof.

“Shit, man, know the last time someone from here went to Kentucky for school?”

“No.”

“Me either, cause it don’t happen. That’s like going to Gainesville. This is Vol country.” He sipped his beer. The chirping of cicadas drowned out the sound of the creek flowing around the tires. “Why Kentucky?”

“Good business program,” Ryan said, which wasn’t exactly true. MTSU in Murfreesboro and UT in Knoxville both had decent programs, and most of his friends were going to one of the two schools. TSU in Nashville and U of Memphis were out of the question; Ryan’s father had said he wasn’t paying for his son to go to college and come home “some black gangbanger.” The real reason Ryan had settled on UK was that it was out of state, still in the South, and in a fair-sized city. The fact that he was the only graduate out of 442 going to Lexington made his decision that much easier.

Ryan lay on his back and looked at the sky. It had gone purple, but the contrail of a single jet was just high enough to catch a few rays of sunset from the west, and lit up like an angry red scar. The jet disappeared, then the exhaust stream faded to nothing.

\* \* \*

“Ryan, dinner,” his mother yelled from downstairs. He was lying on his back on top his bed, tossing a tennis ball. Ryan didn’t quite remember getting home, but he had. He focused on the tennis ball: toss, catch; toss, catch; toss, catch. His mother knocked then opened the door.



“Honey, time for dinner.”

The ball hit Ryan square in the nose and he sat up. His mother was wearing a pair of black spandex tights and an oversized white t-shirt. She was a fanatic for working out. Dinner was frequently late in the Fouch household; his father spent much of his time at the nursery and his mother was at the gym, even though the basement of their mock plantation home housed its own array of exercise equipment.

“Not hungry.”

“You have to eat. Your body needs fuel, just like a car.” His mother was full of sayings – for instance, if he was tired, “Your body needs downtime, just like a computer” – that equated the body with machines. It made him uncomfortable and irritated.

“I’m not ten.” He lay back down. “And I’m not hungry.”

“Suit yourself, but if you don’t eat dinner you don’t get dessert.” She said the last part in a singsong voice as she closed the door. Ryan threw the ball at the closed door, hitting a poster of the Twin Towers burning with a caption reading *We will never forget*. As he often did, Ryan wondered what it would have been like to watch them fall: hear the rumble, see the panicked faces, breathe in the dust and smoke of burning offices, burning buildings, burning people. To run for his life. It wasn’t that he had any great national zeal like many of his friends pretended to; it was more the unspeakable humanity of it that attracted him, the terrifying beauty of being alive while civilization crumbled around him. Seeing death and surviving.

Ryan had been in Mrs. Niel’s second period Chemistry class, junior year, when Mr. Allison, the American government teacher, stuck his shiny bald head into the room

during lecture and asked to see her in the hall. Later, as they tried to make sense of all the confusion and fear from that day, Ryan and his friends laughed that it was Mr. Allison, of all people, who would be running the halls informing everyone. Of course it would be him, they said. It wasn't that funny, but it was something to divert them.

Ryan's father stuck his head in. "Hey there, how come you weren't at dinner?" He was smiling profusely and his face was flushed. Laughter flitted up the stairs. A couple bottles of wine over dinner was commonplace in the Fouch household.

"Not hungry."

Chuck entered the room and sat on the edge of Ryan's bed.

"You're going to miss dessert – you know Mom's rule."

"I said I don't want anything." They looked each other, and Ryan wondered what his father saw. An angry, ungrateful teenager? Himself?

"Have you been drinking?" Ryan froze, felt blood creep into his cheeks.

His father grinned. "Cause I have." Ryan's mother called up, "Charles, come back down. I've got something for you." Glass tinkled; his parents would be having sex later. The thought disgusted him, and he rolled over to face the wall.

"You sure you don't –"

"Go away."

Ryan felt his father rise off the bed, then heard the door click to behind him. In a few minutes both his parents were laughing downstairs in the living room. Ryan put on a rap CD – his parents hated rap – and turned it up.

\* \* \*

It was 9:30 the next morning when Ryan pulled into the gravel lot at the nursery. Arliss sat on his tailgate smoking and whittling, and Ryan wondered if anything would ever change.

Arliss pushed his mesh cap up with a knuckle speckled with wood dust. “Figured you’d be in soon. Thought I’d wait on you.” There was no reason for Arliss to wait on him – Arliss drove the John Deere that sprayed for insects. It was air conditioned, had a radio and CD player, and practically steered itself.

Normally Ryan didn’t have a job description; it mostly consisted of driving around and showing customers the grounds. Fouch Nursery was actually several thousand acres sectioned off in various parcels, but most customers didn’t want to drive around and examine row upon row of the same three and four foot dogwoods or arborvitaes. Occasionally Ryan was called upon to explain the difference between types of dogwoods – Fouch Nursery grew over a dozen varieties – but generally the big buyers already knew; those who didn’t were usually looking for just a couple two-to-three inch diameter trees, two years older but costing three times as much, and the decision frequently came down to what color the flowers would be. Nurserymen like Ryan’s father rolled their eyes at these “amateurs,” but because they were willing to pay exorbitant rates they were still catered to.

However, this summer Fouch Nursery was preparing a new brochure, and the job of photographing inventory had fallen to Ryan. It meant he got a new digital camera and was paid to drive around by himself, both of which he appreciated.

“Preciate it,” Ryan said and sat down next to Arliss. Arliss held over a pack of

Salems, but Ryan shook his head and pulled out a pack of Kool menthols. He rarely ever smoked cigarettes, generally only with Arliss during breaks, and a pack usually lasted him a week. This one he'd bought the day before and it was half gone.

“Don't know how you smoke that shit,” Arliss said. Ryan coughed out a lungful of smoke, and Arliss pointed to his pack with his whittling knife. “Menthols. Shit.” He shook his head. “I heard you pulling in, speakers spitting that bumpty-bump jungle bunny music.” Ryan never remembered seeing Arliss's face up close before, though he was sure he had plenty of times. The whites of his eyes were yellowed and sun spots blotched his creased, waxy face. The cigarette in his mouth dangled by the filter, and the skin of Arliss's upper lip stretched where it stuck to the paper. Arliss squinted against the sun and the crows feet around his eyes deepened into furrows. “Thought you was some coonie pulling in. 'Bout got out my ball bat.”

Ryan ground his cigarette out on the tailgate. “You ain't never going anywhere, Arliss.”

“I'm just joshing you. Don't be so touchy.” Ryan felt his face flush and he looked away. He'd often felt that way about Arliss, about most people in town he knew; he'd just never said it to anyone before.

“I didn't mean it, it's just – ”

“Ain't got yourself some darkie girlfriend, do you?”

“Fuck you, Arliss.”

\* \* \*

Ryan pressed the shutter button down halfway to engage the autofocus. The

image blurred on the LCD screen while the camera configured the proper aperture and focal length, then solidified into crisp clarity. He snapped the photo; yet another image of arborvitaes. The dogwoods, pears, and cherries had already bloomed and shed their petals, so there was no point in capturing them. Customers were interested in the flowers. Arborvitaes, on the other hand, always looked the same, and Ryan's job was to find the healthiest looking specimens or a few long shots of row upon row of the green potted plants.

The pots were ordered with military precision in large rectangular sections pushed up against the road. An irrigation sprinkler system automated watering. Because it was so hot out, the timer's frequency had been increased to a few minutes every half hour, despite the danger of the sunlight scorching the plants; the small drops of water resembled dew, and by changing the preconfigured shooting modes Ryan could tone down the harsh sunlight, mimicking an early morning shot without having to wake up early in the morning. The problem was, Ryan had to be careful to attend to the tell-tale sound of water surging up the pipes. There were a few seconds to move back before everything within a forty foot diameter of one of the spouts was soaked.

Ryan climbed atop an abandoned piece of equipment, a sprayer that Arliss had likely unhooked at the end of the workday and left in the field where he had been working. From his vantage point he could lean out and angle a diagonal shot of arborvitaes down to the road. He pressed the shutter button to engage the autofocus; when the image cleared, he saw that a house across the road would ruin the shot. There were several children playing in the yard, one with a bright red shirt. Ryan zoomed in all

the way. The picture jumped wildly, but by holding his breath and being very still he could stabilize it enough to see the children. There were two shirtless boys with short black hair and brown skin, and a small girl in the red shirt. A woman sat on the steps before the front door braiding her hair. He saw a pair of white shoes peeking out from under her dress, like the canvas kind nurses wear. Keds, Ryan thought. They were popular once, but since they had fallen out of fashion the price had dropped and now they were worn by many immigrant women.

The house was small, but brick, a rarity among nursery workers. It belonged to Ryan's father and was rented out to those workers who could afford it and had been with the nursery a long while. Probably one of the team leaders, then. The land around Warren County nurseries is full of these rental houses; the workers live close to the job and away from the attention of city police, and the owners get back some of the money they pay the men. One of the boys pointed towards Ryan, and he heard the shrill voice carry across the distance. Then all the children were standing, looking at him. Ryan realized how conspicuous he was, a six foot white man standing on top of farm equipment. He waved. The woman in the doorway said something to her children, and the boys ran inside. The girl in the red shirt waved back before rushing inside as well.

A loud gurgling issued from the nearby irrigation pipe. Ryan leaped off the sprayer and pocketed his camera. He had enough shots for the day, anyway. The mist from the sprinklers carried on the breeze and wet his arms, chilling him enough to make the hairs stand on end.

\* \* \*

Cicadas screamed into the night. Ryan and Ben were down at Flat Rock working on a twelve pack.

“What you gonna do when everyone goes to school?”

“Beats me,” Ben said. “Probably apply at Bridgestone once I turn eighteen. On nightshift you work three nights a week, make fifty thousand a year.”

Ryan took a drink of his beer. “Can’t do that forever, though. You seen them guys that work there? Thirty, thirty-five, look like they’re sixty. Hard work.”

“Shit,” Ben laughed, “I can take it.”

“Dad says they’re gonna sell out and ship to Mexico anyway.”

“That’s always the rumor with all the plants.”

“All the plants end up shipping out, too.”

“Then I’ll work there till it does. Hell, I’ll be making more than my brother, and he just graduated from MTSU.”

“What if you don’t get it, though?”

“What’s with all the questions?”

“Just been thinking a lot lately.”

“Quit worrying so damn much. I’m just taking it a day at a time.”

Some of the sun’s residual heat trapped by the dark green paint seeped through Ryan’s shorts. He put his palm flat on the roof and felt the warmth flow up his arm.

“You think too much, dude,” Ben said after awhile.

They finished their beers and tossed them into the creek. Ryan’s caught in an eddy, and spun in circles while Ben’s raced past. The cicadas grew even louder.

Ryan didn't want to get drunk, but he didn't want to be sober, either.

"Think I'm done."

"Not tonight," Ben said, and slipped a slim bottle of Tennessee whiskey out of the cargo pocket of his shorts.

"Really, I'm done."

Ben unscrewed the cap and pressed the bottle on him. "You know the rule; whoever buys can't take the first sip. If you don't drink I can't." He put the bottle in Ryan's hand. "Don't leave me hanging."

\* \* \*

Ben was shaking the last drops from the bottle onto his tongue when Ryan hit him on the leg.

"What?"

"Cicadas stopped."

"So?"

Bright lights flared up behind them. The profile was unmistakable: mid-90's Bronco with floodlights: a constable's vehicle. "Shit. Cops." Just then a red light on top began spinning. Ryan rolled off the roof and hit the water hard, going down to one knee, and heard Ben splash on the other side. He jumped behind the wheel and started the engine; fifteen yards behind them the constable pulled into the creek. Ben climbed in, laughing, and Ryan gassed it before Ben's door was shut. The cooler slid off the roof into the stream and bumped its way down the current.

Ryan had crossed the stream drunk plenty of times. He often joked that he could



drive it blindfolded, but he'd never been forced to make the crossing so suddenly. He zigzagged his way across, managing to dodge the major holes, and though one of the rear tires grazed one, he was doing twenty by then and passed over with only a jolt. Ryan's 4-Runner roared up the opposite slope, through the woods, and onto the asphalt. As they passed over the bridge, Ben yelled, "He's still in there. He's stuck," hanging his head out the window and howling at the night.

"He's got a radio; they'll be looking out for us." Ryan couldn't go home; he had to stay out in the country where there were too few officers and too many roads, but they needed somewhere to hide. He headed towards the nursery.

\* \* \*

Ryan jerked the wheel over and narrowly missed something in the road.

"Shit, man, take it easy," Ben said.

"Almost hit a possum."

"Should've hit it. I hate possums. Nasty red-eyed bastards, always stop in the middle of the road and look at you like this." He held his hands up by his head like claws and screwed his face up, baring his teeth and growling.

Ryan laughed, and Ben put his face and hands on the dashboard, pretending to crawl towards the steering wheel, then leaped in front of Ryan with his opossum face.

Something slammed into the front grill with a loud *thwump* and the truck lurched.

Ryan stomped on the brakes. Ben crashed against the windshield. The truck skidded to a stop on the shoulder of the road. "What the fuck was that?"

A thin trail of steam leaked out of a hood that had crumpled inwards in the

middle. Ryan stepped out and walked around to the front. There was a huge dent, and what looked like oil streaked in places on the grill and bumper. Ryan had stopped the truck on the edge of a ditch, and Ben, misgauging the drop, fell getting out.

Ryan stumbled back down the road the way they had come. Water squelched in his sneakers with each step and his jeans clung to him heavy and cold. A good hundred yards back he spotted the outline of something in the moonlight. The closer he got the more his stomach fell, until he was right upon it. Ryan stared, transfixed, at the form before him.

“Is that a,” Ben started, then made a lurching noise in his throat like he might vomit, but didn’t. “That a person?”

“I think so.” The face was turned away from them, but Ryan could see a long brown braid and dark arms.

“Is it. . .”

“She’s not moving,” Ryan said.

They were a good half mile from the point where the road ended in a T onto an old state route, which meant they were only a few minutes’ drive from the nursery. Headlights passed slowly by the intersection. Ben elbowed Ryan in the ribs.

“Cops.”

“She’s not moving,” Ryan said.

Another set of headlights approached from the opposite direction.

“We gotta get out of here.”

Ryan looked at Ben. “I think she’s dead.”

Headlights swept through the sky as the vehicle turned onto their road.

“We gotta go. Now.” Ben grabbed Ryan and pulled him. The woman wore what looked like a pair of white Keds. Ryan could see an ankle between the bottom of her dress and top of her sock, the foot twisted backwards.

They ran for the car.

\* \* \*

It was the first full day of spring break, a Saturday. Ryan stood on the corner of University and Alumni near Commonwealth Stadium. His girlfriend, Stacie, pointed to a bare cherry tree. “That’s so ugly.”

Ryan saw the limbs heavy-tipped with buds waiting to burst. “Won’t be for long. I bet the dogwoods are already blooming in Tennessee.”

Ryan had been home only once for a few days over Christmas since the beginning of the fall semester the previous August. Over Thanksgiving he had gone camping with friends down at Dale Hollow Lake, where he’d met Stacie. He spent much of the winter break driving across the mid-South in his new Eclipse visiting friends. The 4-Runner he’d had fixed the next day at a cash-only body shop in Murfreesboro, then sold once he moved to Lexington. He told his parents he wanted a car for better gas mileage so he could come home more often. Ryan had organized a ski trip over winter break to Sugar Mountain in North Carolina for his high school friends. Ben hadn’t come.

But now he felt something he hadn’t since leaving home; it was something in the weather, in the heavy swell of tree buds, the smell of the earth: he was homesick. “I think I might go home for a few days,” he said.

Stacie rubbed his arm with her hand. “Good. You should.” She was leaving in the morning on a Bahamian cruise with her sorority sisters and had been suspicious that Ryan, who was always making plans, always going somewhere, seemed to have nothing planned for the break. He was outgoing and engaging, almost to a fault, but he had his dark, quiet moments; she had been concerned about everyone leaving town and Ryan staying behind by himself, about what time and silence might do.

The pedestrian signal changed to a white figure and they stepped out into the road.

**Modern Life 3:  
Straight Is the Way**



## Night Lights

Stewart didn't usually have alcohol during the day – most days he was just as likely to skip lunch as he was to grab a quick bite to eat – but there was a certain feeling that came with alcohol that he wanted at that moment. Numbness wasn't the right word; rather, he wanted that pulsing tingle that begins in the fingers and toes and makes arms and legs feel like balloons. He wanted that solid buzz that comes with three glasses of stout. He took a large swallow.

Stewart set his glass back on the table and checked his watch. Two down and twenty minutes until he was expected back at the office. He caught the eye of his waiter and raised his glass. Normally he hated people that were rude to waiters, but he didn't notice his own brusqueness. Instead he pushed his plate of fish and chips (he wondered how he had found what must be the only English pub in the South) toward the center of the table and wiped it smooth with the sleeve of his shirt, four fingers grasping the cuff. He was normally fastidious about his appearance.

Stewart Craine was a salesman. His father hadn't believed in handouts, and Stewart had worked in his father's lighting company from the ground up. Sweeping floors in a single store at fifteen, Stewart was now managing director of five locations across the mid-state area, and had just been informed the week before his father would be retiring at the end of the year. At thirty-seven, Stewart would be the principal shareholder and chief executive officer of a twenty-five million dollar retail business.

Stewart looked around the room. The lighting was imitation rustic, one of those brand new places that try to give old world charm to the décor. It wasn't Craine

Lighting, but it was decent nonetheless; a bit too modern, but decent. He especially liked the wall sconces. He made a note to look into hand-beaten bronze.

The waiter placed a fresh glass on the table and took up the empty one. Stewart fished in the coat draped across his chair, pulled out an envelope, and laid it down on the table after first wiping it clean again with his shirtsleeve.

It was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Stewart Craine from Mae Tidwell. Mae was an illustrator of children's books – had a mantel full of awards, even a Caldecott – and Stewart laughed as he stared at the swirling, perfect letters. For an illustrator, Mae had terrible penmanship, and for her to form the letters so finely must have been more difficult than sketching any dancing bear or talking train. It didn't occur to him that Mae's handwriting could have improved in the last thirteen years; for Stewart, while he and his wife aged, in his mind Mae remained unchanging.

The letter had come that morning to the office, the one address that hadn't changed several times by then. He had spent his morning reviewing the previous year's order reports. He had a suspicion that one of their suppliers was taking longer and longer between shipments of new merchandise, but he couldn't be sure until he had the specific reports in front of him. He was taking a break from comparing current and previous orders – it was taxing to do anything for a sustained amount of time in the heat of his office – and standing closer to the fans to cool off when Jill, one of the secretaries in the main office directly below his, handed him an envelope saying, "This just came in." He had decided to take an early lunch.

Stewart's face felt hot and there was a pressure behind his forehead that felt like

cotton balls were being stuffed into his skull well beyond capacity.

Stewart checked his watch. He would be late.

He downed the rest of his beer.

Stewart laid a twenty on the table, shrugged on his jacket, and stuffed the envelope back into his pocket. He stopped halfway to the door, came back, and left another five. He knew what it was like to struggle, though it had been some time since he'd had to. Mae had been a waitress once.

\* \* \*

The tower that houses Stewart's office and the main office looms from the middle of the show room floor in the first Craine Lighting Supercenter, built mostly on loans and dreams when Stewart was still young. The white plastered exterior of the office tower is complimented by a black, wrought iron staircase which leads to Stewart's office – his father's idea, the black and white – and an interchangeable array of fixtures over nearly every other inch of free space. The slide and lock mechanism had been Stewart's idea, an engineering feat which Stew Sr.'s stark imagination had been unable to envision and whose business sense had instantly recognized the value after it had been put into place. All the year round, the hub of the showroom was a blinding assortment of everything fashionable, and Stewart's design allowed for instant replacement of outmoded styles. Other lighting centers took weeks to update their displays; thanks to Stewart's design, they could update theirs in hours. The system had only one drawback: the heat from all those incandescent bulbs radiated up and smothered the upstairs office. Thus, after installing the lighting interchange system, the office that had so long been the watchtower



of Stew Sr. became an oven for Stewart Jr.

Stewart sat with his head resting in his hands behind an oversized desk whose matching desk lamps were nearly obscured by various papers: shipping manifests, order reports, inventory statements, tax documents, and the occasional quarterly review of the company. These were necessarily weighed down by various odds and ends – a pewter cast of a light bulb, a small scale reproduction of Rodin’s Thinker, the base of a lamp concept that had never matured – in order to prevent their being blown and scattered by a mismatched series of oscillating fans that swept the room constantly. Though an electrician had told him a window air conditioning unit would be unfeasible – something about multiple device capacity and the necessity to rewire the main power supply – Stewart felt certain there was a way it could be done. The only thing stopping him was his remembrance of how his father had bestowed the office on him, had joked that he’d made his bed and now should cook in it, and he felt that an air conditioner would be a sign of defeat. The fans, he reasoned, were an honorable standoff.

A knock at the door was followed almost instantly by the balding, bulbous head of Jim Egerton. Egerton had been a shelf stocker at one time. It was Stewart who had seen his potential and advanced him to a managerial position. Since becoming *the* Craine of Craine Lighting in all but name, Stewart had kept Egerton close. It helped having at least one person who was loyal to Stewart, and not his father.

“Mr. Craine?” Stewart did not lift his head. Egerton adjusted his volume accordingly. “Mr. Craine?”

Stewart acknowledged his presence.

“I have the manifest you requested. Last month’s order from Kalamazoo.” He held up a folder full of papers as proof.

“What?” Stewart indicated the fans. “Loudest convection oven in the world. Circulate the heat so I’m cooked thoroughly all round.” He waved his hand to illustrate.

Egerton laid the papers before Stewart, then backstepped to the doorway, resisting the urge to mop his brow with his sleeve. Stewart glanced at the pages. “Thank you, Jim.” Egerton stepped out and closed the door quickly behind him.

Stewart ran his hands through his hair, oily from alcohol-aided perspiration. There were days when the oppressive heat seemed to suck the life out of him; his blood would rush to the surface of his skin; he would turn beet red and his pulse would throb visibly along his temples; the incessant perspiration would rise into the air and lend the atmosphere a stagnant, greenhouse quality that would bead the walls with moisture. Some days the moisture would coalesce until a few stray droplets formed and coursed their way down the walls. Today was one of those days.

Since returning from lunch Stewart had been unable to get any work done. He couldn’t concentrate, was irritable, and had spent the next ninety minutes running his hands through his thinning hair and glancing sideways at the envelope he had lain on the corner of his desk. *Mr. and Mrs. Stewart Craine*. He had met his wife Rebecca in college. They were both business majors and had signed up for the same study group in business ethics. They went on a few dates, and then grew apart - quite naturally on Stewart’s part, and reluctantly on Becca’s - until years later when they became reacquainted at a business conference; and if Becca was surprised at the newfound

enthusiasm Stewart then showed for their rediscovered relationship, she didn't question him about it.

Stewart pictured Mae as she was thirteen years before: vibrant, youthful – almost girlish – always quick to laugh. So much had changed, but he knew she was the same. He had married Becca after a brief courtship, had quickly risen through the company, had become a father twice over, as attested by the sweating photograph framed on the wall behind him. Stewart eyed the envelope again. The pounding in his skull increased to a steady compression, as though a giant, steel hand were squeezing his brain harder each second.

He leapt to his feet, pocketed the envelope, and left the office.

\* \* \*

Descending the staircase from Stewart's office was like stepping back from an autumn bonfire: the heat from all the bulbs was felt only on the side facing the source, while the other side felt cool relief; gradually, the lower one descended, the lower the temperature became, until like a fire at night all that remained was the light itself. This peculiar feature of the office was frequently disconcerting to visitors; and on more than one occasion, business associates, on climbing the stairs for the first time and experiencing the simultaneous sensations of heat and cold on alternate sides of the body, wondered if they were taken ill.

Stewart scarcely noticed the effect as he left the office. He sought the cool comfort of the warehouse's ground level, like one leaving the blinding heat of the treetops for the cool shade of the forest floor. Egerton noticed his boss's descent and

timed his exit from the customer service office to meet Stewart at the bottom of the stairs.

“Mr. Craine?” Egerton’s head was like nothing Stewart had ever seen before, narrow to a point at his chin and swooping out and up to the top of his head where a few coarse hairs remained at odds. Though he had seen it every day for years without event, for some reason Stewart was reminded of planting White Emperor bulbs with Mae on the third anniversary of her mother’s death; he was reminded of Rebecca’s bridal wreath, which she’d had composed largely of White Emperor blossoms due to Stewart’s affinity for them. Egerton raised his bushy eyebrows above the rims of his glasses.

“Sir?”

“I’ll be taking off early today, Jim.”

“Feeling alright, sir? You look a bit pale.”

Stewart swept his hand across his sweat-slick hair. “Fine, Jim. Just a bit under the weather. I think I’ll pick the kids up early from school. You can man the furnace,” he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, “till the end of the day.”

Egerton squinted up the stairwell. Stewart laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Without those lights, who knows where we may now be? and so they must be endured. Soldier on, Jim.” He pressed a dollar bill into his hand and nodded towards the vending machines. “And take something cold to drink.”

\* \* \*

Stewart sat in a chair in the principal’s office. The receptionist had been surprised he should want to pick up the children a half hour before school let out. Were they sick? Some family emergency? She had been skeptical at his excuse that he just wanted to pick

them up, and looked at him out of the corner of her eye while she made the requisite phone calls to his children's teachers. Beyond her hushed voice and the restless tapping of her foot on the tiled floor, the office was blanketed in a hushed silence. Stewart couldn't quite shake the feeling that he should meet the principal soon and be reprimanded for some infraction, and he sat uneasily with his fingers drumming on his kneecaps. To pass the time he thought about what he would do with the kids. He would take them for ice cream; he would take them to pick out a toy. Were they too old for toys? He would take them to buy a video.

As a child, his parents had only picked him up from school unannounced once. It was his ninth birthday, and they had repeatedly warned him not to expect anything that year, because they could not afford much at the time. When they showed up in his classroom, it was the unexpectedness of it that he had cherished so much. Something could be said for anticipation, but it was the surprise, the break from the norm, that had thrilled him at the time. He realized he had never before picked up his children from school without some medical reason: vomiting, chicken pox, a sprained ankle. His own father hadn't been a bad one; he was austere, reserved, inattentive, but he had never abused or mistreated Stewart or his mother. In fact he rarely seemed to notice them. Had he become like that to his own children?

The door opened and Rachel was ushered in, followed by pudgy little Sam. Their eyes went wide at the sight of him, and he stood and extended his arms. They looked uncertainly at their chaperone. Were they unsure they could leave, or hesitant to leave with him?

Stewart placed his hands on their shoulders. “Let’s go, guys.” They looked over their shoulders at him. Sam shoved his thumb into his mouth. Stephen yanked it back out. “Let’s go.”

\* \* \*

In the backseat Sam and Rachel were both silent. Stewart saw them in the rear view mirror with their heads turned out their windows. Sam sucked on his thumb.

“Don’t you all want to know where we’re going?” They both turned their heads back toward him, but said nothing. “What if I said we were going for ice cream?”

Rachel turned back to the window. “I had ice cream already.”

Sam plucked his thumb out of his mouth with a wet smack. “I haven’t.”

Stewart turned around briefly and looked at his son. Sam was seven, and though short for his age, what he lacked in height he more than made up for in width. Perhaps not ice cream after all. “How about a movie?”

Sam deflated a little and rolled his head back to face out the window. Rachel piped up, “Veggie Tales?”

Stewart tried not to make a face.

Rachel was nearing ten years old – was that too old for such childish cartoons? It was his wife that had started Rachel watching those moralistic bible stories acted out by animated vegetables. At an age when Rachel should be attending birthday parties and sleepovers, keeping secrets in a locked diary and talking nonstop on the telephone, she did none of those things. Just the other day she had asked her father what he would do if he were swallowed by a whale. He had joked back that any whale swallowing him would

spit him back out for being too salty, but she hadn't laughed, or even smiled.

“What about something else? What kinds of things do your friends watch?” He glanced in the rearview mirror again. Rachel was back to surveying the passing landscape. Sam sucked on his thumb.

“SAM.” Stewart reached back and smacked his son with a loud thwack on his bare leg. “Get your goddamn thumb out of your mouth.”

Sam's eyes brimmed with tears. Rachel was mouthing words to herself, as though she were praying. So much for surprises.

He drove home.

\* \* \*

Rebecca had called to say she would be home late – something catastrophic about color ink cartridges – and that Stewart should pick up something for the kids to eat. Stewart decided to make dinner. He wasn't much of a chef – had not attempted to cook in a long time – but he felt he had a good sense of food. He had once cooked a lobster pasta for Mae on Valentine's Day in college. He had picked the lobster from the tank himself, made the sauce from scratch, even whipped up his own garlic butter spread for the baguette he toasted. They made love that night, hot, passionate, desperate, as though Mae knew it would be the last time. Probably she had known. Stewart shut the refrigerator door and straightened up.

A picture of his wife and children last fall was fixed to the door with a Florida-shaped magnet. He had taken the picture himself. They were sitting in a pile of leaves, an October sky behind them fading into fuchsia. It was his family, without him. They

looked happy. There was an open space to his wife's right, as though he had purposely left it blank for his imaginary self to fill. Was he there, or was that where he had been?

"What are you doing?" He jumped and hit the photograph with his hand; it flew into the air, fluttered down slowly, then turned an angle, swooped down, and slid under the refrigerator. Rachel stood in the doorway chewing her lip.

"Nothing. Why?"

"You just looked weird."

He thought about it; he had been hunched over, his face merely inches from the photograph on the door, gripping both sides of the refrigerator as though he might shake it. He had looked weird. "I was just thinking. What's up?"

"We're hungry."

"Good. I was just finding something to make."

"You're going to cook?"

"Yeah."

"You never cook."

"I'm cooking now." Her eyes left his face and traveled over his shoulder, then she turned around and left the kitchen. He looked behind him; the cupboard was open, displaying a variety of microwaveable bowls of soup. "Not much faith," he grumbled to himself. Behind the soup was a large jar of cinnamon applesauce. He would make pork chops; it would take a very bad cook to ruin pork chops.

\* \* \*

Rebecca came home just in time for dinner. The kids were seated in their places



around the dining table; Stewart had set out the good flatware and lit candles; he even uncorked a bottle of wine which the label claimed went well with pork.

“Something smells good,” Becca said from the foyer.

“Dad cooked!”

Becca walked into the dining room and placed her hand on Sam’s head. “Did he?” She tousled his hair, kissed Rachel on the head, and left her purse on the side table before walking into the kitchen.

Stewart remained standing with his hands on the chair back. “Hello to you, too.”

The water turned on in the kitchen, and Becca shouted through the doorway.

“Sorry, honey. It’s just – what is all this for?”

“I wanted to cook.”

“But you never cook.” At the table Rachel nodded her head, as though a prophecy she had foretold had just come true.

“That’s what I keep hearing.”

Rebecca reentered the dining room and kissed Stewart on the cheek on her way to her chair. “And a bottle of wine. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to seduce me.”

Stewart sat down and poured Becca’s glass half full with wine. “Maybe I am.” He poured again and filled it nearly to the top.

“What’s seduce mean?”

“Sam, honey, don’t talk with your mouth full.”

He swallowed. “But what’s it mean?”

“Never mind that.” She looked across the table at Stewart. “It won’t work tonight anyway. Mommy’s had a long day at work, and there’s a kitchen full of dirty dishes that have to be washed.”

Stewart chewed his stringy, overcooked pork chop until his jaws ached.

\* \* \*

Stewart washed the dishes after dinner. He told Becca she needed to unwind; instead she helped Rachel with her clarinet lesson and Sam with a math worksheet. By the time Stewart finished washing all the dishes – how had he dirtied so many? – the kids were in bed and Becca was in the shower. He stripped down to his underclothes and laid on the bed awhile, flipping through the channels. Nothing on.

He hit the power button on the remote and got back out of bed. Becca was still in the shower. He opened the door to the bathroom; steam billowed out – Becca loved hot showers. He stepped inside. The shower was a stand-up model, with two clear glass walls; the glass was completely fogged over, but he could make out her silhouette behind it. He tried not to think about the time at Mae’s parents’ house over winter break that they had taken a shower together; he didn’t want to, but the shower was nearly identical, the thick, hot air scented with a hint of floral bath soap that almost seemed the same. He couldn’t make out any features of his wife behind the glass, and he imagined curly brown hair wetted to a near black falling over bronzed shoulders and coming to a jagged rest near the small of her back. She would pull her hair back, just so, with her elbows extended to the sky, and in that moment he would pull her to him and –

“Stew, what are you doing?”

He looked at his wife, her dirty blonde hair over one shoulder, a pale, freckled arm covering her chest. He had opened the door to the shower and was staring at her, for how long he didn't know. She pushed him back and shut the door. "I told you, not tonight. I'm tired." Stewart left the bathroom.

Back in the bedroom he picked up his clothes where he'd taken them off. It'd just be one more thing if his clothes were lying on the floor. He took his wallet and keys out of his pants pocket. In another pocket he found an envelope. He pulled it out: *Mr. and Mrs. Stewart Craine*. It was slightly crumpled from being in his pocket so long, and he smoothed it out carefully on his nightstand before sliding it under a book.

He turned on the television and flipped through the channels a few minutes, looking at but not really seeing the screen. Why would Mae have invited him to a party? They'd seen each other a few times over the years; they shared some friends and ran into each other at Christmas parties and birthdays, much to Becca's chagrin. But she'd never invited him anywhere. A loud smack startled him. He had paused his surfing on a classic movie channel; an old black-and-white was on, and a man in an overcoat had just been slapped in the face. The man turned around and left the room.

Stewart slipped the envelope back out from under his book and examined it. He held it up to the light. He smelled it. He started to open it, then stopped. He pressed the mute button on the television. The shower was still on. He fingered the corner of the envelope, ran his thumb along the edge.

In a rush he broke the seal, yanked the letter out, and opened it.

It was a simple invitation, handwritten, listing the time, place, and that it was "for

all my friends, old and new.” There was nothing more to it. He released the breath he hadn’t realized he was holding, then folded the invitation back up and slid it into the envelope. What had he expected?

\* \* \*

Rebecca exited the bathroom long after the steam had condensed and dissipated. Stewart had his face to the opposite wall, and he felt her climb into bed beside him without turning a light on. She fidgeted for awhile as she settled herself into position. When she was still he rolled over.

Her back was turned to him, and his face came right to the back of her head. Her hair was still damp and wrapped in a towel. It smelled like the static sheets she used in the dryer. He brushed a stray hair behind her ear and trailed his finger down her neck and across her collar bone; at her shoulder he laid his palm and lightly ran it down her arm, past her wrist, and ended up on her thigh. She wore a nightshirt to bed, and it had ridden up so that he could feel her bare skin just at his finger tips.

He pulled his fingertips up slowly, brushing the light shirt up higher as he went. He twisted his hand around and moved it under the shirt, past her hip and then across to just below her navel. He inched himself closer, slid his legs up so his shape mirrored hers. He slid his hand slowly up her abdomen, until his finger just touched the base of her breast.

Becca’s arm clinched tight against her chest like a trap; she rolled over on her stomach and pulled her shirt back down. “Stew, I said no.”

He rolled onto his back.

He could barely make out the ceiling in the glow from the bathroom night light. It was bordered in crown molding, something meant to mimic nineteenth century affluence, and the sharply planed angles took on eerie proportions in the scant light. If he let his eyes unfocus, like looking at a 3-D puzzle, the lines seemed to move, to change shape and place.

The night Mae left him he had not cried. His eyes burned, but he had refused to cry. What did she mean she was afraid of getting too close? He had lain on his back and stared at the ceiling till the sun rose. At first he had run through every second of that night over and over again in his mind; but towards morning he had begun to replay other moments, the good and the bad, as though he were trying to catalog every moment of the relationship, to compile it all into a picture of life and file it away. There was one image that had kept reappearing with greater and greater frequency as the night wore on, until it was all he could think about. They had been driving through Kentucky early in the morning. It was the grey light of predawn, and the fog lay thick on the road like whipped cream. They hadn't seen another car the entire morning. He looked over at Mae – she was driving – and caught her in profile. He said something, he couldn't remember what, and then she laughed. That exact moment, her laughing with her hands on the wheel, the fog and the road, he relived over and over that night. He thought then it was because they had been truly happy at that time.

Stewart hadn't thought of that drive in a long while – since the night she left him, actually. It came back to him now with a force only increased by the space of nearly a decade and a half. They had been happy other times, most of the time in fact. It wasn't

that. Becca moved in her sleep beside him, but he barely registered it. He looked closer in his mind's eye, traced the line around Mae's lips, across her teeth, in the soft light, and it hit him. That was the precise moment he'd fallen in love with her. He realized now that he had never stopped.

He felt Becca's hot breath on his shoulder.

Stewart rolled over towards the wall and shut his eyes tight against the night.

## Some Dreams Are Bigger Than Others

A pink comb, unclaimed by all save the April sun.  
Tapered at the end like a pair of poorly fitted jeans,  
teeth that zzzzzz as I flick my thumb along them -  
thick, throaty at the wide-toothed end, finely singing at the other.  
There is music in the zimming of the teeth, music in its bright, translucent color, music in  
the heft of it in my palm, in the smell of freshly shampooed hair  
- music in the smell of a woman

I want to rake its teeth through my hair, to feel teeth on my skin, spine tingling.  
I wonder where it has been:  
rim of a washbasin, apartment in St. Germain, spring fluttering through thrown-wide  
windows;  
a beach, deep waters calling just beyond the breakers, sun blushing itself into the ocean;  
a boat, a cabin, a posh hotel room;  
or perhaps the bottom of a purse.  
And who's to say which is better or which is worse?  
We want romance, exoticism, fire;  
we want familiarity, comfort, remembrance of things past.

Me, I'll settle for the purse, the mystery of the unknown,  
the shape of a shoulder still in its strap, warmth of the hip not yet faded from its  
soft leather.

## Quiet War





## Neighbors

It's sometime around 1 a.m. when the yelling starts. They can hear them through the ceiling. It's been like this for months. "One of these days, he's going to do her in," he always says and she just shakes her head at the tragedy of it all. But they always listen.

They can only make out a word or two every now and then. The man and woman try to guess what their neighbors argue about based on tone and volume. She told him once that she thought it was the same way for dogs, that they stare at you until they hear a word they know - "Sit. Treat? No." - and the rest is just garbage.

Some nights the neighbors upstairs swear at one another, loud enough that the man and woman can make it out. "Bastard!" she'll say. "Bitch!" he'll reply. Sometimes they will break things, but not very often. The apartments aren't that nice, and the man and woman think they don't have that much stuff. The neighbors always have sex afterwards. Loud sex, and at first it's hard to tell the difference from the angry yelling and the fucking yelling, but the box spring clears that up. She once wondered if they might be rednecks. He told her that's a stereotype, but wonders, too. The neighbors seem kind of trashy.

Tonight they are very loud. "Was that 'your mother!'" she asks. "I think it was 'your brother!'" They stare at the ceiling as though they could look through it. It is popcorned, and there's a spider web in the corner by the television that doesn't work anymore. He rolls over on his side and places his palm on her stomach, just under her shirt. Her eyes move around the ceiling as if she were tracing them, like it can help her

hear better. He moves his hand up. “Not right now,” she says. “This is just getting good.”

The shouts are louder and closer together. The neighbors stamp on the floor. They might be fighting. Sometimes they do that. Once the man and woman heard a slap, and then the woman upstairs crying, and she thought the guy had hit her, but he thought she hit him and regretted it afterward when the door slammed on his way out. There is a loud thud through the floor like something heavy falling on it. The shouting stops. The man and woman are very quiet, and he realizes his head is tilted like a dog’s; he had this retriever, Chip, when he was little, and Chip used to do the same thing, as if by doing so he could hear better. The man looks at her and her head is tilted, too.

She exhales and he notices he’s been holding his breath as well. There is nothing. Outside someone’s dog barks and they hear, “Sadie, no,” but that is all. He places his hand on her stomach under her shirt again. The other arm he slides behind her head, right into the hollow between her skull and shoulders. She usually likes it when he does that. He moves his hand up and this time she doesn’t stop him. Her breath catches when he brushes a nipple, but she doesn’t move his hand away.

They make love, but neither of their hearts are into it. He finishes quickly and she doesn’t finish at all. After, he says, “I wonder if everyone is alright?” because he knows she is still thinking about their neighbors, too, and she asks, “Do you think we should do something?” Instead they lie on their backs, and he’s careful not to touch her so they won’t stick to each other, because he knows she hates that. He thinks it feels exotic, like they’re in the tropics, somewhere they’ll never go, but he’s careful not to just the same.

There's still no sound from upstairs. After a while he rolls over and tries to sleep. In a half hour he will ask if she's awake. She won't say anything and will pretend to be asleep, but he'll know she's not.

## What She Thinks One Year Later

What was it I left you for?

Whispered words, the glint of a smile,  
volcanoes? There was the hint  
of something, of snow irises bending  
to the sun, spring breezing into  
an empty tomb – but whatever it was  
I can no longer remember. I've already  
forgotten his rough tongue, my  
bruised lips, the novelty of excitement.

What was it I left behind?

The creak of a couch spring, wall clock  
ticking down the seconds till morning,  
a taste in my mouth like blueberries.  
I left comfort for the promise of fire  
and perhaps you'd like to think  
I was burned, and perhaps I'd like to think  
I was reborn, but in truth it was neither.

What happened to the past in the  
space between now and then?

I can no longer remember, and  
every time I try suddenly  
I'm bobbing in the current with no  
place to plant my feet.  
I was just a girl, a nobody  
who managed to break your heart.  
I don't know where the  
gray rose of tomorrow  
will drag me, and

I am not sorry.

**Modern Life 4:  
Beginning the Journey**



## Roadsong

There were a few wispy clouds off in the distance, and jet exhaust crisscrossed the sky, but other than that it was a clear azure. An SUV passed by across the median and flashed its lights twice. Scott eased the accelerator down further to sixty-seven and watched ahead for a hummock or swell that could hide an officer's car. Julie murmured incoherently and reached up to brush loose hair behind an ear before settling back down to sleep.

The road stretched out ahead of them, a thick black arrow cutting through browning fields of Ohio corn. Scott glanced at the dash, checking the speedometer again. The monotonous landscape made it hard to tell how fast he was going. He looked over at Julie, asleep in the passenger seat, ripe stalks of corn whipping past her window. She had reclined the seat all the way back and was wrapped in a pink afghan, the air conditioner blowing loose strands of hair across her face.

Too late, he saw the squad car as he turned his attention back to the road. Scott silently thanked the unknown motorist who'd warned him to slow down, then smiled when he got a good look at the car. It was empty, and grass had grown up around the tires: a decoy. He traced the curve of Julie's hips under the blanket with his eyes. There was something about her, how she had firm curves while still being small, not too thin but with nothing extra. But it wasn't just her body that set her apart, and for Scott that was the difference between her and other girls. These reflections were always accompanied by a sense of fear bordering on panic – what would he do if he lost her?

They were returning to Tennessee from a wedding in Lima; Julie's college friend,

Allison, and some real estate investor. It was a beautiful ceremony, flamboyant and gaudy in the way girls with big dreams who marry up can do, with silk hangings, a small orchestra complete with a harpist, and a tiered champagne fountain. The bridesmaids' dresses were a rich cream. Julie was so happy for Allison she was practically beaming, and the lighting was just right to set off her tan against the dress. She had been placed on the bottom step of the altar at the left, furthest from the bride. Afterward Scott joked that it was because she would have taken the attention away from Allison.

The fuel gauge was showing more than half full and Julie was sleeping peacefully; there wouldn't be a reason to stop for a little while. The volume was low so not to disturb Julie. Scott could pick up on sporadic tones now and again, but nothing distinguishable. They merged with the hum of the tires, until the radio and the tires, the wind swirling against the car, and Julie's slow breathing merged together into one road song. This was the zone all drivers with long distances hope for, the place where the universe falls into a void and all that exists is the car and the road, when the clock and odometer march forward at a steadily accelerating pace.

Scott and Julie had been together for two years. Before Julie there had been dates, but none worth recalling, and none that came close to comparing to Shae. For the first year and a half with Julie, Shae had rarely crossed his mind, but then he was asked to attend a training seminar in Cincinnati. Shae had accepted a job in Cincinnati, which at the time Scott had blamed for the split-up, though eventually he realized she had taken the position because there was nothing to stay for.

It was the perfect time to be driving. The seat was warm and comfortable, the sun

just beginning to slant toward the horizon but not yet in his eyes, the road open ahead. Yet Scott struggled against it. The allure of falling into the roadsong – the automation of driving allowing the mind to wander in itself – was Scott’s fear. He didn’t want to think about what had happened a few months before. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, tried counting the number of colors he could see within the car without moving his head, labeled all the possible figures for the scant clouds in the distance, but eventually the endless fields of gold and auburn stretching towards the horizon lulled him into himself.

\* \* \*

The seminar would last for two weeks, six days a week. It would mean a pay increase and greater advancement possibilities, and Julie had urged Scott to go. She had her job, her friends, and her mother was recovering from the flu, so they wouldn’t be able to see each other during those two weeks, but they would talk every day, and in the end he had decided to do it.

Scott tried not thinking about Shae, but he couldn’t help it. He was excited that they would be in the same city, and furious at his excitement. When he hugged Julie goodbye Shae flashed through his mind again, and he hugged all the more fiercely, ashamed and afraid. He wasn’t thinking about just any woman, but one he’d slept with, gone skinny dipping with, played sex-themed board games with. An image of Shae holding a toy gun wearing a black garter and blindfold flashed in his mind. What was wrong with him? Julie tried reassuring him, thinking he was upset about having to be apart. That made it all the worse.



The drive north was a curious mixture of dread and apprehension, an intense elation coupled with a sinking stomach. He stopped several times to try to walk off the jitters, but the mocha frappuccinos he kept drinking didn't help.

The seminar was rough, 10 hour days staring at computer screens and being condescended to by an IT guy five years his junior named Chad. It was short for Chadwick. By Saturday night he needed to unwind.

It was after 10:00 and Scott was staring blankly at college football highlights. Julie hadn't been at home, and when Scott phoned her mother's house he was told she was out with friends. He was feeling lonely and tired, but not sleepy. He was irritated and worried all at once, and it gave him a strange courage, a certain recklessness. He looked at his cell phone lying on the nightstand next to him. Ten digits. Besides, she probably changed her number a long time ago. It was just ten digits.

\* \* \*

Scott met Julie in what they would later laugh about and call a serendipitous crossing of paths. He was in a bookstore looking for transcendentalists; she was sitting cross-legged on the floor reading the back cover of Emerson's *Essays*. He nearly stumbled over her coming around the corner of a stack, catching himself at the last moment. She looked up with a half-smile, her eyes dark and blue. The hushed sounds of bookstore chatter filled his ears, intense and pounding. She continued looking at him for a few seconds, her smile slipping, before Scott realized she was giving him a chance to speak. He returned a smile, blushed, and turned back around the corner.

A few minutes later he was wrestling with himself on the opposite side of the

stack, having checked other aisles to be sure that she was, in fact, directly in front of where he needed to be. God she was beautiful. He looked around the corner to see if she was still there, and in one of those moments that define future events, she paused her skimming and looked up, catching his eye. She had caught him peeking at her, and it was either fess up to it and get the book he needed for class, or be a voyeur. He stepped around the corner with a sheepish grin and introduced himself.

Scott looked over at Julie again, asleep in the passenger seat. She frowned in her sleep, slight and quick, then exhaled deeply. A sign ahead warned of a speed limit change. They were coming upon a construction zone, and fines would be doubled. They were in no hurry, and he slowed down further and set the cruise control at fifty-nine. By his best estimate, Scott figured they were still about forty-five minutes from the Kentucky border. He kicked off his clogs and folded one leg under the other, grabbing the wheel two-handed like an open book.

\* \* \*

Scott sat on the edge of his hotel room bed, looking at the cell phone in his hand. His palms were moist and he could feel his heart racing. The phone rang, Shae's number illuminated on the screen. Scott looked to the door, checking to see that it was locked and chained, then to the window to be certain the shades were fully drawn. It rang again. Why had he called and hung up? If he answered, he'd seem desperate and foolish. But surely she recognized his number; he'd never had it changed.

His palms were hot and wet now, his heart leaping into his throat. It rang again. He switched off the TV, kicked off his shoes as quickly as possible and leaned forward

on the edge of the mattress. He wiped his palms one at a time on his pants legs. It began ringing again, and midway through he punched the green send key and put the phone to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Scott.” The silence stretched uncomfortably.

“Hi, Shae.”

“You called me?” Her tone rose infinitesimally, and he could tell she was either intrigued or concerned. He wasn’t sure which.

“Yeah. I’m uh, in Cincinnati, and I knew you were too. I mean, I thought you would be, because I remember . . . you know.”

“Yeah, I’m here.” She almost said it evenly. Almost, but not quite. He felt his courage rise and spoke through the lump in his throat.

“Well, I’m here for this business thing, and I know it’s late, but I just thought that maybe if you wanted to we could, you know, go grab a drink or something. Catch up on the past few years.” He hoped he sounded nonchalant, but he could feel the anxiety and anticipation doing its work on his pitch, and his voice echoed back through the receiver alien to him.

“Where’s Julie?” By the fact that she asked this question, he knew, everything had already been set in motion. She knew he wouldn’t have called if Julie were with him, but she wanted him to say it himself.

“She’s in Tennessee.” He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and played with it absently, turning it over in his hand.

“I see. And you want to. . .?”

“I dunno, I just thought I’m not busy, and if you’re not busy, maybe we could grab some drinks or food or something. It’s not a big deal if you have something else.” He hoped he sounded apathetic, that it didn’t matter either way, but his voice cracked towards the end.

“Well, I don’t want to cause any trouble.” Her tone was lyrical, playful, and he knew she was playing along.

“It’s no trouble.”

“Well, if you’re sure.”

He paused for a few seconds and looked down. He was cradling the phone with his shoulder, and had taken all the cards out of his wallet, leaving them in his lap. On top of the pile was a worn picture of Julie with her arms around a snowman. There were flakes in her hair and her eyes were bright. It was his favorite picture of her. He shuffled the cards together and slid it in the middle of the pile. “I’m sure.”

They agreed upon a bar Shae suggested. Since he didn’t know the city, she would come pick him up if he would buy the drinks. The ceiling was pocorned and slightly yellowed by the incandescent bulb from the bedside lamp. He felt calm and chaotic at once, a deep stillness settling over the turbulence in his gut. It was an odd feeling, exciting and terrible. He had to brush his teeth.

\* \* \*

In every relationship there are moments, small, quiet moments that affirm the direction of the future. With Shae there had been many affirming moments early on, as

there always are in long term relationships. But they became more infrequent over time until they stopped altogether. Scott hadn't realized all the damning moments until he met a cute blonde reading Emerson on a bookstore floor. It wasn't the beginning of the end, he thought later, but rather the recognition the end had begun long before. After all, he later reasoned, Shae had probably already applied for the job in Ohio before he met Julie.

With Julie it was different. After the initial period of shy awkwardness led to a couple months of intense, frequent sex, while they had cooled off, it wasn't an absence of passion so much as a comfortable familiarity. They smiled during lovemaking, the laughter a stark contrast to the quick fierceness of sex with Shae.

The first time Julie had laughed she was on all fours. Her head was hanging low, hair sweeping back and forth across their sleeping bags. The fire cast leaping shadows across the skin of the tent. It was muggy and he was beginning to feel the nearness of climax when she started laughing. He had stopped, suddenly ashamed and not knowing why, all too aware of the calls of cicadas and the sweat cooling on his back. Then she made a joke. He felt like he ought to be embarrassed that she had been thinking about a familiar aging professor with his wife. But it *was* funny.

Afterward he lay on his back listening to the fire popping its way through a thick pine stump with Julie's head on his bare shoulder. A small bead of saliva slipped from the corner of her mouth and touched his shoulder, wet and cold. He wiped it off and was surprised to find himself smiling rather than disgusted. Surely this was love.

The road changed from the smoothness of fresh asphalt to a deeply grooved surface waiting to be paved. Another, deeper frown creased Julie's face and she rolled

over, turning her back to him. Orange and white barrels whipped by her window. Her feet peeked out from under the pink weave of her blanket, thin and fragile with thick, callused balls – dancer’s feet. Her black hair band was slipping out, her pony tail loose and lopsided, falling down her back.

The radio struggled against the heavy thrumming of tires across the pitted pavement, and it sounded to Scott like a Bob Dylan song. He turned the volume until the digital face showed a 6. It was Waylon Jennings. Must have switched signals some time back. He didn’t like country, but it wasn’t that bad.

“Honey, where are we?” Her voice was heavy with sleep.

“Still in Ohio, close to Kentucky.”

“How long was I asleep?”

“Hour, hour and a half.” She made a happy murmuring noise.

“Are we going to stop soon?”

“Yeah.”

The view out the window was alternating between low, bushy soybeans and tall stalks of maize. Up ahead a blue sign had a green and yellow starburst in one white box and a yellow shell against a red background in the other. If they had to stop, they might as well fill up too. It was a road philosophy that had exasperated Shae, but Julie had understood the practicality of it early on. Julie lay quietly the next mile to the exit, but he knew she was awake, and as the car eased onto the exit ramp she poked her head up to look out the window.

They pulled into the nearly vacant station across from a rusted, blue pickup. Julie

had her shoes on and was shouldering her purse before the car had finished rolling up to the pump. She had a small bladder; Scott sometimes joked he could set his watch by it.

“If you want anything from inside, to drink or eat or whatever, just stay in there and I’ll be in in just a minute.”

She crossed the lot and pulled open the swinging door while Scott swiped his card at the pump.

\* \* \*

Whispered footsteps came down the cement walk. Suddenly all the calm that he had been trying for stole away and it all broke through: fear, anticipation, anxiety, arousal, disgust, excitement. Magma and glaciers coursed through his veins, and he couldn’t say what he wanted more, Shea to be there or her to never show up at all. The footsteps paused outside his door, then she knocked.

He had spent the last hour alternating between staring at his reflection and trying to calm himself with the television. Ultimately, he had given up with the mirror after he had combed his hair a hundred ways and changed shirts a dozen times; it was hopeless. He had put on a few pounds since they had last seen each other, there were bags under his eyes, and he looked bewildered, the same expression on his face that he’d seen on a child’s once who had just witnessed a dog being run over. He didn’t dare look through the peephole, fearing what he might see, so he twisted the bolt out of the frame and opened the door.

Shae was exactly as he remembered, and that made him afraid. Her makeup was different, and she was wearing a black dress, but she still carried a shawl just in case and

her eyes were the same. She was taller than Julie, almost as tall as Scott, and had her hair pulled back in a loose fashion that was meant to look like she hadn't spent a lot of time on it. He'd seen her often enough spending an hour getting her hair to look that nonchalant, and it made him feel better to see it now. It was a struggle to keep his knees from buckling and his stomach from burning through his abdomen. He wanted to throw up and run a mile at the same time, but instead he just smiled at her.

“Well aren't you going to invite me in?” Her eyes flashed when she said it and her lips were turned slightly up. He realized he must look a fool standing in the doorway while she stood on the threshold. He pulled the door wider and stepped back.

“Yea, sorry. Come in. It's not much, but it's just temporary.” He could have hit himself.

“Well, it *is* a hotel.” A mischievous smile lit up her face. “There are two beds.” She sat down on the obviously unclaimed one and then looked at him. She looked innocent in the light of the lamp outlining her from behind.

“Uh, yeah. Comes with the room.” He wanted to throw himself over the balcony.

“So what do you want to do?” It sounded so simple, as though they had just met in a store and were deciding whether to go for coffee or sandwiches. He retrieved his coat from where he had laid it folded on the comforter. She was wearing toeless flats and her nails were painted red. He didn't like red polish on toenails. Scott looked at her, and she smiled.

\* \* \*

The gas pump lurched in his hand, and Scott realized the tank was full. He



checked the machine and was surprised to see the car had only taken just over 6 gallons. He tried the lever again, and it immediately shut off.

By the time he finished screwing on the cap and closing the cover, Julie still hadn't come out. Scott decided she must be inside, waiting. Though the sun was still above the horizon, the first signs of daylight fading were stretching across the sky, touching the west with yellow and rose. His shadow stretched across the lot as he walked towards the entrance. He stepped inside and noticed Julie chatting with the sales attendant. Not a very tall man, wearing a dark blue t-shirt that was relatively clean though showing wear, he was slightly grizzled and the whites of his eyes were striated with red veins. He had on a mesh cap bearing the logo of the station resting delicately at the very peak of his head, and a name tag pinned to his shirt read *Steve*.

"I don't think it's something you have to worry about too much."

"Really?" They didn't seem to have noticed him entering the store, though a bell had dinged.

"Really. I mean, where else is she going to go?"

"Somebody else." An out-of-the-way gas station that didn't see very many customers, a beautiful woman who was attentive and understanding. It probably didn't take long for the attendant to completely open up to her. Scott had seen it happen before. He had to smile.

"She only wants you to think that. She's probably staying with one of her friends."

"You think?"

“Sure. Women are simple, Steve. We want a guy who shows us he cares, and we want him to be totally ours.”

Steve laughed, then noticed Scott edging towards the drinks. Blood crept up his neck into his face, and he forced out a “Evening,” nodding his head crisply. Scott felt embarrassed for him. Julie was still at the counter, speaking in a low voice. He picked up a 20 oz. of cherry-flavored cola, her favorite, and made his way back up to the counter.

Steve didn’t look up at him until after he’d finished ringing Scott up and asked for the money: \$1.42. Scott paid him with a dollar and two quarters and told him to keep it, then grabbed the drink and headed for the door; the man was already humiliated enough, no sense in prolonging it waiting on a few coins. As he pushed through the door he could just make out what Julie said to him.

“Trust her.”

During the few minutes he was inside it had already grown dimmer, and though it was still warm, the wind that always blew across the flatlands carried an edge to it, promising a chill night. He got in and started the car, then pulled up closer to the door. Julie exited and flashed a big smile at him when she opened the door.

They were on the highway before Scott couldn’t take it anymore. It was a game to them, leaving questions unasked, waiting for the other to break the silence. Julie always won.

“So what was that all about?”

“Nothing. Steve was having some trouble, and I gave him some advice.”

“How do you always get people to open up like that?”

“When you ask them how they are, look them in the eye and listen.” She smiled at him, and he knew that was as much as he’d get out of her. He pushed the scan button on the radio and hoped it would pick up something besides country.

\* \* \*

Shae had put on weight since the last time Scott had held her. The bar had been crowded, noisy, and after a few drinks he wanted to leave. She asked if he wanted her to come up for awhile. He felt warm and his ears were buzzing, and he didn’t remember saying yes, but there she was. There was something more substantial to her, more solid about holding her. His fingers pressed into the soft flesh of her back as she breathed in his ear. Her shirt and bra had come off sometime, he didn’t know when, and his shirt must have come off too because her breasts pressed against his skin.

She was breathing heavily through her nose, making soft, wet noises as she sucked on his neck. He pushed her lower before she could leave a bruise. Scott lay on his back with his shoes kicked off. Shae left cold chills down his chest where her nails and lips and tongue moved. Her fingernails weren’t painted, and they were chewed off at the ends.

“What do you want me to do?” She managed to sound soft and fierce at the same time, looking up at him while she tongued around his belly button. Her hair flowed wildly around her face, obscuring everything but her eyes, nose, and wet, red mouth.

“I don’t know.” Scott was breathless and uncertain, his blood racing through his veins. He was sure she must hear it. She seemed to be asking him something, but he

could only see her mouth moving as she pulled at his belt. He continued looking at her.

She unthreaded his belt, then unfastened his pants, kissing lower all the while. “I said, ‘are you sure this is what you want?’” His pants were down to his knees. There was saliva at the corner of her mouth. Behind her, the reflective surface of the mirror was wearing off, dark spots speckling the surface. The room smelled of mildew and he became very cold.

\* \* \*

The low beams made a yellow half-moon in front of the car. He didn’t bother putting on the brights. The sun had dipped below the horizon and draped the sky in waves of orange, pink, and violet as they crossed into Kentucky. Scott nudged Julie awake.

“Look honey.”

“It’s so beautiful.” Her eyes were shining and she placed her hand on his leg. There was nothing sexual about it, and it felt comfortable. The sky painted her face rosy and her hair seemed to grab the gold and hold on to it. She was smiling with her mouth slightly open, eyes wide. It made him feel vile and unclean, his thoughts shifting from the earthy animalism of his encounter with Shae to seeing Julie practically radiate. He still had not been able to find the words to tell her; in fact, he had almost managed to put it out of his mind, like a bad dream, until the drive home from the wedding. He gripped the wheel with both hands and stared at the point ahead where the road was swallowed by the darkening horizon.

The stars had begun coming out before deep twilight had spread fully across the

sky. There were a few at first, but as the sun sunk completely and took its colors with it, the heavens came alive. He slid back the cover of the moon-roof. He wished he knew something about astronomy.

Julie was curled up in her chair once again, the pink of her blanket a light gray-green from the dashboard lights. The starlight illuminated her hair a soft, delicate white. She looked ethereal, like some creature from beyond the earth that had stopped to rest awhile in his passenger seat.

The moon was peeking above the horizon, an orange fingernail pressed against the stars. Scott had turned the radio off some time before, and he now dimmed the dashboard lights until they were just visible. The highway was open before him, and he felt like he could turn off the headlights and navigate along the dark silver of the road by starlight. The only sound was the tires on the pavement, the wind flowing around the car, and the steady, slow breathing from Julie beside him.

A green sign with white lettering showed 17 miles to Berea. The road song played heavily in his skull, relaxing his muscles and lifting him out of his body. He could see his arms hanging down, his hands low on the wheel. His shoes were off and his left leg was curled up against the door. Julie was wrapped in a soft cocoon, quiet and safe. It felt right, and he could imagine a car seat in the back holding a baby, smiling in her sleep.

Scott broke from his dream and turned the radio back on low. It was an old song, Johnny Cash singing slowly in his deep, sonorous voice. He could almost make out the words. He reached over to Julie, then hesitated. She was so peaceful lying there.

He laid his hand on her shoulder and rubbed up and down her arm until she sat up.

“Are we close?” She was rubbing sleep out of her eyes and yawning at the same time.

“No, not even to Berea yet. Then another three hours after that.” He felt cool, almost cold, and his voice echoed through his head in slow motion.

“Is everything all right?” Her eyes were bright and his filled up as he looked at her. It was now or never. As bad as it would be to tell her, he realized it would be much worse not to, that the memory would work like cancer until it ruined any slim chance that might remain to him and Julie.

“I’ve got to tell you something.” He was oddly relaxed, and though he knew what was to come next would be hard, probably harder than anything he’d done before, he felt the terrible burden begin unfastening itself from him, and he clung to hope.

\* \* \*

Shae looked up at Scott again, confused. Her fingers were wrapped in the elastic band of his boxers. Scott stared up at the popcorned ceiling, so different from the smooth white-painted sheetrock above the bed he shared with Julie. The comforter was scratchy on his back and his legs hurt from bearing her weight on them. He leaned up onto his elbows.

“I can’t.”

She exhaled slowly. “I know. I kind of figured, anyway.” She was still straddling him, her knees on either side of him.

“Why did you come up to my room?”

“There was this thing we had, that I thought I let go of long ago, but never really

have. It all seemed so perfect, I knew it wouldn't last."

He was out of words to say. How can you explain a dream, a promise that fades before you?

"I'll go." She lifted off him and turned around. Red streaks ran down her back where he had pushed his fingers hard against it.

She dressed quietly and shouldered her purse before looking back at him. He had pulled his pants up and was sitting at the corner of the bed with his hands in his lap, staring at the patterns in the carpet. His scalp felt hot and stinging and he knew his ears were red.

Shae kissed him on the cheek. The door shut behind her with a click. He lay on his back and wanted to weep, for Shae and for Julie, but mostly for himself. He wanted, but he couldn't.

\* \* \*

Julie will cry when Scott tells her about Shae. He hopes that she will scream and beat his chest with her fists, but she won't. She will look directly at him while she weeps so he can see her heart fracturing. It will be precisely at that moment that Scott realizes how much he loves her, and that she is all he wants. And she will never take him back.

## **Vita**

Ashley Scott Moser was born in St. Petersburg, Florida, on 2 August 1984. He moved to McMinnville, Tennessee in 1992, and spent the next ten years discovering who he did not want to be. He received his B.A. in English and B.A. in Philosophy from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in 2006, and has been attempting to discover who he does want to be ever since.