

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Patrick J. Clarke for the degree of Master of Arts in English, presented on May 26, 1999.

Title: The Night before the Elections, and Other Stories

Redacted for Privacy

Abstract approved: _____
Marjorie Sandor

The stories here are stories of childhood. To me, they concern the shift between dependence to independence, comfort to instability, which is disastrous for the characters but also a point of awakening. The move from childhood to adulthood puts the characters in a world that is neither made for the adult or the child, but someplace between these two. It's here that a kind of mystery—in the sense of wonder, terror and subsequently, grace—exists.

The Night Before the Elections, and Other Stories

by

Patrick J. Clarke

A Thesis Submitted
to
Oregon State University

In Partial Fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented May 26, 1999
Commencement June 2000

Master of Arts thesis of Patrick J. Clarke presented on May 26, 1999

Approved: *Redacted for Privacy*

P. J. Clarke
Major Professor, representing English

Redacted for Privacy

William F. Sullivan
Chair of Department of English

Redacted for Privacy

William F. Sullivan
Dean of Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Redacted for Privacy

Patrick J. Clarke
Patrick J. Clarke, Author

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Lily	1
In a Time of Violence	6
The Night Before the Elections	42
Blue Racer (a novel fragment)	57

for my parents

The Night before the Elections, and Other Stories

Lily

We all knew Lily Jarvis. We knew her as a not-tall but striking girl who sat in the first row of Mr. Herskowitz's fourth grade class, her long pale hair shuffling back and forth on her slender neck and sending off the peppermint she had a penchant for and smelled of always. We will forever, when passing the small purple and white flowers in the peppermint field near the edge of town, think of Lily—that fatherless girl so proud in her ability to recite all fifty states and their capitols.

Lily's is a horrible story, but one that has an odd pull on our lives. Understand: we don't find any perverse attraction in her demise—far from it—for as one flocks to staged tragedy, one equally runs from unfeigned misfortune. Or should. And this story is a tragedy, in the worst sense, because at some point, Lily, that most popular of girls, began to fade from us. She began to slowly waste away before our unbelieving eyes. But before all that, it's important to tell the story as it happened, even if you won't believe it, and judging by the reactions of those in other towns, places not far from here, you won't.

Lily woke with a start one night. She had a nightmare. How do we know, you ask? Were we there with her when she sat bolt-upright and whimpered in the dark?

No. But we are all like Lily, all of us, and therefore in a sense, we are *of* Lily, a piece of her. So, we understand that after a nightmare, she would wake up this way.

Again: Lily woke and felt as if a heavy cloth had been draped over her body. The room was dark except for the pitiful glow from her frog night-light in the corner. Her chest rose and fell with her labored breath and slowly, very slowly, the edges of her nightmare shimmered against her memory. Through a watery-like haze, she remembered she'd been drowning in a cold sea, had been dog-paddling as Mrs. Michelson had taught her during summer camp. But, the water was thrashing over her head. Near her, a boat bobbed half above water and half below, sputtering in flames. She struggled to stay up, to keep her head above the waves, but her legs were tiring quickly, and finally refused to kick. Just before her final plunge down, she read the white letters on the ship's sinking hull.

"I was on the *Mauritania*," Lily realized in her frog-lit room.

Who was she, she wondered, that she might be on the *Mauritania*? A captain, a lowly deckhand, a stow-away? She considered these things with a growing trepidation, but could not fend off her growing fatigue. She settled back into bed and fell into sleep.

The next morning at the breakfast table, Lily swore off water. "I won't drink it," she said to her mother.

Though Mrs. Jarvis clearly passed on to Lily the pale hair and striking face, she did not have Lily's sense of universal harmony—that unflagging belief, so

strong in children, that at their sources, all things are connected in one brilliant weave. As a result of her practicality, Mrs. Jarvis only cast a tired glance at her daughter when that first warning shot sounded over their toast and orange juice. She paid no mind to Lily who drank not a drop the whole day, and who, by evening, complained to her mother that she could almost taste her thirst far back in her throat.

“If you want water,” Mrs. Jarvis said, “where’s the harm in drinking?”

Lily shook her peppermint head. “You have no--” but she could not finish. The words for her convictions hadn’t been taught to her in school just yet. Later, when the rest of us reached an upper grade, we sat slack-jawed in Ethics, shocked by what we had known for so long but could not explain. There before us on the chalkboard was that great human conundrum—a boat full of people, only six can stay, whom to throw out, whom to save? Of course, we realized then that Lily had jumped over without any sort of tally on our part.

But that’s neither here nor there. The fact of the story is that after Lily’s first day without water, she drank nothing for four straight days. Not a drop. At PE we mooned over her sagging eyes. During recess, when her lower lip cracked and began to bleed, we clamored to offer a handkerchief or an end of a T-shirt. The skittish ones of us begged Lily to sip from the drinking fountain, while others kept a horrified distance. As if to answer our conflicting feelings, Lily stepped up onto a nearby bench. She held out her arms. The black tarmac dropped into a hush.

“My friends,” she began, but sadly, with no water to fuel her voice, the rest of her words sputtered into hollow squeaks. Some of us toward the front, near the bench she stood upon, reported later that she had asked us to forgive her. But no one can confirm that. All we do know for sure is Lily stepped from the bench and marched off to our classroom.

Mr. Herskowitz, our teacher, with a sad shake of his loose jowls, refused to let Lily back into class. “She passed out during a math test,” he reasoned to us later, tears visible in his timid eyes. We couldn’t deny the soundness of his argument.

And so, on the fourth day of her water strike, banned from the classroom, Lily was asked to stay home—a punishment many of us had wished for ourselves, but under different circumstances. During arts and crafts that afternoon, we wondered what Lily did alone in her large white house. Did she laze on the couch and spoon ice-cream into her chapped mouth? Did she run through the dark halls, announcing her new-found freedom to her toys, to the walls, to all the silent furniture guarding a mid-afternoon home? Or more likely, did she have horrible thoughts about large glasses of water being forced to her lips, and then, as she had felt the cold water around the Mauritania, did she feel, could she taste, the water sluice down her throat and freeze her insides out?

All death is speculation. We can only assume at some point Mrs. Jarvis realized the seriousness of her daughter’s prohibition. She must’ve begged Lily, as any good mother would beg, to end the apparent nonsense.

“Please honey,” we hope she said, “please drink for mommy.”

But of course, knowing ourselves and therefore knowing Lily, these supplications held no sway.

And so, on that fateful fifth day, we imagine Mrs. Jarvis gave up trying to get Lily to drink. That day, as we all remember it, was cold and cloudy, as if the sky itself prophesied doom. We could see no sun at recess where we stood by the arching hand-ball courts, all of us refusing to play jump-rope or four corners or kick-ball, because we knew, somehow we all knew, that inside their large white house, Lily and Mrs. Jarvis were holding each other on their brown davenport, preparing for the end. We knew mother and daughter spent that last day holding each other and crying and laughing about times past because they must eventually do these things.

And that night, while we wrangled fitfully in our beds, Mrs. Jarvis eased exhausted Lily onto the davenport and then curled up on the floor to watch her so beautiful daughter sleep her last sleep. And in the morning, Mrs. Jarvis woke to find nothing but a stretch of sand on the couch where beautiful Lily had been. Mrs. Jarvis opened the drapes and found the dogwoods blooming as they always will, and the sky clear and bright—just as we found the world from where we sat behind our chipped wooden desks in Mr. Herskowitz’s classroom, all of us wondering, not about multiplication tables or the curly-cues of cursive, but if we would some day soon come home to our own parents and hold them and cry and laugh with them, if we would find reconciliation before it was too late.

In a Time of Violence

1

When I was around nineteen and a college student at a small Midwestern university, I decided to give a piano recital. Thinking back now, I'm not entirely sure why I lighted on the idea. I hadn't played for four years by that time but wanted to settle some sense of loss, I imagine, wanted to get back to what I had once considered my only joy and future profession. I still played at times. On Wednesday nights I pounded out straight-ahead blues with a bar band, but it was just to make enough money to eat and to watch the sorority girls stumble over each other on the small parquet dance floor. Nothing honorable in that. In my mind, to give a recital would be an event, a charge for a respectability I did not get from friends, and especially, my parents.

I went downtown to a local music store and rifled through stacks of brown, flaky scores. Nothing caught my eye and the idea of the recital began to quickly lose its potency. In the last bin, though, I found a copy of Rachmaninoff's *Prelude in C# minor*, a piece I remembered my father listening to when I was a boy. The image of his spreading fingers, reaching to catch imaginary chords, rose in my vision. "You hear that?" he would say. "That's the sound of power."

The paper felt powdery in my hands, smelled damp and like sandalwood. I followed the notes across the page and though it was a trick of the mind, a moment

felt in recollection only, I'm sure I heard the music flitter by in my head while I stood there in the store. This was the music I needed.

I rented a practice room in the music department's basement at school. The walk to my cubicle passed through dank, poorly lit corridors. Inside, a plate glass window looked out to a courtyard full of dead plants and a spattering of paintless, wrought iron tables. The piano hunched in the far corner, dirty black and monumental, solid as soap. The keys had long gone yellow and a few stuck together when pressed. And yet, for the next two months, I went everyday to that piano and played for three hours, slowly building back my finger strength and grinding each measure of the piece into my head and hands. I felt involved, a part of something greater than myself.

One night, two weeks before the recital, I made my evening sojourn to the practice room. It was cold and threatening snow. The furnace that lapped and gurgled below the music department had stopped running the day before so I had to wear my gloves and coat indoors. At the piano, I began with a few warm-up scales, my breath running down to my hands. I couldn't directly feel the keys through the gloves, so I took them off, but, soon enough, my fingers became brittle and unwieldy.

I rushed off to the bathroom. There I pulled the stopper on the sink, ran it full of hot water, then stuck my arms in up to my elbows. I'd read the famous pianist Glenn Gould did this before his recitals and I felt akin to him then, slightly mad but brilliant. While I rubbed my arms under the water, I daydreamed about

performing the Rachmaninoff, sweating profusely onstage, bowing and waving at piece's end, all the while showing no emotion except to kiss my mother and shake hands with my father whose proud tears could not be stopped. When my fingers began to prune, I rushed back to the cubicle.

Right away I started playing the piece. I'd finished memorizing it completely a few days earlier and my fingers knew where to go. This allowed me to concentrate on the arc of the music, to *listen* and not think, to develop the loping beginning, the swelling volume and speed of the middle, the ornery simmer at the end. I took the notes running, hit my stride with each passing measure and I believe I lost myself, forgot about the recital. I don't think it's too much to say that I was a part of the piece. It was a rare moment. I was unfettered, mindless and so deep into the pure *sound* of things that there was no room to wonder, but, near the midway point, like a foot misses a stair, my fingers slipped off the keys.

I stopped and backed up a few measures. I was playing well—no reason to be upset. But again, when I reached the run, my fingers jumped and stiffened. Again I backed up, again I stopped cold. A sliver of anger ran through me. I struck the keys with my fist. My jaw began to ache. An image of my father came to mind, his brow furrowed—was that anger, disgust on his face? I took it back a few more measures this time, hit the run and stopped. I held my hands above the keys; they shook as if wracked by palsy.

The sliver of anger became a wide, spilling breach. I stood, knocking the bench backwards, and punched right through the piano's wooden music stand, a

chunk of which jumped up and struck me below the eye. I turned a few frenzied circles, wholly believing the piano had somehow retaliated with the errant piece of wood, grabbed the bench, got it over my head and threw it through the window. The plate glass popped like gunshot.

A roaring silence. It had begun to snow and the wind ached around the remaining pieces of glass in the window. I began to shake, the adrenaline leaving my body. The orange lights from the city pushed against the low clouds. Slowly, my shaking ebbed. Like confetti, snow fell sideways through the window. And that same question came up, the one that had been on me for years—why play the piano in the first place?

2

When I was seven, I lived in Los Angeles with my parents and older brother. We had a small house full of my mother's roiling seascape paintings, my father's mock Oriental furniture and, outside by the pool, his great love—a statue of Venus bought in Greece. To this day, I remember darting around the far corner of our house to get a good look at the statue, that one exposed breast which invariably caught the light. I didn't want to look, couldn't look, but at the same time I couldn't help myself. I'd end up taking a quick peek, which turned into a blank stare. I stayed this way until a noise from inside the house would shake me back into the world.

My mother was from the south. She'd raised her brothers and sisters in rural Kentucky, all six of them, and when they were gone from home, she married a mechanic. He ended up drinking too much and cheating on her. When she was three months pregnant with my brother, Sebastian, she skipped town and landed in Ohio. That's where she met my father. She was an intelligent woman, read books, walked around Sunday morning in a teal blue bathrobe. I adored her, read books because she read books. She was quiet, and like me, she preferred the house to be still. Everyone agreed we were cut from the same cloth.

My father was a squarely built man with broken hands. For a while he ran a roofing company from a back room. When this went under, he was left with stacks of excess slate tiles. He was a black belt in some Korean martial arts school whose motto was, "One blow, one death." He'd line up the extra tiles, sometimes nine at a time, breathe, yell, then crack through all of them. In a year or so, the tiles were gone.

We were all afraid of his temper but never said so. He never liked Sebastian, his step-son. You could see this in the way he'd make tentative gestures toward affection—he'd put a beaten hand on Sebastian's shoulder—but soon enough, he'd get an uncomfortable look on his face and retrieve his hand.

My mother said my father couldn't accept a child not directly his. My father said that Sebastian, even as a little boy, monopolized my mother's attention and distanced him in the process. Regardless, watching the mashed potatoes go back and forth across the table put my heart in my throat. Sebastian would sit

stiffly next me, his fork scraping back and forth on his plate. Sometimes I would count the seconds before he would drop his fork and leave the table without being excused.

Seb was thirteen. He had stiff blond hair and smoldering blue eyes. Our mom's Cherokee blood rose in his cheekbones. It's this same Cherokee blood, I think, that made him ornery. "I've got a mule for a son," my mother would say, not with mean-spiritedness but resolve. I know because I loved him too and had resolved to suffer his endless taunts and his seemingly inexhaustible ability to do the wrong thing and anger my father.

We were happy in our way, had problems like everybody else. But the strain of Seb and my father's relationship began to grow. We all sought some kind of relief. My mother cooked. My father worked harder. Seb walked through the old sewers downtown and explored the nearby hills, a BB gun slung over his shoulder. I played the piano, and when I wasn't doing this, I spied on the neighbors.

Mr. and Mrs. Melne, the sole Jewish family on the street, lived across from us. He was a retired psychologist and an avid tennis player. No one knew what she did and to my knowledge, no one had ever been inside their house. They were both old, diffident in their dotage, and known up and down the block either as the Jews, or the Jews with the perfect yard. This last part was true. Their pristine yard drove my father mad. Even though he worked all weekend to catch up, he could not get our grass and shrubs to equal the Melne's sense of balance, of critical symmetry.

They were masters of pruning and maintenance and my father could not rise to the challenge. Instead, he worked tirelessly to defame the old couple.

His favorite story concerned the time he caught Mr. Melne pulling blades of grass from his lawn during a thunderstorm, a small blue umbrella his only shelter. My father would lean back in his chair and add one last damning detail, that when Mr. Melne took a step, water squirted from the back of his loafers. "What a sad sonuvabitch," my father would say, but you couldn't deny the bitter admiration in his voice.

Especially theatrical on the block were the Ricards, a family directly across the street. There were four of them, two kids, two parents, and unlike the rest of us, their traumas and indiscretions were played out in full view of the neighbors with a complete lack of propriety. Their mad squabbles became the stuff of legend and their inimitable bad luck reached Greek proportions.

I remember one morning when I woke up to a long, suffering wail that came from the street. I got up and found my parents and brother in their robes, standing in the hallway. Together, we went outside and found Mrs. Ricard, a fragile woman with a smoke-ravaged voice, howling in the street. Mr. Ricard had her by the shoulders and looked as if he were struggling to land a large fish. Two police cars were angled in their drive, lights whirring. Other families stood by and watched, their hands on each other's shoulders. Mrs. Melne shuffled across the road and told us everything. Mike, the Ricard's oldest child, had gone drinking the night before, driven home, and run his sable Camaro into a tree.

I sat on the curb and watched the Ricards grieve. Except for Mrs. Ricard, who continued to thrash and scream, the others, Mr. Ricard and Suzette, the youngest, held their heads like they'd bumped into a cabinet. I didn't know Mike. I was too young. But I looked over at Seb, who was standing in the street, his hands deep inside his robe pockets, and wondered what it would be like to lose him, to still see him standing in the hallway or the bathroom but not be able to touch his face or hold his arm. When Mrs. Ricard fell to her knees and began pulling up clumps of grass, my father carted me back inside. Seb and Mom stayed in the street.

“What’ll they do?” I asked my dad while we stood in our kitchen, a glass of orange juice in my hand.

“Don’t know, bub,” he said. “All I know it’s pretty damn dumb to go out and get yourself into a situation like that. Mike never was the brightest bulb.”

It made sense. You put yourself in a bad position, you got hurt. But still, Mike’s death would not settle in me. I tried asking my father later that day what they would do with the body, but he only shrugged his shoulders.

A few days later I was playing catch with my terrier, Toby. The Ricards came outside and piled into their Buick. By the black sadness of their clothes and the slump of their heads, I figured they were going to Mike's funeral. I stood at the end of my driveway. Their car started to back into the street and I impulsively threw my ball by the right back tire. What did I think I was doing?

The car stopped and the back door opened. I ran across to get the ball and Suzette, a red-haired girl three years older than I was who couldn't exercise the baby-fat from her face, stepped out and carefully picked up the ball with a lacy-gloved hand. I had never paid much mind to Suzette. In a family of tragedians she acted the straight part, never did anything bad or got into trouble, much like me, and because she was like me, I left her alone. But now, not so much out of sympathy but morbid fascination—the long face, the lacy glove—I wanted to be close to her. "How are you?" I asked. Suzette shrugged her shoulders. "You wanna play when you get back?" I said and rolled the ball in my hands.

She sighed heavily and put her hand against the Buick. "I'll be home later."

And so that day and every day after that I played with Suzette. We became inseparable. For hours we toiled around gameboards—Monopoly, Risk, Boggle, Operation—on the red shag carpet of her den. Mrs. Ricard hovered around the house like a wraith, always with a tall glass of water in her hands. Sometimes she offered us cookies. If we declined to eat, she would crumble them up and drop them on our heads. My mother asked me how I thought Mrs. Ricard was doing and I told her about the tall glasses of water but left out the cookies, afraid she would keep me at home. She laughed. "Honey, that's not water."

But that time of my life wasn't about Mrs. Ricard or even my mother. It was Suzette, the belly-white skin under her arms, her sad green eyes, the way she wore flared jeans and tie-dyed t-shirts from Goodwill, how we contrived songs together and inside jokes funny to no one but ourselves. We swam in my backyard

pool until our eyes burned from the chlorine. She introduced me to a bastardized version of Doctor which, at her suggestion, we practiced religiously in order to perfect. She had her own word for it, the doctoring, which she said she'd heard from an adult. Wherever it came from, it haunted me. At night I would say the word out loud, the mere sound conjuring the sensation of stroking Suzette's pale bottom.

I was in love, truly, the first of many times. But it had to end, and because we were young and because she was a Ricard, it had to end tragically.

We were making milkshakes one morning. Mrs. Ricard had come over for tomato juice. She needed a Bloody Mary, but we only had ketchup. She accepted it as a substitute. While Suzette and I got the milk and bananas from the fridge, my mom sat Mrs. Ricard at the kitchen table and suggested she not drink so much around Suzette.

But I only heard bits of their conversation. My attention stayed on Suzette, who chopped bananas while I poured the milk and scooped ice cream into the blender. When she shoveled in the bananas, I pushed *frappe* which sounded exotic to me like Suzette's name. I told her this, that I'd turned the blender specifically to *frappe* in her honor. But as with most things I offered her, she merely dismissed it with a smile then acted as if nothing had been said.

Over the grinding milkshakes Suzette asked me what I wanted to do for the rest of the day and began curling a loopy strand of hair, bright red, around her

index finger. I switched the blender off. In the room's new silence I said, for the first time using Suzette's wonderful word in public, "*Sex*. I want to *sex* today."

My mother coughed. Mrs. Ricard's Bloody Mary stopped half-way to her mouth. My chest felt suddenly as if it had been inflated with air and I knew in that moment what it meant to be an adult. I had used a man's word and because I'd spoken so casually, so confidentially, I'd situated myself in a man's world. I was sure of this. So sure I said it again, this time loudly, "I want to *sex* all day."

I turned to Suzette. I wanted a nod from her, a smile, her approval. But she kept her sweet green eyes on the floor. Mrs. Ricard got up from the table and walked solemnly over to us. She put her hands on Suzette's shoulders and led her out of the kitchen and through the front door.

For days afterwards I sat in my room and held the radio near my ear, singing along with the songs. The lyrics, *Baby, baby, don't*, rattling through the tin speaker, suddenly made sense to me. Sometimes I'd go outside to dump the trash or help my mother with the groceries and I'd see Suzette sitting at her window. I'd wave but she'd only stare back and I'd think, *Baby, baby, don't*....

My suffering continued until one night when Sebastian came to my bedroom door. He had a Popsicle in his mouth. His pet rat, Killer, nosed around on his shoulder. I sat on my bed and turned up the radio.

"Stop that a sec," Seb said.

I didn't do it.

"Whatever. You know what you did, right?" He rested heavily against the doorframe.

I didn't answer.

"You said you wanted to have babies."

"No I didn't," I said.

"That's what you said."

"I didn't say that."

"All right," Seb said, smiling now, "you didn't." He put the Popsicle back in his mouth and left.

That night, I remember, it rained. The water on my windows dribbled long sluicing shadows down the far wall of the room and I counted the space between thunder claps. When the storm settled into a roil, I got on my knees and prayed. I said I'd do anything if Suzette didn't get pregnant. I wasn't a man, I couldn't take care of a baby, I said. Then I tried to squeeze out tears. I thought about my dog getting hit by a truck or my parents dying in a plane crash, but nothing moved in me. I scrambled back into bed. The last of the storm ripped through the chimes in the backyard. I felt a little better but couldn't shake the feeling that I was becoming like Seb—all deviousness and wrong-doing—and didn't sleep at all.



Not long after Suzette dropped out of my life, my father bought a deep black grand piano. My mother tempered the gift by saying it made for nice furniture, but we all knew he'd bought it for me, to make up for the loss of Suzette. Seb stood by, a look on his face that said, *Here we go again*. I tried to explain that

he could play too, that the piano was for all of us, but he'd push me in the chest and walk away.

We kept the piano in the living room under a skylight. All day sunshine poured down and lit up the surface. The cover locked with a big brass key I stashed in my mother's maple secretary. Four or five times a day I'd come into the room, pull back the cover and just stare at the coiled, gold wires. I'd heard somebody say the piano had an orchestra inside of it, and I imagined little bells and drums among the wires and wood.

Without Suzette around, I practiced all day, almost every day. There wasn't much else to do. But I think I mostly played because I wanted to justify my father's gift, to show not only him, but Seb and my mother as well, that I deserved a nice piano.

And so I practiced. I listened to classical music on my father's record player. I moved through primers so fast my teacher finally gave up and referred my mother to a professor at the local university who specialized in child pianists. At this, my father became almost giddy. He told my mother at the dinner table, "He's really going to do something isn't he?" She didn't reply, just smiled, worried, I think, that his enthusiasm would somehow swallow me. Seb dug his fork across his plate.

When summer came, Sebastian was at home more often because his friends lived too far away to bike. I continued to practice but found it hard to concentrate with him milling around, staring at my hands to make me falter. One day, while I

was playing *Fur Elise*, what my father called "Ferdie Lee," Sebastian came into the living room wearing a baseball mitt. I glanced at him but didn't stop playing. He sat down at the end of the bench. I could smell the glove oil and sweat all around him. For a moment he listened quietly, but couldn't wait. "You want to play baseball or what?" he blurted.

"I have to practice," I said, almost apologetically.

Seb beat his glove against his leg. "Practice after. Practice tonight."

My father would be home at night, he could hear me play. "Let me get my glove," I said.

And so began our summer of baseball.

Because school wouldn't start for another two months, and because there were no kids our age on the block, we had to play over-the-line. A simple two-man game. One player stood in the outfield, at the end of the cul-de-sac and just before a chain-link fence, while the other, who stood farther down the street, tossed up a tennis ball and hit it with a bat. One hop meant a single. Bounce and hit the fence, a double. Hit the fence, a triple. Over the fence, lost ball.

But the real fun of the game came from what you couldn't see. Seb and I kept statistics and assumed teams and changed our batting style to suit certain players. For hours we would stand in the street, call out epithets to the other team, dive at balls, swing from the ankles, amaze ourselves with towering home runs and risky catches. We only stopped when the oncoming night started to snatch the ball out of the air.

One day in the middle of summer, when my father was at work and my mom was shopping with a friend, Seb and I got up early to play ball. The heat was almost intolerable. Waves shimmered off the blacktop and when you took a deep breath your chest clinched up from the smog. The game began easily enough, but after only three innings, the sun got to us and we sat down on the curb to take a break.

I ran inside the house to get a pomegranate I'd found the day before and put in the fridge. When I came back outside, Seb had turned some roofing nails upside down in the cul-de-sac. He'd done this many times during the summer but never actually had a car drive over them.

I thumbed into the pomegranate and gave him half. We ate in silence until Seb, his face and fingers blood red, hitched over on a hip, reached into his pocket and pulled out what looked like a gold larva. "You know what this is?" he asked. I didn't.

"It's a .22 bullet," he said. "I'm going to shoot it."

I rolled my eyes. I knew for a fact that he didn't have a rifle. My father had three—a Winchester among them. But Seb?—he only had a BB gun.

"No shit, gay-wad," he said when I reminded him of the fact. "I'm going to shoot it out with a pellet."

I didn't understand. A bullet wouldn't fit in the BB gun. But Seb shook his head and put the bullet back in his pocket. "You're up," he said and tossed me the ball.

We fouled toss after toss into the Frederickson's wild thatch of ivy where tennis balls went to die. The heat made us edgy but we were distracted anyway, pulled out of our imaginary teams and into the possibilities of what a bullet could do. When Seb fouled off our last ball, we dug half-heartedly through the tangle of vines and green leaves. Nothing turned up. While I continued to search, he walked into the middle of the street and picked up a nail. "You want to see this or not?" he yelled, threw the nail against one of our lemon trees, then tromped away without an answer. I ran to catch up.

A hot breeze cut through the small, square plot of the backyard. Here was the pool and the barbecue, the Venus statue, and our ruffly yellow lawn furniture, which sat like large, leggy birds in the drying grass. Over the wall, we could hear the splash and hiss from the Frederickson's grill.

"I'll get the gun," Seb said and ran around the side of the house.

I sat down in the grass and counted the sparrows sagging the telephone line with their nervous weight.

When Seb came back, we waited until the Fredericksons went inside. Then he placed the golden larva on a white wood stump jutting from our lawn. He knelt. I fell in behind him and looked right down the length of the rifle. Seb put the stock to his shoulder, eyed the sight with an archer's precision, let his breath filter through his teeth, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet came alive, bounced left and right around the yard. Seb fell to the ground and then pulled me down by the shorts so that I dropped, face-forward, onto the grass.

The wild keening of the bullet continued around us, over our heads, then stopped with a dull crack somewhere across the yard. Shaking, Seb and I got up. We walked around the pool, to the left of the diving board, where we'd heard the bullet rest. We checked the palm tree and even dug through a small mound of dirt, but found no sign of it. Finally Seb sat down on the diving board and started laughing. I looked at him and he pointed behind me, to my father's cherished Venus.

A dime-sized hole pierced her chalky breast.

I ran over and checked her back. A ragged wound broke through her gently arched shoulder. Pieces lay scattered at her feet. I got on one knee and began picking up pieces when I heard the first shout, a high joyous exclamation. Seb was running around the pool, his arms in the air, his mouth turned up. He jumped, did circles, did a cartwheel, took off his shirt and pants so he stood in his underwear. At last he ran around to the diving board where he bounced impossibly high, so high that from my vantage point he seemed to be held aloft in the air, the whole time shouting, "I got her tit! I got her tit!" and then, with one last leap, plunged backwards into the pool.

We came inside the house and found my mother on the phone. She'd come home without us knowing. She turned to the wall when we stepped inside. She wore a black skirt, the price tag dangling from the side, and I started to feel a welling of panic in my chest. Seb laughed, pointed to the tag, and walked through the kitchen to the den where he turned on the television.

Mom thanked whoever it was on the phone and hung up. When she turned around, the skin flushed above her eyes.

"That was the police," she said.

"Yeah?" Seb called from the couch.

"We just shot a little bullet, that's all," I chirped. My mother covered her mouth with her hand. Seb turned murderous eyes on me.

"That's dangerous," Mom said. "Isn't that dangerous?" She shook her head. "I have to tell your father. Okay? So you know. He's got to hear about it."

Seb stood up. "Why does he have to hear about it?"

"Because he's your father. He has a right to know."

There was nothing for us to say after that. Seb grumbled and thumped me on the head with his finger. He wouldn't let me sit on the couch. "You're a little bastard," he said. So I sat on the floor. He picked up a push broom we kept behind the couch and began to twirl it nervously in his hands and sometimes, when I'd gotten comfortable sitting in front of the TV, he poked me in the ribs with the bristled end.

That evening, when my father's car pulled in the driveway, I didn't run to the door as I usually did, but waited next to Seb. The back door opened and closed. I could hear him talking to my mother in the kitchen, their voices low—a good sign—but then, in the middle of their hushed conversation, something dropped on the floor and my father's voice jumped a register, "You're fucking kidding me."

My mom called out his name but it was too late. He rushed into the room, a blue silk tie swaying back and forth under his chin. His eyes were slivers. Seb shifted on the couch.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he yelled at Seb.

I scuttled away from the couch. Mom stood a few paces back, behind my father, her face drawn and pale. Seb didn't cower on the couch, but he seemed smaller, less important, and even though I worried for him, I felt ashamed for him as well.

"Are you out of your goddamned mind?" my father asked and waved his arms. "Have you lost your mind completely? Are you so goddamned bored that you've lost your mind?"

Seb gripped the broom in one hand and wiped the hair from his eyes with the other.

"Do you need things to do?" Dad asked.

"No."

"Are you so bored? Because you can mow the lawn if you want or paint the goddamned house."

Seb didn't answer this time.

"Who bought you that BB gun?" Dad asked.

"You did," Seb said quietly.

"And what did I say you could shoot?"

"Cans."

"What?"

"Cans."

"Exactly fucking right. Cans. What did you shoot?"

"A bullet."

"Which is not a can. Right? You understand that part of it, I hope. That a can is not a goddamned bullet."

"Yes."

"Or are you so goddamned stupid you can't tell. Maybe that's it. You can't tell."

Seb gripped the broom with both hands. His lips pursed and he said, "Get away from me," so quietly that I almost didn't hear it.

The room seemed to tilt to one side. In one motion my father had the broom out of Seb's hand and up above his own head. He shifted his weight and swung through, like he'd shown us to hit a baseball, and the bristled end came down, striking Seb between the shoulder-blades. My mom shrieked. Seb rolled over on the couch. My father swung again, this time catching Seb behind the head. Mom jumped on dad's back and the broom fell to the ground. I kicked it behind the

TV. Mom and Dad wrangled around for a moment like they were dancing, but he twisted and threw her off and onto the couch. She bounced near Seb who still had his hands over his head. My father stepped away from them both, his face red and puffy.

"You're all out of your goddamned minds," he said breathlessly. "What is the matter here? Can't I come home to a normal house just one day?"

He left the room. I heard the front door open. The car in the driveway started up and screamed into the street. Mom began stroking Seb's head. I covered my eyes with my hands and bit the inside of my cheek so as not to make a noise.

Later that night I was halfway asleep, the radio low and playing close to my ear, when I heard a knock at my door. My father stepped inside, dressed now in jeans and a dark blue sweatshirt. He moved slowly, like he didn't want to startle me. He sat down on the bed, close to my legs.

"I want to apologize," he said. "I'm sorry you had to see all that."

"It's all right," I said.

My easy pardon must have worried him. Maybe he was worried already. He rubbed his nose and took long, deep breaths. Finally he said, "You don't understand why things are the way they are," he said.

"I understand," I said.

"No, son," he said, his voice tired, "you don't. You really don't." He put a hand on my shoulder and stared at my door, as if he was trying to find something there. But I was the wrong person, this was the wrong room.

"If your brother does something like that again, you get out of there."

I nodded.

"You hear me?"

"Yes," I said. "But it wasn't all his idea."

He didn't say anything for a moment, just continued to look carefully at the door. "I know what happened. You would never do something stupid like that."

I put my hands in my lap.

"Get to sleep soon," he said. He got up then and walked across the room.

At the door he said, "I love you, son. Do you know that?"

"Yes," I said.

He opened the door and left.

I waited a moment after he'd gone, then got on my knees. I pulled myself over the carpet with my arms so no one could hear my footsteps. I put my ear to the wall so I could hear the creak of Seb's door, so I could hear the hush of wood over the carpet and then my father's apology. I stayed there a long time. I didn't hear anything but the air conditioner rumbling on and on like a train in the hallway.

3

I waited until after the college recital, which passed without a hitch, to tell anyone about breaking the window. I'd almost forgotten about the whole incident—there was no memory of any anger or panic, just a dim idea that I'd thrown the bench through a plate glass window in some inexplicable fit. Actually,

I kind of liked the idea of being out of control. To me, the bench incident meant passion, meant that music mattered to me in a very powerful way. I felt validated.

Surprisingly, everyone flinched when I told the story, especially my mother, who, I realize now, must've seen some mirror of my father's quick anger. She advised me to get to a therapist. I thought the idea was a little extreme, but she continued to bring up the idea when we spoke. Finally, I conceded, and more than a month after throwing the bench, I walked up the steps of a dirty downtown building to the office of Dr. Berkus.

The waiting room smelled like paste. Self-help magazines with revitalizing titles—*Get Back Up!*, *A Healthy Day!*, *Outlook!*—smothered a squat wooden table. I read an article about better loving your mate until a side door opened and out stepped Dr. Berkus, a short man in a lumberjack shirt and frayed, taupe pants. He gave me a placid, courteous smile, a smile I'd soon come to recognize as his only smile. His face had the leathery warp of someone who'd worked in the sun for much of his life and his arms were oddly hairless. We shook hands and he waved me into his office.

Through my mother, who'd studied to become a therapist herself, I'd picked up all the jargon and techniques of analysis—how to encourage "I" statements, how to maintain unconditional positive regard of the patient, how to reflect back to the patient what they've said. Because of this, my first three sessions with Dr. Berkus were like watching an airplane land—every move he made towards me came slowly, from a great distance. He lunged into my problems, asked about my

parents, asked if I abused any substances, if I'd ever considered killing myself. I deflected these and countless other questions with a mish-mash of psychological theory and book quotes, religious nonsense, and a few times resorted to complicated self histories which I'd pilfered from the lives of friends. Though I didn't consider Dr. Berkus much of a therapist, I liked coming to see him. He was well-read, easy to laugh, and despite his rough-and-tumble demeanor, he had a gentle personality. Around our fourth session, he stopped asking me questions altogether and instead we talked about ideas. I felt completely comfortable with him. I had an hour where an intelligent person would listen closely to me, to my ideas. I think he recognized he wasn't going to get me, that I was going to remain a step ahead, and that in order to make the best of our time together, we should just sit back and enjoy each other's company.

Early in the spring I came to Dr. Berkus's office feeling uncharacteristically good. The weather had broken warm all week, and spurred by the thaw, I seemed to be regaining my old self. As usual, I waited outside his office until he came to get me, this time in a T-shirt and jeans.

For the first few minutes we laughed and joked, all pretense of actual "therapy" having long been cast aside. He said he was thinking about an experiment this week and he wondered if I would be willing to help him. He smiled his placid smile and told me to stand.

On his direction we moved the furniture, two chairs, a desk, a floor lamp and a filing cabinet to the far side of the room. With the space cleared, we stood

facing each other in the middle. He was a full head shorter than I was and from my spot I could see a small crown of tanned scalp.

"Put your hands up for me," he said. I obliged. He brought his up as well and our fingers locked.

"I'm going to add a little pressure and you react naturally," he said. I laughed, embarrassed to have him so close, but still willing to play the game.

Slowly, he began to push forward. My arms locked at the elbows and my chest began to burn. I had the horrible realization that something bad was happening. Dr. Berkus glanced up and I could see his black wet eyes and his mouth, which was bent in a rictus of pleasure, as if to say: *Here you go, you arrogant little prick*. I also realized if I didn't start to push back, he would walk all over me.

The pressure continued and I leaned against his arms, not slowly as he had done, but all of a piece, giving him the full brunt of my weight. My arms wobbled from the strain but then settled. We were sweating now. I shot my left leg back for balance and dropped my head. His arms were much stronger than mine, coiled, his center of gravity closer to the ground as well. But I had him beat by a good forty pounds. I was in no way muscular, but my legs were strong. If I could keep balance, my legs set and moving forward, I knew he wouldn't have a chance.

I took a step at him, determined to end it. Grunting and straining, I looked down quickly to mark his advance, to see how far he'd come toward me. The view cut under Dr. Berkus's arm and my heart sunk at what I saw. His feet were side by

side. He was not, as I was, having to find leverage in his legs. All the pressure came from his upper body.

His head jerked back. The sound of some deep release poured out of his mouth and then, with little exertion from his legs, he pushed forward. My arms sagged, my legs gave out and I slipped, toppling backwards, my arms waving to grab what was not there. My shoulder hit the ground first and then the back of my head bounced on the full carpet.

I lay there a moment and stared at the pocked ceiling, ashamed to the point of tears. I could hear cars in the street and doors opening and closing and Dr. Berkus's steady breath somewhere around me. I wouldn't look at him. When I'd settled enough to move, I rolled over and stood. Dr. Berkus was in the process of bringing our chairs back to the middle of the room. I sat down in mine and as he passed he stopped and put his hand on my shoulder. Still, I didn't look at him. His breath got close to my ear and he whispered, "If you're ready to quit with your bullshit, then we can get down to work."

He sat down across from me. Stunned, I focused on the window and found a small place in the corner where part of the glass pulled away from the frame. I had to concentrate on this small crack so as not to break out in uncontrollable sobbing. Neither of us said a word. When the chiming clock on a nearby shelf struck the hour, I stood, put on my coat, and left.

I punched my dashboard during the drive home from his office, tears of rage and shame in my eyes. The idea of suing Dr. Berkus came to mind and I was

convinced that's what I would do. But, the drive wore on and my anger wavered. I wouldn't do a thing. By the time I parked the car and stepped out in front of my house, night was coming quick. The smell of barbecue wafted down from a nearby house. I wanted to forget all about Dr. Berkus. My heart braced in my chest, immovable as a stone.

4

The day after my father swung the broom began badly.

Seb and I'd woken up early and found the Fredericksons' cat licking its paws outside the kitchen window. Seb said the cat howled all night and kept him up. I thought maybe he was still upset about getting hit with the broom, but didn't say as much. He left the kitchen and came back with his BB gun and aimed it through the kitchen window at the cat's rump. I didn't think he'd do it. It was just to scare the cat, he'd said.

Just as he pulled the trigger, the cat turned to face us. It caught the bronze BB between the eyes, swiveled on the dividing wall between the houses, and fell over into the Fredericksons' yard.

Seb brought the gun back in from the window. He didn't say a word, just walked away and put the gun back in his room. After that, we sat down to eat breakfast. I felt hungry and nauseous at the same time and sat at the table and watched my oatmeal cool while Seb ate his and drank two glasses of milk. Finally,

he pulled my bowl over and ate that too, and began talking quickly, as if he'd pulled himself from a deep vision and wanted to bring back the news.

“Did you see the way it freaked out?” he said. “I never thought two pumps could kill a cat.”

I couldn't breath. I got up from the table and shouted at him, “You're not even my real brother.”

Seb stared up at me. I began to cry and ran off to my room and as I left, I heard him say over my shoulder that he would make more oatmeal for me, just shut up a minute.

I didn't see Sebastian for the rest of the day. No one knew where he'd gone. My mom stayed in the kitchen and cooked. I anchored myself by the radio in my room, afraid to leave. Seb was gone, my father was at work. The house was still.

In the afternoon my mother came to my door. She needed lemons. Would I go get some?

Outside, the sky had purpled. I went to the toolshed, a makeshift shack at the side of the house, which smelled of grass clippings and gasoline. I took out the picker, a long white pole with a small basket at the end, and spun it over my head while I walked to the front yard and to the two lemon trees. I had picked off a shirt-load full and was gathering them to my chest when I heard, suddenly, the soft ticking of a rake from across the street. I ducked under the shield of the trees. Mr. Melne worked across a collection of leaves and cut crass in his driveway. I

watched for a few minutes and noticed a pattern to his work, how he stiffly repeated the same tentative scrapes over a small area.

I threw a lemon at Mr. Melne. It cut a high arc across the street and landed square in the middle of his back. He cried out, pitched forward to his hands and knees. I jumped behind an aloe bush not far away from the front door and bit into my knee in order not to laugh. I could hear the rake tapping on the blacktop and Mr. Melne's grunting effort to stand. Slowly, I opened from my crouch and crawled on my belly across the short stretch of grass between the bush and the door.

Inside, I walked past the kitchen to get to the living room. My mom stood over a steaming pot and glanced at me when I came in. "Where's my lemons?" she asked. "All rotten," I said, and ran to the TV room.



I watched *Land of the Lost*, a show about a father and his two kids who get sent to a world where dinosaurs lived. I stayed there, inside the story, and didn't move until my mom stood over me in her grease-smearred apron. Her mouth had no curve to it.

"I don't even know what you're doing anymore," she said.

I rolled over on my back and looked up at her. She put her hands on either side of her face and her mouth wavered and her eyes got glossy. "Did I do something to you? Are you upset at me for something?"

"No, Ma," I said.

"Why did you do it?"

"Do what?" I asked, but as the words left my mouth, I realized Mr. Melne had called.

"Go over there and apologize." She pointed across the street. "Now. I want you to go apologize."

"No," I said.

"Don't you tell me no," she said and raised her hand up, showing me the edge of her palm. I got up slowly.

"Can't I call him?" I asked.

"Go," she said, her hand still in the air.



Outside the sky was darker. Mr. Melne still scraped at his driveway, his back to the road, to me. I could see no sign of the lemon. I walked over to him and when I got to the edge of his property, I called out his name. He glanced around furtively as if he expected more people. I stopped not far from the teeth of his rake. Up close he looked like someone had grabbed his cheeks and rearranged the lay of the skin. He stood like he'd been in a fight, slumped and startled, and as I got closer, the smell of his cabbageey breath almost became a presence. Over his left shoulder, the half-moon rose in the pale sky.

"I expected your brother," he said dryly—was he trying to shame me? But then he said, "He has a better arm."

"I'm sorry I threw the lemon," I said.

He waved me off.

"That's why I came by," I went on, "to apologize for the lemon."

He put his hands in the pockets of his sweater. Neither of us said anything. A car passed in the street, circled through the cul-de-sac, and left the way it came. I fixed my eyes on the sickly moon over his head.

"Do you know anti-Semitism?" Mr. Melne said suddenly.

I didn't look down. Mr. Melne coughed, a wet breaking sound. When he caught his breath, he shook his head as if he were dazed by the violence in his own chest. "Never mind," he said. I thought I heard a little laugh escape his mouth. "Never mind that at all."

"I didn't mean to throw the lemon," I said again and toed the ground.

"I watch you guys play out here," he said, his voice suddenly softer. He thumbed in the direction of the road. "I watch you and your brother every day. You don't know that, do you? I watch you guys and I'll let you know, you could be better but Sebastian wants to win more."

I nodded.

"You're a good player. You really are. To get that lemon all the way over here you'd have to throw it pretty well, you know." He waved at me. "C'mere. Show me. Show me how you held it."

He pulled the lemon from his sweater pocket. I took it from his hand.

"Go on," he said. "Give me your throw."

The lemon felt enormous. I split my finger over the thickest part and arched my back, slung my arm behind my head.

Mr. Melne pointed in delight. "That's it, that's it exactly. You know, with the tennis balls you throw sidearm. Like a girl. You won't get any lift like that, like a girl. You have to come over the ear." He stepped back on a wobbly leg and rattled forward, his hand open and in front of him.

"Thanks a lot," I said. "That'll help." I didn't mean it. A lemon was a lemon. A ball a ball.

"Why don't you show me," Mr. Melne said. "Go ahead, throw it back home. Act like Reggie Jackson is rounding third. Act like you'll win the World Series, act like you'll get him at home."

I turned to my house. It looked quiet and warm and I desperately wanted to be back inside. I put my fingers around the lemon and threw it back over the street, careful to bring it over my ear. It bounced on the driveway and landed against one of the palm trees.

"That was a thing of beauty," Mr. Melne said.

I smiled politely and wiped my hands on my jeans.

He took a blue kerchief from his pocket and wiped his mouth. "I've got some tennis balls inside if you want them." He pointed to the house.

"I should be going," I said.

"They're just inside. Just come inside, I'll give them to you." This time he didn't wait for an answer. He turned and shuffled to the front door. I thought about leaving, but then ran to catch up.

I stood behind him at the door while he produced a key from his pocket and clicked the deadbolt. He'd locked the door even though he was ten feet away. *That sad sonuvabitch*, my father said in my head. The door swung open.

We stepped inside. The house felt dark and shallow. The walls were blue and brown leather furniture faced a small television. A cloying, sweet smell drifted in and out of the foyer, a smell I dimly associated with foreign countries and rotten meat.

Mr. Melne walked into the adjoining living room and sat down in a large brown chair that nearly swallowed his body. I stood by his feet. He looked distracted, his eyes playing around the room, and seemed like he wanted me to do something. I knew then that I was probably the first person inside his home. To remember this world, to report it back to my father and hear him laugh at their craziness would be something, and so I started to make an inventory. I'd tell them all what I saw—the black ceramic bowls, the leafy plants on the sill, the odd masks on the near wall, and, above the chimney, a large, grainy oil portrait of a family.

I did not move on so quickly after this, but studied the picture a moment. Five people stood in front of a stoop. There was a little boy in billowy white pants, an older girl with a ribbon in her hair, a young man in his twenties who clowned with a cane, and a couple whose faces had the same scrunched intensity as Mr. Melne's.

"That's my family," Mr. Melne said, catching my attention. "In Dusseldorf. That's me with the cane."

I looked back at the picture, at the twenty-year-old Mr. Melne. There was only the faintest resemblance. They were about the same height. "It's old," I said.

"Oh yes, it's very old."

Mr. Melne stood then and announced he was going to find the tennis balls. He clumped across the room and opened a back door. I heard boxes being shuffled.

A car drove by in the street. I took a step closer to the portrait and looked again at the children, then at Mr. Melne. I looked at his mother, at her wrinkled face and clothes, and noticed that one of her arms was draped almost imperceptibly around Mr. Melne's waist. Pale fingers clung to the other side of his shirt. Mr. Melne's father sat next to her, his face rigid. His parents didn't touch at all and I wondered why his mother wouldn't touch her husband, but would hold her son, and nearly a grown man at that.

Mr. Melne came back into the room with three cans of tennis balls. I turned my back to the painting. He rattled each can to show me what was inside.

"Remember to throw over the ear," he said. I took the cans and held them under my arms. I moved to leave, stepped around a fat chair, and then for reasons I don't know, turned around to look at the portrait a last time.

"You like that picture, huh?" Mr. Melne asked. He patted my shoulder.

"I was just looking."

"It's okay to look. Look, look all you want." He took a step closer to the fireplace and crossed his arms. "See those people on the side there? That was my

mother and father. They gave me some money not long after this picture was taken and I never saw them again.”

I stared at his mother’s bright eyes, at the short black hat with a small feather tilted on her head. I didn’t understand how she could put her arm around a boy who could leave her and never come back. She must love him, I thought, and then I felt warm, hateful jealousy of their happiness.

“This was just before the Holocaust,” Mr. Melne said. “You know what that is?”

“What is?” I said though I’d heard him.

“The Holocaust. You’ve come across that, yes?”

I’d heard it. I didn’t know where I’d heard it, somewhere close by, and I answered in a fit of compulsion, as if it were a duty: “It’s when Jesus comes back to Earth and takes us away for being good,” and then added, “Takes the believers away,” because I knew Mr. Melne wasn’t a believer.

He coughed and sat down. There was a quiet moment then his chest heaved once and when he covered his face I realized I’d hurt him. He made a sound through his hands like air leaving a balloon. I took a step back.

I’m not sure when I figured out he wasn’t crying, but laughing. Something changed. Or nothing changed. He couldn’t get air fast enough into his lungs to catch the next wave rising out of him. His body went still but between this stillness came a violent shake of his shoulders, or a wipe of his eyes or a whistling deep in his throat, followed by another stillness where he tried to catch his breath to laugh

again. I found myself listening to those quiet spaces between his outbursts. The moments when I didn't know how he felt. He seemed to understand everything then.

The Night before the Elections

My father, a ten year old boy in dirty denims and a black shirt, wakes up suddenly in the dark. This scene is not so hard to conjure. Later in his life, I will watch him wake up on our dusky couch, in the large bed he shares with my mother, in an cherry wood rocking chair. Each time it's the same—dead to the world, head cocked back, saliva around his open mouth, then, awake and rubbing his head as if to bring his thoughts back to the room. But in this story, he is a boy, and I'm only a dream to him.

It's dusk when he wakes, he's only been napping after dinner, but already the room around him has lost its shape and definition. He rolls over to his side and rests for a moment, his arm braced behind his head. Above, his model B-17 slowly twirls. It's tied to a frayed string he's stapled to the ceiling. In the dark he can't make out the fuselage or the sharp, angular tail, but as it turns, the tips of the wings catch the light from the neighbor's kitchen window, and in that moment, my father sees the burnt green paint he's applied himself. It's a good plane, he thinks, the best he's built yet.

It's November. The smell of burning coal and fried potatoes fills his small room. He sticks his hand outside the quilt and feels the sharp cold, then quickly puts his hand back inside, close to his body. He's already had dinner, but he's still hungry. He wants more potatoes and onions, but knows there's none left. Earlier

that evening, his father took the last helping, spread butter and ketchup over the potatoes, then, because of the famine, called the potatoes sons of bitches, and ate.

Not in front of the boy, his mother said, but she didn't seem genuinely angry, her eyes off toward the sink, the dishes to clean. She passed Patrick a roll and poured herself some milk from a blue ceramic pitcher.

There's a knock on my father's door, and though he's been lost in his own thoughts of airplanes and hunger, the sound doesn't surprise him. His mother opens the door, her figure smudged in the lightless room. He knew she was coming, believes he and his mother are connected in some way neither of them has asked for. He can simply wake and find her there. Glasses of water appear when he is thirsty, lamps that he should have lit himself are somehow glowing hot when he finally runs upstairs.

"We're leaving soon, Paddy," she says. "Get dressed." She turns up the lightswitch by the door. He squints out the light and sees his mother smooth two brown ringlets of hair away from her eyes, a faint smile on her mouth. She's changed into her thick, red dress since dinner.

"Do I have to go?" he asks.

"You agreed to go," she says. The corners of her mouth pull down.

"It's his elections, not ours," he says, knowing that siding them both against his father is his only chance.

She tilts her head. "You have to go. Now hurry." She steps into the hallway and quietly closes the door.

His name is Patrick though his parents call him Paddy, like his father was called and his father was called and on and on. "We're a sainted bunch," Patrick's father says sometimes, but Patrick hears a kind of hook in his father's voice now, a darkness that hasn't always been there. His father is a tall man, thin with thinning black hair and long fingers like leather straps. "I don't like the name Paddy," Patrick has said to his father on more than one occasion, and it's true, he doesn't like it, he means what he says. "Wait until I die," his father says, the hook there again in his voice. "You'll get to be called Patrick then."

He swings out from the quilt and feels the cold crimp at his legs. A door slams downstairs. Patrick gets on his knees and weaves his hand under the bed until he finds his brown shoes. When he pulls them into the light, he sees the shoelaces are caked with mud, so he bends them and mud breaks off and falls to the floor. This he sweeps under the bed.

It's too cold to move fast, not even his father could expect him to be ready so quickly in this weather, so he sits on his bed and pulls on the shoes but doesn't lace them up. He looks through the window above his bed. The streetlights are burning. The wind is still because the trees are still, but the ground looks blue and cold. Across the way, the neighbor, old Mrs. McCurty, scrubs a large metal pan with a rag, the skin below her cheeks shaking with the effort. Patrick blows on the window and draws a face in his breath. Mrs. McCurty's silver-white head bobs in and out of the face's eyes, and he laughs. She rumours around too much, or so his father says, but now she just seems pitiful scrubbing that pan and shaking.

From downstairs, Patrick hears a loud clanging and becomes still. He knows the sound—the shaker running on the furnace, the excess coal dropping into the dark-stained bucket. A sound that means his father is home. Patrick quickly rubs out his breath with his sleeve and slides off the bed. He hurries out his room, then clops down the steep steps which lead to the kitchen. Downstairs, his mother and father are standing by the back door, both them in their winter coats, his father in his good hat.

“Get your coat, dear,” his mother says, then looks down at his feet. “And tie your shoes.”

“It’s about time, lazybones,” his father says. “I’m going to be late, so shake a leg.”

Patrick opens the closet door by the staircase and finds his coat, a navy blue wool coat that’s too big for him. I’m no lazybones, he thinks, but he’s been caught napping and he’d lose in an argument. He puts his coat on and yanks on the collar.

“The neck itches,” he says.

His father holds up a hand. “The hell it does, that’s a new coat.”

“It’s not new,” Patrick says, his head tilted down into his collar, “you bought it from Chuck Rainery.”

“So it’s new to you, bub,” his father says and lets out a little sob of laughter.

His mother steps toward Patrick and puts her hand between the wool collar and his neck. Her hand is warm and a little wet. She smells like oranges, or maybe

orange blossoms. “I’ll sew it up later,” she says, and then to his father, “We should probably go if you have to be at the gym by eight.”

For a moment his father stands still and it seems he will continue on about the coat, probably what he usually says, how in Cork they never had anything, goddamnit all—but he sucks air through his teeth and opens the door.

“At least get him to tie his shoes,” his father says, and steps out into the cold yard.



The drive to the school gymnasium takes them out of town, passed cornfields and silhouetted silos like bullets from the ground. Patrick’s been warned to let his father think during the drive—this means silence. Papa has to warm-to, his mother said. Hush hush.

Patrick watches the landscape outside the speeding car. He can see the beginnings of the low corn, but beyond that is only darkness. To while away the time, he imagines Germans in the brush, guns raised, his father’s ’39 Chevy too fast to get a bead on. He turns and sees the road ahead opening up under the headlights. His mother is staring out of her window and he wonders if she is dreaming the fields the same way, just to make the time go faster.

Finally, they turn into the high school parking lot. The gym sits like a white elephant in the dark. His father finds a spot—close to the doors, always close—and kills the engine. They get out and walk, Patrick behind his mother, his mother behind his father. The air is cold and pungent with woodsmoke. Patrick claps his

hands for warmth. When they get to the gym's sidedoor, his father stops and adjusts his hat.

“Make sure you get a spot so you can see,” he says to his mother.

“We will,” she says and kisses his cheek.

“Get that for me,” he says and she rubs her thumb near the spot she's marked with her lipstick.

His father pulls open one of the big doors and they are met with loud voices and the rising music from a band. Circular tables cover the gym floor and men and women in black coats and dresses sit at the tables and drink from long-stemmed glasses. Gouts of smoke waver above their heads.

Inside the gym now, Patrick can see an accordion band, far at the opposite end. A few couples are spinning one another in front of the bandstand and under a long red and blue banner which reads, “Republican Sweep in '46,” Patrick begins walking toward the music, but a soft hand stays him by the shoulder.

“Keep next to me,” his mother says close to his ear.

His father has his hat off now and is craning his neck to the left and right, searching for someone.

“Can't we get a table somewhere up by the band?” Patrick yells to her over the din.

She waggles a finger. Across the gym, Patrick notices a man walking toward them. He is short and stocky with a thin mustache and a bald head. Patrick has seen the man talking with his father many times—his name is Chuck Rainery,

he runs the miner's union in Taylorville and sometimes sells them his oldest son's cast-off clothes. Besides having to wear Richard Rainery's old wool coat with the itchy neck, Patrick bristles when Mr. Rainery is around because his mother doesn't like him. The man has too much teeth, she's said before, and Patrick agrees.

Mr. Rainery breaks through a line a people nearby and falls upon their little group. "Glad you could come," he says in a booming voice. "We've got the board set up by the band."

"And the adding machine?" his father asks.

Mr. Rainery nods and rubs his chin. "All there. Even got a girl to work it." He thumbs over his shoulder. "Why don't we head on over."

Together the men weave through the dense crowd. Patrick sees his father's mouth moving, then Chuck Rainery laughing and patting his father on the back.

"Can't we sit down?" Patrick asks his mother again.

She hasn't taken her hand from his shoulder and as an answer, she squeezes him gently, a sign to let him know she needs him to be quiet. "We'll be done soon," she says. At the bandstand his father waits by the few dancing couples. The accordion band continues their bumping waltz, but behind them, a long green chalkboard is being wheeled onstage. Some people sitting at the circular tables have turned and are watching the stage. Chuck Rainery walks up and taps the shoulder of the man with the largest accordion, a sway-backed man with long sideburns. Slowly, the music winds down and stops. There's no sound now except

the voices in the crowd, and without the music to blanket them, these too slowly drop down into silence.

Patrick's hands begin to burn from the excitement. Onstage, his father looks tense and small. His hat is clutched to his chest and the sweat in his closely cropped hair picks up the overhead lights.

Chuck Rainery taps the microphone and laughs. "Ladies and gentlemen," he says, "if I could have your attention. I'd like to present a very special friend to the district Republican ticket, Mr. Patrick Clarke."

There's scattered applause.

"Is he going to speak?" Patrick asks his mother. For a moment he thinks she hasn't heard him, her face is turned toward Mr. Rainery, but finally she looks at him and he sees her face is red and she might cry.

"No, he won't speak," she says. "He's not here to speak."

Patrick wants to console her, to touch her hand at least, but she is probably crying because she's happy. There's movement on the stage. A small desk is being carried up and a thin, blond-haired woman in a blue dress brings up a box and rests it on top of the desk.

"I'll need ten volunteers," Chuck Rainery says. "Ten people with ten dollar bills. Just yell out the serial numbers."

"Even the letters?" someone says from the crowd. Some laughter.

Chuck Rainery smiles and shakes his head. "No, Jim, just the numbers. Only the numbers."

At this, Patrick's father takes a step to the front of the stage. The man who played the largest accordion is now behind him at the board, a large piece of chalk in his hand. The blond woman in the blue dress sits at the desk, her fingers poised above the box. The gym is quiet and for a moment, Patrick thinks he's seen this before, at the circus, it's all just like the performer on the wire. They've all come to see his father perform.

There's a soft rustling around the room—men are digging into pockets, women into purses.

The first voice in the crowd makes Patrick jump. Eight numbers are barked to the stage from a face Patrick can't find. The accordion player with the sideburns writes the numbers quickly, the sound of the scratching chalk carrying across the gym. Chuck Rainery turns expectantly from the chalkboard back to the crowd. Patrick's father stands only with his head bowed, his hat now behind his back. He seems nervous, his lips folding and unfolding inside his mouth, as if he were looking down at the thin wire from that high perch and having second thoughts about the whole thing.

Another voice calls out eight numbers, then another and another until Patrick has lost count of how many have gone. The accordion player hurries to get them all down and as he writes, the list slants downwards. His father hasn't moved except for his rolling lips. Finally, the last eight numbers are called out and the accordion player nods. Chuck Rainery says something away from the microphone

and the accordion player moves back to the board and begins to scratch a long line from one end of the board to the other.

He's going to total it up, Patrick thinks, this is it.

The crowd is so quiet. His heart clicks painfully in his chest.

And then someone is speaking, a low, faint voice. Patrick can't tell who it is until he looks at his father and sees his jaw and mouth moving.

Chuck Rainery stares at him in amazement or horror, Patrick can't tell. The two men are locked in their positions for a moment, Mr. Rainery watching his father, his father studying the floor. Finally, Mr. Rainery seems to wake and waves his father to the microphone and says something Patrick thinks is "louder". His father takes a step to the microphone stand. Everyone is watching him now, there's nothing left to do, and suddenly, Patrick thinks his father won't be able to speak. His voice will break, he can't do it. Patrick wants to yell at him, tell him to get off the stage, that he doesn't have to do anything. But, out of the quiet, his father bends his head down and his half-voice strikes the microphone—a series of numbers trace through the loudspeakers.

Patrick excitedly beats his leg with his hand. Mr. Rainery turns to the board and waits as the accordion player adds up each row. The blond-haired woman at the desk pushes on the box in front of her. Patrick feels sweat drip down his back and burn at his palms. Each row of numbers drops on the board until, at the final tally, the accordion player stands and puts the chalk down. Chuck Rainery glances at the woman at the desk and she nods, her lips bunched together.

Mr. Rainery almost runs to the microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he says, his face red and smiling, “Mr. Clarke has added all the numbers up in his head, and has got it right, straight down to the last number.”

And the room, strangely, remains quiet.

A woman in the back begins to clap half-heartedly and Patrick can hear other people begin to applaud, but it’s not enthusiastic. He turns to his mother but her face is pale, she doesn’t seem to have seen or heard anything. Some people begin to take sips from their drinks, others lean over and start talking loudly. Didn’t they see what happened? Patrick thinks. Don’t they know?

Chuck Rainery rubs his lips as if something was burning his mouth.

“Multiply ‘em!” somebody yells in the crowd, a joke. Again, a few people laugh. And Patrick realizes with a tight clenching in his stomach, that it’s all a joke. His father isn’t walking high above the crowd but is stumbling around in red shoes. He feels sick for him, ashamed.

His father coughs into his hand, unable to walk away from the microphone. He’s embarrassed, Patrick thinks, that’s what he does when he’s embarrassed. But as he thinks this, his father moves, slowly, a step to the microphone. He speaks. A number, another number and another until it seems the numbers from his mouth will never end.

The woman at the desk doesn’t type, the accordion player stares glassy-eyed into the crowd. His father continues his rant and finally, breathlessly, whispers the last.

No one moves or speaks. The numbers hang in the air.

And then, as if a levee has spilt, a roar of clapping and stomping spreads. People jump to their feet. The band begins to play again, a boisterous polka, there's shouts and hollers coming from all around. Patrick can hardly see through the bodies, but above the arms and heads, he sees his father's hat being waved high in the air.

Over the music and the cheering come's Chuck Rainery's voice. "Republicans at work. Remember tomorrow. These are your Republicans at work."

The shouting and the clapping continue. Patrick can see Mr. Rainery leading his father through the crowd. They're shaking hands. A flash goes off for a picture.



His father slaps the steering wheel during the drive home and speaks loudly between fits of laughter. Patrick laughs with him. He sits up close to the front seat, his head resting on the cold cushion between his mother and father.

"It's all numbers," his father says and grabs the rearview mirror so his eyes lock onto Patrick's in the reflection. "You figure out the numbers and you've got everything."

Patrick smiles and nods and checks to get his mother's response. She hasn't said much during the drive and only watches the dark fields pass outside the window. "Even baseball?" Patrick says suddenly, though once he's said it, he wonders why he was given voice to speak.

His father pops the steering wheel again. “Hell yes,” he says, “especially baseball. All those groundballs, ratios of speed, pitching—short hops, don’t forget short hops.”

They let several minutes pass to bask in what they’ve done and seen or spoke about. Or that’s how Patrick thinks of the quiet. They’re all wondering about what’s happened to them.

“A hundred dollars,” his father says suddenly, almost to himself. He stares fixedly through the windshield. “One hundred dollars for goddamned numbers.”

“It’s a lot of money,” Patrick adds.

“Yeah, bub. It’s a lot of money.”

“They didn’t ask us to stay,” his mother says softly from her corner of the car. She turns her head and Patrick can see one bright curl of hair bounce on her forehead.

His father glances at her then focuses back to the road. “Who wants to stay?” he says, then laughs. “Honey, that was a dinner to get people to vote. We’re already going Republican.”

“It just would’ve been nice to have been asked.” She puts her hand out and Patrick thinks she’s holding something for his father. He leans forward a bit and sees she’s bracing herself on the dashboard as if the wheels had struck something to make the car toddle. “We deserve that,” she says.

His father’s head doesn’t move, stays stock-still on the road.

Patrick sits back in his seat. His mother turns to his father, but she doesn't say anything more. She watches her window again, the back of her hand against her mouth.

There is only the sound of the tires crunching on the road when his father says, "You'd take it away from me. I get a chance for me, something that's mine so my family can see me, and you can't even give me that."

They drive on through the dark. Patrick sits quietly and watches the night continue its gentle opening in front of the headlights. His father's wrists are bent over the wheel. His mother stares at the black corn just feet away. Why has she done it? Why would she make him angry? Couldn't she let him be happy, couldn't she see what this meant to him?

Patrick can't look at either one of them. Upturning his head, he finds the moon over the fields and is suddenly filled with an ache so strong he has to bite his collar to keep from sobbing out loud. It's the moon that reminds him, somehow, that they have come back to this car, to this road, the night, and they will soon go back to their house and their lives. During the course of the night, he has forgotten. Where? he thinks. Where did I forget? But all he wants now is to have remembered there in the gym. If he only would have remembered who they were, there on the oiled floor, he would have begged to stay by the band for just a few more moments. He would have listened to the heavy music beating—oomph, oomph, oomph—and even danced with his mother, folded in her orange blossom smell, if that would keep her distracted.

The collar in his mouth tastes like paper but he won't let it go from his teeth. To cry out now would only make things worse. The three-step waltz plays in his head. There's his father's hat high above them in the smoky air.

Blue Racer

I never did tell you the story about my good cousin Ben and the blue racer snake. Benjamin was my cousin, is my cousin, though I have lost him. We have gone the way of all men, apart, but we were always together then, he and I, Ben and Socket, boys dirty from the waists up with sticks in our hands, the points whittled for poking and stabbing at fish and crabs. It is to this time, my time with Benjamin out near the alligator slue of the tidewater when I was twelve, that I go at night to ease that burning sick in my soul which has seen and lost so much. Only then, the cool evenings, can I think back to the marsh and mud and go with Ben until the late hours on the slue with our wire cages and rotten chicken legs, back on the dirt road leading up to the houses and their deep shadows inside, up above the world on the roof of Ben's house, Davis' guitar humming below us in the dark, and in the distance, the swinging klieg light in Granville cutting through the night like a wand. This is my story about Ben and who Ben was to me and how a snake tore us apart.

They called me Socket because I stuck a fork into an outlet when I was four and nearly died. Davis—that's Ben's father and my uncle—he gave me the name. He's the one who came in the living room and kicked me off the wall with his mud-chapped boot, off the wall where I was bouncing and shaking with the fork still in my hand and the tooth end half stuck in the plug. I thought a little rat lived inside and wanted to help my mother clean—she was a woman with a yellow rag in her hair who was always cleaning, cleanliness being next to Godliness and all. She ran

into the room only after Davis got me off the current. I retched and she fainted cold. Afterwards, she was always terrified I'd die of one thing or another—she'd lost a little girl younger than me, Carolina, to the mysterious sickness when the baby was only a year old and this has something to do with my mother's covetousness. When she did come into the room and saw me there, sweaty and pale, Davis standing over me, she was sure the Lord'd taken another one. Davis, with his black shiny hair, I remember it still like hot road tar, was barely shaken, probably working on my new name even then. Shortly after, I was Socket and though now live nowhere near that alligator slue of the tidewater, I'm still called Socket James and don't expect to ever shake it.

When I was three, Uncle Davis and his wife, Kathy, moved down to the slue from Charleston and brought Ben with them who was two and afflicted with asthma. They'd been living up in Charleston because Davis played in a band there that had a steady gig on Thursdays and Saturdays making the blues. I don't remember much of Kathy except that she had a pinched face and spacious breasts (maybe pictures tell me this) and that she'd lie out flat on the carpet and drink mint juleps, a true southern belle, and do paint-by-number pictures of famous religious scenes. Moses and the Red Sea. The feeding of a thousand. Attrition over Sodom and Gomorrah. Her parents made their money in longhorn oysters, making the hoses that sucked shellfish from the ocean floor. These two, her parents, bought Kathy and Davis a little house from whose top window you could see the Battery

and the south edge of Fort Sumner where you can go now by ferry and walk around the battlements and eat cotton candy in the shade.

Why they moved away from Charleston and this life of ease and pleasure I'm not entirely sure. Maybe to be around family. I do know Davis played guitar his whole life, really played guitar, but like most of his kind around the slue—really anybody who didn't work on the wharf or dangle by ropes fixing the Pickerton bridge or tend shop—he drank too much and caroused and generally caused a disturbance. He'd been like this before meeting Kathy, or so I'd heard from my father, but marrying a rich girl didn't do him any good. He's nearly no count, my mother would say, holding just enough back in her judgments so as not to anger my father.

Kathy, despite her family money and big education at the U. of S. Carolina, was a tart. But maybe this is my mother speaking through me. I get conflicting voices saying what's true about that time and those people. Sometimes it's my father speaking and he says Kathy had a big heart, but marriages sour. And yet, a tart is still a tart, no matter how you cook it. I know my mother said that and you could expect her to. Since the death of Carolina, she'd drive nowhere without a good-sized Bible on the dash and talked about strolling to Emmaeus, which is what she called the bathroom, and generally, as Davis would say with a snigger, got religion bad in her soul.

But Kathy. About five years after she and Davis moved down to the slue, Kathy got caught astride a neighbor, named Millshaw. Caught by my very father,

Davis' brother. The story is that Thomas came in because Davis asked him to, if you can believe that. Davis had a show downtown at the Crowbar that night—the Charleston band having long broken up, Davis had gone out on his own as a blues singer and guitarist—and said to my father, If ever we had the same blood, if ever our mother drove us down that one time to St. Louis and took us on that paddle boat where we saw those two white birds sunning themselves on the bank and we both agreed right then and there it was the most beautiful thing we'd ever see, if ever that happened, go over to Millshaw's and see what my own wife's doing to me, see why I'm so ornery.

My father was a large man, a quiet lumbering man who had a respectable job himself as a floor manager at the nearby Penn tennis ball factory. I can't imagine him doing anything at night but sitting in his chair with the paper, let alone breaking in on any lovers, but because my father loved Davis in his own way and because he still talked about that paddle boat ride down the Mississippi and yes, it might have been the best moment of his life up until then, he went uptown to Davis' rangy house, crawled in the window and saw Kathy astride Millshaw, her spacious breasts in his hands.

"Excuse me," my father said, and crawled on back out.

Kathy left the next day, though nobody saw her go. That was the day I convinced Ben to come out on the slue and crab. The light was hot-blue but shadowed and the deep water cool and good for crabs to show themselves. We went out, standing knee-deep in the water, naked down to our three-quarter pants.

I was sick for crabbing then and so was Ben. There's a dim light catches a crab on its red back, a glowing like a bulb when it wants to eat. Sunlight bends through the water into the dark below the surface and you wait and watch, tensed and listening to the sound water makes when it's moving—like wind in trees—moving, but if you look and try to prove with your eyes, water's just still, still. There, in that quiet moment when the water won't go, the crab creeps down through the silt-dark bottom to the silver cage, the diamond-shaped cage of your making from chicken wire and rope where inside, hooked and bloody, is the rotten chicken leg as trap. When the crab scuttles across, your hand rattles from the click of its claws and you have to wait, wait, because the crab is quick and will get away. Right when the claw tastes the leg—you pull that rope. Up, out the water, thrashing up into that other light, the deep true light of day, your crab against the silvery bars of your making. I was sick for crabbing.

That hot-blue day, we stood stock still, warmed by the heat. Any day it could have been. But something was wrong, of course. Ben stared into the water where the line of his crab cage broke the surface.

Ben had his mother's face and a frail little body and wiry hands like a woman's too, and tight lips that made you think he was always about to scream something. He didn't seem intelligent at all because of those lips and because he rarely said anything except to tell you later, as we'd learn our politeness, how someone, usually his dad, Davis, had been horrible wrong.

“She just left,” he kept saying on our blue afternoon, though I hushed him to keep the crabs calm. He loved his mother. A truth—he’d crawl up and sit in her lap all day if she’d let him. All I could do was nod at his spoken suffering, my eyes down for the sideways crawl of some crab.

After a little while, Ben dropped his line in the water, something you never do because the crabs see the movement and scare. Without a word, he tromped through the muck of the bank and lay back in the high witch grass so I could only see the white tops of his bent knees. I found his line where it snaked around on the surface and held both lines together; but in me, I wanted to speak a word to Ben to ease him, to loose his troubles. That I could’ve had that voice then to speak what it was to lose someone and feel a part was sheared clean from your body—as I’ve now lost Ben and now feel that shearing of myself—I could have helped him some. But that’s a regret which needs no airing here—that afternoon, I pulled both cages to the shore, hell with crabbing, and walked up through the bitter witch grass to where Ben lay.

At first I thought I’d come upon a crane or heron broken in the grass. His legs were close and risen but his arms were splayed from his body and his head was tilted so that he seemed to be watching something crawl up his wrist. Around us was the shik-shik-shik of bugs and off, down toward the branch, I could hear the belly-rumble of cranes and plows. I squatted by his white-skinned legs. A shock of blackish hairs sprouted from the edges of Ben’s breasts, hairs I’d not noticed before.

“That’s toadflax,” Ben said and pointed to an arching plant near his hand.

I squinted out the light and found a thin leafed plant and spurred flowers arching over his thumb. “That’s ‘butter-and-eggs,’” I said. “We got them around our cellar door.”

Ben gave me his upturned face. It was too much, suddenly, to see him there, unfolded in the grass, that face wide and listening and too impossibly gentle. I looked away.

“I’m heading out,” I said and drug the cage cords over my shoulder back through the brown muck of the bank. At water’s edge I turned to him. “You coming?” But the witch grass’d taken him back—only his knees shown again. I went out and crabbed by myself.

If there’s something I know, it’s that some of us are too fragile for this world. One blow and the soul breaks like glass windows. My sister, Carolina, though I never met her as a person but just a toddler, was like this, is still like this in my mind, still gentle in God’s eternal respite. And Ben too. You could just tell by looking at him—he belonged only partially to this world.

He carried around, the back of his pockets, a map of the night sky. Like other kids carried slingshots or glossy crumpled pictures of naked ladies. We all knew something about stars, living in and around the tidewater, but Ben knew more than most from reading that map book over and over.

I remember clearly the day we got his star book. It wasn’t long after his mother’d died. We went down to Winnomaker’s pharmacy downtown, past the

encyclopedia warehouse. I wanted to get a model airplane, the kind built out of balsa wood. The store'd just gotten the new set, Junkers and a Mustang, an old Red Baron and B-17s I couldn't afford. It was a small shop on the corner, south of the wharf, and the insides smelled like toilet cleaner. Mr. Winnomaker owned and ran the place as his father and father's father had, men who both fought valiantly on the side of confederation, not that I'm proud of that. Winnomaker was a sweet old man, a slumped over tree with gnarly hands and a white hanging beard like moss. His people were the church-going south and so he adored my mother who he said was revered for having directly touched the cloak of God when her little girl was taken. Tragedy brought favor, from God and man, but as I quickly learned only some kinds of tragedy. As the child of a run-off adulteress and a drunken musician who sang the songs of the dirty sadnesses even God had a hard time relieving, Ben was given a cursory nod and little else when we came in the door.

Ben and I went in on that day in our three-quarters and bare chests. It was mid-summer and you couldn't stay out in the heat for too long or the sun'd bore into your brain and you'd pass out. We sought out the cool places and Mr. Winnomaker's was the coldest of them. And he had ice cream. Inside the store, Ben walked behind me as usual-- I could hear his feet padding on the cold black and white tile. I was the talkative one, could get along with adults, and besides, Ben knew what Mr. Winnomaker thought of his family. He stayed quiet.

On the right of the store were the adult items—panty hose, some small stools, canned foods, tobacco—and on the left was a wide counter were Mr.

Winnomaker made shakes. Down past the counter were a few aisles for children—candy, toys, white wire racks full of comics. Ben and I shuffled in and I lost him by the candy, he didn't care for planes but did enjoy Baby Ruth. I wasn't worrying much about him, which was rare for me. I took up a Mustang in its plastic bag and held it up. No deserving child then would buy a damn Junkers or a Red Baron—we weren't all that far from the war. I must have been lost in my ideas of flying, how that little wood plane could take off and swing around in the air like the silver slue birds which brought up fish—anyways, I didn't pay Ben any mind. I paid for the plane and Mr. Winnomaker doled out my change and out I went into the hot glazing street only to find Ben standing there, his eyes cutting this way and that.

“What hell's done to you?” I said, which was an expression Davis used. Ben didn't like for me to say it, he said he got enough of that at home, but I couldn't help myself.

Ben didn't say anything but waved me down the road toward the slue and back home. It was a dirt road pocked with holes and lined by deeply sagging trees. The heat made my eyes burn and I couldn't get enough air. I could see the men working on the Pickerton in the distance, how they hung from the girders like spiders. We walked in silence until, at a spot almost halfway home, when Ben turned and said, “I can't believe I've done it, but here it is.” He pulled out the book, a thin blue paperback with a shiny cover, and flopped it around in his hands like it didn't mean much to him.

“Hot damn,” I said, and took it from him and looked inside. Of all people, Ben, stealing. I imagined he’d gotten something racy, something we could use, but when I opened it up my first thought was, What hell? because all there was were black pages with white dots and then on the other side, some text and besides it was a little book you couldn’t sell back for anything. On the upper corner was a price—ten dollars, which I thought was a lot for a damn book.

Ben took it out of my hand. “I can’t believe I did it,” he said again and held the book out in front of him like it would bite him if he got close.

“Don’t tell anybody,” I said. “It’s not worth worrying about.”

Ben looked over at me, his face stricken and white. His little black eyes were almost filling up with tears and his bird chest puffed in and out. I couldn’t take the sight of him. Seeing him like that. You see, I was his protection, being older, and because I loved him.

“I’m not like him,” he said now. “I’m not him at all.”

“Who you talking about?”

“I just couldn’t help myself,” Ben said and looked down at the book.

The trouble, as far as I could tell, was wrapped up in that book. Without so much as a thought as to what was really going on with Ben right then, I reached around his waist and pulled the book from his hand, my wrist rubbing against the slick sweat on his back, and took off running back to Winnomaker’s. Ben yelled after me and started running too, but I was fast. Davis used to say, Socket, you’d skin a blue racer at his own game and he wasn’t wrong. I was quick; my legs

seemed to work of their own accord. I took off for the pharmacy with the book down now in my own shorts, my wood Mustang in its bag and clutched against my chest, which was really burning now from the heat. I skidded around the corner, and pulled open the pharmacy's door.

"Home again, home again," Mr. Winnomaker said. He pulled his beard and smiled.

"Right-O," I said and starting walking around the store as if I didn't know anything about anything or what I wanted. I held the plane against me and circled around the place until the ruse got me near the book section. My heart was throbbing in my chest. I'd be caught, I knew it. I cursed Ben for stealing the book—why would he want a damn book of the stars anyways? Just look up already. Mr. Winnomaker'd gone back to his business behind the counter. He only had a small rack of books and I found the slot for the star book fast enough. Quickly, I took the old one from behind the waist of my shorts, the binding or something nipping the edge of my skin, and slipped it back on the shelf. Mr. Winnomaker was holding a jar of bolts up to the light. Outside I could see Ben standing across the road. He looked so small, like a little bird fallen out of a tree. There was no understanding him. First he'd steal, then hate himself for it. I pulled the same blue book up from its slot and shoved it into my pants and sallied toward the exit.

"Chin up, Mr. Winnomaker," I said and waved as I passed the old man.

"Up, up," he called when I opened the door.

I got outside and stopped not ten feet from Ben.

“What’d you do? You tell on me?” I stood there for a moment. Ben took a step forward and stopped. I didn’t know what to think. It hurt me, but I decided to play more hurt than I was, to, for once, need his forgiveness of me. I took off running down toward the slue. Ben took up again after me and I kept going until I reached the Henderson’s mailbox where I stopped and dropped my plane in the grass and put my face in my hands like I couldn’t face him.

Ben came up next to me. I could hear his heavy breath broken by the asthma. “Aw shit, Sock,” he said. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

I pulled my hands from my face. Ben was doubled over, his hands on his knees, and when he saw I wasn’t crying, he just shook his head. I took out the book from behind my jeans and handed it to him.

“There, I bought a copy with the leftover change.”

Ben looked up, still bent over, his face flushed. He took the book but didn’t look at me.

“Race home?” I said.

Ben turned toward the slue which bent and ran on the other side of the Henderson’s property. All around us, the heat was stirring up the bugs and I listened to the sounds of that singing for a moment. There was nothing else, not even the water. I watched the sweat from Ben’s hair catch on his one bony shoulder and knew I should tell him—I stole it, but I stole it for you. But since I knew him, and knew he would’ve taken it back and done without the book whether

I'd stolen it for him or for the pope, I kept quiet. Ben just watched the slue and I felt some deep struggle swing back and forth in him. You could see it in his face—the way his eyes narrowed and widened on a thought. I wanted to shake him out of it, out from that place that paralyzed him cold. But I could never lay hands on Ben.

“Race home?” I asked again.

He turned away from the slue, back to me. His face was calmer now.

“Naw boy,” he said. “Let's take it slow.”

We started walking home and he showed me from the book the way stars had come to make shapes of themselves. I felt light, forgiven, and yet wondered if Ben knew for what he'd pardoned me.



Ben and I lived there in the marsh and mud of the slue until the late hours and then when it got dark we went to his house, which wasn't far from mine. My house was too clean and my father needed quiet after listening to all those tennis balls being pounded and stitched. Neither he or my mother wanted me over with uncle Davis but I'd sneak out anyway or not come home at all, and if I got caught, I'd say that Ben and Davis were family and if we don't have family what have we got? This never worked on my mother—she came from a family of eight kids, she'd had all she could ever want out of family—but my father always broke. He was loyal like that, and at the same time hotly distrustful of everyone, even himself. In the end, I spent my evenings at Ben's.

He and Davis lived in a squat wood A-frame behind the tennis ball factory. Since Kathy'd gone a few years before, the house had gone dirty and spare. Davis

had sold all the furniture, all of Kathy's family furniture, except one couch he kept under a big window in the front room. Ben had his own room in the back that he'd had to fix up himself. He'd unbolted siding from the tennis ball factory and covered the wall with it so he didn't have to look at the chips and holes where Davis had punched through. Ben built himself a bed, too, out of plywood from a skiff we found, one of many that only tourist kids built to run on the slue because they didn't know really how to crab, with traps and rotten chicken, and because they hadn't yet gotten an eyeful of a gator.

The rule in Ben's house was leave Davis the hell alone. The two of them acted like brothers and sometimes Ben acted like the father—he bought groceries, paid the power bill and once washed Davis in their tub after he'd come stumbling home one morning from a show, a jelly-colored wave of blood creeping under his hair. Ben and I didn't ask what happened, Davis couldn't talk if we had, so we stole a scrub brush from my house, from under my mother's sink, and a bar of soap. We carried Davis, who was only barely heavier than me into their rusty tub and there we began to scrub the caked blood off him. The blood came off in time but we continued to scrub because Davis hadn't bathed in weeks. My arms got tired after awhile but Ben wouldn't stop, back and forth back and forth until Davis cried out in his drunken pain and little drops of blood showed up on his skin where Ben had rubbed too hard.

There is a night in the house I won't forget. It wasn't so hot, late spring and rainy outside. Their house was so badly lit that deep block shadows would fall

across the room. Ben and I were playing darts in the hallway and Davis came home, wet and carrying his ratty guitar case with silver tape all over it. He dropped himself on the couch and took his coat off and threw it on the sill. Then he started tooling out some little piece on his guitar that was so sweet and so contrary to everything I knew about him that I stopped playing darts. Sometimes I thought he had to have been, even for just one day, some kind of angel, some God-touched man, to play like that. And he could play sometimes even when his mind wasn't on it, so sweet, so sweet, it'd make you sad for a whole day. To me it was two or three notes that he'd set up for a whole song—chorus after chorus and verse after verse would pass by, but then towards the end he'd change some vital part of it so slightly you wouldn't notice until it caught in your head and you'd want to tell him he was playing it all wrong, but you kept quiet because Davis kept playing no matter what you said. And later when you were alone it was those two or three notes that came back to you like a body drowned in the water comes afloat on the surface, those two or three notes hurt they were so right.

So Davis played and Ben went on heaving darts because he didn't want to seem like he was listening, though I knew he loved those two or three notes too. He had this thing about his own father—shame maybe, anger over Kathy—and he couldn't shake it or talk it through. Not that Davis would have heard him out. I imagine he wasn't much of a father, but he was more like the two of us than any other person we'd known up until then and I couldn't help myself but to sit and listen when the man talked or played. He had a power over me. So I leaned

against the wall and listened close because from experience I knew those two or three notes would come, the notes that set me laughing with their perfection and later realize that Davis had just shown me who he was and who I was by blood, some horrible transference. That's how Davis would speak to you, believe it or no.

I was so caught up waiting for his song to unfold, my eyes were closed, I didn't even register when he'd stopped playing and when he'd started talking. Ben's darts stopped popping in the wall behind me and I realized Davis was in his story. Why he didn't sing it, I'm not sure. He had the guitar on his lap and he took his shirt off so his white flat chest picked up the light from the room. He looked sickly to me.

When Davis was little, he said, he lived with my father in a poor county. Their parents were no count—their daddy was a collector, their mother made quilts for fairs—and the brothers lived in a world unto themselves without rules or guides as to how to treat one another. Davis was the youngest and the smartest of the two, or so he said. My father's not dumb by any stretch of the imagination, he just, as my mother says, *lacks imagination*. A different thing. Though, Davis said, Thomas was a large boy who could fight anyone, even men, and make it interesting, and it was after one of these fights that Thomas found a dollar bill in another boy's pockets and gone out and learned from a woman called The Witch, who was probably a gypsy woman in the camps and not a witch at all, he learned from this woman for the dollar that if you caught a blue racer without getting bit, that's the key thing, he said, don't get bit, if you caught it and cooked three feet of

its flesh, one foot for each of the holy hosts, you'd have the power of self divination. I looked over at Ben who was standing in the hallway, looking at his father. Davis leaned toward me and explained quietly—that's the power to see what there is to see about yourself.

So, Thomas told Davis about this and together they went out early one morning with a net and a machete and a primus stove for the cooking because you had to cook the snake where you caught it so as to trap its spirit in its place. They went early so the snake would still be sluggish but starting to come out into the sun and warm up its evil body. The boys sat behind a bush out near the swale where nobody went because the racers had nests all over, a place called McTiernan's because some McTiernan had bought the land to make apartments (this was Florida, not around here). A sheet of tule fog hovered above the ground and the sycamores hung loathsome over their heads. There they sat all day, jumping at any little sound, the heat tearing through them even though they stood under a sycamore. In the late afternoon, my father finally stood. What're we doing? he said.

But Davis wouldn't answer. He didn't want to say a word, wanted to keep all of it inside himself so when the snake came he'd have something to see about himself.

"I had something in me," Davis said while Ben and I listened. "I knew I did, I was different than the pokes in my family. You call that arrogance or whatever, do as you please. But I knew."

Thomas looked out over McTiernan's but nothing was there. Maybe we have to flush them out, he said. He stood awhile longer, then looked at Davis. You coming with me or not?

Davis didn't move, just tightened his grip on the net.

Suit yourself, Thomas said and walked away, not knowing this was the beginning of the split between himself and his brother. And Davis was behind the bush, scrawny little Davis who nobody paid much mind. Because it's Davis' story, the snake had to show up.

A blue racer is a snake, a big thin streak of midnight black so black it's blue, called a racer because they're faster than a trackhorse and as mean as any snake around here, that is, any snake not packing venom because they don't have any but they hurt, they hurt. How do I know? That's my story. But this part is Davis's, and he says the sky, at the end of his day out by the bush, turned orange. He started to get cold and when the wild dogs started howling by the trash dump, he decided it was time to pack it in. He loaded up the stove and the net and machete and started walking home when, at the edge of the swamp, in a deep divot made by McTiernan's bulldozers, a racer rolled up and stared right at him.

"It was straight up, like it was standing," Davis said and held his arm in the air, bent at the wrist.

It had black eyes and a little upturned mouth at the edges. It waved forward a little bit and then started at him, a long loping motion where it threw itself forward rather than ran, a hula-hoop with teeth on the end. Davis knew he couldn't

get away and so threw the net as quick as he could, but the snake was fast and the net slipped over and into the grass. The snake pitched at him to bite, so quick, so quick, and should've, but Davis somehow dodged to his left apart from the snake who's still a damn snake and not smart at all about fighting, and in Davis' words, don't you know that old snake was used to getting its first bite in and ending it. Davis was low and clutched the knife, and when the snake dipped it left itself open and Davis brought the blade end down and cut clean through the back of the snake's neck and felled it right there.

"I ate it right," Davis said. "Nearly puked all the way through the three feet of it, but I kept it down. And on the way home, I'd gotten it. The snake had done right by me and given me my gift." Here Davis held up his right hand and brought it down to the strings of his guitar and played a soft chord, so soft. He smiled. From that we understood of course what he'd been given, that the snake had brought up from the bottom of his being his true nature, a shining filament in his heart which spurred him to forever shun those who loved him in favor of playing his painful swamp guitar.

"I don't believe it," Ben said from the hallway, the light on his shoulders.

"You believe anything you want," Davis said and put the guitar down on his case. "Old Sock here believes me, don't you Sock?"

I didn't say anything. Davis looked over at Ben in the hallway and for a moment they just stared at one another. I shouldn't have been there. Anything could have happened—from Davis taking Ben up and saying those fine things a

boy wouldn't admit he wants to hear—I love you, son, you're my son—all the way over to running at one another like mad men and finally having it out, fists and feet. The rain beat on outside. Ben looked away first and threw a dart as hard as he could into the wall.