

POQUOSON

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Chores

“And I don’t want to hear about a one of you backtalking your grandmother,” Pops said, standing before us.

We sat on the couch in Big G’s living room, my brother June on one side, me on the opposite, and my sister Divin’ Duck between us. Only June’s legs were long enough for his feet to brush the carpet. I wanted to lounge, to throw my feet up on Duck’s lap and hear her squeal in fake outrage, “Get those stinky things off me!” But I knew if any of us relaxed our posture—backs straight, up against the cushions, our heads bowed slightly as if in concentration—we would endanger ourselves with an additional twenty minutes or so of Pops talking at us.

His lectures were aspirational unto himself, standards he held for his children but which he personally disregarded. For he was the ultimate backtalker, a spendthrift to boot; fatally impressionable, prone to wild hairs, flighty, taking every opportunity to be shiftless, which had lately become more desperate as work, and the attention our mother required, drained him of his essence, of his devil-may-care laziness. A remarkable father, all in all, but of the “do as I say, not as I do” variety.

As he went on with what he had rehearsed—I’d already gotten the sneak preview before he drove us to Big G’s house in Poquoson, explaining to her how important structure was, occupying our time with activities—I took some comfort in the familiarity of our grandmother’s living room, which had not changed at all throughout my life. Recliner perpendicular from the couch where we sat, which faced a television encased in brown wood, tweed panels on each side. Once turned on, the image on the TV screen faded in slowly, like a Polaroid coming to life after several violent throttles. Next to the recliner, a magazine slot with a narrow surface upon which the slovenlier among us might set a soda or a beer. Instead, a decorative ceramic lighter shaped

like a bell, with a textured ceramic cherry blossom glued to its side, lay next to a crystal ashtray. Relics from Big G's smoking days, pretty enough to keep though no longer useful. Centered under each item, a starched white lace doily.

No object in the living room lay directly on any surface, whether the broad flat top of the television or the heavy drawers and cupboards along the opposite wall, stained a darker shade of brown, with heavy brass handles that hung and knocked when a drawer or door was opened. Vases, brass elephants, glass and ceramic knickknacks—all of them rested atop a doily or some woven mat or macramé circle, or ensconced in a knitted cozy. Even the vacuum wore a dress, its cover a stuffed goose woman in bonnet and apron and Mother Hubbard, her folded hands sewn together, her posture the same crook as the vacuum's handle. The bedrooms were rife with bed skirts, duvets, and coverlets.

"And because your grandmother has been so gracious to look after you while I'm away, you'll have chores. I assume you'll manage them accordingly."

"How much?" June said.

Pops put his hands on his hips and stared at him. "How much what?"

"How much per?" June replied.

Pops stared a little longer and began to shake his head.

"God save me from these greedy, materialistic children. The reward for completing your assigned chores is the satisfaction of a job well done."

June said nothing, just pursed his lips, leaned forward, and steepled his fingers.

"Anything you want to say, Gladys?" Pops called to Big G in the kitchen, where she wiped at something that most likely no longer needed wiping.

"No," she said. "But let's not make it a big deal."

Pops turned back to us. “If I get word that any of you is giving your grandmother a hard time, I will drive back here and beat the living daylights out of you. Even in the dead of night, I’ll be back here with a belt in my hand.”

He’d go soft on me, sometimes, if I could get him to laugh before I went over his knee for a spanking.

“You understand? June?”

June said nothing, just looked into the middle distance. Then he nodded once, slightly.

“Any questions, Jesse?” he asked me.

“Nah, man,” I said, like a teenage hoodlum from a black and white TV show I’d watch back home on weekday afternoons. It was how I started calling Dad “Pops,” and Grandma “Big G,” trying to be a street-smart wise ass. After a couple years, neither seemed to resent it, were even amused, sometimes referring to themselves in the third person by their nicknames, writing them on birthday cards. So it stuck. For Pops at least, it wasn’t such a leap since he’d named his daughter from a line in an old blues song. Me he called Slugger. June had shortened it to Slug.

Pops only glanced over at Divin’ Duck. He didn’t want to get her started on a whole thing. She had been so good, sitting so quietly, so still.

“Well, then, I got to get back on the road if I want to make good time. June, I love you.”

“I love you, too,” June said quietly.

“Slugger?”

“Love ya, Pops.”

“I love you, Duckie.”

When Duck finally looked up at Pops, her eyes glistened.

“When are we gonna see Mommy again?” she said.

I had to turn away. I'd already been through it, didn't want to go through it again.

Pops kneeled before her, took her hand. "When she's feeling better, baby. All she needs is a little rest. I'm gonna make sure she's taken care of. You'll see her before you know it."

Pops had already enrolled us in the school here, a month left of fourth grade before the summer break, so I knew it would be a while. I wondered if I'd be starting fifth grade in Poquoson, with June in seventh and Duck starting second.

"You're gonna be just fine with your grandmother, right?"

She nodded but continued to cry silently. I turned to my brother, whose gaze was fixed on nothing in particular.

"She's a decent old broad," I said.

"Give it a rest," June said, not looking at me.

On his way out through the kitchen door, I saw Pops try to pass Big G a handful of folded money. Big G waved it away and Pops finally returned it to his pocket.

"You'll want Jesse on the lawnmower," he told her. "June might still be a little, you know, from the thing—besides, he's not so hot on attention to detail."

After we watched Pops back out of Big G's empty driveway—she'd never learned how to drive and didn't own a car—she led us back inside.

June was already several inches taller than Big G, and I was just about her height. A dark Asian woman, Japanese, who still dyed and permed her hair every week, with a kit at home. Toothless, she could still chew an apple down to its core, gums only. Her preferred outfit was the mu'u mu'u, many of which she'd acquired from Hawai'i over the years, though she would often put on a pair of pants if she was leaving the house. The holes in her ears had become ovals, stretched downward by heavy golden earrings I'd never seen her without.

“Come on, Duckie, I’ll set you up in your room,” she said. “June and Jesse, go put your clothes away.”

June and I split a dresser in our room, two single beds and a desk with a lamp on top. We unpacked the suitcases we’d carried from the living room, all cleanly folded for us by Pops. Despite his disinclination to work too hard, he was a neat freak like the rest of them, Big G and my mother. Besides our clothes, we had school supplies, notebooks and pencils. Of all my toys, which Pops had ordered us not to pack, I’d only brought my plastic Chewbacca action figure. I stood him on the desk. As I posed him, the heat of all the toys and games we’d left behind rose to my face, and it all at once seemed unfair.

“This is stupid,” I told June, who lay his underwear in the top drawer, alongside his socks.

“Out of our hands,” June said.

I had been gripping Chewbacca in my fingers so hard I couldn’t get him to stand straight.

“But what if Mom—”

June closed the drawer and withdrew a folded piece of yellow paper from the suitcase. He slid the paper in front of me on the desk, and I saw a calendar of days, a grid for the month of May. The school lunch menu.

“Look, Sluggo. Nachos on Fridays, man, Nachos.”

The rest of the day we settled in, which meant for me getting acquainted with Big G’s kitchen, opening cabinets and drawers, the refrigerator and the pantry where, in addition to a fifty pound bag of rice on the corner that sat slumped over like those stereotypical hombres in a Speedy Gonzales cartoon, the shelves were lined with rows and rows of canned goods, vegetables and tuna and meat—Spam and devilled ham—and a section dedicated just to

Campbell's creamed soups. There was even a canned whole chicken, three times the size of the other cans, and at once I resolved to myself, someday, to eat the chicken in its entirety.

Before dinner, Big G set two tackleboxes on the table.

"Let's see how fast you can get these organized," she told June and me.

"What does the winner get?" I asked.

"The winner may get supper tonight," she replied.

"Right," I said. "Chores."

I slid an orange tacklebox over in front of me and opened it to its three staggered levels and began setting the lead weights in the top compartments by size. June shook his head, digging fish hooks out from swivels.

"What?" I said.

"It'll tip backwards every time you open it," he said.

"Duh," Divin' Duck added. She was working her way through an interminably knotted piece of rope that Big G had also lay on the table.

I moved the weights to the bottom compartments, the hooks and the bobbers on the top, the swivels and lures in the middle section. Big G stood over a skillet on the stove frying pork chops to which she added a can of cream of mushroom soup from the pantry. The hiss and odor made me careless as I worked, and soon I was moving the little metal pieces into their rectangle slots willy nilly. With the length of rope she'd untangled, Duck tried to throw a loop around June's head in weak tosses that landed against his ear.

"I'm gonna tell you one more time," June said, digging through the tackle box with his fingertips, raising a small glinting piece to his face. "Stop."

Divin' Duck knew our brother was not one for idle threats, so switched to me. On her first try she had the loop around my neck, and when she jerked the two ends, she nearly pulled me off my chair. As soon as I had my fingers around the rope I turned to where she stood, wide-eyed, mouth open.

"I didn't know," she began, as I lunged at her and chased her into the living room.

We ate the pork chops with the gravy over rice. When he was finished, June balled a piece of rice and rolled it along the flat of his plate, trying to get the last of the gravy streaks. Big G drew a box of Otter Pops out of the freezer and it occurred to me that she must have shopped for groceries just for us, before we came. I watched her as she pushed the stick of blue ice out of its plastic sleeve onto her gums.

Television that night was a rerun of *Baa Baa Black Sheep* before *Matlock*, then *In the Heat of the Night*. Most of Big G's favorite programs featured silver-haired white men, though she also made it a point to watch *Magnum P.I.* every week.

The next morning after breakfast, Big G lay a stained sheet on the front step leading out from the kitchen's screen door, where she made us leave our shoes before we went inside her house. Next to our shoes, on the old bed sheet, she set out tall candlesticks, hands folded in prayer or gratitude, bowls, elephants, and decorative bells, next to a pile of cut up cotton rags, swatches of old laundry.

June was quiet, too quiet, as he squeezed a thick squirt of Brasso into the wide base of a candlestick. He rubbed and looked out to the yards of the neighbors.

"What is this, a skid mark?" I said, holding what appeared to be a torn piece of expansive underwear.

“Gross,” Duck said, giggling. Streaks of Brasso had climbed up her finger to her arms. June took her pieces from her and finished them.

“Cut the crap,” Big G said as she stepped onto the sheet from the kitchen, two hands full of more brass, the handles she’d unscrewed from her living room furniture. After she laid them on the sheet, she stood and squinted out across the street.

“Dressing up that damn dog again,” she said.

We all turned to look—a young woman in shorts walked a Chihuahua in a little t-shirt, but I couldn’t see the print.

“So cute,” Duck said.

“Probably just gets cold, is all,” June said, setting a bowl in the finished pile.

Big G shook her head and went inside. It wasn’t dogs in clothes she hated, so much, but pets in general. They were a mess, a hassle, a pain in the ass.

“Geez, how much brass does one person need?” I asked.

We’d polished and put away the brass, and Big G led Divin’ Duck to the soft black dirt of her flowerbed, lined up against a chain link fence that marked her property. She assigned June to the garage and me to the yard. As she explained to June how she wanted the buckets and blades and shears and rakes and brooms and brushes and rods and towels arranged, I wheeled the lawnmower out of its corner to the driveway. I went back to retrieve the red metal gas can and I thought about Mom until I shut her out of my mind. It was gasoline that started everything. The gas sloshed over my feet as it overflowed its reservoir in the lawnmower.

When Big G saw me yanking the drawstring to start the engine in her backyard, she stepped in front of me.

“I don’t want you running over everything with my lawn mower,” she said. “You’ll ruin the blade.”

A single magnolia tree grew in the middle of the yard, from a patch of dirt where the grass had thinned into the shape of a circle. Under the boughs of the tree were green leaves, young seed pods, and a branch or two.

“There’s a rake in the garage,” Big G said, walking to the edge of the yard with a pair of shears.

The branches and leaves under the metal tines of my rake were yellow and green, broken off by the wind or rain before they’d had the chance to grow in. When I looked up at the garage I saw June walking down the street, away from the house. We’d long since stopped tattle-telling on each other, but the thought of his ass getting chewed out for ditching his chores injected my boredom with a little juice, and I raked with gusto. Divin’ Duck was on her knees at the edge of the yard, picking worms from the flowerbed and dropping them into a Mason jar.

A tall man carrying two black plastic pots of plants unlatched the gate on the fence and stood over Big G where she was crouched, both feet flat on the ground, edging along the fence with her shears. When Big G saw him, she stood and smiled, and I noticed she was wearing her teeth. She motioned me over and I stood in front of her, planted my rake in front of me like a rifle and squared my shoulders, a little guardian.

Big G introduced the man as Mr. McCord. He’d brought some jalapeño plants, which she lay along the fence. I shook his big rough hand but didn’t say much other than my name. Instead I watched Big G smile with her large white teeth, blink her eyes as if something had blown into them, set her hand on the hip beneath the shape-erasing mu’u mu’u. Mr. McCord smiled back at

her, towering over the both of us, a day's worth of stubble under his blond mustache glistening in the sun. He almost looked like a photo negative of Tom Selleck.

With the yard trash gathered into piles and stuffed into a garbage bag, I set the rake against the house and started the lawnmower. Pops was right—I was a damn fine lawnmower and I didn't mind it. I could make a long straight row, followed by a sharp turn, then an equally straight row, easing around built-in sprinklers, lawn ornaments, sapling trees. The constant vibration of the handle ran through my arms, imparting a pleasant numbness as I followed one row to its terminus, the earthy and green-smelling cut grass forming long mounds as it sprayed from the mower's hooded exhaust in a steady stream. Looking out past the fence into the neighborhood—Poquoson—it seemed much like where we lived in Lawton, though the air was heavier, wetter.

The lawnmower droned, clicking now and then, and I wondered what was going on in those houses across the street, if the children there were like us, and what would they say if a woman walked right into their living room, no knock at the door, begging them to throw out their gasoline canisters because she was certain they would explode. By the time Pops drove us to Big G's house, that had become Mom's latest fixation: gasoline cans. Before that, it was coffee makers left on for too long, faulty electric wiring that existed in the walls unseen, all kinds of dormant conflagrations. As Pops had explained it to a friend over the phone, death for Mom was a genie in every bottle and it required only the lightest inadvertent brush, a glancing swipe, to be released.

I knew she wouldn't stand for me pushing along a spinning blade, motorized by internal combustion, in flip-flops even, or what Big G called slippers. One of her Hawai'i-isms—flip-flops were slippers, garbage was rubbish, Pops was a haole, and leaving your shoes on when

entering someone's house was barbarity. Thinking about Big G kept me from thinking about Mom.

After edging, Big G followed along with a rake, and when I cut the lawnmower power, I helped her bag the warm, moist piles of grass. We walked back to the garage, me in anticipation of how she might approach a nasty takedown of June.

"Looks good," Big G said.

June sat before us in a folding chair with a push broom across his lap, in a now empty space he had cleared out. Mops, brooms, and rakes he'd stacked neatly in a corner, while the smaller tools and gardening implements he'd hung from hooks Pops had installed a couple years back. Buckets he'd arranged according to size, the same with planks of wood he'd stacked along the wall. Within a shelving unit he'd separated the cleaning supplies from the paint. The tackleboxes we'd organized the night before he'd set on top of wire cages, shaped like boxes, underneath two fishing poles, their lines tied off at the last and narrowest hoops at the tops of the rods.

Big G dumped a Styrofoam tray of chicken drumettes she had been defrosting in the sink into a cellophane bag, tied it, and dropped it in a cooler. June gathered the chicken wire cages, me the two rods under one armpit with a tacklebox in each hand, Duck the chicken wings and jar of worms in the cooler, Big G a stack of buckets and their lids. It wasn't even noon. Big G led us down the street, old Japanese lady with her white grandchildren, drivers turning their heads to watch us as they passed. At the end of a cul-de-sac a wooden dock extended over a wide body of gray-brown water, its surface cut with glints from the high sun.

June dropped the cages on the dock, drew his t-shirt over his head and, after walking back a few steps for a running start, launched into the bay in a loud cannonball. I entered more

gingerly, after I'd set my glasses on one of the posts, sliding off the edge of the dock by my ass, my feet landing in the soft, silty bottom as my head went under. Duck watched June as he circled around me, then struck with a full nelson. On the dock, Big G tied drumettes to the tops of the cages with twine.

"Is it deep?" Divin' Duck asked.

"Kinda," I said, treading in front of her. "You can ride on my back."

With the same abandon as June, except fully clothed, Duck leaped in. She hadn't yet fully learned how to swim. And me, just barely, though I'd been swimming for years. Water wasn't my friend—I fought it, thrashed against it, for some desperate mastery I thought I was supposed to have attained, which is why I never learned properly. I could doggy paddle for hours, though. After Duck emerged with her eyes closed, still holding her nose, I let her feel around my neck and shoulders for a hold. As soon as she was secure, she began sing-yelling into my ear.

"Quiet," I told her, but it did no good because I was half-laughing anyway.

"You're going to scare the fish away," Big G called.

I pushed Duck up the ladder first before I got back on the dock. While June was still in the water Big G handed him the cages, each with a dangling piece of raw chicken, and told him to swim them out a ways and let them sink.

The traps set, we sat at the edge of the dock drying in the sun. From a tackle box she'd set up on a post, Big G made her line on the pole with the open reel. She passed June the smaller pole and slid the second tackle box over to him.

"Something to do while we wait," she said.

“Jesus Christ,” June said, yanking his hand from the open tacklebox. He withdrew a barbed hook’s tip from his thumb and pressed at the inflating red bubble before he started sucking the blood away. “I thought I had cleaned these out.”

I looked away to the bay, where a small but dense cloud of seagulls flapped over the spot when June had lay the traps.

“Can I try?” Duck said.

June turned back to her, squinting. “You can worm the hook.”

“No way,” she said.

“Then no.”

The worm in his fingers vainly sought to locate itself in the open air, far from the cool darkness of the flowerbed from which it had been drawn, until June speared it bloodlessly at the barbed end of the hook and wrapped its still writhing body around the hook’s curvature, into a kind of knot.

None of us, particularly Divin’ Duck, were equipped to manage stillness for an extended period of time. Boredom—a rock in the water that drew a stern twist of the head from Big G, a nonsensical song that triggered a soft, not clearly articulated, “you’re skating on my last good nerve”—spread among us as the seagulls, their sharp cries overlapping like a group of old women in distress, gathered and spread in a mass above the water. I thought about the end of the weekend, how I’d be going to a new school on Monday, that the only thing to look forward to were nachos on Fridays. I hooked a drumette to the end of a fishing pole and cast it directly into the hovering crowd of birds, and one of them caught it, in its beak, on the descent of the drumette’s arc.

For a second it was like flying a kite. The other seagulls dispersed, away from the hooked bird and its desperate flapping. When it quickly became clear the seagull couldn't release itself, I nearly dropped the pole.

"Let him go, let him go!" Duck screamed, waving her hands at me.

June took the pole from me and shoved me away. Very slowly, he reeled in the seagull, which remained in the air by the enormous effort of its wings. When she could reach it, Big G took the seagull by the neck, pressed its mouth open, and removed the hook and the chicken bone from the back of its beak. She released it, and it immediately rejoined the drunkenly weaving blob still circling the submerged crab traps.

"Next time, I cast you out," Big G told me.

"Poor little guy," Duck said, but overdoing it like she usually did, seeking sympathy for the bird on behalf of herself.

"Shut up. Like you care," I began, but stopped as I saw June glance over me, as if wondering whether an intervention was required.

A few minutes later Duck had, of course, forgotten about the seagull altogether. "I want to go home. I'm hungry."

Big G smiled at her. She'd taken her teeth out again, so it was a straight line, except her cheeks puckered. She patted Duck's head. She was partial to Divin' Duck, who would be short like her, and who looked the most like her out of all of us, even though she was tow-headed.

"We'll get you something soon. June, pull up the traps."

June undid the loose knot around one of the posts of the dock and gave it a tug. The trap didn't move. He furrowed his brow and pulled harder, bracing his feet against the dock. Slowly, hand over hand, he dragged the traps closer to us. Eventually it emerged dripping from the water,

swarming with crabs on the inside, and two or three clinging by their claws to the outside. As the trap hung suspended from the dock, these crabs dropped into the water.

“Holy moly,” Duck breathed—more emphatic than was called for, maybe, but even I could hardly believe what I was looking at.

“Don’t let it just hang there,” Big G said.

I helped June pull the trap over the lip of the dock. As he went for the second trap, I pinched the crabs by their spiny rear ends and dropped them into the bucket. Occasionally I’d raise a smaller one to Big G and she’d nod or shake or head, and I’d fling it back into the water.

We heard them scratching at the buckets’ plastic interiors as we carried them home. June, Duck and I took turns dropping them into the boiling water, steaming from a tall, stainless-steel pot, each of us thrilled at the hiss of the crab as it dropped below the bubbling waterline, the crab’s soul, if it had one, merged with the Old Bay and water vapor that moistened our faces and dissipated past us.

I sat on the kitchen floor, my back against the cupboard below the sink. I’d wanted to see what June was doing but had only gotten so far. I heard the TV on, so I guessed he’d made it to the living room. Probably on the couch, on his stomach. The commercials, as they played softly into the kitchen, seemed endless, one jolly and aggressive jingle after the next. Here, too, in Poquoson, the musical *Cats* was playing, at some amphitheater or concert hall. *Here was Poquoson.* I had to get used to that. School on Monday. *Take part in the experience that has thrilled Broadway for years!* It seemed so stupid, the striped aerobic wear and puffy wigs and tails and ears and face paint. “Not for me,” Mom would have said.

The shells and lungs and joints and shredded meat pieces of the blue crabs soaked through the brown paper bags that Big G had cut open and lay over the table. Big G, her eyes vacant and the corners of her mouth shiny with butter sauce, held herself upright in her chair with her elbows on the table. Her hands, glistening with butter and crab juices, floated before her, bits of shell and flesh on her fingers and under her fingernails. Duck, on the other side of the table, sat kicking her feet above the floor, legs dangling from her seat. She cracked another thin shaft of leg in half and sucked out the inside.

An untouched tray of dinner rolls lay on top of the stove. A pot of rice, also untouched, warmed on the counter.

I licked my lips, wanting just the memory of the taste of what I'd eaten, since I physically couldn't ingest anymore. The sweet meat, the lemon-touched butter, the Old Bay. Each crab dissected methodically, though I didn't bother with tools—I broke shells with my bare hands or my teeth. First the abdomen, unpeeling the back shell from its insides by a tab on its belly, tonguing through the tough rib meat in compartments segmented by a stiff membrane. Then the legs, careful to inhale the meat knots from each joint, before breaking the leg near the knuckle, so the meat would slide out in a long, interrupted sleeve. Claws last, the meat at its thickest and sweetest. After a while, pleasure veered into pain, almost becoming even more pleasurable.

There was hardly space in my belly for simple air. I longed for a redemptive burp. I sat in my stupor, in wonder at how distant it all felt—Mom, Pops, and school, which we'd have to start after the weekend.

Canasta

June was done with Uno.

Divin' Duck had laid down a Reverse, rotating the hand back to me, a position from which I blasted June with a color-coded Draw Two. Duck Reversed again, and June tried to wrest control away from her by changing red to blue, which left me drawing cards until I dropped Diver a six. On which Divin' Duck, with a squeaky, elated "Uno!" slapped down an eight to June. Panicked, he converted the color to yellow with the same number. Only numbers left for me, so I fed Divin' Duck another eight.

When she administered the coup de grace—a wild Draw Four—she stared at June, both of them equally stunned. June then gathered the loosely stacked cards unto him. When he'd squeezed them together in one hand, he flung them from the kitchen table. The Uno cards fluttered to the floor or spun like chopper blades to crash into the cabinets, among the sugar and flour canisters.

"Pick 'em up," he said to both of us, as he stood and trod over the cards to the screen door. When the door slammed behind him, we heard the rough clicking of nails up the cement stairs, Klinger's loud snuffling at June's knees.

It wasn't just that June had lost. It was the extra humiliation of losing to a six-year-old who had scant awareness of what card was played from turn to turn, who thought when matching cards matched they were an "Uno." At some point, Divin' Duck had caught on that she was winning—God bless her, she tried not to give it away—but the big smile and restless legs that nearly shook her right off her chair was a tell. June hated the whole production. I only got a kick out of it because I lost every game I ever played, anyway.

“I’m gonna tell!” Duck called after June, as if those words had power to release fear into his impenetrable heart.

“Forget it,” I said, already sliding the cards into a pile on the linoleum floor—from under the oven, the refrigerator, pushing loose Uno cards together on the counter. June wasn’t afraid of any discipline Big G could mete out. He coexisted with her, a tenant of her house, yes, but not necessarily as a grandson. A wary understanding floated between the two of them, predicated on their tacit agreement that Big G would never get into his shit. Rather than suffer through another impotent rant Big G would direct at me as she wiped the counter (she was always wiping something) for what June did, I stacked the cards, banging the edges against the water-ringed stained table where Duck gawked at me with her mouth open. I rubber-banded them together and dropped them in a junk drawer on top of a pair of scissors, an old address book, some new unsharpened pencils, and a roll of string.

“Go watch TV,” I told my sister as I followed June out the screen door.

“Sic him, Klinger,” I heard June command from some corner of the back yard, just as soon as I’d crossed the threshold onto the cement platform and put on my shoes. I turned to see Corporal Klinger running at me full-speed, a strand of slobber swaying from his flapping jowls—so thick it would not release itself into the dirt—his great front paws as big as my fists flinging dirt behind him as he propelled across the lawn with the impossible speed and gracelessness of a young dog. I had only a second to think. I leaped onto the grass in my bare feet, stumbling over twigs and rubber things chewed beyond recognition and the moist piles that Klinger, not without embarrassment, shat frequently. At a low tree in the middle of the yard, I jumped and wrapped myself around the thin trunk.

One of Pops's friends had given Corporal Klinger to him just after we moved in with Big G. Pops had named the dog after his favorite character from *M*A*S*H*. How much Klinger had hated where he was in life, the lengths he would take to try and escape. Pops's whole definition of success was getting out of some shit he wasn't inclined to participate in. For a little while, Pops believed that Corporal Klinger would keep him company back home in Lawton, while he worked with the doctors on helping Mom. He got wild hairs up his ass like that all the time, doing things that were the opposite of necessary or practical.

Two weeks with the dog reversed that notion, and on his next visit Pops brought a special present for June. I wasn't all that interested, and Big G, who played the long game when it came to guilt-tripping, took in Klinger on the condition that she might use him as another example of her son-in-law's impulsiveness, negligence, carelessness, and short-sightedness. For Divin' Duck, Corporal Klinger was just another thing she could boss around.

As the hunted, I can confidently share that a four-legged animal can close the distance to its bipedal prey in seconds. Lately, I'd tried a few feints to throw Klinger off—a juke left, then right—but he'd gotten better at recovering off a trip-up. It's not that he would attack you. He just wanted to knock you down, dig those big, heavy paws into your shoulders, bite at the air in front of your face as the slobber, which had clung so stubbornly to his jaws when running, dropped mucous-like around your neck and mouth. He wouldn't bite. Just a ripped shirt, some scratches, a grass stain—bruises when he really pressed his weight into you.

This time, though, I scrambled up the tilted base of Big G's magnolia tree, Klinger's hot, labored breath at my heels. I scooted to a crook of a thick branch.

"Call him off!" I told June.

"Come on, Slug," June said. "He just wants a little hug and kiss."

“Call him off!”

Klinger’s front paws were now scratching bits of bark off the trunk as he coughed wetly up at me.

“Klinger. Down now.” June whistled once. The American bulldog, his back muscles as defined as a swimmer’s, pushed himself off the tree and loped to June’s side. “I’m going to Dewey’s.”

“You tell Big G?”

“I ain’t gotta tell her crap, man. You coming, or what?”

I was about to push myself off the branch and stopped, staring hard at June.

“Don’t do it, man.”

June lightly touched the top of Corporal Klinger’s head. “Whatever do you mean, Brother? I would never allow for harm to befall one of my own.”

I brushed dirt away from a stain imprinted on my t-shirt by Klinger’s paw, from where he’d caught me on the bare, grassless patch under the tree, just as I’d descended. No holes this time, so Big G would only mutter while she sprayed the stain before she washed it.

We walked to Dewey’s along the two-lane road that led to town. Summer’s green seeped out from yards and fields in overgrowth upon the fences that surrounded, but could not hem in, the bulging, bristling landscape. Under the bright sun, the shadows cast by tall trees were thickly dark and comforting. June was in a chatty mood, apparently; he asked me what I thought about things. Normally, our conversations were based only on what he thought about things.

“I can’t remember what Aragorn’s sword was made of,” he said.

“The strongest metal on Middle Earth,” I said.

“So why was it broken?”

“Because they cut off Sauron’s hand. His blood is like god acid.”

“Mithril is stronger.”

“Probably,” I mused. “Mithril might actually be unbreakable.”

“Adamantium could cut through mithril.” I thought maybe that June had already sorted all this out and was just allowing his mind to play a leisurely game of ping-pong with itself.

“But Wolverine would never be in Middle Earth, so—”

June pushed his hand into my chest and we stopped. We were about a mile out from home. In the distance, up an eerily black road that shined in the sun like snakeskin, was our school at the top of the hill: empty, gray, and uncanny in the weekend sunlight. I was seized with dread at the sight of this haunted palace. I wanted away from it.

“What?” I said, stepping back from his hand. I made a choice not to bat it away.

“Stop for a second,” he said, listening.

A moment later I heard the distorted rumble and whine of a car’s engine, the manic protest of a machine taxed beyond its capacity. When I was younger, I’d had a wind-up toy robot I had tortured before breaking into pieces. I heard the death squeal of the robot in the approaching car.

June and I knew it was the McCords from the sound of that soon-to-be-burned-out engine. Though we were new to Poquoson, and had only been in school a month before summer started, we knew the McCords were mean people who took pleasure in generously meting out their meanness to the less fortunate. They stole bikes and returned them broken, wheels bent, tires flat. When you fought one, you fought with them all—and they threw rocks, hit with sticks, or whatever might hurt the most. Robbie was the teenager, Norm and Phil were our age.

June stepped off the road into a bank of gravel, then lower into a deep ditch overgrown with grass and species of mismatched weeds vying for survival. He splayed his feet above a trickle of water over mud at the bottom of the ditch.

I myself was not fearful of the approaching car and its passengers. I was with my brother, and I knew of nothing that could withstand the wrath of June's destruction if he was inclined to crash into it. Even if—especially if, maybe—his crashing was at great personal expense. June was cautious (he would never admit to being afraid) for both of us, out of sight, off the road, his breathing absorbed into the thunder of the car coming, then passing, the heads of the alien vegetation he stood among caught in a vague drift, bobbing in narrow, circular orbits. Before we stepped back onto the road, June ensured at least one of my feet landed deep in the mud at the bottom of the ditch.

“Hot today, ain't it?” the man at the counter of Dewey's said as we entered. Though the man was young, the thickness of his eyeglass lenses made him appear elderly, infirm. I hated him for how much he resembled my future. A row of Marvel figurines—Spider-Man, Captain America, Hulk, Dr. Doom—stood in a row in front of his register, and the ache to shoplift stabbed me in the chest.

Though I'd seen him dozens of times, neither June nor I said anything in response. After the neighbors, Big G, my sister, the teachers, the principal, and my father on the phone, I wasn't inclined to speak to anyone I didn't have to. His remark, though, brought onto me the awareness of the difference from outside to inside; as the door shut behind me, some demon that had been draped around me took flight from my body, and I felt as though I'd stepped cleansed out of a river. When you're a kid, you don't know it's hot until someone tells you. Sweat is just something you wipe away from time to time.

I longingly spun the comic book rack in its tall axis. Always Marvel, never DC. The cashier eyeballed me with the pinpricks behind his lenses, waiting to spring if I had the audacity to slide one out and peruse. I only had a dime I'd been carrying around as if it could somehow breed larger currency. It wasn't enough to spend on anything. I stared at the glossy covers and absorbed their explosive conflicts into fantasies I would remix, an eternal war that rampaged in my undergrown heart: Spider-Man versus Hobgoblin, Daredevil versus Kingpin, the Avengers versus Baron Zemo. I had never beaten anything. I tended to do whatever anybody told me, or even suggested, at any given time.

June meanwhile stood in front of the paperback books in the front facing shelves under the bright store windows, seeming to carefully consider a few Steven King novels. When the cashier looked over to him, he made a show of lifting *Salem's Lot* from the shelf, taking a few steps and, shaking his head as if the back cover synopsis hadn't quite moved him, setting it back on the shelf regretfully.

"Gimme ten cents," he said as he passed me to the checkout line.

I thought, *well, at least it gets spent before I lose it*, and fished the coin out. June set a Snickers bar on the counter and gave the cashier the change he had.

"I want half," I said, as the door closed behind us.

"You get ten cents' worth," he said, breaking off the smallish end of the candy bar. As I ate it and we turned the corner, June lifted the front of his t-shirt where he'd slid a paperback into the waist of his shorts. *According to Hoyle*.

"No more Uno," he said. "I'm sick of the baby games with Diver."

“A canasta is a melded set of seven or more cards. It is a natural when it is wholly formed of all natural cards. A mixed canasta consists of any canasta containing wild cards, which cannot exceed three wild cards.’ Melded,” June said. “Melded.”

We sat on the grass in the yard with Klinger’s large skull on June’s lap, the dog’s sleepy eyes never straying from me as he licked his flabby chops.

“Don’t we need four players?” I said. “We got Big G, but Divin’ Duck’s not gonna make heads nor tails out of this.”

“Says three-handed canasta’s just as good as regular. We’ll find some others to play.”

It didn’t take Big G too long at all to learn the rules. After a few hands she was beating us soundly. Maybe we just kept getting beat all the time because we hadn’t correctly learned the rules.

Big G grew up the second eldest sister of twelve siblings, her parents immigrant laborers from Japan cutting sugarcane in Hawai‘i. As a plantation child, she’d learned all the card games. She was most ruthless at poker and had not a qualm fleecing her grandchildren of their pennies. Playing cards in the plantations back then was the source of her prejudice for non-Japanese Asians—Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos she viewed as inherently inferior. American whites, like our grandfather had been, were an exotic alternative, and it was the strapping, blue-eyed invader that had led Big G from those beautiful and troubled islands to Poquoson, Virginia.

“It’s because you don’t have any friends that we gotta play with Big G,” June told me, as he marked short rows with Big G’s telephone number written vertically on the bottom of a piece of notebook paper. “Make three copies and bring me the change.”

It wasn't like he had a posse, a crew, a gang, beseeching him to accompany them on bike rides or to the arcade. It was summerr, so neither one of us had time to get to know anyone very well.

The page above the rows of phone numbers read, *What's the radical card game enjoyed by beatniks and rastas? Canasta! Seeking a couple strong hands for a fun time. Beginner or Intermediate level preferred.*

I copied the flyer at the drugstore but made a point of not returning June's change until he demanded it, under explicit threat of violence. After I gave June his copies, he snipped the phone numbers into removable strips and went out to post them, God knew where.

"I want to hold his leash," Divin' Duck said, in that way that compelled you to make her suffer. When she talked like that, every fiber in your being drove you to deprive her of what she said she wanted.

"He'd drag you twenty feet before you had the chance to let go," June told her.

"He's nice to me. He doesn't hate me like he hates Jesse."

"He doesn't hate Slug. I don't think Klinger has a strong opinion about Sluggo either way."

It was one of those mornings when the sun's golden glow grew diffuse into a white brightness, setting off a glare against the grass, the pavement, the leaves in the trees. That summer, everything under the sun shined desperately, as if it knew its moment of brilliance would just fade away unnoticed. The world's vividness was perhaps too much for me then. Listening to June and Diver discuss notions of my personhood, I simply squinted through my glasses at the great illuminated impressions that surrounded me.

"Feeling's mutual," I added, too late.

“Gimme the leash,” Duck said as she grabbed at the loop around June’s hand.

Meanwhile, Klinger plodded along, snuffling occasionally, keeping dog time, basking in the outdoors and in being everyone’s preoccupation.

Which was interrupted by June’s abrupt halt. Klinger coughed as the collar caught in his throat.

“Goddamn it, Divin’ Duck, I told you to let the leash alone.” June rounded on our sister, shoving the end of the leash at me without looking at me.

Automatically, I took the leash and tried to position myself between the two of them. Duck knew June, but didn’t know June as well as I did, that there were only so many times those nerves could be plucked before they separated altogether, the incredible tension flinging outwards into a hideous exercise of total war, collateral damage for all in the vicinity, trauma for years to come. Duck’s eyes were wide.

“You ever notice how this dog’s tail wags kinda crooked?” I said, trying to make June look away.

It was too late before we heard the overtaxed scream of a Pontiac engine coming around a curve in the road—and this time we saw it, green with crudely painted gold stripes down the sides, and over the center of the hood and the roof. There was no ditch to which to retreat. I yanked Divin’ Duck’s arm to pull her over to the side of the road. Still, we had to leap back as the Pontiac wheeled off of the asphalt into the dust, which billowed about us as the elder McCord skidded a few inches from our toes.

It was all three of them, each a variation of the other, each possessing the allure and young beauty of psychopaths: blond hair, blue eyes, teeth straight and white. They were shaggy

and unkempt, but still it was a struggle to remember to hate and fear them, desirable as they were. Even though they'd just about ran us over. June took Klinger's leash from my hand.

"I seen you children around here," Robbie said, over his brother Norm in the passenger seat. "Names."

"I'm gonna guess Nerd, Dope, and Slut," Norm said, as he pointed each out in turn. Phil, in the back seat, tried to climb over into the front before Robbie pushed him back. "What a fucking nerd," I heard him say. Obviously on account of my glasses.

"I'm Jesse, my brother June, and here's Divin' Duck," I said, misapprehending that the eldest McCord had a true curiosity.

"What the hell kind of name is Divin' Duck," Norm in the passenger said, through a powerful countenance of distaste.

Duck, who hadn't the presence of mind not to be enamored with the boys, stepped forward. "*If the sea was whiskey.*" It was how our father explained to anyone who asked about Diver's name.

"Good looking dog," Robbie said, now bored. "How much?"

"Not for sale," June said.

"Too bad. Later, Nerd. Dope. And you, sweet little double-d." He winked and blew a kiss before the Pontiac's wheels spun in place a moment, infusing the air with dust once more, and they sped off in an ungodly noise that faded as we watched them grow smaller in the distance.

"Fuck them," June said, pulling Klinger back toward home.

"I'm telling," Divin' Duck said, as the two of us followed.

Over the next few days, June tried to get me jazzed in other games from his book, but I'd jumped off the carousel. Big G helped me get a library card and I walked out of there with a

stack of Greek and Norse mythology books. They were almost as good as comics. It was Hephaestus I was reading about upside down on the couch, my feet toward the ceiling, when I heard June rush into the living room.

“Where’s Big G?” he said breathlessly.

“Kitchen,” I said, without looking up.

“She didn’t take Klinger out?”

“Why would she do that?” Klinger was June’s dog. Big G didn’t want anything to do with Klinger.

“Then it must have been you that left the gate open,” June said.

I closed the book and slowly spun my legs under me. “What the hell are you talking about? I haven’t been out there all day.”

June looked stricken. “Well, he’s gone. The gate’s open and he’s gone!”

Dutifully, but with a lack of conviction, I went along with June down neighborhood roads, into town and along the beds of creeks and between the trees of the forest, shouting Klinger’s name. Without someone other than himself to blame, June was doubly distraught. “I know I shut that gate. I know I did.”

After the first day, I grew increasingly uninterested in finding our dog. It was a relief not to have to flee for my life every time I stepped foot in the backyard. And when Klinger wasn’t attacking me, he was shoving his big head into my business, snatching at my sandwich, drooling on my knees. Like Big G, I thought Klinger was a hassle to have around.

Divin’ Duck cried every night June returned home empty handed. I came in on her and June unsuccessfully attempting to render Klinger’s likeness on a piece of notebook paper.

“Lost Dog,” it read. “Reward. Call if found.”

“At that again?” I said. “What kind of reward you think you got?”

“Whatever I have,” Duck said. “June, too.”

June looked up at me. There was no heat in his eyes. “He’s just a baby, Slug. He’s gotta be scared. What if he’s hurt? He doesn’t know anything about anything.”

That night I couldn’t sleep. It was the most damning curse I could imagine. The mattress would not embrace me, the pillow was like an elbow to my head, pushing me away. It had occurred to me that I have never loved anything in my life.

“Stop,” June said, in the bed across from me.

“I think I know what happened to Klinger.”

I heard June turn on his mattress.

“The McCords. They were asking about him. Probably wanted to breed him.”

June didn’t respond.

“We should go to their place, bust him loose.”

The McCords lived on a property not a mile out of town. Their dad had given Big G a bird of paradise he’d ordered as a cutting from Hawai‘i. They’d talked at the flea market one time and she’d told him how much she’d loved the flower, and he’d been giving her plants ever since.

June and I set off in the early morning and found a hill that overlooked their expansive, broken-down estate—a sprawling piece of land with a house that seemed to offshoot additions, in various stages of development, like tumors, each one in poorer condition the farther from the main house. In the back we saw rusty kennels, but they were mostly empty, except for one, in which a not-so golden retriever got to its feet and barked furiously each time an unbound dachshund trotted by, on its rounds through a yard strewn with broken Big Wheels, husks of cars

on cement blocks, turned over ice coolers faded and cracked by the sun, loose piles of wood and stacks of roofing shingles, and a hay bale with a target pinned to it, shafts of arrows near the bullseye.

“I don’t see him,” June said, walking back and forth, trying to take in the place from different angles. “Not in any of those cages, at least.”

The dachshund strolled near the golden retriever again, flaunting his liberty to the other dog.

I’d brought along a toy spy glass that was left at Big G’s years ago but never actually used for its intended purpose. I’d only ever extended it to come at Divin’ Duck like a swordsman. Surprisingly, it served its function, enhancing the small bits in front of us. I watched the golden retriever, the luster of its coat diminished by fur matted with mud. Just outside the kennel, the arm of a baby doll reached up from the tall grass. And I could see clearly into the McCord’s living room through a sliding glass door.

“Old man McCord’s really giving one of those fuckers hell,” I told June. The father’s face was a purplish red as he screamed at his son—Norm?—and I could almost see the spittle flung from his mouth at the boy’s bowed head. Mr. McCord stopped for a moment, turned as if to walk away, then rounded back, and punched the boy in the face. The boy fell below a couch.

I lowered the spy glass from my eye. Once every two weeks or so, June would kick my ass on general principle, when he thought I was maybe getting too big for my britches. But I’d never been cold-cocked by an adult, my parents or otherwise, the way the McCord boy had been laid out.

“Let’s go,” I said to June. “Maybe they don’t got him.”

June nodded.

“Anyone call about Klinger?” June asked when we got home. Big G sat in the easy chair, trimming her fingernails into a porcelain ashtray.

“No, but I got three calls about canasta for some reason,” she said. “Three! These people don’t sound right.”

“Oh yeah,” June said. “Forgot about that.”

All of us, even Divin’ Duck, began to get used to Klinger being gone. June even relented and tried teaching Duck canasta. A bust, naturally. When went back to paying three hands with Big G, sometimes June won a game.

“Take this garbage out for me, Jess,” Big G asked as I was on my way to bed.

“I’m totally exhausted, man,” I told her. I had fallen asleep watching *Murder, She Wrote*; Jessica Fletcher’s voice had grown a little louder, almost distorted, after I closed my eyes, before it disappeared completely.

“For me,” she said. “So we have a fresh bag in the morning.”

“For Christ’s sake,” I said under my breath. Even considering the value of a ‘fresh bag in the morning’ was beyond perversion for me. In a huff, I yanked the drawstring from the plastic receptacle, ensuring it fell over on the kitchen floor as the overstuffed bag slid from it. I left it there as I went out the back door and made an equally big show of throwing metal lids off the cans outside. The moon was bright and big in the sky, and for a moment I swallowed my piss-poor mood as I looked up at it, through the leaves of the magnolia tree.

A second later, I heard a whine on the other side of the fence, a gentle rattling at the closed gate.

“Corporal Klinger?” I whispered. In the white light of the moon I saw him sprawled up against the fence, nudging the closed gate with his head. I ran to the gate and pulled it open, expecting him to pounce over me, intermingle his saliva with my own.

Instead, he lay there a long time, looking up at me silently, seemingly too tired to bark. Then he struggled to his feet; but his loose, floppy rear leg could hold no weight. He collapsed.

I ran into the house. Big G was at the kitchen table now, watching Divin’ Duck color badly into a book of girl-pictures. I ran past them into my room where June lay on the bed, reading the book of Greek myths I’d finished.

“He’s outside,” I said, pride rising in me. As if I was the one who’d saved Klinger.

June threw my book away from him.

“Come on, boy,” he was telling Klinger outside. He turned to me. “His leg’s all broke. Worse than broke.” He tried to get his arms around the American bulldog, but Klinger whimpered every time June touched him.

“I called the vet. And a cab,” Big G said from behind us.

Divin’ Duck was already underfoot, alternating between skipping around Klinger and stroking his head. “Good, good, doggy. You came back, yes you did, yes you did.”

“Move over,” Big G said. She took a deep breath and stared at this dog that had been such a pain in her ass, that recalled to her what a flake her son-in-law was every time she laid eyes on him. Then she bent at the knees and cradled Klinger like he was baby and picked him up right off the ground. In the moonlight it looked as though she was carrying a full-grown man.

“I’m going around front,” she said. “I’ll ask Tony for a ride.”

You assume that everyone is just as weak as you are, that they have the same fears, and that your flaws are everyone else's flaws. You don't realize how strong someone is, how much better, until they show you.

Klinger lay in a blanket between Divin' Duck and June on the way to the vet's office, in the back of Tony's Cabriolet. Now that there was a show to be had, she went all-in on tears, hyperventilating, occasional squeaks. June, meanwhile, sat quietly, losing his fingers in the folds of Klinger's neck. Tony, Big G's next door neighbor, glanced at us through the rear view mirror. A bachelor who smelled like beer at any time of day, he was happy to drive Big G to the grocery store because she always pressed a few dollars to him, though he protested vociferously.

"I'm pretty sure it was the schoolteacher did it," Tony said, making a deduction as to the last few minutes of *Murder, She Wrote* from which he'd been pulled away.

"He just had that face," Big G said, pleased at the opportunity for small talk.

The vet's office was dark when we arrived, but soon a Volkswagen pulled in next to us in the empty parking lot and a woman in glasses and house shoes, with a long messy braid down her back, got out and unlocked the glass door to the building. After she looked in on us, she rolled a cart to the back door of the car.. They had to amputate Klinger's rear leg. The bones were completely shattered; infection had set in.

"Tripod," Pops called him when he came by the next time.

He was no longer fearsome. If you didn't know any better, you might have called him pitiful. He learned how to walk again on his three legs, and he learned how to run, though not as fast as before. I let him get me once in a while, so as to not wreck his confidence.

Campground Special

“Beat it, Tripod,” Pops said as he kneeled in front of Divin’ Duck. Her tantrum had subsided to sucking her wet finger as the tears slid into the corners of her mouth, her breath hitching between her sad murmurs.

Klinger, whom Pops had been calling Tripod since the vet removed the dog’s back leg, ducked away from Pops’s batting hand and crammed his jowly face, just as drippy as Duck’s, under Pops’s armpit, between the two of them.

“It’s only going to be a couple of days, honey,” Pops said softly. He pivoted his crouching stance to position Klinger behind him. “You wouldn’t even have any fun out there. Just us boys, getting dirty, farting in each other’s faces—we wouldn’t necessarily be behaving like gentlemen. I’ll take you some other time, okay? Just me and you.”

I watched the two of them from where I sat in the backyard—three, including Klinger, who had somehow gotten back under Pops’s arm and was panting delightedly as Pops, absent-minded, held him around the neck. I plucked blades of grass, whistling into them, casting them off. Though I hated to see Duck so devastated, I lacked enough empathy to advocate for her coming along on the camping trip. If it was me in Duck’s shoes, though, there would be one remedy to my misfortune: pay me.

“I just wanted to see you and thought you’d stay,” Divin’ Duck said.

Pops looked over to the house. “If I stayed here, your grandmother would be on my ass every second of the day,” Pops said. He stood up to fish something out of his front pocket. “Now here’s two dollars—” he paused, looking at Duck’s open hand for a moment— “here’s five dollars.”

Diver had removed her finger from her mouth, her face now calm and business-like, though still tear-stained, as she looked up from the bills in her hand. She was one of us, all right.

“I want you to give that money to your grandma and you tell her to take you to Dewey’s and let you pick out whatever you want. And if she asks you what for, you just tell her because I said so.”

Divin’ Duck’s eyes glowed in the sunlight, but no longer from tears. “She ain’t gonna care about that,” she said, with absolute practicality.

Pops stood and placed his hands on his hips. Klinger set about cleaning off Duck’s face with his tongue.

“You’re probably right. I’ll try to convince her. Emphasis on the ‘try.’ Come on, Slugger. Go find June and quit your dilly-dallying.”

Pops had called me Slugger because of the last time I’d taken a swing at June, after he’d—with the nonchalance that usually accompanied his acts of violence and mischief—knocked a nearly-full Coke out of my hand with an upward smack. This set Pops laughing in his folding chair in the garage, where he liked to listen to his music. Seconds later, he was leaping out of the seat, pulling June off me by, first, the back of his t-shirt, which just ripped the whole thing right off him, and then by a full head lock. Obviously, he hadn’t anticipated the severity of June’s retaliation for my weak punch.

As I went for the screen door, June busted out of it, his rolled sleeping bag in front of him, stuffed backpack strapped to his shoulders.

“You got our stuff?” I asked as he passed toward the car.

“Got mine,” he said.

Big G was in the kitchen, wiping again (she was always wiping something, with her rags of torn cotton t-shirts), watching Pops from the window above the sink.

“I guess this is farewell,” I said.

“Hmm,” she replied.

I hadn’t yet left for the camping trip over the weekend, but I was already missing her. Before I went to my room to pick up my bedding, I slid between Big G and the counter and held her tightly. She was more mu‘u mu‘u than flesh.

“All right,” she said, patting me on the back. “It means a lot to Dale, having his boys with him. Just watch out for your brother.”

Me watch out for June? It didn’t compute. I pulled away, grabbed a pillow and some sheets in a wad, and slung on my backpack before I went out to the car.

“What’s the place called again?” I asked from the back of Pops’s Cutlass, over the rushing wind from June’s open window and the car radio playing a cassette of zydeco music, along with which Pops drummed his fingers against the steering wheel. Up front in the passenger seat, June squinted as the wind crashed across the side of his face, his arm out the window, turning his head slightly to watch the trees and houses slide by.

“Chopper’s Dismemberment Camp,” Pops said, His eyes flicking to the rear-view mirror from under his sunglasses. “They got the cutest little swimming hole with this gaping set of teeth at the bottom that sucks little boys to the frozen lake of hell, to be endlessly chewed and regurgitated through the three mouths of Satan.”

Our little plot at Crispin’s Cove was nothing so colorful—a bald, dusty patch of ground surrounded by the green foliage of low bushes and, farther out, the scant trappings of a cultivated forest. When Pops opened the trunk, we saw the camping gear he’d apparently just purchased:

new Coleman tent, camp stove, butane cylinders, stainless steel pots and utensils, all of it still packaged in bags from the sporting goods store, next to the brown bags of provisions he'd bought from the Safeway.

"Slugger, you set up the mess while June and I get the tent up," Pops said.

I looked at him blankly.

"The kitchen, boy. What they teach you people these days, anyway?"

I stacked the groceries on a park bench at the edge of our site, near a metal garbage can. Vienna sausage, instant ramen, bags of chips, Oreos, marshmallows, Ritz crackers. The absence of fruit or vegetable seemed to me delightfully transgressive. From the bottom of the trunk I withdrew a half-melted bag of ice, which I emptied into a cooler on top of a twelve-pack of Cokes. I couldn't fit the two-liter bottle of Dr. Pepper on top of the sodas, so I left it on its side in the trunk.

As I arranged the stove and cooking implements, I heard Pops addressing June as I'd never heard anyone talk to my brother before.

"Put the pole through the sleeve. That sleeve. Goddamn it, give it here."

"Where's your sense? You think the tent is supposed to be crooked?"

"Jesus Christ, you ain't got brains god gave a goose. Go on, help your brother. You're making this take twice as long."

I kept my back turned as I made miniature adjustments to my kitchen, so June wouldn't see me smiling.

"When we lighting the fire?" June asked Pops from the bench, nodding at the empty, ashy ring of stones a few steps from the tent.

“Whenever you get the firewood,” Pops said. He had set up a folding chair in front of the ring, still in his sunglasses, and sipped from a metal flask.

“You didn’t bring any?” June asked.

Pops lowered the sunglasses on his nose and stared at him a moment. “There is a literal forest of firewood just waiting to be burned. Go and get it.”

June sighed big and pushed himself off the bench. “Come on, Slug.”

“Don’t forget the kindling,” Pops called after us.

When we came to the pond, I had a fair-sized bundle of sticks in my arms, while June carried two medium logs and a couple of broken-off branches with the green leaves still on. A thick carpet of algae covered the surface of the water; it could have been a field. We only surmised it was a pond from the glistening patches of brown between the yellow-green skin that lay over it.

“Look at all that scum,” I said. “Jeez, it stinks.”

“Like to like,” June said as he dropped his wood suddenly. His hands gripped my arms tightly and he pulled me to the edge of the pond. I tried to jerk myself away, the kindling in my arms breaking against my chest and falling to the ground.

“I didn’t bring any other clothes,” I told him.

“That’s on you,” he replied.

When my foot sank into the mud at the water’s edge I lost my balance, and the scum and dirty water enveloped me. The gaping hole, the teeth, the mouths of Satan. My panic sent the water into my mouth, up my nose.

As I rose from the pond’s soft bottom I saw June running back to the campsite. The moss clung to my head and shoulders. I flung it away from me, its green stink acrid, as if in a perpetual

state of rotting. Even after I had removed all the dripping bits, the smell remained, having permeated my soaked clothes, including my sock and shoes.

“Christ, something stinks to high heaven,” Pops said from his seat on the chair. Other than take nips from his flask, he had only set up a boom box on the bench from which he played an unlabeled Memorex tape. Joan Baez sang about Billy Rose burning the prison down. “Don’t tell me you went swimming in those clothes.”

“June pushed me in,” I said, as my brother carefully arranged the logs and kindling in the stone ring, the concentration of activities prohibiting him from participation in this new discussion.

“Damn it, June,” Pops said, and he made a jerk as if to leap from his low folding chair.

June stepped away to the other side of the fire ring. Just as suddenly, Pops collapsed back into the chair.

“Well, go get changed. That smell is enough to make me sick.”

“I forgot to pack clothes,” I said.

“Forgot to pack—for God’s sake, what kind of children are being raised outside of my close watch? Here,” he said, holding the car keys he’d dug from his pocket in front of him. “I think there’s something you can wear in the back seat.”

A bunched-up flannel shirt had been mostly stuffed into the fold of the vinyl seat. I peeled the wet clothes from my body and wrapped the flannel around my waist so that the sleeves fell over my privates.

My father just shook his head when I returned.

“Nice skirt,” June said. He’d coaxed some smoke from under the pile of twigs, but no flame.

The sun lowered, but still Pops kept his sunglasses on. Judy Collins sang about a cowboy from Colorado whom her Pa hated.

“Put the clothes in a plastic bag and wrap it tight,” he told me.

When I had taken care of the wet, smelly clothes, I extended my clammy ass out to the firepit, smoke now billowing about me, and scratched the hell out of it. It felt better than sneezing, than peeing—which Pops never seemed to do as he sat in his chair. Kate Wolf sang about the great divide. It began to grow dark. June threw a fistful of the green vegetation around the site into the fire, and it flamed for a second before transforming into thick, pungent smoke. I followed his example, entranced by the flash, drinking Cokes until well into the night.

Over the boombox, Joan Baez sang about Billy Rose burning the prison down again. Pops continued to sip at this flask.

“Your mother—she would have liked nothing more than to be with us right now,” he said. “You have to believe that.”

When we’d gotten bored with the fire, June and I looked at each other,

“We’re hungry, Dad,” June said.

With his sunglasses still on, we weren’t sure if Pops had heard us, or if he had fallen asleep. He sat for a minute, the flask dangling from a hand as it hung from the arm of the folding chair. Judy Collins sang about the cowboy from Colorado, the rodeo, and how her Pa hated him. In one rocking motion, Pops propelled himself to his feet and yanked off his sunglasses, sliding them into the front pocket of his jeans.

“Well, it’s dinner time, then,” he said. “The boys is hungry!”

He attached the butane to the camping stove and lit a flame from a book of matches, set one of the new pots on top of it.

“Where’s that goddamn water?” he murmured. “Shit.”

Cupping his hands, he carried liquid from the cooler of melted ice to the pot and, as it hissed and simmered, dropped squares of dried ramen noodles inside. After the foil packets of seasoning, he emptied the entire can of Vienna sausage into the pot, including the brine. When he looked at us over the pot he stirred, his eyes were two embers dulled under smoked glass.

“Campground special,” he said. “Just like mama used to make.”

Under the Vienna sausage he found a can of green beans—with a can opener he twisted it open and dumped that in, too.

“Come and get it,” he said, pushing the other groceries to the side as he set the pot directly onto the picnic table. “Here’s the forks.”

Clad in only my flannel loin cloth, I crowded around June and picked at the noodles and pink, bald meat. June elbowed me over and I slipped right back in.

“Salty,” June said. It was also soft in the mouth, but more than that, salty.

“Campground special,” Pops repeated, absently. “Just like mama used to make.”

“Anything else?” June said, as I tried to wrap the last small bits of noodle at the bottom of the pot around the tines of my fork.

Pops shoved the unopened package of Oreos over to him. “Knock yourself out.”

Each of us took two fistfuls of cookies and kept doing so until the package was empty. After each Oreo—the dusty, ash-like crumbs and the icing that coated our mouths like lard—followed the sparkling deluge of Coke. All of a sudden, I stopped; I was completely devoid of want. The thought of all I had wanted before sickened me.

Pops went back to his folding chair, after pressing Stop on the tape that played a masculine-sounding Judy Collins singing about the rodeo again, at half-speed. All at once he began to chant.

“There are strange things done in the midnight sun

By the men who toil for gold;

The Arctic trails have their secret tales

That would make your blood run cold;

The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,

But the queerest they ever did see

Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge

I cremated Sam McGee.”

June and I listened, oversalted, our imaginations aflame with sugar, blazing more brightly than the paltry, smoky haze Pops sat next to as he told us in verse about two men mushing dogs in the Arctic, the dying Sam McGee, the entreaty to cremation and the promise made, the conveyance of the corpse on sled through the frozen wasteland.

“The trail was bad, and I felt half mad, but I swore I would not give in;

And I’d often sing to the hateful thing and it hearkened with a grin—”

Pops stood up at once; we braced ourselves for him to leap out at us on the bench, to drag us near the fire. We thought the lack of vision in his eyes was a part of the performance. After a few moments of swaying slightly in place, he turned to the tent. Waving his hands in front of him blindly as he felt his way through the open tent door, he then fell face first on the bare floor of the tent’s interior.

“I guess it’s bed time,” June said.

“Wait, wait,” I pleaded, moving to a tree and parting the sleeves of the flannel shirt. It was simply not possible that I would leave the tent in the dead of night to relieve myself. When I was done with business against the tree, I continued to stand and attempt to press out more.

“Hurry up,” June called from the bench.

“What do we do with all this?” I asked—the Oreo crumbs, the pot, the half bag of chips.

“No one’s gonna mess with this trash,” June said.

Late in the night I felt June’s hand on my shoulder, gripping it as he shook me.

“Stop it,” I whined.

Pops still lay face down on his side of the tent, like how I’d imagined Sam McGee’s corpse had been dragged over the ice of the Arctic. Except that Pops’s snore, as it rumbled against the nylon floor, was deep and resonant.

“Listen,” June said.

Outside I heard someone going through the food we’d left on the bench. Another package being opened—the crackers or the potato chips. Sam McGee awoken from his frozen slumber with the appetite of the undead.

“Make it go away,” I whispered to June, my eyes closed. “I’m tried.”

As if Sam McGee had heard me and wanted to be sure his presence was known, he flung away the pot and swept the utensils off the table.

When I looked through my slightly opened eyelids, I saw that June had turned a flashlight on and was lifting himself to the closed tent door. He had his fingers on the door’s zipper and turned to me, shing the light upward into his face. “If it gets you, it won’t get me,” he said. “One, two—”

And with that, the door dropped open in a long arc of the zipper. We saw before us dozens of pairs of glowing eyes, which seemed to float in bulbous scraps of darkness. When June raised his flashlight, the racoons were unmoved by the new illumination—they continued with their dainty bites into broken chunks of food in their hands, chewing thoughtfully as they considered us.

June leaned back and felt for the half bag of Doritos he'd brought into the tent, flung it out to them. With that he closed the door and went instantly back to sleep. Sam McGee stood over me for some time before the sounds of chewing and tearing, that had been gently lapping against me where I lay, rolled over me completely.

Pops emerged from the tent the next morning, as June and I pointed out teeth marks in bags and packages. All the food was gone, torn open—even the cans of Vienna sausage had been carried off.

“What kind of party did you kids have last night?” Pops slurred, holding himself up at the tent’s entrance as the poles sagged under his weight. “Put all this shit away.”

He waved his hands, fell forward, reached out for a tentpole, and nearly collapsed the whole thing on top of himself before he found his balance. His face was pale except for the dark circles under his eyes, and the rough hair coming in at the soft part of his neck. The hair on his head, some of which had been combed over from the side to the top, stood at crazy, thin angles over the surface of his skull, through which the light shined unimpeded.

“I’m gonna bathroom.”

With the food all gone, June and I assumed that we’d pack up and go back home. “Undo the other side,” he told me, grabbing the end of a pole to release it from its mooring.

Pops returned as we released the hooks connecting the rain fly to the tent. He'd wetted his hair and had combed it back and now wore his sunglasses, though they perched on his nose crookedly, from when he'd fallen on them the night before. He stood watching us as we slid out poles and folded them, one hand on his hip, wavering in place. I could have probably knocked him over.

"Throw it away," he said, all at once.

June gathered a fold of the tent material in his hands. He stared at Pops for several seconds.

"Huh?" he said, finally.

"Throw it away, June," Pops said. "I'm not gonna tell you again."

As June continued to stare, Pops said, "I don't wanna deal with this shit right now."

June shrugged, bunched up the tent in a big ball, and carried it over to the garbage can at the edge of the site.

"All of it," Pops said, waving at the stove, the pots, the utensils. "Throw it away." He opened the cooler. "Who drank all the goddamned Cokes?"

What we couldn't fit in the garbage can, we leaned against it. There wasn't much to pack back into the car—only our sleeping bags and my wad of clothes. I still hadn't changed out of the flannel shirt from the day before.

"You got lice or something?" Pops said as he opened the trunk of the car.

June had been viciously scratching at his elbow—the skin was red and looked slightly wet. The same redness spread from under his eye to his cheek.

"I itch all over," June said.

“We’ll get you something,” Pops said. “Ah, mother’s milk.” He withdrew the swollen two-liter bottle of Dr. Pepper I’d left the night before, inflated beyond what seemed possible. When he twisted the cap, the brown soda spilled over his fingers, yet he lifted the foaming, overflowing bottle to his mouth, gulping at the narrow hole. The Dr. Pepper continued to flow into the collar of his t-shirt. As soon as he pulled the bottle away from his mouth, a burp, a chesty, throbbing quake that I’m sure set the small, unseen creatures around us fleeing in fear, reverberated against the lid of the open trunk back at June and me, who were struck by both the deafening sound and the abusive stench that accompanied it.

With a mouthful still swishing between his teeth, Pops held the bottle out to us.

“Swig?” he said.

We shook our heads.

“Diver’s gonna be ecstatic we’re coming home early,” I said from the backseat, as the familiar landscape rolled by in reverse. I leaned up to the space between the driver and passenger seats. “You’re gonna have to get half of that five bucks back.”

“Five bucks?” June began, but Pops waved it away.

“There ain’t no half-stepping here, boys,” Pops said. “We eat when we’re hungry, drink when we drive. Straight shooting, right down the line. No going home just yet. We’re staying at a hotel.”

June turned around and smiled at me. The redness from his eye down to his chin was now not only moist, but slightly puffy. “Suits me, man,” he said. “Hope they got a nice pool.”

The Motel 6 neither had a pool nor was particularly nice. June and I had to duck below the dashboard, crouching on the floorboards, while Pops rented a room in the office. Once inside, Pops emptied the plastic bag with my clothes into the sink.

“Shooey, I should have left these out in the sun,” he said, unwrapping and wetting a miniature bar of soap. He plugged the sink basin and scrubbed my shorts, shirts, and underwear before agitating them with his hand in the soapy water. “You know how to wipe, or what?” he called from the bathroom.

“You see them skid marks?” June said.

“Shut up,” I told the both of them.

Pops ran the water once more over the clothes, then wrung most of the water out. He approached June on the edge of the bed, scrolling through the six available channels on TV with a remote control. “No HBO,” June said.

“How much money you got?” Pops asked June.

“I don’t know,” June said, continuing to flip channels, his eyes unmoved from the flickering screen.

Pops yanked the remote from June’s hand and turned the TV off.

“How much money do you have?”

June sighed and lay back on the bed, his elbow propped up on the mattress.

“I don’t—fifty cents, maybe.”

“Quarters?”

“Yeah.”

“Give ‘em here,” Pops said, holding out his hand.

“What for?”

“Because you threw your brother in a pond, and now I have to dry out his clothes. I promised your grandmother I’d get you haircuts, and he can’t go dressed like that.”

June looked at him.

“You do the crime, you do the time,” Pops said.

After Pops returned from the laundry room with my warm, clean clothes, I dressed and we got back into the car.

The barber shop, staffed by three older gentlemen in white smocks, smelled of the blue Barbicide in jars under the mirrors on the wall, in which combs and pairs of scissors floated.

“Go on up there,” Pops said, as one of the barbers spun his chair to face me. June spread out a stack of magazines on a coffee table, while Pops gathered the loose sections of a newspaper and sat down.

“Just something so he’s presentable to his grandmother,” Pops said.

With hair like mine—bushy, interspersed with irregularly placed curls—I was prepared for the electric buzzer right away, bearing down on the dense growth. The barber instead misted my hair with a fragrant spritz, parting sections back and to the side, sending a cool cluster of goosebumps down the skin on my neck and shoulders as the teeth of the comb furrowed into my scalp. There was the light snip of the scissors with each comb-stroke as the barber gathered and pruned. The buzz of the electric clippers rung against my skull each time the barber rode them along the bone behind my ears.

“Your son—has he had this rash for a while?”

The other barber had June up on his chair and was studying his face.

Pops lowered the page of his newspaper. “I wouldn’t say for long. June, when did your face start getting all red like that?”

“Yesterday,” June said. “It’s all over my body.”

“My nephew’s allergic to poison oak,” the barber said. “Gets all puffed up, when it gets worse. You’re gonna need some medication.”

The green plants we kept throwing into the fire. I looked at my hands—red and blotchy bumps on the fingers and palms, but nothing on my face like June had.

When we stepped out of the barbershop, Pops lay his arm around June's shoulder. "I'm sorry, June," he said. "I really am."

"It's no big deal," June said. His face had already started to swell, so one of his eyes squinted.

That night, all three of us lay clean in our underwear in the single queen-sized bed, doing what we did best as a family—watch TV. We watched whatever Pops wanted—*M*A*S*H*, probably, since somewhere on this planet there is an episode of *M*A*S*H* playing somewhere—but we didn't care. We just wanted to learn how Pops laughed at the world like he did. When Pops turned out the lights June and I lying on either side of him, he began chanting once more.

"There are strange things done in the midnight sun

By the men who toil for gold;"

This time he made it all the way.

"And there sat Sam, looking cool and calm, in the heart of the furnace roar;

And he wore a smile you could see a mile, and he said: 'Please close that door.

It's fine in here, but I greatly fear you'll let in the cold and storm—

Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee, it's the first time I've been warm.'"

I would have stared at the burn-ravaged Sam McGee reaching out from the dark edge of the bed all night, had not my father been so close, snoring loud enough to frighten the devils, even enough to knock me out.

“What in the world,” Big G said as June entered the house. His face was now bloated and red-yellow, moist with a crusty discharge and the topical Pops had applied. “What did you do to your children, Dale?”

Pops held out a brown paper bag. “The pills twice a day, and the cream whenever he itches bad. Should clear up in no time.”

Later, after Pops had left, June sat on the sofa, his swelled head bowed, his left eye near completely shut. He wasn’t reading, wasn’t watching T.V.—he just sat there. He didn’t look like my brother. Big G was out in the garden, Divin’ Duck probably playing with her new toy. I wanted to find her, see what it was she got.

When I passed by the living room, June turned his one good eye on me. It looked like it had been transplanted from his face to some hideous agglomeration of mismatched matter that only barely resembled skin. I had not watched out for my brother. I went into the living room and, from a magazine rack alongside Big G’s recliner, fished out a pack of cards. I threw it on the carpet in front of where June sat.

“Cards?” I said.

He slid off the sofa onto his knees, and started shuffling.

Safe

We jumped Adam on his way home from school. Ben tripped him, and Kostas ripped away his backpack and threw it into the road. I just gave him a weak push in the side as he tried to get up. My heart wasn't in it. After we ran away and regrouped in Ben's backyard, I said I was going home. They didn't look at me. They were headed over to Kostas's basement for pinball and Galaga, and they no longer needed me around.

Just a few weeks before, I'd been Adam's friend. But that changed after he kicked Ben in the nuts in front of the our fifth-grade classmates at recess, after Ben tried to play keep-away with one of Adam's free-lunch tickets. Naturally, I was called upon to demonstrate my loyalty in Ben's demand for retribution.

Weighing my options, I thought about Adam, and what we played together. Marvel superheroes, jumping and somersaulting through the neighborhood, him Spider-Man, me Daredevil. Or the Werewolf Prince and the Hunter, out in the forest. Then I thought about Kostas and Ben. Ben, who once slammed me in the back of the head with a dodgeball, suddenly changing sides after the two of us had gotten everyone else out. His face so dense with freckles I couldn't tell his actual pigment. With Kostas, all the *Galaga* and pinball you could play, and your quarter would just come right back to you in the return slot. The last time in his basement, the only light from his arcade machines and the hissing flashes from the blowtorches we shot at each other, WD-40 sprayed into the flame of a Bic lighter. I had burned off the hair on the fingers of my right hand.

So I helped jump Adam. On the gravelly asphalt of the sidewalk, he tore the knee of his jeans and scratched up his hands.

The guilt I felt afterward made me plausibly sick the next school day. That morning I lay in bed too preoccupied to read. June glared resentfully as he got dressed for school.

“Faker,” he said. “Next time I’m sick and you tattletale, you’re dead.” With that he gave me two punches, hard, in the arm and left for class.

By noon or so I was hungry, and when I left the close, boy-stink of my room Big G asked if I wanted some chicken noodle soup. I forgot I was supposed to be sick, and my stomach pleaded for bacon and eggs. This was when Big G could still use the stove, before she forgot what was on and what was off, before she forgot that the eggs were supposed to go back into the refrigerator and the plates in the cupboard, not the other way around.

While she fried the bacon in her mu‘u mu‘u and set it grease-dripping on a paper bag laid flat on the counter, I drank orange juice and chatted.

“Aunt Ivy still going out with what’s-his-face?” I said.

“Apparently,” Big G said. “Surprisingly.”

“He helped me with my boat for the Cub Scouts regatta that one time. Got second place.”

“Making a toy boat is about the threshold of his potential,” Big G said. “Just as useless as tits on a boar hog.” She was a Japanese woman with a southern accent, which generally gave others pause when she talked at them.

Big G sat with me and drank reheated coffee as I sopped up the coagulating yellow yolk of my eggs with the edge of my toast. Back at home, Pops was still working with the doctors on Mom’s problem. She’d been going around to everyone in the neighborhood, telling them the gas in their lawnmowers was going to explode.

“Glad to see your appetite is coming back,” Big G said.

I was certain that the spiritual blackness generated by my conscience would pass. But when I got comfortable on the couch, Big G across from me on her recliner, and tried to follow the latest betrayal on *Santa Barbara*, I had to run to the bathroom, nauseated. The undigested bacon, the eggs, and the orange juice splattered against the walls of the toilet bowl.

Though I was shivering under my blankets when June returned from school, he had no compunction about throwing himself on my bed, pinning my arms under his knees, and lightly slapping my face while I tried to twist it away.

“I’ll scream,” I told him.

“I heard what you did,” he said. “You think you’re a bad-ass now? Three to one?”

“‘Cause he—‘cause he—” But there hadn’t been any reason for me to jump Adam. I closed my mouth and let my brother kick my ass. I even provoked him as he was letting up, shoving him lightly when he finally moved off the top of me. He immediately threw his arm around my neck and tightened his muscles against my skull in a headlock, right before he threw me across the room. On my back, the wind transported far from my body, I felt better.

“If you’re beating on your brother I’m gonna whip the hell out of you!” Big G yelled from the living room. It was no joke, she would come at you with the wire hangers.

That weekend I didn’t leave the house. I didn’t want to see Kostas or Ben again, and I was yet too ashamed to apologize to Adam. Me at home was seventh heaven for Divin’ Duck, whom I hadn’t let into my room in more than a month. While I messed around on a Casio keyboard with its missing high C key Pops had picked up used and dropped off the last time he visited, Duck sang commercial jingles about breakfast cereals against clavi squelches onto a rhythm and blues programmed backbeat. When I played back the tape I’d recorded on June’s hand-me-down boombox of the skits and songs we’d done, she giggled uncontrollably at the

sound of her voice coming back at her, then sat in rapt silence as she listened to herself recite the *Silver Spoons* theme song.

Saturday Adam went to the mall with his parents. Sunday evening, his parents told the police that he'd never returned from 7-11, where he had gone earlier that day for a Slurpee.

When it came on the news a few days later, the police had already talked to me. Yes, I'd seen him a couple days ago, walking home from school. No, nothing unusual, nothing different from any other day. He didn't say anything about leaving, about running away. No, I didn't notice anyone suspicious driving around. They didn't ask about that other thing.

School was only a month in and the parents, including Big G, wanted the kids close to home everyday when school got out. Or at least until Adam came back. Stuck in our room in the afternoons, June, facing me on his opposite bed, told me Adam wasn't ever coming back. He must have seen something come over my face because he changed the subject right away.

"Look, Dustin and me got this gang. The Sewer Rats. If you want, I can ask him to consider provisional membership."

"Just the two of you?"

"Yeah."

"Not much of a gang."

"You want in or what?"

"What do the Sewer Rats do?" I asked.

"We whitewash fences, dumbass. What the hell do you think we do? We go underground. A little tagging here and there. You tell Grandma and—"

"I'm dead," I said. "All right, consider me a member."

"Provisional member," my brother said.

“When are we gonna start sewer ratting?”

“When all this stuff blows over,” June said. “When—when Adam gets back.”

A few weeks into the lockdown Big G, who had enough responsibility acting as Divin’ Duck’s full-time playmate, was sick enough of us to pull back on her close oversight, and June, with red-headed, denim-enshrouded Dustin, led me to a large drainage pipe that fed out to a dry creek in the middle of the woods. Though I had belted up with flashlight, canteen, and the magnifying glass Big G used for the *TV Guide*, June was equipped more simply, in his shorts, Dustin with his jean jacket tied at his waist.

“What if we get lost?” I said, entering the half-dark, almost grabbing at June’s t-shirt.

“Relax,” June said. “Dustin knows these tunnels like the back of his hand.”

We never went as far to be enveloped in complete darkness, but I shined my flashlight anyway. The concrete tunnels were illuminated by some source of light that came from various mouths, or from some opening above, so we walked in what seemed to me circles in dream-infused half-light, only rarely turning deeper, after inspection by Dustin. The end of summer was dry, so the bottoms of these expansive tubes were either caked in dirt or had merely a trickle of water running through, overlaid with sticks or clothes or paperback books that had been washed away. Once every few yards Dustin and June would pause to write “Sewer Rats Rule” in permanent marker on the wall.

“If we find treasure,” I said, “Even split, three ways.”

“Not the kind of treasure you’re thinking of,” Dustin said.

I shined the unnecessary flashlight at our feet: a stack of crinkled *Playboys*. Dustin had stolen them from his grandfather and hid them in the sewer. The first cover image was of

Suzanne Somers emerging topless from a pool. In silence, June and Dustin took seats across from each other, their backs against the sewer walls, and turned the pages of the magazines.

A week or so later Helena and her family moved next door, her father a Major in the army stationed at the base. Neither Kostas nor Ben were coming around anymore, and my provisional membership in the Sewer Rats had been revoked when June overheard me going on and on about the drainage tunnels to Big G, how deep they went, the mysteries from one turn to the next, the secret society I imagined conducted business down there: a silent language of flashlight Morse code, each unseen to the other, sharing the world's hidden wisdom. Down in that world without stars. I told Big G that if I spent just a few weeks in the tunnels, getting my subterranean bearings, it was guaranteed I'd never be lost. Though I never specifically fingered my brother or the Sewer Rats, my enthusiasm was enough for June to forbid me from ever coming along again.

So when Helena saw me in the front yard, alone, in desperate hand-to-hand combat against a squadron of invisible ninjas, and asked me what the hell I thought I was doing, I, out of breath with my hair sweat-stuck to my forehead, didn't ignore her or send her off to play with her stupid dolls. I deliberated a moment on how to explain the whole damn thing before I told her I was Daredevil, the Man Without Fear.

"Like Evel Knievel?"

"Not *a* daredevil. I'm blind, but my hearing is so good I can sense shape outlines by their reverberations against sonic vibrations." When she looked at me blankly, I told her, "Hang on a second."

I ran into the house and brought out a set of binders June had made me my last birthday, photocopied entries from part of the *Marvel Universe* collection. He'd put the binders together

with the copy machine in school. When the secretaries found out, he got a week of detention. I laid the black and white mimeographs on the lawn, showed Helena a picture of Daredevil (“He looks sad,” she said), and gave her a synopsis of his powers and origin. I told her that she could pick out a character and we could play.

Helena sat cross-legged on the grass and squinted at the bright white sheets, once in a while slapping a mosquito away from her knee. “Ohhh, this guy,” she said. “Galactus. He’s like a hundred feet tall. He eats planets.”

I pulled the binder away from her. “Daredevil has a baton and super hearing. Galactus is this cosmic death force. I don’t see these characters crossing over.”

“All right,” she said. “I’ll just be Spider-Man. Daredevil’s like the poor man’s Spider-Man anyways.”

“Adam’s Spider-Man,” I said.

“Who’s Adam?”

“He left,” I said.

She hadn’t heard about Adam yet—not even what the kids were saying, that the Greeks had kidnapped him and were serving his flesh in the gyros. It was one of those things people said because the satisfaction of having it cross their lips superseded the inevitable collateral damage. As it was, Kostas, whose parents owned the Greek restaurant and were loaded, also didn’t have many friends anymore.

“He’ll be back soon,” I added.

“Then I’ll be Spider-Woman,” Helena said.

“She’s kind of a token character. Besides, she doesn’t really fit into this continuity.”

“Fine. You just tell me who to be and I’ll be her.”

“Well, there’s Silver Sable,” I said. “She’s kind of into martial arts, but—well, guns and stuff. Or—I know! Elektra!” I flipped to her page in the *Marvel Universe* and passed the binder to her.

“Looks cool,” Helena said, admiring the single panel illustration. “But this says she’s dead.”

“That’s the thing about comic books. No one’s ever dead.”

Helena threw herself into the role with gusto, and in a week her dad had made her a pair of sai out of scrap pieces of wood screwed together. We tumbled through yards, hopped fences, jumped off doghouses, sweating through our clothes as we cleansed the neighborhood of the unseen menace. And when we were spent, and Helena was showing me how to spin the sai in one hand, I told her that Spider-Man was under attack by Scorpion somewhere in the woods and needed our help. The next day we were in the woods, flicking pinecones as ninja stars and tossing rocks as smoke bombs. Each time we just missed saving Spider-Man.

One afternoon we were picking out smooth stones from the red dust of the dried-out creek when I pointed out the entrance of the drainage tunnels my brother and Dustin had shown me. I led Helena to the mouth of the tunnel.

“What’s ‘Sewer Rats?’” she said, looking at my brother’s tag while shielding her eyes from the sun.

“An enclave,” I said. “Like a secret group—”

“I know what an enclave is.”

“They gather under the town to help citizens in need. Somebody needs a little money, they get together, figure out how to get the money to them. Secretly. Lost dogs, bullies. Here, underground, they discuss how to deal with the real problems.”

“So why do they graffiti if it’s supposed to be secret? Why would they want anyone to know?”

“Come on,” I said. “You can ask them yourself.” I just wanted to freak Helena out with the *Playboys*, just to see her reaction. “I know these tunnels like the back of my hand.”

It wasn’t but five or so minutes until all my bearings had left me. I lost track of the Sewer Rats graffiti, taking blind turns that led to long shafts and grates that forced us to reverse course. Panic arrived swiftly, though I said nothing. I simply grew grim and more desperate as I stepped over trash and vegetable debris and rubbed my fingertips raw against the rough concrete walls of our narrow passage. Would they find us? How would they know? How long until they saw we were gone? Supper time? Bedtime? The next morning? When would the rodent people emerge from the shadows to feed? When they did find us, would we be skeletons, clutched together in cold starvation?

“Let’s climb up here,” Helena said, pointing up at a rusted set of iron rungs leading to a closed manhole cover. She pulled herself up, climbed effortlessly to the top. Hanging on with one hand, with the other, she pushed the cover.

“Is it moving?” I asked from below, my voice no doubt betraying the encroaching hysterics.

“It’s heavy, but—” she pushed again. “It’s moving.”

“Think Spider-Man,” I said.

“Oh, I get to be Spider-Man now?”

From under her, I saw her tense her thin muscles as she switched handholds and pushed the manhole cover again. “Won’t work that way,” she said, and she climbed another rung and set her shoulder against the cover.

I heard the reverberations of the iron against the asphalt. “Damn it!” she yelled, and I saw her legs lock, her arms pull tighter, and my eyes were then blinded by the hot white blue of daylight through the uncovered aperture.

“We’re over by the library,” she said, looking down after she’d scanned the surroundings above. “Hurry, before a car comes!”

I did not pull myself up with the same ease as Helena, but eventually I was able to begin the ascent, smelling the rust of the thick rungs, which landed on my tongue through my nose like the taste of pennies. The hysterics hadn’t dissipated completely, but instead of worrying about dying undiscovered in the sewers it dawned on me in a powerful flash that yes, this is where Adam must have gone. In the tunnels. He’d been lost, just like me. But not for forever. I was going to tell everyone—the police, Big G, Adam’s parents—that he was down in the tunnels, that they’d been looking in all the wrong places. He was safe. And if Adam was safe, we were all safe.

The top rung caught me square on the nose as I climbed, absorbed in my revelation. I would have fallen had not Helena grabbed one of my wrists. It wasn’t until I felt her hand grab me that the loosening fingers of my other hand gripped the slippery rung hard. I blinked as I hung in place, trying to dispel the sharp strikes of lightning behind my eyeballs. I could taste the iron of my blood drowning the taste of old coins on my tongue. Blood flowed past my lips, down my chin and neck into my shirt. I blew the blood against the concrete and the asphalt as I pulled myself up through the hole and onto the road.

Helena kicked the manhole cover back into place while I wiped my nose with the end of my t-shirt. The panic had departed, even the pain. I didn’t feel anything.

“We could maybe get you cleaned up in the library,” Helena said.

“Why don’t I just walk you home,” I said, struggling to dislodge a bloody snot clog from my nostril.

It turned out to be the other way around. Helena held onto my arm as she led me back. The faces of the drivers in passing cars were horrified—I’d smeared the drying blood all over the lower half of my face—but Helena waved them on as they slowed down. When we got to my house, Helena simply let me go.

Big G didn’t notice me at first. She was at the kitchen sink, watching her blooming jalapeno peppers as she rinsed a cereal bowl. I stood behind her and the water ran, Big G thinking over her peppers. When she finally turned around I was bawling, tears moistening the dried blood as I buried my face in her mu’u mu’u.

I have this recurring dream where I find myself in a strange city, vaguely European, and I am on a narrow road between a bell tower, which is behind me, and a tall wooden cross, which stands at the top of a hill in front of me. Invariably I am compelled to walk toward the cross. At the end of the road, a stone stairway climbs the hill to the wide base of the cross, and before I take my first step I see Adam, sitting at the bottom of the stairs. He’s going through his football cards. He’s neither young nor old. And though he doesn’t always look like Adam, I know it’s him. I don’t want to ask him where he’s been all this time. I just want to know if he held onto his rookie Bo Jackson card.

“What happened?” Big G said, at first trying to push me away so she could see my wrecked face. A few moments later, she allowed me to cling. What could I tell her? I couldn’t say that I knew that Adam wasn’t in the sewers, that he wasn’t safe at all, that they’d find his body in a forest somewhere. I couldn’t tell her that we’d blown it. We couldn’t even take care of each other.

Divin' Duck came in at some point, put her hand on my back, asked again and again
“What’s wrong?” I couldn’t tell them anything. I only heard the refrigerator open, and a few
seconds later, the spoon ringing against the glass as it stirred the powder into the milk. June had
come in, made a glass of chocolate milk, and left it on the table.

Gauntlet

“*How high can you fly?*” Davis shouted above us as our voices trailed off on the titular chorus of “Sky Pilot,” twice in refrain. His right hand driving a fleet of piano chords through various maneuvers, with his left hand Mr. Johnny conducted, from one side of the class to the other, the pre-separated clusters of children in sequence: three “*nevers*” that grew higher in tone as they swept through us, culminating in a deafening “*reach the sky!*” sung by the class in unison, as we imagined the plane exploding above us.

Mr. Johnny pushed himself away from the piano with a final chord and stepped over to face us, smoothing the apron over his somewhat protuberant belly. In muted, multi-colored stripes, Mr. Johnny wore the apron every music class, even though our assignments called for neither food nor paint.

“You’re cutting off the first ‘never’ after the second one begins—carry it along, even until the third. He pointed to the left cluster, where I stood.

“*Never,*” we began.

“Good, now hold it. Don’t rush it. He pointed to the second cluster.

“*Never,*” they sung.

“Good,” he said. “So why do they call him a sky pilot if he doesn’t actually fly?”

We looked at one another, assuming it had something to do with Vietnam. Mr. Johnny often talked about the War; sometimes his voice would break. We couldn’t see his eyes behind his dark glasses, only his finger rubbing under his nose, along his thick mustache. If it wasn’t about Vietnam, it was about how we always said these nice things about ourselves in this country but ended up treating everyone like garbage. He taught us how to sing “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “This Land Is Your Land,” “Knee Deep in the Big Muddy.” On Fridays, though, when his friend

Bert would visit class and accompany him on the bass guitar, he'd lead us into a hot version of "See You Later, Alligator." When we sang it back at him, we still couldn't see his eyes, but thought he must be kind of happy.

"Because he likes to get high," Davis said, miming a tightly pinched cigarette to his lips. We all laughed, even though most of us didn't know what he was talking about.

"Don't be a jerk, Davis," Mr. Johnny said, and we stopped immediately. "The pilot is the priest. He's blessing these men to their deaths. He doesn't know what's up there."

We remained silent.

"It's what they all do. Offer a few prayers before the body bags come back. They might as well be presiding over their funerals."

Some looked at their shoes, some straight ahead.

"All right, grab your flutophones and glockenspiels. Each group gets a practice room. No, there's no switching—the Talent Showcase is Friday, and I need you to practice with your assigned instruments. The one with your name on it, McIntyre."

My group included Davis, the solo exhorter; Bea, who once slapped me silly at recess after a football I threw hit her in the head; Quinn, with whom I'd had a few conversations about *The Hobbit*, which stalled after he passed to me several Piers Anthony books I didn't and would not read; and Alice, whose only notable personality characteristic—except when Mr. Johnny made her sing by herself, which she did beautifully—was a dogged silence.

I set the binder of songs, each page in a clear plastic sleeve, in a chair next to me, glockenspiel on my lap. As I turned the pages, Davis struck the highest and smallest bar of his instrument in repetitive whole notes, ringing dully against his rounded wooden mallet.

“We could try ‘Michael, Row the Boat Ashore,’” I said. “Oh, there’s also ‘I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.’” I tried the first couple of notes—the timing was wrong, but some melody struggled to emerge, an underdeveloped reptile under the skin of its egg.

“Muppets, poppets—what was it again?” Bea asked Davis, whose slouch on the chair had sunk lower, his ass nearly hanging off the seat. All at once he repositioned himself.

“Muppets, poppets, puppets, moppets,” he said.

“Muppets, poppets, puppets, moppets,” Bea repeated.

Alice sat looking at them.

“Sorry, what are you going on about?” Quinn asked.

“Muppets, poppets, puppets, moppets,” Davis said. “You have to respond.”

“Like a code,” Bea said.

“You don’t just repeat it,” Davis said. “If I say ‘Muppets, poppets, puppets, moppets,’ you say, ‘poppets, Muppets, moppets, puppets.’ And if I say ‘puppets, moppets, poppets, Muppets,’ you would say—”

“Muppets, poppets, moppets, puppets,” said Alice.

“Alice got it,” Davis said.

“So—‘Michael’ or ‘Railroad?’” I asked. A week to prepare for Mr. Johnny’s Talent Showcase, each group tasked to perform a song from his binder. Davis and I had what Mr. Johnny kept calling glockenspiels (I’d always thought they were xylophones), miniature instruments, each rectangular bar in different colors and increments of sizes from left to right, while Bea, Quinn, Alice were assigned plastic flutophones.

“You have to catch the vibe man,” Davis said, strumming the head of his mallet down the bars of the glockenspiel. “Feel it out, you know?”

““Feel it out?”” I said.

“Just feel it out,” Davis repeated.

He struck three notes on his glockenspiel, struck them again. Once more. The same sequence of notes, broken by a moment’s pause. It seemed to invite someone to step on top of it, or inside it.

Which Bea did, on the lower register of her flutophone. Just two notes, open, closed. Open the door, close the door. Quinn followed her fingers first, then matched the pressure of his breath, the holes along the flutophone’s spine releasing some aspect of feeling, expanding the space, contracting the space; open, close, as if a mouth.

Into which Alice threaded herself, snaking elastically through the sharp corners Davis had set in place, as the sound opened and closed, opened and closed. She skirted past and through, occasionally forcing herself into the center of this being with a single, sustained note, leaping away just as the mouth fully closed on her.

It was nothing I’d heard before; surely not “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” I sat there waving the mallet in my hand. How could I not destroy this organism respiring before us, which we had created with a few simple notes skipping along to fractions of ticking time? It reared its serpent’s head, and its eyes met mine.

The first few notes were tentative—one here, one there. One way over there. Even if off-beat, they were absorbed into the thrust of the noise from the relentless Davis, the synchronized Bea and Quinn, and Alice, circling around the others, drawing its form more tightly. I started to play the damn glockenspiel.

Every bar I struck seemed to ring true. No false notes. Up and down the instrument, I prodded—what’s behind here? Here? And there was a smiling face behind each ring of the glockenspiel, telling me to move on, move on.

I couldn’t say how long we coaxed this near-ecstatic racket, but someone must have realized what was happening; at that moment, it all fell apart. One misplaced beat sent all of us tumbling over one another, and Alice disintegrated the mess with a long, high, keening note.

“Beats ‘She’ll Be Coming Around the Mountain,’ or whatever that bullshit was,” Davis said.

“I call it ‘Muppets, Poppets, Puppets, Moppets,” Alice said.

“Poppets, Muppets, moppets, puppets,” Quinn replied, automatically.

I shook my head. “It still doesn’t make any sense to me,” I said.

“Should we try it again?” Bea asked.

“Let’s preserve the magic,” Davis said. “This is a summoning. You can’t just practice it.”

It was enough to convince us. We set our instruments down and waited out the remaining fifteen minutes in the rehearsal room. I stared at the brown linoleum tiles, recently buffed, gleaming like the fur of a recently groomed Maltese, like Mr. Johnny’s Trixie. Not only did he refer to her often (“Trixie could carry a tune better than you can, and she has severe respiratory distress”), he sometimes brought her to class to sniff at everyone’s shoes. She ingested anything that had happened to drop to the floor.

I looked for Helena when the bell rang and we left the practice room, so that we could walk home together. I’d gotten used to the apple slices and orange cheddar cheese her mom set out when I came over, as we killed the rest of the afternoon until dinner with *Heathcliff* reruns.

When I saw her, she hadn't yet picked up her backpack—instead, she stood a few paces away from Mr. Johnny's piano.

"It's not just about the voice, Hel," Mr. Johnny said, as she stared at him defiantly, almost hostile. "It's your heart. It's got to be there. I'm not saying you shouldn't do the song, but there's maybe something that will suit you better."

I stepped toward her, and she lowered the same look she'd delivered to Mr. Johnny to me. I froze.

"We need some privacy, here, Jesse," Mr. Johnny said. "Run along, you can catch up with your girlfriend later."

Instantly I grew hot. Girlfriend? Helena stared at me with no recognition. I backed out of the room, closing the door in front of me, and heard the first chords of Mr. Johnny's piano through the narrow rectangular window above the doorknob. I remained there, looking in, at Helena's face.

"Hey, Jesse," I heard from behind.

I turned. Davis, with Quinn.

"They got a *Gauntlet* at the Crust," Davis said.

"*Gauntlet*?"

"Greatest game ever," Quinn said. "Up to four players. Warrior, Valkyrie, Elf, Wizard."

Helena's face slipped away for a moment, and I was immediately aroused to a kind of passionate fervor. Warrior, Valkyrie? Elf and Wizard? Four compatriots on the same quest? Disappointment, though, quickly drowned the excitement sparked by the possibility of fantasy. It was a heavy, sodden feeling to which I was lately accustomed. I shook my head.

"I don't have any money," I told them.

“All taken care of,” Davis said, patting Quinn on the shoulder. “Just need someone with heart.”

The Earth’s Crust, the pizza parlor few blocks from school, seemed hastily designed from a faded photograph of a pizza parlor long ago, a restaurant in a commercial office building with scuffed linoleum floor, red and white checkered tablecloths draping mismatched tables, each with a pair of shakers—parmesan cheese and red pepper flakes. On the walls, framed movie stills from *The Exorcist* and *Night of the Living Dead*. The pizza oven dwarfed the kitchen, separated from the dining area by a glass display counter with two rows of steel trays. At 3:30 in the afternoon there was no one dining—the only other person in the joint was a tall teenager with a patchy beard whose formerly athletic body had already begun going to seed. He stood hunched, leaning over the glass counter above the aged pizzas, most with slices cut out. Shriveled though they were, the pizzas, along with the warm smell of yeasty dough and melting cheese, struck me with the giddiness of that desiccated man in the desert who sees far beyond him an oasis.

Gauntlet glowed and beeped and poofed and gurgled over in the corner opposite the counter, console surface in four colors based on character type—red (Thor), blue (Thyra), yellow (Merlin), green (Questor)—with corresponding joystick. Tall as a wardrobe and twice as wide, it proposed a living world of magic if one only walked through.

“You gotta order something,” the kid at the counter said. “I can’t just keep giving you guys change.”

“Relax man,” Davis said. “I brought my appetite with me this time. Jess, you want something?”

God how I wanted something. But someone had to eat Big G's food, and if she found out that someone else was feeding me, I'd never hear the end of it. Not just from her, but from Pops, who made a big ass deal about sending money for his kids to eat.

"I'm fine," I told him.

"Suit yourself. Quinn, I'll have a slice of that pepperoni, and a Coke. Awesome, thanks man."

My regret was neither delicious nor sustaining. I sat miserable with Quinn and Davis, both taking large bites of their folded slices as reddish grease dripped through the crease at the butt end of the crusts, followed by long draws at the straws of their massive Coca-Colas. Maybe Big G would let me change *Press Your Luck* over to *Heathcliff* if I got back soon. It was fine if I didn't play the arcade game. It wasn't worth watching paradise from the landfill. Besides, they had been going on about the Muppets/puppets thing, which was getting on my nerves. Quinn had finally gotten it, apparently.

"I gotta head out in a minute," I told them.

"Right," Davis said, wiping his mouth with a paper napkin as he worked a chunk of tough crust in his cheek. After another long drink, he set his cup and wax paper-covered paper plate on top of the circular aluminum pizza pan on which the kid had served their food. Quinn followed suit.

"Grab some quarters and I'll take care of the trash," Davis said, and as the pizza and soda slid from the tray past the swinging door of the garbage receptacle, my heart cried out, silently.

Quinn returned from the counter and dropped some quarters in my hand. I couldn't believe it. A dollar's worth of quarters, money I had not earned and therefore was not compelled to save.

“I got Warrior,” Davis said.

“Elf,” Quinn said.

“I guess I’ll be the Valkyrie,” I said, and dropped the quarter in the slot.

Most adolescent boys, beyond an aptitude for sports, have a limited set of skills. In many, an inherent laziness inhibits growth to a great degree, which often leads to resentment of others who are smarter, stronger, or generally more capable, manifested as a hostility to the world at large. Such is the cycle. But one of the limited skills afforded boys of a certain age is the ability to proficiently play video games in a short time span. After a few tentative button presses and joystick maneuvers, I was slinging flying swords on the front line with Davis’s Warrior, whose ax disintegrated our foes into specks of nothingness. Quinn showered speedy Elven arrows from behind us, rearguard.

“That hambone is mine,” Davis said.

“Take it,” Quinn said. “I got you covered.”

“Yes,” Davis said, as the machine purred in satisfaction and his character ingested the pixelated meat.

“The next one is mine,” I said, as *Gauntlet*’s narrator, a disembodied, synthesized voice of epic gravitas, informed us “*Valkyrie is dying.*”

“*Someone shot the food,*” the machine told us, as an arrow from behind pierced the bone of what looked like traditional Spanish jamon in front of me.

“Sorry,” Quinn said. “You’ll get the next one.”

“Too late,” I said, as Valkyrie collapsed in a final death throe.

“Continue, continue!” Quinn said. “I need some back up here!”

He pressed the button furiously at a cloud of approaching ghosts.

Just like that, my Valkyrie was resurrected with full health, intent on punishing the monsters who'd sent her to the Underworld prematurely. One by one she slew, and with the Warrior at her side and Elf at her back, the sentient scum of this fantasy world fell before us in clusters.

"Someone shot the food," Quinn, whose Elf was now visibly suffering from the absorption of enemy malignance into his constitution, said along with the narrator.

I could only shrug. The monsters didn't stop coming. Seconds later, a refreshed Questor in Elven green rushed from the spot where his previous incarnation had just been felled.

Against the three of us, the endless enemies were driven back. We advanced, and they replenished their forces. Ghost, Grunt, Demon, Sorcerer. Ghost, Grunt, Demon, Sorcerer. I was the Valkyrie. Muppets, poppets, puppets, moppets—poppets, Muppets, moppets, puppets. It finally became clear. I was the Valkyrie.

"Damn it," Quinn said, as his Warrior withered away on the screen into the void of a spiral pit. The ghosts and grunts had breached our defenses, and soon Quinn and I were facing a timer counting down from ten below a *Continue?* printed in pixelated fantasy script.

"That's all I have today," Quinn said.

I stood frozen in front of the screen as the two of them stepped away, convinced that my life had changed.

"We'll get them next time," Davis said.

"I'll have some more money tomorrow," Quinn said.

I turned to him. Each new chamber we had cleansed of evil spirits was filled with a higher concentration of enemies, all of them stronger, with less sustenance for our efforts; the game was programmed to lead to an impossible outcome, that of victory. But I was convinced

that with my sword, and the Warrior's ax, and the Elf's arrow, we could penetrate deep into the black heart of *Gauntlet*. All we needed was a Wizard.

"Tomorrow?" I said. "Would it be okay if I brought along a fourth player?"

When I got home, Divin' Duck was eating cereal and milk at the kitchen table. If only I hadn't passed over the pizza that had been offered.

"Where's Big G?" I asked her. I wasn't all that late. Though I felt as if the blood-misted soot of the dungeon had lain over my armor for weeks, I'd only spent forty-five minutes at the Earth's Crust, until the quarters had run out.

"Living room," Duck said, with a mouthful of milk and partially chewed cereal falling over her chin. She turned a page of one of Big G's *National Enquirer* magazines on the table in front of her. She wasn't reading it—she was drawing warts, tooth gaps, and facial hair on the faces of beautiful movie stars with a ballpoint pen.

"Gonna make you pretty," she told a grinning photo of Connie Selleca.

Big G sat reclined in the easy chair, the remote control on the arm rest, *Super Password* playing at low volume. Among Chuck Woolery, Bob Eubanks, Wink Martindale, and Pat Sajak, Bert Convy was an Adonis to her. I approached hesitantly. There were times when Big G did not direct her complete will and attention to the satisfaction of our needs. It wasn't just that she'd had it with June, or me, or Divin' Duck. A dull heaviness would cover over her like a dome of lead, rendering her remote, impenetrable. Sometimes she wouldn't leave her room for a day. Other times, we would sit through an hour of her telling us it was our fault that Mom had to go away.

There was no breaking through the dome tonight. I knew that before I said a word to her.

“At your friend’s house again?” she asked, not looking at me. While Big G harbored resentments to Asian races not Japanese, she reserved her most sincere racism for Black people.

“What friend?” I asked. I was just hoping she would say Helena’s name for once.

“The colored girl.”

“Helena,” I said.

Big G turned to me. “Odd name for a colored girl,” she said.

“Well,” I said. “ I guess it suits her fine. Is there something for dinner?”

“I made rice,” Big G said. It was the one constant in all our meals. White rice with pork chops and cream of mushroom gravy, rice with hamburger and bean sprouts, rice with meat, rice with chicken. When there was spaghetti, there was rice. “Got some devilled ham you can open. Or tuna. Or you can make a bowl of cereal like your sister.”

So I spread a can of devilled ham over saltines and drank a glass of water while standing at the kitchen sink. I went to my bedroom.

June came in a few minutes later.

“Where have you been?” I said, looking up from a book report I was writing on *Johnny Tremain*.

“Out walking Klinger,” he said. “You want to throw around the football?”

Making somewhat of a deal about it, I turned my chair around from the desk we shared, sat, and leaned toward him. “Muppets, poppets, puppets, moppets,” I said.

He looked at me blankly.

“Now you’re supposed to say ‘Poppets, Muppets—”

“I’m not doing that.”

“Fine—have you ever heard of this game *Gauntlet*?”

The next day in Mr. Johnny's class, after we broke from "Sky Pilot," I stepped over to Helena, who had been assigned to another cluster of vocalists.

"So you don't have to play a flutophone or anything?" I asked her. "Is this like an extra credit thing?"

She looked at me for a moment, but she was soon distracted by Mr. Johnny, who was sending the students to their practice rooms.

"We've been working on something we can do for the Talent Showcase together. With Bert. They think I sing okay."

"I mean, how long do you have to practice for this thing? I wanted to show you something at the pizza place—"

"Jesse, your band awaits you," Mr. Johnny told me. "Now grab your flutophone and support them."

"Glockenspiel," I said.

"Whatever," Mr. Johnny said. "Helena, we should try the bridge again. See how comfortable you feel."

"Muppets, poppets, puppets, moppets," Davis said to each person who entered the practice room, to which they responded "poppets, Muppets, moppets, puppets."

"Are we sure we really want to do that thing—that song or whatever—for the Talent Showcase?" Alice asked us. Her desire to represent herself well in front of others was beginning to supersede the loose unity we had achieved the previous day.

"We could always work on a backup," Bea said.

Quinn sat tootling on his flutophone.

“I’m sure we could work out a passable version of ‘I’ve Been Working on the Railroad,’ I told them, turning pages in the binder once again.

“Would you guys relax?” Davis said. “We are dialed in. We got this. You heard what we did last time, right?”

“So you want to try it again?” Alice said.

“It’ll lose its magic. It’s like an impromptu thing. It’s not something you can practice.”

June met us at the Earth’s Crust that afternoon. Davis and Quinn ordered their slices and sodas. I thought my brother would have the same reservations about eating away from home as me; instead, June put in an order for a slice of pepperoni with sausage. As soon as he finished, I hurriedly asked for a slice of cheese.

“Geez, Slug, could you get any more boring?” June said.

“How come he calls you Slug?” Quinn said.

Eating the pizza over the red-and-white checked tablecloth enhanced the anticipation of unsheathing, once again, my sword as the buxom and powerful Valkyrie. Davis and Quinn kept a respectful silence around June, and June didn’t talk because he felt they were beneath him. When we were done, slurping up the melted ice from our paper cups, I stood up and strode to the game with a full meter of health.

“You gotta be the Wizard,” I told June.

“What if I want to be the Warrior?”

“Davis is the Warrior,” Quinn said, with the authority of the personage handing out the quarters to all of us.

For a moment I wondered if June might make a big ass deal of who was who, which would have thrown the dynamic we'd developed askew. But he put the quarters in his pocket and shrugged.

Our party complete, we launched a full-scale onslaught against the gallery of grotesques that were constantly trying to murder us. June was, even though new to the game, especially conscientious about each dying member getting to the replenishing food in time, covering them with expertly placed fireballs as ghosts floated around us in unholy masses.

When the last of the countdowns for a *Continue* rolled to zero, June took a step back from *Gauntlet* and nodded. "Nice game," he said to the screen. He turned to Quinn. "Thanks man. I'm out of here."

When I got home, I was counting on Big G to have her legs propped up on the recliner, there but vacant for another evening; I would just slip into my bedroom and read until bedtime. Instead, she stood at the stove over a steaming pot as I walked through the screen door into the kitchen. She turned to me as I walked in.

"Your favorite, Jesse. Swiss steak. Go put your things away."

"Hurry up," Divin' Duck said, pushing me to my bedroom. "I'm hungry."

It was my favorite—cheap stew beef cooked for hours until tender, then simmered with potatoes and gravy, which I'd sop up with Big G's rice. I felt I had failed some cosmic test. Still, I sat at the table and shoveled the ash-tasting meat and potatoes on top of the pizza slice, hating what I'd once loved.

Davis wasn't in class the next day, so Bea took his place as the shouter of the chorus of "Sky Pilot." Bert, tall, pale, and bald, in a cowboy shirt and faded blue jeans, played along with us on his bass guitar, while Trixie, Mr. Johnny's Maltese, wove between our feet, sniffing. She

climbed up to her rear paws against my leg, seeking some lingering essence of Klinger on my jeans.

Before we dispersed to our practice rooms, I heard Bert talking to Helena.

“The first truth is that desire is the cause of all suffering. The second truth, though, is that we know this, but we still can’t help ourselves. We want what we want and we suffer. That’s what the song is about. Suffering. Sing for the sufferers.”

Since Davis wasn’t there to tell us what to do, or what not to do, we tried “Kumbaya” from the binder. “All My Trials,” too, but we couldn’t make any sense of the notes because none of us knew the melody. Eventually, Trixie nosed her way into the practice room and we set our instruments down, each of us rubbing a different section of her while she sprawled on her back, jaws wide, the side of her tongue almost against the linoleum floor that bore her colors.

“I can’t believe Mr. Johnny is letting us get away with this,” Alice said. “Where’s the instruction? The quality control?”

“All he cares about is “Sky Pilot” and that song he’s doing with Helena,” Bea said. “Like she’s such a great singer.”

“And we’re chopped liver,” Alice said.

I didn’t say anything. I just wanted Helena to not care as I didn’t care. I just missed my friend.

A role for which Quinn was an imperfect replacement. Neither of us ordered pizza at the Earth’s Crust after school. I sat with him while he drank, very quickly, a large Sprite. During long sucks, the cup on the table as he craned his neck over it, I evaluated our compatibility.

“You know, it always struck me weird that Chewbacca would wear a headset on the Falcon,” I said. “Like when everyone’s in the cockpit. Who’s he communicating with?”

“I’ve only seen the one with the little furry bears,” Quinn said.

“Ewoks, right,” I said. “*Return of the Jedi*. The worst one.”

“My mom says those movies are just overlong commercials for toys. She says it’s all just corporate interests at this point—no soul.”

I stared at him grimly, thinking of the eight by ten glossies of Threepio and Lando Calrissian back home, the *Bantha Tracks* newsletter.

“*Star Trek* is more about ideas,” Quinn said, after he’d noisily removed his lips from the tip of the straw.

“*Star—Trek?*” I asked. Aged men, makeup powder sunken into the crags of their faces; static, uninspired space combat.

“It’s politics and philosophy.”

“I see.” Two things of which I had neither concept nor interest.

Though our team was reduced in number, we fought with greater accuracy and just as much heart. Every arrow the Elf released from his bow turned another ghost to dust. While Quinn cleared enemies on our flanks, I pressed our efforts forward, throwing an endless supply of swords that vanished along with the receding corpses of all who had been slain in my path.

“Get the food!” I shouted.

“Ah, sustenance,” Quinn said along with the Elf’s relieved voice over the cabinet speakers.

At once, and rapidly, our enemies began closing in, and I heaved swords pell-mell into the fray. After a few moments, I noticed the Elf behind me, motionless.

“Where’s my backup,” I yelled at the screen, my Valkyrie, overwhelmed, grunting in pain. I glanced over at Quinn.

He had taken a step back from the machine, his hands still stretched out before him, a stunned look on his face.

“What?” I said and looked down. A dark stain had spread from the crotch of his jeans, down the inside legs.

There was in me a voice that directed me to put my arm around him, lead him quickly and discreetly to the restroom, help him sop up the piss with paper towels while talking through a plan to get him home, unnoticed. These things are knowable in an instant. I was certain of the proper response.

But the voice that explained the steps so clearly in a fraction of a second was drowned by a stronger, less articulate notion. What I saw before me inspired neither compassion nor pity. I was revolted.

“I can’t,” I said, lifting my hands in front of me, almost in mirror image. I turned and fled.

I told no one what happened, not even June. In bed that night, I was sure I had taken a step toward the person I was supposed to be. Who was this person? That man who had the liberty of mind to dismiss from his thoughts all that didn’t please him? Or the weak man whose heart would inevitably be degraded by one failure after another?

In the practice room the next day: Davis, cool as ever, balancing his glockenspiel on one shoulder. Quinn silent, presumably in anguish, as I would have been. I now lacked even the conviction of my disgust—I felt only shame. I wanted to meet his eyes a moment and impress upon him that I would not betray the secret.

“Talent Showcase is tomorrow, people,” Alice said. “Let’s run through the thing again, so we know what we’re doing. Davis, go ahead.”

“I thought Bea was the one who started us off,” Davis said.

“No, man, it’s you,” Alice told him.

The glockenspiel slipped off Davis’s shoulder and clattered on the linoleum.

“Yeah,” Bea said. “You do that thing.”

“What thing?”

Alice’s fingers were white around the narrow body of her flutophone.

“This is no time to mess around, Davis.”

“Okay, okay. I think it was like—”

He played three notes in sequence, but the second time around it was three different notes.

“I don’t think,” Bea began.

“Just wait,” Davis said, locking in for a second refrain of notes that soon changed again.

“It’ll come together.”

It didn’t come together. Davis played, Bea played, Quinn played, Alice played, and I played—though “played” seems suggest that there was some conscious intent in how we were making these discordant sounds against one another, out of sync, breathing into mismatched holes and hitting all the wrong rectangles. We were kids banging on instruments with no idea of how they worked. What had occurred earlier was either a miracle or an illusion that we all, in our arrogance and supreme laziness, stupidly believed.

“Stop, stop!” Alice yelled. In her eyes I beheld the terror that had emerged from the satanic noise we’d made. “We’re gonna go up there and make fools of ourselves! We sound like shit! What kind of teacher would allow this to happen?”

“Yeah, I’m not sure this is working for me,” Bea said.

“Well, let’s try it again,” Davis said.

“Just stop,” Alice told him. In slight jerks of her wrist, she pushed her hair to the side of her face. “We can do ‘Railroad,’ right? We probably have enough time to learn one of those songs from the binder, right?”

“It has to be something easy,” Quinn said, quietly.

“No way I’m doing ‘I’ve Been Working on the Railroad,’” Bea said.

“It’s ‘Hot Cross Buns’ or nothing,” I said, turning pages in the binder.

“Babies play that!” Alice stared hard at the floor, then shook her head. “Fine. This is a travesty, for the record. All right, here we go. One, two, three—”

Our heads bowed low, we followed one another offstage the next morning, to a smattering of lukewarm applause from the teachers. Two humiliated cycles of the “Hot Cross Buns” melody with glockenspiel and flutophone playing the same notes. Louder than the applause was the murmuring of bored children, sitting on the floor of the cafeteria facing the elevated stage. The tables had been folded and rolled away alongside the walls, under the large windows that looked out to the yard and playground. Our group took cross-legged seats in our own homeroom classes, which had been arranged in lines from the front of the stage to the back of the room. At the end of my line, there was no one to congratulate me for a workmanlike performance of a song that existed only for instructional purposes—neither was there contempt, since everyone knew “Hot Cross Buns,” but felt nothing about it whatsoever. But there was the relief that “Hot Cross Buns” was short, and now it was over.

I didn’t realize how low and hunched into myself I had been sitting until Helena walked onstage and stood below the Talent Showcase banner, the letters in silver glitter, each on a black

square of paper from a long strand, slightly bowed, attached to both wings of the stage. I had never seen Helena in a dress, a rich purple that glowed against her dark skin, nor with a bow in her hair—she'd only ever worn shorts, or jeans. Ms. Testaverde followed closely behind her with a microphone stand that she planted in the middle of the stage and adjusted to Helena's height.

"Check," she said, after tapping the fine mesh of metal that covered the microphone's head. "Before our next performance, let's bow our heads in a minute of silence dedicated to the memory of Adam Jennings."

I closed my eyes, wishing that I'd done right by Adam, that I'd done right by Quinn.

Bert walked onstage with his bass guitar slung over his shoulder, while Mr. Johnny took a seat at the piano opposite Helena. They, too, were dressed as I'd never seen them—Mr. Johnny apron-less, in a tie and a too-tight jacket. His eyes, with his dark glasses off, looked like tarnished, weakly glinting nickels that had been pressed into a lump of dough.

Whereas Mr. Johnny's clothes appeared too small, Bert's black, double-breasted suit was too loose, as if it were draped on a clothes hanger instead of the body of a man. Which is to say, the two of them looked perfect, their ill-fitting presences serving to make Helena more radiant.

Radiant? I knew the word, generally. But in reference to Helena? I heard a buzz and a loud click as Bert plugged in his bass guitar.

I wasn't familiar with the song, but it began with sweetest word I will ever have known: "maybe." As she sang, she put into me an ache. I watched her, listened to her, and the ache grew unbearable. The ache, I knew, was borne out of the realization that what I wanted I would never, not in a million years, possess. I could waste a life trying, I could try to beat it into submission, but would never hold it in my hands, would not get a grip on it, not even the tip of a finger. "*But not for me,*" my mother used to sing while window shopping, or in idle moments in the car, and

finally I knew why. For a few minutes, though, the sweet ache and the distance between Helena on the stage and me sitting cross-legged on the cafeteria floor was sustenance enough.

As well as they played, Mr. Johnny and Bert were merely sky pilots. Helena was the one taking all the risks, soaring high above us. “*Maybe*,” she sang again, and the possibility that I might be a different Jesse than the one who had run away when somebody needed his help, who had pressing the dying man deeper into the mud of the ditch, that I might be someone who cared about things, that I might be the one that Helena—and all girls—loved, occurred to me, and helped me float in the blues in which I had been drowning.

When the song was over, I leapt to my feet and clapped with the others. It was the end of the day. I walked home by myself, in a daze. All at once, Muppets and Warriors and poppets and Wizards meant so little. I spoke to neither Big G nor Divin’ Duck as I entered through the kitchen. Instead, I went to the bedroom and turned on the clock radio with the glowing red digital numbers on the bedstand between June’s bed and mine, seeking out Helena’s song over the different stations. As I listened, it was clear all the songs were saying the same thing, what all of us pleaded in the deepest chamber of that deep ache: *I need your love, I need your love.*

Satan's Womb

“We’ve talked about things you don’t like, Jesse—cucumbers, octopi, ticks—what about something you want? Like right now?”

Mrs. Eberhardt looked at me from the other side of the desk, her eyes above the reading glasses that had slipped to the end of her nose. The sky was getting dark on the other side of her venetian blinds, drawn but open, and the desk lamp’s beam expanded over the desk’s broad surface: beige telephone with tangled cord dangling over the desk’s edge, connecting handset and cradle; questionnaires with penciled responses; a closed datebook; her spiral notebook in which she wrote, and to which she referred while she spoke. Each item appeared vividly illuminated. June and Divin’ Duck, in wooden chairs on each side of me, looked at everything in front of them except me and Mrs. Eberhardt, their faces and hands on their laps catching the light, their bodies slipping into shadow with the waning of the day.

After a few moments, I raised my eyes level with Mrs. Eberhardt’s. I shook my head.

“Nothing,” I said, and folded my hands behind my head.

“Out of anything in the world? Just imagine, you could have anything you wanted right now.”

“Nothing comes to mind,” I said, and shrugged.

“What about you, Duck? Anything in the world you’d like right now?”

Divin’ Duck sat forward at hearing her name, ready to tell this lady anything, just for the opportunity to talk. One glance over at me, though, she pulled back into herself, and slowly slouched in her chair so that her head was below the backrest.

“I don’t know,” she said, almost under her breath.

Mrs. Eberhardt sighed and stared at Duck before she rolled her eyes over to June. She set her pencil down, ready to close the notebooks for the day.

“June?”

The way he stared at Mrs. Eberhardt, I was sure he’d stonewall her like the rest of us. Then he cocked his head and crossed his legs.

“You know that song, ‘Dancing in the Moonlight?’”

Mrs. Eberhardt squinted.

“King Harvest,” June said. “It’s an old song.”

She began to nod. “Yes, yes—everybody is feeling all right. Sure. I am aware of that song.”

“That’s it.”

“You want to hear the song? Or you want to be dancing in the moonlight?”

I looked over at my brother, my mouth open to say something that wouldn’t directly come to mind.

“Not just me dancing. Like everybody dancing. When the moon shines, the full moon, people glow this white—they’re not shining, it’s more like they’re reflecting. Radiating. In the moonlight, everyone just looks better, like how they wish they looked all the time. Their skin is smoother. Everybody in the moonlight, dancing—but they’re dancing because they feel like it, not because they’re pretending to feel like it.”

As we walked from Mrs. Eberhardt’s office to the front of the administration building, where Big G sat waiting for us, Duck ran ahead, wearing only the hood of her coat as she tried to make the rest of it billow behind her like a cape. The bulletin boards, encased in glass, advertised the Talent Showcase, which had passed, and the upcoming Halloween Parade, which depicted

Dracula as lead drum major, leading Frankenstein's monster and the Wolfman forward. I turned to June.

"How come you said all that stuff?" I asked him. I had thought we'd all made a tacit agreement to tell the counselor nothing.

"Someone told me that if you don't talk, it doesn't help," June said.

"Help with what?"

"The whole thing, man. I don't have to explain it to you."

"So the dancing in the moonlight thing was real?"

"Could be," he said.

Halloween had never sat well with me. When I could fit in the hard plastic seat beneath the shopping cart handle—before Divin' Duck was born—Mom and Pops would wheel me through Walmart, June holding the corner of the cart, his fingers interlaced with the grates of the metal frame as he pulled us to the seasonal costume section. I would close my eyes, shutting out the collapsed rubber masks, bins of vampire teeth, greasepaint packaging illustrated with the undead and their rotting flesh. I could barely handle the Luke Skywalker X-Wing pilot costume, the flat orange jumpsuit in thin plastic, two-dimensional, and the mask, a face plate with muddy, peach-colored skin and empty eyes, dangling from the hanger on its rubber band. I was certain these dead things would become animate, were only waiting to absorb my life force into their uncanny suggestion of humanness.

"You're not dressing up at all?" Helena asked as we walked home from school. More leaves had gathered on the ground than there were in the branches, and the constant smell of smoke or char hung in the chill air.

"You are?"

I assumed that just about everyone else had the same feelings as me about any given thing, especially friends of mine.

“Of course, man! Halloween is like my favorite holiday. This year, I’m going to be a cat, like one of those cats from *Cats*. The musical? We just saw it a couple weeks ago—I know, I told you already. My mom’s dyeing the stripes on this leotard, and I can poof my hair out, put some paint in it or something.”

“I see,” I said. I knew it wouldn’t do if I told her it was the stupidest thing I’d heard in my life.

“If you want, she could help you make something,” Helena said. “You don’t have to wear a leotard. You could wear a little suit like Macavity.”

At the Halloween Parade, for grades fourth through sixth (because they needed to schedule real estate on the asphalt recess yard) the children in costumes marched single file over the looped track, outlines for a four square, and the basketball courts, all painted in faded and chipped white. I dressed in the same clothes I’d worn the day before with a piece of notebook paper scotch-taped to my jacket that read “Jesse on Thursday.” A boombox set on the steps to the cafeteria doors played “Monster Mash,” “The Purple People Eater,” and “Short Shorts” while we trudged through the yard, like prisoners let out for their daily constitutional. Except these prisoners wore witches’ hats with faces painted green, fangs, with dribbles of red from the corners of their mouths, plastic coveralls that only vaguely suggested Darth Vader’s space leather and electronics, or a Care Bears’ fur and belly emblem. Helena, who had the capacity to admire others’ costumes, and to be admired in her *Cats* get up like some slick space-age mutant who was undoubtedly more evolved than the rest of us, stalked feline-like near the front of the line, pretending to groom herself with the back of her paw against the side of her face. She

laughed and pointed, calling out to Davis, to Meghan, “I’m not looking for a bowl of milk, fool! I want some of that candy in there!” I watched her for a little while, and when I realized I wasn’t going to bring anyone down to my level, I took cold comfort in silently resenting the whole production. At the back of the line, hands in my pockets, I stomped behind the others as “Woolly Bully” played until I saw the demon, walking in a line from another class, a younger grade, on the other side of the yard.

The costume itself was simply a rubber mask and a vinyl vampire’s cape over street clothes. The mask covered the boy’s whole head, with a mat of black hair that was set high on the almost cylindrical forehead, down to the base of the neck. The rubber skin of the demon’s face was bluish, corpse-like, with gaping dark sockets for eyes and a skull’s lipless rictus over the mouth and jaw.

It wasn’t the mask and cape that had disturbed me. It was how the boy wore the costume. Like an obligation, a burden. I could see nothing of his face as he shuffled in step with the others in front of him. I wondered who had picked the mask out, and why? Was it new, or passed down? Why match it with a cape? I called it a demon because I didn’t know what kind of monster it was supposed to be—a zombie? But why the pelt of black hair, then?

The kid walked, his cape fluttering slightly behind, a plastic jack-o-lantern bucket in one hand. Who was he under the mask? Maybe it didn’t matter. I was only certain that he felt as I did, walking where everyone else walked only because he was supposed to, but lost all the same, cut off from everything around him by the barrier of his mask. If we hadn’t been walking in crooked circles in the stupid Halloween Parade I would have shouted at him, “Be free! No one cares anyway!” But he kept walking, silently—if he said something no one would be able to hear

it over the music, behind the mask. Something clenched the stem between my lungs and held tight there. Long after he passed, I couldn't forget how he walked, just to get through it.

I snuck away from school after we shared the spooky stories we'd started at the beginning of the week, mine about a haunted wheelchair. Child dies, parents keep his motorized wheelchair in his room, and when night falls the parents hear the child's wheezing, see his silhouette against the wall in the moonlight. It wasn't as good a story as Bea's, about the ghost of the old woman who howled blood-curdlingly and gnashed her teeth at the girl every time she opened her textbook, which caused her grades to suffer terribly, much to the mystification of her parents. When class ended Helena mingled with the others in costumes, swapping fun-sized candy bars as they repeatedly crested sugar-highs until their eyes hung at half-mast. I was inclined to kill the fun with a litany of smart-ass remarks, but instead decided to get away.

The wind cut through my sweater and tossed the leaves around my ankles. I zipped up my jacket. I knew Big G wanted me to take Divin' Duck out trick-or-treating that night; I couldn't think of an excuse to get out of it, except that there was nothing I wanted less in the world. Duck was going as an old lady, that is, wearing Big G's clothes. June had made it clear earlier in the week that he had his own plans and wouldn't have anything to do with us.

Despite the cool wind, it was a nice day, an easy afternoon, nothing like the leaden feeling that weighed inside me. A gray cat licked its paw in the faded warmth of the afternoon sun as I turned a corner closer to Big G's neighborhood. In no great rush it licked, as if between fingers of a hand, so content with the afternoon it didn't jerk defensively and bolt as I stepped closer. I took another step, and when it still didn't run away I stomped my foot toward it, which finally sent it skittering across the yard to its house.

Along the neighborhood were single-story houses, like Big G's, and split levels, most of them cream white with a gray or brown trim, though I saw one painted a bright lime green. The houses sat back behind big front yards with elm trees growing tall, towering over the roofs, bark tough and mapped over the surface of the trunks like thick fibers of rope. Most of the trees were now leafless, or mostly so, except for the odd evergreen, pine or spruce. A paved driveway, concrete or Futura stone, ran along the edges of the front yards to a garage, either fixed to the side of the house or slightly apart from it, some with basketball boards, hoops, and nets installed above the garage door, just below the ridge of the roof. I wanted to wander down a strange driveway, just to extend the inevitable return home, where Big G would try to convince me to put together a last minute costume to give Divin' Duck a good Halloween, which probably meant wearing one of Big G's old mu'u mu'us as well. Probably something more elaborate than what she'd usually wear, floral, with ruffles at the neck and at the sleeveless shoulders. And what was down that driveway? Were they watching some movie that hadn't yet come out on video? Nintendo in a darkened bedroom, the glow from the TV flickering like torch light in the chambers of the boss's dungeon?

"Where's your brother?" I heard someone call from across the street.

It was Rich, a couple years older than June. A few weeks earlier, June had brought him over to Big G's house to play from Rich's *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* set. In preparation, we'd come up with character names (me, a Halfling thief named Norbert Rose, June a Dwarven warrior he called Fyodor Brightbeard), but by the time Rich had gone over the rules—for character generation, melee, parley, and general decision-making while questing—the night was over, the pizza Big G had baked in the oven long gone, and the character sheets Rich had

photocopied lay before us blank. I stared at the twenty-sided die, limpid and rosy in hue, with a complete lack of comprehension as to its true purpose.

“If this is *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, why don’t we start with regular *Dungeons and Dragons*?”

Rich, who throughout the evening referred to himself as “Dungeon Master,” gathered the thick modules, the loose sheets of paper, the map drawn in ballpoint pen on graph paper.

“There’s no regular *Dungeons and Dragons*,” he muttered. “Only *Advanced*.”

I simply nodded, comfortable to remain benighted about the intricacies of a game that seemed so nitpicky and overly procedural and wholly unfun.

Now I crossed the street over to him.

“Don’t know where June is,” I said. “Doing his own thing, I guess.”

“Too bad. I wanted him to see my haunted house.”

“You made a haunted house?”

He looked down at me. “Make one? Nah, man. Didn’t have to make one. I *live* in one. Devil’s in the walls, looking for a way to get out.”

“You lie.”

“Wish I was. Dad’s got a priest coming over for an exorcism—kind of busy this Halloween, I guess.”

“No such thing as a haunted house.”

Rich studied me for a moment, as if to ascertain whether I had just laid a loud resounding fart. I noticed fine dark hairs that lay like the smudge of an erased pencil on his upper lip.

“You’re kidding, right? Ghosts float among us every second of every day. I’d show you, but—” he shook his head. “Too young, man. It’d scare you to death.”

I'd come a long way from shielding my eyes at the empty costumes at Walmart. Once I had been convinced that Frankenberry lay sleeping on the couch of our living room, and I would have to sneak past in the early dawn hours to my parents, where I would insert myself between them on their bed and Mom would rub my back until I fell asleep again. And that Freddy Kruger had leaned a ladder up against our house in Lawton and climbed it slowly, rung by rung, the razors on his glove screeching as they dragged against the aluminum siding on his way up. Since then, barring the demon I'd summoned while plodding along during the Halloween Parade, I'd mastered a part of fear. I feared pain, but not necessarily death, which never seemed to me entirely unpleasant. I was scared of people, but not monsters and ghosts.

June had made sure of that, showing me on the TV, way before my time, a young woman adrift on a canoe in a calm pond, her figure growing slowly distant, almost a silhouette, revealing the harmony of an undisturbed portrait of nature, a Nature that cupped one in its expansive hand gently, so that its marvels could be enjoyed in introspective comfort.

Until the pale and bloated corpse, reanimated by either hideous magic or sheer murderous will, erupts from the smooth surface of the pond to drag the young woman under.

I fled then, from the dimness of the den to the daylight through the frosted windows on each side of the front door, my heart beating as if what had happened to the girl on the canoe was happening to me, kept happening to me, again and again.

After that, what else to fear?

"I want to see it," I told Rich. And if I got scared, it was better than walking home with the demon, anyway.

Rich shook his head.

"Nah. Can't handle it. When you see your brother, let him know in case he's interested."

“I can handle it.”

He squinted at me again, pretending to size me up.

“Just remember I warned you. No one to help if you start crying.”

I felt as if I’d finally stepped to the edge of some unmapped territory as I crossed the threshold to Rich’s house. The dust on the mirror facing the front door in which I caught myself, surprised. Cigarette smoke baked deep into the furniture, layered upon menthol and moth balls. It seemed the house was too large for the people who lived there, not only a kitchen but a dining room, not only a living room, but a den, too. And the furniture underused, neither stained nor torn nor squashed by the weight of butts on seats, no smear of chocolate or faded splotch of Kool-Aid. With my assumptions of what a haunted house should be, I noticed a dry airlessness devoid of breath or perspiration, permeated by menthol and camphor, maybe Vicks. But there was no floating head with decomposing skin and rotting teeth and stringy hair falling over eyeless sockets, no giant spider in the corner, its thorax pulsating in blood-soaked digestion. Rich’s house reminded me a little of Mrs. Eberhardt’s office: clean, outdated, and lifeless, nightmarish only in the sense that, should I have found myself trapped there forever, I would know that I had surely been sent to Hell.

“This way,” Rich said, directing me down a dim hallway. On one wall, rows of silverware in diminishing sizes behind a glass pane, and on the other, an over-posted bulletin board with what looked like bills and receipts hanging past the corkboard’s wooden frame like white leaves that shuddered slightly in our wake. As we passed an open door to my right, I looked in quickly. I saw a person, or what appeared to be a mostly fleshless, hairless head propped on a pillow, its unseen limbs under heavy covers with a floral design. The head’s mouth was open and its skin, thin as typewriter paper, was red and chapped. From where I stood, it

looked as though a portion of the forehead had been removed, or was caved in. A light electronic beep I hadn't realized I'd been hearing chirped in regular increments of time.

"Who's that?" I whispered to Rich, who'd moved in front of me to close the door shut behind him. "Is it part of the haunted house?" The old people I knew were like Big G, either stout and sturdy or already long dead.

"All will be revealed," Rich said, in something like his Dungeon Master voice.

A few steps led down from the hallway to the den, where the weak afternoon light shone on the brown windowsills, below the drawn curtains. A lamp next to a record player and receiver on a long table set against the wall was the only illumination on the room, sending a band of light upward past its beige lampshade to the wood-paneled walls. Opposite the table was a couch, its upholstery, including the individual cushions, covered in clear plastic. The carpet was a thick and rich orange. Rich pressed the On button of the receiver, which coughed once before its dials began to slowly glow, and started an album on the turntable. First, I heard the sounds of rain, then alongside it, a church bell ringing in the same pattern as the electronic beep. It was followed by a jarring and extended set of squeaks and farts as Rich adjusted himself on the couch. He crossed his legs like an adult.

"Sit down," he said, nodding at me.

There was an easy chair in the corner, similarly upholstered and also covered in plastic. The thick carpet, though, looked inviting, so I lowered myself onto it directly across from Rich, and after sitting I lowered myself further, so that I was below the level of the stereo on its short table, my head propped on my hand. A nasally but strangely deep cat's yowl came from a distance on the record, disembodied from the plodding electric guitars.

"Have you ever wanted something really badly? Like you'd almost kill for it?"

Rich sat straight and motionless, as if he was reciting something. He seemed less like a kid, and more like Mrs. Eberhardt. Of course I wanted things. I wanted things so badly it hurt not to have them.

“I don’t know,” I told him.

“The family in this house—they wanted something so badly they were willing to do whatever was necessary to have it.”

He sat back, uncrossed his legs. He slowly leaned forward and stopped looking at me, focusing on something that was invisible to me between the two of us.

“A child,” he said. “A child born too early, unfit to survive in a world such as ours. What to do? They had tried for so long—and after the cynical doctors, the drunken preachers, they decided to walk a different path. A deal with the Devil.”

Suddenly, his eyes went back to me. I caught the echo of a thrill, alongside the slow riffs and heavy drums from the speaker. I gathered the long strands from the carpet between my fingers and released them.

“The Devil told them, ‘Bring the child to me and he shall live.’ They asked, ‘And how shall we deliver him?’ He told them, ‘For a long time, I have watched you in your distress, and have made my realm available through a portal in your very home. You will leave the child at the entrance to this portal. After three days, you will collect him, robust and healthy, as if he had been born out of my own womb.’ So the parents did as he asked; they left the child, waited three days—terrified, ashamed at what they’d done. But on the third day, when they approached the portal, they did not hear the weak mewling of the child they’d known before; instead, it was the full-throated cry of a vigorous baby, left before the doorway as the Devil described. There was

no denying it was their child. But, whereas his complexion had been ashen, this baby's cheeks were pink and glowing, fat where they once were hollow."

Rich stopped, crossed his legs again.

"Of course, that wasn't the end."

I hoped not. The music took a turn, an electric guitar breaking free from the leaden riffs, lighting the tempo of the heavy song aflame, building toward a new intensity.

"Satan has his price," Rich said. "First, this house. Second, the health and sanity of all who dwell within. All prelude to ensure the misery of their souls when he finally collects them."

I thought of the figure on the bed.

"His mark is all around us," Rich said, opening his arms to the room. "Watching all the time."

My eyes went to where he gestured, and I saw them imprinted on the wood paneling of the walls—dozens of dark circles in the vertical slats. I pushed myself off the carpet and stood, turning around the room. The music had accelerated, giving me a sense of freefall: into the pit, maybe, dirt flying into my eyes and mouth as I clawed at the sides helplessly.

They indeed looked like eyes. Wolf's eyes, the eyes of Satan burned into the wood, some of them in crooked pairs, all of them dark and unblinking, watching me.

"This is nothing compared to Satan's womb," Rich said.

"Room," I said, trying to convince myself that the eyes of Satan were indeed upon me.

"Womb," Rich repeated.

I wondered why he kept saying it like that.

"I can show you—unless you're scared," Rich said.

The song ended, the brief silence soon overrun by the ghost whistle of a harmonica.

“Okay,” I said, hoping for a bigger payoff than knots of wood spread out over the walls.

Rich led me to the garage, connected by a door to the kitchen. Unlike other parts of the house, the garage and kitchen appeared frequented, with a white bread sandwich on a plate on the counter, a bite taken from the corner. We went down one step into the concrete garage, where the remains of the afternoon shone from windows near the top of the closed garage door. A broad, empty place to park the car, buckets and yard tools along the walls, some of them on hooks, next to a stack of bicycles, the smallest ones with flat tires. A wooden work bench, painted brown and chipped all over, had been built opposite the garage door, vise perched at the end of it. Next to the work bench, in the far corner of the garage, a closed door.

Rich put his hand on the knob. “Just a glimpse. The horror of what you see may rob you of your sanity.”

I assumed it was some terrible thing he had planted in there, and I was ready to face it. Some dead, wicked ghoul I would stare down before I went home.

Rich opened the door slowly, and through the crack I saw cans of paint, power tools—a drill and circular saw—metal cases of sockets.

“Enter,” he said.

I stepped in front of the doorway and peered inside, my eyes not yet adjusted.

“Toward the back.”

I crossed the threshold and the door slammed behind me.

“No one gets out of Satan’s womb alive!” Rich yelled from the other side of the door.

“Nah, man, come on—” I said.

Automatically, I tried the knob. It turned but I couldn’t push it open. He’d either latched it from the other side or held himself against it.

“Come on, open the door,” I said to the wood in front of my face.

Rich didn’t respond. He probably wanted me to plead with him, quaking with fear.

I stepped back from the door. If I’d been afraid of the dark, I might have been scared. But the dark to me was like Bilbo’s ring, a substance through which I could move freely, unnoticed, watchful, the advantage mine. And if I’d been afraid of tight, enclosed spaces, I might have panicked—but those were the spaces I went to when Mrs. Eberhart asked me what I wanted, or when Divin’ Duck wanted to play the game of *Life* again when she clearly couldn’t understand the rules, or when Big G asked me to take out the trash or June had me in a headlock or when Pops had inflated himself with disparate, unconnected grievances and was ready to lay into a lecture of breathtaking proportions. All of it made me so tired. I wanted, at those times, to be in a small room, no doors for entering, the walls and ceiling painted a slightly darker shade of blue than the sky, and a single bed that, when I lay on it, made me feel like I was floating. I didn’t want to be there forever, but just in those moments. In that room I wouldn’t have to learn how to apologize to Quinn, or to Adam. No one to walk in and bother me. No Divin’ Duck, no Big G, no Mom.

It was back when Divin’ Duck couldn’t yet walk and had to be carried everywhere. Pops was gone again. He was often gone for work, or something else. They weren’t so forthcoming with the details. Mom couldn’t take us trick-or-treating because of Duck, but the whole day she made giving out the candy, which she had dumped into a big silver mixing bowl, sound just as fun.

“Best part is, you get to keep whatever’s left over,” she told us, sliding a peanut butter cup over to June and me, even though we hadn’t eaten breakfast yet.

It had been raining all week and Halloween just crept up. The roads were no good for driving, so we couldn't get costumes at the store. She didn't think many people would be out anyway, to come to the door, which left us with pretty good prospects for a Halloween takeaway. That morning, she drew us masks with crayons on paper bags, a skull for June, werewolf for me. She let us cut them out. When we were done, she cut out the eyeholes, and with a needle through each side, tied a string.

The rain didn't stop the trick-or-treaters after all, and every time the doorbell rang, Duck would start crying, while June and I jumped up in our paper masks and raced to the front door, dropping candy into plastic buckets and bags, Mom in the living room, trying to calm down Duck.

Maybe it was the constant ringing of the doorbell, those same two notes from one minute to the next, "ding dong" that began to seem like an alarm after a while. Or maybe Mom caught a glimpse of a vampire or princess or robot she didn't like the looks of. She clutched Duck against her breast, breathing hard.

Ding dong.

"Get away from that door and bring me the phone. I'm calling the police."

"It's just the trick-or-treaters," June said.

Again, Duck crying loudly right into her face, her ear.

"They're trying to get into the house," Mom said. "They'll say whatever they want you to believe."

"Let me hold Duckie, Mom," June told her.

“Just as useless as tits on a boar hog,” Big G would tell us, when she was in her mood. “No wonder your mother is the way she is. I don’t know what I’d do with children like you. Haven’t got the brains God gave a goose.”

Standing in the dark, feeling my breath bounce against the dark door in front of me, I tried to grasp what I felt. Afraid? Always, but not because of this. Hurt? Aggrieved? Sure—I hadn’t expected being locked in a closet, but it wasn’t the first closet I’d been locked in. What I felt most of all, there in Satan’s womb, was cheated. If I’d have been June, the door would have been kicked down by now. But I was more a reptile than June could ever be. I went at the door with a cold fury.

I felt along the shelves. First a pair of screwdrivers lying next to each other. I gathered them and flung them at the door, satisfied by the staggered, amplified pops. A hammer next, that sounded like it had chipped off a chunk of wood. The plastic protective covering around the circular saw blade sounded like it broke, first against the door, then against the concrete floor as it landed. The can of paint made the loudest explosion, and I felt its thick liquid contents splash against the legs of my jeans.

The door was then flung wide, and a rectangle of light in front of me swallowed the darkness and released it as a haze, while my eyes adjusted. I’d neither heard the garage door opening, nor the car pulling in. An older man in a loosened tie, brown on a beige shirt, stood in front of me, face contorted, the wisps of his comb-over standing vertically.

“What on earth?” he said, looking at me, at the tools in the pool of blue paint that spread out into the garage from the threshold of the work closet.

Rich wasn’t there. Maybe he’d gone to finish that sandwich on the counter.

“Wait a minute,” he said, as I stepped through the paint toward the open garage door. He put his arm on my shoulder.

Rich arrived, chewing, and stared at the paint spilling from the closet with wide eyes.

“Who is this?” his father said.

I pushed his hand off my shoulder and walked out to the fresh air, which hung cool outside the garage and along the driveway, faded footprints in blue trailing me, growing fainter with each step.

“I had some expensive things in there,” Rich’s father said. “I’m sure my saw is ruined.”

I stood next to Big G in one of her fancier mu‘u mu‘us, and a wiglet she had pinned at the crown of my head, among the lighter brown curly hair. Divin’ Duck was dressed nearly identical, except she wore Big G’s spectacles with the lenses popped out. I just pushed my own glasses to the end of my nose. Big G wore a similar outfit, but for her it was no costume.

Rich and his dad stood in front of us. His dad had changed into a t-shirt, and I noticed dried blue paint splotches on his fingers and forearms.

“The kids are going trick-or-treating,” Big G told him. “I’m sure we can talk about this some other time.”

“Yes, but it’s a matter of the mess, and the considerable expense of some of the tools. The boy should help with some of that.”

“Can we go trick-or-treating now?” Duck said, unwilling to suffer this stranger before us.

Big G was no more than five feet tall, but she had a way of looking down at people, even if they dwarfed her, her head tilted backwards slightly, eyes so hooded you could only see a line

of shadow under the heavy lids. As she regarded Rich's dad, I heard the screen door open and shut. June approached to see what was going on, his left hand in an open bag of Doritos.

"Didn't your son lock Jesse in the closet?" Big G said.

"Can we go trick-or-treating now? Duck asked again, except louder.

"Yes, but I would say the response was asymmetrical."

"I have no idea what that means. What I do know is that I have to get these kids out and back before it gets too late, and then figure out how to get your paint out of Jesse's pants and shoes. Now does—what's this boy's name?"

"Rich," June said, through a mouthful of Doritos.

"Does Rich want to lend a hand with that? If not, I have nothing else to add to this conversation."

Rich's dad stared a moment, his eyebrows drawing, in minute increments, slowly together. He shook his head.

"Fine," he said, pulling Rich away by the forearm. "Maybe you're right, these people are crazy. When the parents are fucked up, the kids are bound to be, too."

At this, June stopped chewing and looked as if he would say something. A second later, he shoved a few more broken triangles, dusted with orange, back into his mouth.

"Beats all I ever seen," Big G said, prodding Divin' Duck and me forward to the neighborhood. "Lock up if you leave, June."

"I'm not going anywhere," June called from behind us.

Big G had let Divin' Duck and I use her least favorite handbags, dangling leather monstrosities as big as my backpack for collecting candy. I wore the handbag hanging from my

elbow as I hobbled beside the two of them, three little old ladies hunting for sweets down suburban sidewalks.

White Man's God

“They were in search of a safe place, away from England, to practice their religion. In the ‘New World’—it wasn’t new to the people living here—religion became another tool for expansion and subjugation. Their white man’s god conveniently underwrote the American empire, at the catastrophic expense of this land’s native peoples.”

Ms. Rivera stood in the spotlight of an overhead projector, partially obscuring a colorful image of behatted and bonneted Pilgrims, with their buckles and dickeys, in fellowship with feathered and beaded Indians, all around a roughly hewn table with the horn of plenty in the middle, brimming with berries and ears of corn.

Every year since I could remember, around the middle of November, we’d talk Thanksgiving at school. The covenant between the peace-loving and righteous English, unjustly persecuted in their home country because of the way in which they implemented Christian doctrine, and the generous and welcoming Indians, who revealed to the Pilgrims the method of survival in this strange and punishing land. But I’d never heard it quite like this. The year before, the teacher droned on while I colored in a turkey I’d made by tracing my open hand on a piece of construction paper.

“You mean God, right?” someone said. “God is everyone’s god.”

Ms. Rivera exhaled through her nose and tilted her head for a moment.

“I want to honor your perspective, Peter,” she said in her deadpan, almost monotone voice, which landed with the firmness of steel at each of our desks. “Thank you for the question. My comment is not meant to cast aspersions on the nature of others’ interpretations of a higher power. Though the nature of God is in itself patriarchal and problematic. I only ask that you keep in mind that the white man’s god, which the Pilgrims brought here, to the east coast of the United

States, and the subsequent interpretation of this god's will—including slavery, along with the concept of Manifest Destiny—is in great part responsible for the genocide of native people from our country. Yes, Morgan?"

"So God caused all the Indians to die?"

"First of all, the Indians are not dead. Don't believe that for a moment. For the sake of their culture and this place in which you live, you must believe that they are alive. They continue to thrive. Native Americans in this country have gone to great lengths to protect their cultures and their languages. Plural, because there is no one single tribe. Second, it wasn't God's fault the Indians have suffered. God was just an excuse for what the people later known as 'Americans' were driven to do. God is good, right? It was our forebears, settlers and cowboys who, if not through disease, were just as effective at killing up close, person to person."

After a long minute of silence, Shelley asked desperately, "What are we supposed to be thankful for, then?"

Ms. Rivera shut off the overhead projector, turned on the classroom lights, and stood at her desk. She smiled.

"You should be thankful that the light of existence is each and every one of you. That you have so much to learn and look forward to. That there are no restrictions to what you can change in this world, for the better. Take the time to be thankful for all who came before you, not just the Pilgrims. Remember the Native Americans, and what they went through as well, what they suffered and who they are now. There is so much to learn. Where do you think the word 'Poquoson' comes from?"

"The Indians?" someone said.

“That’s right. Be thankful that there is almost no end to knowledge, and that it is all there for you. Be thankful that it is you, not the Pilgrims or the cowboys or the soldiers, who has the responsibility to carry us forward.”

After she pulled out her chair and sat down, she smiled again.

“And have a wonderful holiday. I look forward to hearing about what you did over the break when you get back.”

The bell rang seconds later, and we stood from our desks relieved, as if we’d been let off the hook in some way.

Thanksgiving—the meal, not the holiday—was not something I’d considered yet. By way of preparation, Big G had simply moved a plastic wrapped turkey from the freezer to the refrigerator but had not yet tantalized us with the list of dishes that would be lovingly assembled, as Pops never failed to recount in years past. “We got turkey, a little spiral cut honey ham—I like a little ham on Thanksgiving—mashed potatoes, gravy, corn, rolls, candied yams, green bean casserole, and two different kinds of pie, apple and pumpkin. If you go away hungry, it’ll be your own damn fault.” I’d never spent Thanksgiving away from my parents before.

After school I walked with Helena back to her house, both of us in our heavy coats, a little cloud of vapor accompanying each word we spoke. The trees by then were naked, which caused the houses in their yards to seem meager and small. In a few weeks, Christmas lights and decorations would fill in all the empty spaces.

While Helena went on about the rituals of her own Thanksgiving—football, shrimp cocktail, macaroni and cheese, turkey, and biscuits—I thought about the white man’s god, how he’d never really took in our family since Mom and Pops weren’t religious. But they had sent us to church with their friend Mr. Abbott, to get us out of the house on Sunday, for close to two

years. Even without the white man's god pulling the strings, I was still part of a long line of murderers and enslavers, when it came down to it. What to do about all that? I'd never had to consider it before.

"You can come over, if you want," Helena told me.

"Huh?" I said, happy to be redirected from a quickly developing anguish about who the hell I was supposed to be. I had blue eyes. I wasn't Japanese. They all thought Mom was Mexican when she was young.

"If your parents aren't around. My mom said you'd be welcome. Your brother and sister, too. And your grandma."

I'd only yet seen Big G move the turkey from the freezer to the refrigerator. No pie crust or filling, stuffing mix, unpeeled potatoes in a bowl by the sink. But I hadn't ever spent Thanksgiving with anyone but my family. It began to seem sad, the four of us at the kitchen table, an overcooked turkey and a pot of rice, maybe some canned black-eyed peas. No Pops to demand his holiday victuals. And if this was what Thanksgiving would be, what of Christmas?

I knew I didn't belong at Helena's either. There was no way I could vouch for Duck's behavior. And then the problem of Big G—June, he'd probably just disappear. Much as I craved shrimp and biscuits, to deliver and coordinate such an invitation was beyond my abilities.

"That's all right," I said. "My grandma's been working on dinner, getting everything prepped, for the past few days. I appreciate it, though."

"Just wanted to make sure you were welcome," Helena said.

Back at her house, after we'd raided the pantry for Little Debbie chocolate wafer bars, Helena leaned over the counter while her mother, who'd gotten off work early and was actually working on their Thanksgiving meal, folded crust into a metal pie pan.

“What was the hot topic at school today?” she said, pressing her fingers into the rounded corners of the pan.

“Something about God being patriarchal,” Helena said.

Her mother looked up at her, thought a moment.

“Yes, I guess that’s right. Father and son.”

“And that Poquoson is an Indian word,” Helena said.

“Your father learned that when he was fixing to transfer over here,” Helena’s mother said. “A boundary, a swamp or a stream, between two higher land features, or something like that.”

“Whoa, look at the egghead,” Helena said.

Her mother grinned. “Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

Instead of cartoons on TV, lately Helena and I had been playing her parents’ records on the stereo in the living room. We both loved the Motown stuff, lined up in faded and fraying records sleeves: the Temptations and the Supremes especially. We could lip sync the music of either group with coordinated dance moves.

“I just got this one,” she said as she passed me the square cardboard sleeve, still glossy, all black except for a pair of golden eyes, feline, and a single word, as if written by some kid Duck’s age. *Cats*.

“Not for me,” I said.

“Come on, you haven’t given it a chance. I told you how good it was, seeing it live, right? We found the original cast recording this past weekend. It’s even better than the show I saw. This is the song.”

At first, I didn't want to hear it. As it played, I didn't want to feel it. "Memory," it was called, and as it went on, it not only seemed familiar, but that I had known the song my whole life, almost that I had written it myself, that the melody had been slumbering in my heart forever and was only now reawakened. "Memory"—and I, who had so few memories, was at once seized with the possibility that yesterday was indeed better than today, would be better by far than any day that came to pass. As close as the next day came to being the same as the previous, the incontrovertible fact was, it just got worse and worse. So many things I couldn't return to already, not even Thanksgiving. I began to miss everyone, even the people I would see in less than an hour, lament how I treated them. As the song played, I couldn't imagine any way to see it differently.

"The cats?" I said. "They sang this song?"

"Yes!" Helena said. "Other stuff, too, but I don't know, this is just so good."

She was right, except for one part about Deuteronomy that kind of ruined the entire thrust of the song for a minute, early into the song—and though I should have released the heavy feeling this music was pressing into me, I asked her to play it again, because for the moment it felt better buried under the past than stepping forward into an unknown future.

I rewound the melody, summoning it again as I walked from Helena's house to Big G's. She rushed into the kitchen as soon as she heard the door, a couple of loose strands flying loose of the barrettes in her hair. Something was off—Big G was wearing pants and a sweater, her teeth in.

"Where have you been?" she said as I pulled my coat from over my shoulders. "Leave it on. Tony's coming."

"For what?" I said.

“For what? Jesus, you haven’t got the brains god gave a goose. Your sister, Jesse. I don’t know what’s wrong with her.”

Duck? I hurried to the living room where she lay on the couch in her pajamas but with her coat over them, her eyes closed, held propped up slightly against June by his arm around her shoulders.

“Can’t hardly stay awake,” she said, looking out the window toward the driveway.

Divin’ Duck had been home the past few days—but we all got sick, June the worst of us, usually, or he made like he had it the worst. For me, strep throat was an annual visitor, swinging its scythe against my tonsils.

It had been different, this time, now that I thought back. Usually, even though she was sick, Diver would still come around my room to play, with a voice raspier than Big G’s, which had been forged through cigarette smoking from the time she was a teenager to when she had her first heart attack. This time, I couldn’t remember if she left her room at all.

“Here it is now,” Big G said, zipping her coat, a manila file folder in her hand.

I walked behind Big G, who stepped toward the bright white glow behind the glass sliding doors of the emergency room with more urgency than I’d ever seen her move, faster than when Klinger thought there was a mole under her flowerbed and he went at it with his front paws. June had said nothing, simply followed Big G with Divin’ Duck in his arms. There was nothing for me to do. The sword of worry, sharp, keen, had slid through my esophagus, the flat of its blade against my lungs, alongside my heart.

Bloody foreheads, bandaged hands, older men whose knees bounced incessantly in their chairs, women who read magazines and glanced up at the men from time to time—at once I hated all of them. These were the people we had to get past to see the doctor. Whatever their deal

was, it was their own damn fault. While Big G talked to the woman at the desk, June next to her, I stood back and away, watching but not necessarily wanting to hear. Soon a nurse arrived, out from a swinging door, and reached out to June to take Duck, who whimpered quietly. Big G followed her through the swinging doors.

June looked at me for a moment, his face devoid of any emotion or intent, before he went over to the waiting room chairs and took a seat away from a man who kept nodding and lacing his fingers together. After I tried unsuccessfully to see anything through the high square window on the door through which Big G and Duck had gone, I went and took the chair next to him, spreading the magazines stacked on a low table in front of me, looking for a *People Magazine* among the *Sports Illustrated* and *Town and Country*. The sword inside had begun to twist slightly. June stared at the nodding man openly, blankly, while I read an article about Pam Dawber and Mark Harmon.

Twenty minutes later, Big G stood in front of us.

“Tony’s coming back,” she said. “Pneumonia. She’s going to be on oxygen for a little while. Nothing you can do tonight. Go home and I’ll bring you back tomorrow.” She passed June the keys and some folded bills for Tony. “Don’t lose them.”

The ride home, each of us sat at opposite windows on the leather backseat of Tony’s Cabriolet, June staring out the window, his thumbnail between his teeth.

“I’m sure everything is going to be just fine,” Tony said to the rearview mirror.

I hated when people told me that.

Klinger shimmied himself out from his doghouse and sniffed at our knees as we opened the door to Big G’s darkened house. With the lights off and the house empty, it was clear that this was not my home, even though I’d been living in that bedroom near the back for months.

There wasn't a time I could remember being in the house alone, when Big G wasn't in her recliner or washing the clothes or out in the yard, picking at weeds or the browning growths of her plants. Without her there, the house was cold, indifferent.

"We could watch TV," I told June, imagining, for a second, that we'd get drunk on ice cream and soda, immerse ourselves in the mysteries of late-night television programming. I didn't have the heart for it, but it was better than sitting with the sword I'd swallowed. June shook his head.

"Going to bed," he said.

June went to the door and whistled for Klinger, who approached and looked at him uncertainly. "Come on, get in here," he said. "It's all right." When Klinger still wouldn't pass the threshold June took him by the collar and dragged him inside, and for the first time Klinger had set his three feet my grandmother's cool kitchen floor. June corralled him to the bedroom and made him lie down.

As before, as it was for all time, I followed him. Thoughtlessly I went through my nighttime things—brushing teeth, peeing, undressing, and slipping into the cool sheets under the bedspread. The darkness was just shade thrown over all the objects in my line of sight, which I could still perceive in all of their solidity by the streetlights and porch lights of the neighborhood, shining through the window. Corporal Klinger was a dark, respiring bundle next to June's bed, snuffling, occasionally sighing into his front paws. I had learned to be comfortable in the darkness, the sheet of calm in which it enveloped its dreamers.

But Duck had never yet learned that. She still wanted a night light in her room.

"June," I said to the bed across from mine.

"Don't say it, Jesse," June said. "Don't even think it. It won't do any good, anyway."

I'd never known June to be inclined to fret. For me, fretting about everything was simply a component to participation in life. It was a matter of putting two and two together, and if you considered anything for any period of time—your mother's nervous breakdown, how your father spent his money, the Pilgrims, the Indians, the white man's god, Big G's bad moods, the way your brother pushed you out of the way when he couldn't simply *move through you*, what happened to Adam, how nice it would have been to have met Ms. Rivera when she was your age, so you could tell her, "I know you from somewhere. My dreams," your sister, your grades, how bad you were at everything and when it was all summed up, how little you really had to offer—fretting was simply the default thought process. And then, when all those worrying things seemed so far away and had nothing to do with you anyway, there was always something to fill the lack, some shameful wraith in the depths of memory to throw under the hot lamps, to harass in the light.

But this was something else altogether. June was scared. For a second, I saw things like he saw things. How it wouldn't do to fret about Divin' Duck. How it would only dissipate the energy that went into hoping.

The next morning, June beat out and rearranged the blankets in Klinger's doghouse, made sure he was warm enough. I wasn't necessarily hungry, but there was an emptiness inside me I thought some nourishment might at least coat over. In the pantry I withdrew the can of whole chicken and carried it to the table, and with a hand opener cut away the lid. There was no point in using a plate. With my fingers I withdrew wings and legs and breast meat from the salty brine, with the sense that I was preparing myself, like a Norse warrior, for some kind of finality. Big G called to let us know Tony was on his way, and when it pulled up we silently took our places in the back seat again.

The nurses led us to a room after we told them our sister's name at the desk. In the mostly empty halls, the squeak of rubber soles against linoleum echoes ahead of us, behind us, around corners. It was Thanksgiving day. Big G stepped out of the door to the hall.

"On oxygen part of the night. They've taken her off. She's sleeping now."

June and I stood next to each other facing Big G.

"Go on, you can see her. I've got to take care of some paperwork. I'll be back. Go on."

We watched as she went down the hall, listened for the squeak of her shoes as she turned down another corridor toward the elevator.

I took the knob of the door and pushed it open. June hadn't moved.

"You coming?" I said.

June stared at me for a long time. "No," he said.

"Come on, man. It's Duck."

"I can't," June said.

There was something behind the blankness I didn't want to see. "Go on," he said.

After a moment, I nodded and entered the room, let the door close behind me.

Duck lay tiny in the hospital bed. The sheets had been pulled up to her chest and underneath her arms, which were bare except for the short sleeves of the hospital gown. A clear tube ran out from under her nose to a digital box on an aluminum pole next to the bed; a plastic clip on her index finger was attached to some numerical panel alongside the other machines.

The curtains had been drawn, but the white morning light pressed against them; a bar of it lay below the curtains' hem, on the ground, just below the windowsill. Besides the muted daylight, the greenish glow from the machines around Duck's bed, and a lamp on an end table next to the entrance to the bathroom illuminated the room. Duck's pajamas and coat lay under

the lamp. Next to the bed, Big G had slid over a heavy wooden chair, upholstered in the pilled, scratchy red covering of movie theater seats. I sat down.

I couldn't say if I loved my sister. Looking at her in this way, she was unknown to me, certainly not the extension of myself I'd imagined her to be, this angel or demon I would conjure when I felt like torturing myself. Just part of the tableau; and I could call her forth and put her away as I wished. Lately I'd been putting her away more often, because I'd felt sure there was nothing she could teach me, nothing she could do or make up that I couldn't do or make up ten times better. Other than being cute whenever it suited her, Duck was a pain in the ass.

But it wasn't a figment of my imagination before me. I wouldn't have come up with this scenario, her unconscious in a hospital bed. Duck was my sister. She was not me. She was sick. Looking at her this way, I wanted to protect her, instead of giving her a hard time like I always did. Out of all of us, she looked the most like Big G, especially when she smiled, her eyes like horizontal parentheses.

None of us, I knew, was exempt from the Punishment. June, he tried to get out of every little thing, skirt the responsibility of paying the price. For me, no punishment was unjust—even when wrongly accused and wrongly prosecuted, I knew I had it coming, that there were a million other little things I'd gotten away with. I deserved it, over and over again. I knew I deserved it. For what I did to Adam. For how I treated Quinn. For how I treated Duck. Duck, though, never deserved this. If I could only appeal to the white man's god, negotiate an exit from this standoff—I mean, I'd seen as much TV as I could possibly stand. And even though they'd keep making it, it wasn't going to get any better. I wanted Duck to have that, too. In the deepest chamber of the ninth dungeon, I'd slain Gannon with my master sword and silver arrows. I

wanted Duck to know that, too. If I'd had a relationship with Jesus, I'd try to reason with him, explain that I was the better candidate of the two.

But I knew turning to Jesus wasn't a possibility. For two years we had gone every Sunday for two years to the Baptist church with Mr. Abbott, his wife, and their son, Sunday school followed by an adult sermon, wooden pews from which I watched the heads of Christ's attendants, slouching until my forehead rested against the back of the pew in front of me. Stand and sing, sit. Stand and sing, sit. Jesus gave us the marijuana plant, but the devil taught us to smoke it.

Mr. Abbott's son Patrick was adult age, and the whole time I knew him he wore a metal headgear in which curved white plastic pads against his shoulders supported a frame attached to a halo that encircled the crown of his head, locked into place by screws that pressed into his temples and skull, rubbed the skin raw and red. I never heard him speak once, either in the van to church or at church. His eyes, though, were constantly moving, nearly panicked as he was led from seat to seat, from van to church pew.

Baptism wasn't enough—we had to get saved, too, in the back of Mr. Abbott's van, with our eyes closed as he recited the words that would make Jesus Christ our lord and savior. We went along with it, because it would have been unacceptable to not have accepted, even though I'd never been convinced. I fretted about it constantly. With my soul at stake, why not let Jesus do the heavy lifting, deal with all the cares?

Because my beef with Jesus was the same as everyone else's. The Indians and the Jews and the African Americans, child kidnappers, what they did to Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., who were just trying to help things along. If Jesus wasn't complicit, he sure as hell let a lot of stuff go. Every time I brought it up in Sunday school they'd throw free will in my

face, and I'd say no way, man. If free will is what you say it is, then God and free will are mutually exclusive. For why are some of the purest expressions of human free will the most ungodly in nature?

There was no one to talk to about it. Mom and Pops didn't care—they just wanted a quiet Sunday to themselves. Knowing Jesus was as unimportant as knowing their state senator. At some point, I began to wear down. I had to reconcile myself to this Jesus. The fear of hell, more than the succor of a Christian life, took root deep within me. It was on a van ride to church that I told myself silently that it was just easier to be for Jesus.

All at once, everything that had been knotted up in me came loose, and a low wave, soothing but powerful, gently eased the confusion out of me. I had the kind of religious experience old widows relate in the *National Enquirer*. I saw the light.

People had been waiting for Jesus for thousands of years, and here he had revealed himself to me personally, knocking at my front door, offering a lifetime of relief, if I'd only surrender to righteousness and piety. But I couldn't open the front door. Instead, I looked from the peephole. There was life to live, yet. To kiss someone, to see Suzanne Somers emerge topless from a swimming pool. Eventually, I went back to watching TV, and Jesus passed by.

There was no recourse to praying to a god I'd forsaken. But I would have, if it could've helped Divin' Duck. If Jesus was as cool as they said he was, he'd take it out on me, not Duck. I was the one who, as Mom used to tell me, was "cruising for a bruising." Pleading for a beating. Praying for a flaying. Duck, man, she just wanted to stay gassed all the time, and what was the point in taking that away from her?

It was just me. Not even June, who might have been pretending all this wasn't happening, for all I knew. Just me, trapped behind my eyes, separate from my sister, who lay before me,

sleeping. Me, faithless, helpless, with a long list of nothing for all the times when I had willed things to be different. Nevertheless, I willed again. I didn't want anything to happen to Duck. Even though I wasn't sure if I loved her, even though I never really knew her and assumed most of the things I had crafted in my story about her. No Jesus, no June, no Big G—just me.

I sat there, disavowing all the illusions I had of magic or some Jedi power. I stared at Divin' Duck. Hoping. The door opened, slowly, and two figures stepped into the room.

“Hey, Ma,” I said.

I could only glance up at her face, saw Pops behind her. Until she had slid onto the edge of Duck's bed in front of me, from where I sat on the chair, I could keep only the middle of her body in my line of sight. I wrapped my arms around her and buried my face in her chest.

“Duckie needs to rest,” Mom said. “Let's give her some time to sleep, okay?”

Big G told Mom and Pops to take June and me home, that she would stay with Duck until she woke up and call us after.

“Grandma got a spread waiting for you folks back at the house?” Pops said. In the rearview mirror we could see the dark circles under his eyes. He was talking Thanksgiving because he wanted to get our minds off Duck. His guidance had always been: if something is bothering you, just pretend it doesn't exist. Especially if there's nothing you can do about it.

“Turkey,” June said.

“That it? That's a shame.”

On the way back to the house Pops stopped off at the grocery store and bought instant mashed potatoes, gravy from a packet mix, and a premade pumpkin pie. While he was in the store, I watched Mom from the backseat with a growing sense of relief, similar to what I'd felt

when June had been infected with poison oak. That this monster with the swollen face both weeping and crusty, was still my brother. And it was still my mother, too, even though she was heavier, a little more subdued than last I'd seen her, and her permanent had gone mostly limp. Where I felt shy, though, June filled the car with stories of school, things he'd never told me: a ferret named Gerald in science class, how he was thinking about joining the football team when he started high school, that he could do ten pull ups. I could barely manage one.

So it went when we got back to the house. Big G called and said Duck would be home the next day, and June elbowed his way to the front of my mother's line, to suck up as much of her love before she had to switch it over to Divin' Duck. I wasn't resentful. I watched and laughed along, standing next to Mom until she noticed and put a hand on the back of my neck while June talked himself into a kind of frenzy. Even Pops stared in wonder from the oven where the turkey was cooking, and the powdered mashed potatoes were being mixed with boiling water on the stove. About Klinger and what had really happened when we went camping, how Pops got drunk and threw all the camping gear away afterward. At which point Pops disappeared from the house, saying he had to take Klinger for a walk. And I leaned further into my mother as she sat at the table, thinking it was all as it should have been.

There was life to live, yet. She'd stay with us the long weekend then go, after the dry turkey had been made into the last of the sandwiches and Monday came around again.

The Mountain

“You want this?” Helena asked, holding her Magic 8-Ball out to me. In her other hand she held a black plastic garbage bag, half-filled with stuffed animals and board games she’d outgrown, a broken E Z Bake Oven.

I sat on the edge of her bed and shook my head, certain there was some bottomless well inside me, growing deeper and darker and more hopeless every minute. Every unloved toy that went into Helena’s bag fell through me as well—but didn’t land, was lost for good. I knew if I took Helena’s Magic 8-Ball I would receive the same answer to every question: “Reply hazy, ask again later.”

Helena’s father had gotten orders for a transfer to San Francisco, after the end of the semester, just before Christmas. She was supposed to have stayed for three years, but her father was promoted to Lt. Colonel, and he was needed elsewhere. It hadn’t been expected by the family, exactly, least of all by me. I’d imagined Helena and I walking side-by-side down broad sunlit avenues into the future, stepping into shops to look at comic books or records, eating whatever we wanted if we happened to get hungry. In front of me now was a scarred and imperious mountain, its treacherous paths narrow, suitable for only one climber at a time, its handholds scanty, unstable. I saw the future as a taxing slog upwards into ever more danger.

Helena dropped the Magic 8-Ball into the bag and hunted for other things to throw away. Already her bedroom had grown sparse—most of the toys either packed or thrown out, the posters of Paula Abdul, Jodi Watley, rolled into a cardboard packing tube, the books in boxes, the bookshelf wobbly without the steadying weight. Soon the bedframe would be dismantled and stacked, the naked mattress and box spring slid up on their sides against the wall of a moving van.

I considered telling Helena I hated her and having done with it. But I knew the only way to spend more time with her was in being helpful, even though I just sat there and mourned inwardly. Another item fell into the bag, descended into the endless pit of me, never to be retrieved.

“Does Jesse want something to eat?” Helena’s mother called from the kitchen.

“You hungry?” she asked, distracted, disinterested in my answer.

I shook my head again. Maybe it was easier to tell her I hated her after all.

“I better get home,” I said. “We’re gonna eat dinner soon, anyway.”

I didn’t feel the cold as I passed through her yard and unlatched Big G’s gate. Klinger gave a perfunctory half-bark as he roused himself from his warm doghouse and approached.

“Poor old man,” I said as I rubbed behind his jowls, over his ears. Lately we’d grown close, as I’d sit on the concrete square outside the kitchen door, watching the dark bodies in the bright, quickly emptying rooms in the house across the way. I’d put my arm around his body and he would sigh, blinking, his sad face saying more than I had the courage to express.

When I walked into the kitchen, June looked up from where he’d made a sizable Play Doh town with Divin’ Duck, with streets and multi-floor buildings and cars between. She had bounced back over the past couple weeks—at times seemingly higher and farther than she’d been before, keyed up by our deference to her—though she was still a little pale, and didn’t carry weight as she’d had. June and I made more time for her, especially since she still couldn’t go outside all that much.

“What’s that man,” Duck said as June tried to affix a blue figure to the top of a nodding skyscraper.

“It’s not a man, it’s a giant ape,” June said. He turned to me. “What, those people haven’t left yet?”

I draped my coat around the back of the kitchen chair.

“No,” I said.

“Poor Sluggo,” June said. He twisted a green string of Play Doh between his fingers.

“The only truth is that love will tear us apart. Maybe you can be pen pals.”

At this Divin’ Duck turned to me. “Jesse’s got a girlfriend,” she sang, glancing over at June to back her up.

I stepped behind her and brought my closed fist down on the skyscraper, smashing the ape into the soft composition of its blended colors.

“Hey,” Divin’ Duck yelled.

All at once June sprang from the table and shoved me against the wall, pressing his weight against me.

“What the hell’s your problem?”

I had the tendency of biting my lips when the urge to do violence overcame me. It must have looked ridiculous. June knew it and watched me, trying to anticipate his next move. I spit my lips out of my mouth.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I said.

“No shit she’s not your girlfriend,” June said. “Not many girls be interested in you.”

“You’re mean,” Duck said. She was already rolling her dream city into a big brown ball.

I stood outside the living room as Big G watched her reruns in the recliner. Buddy Ebsen, Dennis Weaver, Robert Conrad, Robert Culp—I could name them all by then. As soon as the wooly Seventies footage cut to the harsh fluorescent light of a video commercial, I stepped in

front of the television. Big G was first inclined to look around me toward the screen, before she at last looked up at me.

“What is it, Jesse?” she said, in her recurrent mode of exasperation.

“I want to go to the store,” I told her.

“Now? Kind of late isn’t it?”

“Not now—this weekend, maybe. I was hoping we could go to the store. This weekend.”

Big G shrugged. “That’s fine, the store this weekend. What do you need?”

“Gift, maybe. For Helena.”

“Girl next door.”

“She’s moving away,” I said. “I wanted to get something to say goodbye.”

“Moving away? They just got here.”

“Yeah, her dad got promoted and he’s being transferred—”

“Promoted, huh? Good for them.”

I stood while she considered the upward mobility of “good” Blacks versus the stereotypical ones she usually kept top of mind, for easy reference. I’d always assumed her feelings were ingrained, abstract—more a talking point than a real point of view—but maybe it wasn’t the case, after all. I didn’t care, as long as I got what I wanted.

“You’re going to miss her,” Big G said.

“I guess,” I said.

“All right, this weekend. We’ll walk down to the shopping center.”

“I don’t want June or Duck to come,” I added quickly.

Big G frowned. “We’ll see what we can do, Jesse. Now can I get back to my show?”

At school everyone talked about what they wanted for Christmas. It was the first year I can remember not wanting anything, unless it was a Walkman, which I knew was an impossibility. I'd get a puzzle game, maybe, a book, socks, underwear, a sensible sweater. On our way to school June related his own Christmas fantasies, how he'd talked to Pops on the phone and since Mom was doing better maybe she'd come down for Christmas too, and then, who knew—maybe it would all be like it was again.

I listened to him go on, and nodded, wanting to tell him “fat fucking chance.”

One of the McCords, Phil, had started playing touch football with Davis, Bea, Helena, and the rest of us during recess. Every time he played defense on Joey, the fastest of the receivers but the smallest, he'd body check him, crow about it after.

“No way you're getting past me, Webster,” he'd say, at the line of scrimmage.

Joey ignored him, stared straight ahead, and ran his routes across the asphalt school yard. When I rotated to quarterback I saw Joey picking himself off the ground as Phil hustled back to the line. Once everyone was in place I did a quick hike and spiraled the football, not hard, into the side of Phil's head.

At once he was in my face.

“What the fuck, asshole?”

I raised my hands and apologized profusely. Trying for a screen pass, and the ball just slipped out of my hand. The bell rang, and as we dispersed, I had the sinking that that chicken would be coming home to roost. Oh well. It was just another damn thing.

The weekend came, and by that time Helena's house was mostly empty. They'd been put up in lodgings at the base. Big G told June definitively to watch Divin' Duck while she took me to the store, rare for her, to speak to him in such a way.

“It’s because you’re getting us presents, isn’t it?” Duck said, winking big at me.

I had the vague idea of getting some kind of toy for Helena as a Christmas going-away gift, something digital with buttons and a speaker and lightbulbs. That kind of present was neither in Big G’s price range, nor was it within the standards of what she considered reasonable. In the Waldenbooks next to the Safeway she gently, without speaking, guided me to the calendars, which were on sale, the year nearly over.

I brought her two calendars, both of them *30 Years of Billboard Hits – 1958-1988*. Each month featured a collage of musicians who scored a hit that particular month. Rupert Holmes, Donna Summer, the 5th Dimension, The Rolling Stones, Merilee Rush. Every week noted a number one single of a particular year.

Big G was skeptical, the selection obviously not according to her notion of practicality. Over the calendars in my hand, she slid a daily planner, thin, with a black vinyl leather-like cover.

“Something she can use,” Big G said. “And it’s half off.”

At home that night, after Duck went to bed and June was mired in his weekend television, I went to the kitchen table with the organizer, a pair of scissors, a brown paper grocery bag, and some tape. I turned the pages of the daily planner—no cartoon illustrations or bubble print fonts, neon colors or fun facts related to zoological phenomena. Just numbers and letters printed in black, sometimes red, on off-white paper, along clean lines and squares. On Big G’s note pad with the bananas, apples, and oranges in the corner of each page, where she made her weekly grocery lists, I wrote *There’s always something new to look forward to. I hope this helps you keep track*. I slid the note inside the front cover of the organizer and taped the brown paper around it.

That Monday I walked to school with June, the organizer in my backpack. As we approached the steps to the brick building with the long line of glass doors, and the children in the coats and backpacks desperate for a few more moments of the morning and saying whatever they liked, all of them milling around purposelessly with great purpose, I slid the thin package from my backpack, hoping to get it to Helena before the bell rang.

“What’s that?” June asked me as we took the first step.

“Nothing,” I told him.

He stepped in front of me. “Come on, what is it?” He could see by now that I’d written “Helena” in marker on the front of the package. “What did you get her?”

“Nothing,” I repeated, trying to step past him.

In his mind, I suppose he was trying to be harmlessly nosy—it wasn’t the wrapped gift that had piqued his curiosity, it was that I didn’t want to tell him anything.

He snatched the package from my hand and held it away from me. “Just tell me what it is.”

I shoved him with one hand while reaching for the organizer with the other. He swatted at me with the daily planner automatically, the edge of it landing against the side of my face, knocking my glasses off my nose where they hit the smooth cement squares on the landing the school’s entrance, sliding until they bumped against the rubber sole of some kid’s tennis shoe. As if a switch had been flipped, it became very quiet instantly.

June’s face was still close enough for me to see, even though I was blind to the smear of colors around me. He’d always wore this half-smile, amused by a thing known only to him, the kind of look prevalent among the socially anxious. For a second, he was truly surprised. It almost looked as though he would apologize.

Instead of biting my lips, I pursed them, breathing hard through my nose. Sometimes, you don't have to care what the other person is thinking, what they intended. Sometimes you just want to destroy what is in front of you.

All this in less of a second. Children pressing in at once, as naturally as if there'd been some twist in the weather. June's face going blank, as he realized he would have to do something he didn't want to do.

Pops didn't call me Slugger for nothing. I got wild hairs, too. Sometimes you get a wild hair up your ass and throw yourself against the mountain.

Poquoson: A Critical Review

Anecdote One.

On the Saturday morning I was to commence writing this paper, around five a.m., I went for a run through Waikiki. I wanted to get through my daily exercise early so I could make a volunteer shift at the radio station at six. Still dark out, and the sidewalks scant of people: sleepers under tilted umbrellas and tarps and tent pieces posted in various concrete corners; an occasional desperate-eyed runner like me, acknowledging me in only the briefest, already exhausted glance; and a jet lagged tourist, dressed for the day and seeking breakfast in the predawn, killing time before everything opened, before the street lamps power down and the sunlight replaces their pallid, slightly hazy glow.

It wasn't a morning when I enjoyed my run. My route goes along Kalākaua Avenue to Kapi'olani Park, around the park past the profile of Lē'ahi (Diamond Head) and the rear of the zoo, down to the end of Ala Wai Drive to the backside of the convention center, where retirees practice a kind of percussive calisthenics in front of the Ala Wai Canal, beating the palms of their hands against their thighs, swinging their arms to bounce against the trunks of their bodies in timed cycles on the brick walk of the canal promenade. This morning, though, I wasn't feeling it—instead of the clarity of thought that usually settles in after the second mile (I outlined all my area exam papers and most of *Poquoson* out on these daily runs), I just wanted it done. It was too damn early, I was slightly hungover, and I had a long day of writing after I finished the five hours of volunteering. The only way to get through it as soon as possible was to *not stop*. It didn't seem impossible because of the few cars on the road at that time; I could just run through

the streetlights even if they were red. This is why you see runners jogging in place at intersections—it seems to require an inordinate amount of energy to summon the momentum back to a regular pace once you’ve been halted in place. I was tired and I knew I was going to be late already, so I resolved to run one step after the other, feeling each footfall distinctly.

Along Kalākaua Avenue on the dusty flat paving stones in front of the Royal Hawaiian Center, I saw two ducks, one on top of the other, clear under the pallid and slightly grimy streetlights. I probably heard them first. Rather, I heard the one being mounted, who repeated the same phrase over again in intervals, a long “raaak” followed by three short “raks.” “Raaak, rak, rak, rak.” It didn’t register, though, until I came right upon them. They neither stopped nor fled as I approached.

Keep in mind that these weren’t the ubiquitous zebra doves you see in every cranny over Oahu. They were ducks. The bigger duck, one top, extended a wing on the ground for leverage as it sought to position itself over the smaller duck’s back, viciously biting at the base of the smaller duck’s neck with the end of its bill. The smaller one could only rotate in circles as the longer one kept biting and positioning, and with each turn, another “raaak, rak, rak, rak.”

I was tired, I was late, and I had resolved to not stop running. But I wanted to understand what I saw before me. Maybe stopping then made the moment seem more significant—when you’re running a familiar route, so much else is happening in your mind, and your body is on autopilot, muscle memory adjusting for any slight change in terrain. When you stop, your body and its senses are thrust abruptly back into itself, and you feel at once the atmosphere, the pressure of your breath against your chest, how much you’ve been sweating, all the little twinges in your aging body you have thus far ignored. It was this state of awareness that I brought to the ducks before me.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen birds engaged in a sexual encounter; though in most cases, they are pretty effective at keeping their intimate business away from prying human eyes. But never had it struck me as so blunt, the cries of the duck underneath so seemingly desperate, so pathetic—they couldn't be quacks of ecstasy, could they? Was there pleasure, consent? I was distressed, outraged. On the early morning sidewalks of Wakiki, an Olympian tragedy seemed to be playing out between these two small creatures in unseen coitus, or something very close to it.

My first inclination was to break them up, to preserve the dignity or maidenhood of the smaller duck. But after I took a step toward them, I stopped again. Whatever was happening was beyond any intent or scheme I could impose on these wild animals. I turned, I let them be. Their copulation undoubtedly hatched something in my brain, where the brutality of the act cycles through in my attempt to draw meaning from it.

Anecdote Two.

After the dissolution of my relationship with my fiancée this past summer, just weeks before our scheduled wedding date, I struggled with an uncertain state of mind. Sometimes manic, often obsessive, just as often depressive, a shattered set of pieces that kept reordering themselves in overlapping and uncomfortable ways. I lacked the capacity to feel joy. I was also staring down a creative dissertation I had to write and a language (Russian) I had to relearn to meet my PhD program requirements. Unwisely, I leaned on alcohol and drugs to cope with this fractured psyche, and often they simply brought the abyss forward in larger, more terrifying definition.

One summer afternoon, one of those southerly wind days when the air is less invisible and is more of a presence in its warm stillness against one's skin, I dropped a tab of LSD and

walked down King Street, toward the Varsity Building, where I was to meet a friend at an event for which he was DJ-ing music. I was early, and before meeting up with him, I bought a tall boy of Miller Lite at the 7-11 past University Avenue. Sipping at the beer in its brown paper bag, I wandered behind the 7-11, down the short road crowded with apartment buildings to the H-1 freeway overpass, just before the entrance to the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa lower campus. There is a laundromat on the corner there, and it infused the still, warm air with the smell of clean clothes.

The sun had not yet gone down. It was a lovely summer evening, and maybe, if not for the drugs, I wouldn’t have acknowledged it as so. I sat down on the edge of the curb and looked out at all before me, annoyed at once by the sharp cry, the persistent “cheep, cheep” of what I assumed was a baby bird that had fallen out of its nest. It cut through the ambient noise of the cars speeding by on the overpass, the transformers and chillers, all the city’s machinery going in and out like respiration. It distracted me from full immersion in the scene before me: the feral cats spread out like pelts on the gravel across the street, in front of a chain link fence, the heat of the evening having deflated them, flattening them out. Along the freeway on the other side of the street, a dog park I was seeing for the first time, where, far off, the silhouette of a very large, round man walked briskly with a very small dog. The baby bird went on, “cheep, cheep.”

What had hurt me most was not that my girlfriend, my fiancée, had broken off our engagement, ending our seven-year relationship. It was that she had been untrue. Breaking up was something I could understand; I’d broken up with the best of them. But cheating (*on me?*) was something that caused me great pain and confusion. Even worse, I kind of liked her, not simply loved her. What I wanted to know was—if the baby bird would stop cheeping for a second and let me get my head together—what did the moment of resolve look like to her? When

one decides to take an action that will undoubtedly hurt or bring misery to someone else, what does the decision look like, feel like, in their hearts? Is it a conscious step or is it, like most things, the abdication of thought for feeling until the familiar twist of our best friend guilt arrives, on cue? For the first time after several months, I could almost consider her decision objectively, out of a genuine curiosity, out from underneath the smothering self-pity that had darkened my life. Like a writer, I was beginning to sympathize with something I hated, building toward an honest perspective.

I needed that moment. I realized the desire to examine experience, not simply as something that happened (or, in a fictional sense, something that could have happened), but as a moment that resounds against other moments and resounds and enlarges and shrinks and harmonizes with and echoes against and refines those moments in an ever-expanding map of consciousness and memory, that ground upon which our selves know their selfhood. It could just as easily be characterized as a musical score or a land map, or an organizational chart, or a love letter, or a quadruple album. Sitting there I had identified, if not a dramatic or narrative path forward in the creative dissertation that was to become *Poquoson*, the fuel that would power the engine to lay the path. I felt that instead of simply pursuing a neat idea I'd had, I understood what I was *doing it for*. The misshapen chunk of a moment refracts its unholy light against ten thousand other moments, and in the light bridges from each to each one may find a story.

The sun was dimming, and I felt an absence as I stared out to the cats, the dog park, the freeway overpass. I no longer heard the cry of the baby bird, just the hum of the city's machinery. I had wanted so badly for it to stop, but now that it was gone, it seemed incredibly sad. I assumed one of the cats had lazily stalked over to it and put it out of its misery.

Theme, Part One.

I relate these two anecdotes because in each instance I felt liberated from my oppressive need to understand what I see on my own terms; that there was something terrible and magnificent, small as it was, in the world's turning that was beautifully beyond me. As Jesse writes to Helena in his goodbye note: *There are always new things to look forward to. I hope this helps you keep track.* This is my primary motivation as a writer: I bear witness, and in the witnessing I am changed. I want to testify, to tell someone about it. In my case, I had to figure out how to turn away from a life that I had thus far so diligently planned. The nature of identity is a recurring theme in my fiction, that of a character asking, "who should I be now?" Given this revelation, this new piece of information, this terrible knowledge that upends everything considered before, "who should I be now?" I don't buy into the conventionally held opinion that, after a certain point, people can't or don't change. Though certain habits may be fixed, minds and hearts may be changed, even incrementally, since age gives us the wisdom in that not every little thing seems so monumental. One may tweak, adjust, update, upgrade, if only to get by a little longer.

To more deeply explore *why* this question of identity—that it is constructed rather than inherited, that it is fluid, by greater and lesser degrees, instead of fixed—repeats itself so often in my work would require some psychoanalysis of self that would likely discomfort as much as illuminate me. On a surface level, though, I can offer this, as background: in my childhood, I lived in five different places, from the southern United States (Pine Bluff, Arkansas) to the East Coast (Vienna and Poquoson, Virginia), to the West Coast (San Francisco, California) to the Pacific (Kāneʻohe, Hawaiʻi). My family lineage includes Pennsylvania Dutch, Japanese settlers

in Hawai‘i, Oklahoma laborers who moved to California for agricultural work, and each branch of the family has its straights and weirdos. I lived a year in a kind of exile in Asia, and three years in Europe, most of that time in southern Ukraine. When I turned forty, I resolved to learn everything I could about jazz music, which I’d all but ignored for the first forty years of my life. I haven’t owned a car since 2010. I am a settler, a haole, a white man in Hawai‘i. Most of my closest friends from Castle High in Kāne‘ohe, to whom my identity once seemed so fused, are married with children, while I am alone and maybe always will be. In my spare time, I make up stories about imaginary people. I’m a graduate student in the Department of English, and the Director of the Office of Human Resources at the University of Hawai‘i, and I feel myself more an artist than an administrator, deluded as that might be. I interact with distinguished professionals daily, which causes me to be extremely conscious of everything I say—it’s an effort for someone whose baseline utterance is a swear word. I once saw a duck try to fuck another duck on the early morning sidewalks of Waikiki. In all things, I try not to make people feel bad about how they think, what they do, or what they say, since we’re all just trying to get through this, one damn thing at a time. I also know that, as well-intentioned as this point-of-view may seem, it is ethically lazy. Probably my most consistent trait is circumspection, except when I get drunk and I don’t give a shit about any or all of the above. No matter how much I drink, I’ll always have one more. I suppose that, as I slip into the next costume (I hate to think of them as masks) for the next role I have to play—a role that I’ve studied, a role I believe in—the question of “who should I be now?” is always floating there, near top of mind.

In a coming-of-age novel like *Poquoson*, the question of “who should I be now?” surfaces at various points throughout the story. Because of the youth of the narrator, his changes seem to narratively play out on a much grander scale than what an adult would interpret as

significant; as I wrote in my prospectus, I was seeking, in my creative dissertation, to portray the shaping of a personage when they are still fresh clay, not after they've dried out and grown brittle (I can provide plenty of dried out and brittle characters in my fictional rogue's gallery). Part of the endeavor of my project was to clearly identify those moments that build selfhood, and in the process, give definition to a soul. The connective tissue between those moments would comprise the drama of the story.

Development as a Writer.

In my development as writer, this idea of an evolving self-hood has been an interest from the beginning, if not consciously so. Though I'd written songs and comic strips and comedy pieces to entertain my friends and disparage authority figures, I didn't write my first "real" story until I was an undergraduate in college, a three-pager about a dog named Toby.

My parents had brought Toby to Kaneohe from South Korea, where they had worked for two years. Of unknown and mixed breeding, we just called Toby "black dog" though, charmingly, his paws, the slightly rounded ends of his triangular ears, and the tip of his long tail were white. When I'd gotten busted in Boston and went to live with my parents in Seoul for a couple years, I found Toby's energy to be boundless. He would drag me sprinting around the yard of the apartment complex.

After my parents moved back to Kāneʻohe, I moved back in with them while I finished the last classes of my undergraduate degree. One day I saw Toby curled up below the sofa, his head on his paws. He usually sat perched high on the headrest, alert to anyone who might be moving toward the door, panting excitedly.

"What's his problem?" I asked my dad.

“He got neutered,” my dad told me. “I guess he’s kinda depressed.”

This struck me as tragic, and right away I thought I understood why Toby seemed so despondent. (I’ve since stopped pretending to comprehend animal behavior, just take what they do at face value). The story I wrote, “Toby,” was about a dog adjusting to his new life after going through the operation. As a relentless leg humper, as a being whose existence is predicated and mitigated by a human “master,” what left to the dog if the agony and ecstasy of sexual drive and release is no longer accessible? When the pheromones of another dog enter the sniffing nose that grasps like a hand at everything, is there a memory of that compulsion, the shade of a memory? Is going for walks twice a day and the regularly scheduled bowl of dog food, however expensive, enough? In other words, given this change, “who should I be now?”

The next story I wrote concerned a *nouveau riche* post-Revolutionary War landowner who, now prosperous in the agriculture business, decides to buy his first powdered wig. The next logical step, he feels, is to expand his enterprise with slave labor. A youthful screed against capitalism, and a darker take on the “who should I be now?” question.

As an author of fiction, *Poquoson* is the second book-length project I’ve written. The first was *University and King*, a collection of unconnected short stories based in Honolulu, with plenty of the brittle characters I mentioned earlier. I like to think of *University and King* as my garage rock singles compilation, and *Poquoson* as my adult contemporary record. There are elements of *University and King* that carry over to *Poquoson*, particularly in how first-person narrative voices are portrayed, but *University and King* is much rawer (sometimes consciously so, sometimes not), uneven in tone, ambitious beyond the limited skills of its author, and self-consciously “cool.” *Poquoson*, on the other hand, is more unified in tone, more consistent in voice and instead of “cool,” willfully vulnerable and open-hearted. In trying to achieve a piece

that could be open-hearted and vulnerable, I felt writing from the viewpoint of a child would simply be more convincing to a reader; I've been through too much in my life to authentically portray an adult who sees the world as Jesse, the narrator of *Poquoson*, does.

Development of the Thesis.

As I described in my prospectus, *Poquoson* grew from the seed of "Safe," a short story published in the now defunct University of Hawai'i online journal *Vice-Versa*. "Safe" appears as a slightly rewritten chapter in *Poquoson*. In the original version, the names of the characters are the names of my brother and sister, Joshua and Stephanie. I don't believe I even bothered to give the main character a fictional name, so he went by Jeff. After I'd written "Safe," I felt like it would be fun to get to know the members of this family a little better. At the time, I didn't have any prospective stories for them to inhabit, but something in how I could explore their interactions (including their grandmother, with whom they were living) felt refreshing to me, something worth expanding. A few years later, I had an idea for a story in which a dog is lost, and I began to imagine that I could perhaps involve these characters in a new kind of adventure. I wrote that story, which appears in *Poquoson* as "Canasta," around the time I had to choose between two ideas of novels for my creative dissertation, and now that I'd grown comfortable with the narrative voice of the protagonist I'd renamed Jesse, I decided it would be worthwhile to not only write a couple of only slightly connected stories about him and his family in Poquoson, Virginia, that novel could be related in that voice.

Having written another story about Jesse, June, Divin' Duck, and Big G—which by now I was referring to as a chapter—I built the novel *Poquoson* from the middle outward. "Canasta" and "Campground Special" were written close to each other after "Safe," though they preceded

that chapter in the chronology of the story. The next chapter, “Gauntlet,” followed “Safe,” with the character Helena, introduced in “Safe,” playing a significant role in “Gauntlet.” “Satan’s Womb,” by far the most difficult piece I had to write up to that point, was written next, and then what I consider its parallel text, “White Man’s God,” even more of a challenge to write. It was an expanding middle, but I needed a beginning and an end.

I’ve always subscribed to the philosophy that a reader should be illuminated as to the business of a novel within the first few pages, that holding out key information about the development of the story simply to create some artificial expectation wastes the reader’s time. The story of *Poquoson* concerns three children who move to their grandmother’s home after their mother has had a psychological break. Writing the first chapter, “Chores,” allowed me the opportunity to establish the premise of the novel quickly, to define the primary setting, and to plant seeds I thought would come to fruition later in the story, in chapters that I’d already written. That Big G doesn’t have any special affection for pets, and that June’s ways are somewhat mysterious, and that Divin’ Duck is fearless and beyond good and evil are aspects of character that first appear in “Chores,” and are explored more deeply later in the novel. Though I had a general idea of how I wanted *Poquoson* to end, I had to discover the way to get there in the writing of it. The arc of “The Mountain” was completely dark to me until the actual words began to appear on the page. I felt a great sense of satisfaction that the last words I wrote for the first draft of *Poquoson* were the last words of the story.

Genre and Theme, Part Two.

Poquoson is essentially a coming-of-age story, a bildungsroman in which the protagonist, Jesse, engages in the process of moral and intellectual growth, of establishing a selfhood that will

enable him to move through the world. One of the themes of *Poquoson* is exploring how Jesse's identity evolves—to push it a little further, the growth of Jesse's self is often contingent on his acknowledgment of selves external to him. That Jesse may help these other selves thrive allows him to thrive; it pushes him out of his essentially selfish and insular world. For instance, when June's dog Klinger goes missing, Jesse is at first secretly pleased that he won't have the dog chasing him around the yard anymore. After seeing the effect Klinger's loss has on his brother and sister, though, Jesse makes a conscious decision to empathize with their feelings, and involves himself in the search for the dog with a new enthusiasm. Later, when his sister is sick in the hospital, Jesse can, for the first time, understand her as an independent person, wholly separate from his conception of her, that she is struggling and requires his love.

A more prominent example of Jesse's moral development through expanding his consciousness to engage difference occurs when he hears Helena sing at the school talent show. Troubled by the shame of abandoning Quinn at the pizza parlor and embarrassed by his own poor glockenspiel performance, Jesse must push himself outside the confines of his self-consciousness to finally see his friend Helena in a light that he himself has not cast upon her. In the "Gauntlet" chapter of *Poquoson*, he at last acknowledges that what she can do is, and will be, beyond his capacity:

I wasn't familiar with the song, but it began with the sweetest word I will ever have known: "maybe." As she sang, she put into me an ache. I watched her, listened to her, and the ache grew unbearable. The ache, I knew, was borne out of the realization that what I wanted I would never, not in a million years, possess. I could waste a life trying, I could try to beat it into submission, but would never hold it in my hands, would not get a grip on it, not even the tip of a finger. "*But*

not for me,” my mother used to sing while window shopping, or in idle moments in the car, and finally I knew why. For a few minutes, though, the sweet ache and the distance between Helena on the stage and me sitting cross-legged on the cafeteria floor was sustenance enough (84-5).

At this moment Jesse begins to realize and more deeply internalize aspects of Helena’s being that he may have only glossed over, for convenience’s sake, as not to upset his preconception of her: that she is a girl and that she is Black. Even though Jesse understands that Helena possesses a knowledge and life experience that he will never possess, the possibility that there is great beauty and meaning in that difference moves him, deepens his connection to her as a friend. As in other instances, this growth is not necessarily natural to Jesse. It must be learned; it is a decision rather than a feeling.

These kinds of lessons are built into a bildungsroman, and are the familiar beats of a coming-of-age story. Because of the generic openness of what we consider to be “literary fiction,” I did incorporate other elements of genre fiction into the narrative, mostly to diversify tone according to the narrator’s shifting perspective. For example, there are elements of speculative fiction in “Safe,” (Jesse’s proposal that some shadow society thriving in the sewers protects the overworld), fantasy fiction in “Gauntlet,” (intense and epic depictions of monster slaying), and horror in “Satan’s Womb,” the ending of which could also double as a superhero origin story in which the protagonist finally realizes the full extent of his power.

Craft.

Disparate genre elements are sewn together in the first-person narrative voice of Jesse, who calls forth Daredevil, *The Hobbit*, *Star Wars*, Jason Voorhies, Freddy Krueger, Speedy

Gonzales, and various popular culture celebrities of the 1980's as reference points toward deeper understanding of his place in the world; as the author, I incorporated these as signifiers of the time, and reflective of the interests of a kid Jesse's age (ten years old, in fifth grade). My goal in writing through Jesse, aside from ensuring his interests were age appropriate and his references relevant to the time period, was to imbue him with a distinctive voice that would give the reader a sense of personhood behind this fictional character, a sense that Jesse might have existed. Most importantly, I didn't want Jesse, so critical to this novel, to come across as contrived or artificial (and I didn't want him to get on the reader's nerves). Obviously a ten-year old would be unable to relate the events of *Poquoson* the way Jesse does (though his sensitivity and precociousness are not unprecedented in American fiction; Scout from *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a strong model). In writing him, I envisioned Jesse's voice, without explicitly stating it so, as carrying forward the authenticity of his youthful psychology into the syntax and diction of an adult at some unspecified point in future story time, relating to the reader what happened over the course of six months after he was sent to live with his grandmother. The voice, a synthesis of what is seen through Jesse's youthful eyes and processed through the reflection and memory of an unmentioned but strongly implied older self, is consciously "literary," rife with adverbs, similes, and metaphors. My hope was that this voice would not be overly apparent, would carry the reader along by complementing the story mostly invisibly, only occasionally drawing attention to itself; like in all fiction, this requires suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader. Beginning each chapter of *Poquoson in media res* was one of the tools I employed to draw attention away from how the story was being told. I felt if I thrust the reader into an immediate set of circumstances—a card game, a lecture, a deal, a song—in which they would have to situate

themselves with basic information, there would be less attention to the way that information is conveyed, in Jesse's predominant voice.

In a sense, every first-person narrative is a stream of consciousness. The reader is not only informed as to what is happening, or who said what to whom, they are also privy to the impressions of the narrator, who filters events through an established point of view. In stream-of-consciousness writing, the narrator might impose a memory or supposition onto an act, slowing the progression of time down to relay what is occurring psychologically, both within and outside of the chronology of story time. As F. Scott Fitzgerald might put it, though, there is too much business of getting characters into and out of various doors and buildings to immerse the reader in a kind of pure stream-of-consciousness narrative: a glacial, nearly static and ever-present tableau of evaluative memories and sensations, in which past and present are merged, collapsing events of the story into an extremely personalized context. In stream of consciousness, the character's relation *to* events to the reader takes precedence over the relation *of* events.

I'm certain that I would be unable to sustain a novel purely in stream-of-consciousness, though when this narrative technique is used sparingly, it can add greater emotional and psychological depth to the story. A prominent example of stream of consciousness writing appears in the Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River: I," when, after Nick has set up his camp, his mind begins to wander as he brews coffee, and memories of the past infiltrate the action as it unfolds in story time:

The coffee boiled as he watched. The lid came up and coffee grounds ran down the side of the pot. Nick took it off the grill. It was a triumph for Hopkins. He put sugar in the empty apricot cup and poured some of the coffee out to cool. It was too hot to pour and he used his hat to hold the handle of the coffee pot. He would

not let it steep in the pot at all. Not the first cup. It would be straight Hopkins all the way. He deserved that. He was a very serious coffee maker. He was the most serious man Nick had ever known. Not heavy, serious. That was a long time ago. Hopkins spoke without moving his lips (382).

There are two prominent moments of stream of consciousness writing in *Poquoson*. First, in “Satan’s Womb”: after being tricked into being locked in a closet, Jesse’s deeper resentment and outrage emerges, predicated by memories of his mother. He channels these feelings against the door holding him back. Unlocking that deep emotion, with its troubled ties to a Halloween long past, requires the reader to ride along on Jesse’s mental journey as it elongates narrative time, and the past imposes itself on the narration. Jesse’s stream of consciousness subsumes his circumstances of him being locked behind a door in the closet to what being locked behind that door means to him on a deeper level.

I stepped back from the door. If I’d been afraid of the dark, I might have been scared. But the dark to me was like Bilbo’s ring, a substance through which I could move freely, unnoticed, watchful, the advantage mine. And if I’d been afraid of tight, enclosed spaces, I might have panicked—but those were the spaces I went to when Mrs. Eberhart asked me what I wanted, or when Divin’ Duck wanted to play the game of *Life* again when she clearly couldn’t understand the rules, or when Big G asked me to take out the trash or June had me in a headlock or when Pops had inflated himself with disparate, unconnected grievances and was ready to lay into a lecture of breathtaking proportions. All of it made me so tired (100).

The other important example of stream-of-consciousness writing occurs in the chapter “White Man’s God,” when Jesse visits his sister in the hospital. Jesse must muddle through a kind of prayer even though he has no connection to Jesus Christ. Despite this, Jesse’s effort is focused on tapping into some kind of tangible hope and empowering it toward the metaphysical, so that it might somehow be transmitted to his sister. In the muddling, portrayed as a stream-of-consciousness as his memories of the past converge with his narration of present story time, Jesse realizes how much his sister means to him, how he doesn’t want her to go away.

But it wasn’t a figment of my imagination before me. I wouldn’t have come up with this scenario, her unconscious in a hospital bed. Duck was my sister. She was not me. She was sick. Looking at her this way, I wanted to protect her, instead of giving her a hard time like I always did. Out of all of us, she looked the most like Big G, especially when she smiled, her eyes like horizontal parentheses (117).

Influences: Writers and Literary Movements

Stream-of-consciousness as a literary technique in fiction emerged with the modernists, pre- and post-World War I. In exploring my literary influences for the purposes of this paper, I’ve realized that my earliest attempts at fiction writing coincided with my studies of modernist literature, primarily the novelists: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Joyce, and Faulkner. Though my reading and study have since diversified beyond the works of these sometimes problematic dead white men, analyzing their work did provide a guide in how I might also write a story, especially concerning subject matter, depth of experimentation, and tone of narration. I couldn’t help but consciously absorb their styles in an effort to shamelessly ape them. Maybe I felt some romantic

pull toward American expatriate life in the 1920's, when books and writing in general seemed so much more important to everyone.

While writing the first chapter of *Poquoson*, "Chores," I told my friend about the trouble I was having with the plot. It was meant to be a piece that introduced readers to these characters and their circumstances, but the action, what actually happens, didn't seem to me provocative enough. (The kids mow the lawn, and they eat crabs, and then what?). I felt the piece was missing a narrative heat, the spillage from an overflowing cauldron that makes the story go. I was seeking drama. Eventually, though, I began to shape "Chores" into a "Big Two-Hearted River" kind of story, in which the significance of the character's seemingly quotidian actions hints at a sublimated pain and worry that only surfaces to the reader in glimpses. In assigning him commonplace activities, Jesse's grandmother doesn't give him time to fixate on his mother, or that he's been so abruptly relocated; she gives him things to do, and he embraces them as an alternative to completely sinking into the gravity of his new circumstances.

As an undergraduate, I was somewhat mystified by recollections of Hemingway going through each page he'd typewritten and crossing out all the adverbs (if you go through his novels and stories, you'll quickly find this is not true). I don't want to overstate Hemingway's influence on my writing—in all honesty, I hadn't deliberately considered his writing after many years until I began working on area exams for my doctorate degree—but one thing I've internalized from his example as an author is that story is not merely built from neat ideas but words, one after the other, brick by brick. His art as a stylist was invested in not simply relating a ripping yarn, but to make the brick work evident, revealing a clean, austere structure. I myself have a much shaggier style. I love adverbs, and use them *copiously*, more often because I am chasing a kind of rhythm in my sentence, not because I feel that these adverbs are critical for enhancing clarity of sense.

Adverbs for me are like fringe on a garment: far from necessary, decorative in nature; questionable, sure, as a fashion statement, but sometimes they look neat when they twirl. So if Hemingway is a stiff leather motorcycle jacket, and Fitzgerald is an immaculately pressed three-piece suit with a torn inner lining and saturated deep into the fibers with tobacco smoke, and Joyce is a brocaded vest that doubles as a yellow dressing gown then reverses into a multi-cornered hat worn only once at an avant-fashion show, then my writing, at least in *Poquoson*, is a shawl, fringe on the edges, worked in paisley and earth tones; it is neither angular nor jarring, it is meant to ease one into the story, it is warm, and is just as suitable for a grandmother watching *NCIS* on the couch as it is for Jerry Garcia hanging out on *Playboy After Dark*.

Not to overlook Faulkner, who was a deliberate influence; I drew from his classic portrayal of the American family, *As I Lay Dying*, in different instances in *Poquoson*. First, in establishing the characters' names: I named the older brother June as a reference to Faulkner's Jewel Bundren. Both names seem, on the surface, traditionally feminine, imbuing the characters with a kind of "Boy Named Sue" toughness. Divin' Duck was inspired by Faulkner's Dewey Dell, the sister of the clan, though the name was lifted directly from the old blues song "If the Sea Was Whiskey," ("and I was divin' duck"). I took cues from Faulkner not only in names, but also in characterizations. In *As I Lay Dying*, Jewel's point of view is not portrayed as extensively as the other characters, his inner world mostly mysterious. The reader knows Jewel primarily through his actions, not necessarily his thoughts. In a similar way, Jesse's brother June, who verbalizes his inner personhood infrequently, is mostly revealed by what he does, rather than what he expresses. For much of the story June is as much of an enigma to Jesse as Jewel is to Darl. There are also elements of Anse Bundren in Jesse's father, though he is just as much drawn

from my own father, and every father I happen to know. (June's nickname, Slug, I took from the credulous friend in the comic strip *Nancy*, who often falls prey to Nancy's schemes).

Speaking of southern writers, Harper Lee directly influenced a key scene in *Poquoson*, when Jesse's mother enters the hospital room where Divin' Duck is recuperating. I had been struggling with the prospect of bringing Jesse's mother into the story, but I wanted to portray a moment that showed she still loved her children, in real story time, despite her troubles and her separation. And I wanted a moment where Jesse, who has spent most of the novel wrestling with his place in the world, has his soul soothed (it doesn't happen often, but sometimes our souls are soothed). For most of the novel, Jesse's mother is a Boo Radley-type figure, someone who is spoken of but only appears late in the novel. When that happens, the emotional heft of her arrival, captured in understatement, reflects when Boo Radley reveals himself to Scout in her time of need near the end of *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

When I pointed to him his palms slipped slightly, leaving greasy sweat streaks on the wall, and he hooked his thumbs in his belt. A strange small spasm shook him, as if he heard fingernails scrape slate, but as I gazed at him in wonder the tension slowly drained from his face. His lips parted into a timid smile, and our neighbor's image blurred with my sudden tears.

"Hey, Boo," I said (284-5).

In *Poquoson* the sentiment is similar, and I attempted to be authentic to what a child overwhelmed with feeling might say:

It was just me. Not even June, who might have been pretending all this wasn't happening, for all I knew. Just me, trapped behind my eyes, separate from my sister, who lay before me, sleeping. Me, faithless, helpless, with a long list of

nothing for all the times when I had willed things to be different. Nevertheless, I willed again. I didn't want anything to happen to Duck. Even though I wasn't sure if I loved her, even though I never really knew her and assumed most of the things I had crafted in my story about her. No Jesus, no June, no Big G—just me.

I sat there, disavowing all the illusions I had of magic or some Jedi power. I stared at Divin' Duck. Hoping. The door opened, slowly, and two figures stepped into the room.

“Hey, Ma,” I said (119).

Jesse relishes the familiarity of commonplace greeting after being apart from his mother so long.

Style.

I've mentioned that maintaining a narrative rhythm is important to me as a writer, an organic percussion of verbs and nouns and adjectives and adverbs leading once sentence into the next. I haven't attained so pure an expression as to consider my prose music, but it does aspire to a similar sensibility: a propulsion, either gentle or aggressive, that carries one along and doesn't leave them in one place for too long, with the requisite drumbeat, harmonies, and lyrics. I think of Chuck Berry's "The Promised Land;" in an ever-cresting sonic wave of guitar and lyrical American place names, he's able to reexamine the mythology of the United States in way less time than Jack Kerouac did in *On the Road*: "We had motor trouble / That turned into a struggle, halfway across Alabam / And that hound broke down and left / Us all stranded in downtown Birmingham."

Music, above literature, has been my chief preoccupation in life, and it influences the way I think, the way I run, the way I write emails, how I fall in love, how my memories carry

such strong resonances. Music is all over *Poquoson*, culminating in Jesse's revelation of music's power as he watches his friend Helena sing. It is embedded in the novel's thematic material, with significant passages written under the influence of everyone from Nina Simone (a televised performance of "I Loves You Porgy") to Neil Young and Crazy Horse ("Powderfinger"). What I seek in my writing is no more than the lyrical quality of the best rock and blues songs. (Jazz song lyrics are too consciously subtle and sophisticated for me.) When I'm prone to flights of fancy, I try to pull the prose back to earth with a contrasting cliché, or piece of slang, or swear word, or non sequitur, cutting the self-importance a little. It's a self-check so that my language doesn't get too high-falutin.' In a song like "Visions of Johanna," Bob Dylan does this very well, redirecting big ideas when they endanger the song's sense of play and swinging march forward in time: "Inside the museums, infinity goes up on trial / Voices echo this is what salvation must be like after a while / But Mona Lisa musta had the highway blues, you can tell by the way she smiles." And like most popular music, I don't necessarily seek to challenge—I seek to please. This next passage, from the first chapter of *Poquoson*, strives for an engaging prose rhythm first, then, as a kind of mild cymbal crash, undercuts and "sums up" the description with a cliché ("do as I say, not as I do"):

For he was the ultimate backtalker, a spendthrift to boot; fatally impressionable, prone to wild hairs, flighty, taking every opportunity to be shiftless, which had lately become more desperate as work, and the attention our mother required, drained him of his essence, of his devil-may-care laziness. A remarkable father, all in all, but of the "do as I say, not as I do" variety (2).

To give a more in-depth description of the thought process that informs my style, I first offer the following passage from early in *Poquoson*, examining my decision-making when struggling through sentence writing:

The rest of the day we settled in, which meant for me getting acquainted with Big G's kitchen, opening cabinets and drawers, the refrigerator and the pantry where, in addition to a fifty pound bag of rice on the corner that sat slumped over like those stereotypical hombres in a Speedy Gonzales cartoon, the shelves were lined with rows and rows of canned goods, vegetables and tuna and meat—Spam and devilled ham—and a section dedicated just to Campbell's creamed soups (6).

Since this pantry was conspicuous for being excessively stocked with canned goods, I wanted to give it some personality, keeping in mind how children, like adults on drugs, see faces and people in every little thing. I focused on the bag of rice, since in its bulkiness it could be perceived as body-like. I first compared this bag of rice and its slumped over appearance to a “drunk child,” because that’s how its size and slightly droop originally occurred to me. It quickly seemed inauthentic, something that would never come to mind to a ten-year old kid. I then tried “like a dwarf in his cups, having been thrown out of the town inn,” which, even though it hearkens to the narrator’s interest in fantasy, was worse, because it was both too wordy and too obscure. It meant very much to me to get the description of the rice bag, bowed down by its own weight in the corner of the pantry, a slight fold near the middle, right. I attempted several times to align the description with a reference point the narrator would conceivably have. I look back on the final version and I’m still not sure if I should change it.

Conclusion.

I'm a runner and a writer, and on muggy mornings and on lamplit nights, I find myself doing both at the same time. The parallels are evident. In both, there are no shortcuts, but there is the faith, if not always the certainty, that since there is a beginning to the route, there must be an end. Writing, like running, goes best, is almost pleasant, when thought seems hardly involved at all, when words reveal themselves around every corner, in that break of the bushes as you happened to turn your head. It is the most difficult when the mind must simply power through it. The best of us fail and pass on because we get tired, either of chasing the demon or running away from it. I have written so many things that have gone undone, have been rejected by the best and the worst, and I take them all personally. And yet I am still motivated to keep at it, even if I feel like the runner resentfully lacing up the worn shoes outside the door, leaning on inspirational cliché to get me through: it's always worth it, never give up.

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