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**Infidels**

A THESIS

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By

Zacharia Arthur Rupp

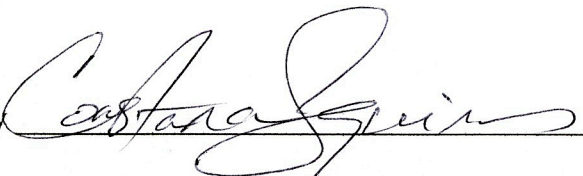
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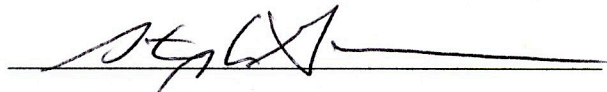
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**Infidels**

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wife, Namina, for fattening my middle with dal bhat when I was starving.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT OF THESIS .....	v
<i>INFIDELS</i> .....	1
SQUATTING .....	2
IT'S THE WRONG KEY .....	17
GNOSIS .....	29
WHO ARE YOU WAITING FOR, BLUE EYES? .....	40
WARRIORS .....	54
HOMECOMING .....	65
PAUL BUNYAN AND DAVY CROCKETT BUILD A GUITAR . . .	78
DUST OF MY DUST .....	95
SHREWD PEDDLER WALKS COYOTE TRAIL .....	108
GOD WILL HEAR YOU .....	122
ELOHIM .....	140

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Dr. Constance Squires

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*Infidels* is a short story collection dealing with a myriad of themes, most centrally of failed parenting, love, and yearning for the divine through spiritual brotherhood.

The world the characters of *Infidels* inhabit is one of psychological wilderness. In the story, "Squatting," for instance, a son watches helplessly as his father realizes that he cannot successfully raise his child as a homeless field squatter. "Gnosis" shows a physics professor experiencing cognitive breakdown as he struggles to rectify or even realize the pain he's causing his wife. In "God Will Hear You," the half-Nepali, half-American protagonist only reveals to himself his love for his wife after driving her into a feigned state of catatonia. The collection culminates with "Elohim," a story about an isolated young man's attempt to experience the divine after discovering companionship in two poorly recovering methamphetamine addicts.

More than anything, however, *Infidels* explores beauty in the most putrid and dysfunctional landscapes of contemporary American life.

*Infidels*

## Squatting

1

My father smoked cigarettes and drank cheap beer, sitting in his plastic lawn chair in the late afternoon, waiting for the sun to set. He looked like a dead man there, slouched in the chair with his big wraparound Glaucoma glasses hiding his eyes, spit or beer in his beard, his arms hanging over the sides of the lawn chair, his jeans torn and stained with oil and earth. I held my breath and watched the smoke rise from the cigarette in his left hand, watched it lift up and float over the dried grass of the ten-acre field we had been squatting on. When the smoke was a thin wisp I exhaled and my father brought the cigarette to his lips. He coughed then and the cicadas started buzzing in the trees behind us. Out in the

distance, the late afternoon was boiling the air and I thought I saw a ghost pointing at me, calling for me to stomp through the goathed stickers to reach her. I closed my eyes and smelled the truck's rubber tires beside me, like honey and earth and cigarettes and road, and I thought, "This smell will one day define me." I liked the way the words felt when I mouthed them, though I did not understand what they meant. I thought of the road, the way it hums under the tires' tread, the lullaby it sings sometimes when the surface changes. When I opened my eyes the ghost was gone and the sun was beginning to set. My father removed his sunglasses and squinted at the descending sun.

"That's money out there," he said in his slow way.

"Out there?" I shielded my eyes and tried to see behind the sun.

He straightened in his lawn chair and pointed with his pursed lips to the pumpjack nodding sickly a few acres ahead of us. "Out there," he said.

2

When the stars were burning over us, my father built a fire and stuck a hotdog on an old wire hanger for me. He drank from his night flask and handed it to me, as he always did when his night flask was full, and I let the whisky burn my lips but I did not drink. When he looked satisfied I put the flask in the groove I'd carved in the dirt beside the leg of his chair, and my father patted his breast pockets for the cigarettes he'd already smoked.

"Kiel," he said, looking up at the stars with his hands in his pockets. He whispered to himself for a while and then kicked a can into the fire. "Do you ever feel small, Kiel?" he asked. "Like you're nothing?"



This was during that time when I hadn't the courage to respond to men when they asked questions, so I ate my hotdog and watched the fire leap in front of me.

"Look out there," he said, and the way the fire lit his face made him look like he could have been my kid brother instead of my father. "Look."

I lay on my back and looked up at the stars. As I stared at that cold sky, searching for constellations that I could not name, I felt that my body had left me, that I was no longer grounded, but floating up, up, up. In all directions, stars and black empty night. I was something moving, something not me, some strange unseeing thing. The earth was like a vehicle. Not like a vehicle, but a dream, a thought, a song. A whispered song. I gripped tufts of the long grass, believed that this world was the real, that the world up there was the lie, and I sat up.

"Old soul," he said, smiling down at me. "Old soul."

3

He picked up his flask again and I let the whiskey burn my lips again when he handed it to me. "This is God's medicine," he used to say to me in those far off days before we were squatting in fields. Or was that a dream?

4

My father lifted the flask a few inches from the ground and dropped it with a sigh.

"You let me drink too much," he said.

The fire was dying and the wind blew embers over the stones surrounding the fire pit and onto my knees. I wondered how we'd come to this place. It had been night, I

remembered, and the road seemed to breathe into the silent car as we drove. The warm wind blew through the car and it smelled like midnight, all wet and dusty and new. My father kept wiping his sweaty hands on his jeans and clearing his throat like he wanted to say something. When we turned onto the gravel road I wanted to tell him to get back on the highway until the sun rose. But I didn't say anything. And then we were here, on just another field during just another night. I had watched my father curse and dig this fire pit while I removed the stones we'd collected from the back of the truck.

Those stones seemed a part of this field now, not something transplanted by a couple of nomads. I looked up at my father from the ground and saw that he was angry with me.

"You didn't drink any of it," he said.

"One of us has to keep the other alive."

He closed his eyes and smiled. I knew what he was going to say about me then, that I was an old soul, but I didn't want to hear it. I just wanted a good night's sleep, for once.

"We need a tent," I said. "I'm tired of sleeping on the ground."

I watched his mouth move while he fought sleep, like he was trying to say something to me, but couldn't get the words out. And then he finally did get the words out.

"Well you won't sleep in the chair."

"I don't want the stupid chair. I want a tent."

5

"You're going to be sick again," I said.

He laughed a slow wheezing laugh for a good long time and then he fell asleep. The dreams he fought that night must have been those of my mother, of methamphetamine and broken teeth. The light from the fire's coals stopped at my father's knees, so I could not see the emotions he wore. I listened to his snoring and his sleep talk and tried to stay awake with him through the night, but I fell asleep soon after he did and only awoke when I heard him sputtering on his vomit.

6

In the morning he nudged me in the chest with his boot and told me to get up. I heard him shake his empty flask absentmindedly, heard him whistle an old tune. I had goathed stickers in my underwear and when I told him he laughed and spat into the fire pit.

"There's the river maybe a mile that way," he said, pointing north, over the hood of the black pickup truck behind me. He kicked the stones into the fire pit and scattered over them handfuls of green grass he'd pulled while I had slept. I coughed and spat into the pit before standing, and he looked at me all ashamed before running his hands through his hair and turning his back to me.

"Let's wash up," he said.

7

It's not easy washing in the Canadian River during the summer, because of the mud and the garbage. I stepped on a fish hook and cried until my father pulled it out with his bare

hands. He didn't say anything as I cried and he worked the hook from the arch of my foot, but he was all sighs and his hands shook while he worked. We sat at the bank of the river, and he dipped my foot into the muddy water when the blood made it hard to see the hook. After a while, I asked him if the hook was free and he nodded without looking at me. He carried me then to the deepest part of the river and washed my hair with a bar of soap, scrubbed my armpits and my feet. The water was cold in that part of the river. I watched blood drip from my foot into the water, watched the current mix the blood with the soap suds.

8

We drove the highway for at least an hour. My foot hurt like fire, so I sang songs about being a poor boy who lost his daddy and my father whistled along and drummed on the steering wheel until we grew tired of that. We listened to the wind cooling the sweat in our clothes.

I watched my father scratch his beard, watched the flakes of skin fall from his face and onto the truck's navy blue vinyl seats. He looked gentle then, peaceful. Seeing him like that, his fingers moving through his beard and then his long hair, made me think of the time before we were squatting in fields, of the time with my mother. Sometimes, when I've had a good night's sleep and the sun's just a bit of hazy light in the distance, I can see them as they were on the morning before my father and I threw as many clothes we could fit into two duffle bags and left. I can see him, his beard thick but trimmed, his hair short. He's just come back from work and I can smell from the doorway the oil stink coming off him. He's leaning over the waterbed, on my mother's side, by the wall, and his

cheekbones are red because he's holding his breath. And then he breathes out and looks out the window on the opposite side of the room before he sees me. It's the first time I've seen him in months. I am eight.

"We've got to go," he says.

"Why?" I cry then, afraid for whatever reason.

"Cut that out."

"But I don't want to go."

He picks up a syringe by my mother's bed and runs his other hand through his hair as he rolls the syringe between his fingers.

"Christ," he says. He drops the syringe and looks at me. "It's like I been dreaming this whole time and only now am awake."

When he walks to me and picks me up, I see my mother, little more than a skeleton, her ribs jutting out where her shirt exposes her belly. I see that she is dead, but it means little to me. She's been dead for a long time. On the nights when I'd pushed through the dirty laundry amassed in the hallway and scratched at her locked door, calling her name until I could no longer speak, she was already dead, though I could hear her tapping on the window, lifting the blinds and then letting them drop.

9

My father worked, though I don't know anything else concrete about that. I like to imagine him begging beside the highway, holding a cardboard sign saying something like, "Have A Son To Feed. Hard Times. God Bless," though the truth is that he probably thieved from empty farm homes and unlocked vehicles. I knew he was going to work

when he'd shake that empty flask and whistle the old tunes his father taught him when my father was a boy, and I knew that it meant we'd be on the highway soon, like a couple of normal people. I liked looking at the other people on the highway when we drove, especially the people who were alone, singing and spitting on their windshields as they drove. I once saw a man my father's age, in a suit coat and a tie, dancing with his eyes closed as he sang, and then he looked over at us after nearly sideswiping us and stopped dancing. He straightened his tie and pretended that he was miserable before slowing down to let us pass.

10

After we got off the highway, my father dropped me off at the mall, handing me a sweaty ten dollar bill before telling me to be safe and to wait in the food court for him or else just walk around the mall.

"Don't look for me," he said. "I'll find you."

11

I walked around the mall for hours, watching the kids in baggy pants shout from one store to another, watching the tall women buy cheap shoes, watching the fat women search the stores with skinny mannequins in the windows. I played the arcades like the other kids, though I never understood the point and always left with a headache. And then I ran up and down the escalators until I could feel the scab on my foot burst open. When I felt sad, I left the mall and watched the traffic move on the highway, listened to the hum of the tires. I mouthed my father's name—"Eugene," I whispered—until I grew bold enough

to say it so that anybody could hear me. When my sadness seemed to me ridiculous, I waited for the traffic to thin out and I ran across the highway to a steakhouse whose burgers I could smell all the way from the entrance of the mall. Those were God's burgers in that steakhouse. Inside, a man named Jeff handed me a menu and frowned at me from the edge of the table.

"You want something different this time?" he asked.

I turned the menu around in my hands and flipped the pages, but I couldn't decide. After a while of that, Jeff wrote something in his notepad and left me there. He returned with a glass of Coca-Cola and drummed his fingers on the table.

"How old are you, anyway?"

"Sixteen," I lied.

"You don't look it," he said. "Where's your parents?"

"I'm my own man," I said.

He laughed at that and sat down in the booth across from me. I could tell by the way that his face shone under the dim lights that he hadn't bathed that day.

"What kind of car do you drive?" I asked him.

"Do you drive?"

Since I feared he might ask me questions about driving, I didn't answer him. He sighed and looked out the window beside us. After a while, Jeff asked me if I had any dreams and I told him that sometimes I dreamed my mother was still alive.

"That's not what I mean," he said. "I mean, like, dreams. You know? Life goals. I always wanted to be a famous musician." He drummed on the table then and I could see that he might have been good.

"I don't know," I said. "Just the thing about my mom is all."

He looked at me like he wanted to say something, but he shook his head and pushed himself up from the table instead.

12

My father found me walking through the mall's parking lot. He was on foot and he smiled when he yelled my name. His beard was gone and I saw for the first time that he had a cleft in his chin and that he had pimples on his cheeks, like a teenager. We walked up and down the parking lot together and he pointed out a Ferrari Enzo and a Mazda Spyder to me. They were beautiful cars and I wondered what it must be like to ride in them with the windows down while he leaned close to see what was inside. When the mall security car started following us we headed for the truck.

13

My father reached behind my seat after I climbed into his truck and retrieved a wrinkled paper bag smelling of fried onions. He put the bag in my lap and looked in the rearview mirror. I reached inside and felt jeans and a t-shirt balled up, his crude attempt at folding.

"I bought them for you," he said, and I pinched the tags between my thumb and forefinger.

"I've got clothes," I said. "We need a tent." I dropped the bag into the floorboard in front of me and looked at myself in the sideview mirror. I am my own man, I thought as I watched the wind lift my hair. What are my dreams? In minutes we were on the



highway again, and I breathed in the same old semi smoke, the sticky summer air, the sweet scent of wheat. But it was not the same.

"I know," he said. He leaned his elbow out the window and covered his mouth with his left hand as he drove. "Kiel," he said through the gaps between his fingers, "I know this isn't fair to you. I do."

14

We squatted in the same field that night. My father spilled whiskey over his hands as he filled his flask, and I wondered why he didn't just drink it from the bottle instead. With the light dancing on his beardless face for the first time, he looked frightened when he lit the fire. I could not stop watching this new man's face frowning in front of me. Just an inch or so below his left eye, his cheek was scarred in a way that I did not then recognize. That crushed pink circle, the size of a pinky print, gleamed in the fire's light. I sat down, my back against the truck's rear tire, and watched my father start and kill, start and kill, and start the fire. Instead of sitting in his lawn chair, he kneeled in front of me and held my face gently in his calloused hands.

"You look like me," he said. "I'm sorry about that." He stood up then and reached into the bed of the truck. "You ever ate a bratwurst?" he asked. "Your granddaddy was a butcher. Did I ever tell you that? He made the best bratwurst, your granddaddy."

He handed me one of the two wire hangers he'd used to skewer the sausages and we roasted them in the fire, the two of us sitting there with our backs against the truck.

"I may not be the best dad," my father said. He leaned forward then and pulled the flask from his back pocket. He started to unscrew the cap with his teeth but stopped. "I've tried to do good by you, Kiel," he said. "I hope you understand me."

If only I'd said something to him then, something to let him know that he did do good by me, that the life we lived was the life that suited me, that I didn't need a goddamn tent anymore than I needed my meth-destroyed mother, that he was all I needed then. But I didn't say those things. I didn't understand him.

"Your granddaddy was a cruel man," he said. "I was about your age, probably younger, when he made me kill a pig I raised from a baby. I know it might sound silly to you, wise as you are, but that pig was like my child, Kiel. She was my best friend in the whole world. She had a brown patch on her eye, and she used to bite my calves when she wanted attention or food.

"She was hanging by her hind legs in the back of the shop, over the big drain in the middle of the floor, and she was blowing snot everywhere, crying like a baby when she saw me. And I killed her, Kiel, because I was scared of my father. I killed her. My baby girl."

He looked away from me then and heaved an enormous sigh.

"I named her after she was born. What kind of kid names a pig?" He looked at me looking at him and then he pulled his bratwurst from the fire.

"Precious. That was her name. Precious."

He was silent then, and I watched the scar on his face reflect the fire light. I sometimes see that cigar burn scar in my dreams, and I wake up, my underwear damp with sweat, and I look through the night to see if the ghosts are watching me, waving at

me to pick myself up and stomp through the fields with them. They're gone, but I can feel them out there, breathing over the wheat, the mustard, the cotton, crying my name into the wind.

15

I woke up in the truck and I thought for a minute that I heard my father crying in the driver's seat, but it was only the road singing beneath us. I tried pretending that I was asleep because I didn't understand why we were driving or where we were going, but my father saw through my act.

"I've got to do this thing," he said.

I sat up in my seat and looked out the window at the sun rising on the horizon. The chill morning air felt good blowing through the window, and I knew that in a few hours the sun would be wicked on us, that today it was going to hurt out there. I looked around the truck, at the dust on the grey dash, the empty spot where the CD player once rested, the peeling registration stickers on the windshield, and felt that I'd never really looked at these things before. The bag of new clothes sat crumpled at my feet and I picked it up so that I could see what my father had brought me. Inside were a red t-shirt with a smiling cartoon car on the front and some blue jeans. As we drove, I changed into the new clothes from the plain brown t-shirt and the dirty jeans I'd been wearing. The clothes made my skin itch and they were stiff, but I didn't complain.

16

We stopped in front of a gas station and my father left me in the truck while he used a pay phone. As far as I know, that's the only time I've seen him use a telephone. After he dialed the number, he turned around for a moment and stared at me with his lips parted, his tongue poking out from between his teeth. With his free hand he rubbed the back of his neck and then slowly ran his hand back and forth through his long hair.

17

We drove back roads instead of the highway that day. I think he wanted the trip to last as long as it could, though he didn't speak a word since leaving the gas station. I sang a refrain from a song he taught me a few weeks before, but he didn't whistle along with me so I stopped. My father sweated in the driver's seat as we drove, and I watched his lips move, watched him shake his head with a pained look on his face. I soon bored of the drive on the back roads, so I slept.

18

The mall seemed a different world that morning, with only a few cars in the parking lot and almost nobody out on the highway. I sat in my seat and watched my father search his pockets for something which he could not find. He cursed then and worked his cheeks in his hands before opening the glove compartment and pulling out a yellowed envelope bulging with wrinkled bills. After he dumped the pennies from the ashtray inside the envelope, he handed it to me.

"Something to spend," he said. He hugged me to him then and I could smell the whiskey on his hands, all sweet and sour and sick, though I could not smell it on his breath when he kissed my forehead. I waited for him to say something, but he did not.

"You'll come find me?" I asked.

He didn't answer, so I opened my door and climbed out of the truck. I held the envelope of wadded bills and ashy coins stupidly in my hands as he drove off.

### It's the Wrong Key

People tell you lies. *We can get through this*, they say, *together*. They breathe into your face and they lie, just like that. You hold her bony hand in your bony hand and you pick at her chipped fingernail polish and she lies when she tells you she'll clean your shit when you're incontinent after the doctor gives you lactulose to unpickle your brain and warns you that you'll be shitting yourself so much that you'll prefer death when you leave against medical advice. Who is she? Anne. Who am I? The scum on a piss-stained toilet, that's who: a believer. I love and am undone. Here's a lie: I loved her. Even as she sat in her metal folding chair in front of the fireplace with her head turned away from me, I loved her. She looked so innocent and broken; her shuddering breath sending strands of her auburn hair away from her face; the sticky saliva holding her lips together

momentarily between her sobs; her fingers gently searching the clarinet in her lap. I watched her from the corner of my eye while I sat padding out drum rudiments on a rubber practice pad and I loved her. Sometimes her hands would stop moving along the keys and she'd look up at the door. I looked with her. Out there's a place that could hold something like truth; she thought it—I thought it. And we were lying to ourselves. There was nothing out there but more shit. We'd been there; would indeed go there again. And why?

I sat on the couch, striking violent accents with the shafts of my sticks slapping the full length of the pad. The shock from the rim-shots caught in my wrists and it hurt. I wanted it to hurt, I think. I changed time signatures so that the middle of the paradiddle fell on the first beat of the next measure. Anne's breathing made her chest quake for a moment and I tried to tune her out, moving on to flamacues and flamadiddles. I closed my eyes and willed her away. When I awakened she was infuriatingly there, holding her clarinet limply in her hands, staring past the sheet music before her.

My sticks clattered to the floor and my snare stand toppled onto the couch before I walked into the kitchen. I opened the refrigerator door and looked at the stains on the shelves while listening for movement from the other room. Her chair creaked and, looking over my shoulder into the living room, I saw that she'd moved the clarinet so that it lay across her thighs, her hands resting loosely on the keys. I closed the refrigerator so that the glasses of condiments in the door would rattle loudly. She did not look up at me. I wanted to go into the living room and throttle her or else run my fingers through her soft pale brown hair and kiss her; doing either would be admitting defeat.

“So you're just going to sit there and feel sorry for yourself? Is that it?”

I thought I heard a hitch in her breathing and I tried to conquer the crushing feeling in my gut with the other feeling, but when I looked at her she was not crying.

The blinds to the window over the sink were open and I could see that it was raining. She loved the rain. When we were good together we'd walk, in flip-flops or barefoot, huddled under an umbrella through the neighborhood on rainy days. I didn't much care for the coldness of the rain on my feet, but she always kept me warm by hugging up close and I liked watching the little worms emerge from the oily rain puddles. I almost told her about the rain but the other feeling came on strong and I had to make it stick.

“Too bad you ruined what could've been a perfect day.”

The rain pattered on the window pane and it reminded me that there was a time, not long ago, when we were good. I saw it in the pristine yard across the street through which we'd walk barefoot on summer nights. It was there, in our bicycles chained to the tree in the front yard. And touching the window pane, cooled by the rain, I could feel it. But it was gone now and I could never forgive its going.

I stood in the kitchen, nursing my broken liver by looking through my kitchen window and thinking about gin. The Oklahoma Highway Patrolman from next door pulled into his drive and saw me looking from the window, the fat fucking pig. He waved. I closed the blinds. It was stupid to take my anger out on him though, so I opened the blinds again and waved back, forcing a smile. He was married to a beautiful woman who I thought was always half-teasing when she and I spoke alone. She kissed him in the driveway and they walked around his patrol car. I closed the blinds once more.



I'd hidden a bottle of gin in the cabinet above the stove. I removed it and poured half a shot into a small glass. I swallowed the gin and rinsed my glass in the sink, filling it twice with water which I quickly drank to eliminate the stink from my breath. It was a good gin; I liked how it looked blue in its bottle. I looked into the living room and saw Anne turn her head from me. She'd seen the bottle of gin on the counter beside me. There was no use hiding it, so I filled my glass and went back into the living room.

"I caught you looking," I said. "Looks like the jig is up, huh?" I took a small drink.

"You're going to get sick," she said without looking at me.

"It's just as well."

"I feel sorry for your liver," she said.

"Don't we all."

I stared at her over my glass and resisted the urge to remind her that she had practically filled this cup for me. I was getting sick. I saw her thigh there under the corner of the pillow case. The bed—our *marital* bed. Her head thrown back. Her eyes closed. Her marital incontinence.

On my way to the bathroom I knocked the vase in the hallway to the ground with an earth-shattering crash. The door frame held me steady. The little monkeys on the shower curtain seemed to be laughing at me. I deposited my innards on the bathroom floor, unable to make it to the toilet.

"I wish the two of you would just get out of my fucking head," I remember saying.

Her flower-print skirt stirred in my peripheral vision and then she was sitting on the toilet with her skirt hoisted and her panties down around her ankles. The vomit underneath and around me was cold and smelled of gin and sauerkraut. I was pitiful there on the bathroom floor looking at her faded blue panties and her chipped toenails.

“Jesus, James. It smells like shit in here,” she said. Perhaps it was, in fact, shit. Was I that bad off then? She was looking up at the small fan in the ceiling. I looked with her. I wondered if she’d turn it on. I wanted to tell her that she smelled worse from what she’d done, but my head was muddy and I couldn’t think of what I should say.

“Do you feel more like a man now, James?” she asked, looking down at me from the toilet, her urine splashing in the bowl.

I felt small, like I was shrinking under her gaze. I rolled onto my back and stared up at the fat lights over the medicine cabinet mirror. My prescriptions of lactulose and antabuse were lurking behind that rusted mirror. It was her damn fool insistence that only the drugs could clean me up that had put me here on the floor, I think. I was emptied and I could feel the medicine sticking in my veins, splintering in my heart, leaking into my lungs. The lights started a chain reaction of cerebral explosions and I tried to cover my eyes but my joints were stiff with the medicine. I heard Anne flush the toilet and felt the wind from her skirt as she leapt over me while I dry-heaved.

“I’m not cleaning you up this time,” she said from the doorway, turning on the fan. Yes, that’s it: her incontinence—my incontinence. Somehow I’d remained while she’d fled. She’d held my bony hand between her fat fingers and told me that she’d take care of me. Lies. Always the lies.

I lay there breathing through the lactulose when I heard her start to play through Debussy's *Premiere Rapsodie*. She was running through the part near the end and without the piano accompaniment it sounded like madness might sound. And for a moment I couldn't remember who or what I was. All that I knew for certain was that I was the breath struggling to get out and that I was pain and sickness. And then she stopped and rustled some pages and began again from the beginning. I cannot say how it was. But it was and will forever be as it was

when I recall

that moment on my back

as I lay

.....

dying

from the poison in my

veins

the slow reedy clarinet ghosting over my skin like the wind from Anne's dress and the

sad

fi-i-ire in

my

bowels

bubbling

up

with her clarinet runs.

I fell asleep there. I dreamt of Anne pushing babies down under waves of amber grain. And then I awoke. I sat up. I took off my clothes. I mopped up my mess with my jeans. I opened the tap in the tub. I turned on the shower. I threw my mess-soaked jeans in the far end of the tub. And I jumped in.

*I love you.*

The other feeling was there too and I scrubbed and I scrubbed and I scrubbed my gin-stink skin.

I was better after the shower. Anne had left at some point and the house was silent but for the moans the wind made through the gaps in the windows. I pulled a pair of shorts and a wrinkly t-shirt from the laundry basket by the tub and dressed myself. As I walked out of the bathroom I thought I saw myself in the mirror. I wanted to look again but I could not bring myself to it. I thought I looked stubbled and red-rimmed, thin-haired, slim. But I did not look again. I was in bad shape, I knew, but I did not want to know.

The broken vase was still in the hallway. The pieces of glass were cold and wet when I picked them up and threw them into the wastebasket. A picture hanged in the hallway showing both Anne and me on opposite sides of the frame, pointing at one another. There was a tree between us. But it wasn't between us; it just looked as though it were. A close look at the shadows revealed that it was in the background. I wondered when we'd taken that picture. Where?

Anne was smiling there in the picture. Her legs were spaced shoulder-length apart and she was looking down her clasped hands as though she were looking through the sights of a gun. Her hair was shorter then and tied back. Was that really me standing there on the opposite side? I stood and touched the picture frame. I touched Anne's leg with my thumb and took the picture off the wall. I took the picture out of the frame and folded it up and put it in my pocket.

At the end of the hall was our bedroom. The door was open but the light was turned off so that I could only see the vague outlines of clothes on the floor and the bed without a frame, its blankets balled up near the bottom. I was still disgusted with Anne, but now that she was gone I began to miss her and I wanted to go into our bedroom. It was cold in the hallway. The walls were a dusty white and cool to the touch. There was a cobweb up at the corner of our bedroom door. I stood in the hallway with the picture heavy in my pocket and the wastebasket full of glass at my feet and I stared at the cobweb.

In the living room Anne's music stand stood empty and her clarinet case was gone. I sat down on the couch and adjusted my dirty pillow before lying down and looking at the blank television set on the opposite side of the room. With my head on this end of the couch I felt very close to Anne though she was gone, her chair and stand only a few feet away, and took comfort in this. My drumsticks were in the fireplace, burning, I now saw. My favorite set of yarn mallets blazed. I closed my eyes.

They tell you lies. You can't understand them most of the time because your brain is a pickle but you know they're lies. You think you recognize some of the words but

soon you're thinking of something else, that time you can never forget, and your brain sends you back. You believe you are there. You forget that you're covered in your own filth, that you smell of something worse than death. You forget and are transported.

At the park: James. She's there, her hair lighted by the moon, a swing rocking behind her. Her eyes wet. Anne, James says. You've broken the world with your callous hands and eaten it piece by piece. But I don't say that—he doesn't say that. He cries. She takes my hands in hers and says something about her friend Victoria and how something her brother a few drinks every Tuesday and I was gone and she thought I was never coming back—this before that. The drinking, she's talking about how the drinking and James gone with the drink and how this and that. I remember being drunk on this same bench two weeks ago before the blackout. And then I strike her. James strikes Anne.

Love is a lie.

I sat up quickly and searched for the remote, finding it sandwiched between the couch cushions. I turned on the television and closed my eyes. I felt sick again, but this sickness was different and it hurt worse. I cried with my eyes closed and pressed two buttons on the remote. The dialogue blared:

“Packing up?”

“Oh I'm just getting my stuff together.”

“All that stuff from prison?”

“Well you accumulate a lot of stuff when you're in the slammer.”

“You were right about Gates. He did try to go after Donna, but she's okay.”

“And Gates?”

“He confessed. It's all over.”

“Thank God.”

“Aren’t you going to ask what happened? To your girlfriend. Donna. You didn’t ask about her. You just asked about Gates. That doesn’t make much sense. Unless. She. Was supposed. To. Die?”

People tell you lies and you believe them. Even after they're gone you believe them.

I turned off the television and looked for designs in the ceiling spackle. I saw the words “slut” and “slammer” smashed together. I rubbed my eyes and looked again and I couldn’t find the words and it was all Braque. In the corner of the room the ceiling drooped a bit and was brown from where the rain leaked through. I looked at the carpet and saw that it too was stained and wet. I imagined black mold breeding up there in the ceiling and down in the carpet and wondered how long before I might die.

The car’s water pump squealed outside and I could hear Anne singing along with the radio after she killed the engine. She stayed in the car singing like that until the radio finally shut itself off and then I could hear her humming the rest of the tune after the car door slammed shut and her heels clicked up the drive. The keys scratched the lock before they fell to the ground in a metallic splash and she cursed, picking them up and rattling the key in the lock.

“It’s the wrong key.” She always did this when she took my set of keys.

A muffled “What?” came from the other side of the door.

“It’s the wrong key,” I yelled.

“Who is that? James? Is that you? I thought you were dying, so I left.”

“Just hold on a minute, would you.” I got up and turned the lock but it wouldn’t budge. She was still trying to unlock the door with the wrong key.

“Take the key out,” I said.

I turned the lock and it moved this time, but I could feel the weight of the keys on the other end.

“I can’t say that it’s good to see you, James, but where else would I go,” she said as she walked into the living room, kicking her shoes off in different directions. I pulled the keys from the lock and found that she had been, in fact, using the right key. I closed the door.

“When you were lying there I thought you’d choke on your own vomit. I thought if I left I could say that it happened while I was gone and your parents would never know the difference.” And then as an afterthought, “I love your parents, James. You know that.”

I could see that she’d been crying and I wondered if she might be a little drunk. She went into the kitchen and filled a glass of water in the sink and downed it. And then she filled it again and gave it to me before sitting in her chair by the fire with her forearms resting on her knees. Her unbuttoned pea coat falling around her made her look childlike and innocent.

“I got in the car and I drove and I was so happy and I thought, ‘This is it. This *is* it. *This is it.*’ And then, I don’t know, it was raining and I thought of us and I couldn’t help it James.

“I didn’t want to cry when I came in here but now I do and I can’t because when I look at you I feel sick.”



She took her jacket off and I could see through her white shirt her bra with the word “slut” on one cup and the word “whore” on the other written in black permanent marker. She looked up at me and I looked down at her and I loved her and I had the other feeling too, which was a mixture of rage and hate and even love, but a different kind of love, and they were there in discordant harmony. She looked at me from one eye to the other searching for the answer to a question, her eyes watery and the light from the kitchen reflecting down near the bottom lashes where her tears were pooling up, and I could see the question before she asked it:

“What are we going to do now?”

And it was a bad question that sounded almost like it came from the television with my eyes closed and I wanted to hate it. But it meant something to me. It meant something to me. It meant something to me

but I do not know what.

## Gnosis



–Erik Satie, *Gnossienne No. 1*

I am standing in the center of a run-down rural city, watching a clock tick. I have been told sometime before now that this large clock is made from a million shattered plastic cups which were recovered from a nearby landfill. The clock certainly appears to have come off the garbage heap; its hands are stiff polycarbonate twisted things lurching forward with the momentum of a starving beggar, the roman numerals to which they

point, odious blobs of primary colors. It is a noisy machine that glints in the sun and whose flaps of plastic screech when the wind blows, which is always. As I stand among the ruined sidewalks of this city, I can literally feel myself growing older with each plastic-scraping tick. And I am not an old man.

At my feet is a hopscotch course drawn on the sidewalk in chalk. The sidewalk on which I stand begins and ends abruptly at the end of an empty lot. There is a street in front of me, and on the opposite end of that street, the clock. A number of children in loose-fitting clothing are gathered before the great clock and they are keeping a very close eye on me. A peasant in rustic overalls is waving at me from atop a rusting tractor which he is driving through the street. *Hello*, I think at them. *Hello*.

It was raining not long ago, but now it has stopped and I can only imagine the sound from before, of droplets tapping out short polyrhythmic units on the clock's flimsy plastic cups, cups which surround its beastly face. It did rain. But the children have, hanging from their skinny elbows, dry clothing. Looking again at the white-bearded man, who distantly searches me from atop his groaning tractor, reveals that he too is dry. I alone am wet. I, wet, am alone. It is nine forty-two and sixteen seconds—now seventeen seconds. I find this unfortunate.

I remember that I have a wife and three children in that far-off land whose name I can never quite recall: I think it is called New Jersey, but the word “new” means almost nothing to me and there is a dog walking across the street toward me whose bark sounds like “Texas.”

“Texas! Texas! Texas!”

But now the word “Texas” sounds almost Cyrillic and I wonder, *Can anything sound Cyrillic? Can anything sound Devanagari? Can anything sound alphabetical?* I am petting the dog now and he seems to enjoy the attention. At least I imagine that the mongrel’s tail waving like that implies happiness. I seem to remember a cousin being lured to his death by the wagging tale of a rabid dog. It does not concern me, however, for I am certain that I know this dog—that his name is Miles and that he is mine.

“Miles,” I hear myself saying. I am awed by this voice. It is like the hollow rattle of seeds in a dried gourd.

“Texas! Texas! Texas!”

Instinctively I would like to say to him that it is getting dark out, but it is only morning.

Before she left for work she said to me that she’d let the clothes out on the line and that I’d have to bring them in while she was gone—around two o’clock, she said. The kids were running back and forth through the hall and the smallest was bashing the lid of the pressure cooker with a wooden spoon. It was getting dark out. I opened the door to let our dog in and I noticed that I’d forgotten to retrieve the clothes from the line. It was too late; they were frozen. I thought of the broken dryer rusting in the garage. The middle child, whose name is somewhere in the dreams that I can no longer recall, grabbed my shirt-sleeve and asked me what was wrong. I was crying. He is a ghost, I told myself. You are only imagining him. They are gone and you remain. And you remain.

Where did this memory come from? Reeling from it, I find myself moving from the sidewalk and into the street where I fall, ignorant of the sudden drop from the curb, into a puddle of rainwater. I am muddied. The dog has come to console me. He is licking

my face. I am crying. The clock gives voice to the oppressive wind and one of the children is pointing at me and laughing.

There is a woman now stooping low to lift me from the muck. Her bare arms are dirtied by me as she pulls me to my feet. She leans close to me with her forearm resting on my shoulder. She asks me if I'm all right and I am not sure what she means. The word "all" seems terrifying. I shake her off with tremendous effort and she stares at me as through a veil which she wishes to remove. Her black hair is streaked with mud. I realize now that she does not know what to say, and I am ashamed. I want to tell her something, but I do not know what. Miles is at my heels, looking from me to the woman with the mud in her hair.

I am staring at her, loving her, and wanting her to leave me alone.

"Benjamin," she is saying. "What in God's name has gotten into you?"

"Ben-ja-min." I like the way it feels in my mouth, all in the front like that. I say it again.

The universe is infinite, but it's an empty place. It's made up of things like bosons and quarks and squarks and muons and smuons and m-branes infinitely repeating, and it is still empty.

I wish that one day we could really *see* the higgs. The Large Hadron Collider, when up to full capacity, can do it. It can do it. It can. I know it. I have hopes for warp drives and teleportation and the ability to defy gravity.

Anti-matter and matter compete but matter always wins; it's fractional, yes, but matter is there while anti-matter simply loses. They do not cancel one another out.

Black holes and light holes can never be entered, or can they? Black holes can never be—no, black holes can be entered, but never escaped. Or was it the light hole? Never. Never. The word has a disgusting taste. To be stuck on the border eternally or to enter and never escape or to be drawn into another universe—which is it?

The gigantic energy bubbles in the center of our galaxy expand astronomically until—but here I am in the street staring at this beautiful woman who calls me Benjamin. There is a ghost on my lips and its name is:

“Rosa?”

I look away from her and toward the clock, under which the children are sitting cross-legged, playing a game of dominoes. One of the children peeks up at the two of us from his tiles and then he places one on the concrete beneath him, breaking the horizontal line cutting through it. I wish I could see the numbers on that tile. I realize that the woman has been talking.

“I was so scared when I woke up this morning and you were gone,” she has said.

By God! It occurs to me that this woman seems to think she knows me. I am having a conversation with a lunatic. I am terrified. But I am intrigued. And she is very lovely. I am particularly drawn to the cluster of pimples on the upper right side of her forehead which she attempts to conceal with her bangs. It is the shy display that eviscerates me.

“Woman,” I say, “I have held you in the thousand-tendrilled cosmos and every time you despaired at the monotony of space, I bore for you a galaxy.”

It pains me to say that she is neither smiling nor blushing. She is pulling me by the hand now through the street and muttering obscenities as she walks. I discover, as I walk over sharp pebbles in the street, that I am barefoot. My feet are bleeding.

“My feet are bleeding,” I hear myself saying.

“I see that,” she says, shortly. “I am going to kill Frank if I find out that he has something to do with this.”

I imagine at this point that anybody would be wondering who this crazy woman is talking about. I would like to ask her, but I am again terrified. I feel my mouth stretching into oblivion. I must stop this. Miles pants loudly behind me. We are closing in on a small black car. In front of the car is a building whose façade is made entirely of glass. Posters line the interior of the glass and I feel that I have been robbed of something by these obstructions. I want to go inside this building. I want to go inside this building. I want to go inside this building, but it is closed. And the woman is slamming her door and turning over the engine. Twice.

I am in the car now and we are driving. Miles’ head is thrust out the window and his cheeks are flapping in the wind. I see the clock for the last time through my side-view mirror and it is falling to pieces.

“Stop,” I say. “The clock, it’s falling to pieces.”

She looks to me briefly as though she is about to speak. It seems she’s changed her mind; she is turning the radio up. I catch the tail-end of a song before the radio jockeys begin philosophizing.

This is what they’re saying:

We've got to play this audio for you where uh this Rutger's professor is recording his students littering littering You've got to see all this garbage and also a couple on the internet is wondering if they should have an abortion or not if you really want to get rid of tyranny in Washington you've got to contact Freedom Calls, because freedom works have you ever tried making a pecan pie *it can get soupy* seventy-four-year-old man found dead in a house she allegedly sent nude pictures in texts to a thirteen-year-old boy a sixty-eight to twenty-four win on the air and on your iPhone

I cannot follow this and am feeling ill. There must be order to this universe or we shall all perish in unbridled chaos. There must be chaos in that order. Ordered chaos. *Yet this be madness* and so on. I lift my hand and it falls: SPUE Dynamics.

Infinity is itself a form of madness. Every face of the human race may appear in my sub-atomic structure, if we combine the particles randomly to infinity. In essence, I am the whole of humanity. Potentially. Universes are born and die within me daily.

I am nothing. I is nothing. I is no thing. But that's not actually true. I perceives and is perceived. This thing which is understood to be I thinks that it perceives the external world and that the external world perceives it.

What am I going on about?

The radio is off. The car engine is dead. Miles is barking, "Texas! Texas! Texas!" and the woman is looking at me. She places her hand on my thigh.

"You know that you can tell me whatever it is you did last night."

I did not know this. Correction: I did not have reason to consider this. I try to think of last night, but time is nonlinear and as such I am at a loss. To which last night is she referring? Was there ever a last night? Is there ever a tomorrow? There is only the



now. I say, for instance, that I will wake up at six a.m. tomorrow morning; it can never happen because I never experience tomorrow morning. I only experience now. It may be feasible to assume that last night falls under the category of now, however. At some point in time it did. Some point in time? Points in time. What? An air-freshener hangs from her rearview mirror; I try to remember a time when it did not: I cannot. I cannot remember time. I say as much:

“I cannot remember that time.”

She puts her hand to her mouth and she begins crying. I do not know why, but I am now under the impression that this strange woman loves me. She hugs me and weeps into my shoulder. I turn my head to see Miles’ eyes following something outside. His mouth is shut and his ears are erect and the strange woman is weeping more loudly. She is speaking, but I cannot understand a word of it. I would like to say as much, but I feel that this would be inappropriate. She is, after all, a mere reflection of that which comprises my self. We are one and infinite inside this car.

I turn from Miles to see the house that is parked outside of the car. It seems vaguely familiar, but then again I assume that most things have that ring. To describe it would be to describe any house: it is comprised of a number of walls which divide the structure into a number of rooms. Once the house is inhabited—or is it moments before?—the rooms are given meaning: her study; his lounge, complete with hand-crafted martini bar. I realize this as we leave the car and walk to the front door.

Through the glass at the top of the front door I can see that this room has been given a set of distinctions for the intent of culinary cultivation. We enter this room. There is a stove in one corner, atop which rests a frying pan and a tea kettle. A refrigerator rests

docilely beside the stove and the woman is opening this refrigerator and retrieving from it a carton of eggs. She is speaking now.

“Benjamin,” she is saying, “I’m going to make you some eggs, okay?”

She is holding an egg in her hand now and she is asking me how I would like the egg. Over-easy, she suggests. I admit that I would like to eat the egg. She seems to understand. She cracks the egg on the edge of the frying pan and drops it into the floor. The floor is comprised of boards made of lacquered wood. It is beautiful.

“The clock,” I am saying.

“Damn you and your clock,” Rosa says. “Help clean up this mess.”

As I stoop to clean the egg with a small hand towel she’s handed me, I feel that I’ve been lost a long time. I have been here many times. The room holds me, embraces me, warms me as I soak the hand towel with the running egg. There is familiarity in these hands dripping with egg and towel. Here, at Rosa’s feet, is love and compassion on the lacquered boards of the solid wood floor. Her office. My martini lounge. Lounging martinis. I have done something. I can feel it burning through me, this knowledge of wrongdoing. And yet it resists me.

“Stella,” I say. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; it feels heavy up there. “Remember that time you rafted down the creek in your wading pool? The creek was so high that we had to swim through the back yard to climb the fence. You were wearing a new dress that your mom had bought you and you swam through the muddy water to spite her for marrying that man—I forget his name now. The current in the creek was so strong that I thought I would drown, yet you dragged the wading pool to the center and

rode it down the creek until you reached the road that passed over it. You were so brave, Stella. And I was a coward, watching from the apricot tree while you..."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Rosa says.

The ballet plays in the distance and I can see you vibrating the window panes, Stella. In this moment of clarity I can see. That red afternoon yawning in front of me from the balcony never seemed so near. There are the boys running through the field slapping at the dried weeds. There the clothes freeze on the line. Tom is coming to take them ice skating in town so that I can explore something forbidden. What was it this time? What was it? Tom will put the smallest in the front and I will watch the other two fighting in the back, pulling at each other's hair yelling while he drives down the county road. Sammy, Max, and Billy. Why now all this knowing? Soon they will be gone. Soon we shall end.

Rosa grabs my face between her hands and shakes me. There on the baseboard is a bit of egg I've missed. I move to clean it but she stops me. I feel that I've known this life before, that Rosa and I are part of something repeating itself into infinity. From the center of the house comes the thrumming of some monumental machine. I listen carefully, but Rosa won't shut up about some nonsense or other. *I thought we were through this*, she says, but I ignore the distraction. I hear the scraping of plastic against plastic and the gyration of gears emanating from the floorboards. It's the clock! I peak through a gap in the boards but I cannot see it. This is eternal, I tell Rosa. This is eternal.

I feel her kissing my lips; I taste her cigarette spit. I want to reach a center. I want to reach a center. I feel myself moving toward it, my heart throbbing with rubbish ticks and tocks. They say we are eternal. They say that life is never-ending and that we'll be

born again by the energy of our corrupted cell matter. It's energy will save us. The bubbles of energy in the center of our galaxy span 25,000 light years each and they continue to grow. Particle acceleration will one day reveal the opening within us all and we will descend into ourselves forever, forever, forever.

Who are you waiting for, Blue Eyes?

Kimberley Wodzki's parents left her alone that summer after finding teaching jobs in Germany. They packed their luggage on the day of departure while Kimberley prepared to leave for work at Video Giant, and they left before Kimberley's lunch break. Because her parents had terminated their cell phone contracts earlier in the week and because her father believed hepatitis lurked behind the mouthpieces of every payphone, Kimberley was unable to wish them well before they boarded their flight. When she returned home from work that evening, she climbed into her parents' bed and wept until she fell asleep.

Her aunt Junie stopped by every morning after Kimberley's parents left, and waited for Kimberley to make coffee. Junie was a large woman, like Kimberley's mother, with a face like a cinder block. She was also insane. Kimberley would watch Junie speak through her lithium haze, her lips fat and slow, only catching up with every third or fourth word. Her tongue, like a grey dish sponge, seemed too big for her mouth. Junie's speech frightened Kimberley, and sometimes she worried that she, too, would one day be like that.

"My kids make me want to shoot my face off," Junie said on this morning, three weeks after Kimberley's parents had left the country.

Kimberley stretched her legs out on the living room sofa until they were almost in Junie's lap, and looked through her blinds to the street outside. She held her cell phone limply in her hand and listened to Junie speak.

"Brendan Doyle did it to me, you know. I was around your age, I think."

"Gross," Kimberley said, reaching out with her leg and kicking Junie lightly in the stomach.

"That's not what I meant. And don't play coy with me." Junie looked up at the ceiling and rubbed her palm hard against her cheek. "I know what you get up to when I'm not here. I've seen William's car in the driveway, girl. You can't fool me."

"Stop it." Kimberley kicked her hard this time and immediately felt childish for her violence. "I would never."

Aunt Junie grabbed Kimberley's foot and pinched her big toe.

"Well it wouldn't hurt," she said.

"We're not talking about this," Kimberley said, pulling her feet away from aunt Junie. "It's not normal."

Aunt Junie looked hurt. She tugged at the loose skin on her neck and looked down at her free hand. They sat in silence for a long time until Kimberley stretched her legs out again and put them in Junie's lap.

"He must have tilted his head way back when he did it," Junie said when Kimberley made eye contact, "like you see in the movies." Junie leaned her head back until the back of her head touched the couch, and then she made the shape of a gun with her index and middle fingers. She touched the roof of her mouth. "Then he blew his face off. He bled to death. It must have taken hours."

Kimberley stood from the couch and walked to the door, which she opened so that she might have a better view of the street. She tapped her phone against the door frame.

"Mom told me about it."

"Well," Junie said, "your mother doesn't know anything. Not a thing." She took a loud drink from her coffee and cleared her throat. Kimberley could hear Junie opening and closing her zippo lighter.

"Who are you waiting for, Blue Eyes?" Junie asked.

"Nobody." Kimberley opened the screen door and leaned outside the house.

"William's a good-looking guy. I'd be waiting for him too." Kimberley heard Junie light a cigarette. "Don't let him know that, though, or you'll spend the rest of your life waiting." Kimberley let go of the screen door and the wind slammed it into the wall beside the front door.

"Mom's going to kill you for smoking in here,"

"She's never coming back here. This is your place now. You can do whatever you want in here." The two of them listened to a truck backfire as it passed. When the truck's rumbling engine disappeared down the street, Kimberley felt the silence and the summer heat closing in on her. Her lips trembled and she touched them delicately with her long fingers. Her mother was never coming back.

"That's what he used to call me," Junie said, breaking the silence. "'Blue Eyes,' he'd say, 'you look like water today.' Every time we met. That's what Mom called Sinatra, so it made me feel more like a man than a woman when he'd say it. And I liked that feeling. I liked feeling like a man. Isn't that weird?"

"Were you in love with him?" Kimberley asked.

"Maybe."

Kimberley mouthed the word love. I love him, she breathed after the word felt full in her mouth. I love him. He'll come shooting down this street, his car rising an inch or two from the ground when he hits that hill, and then he'll stop and say "Shit," and I'll run out to his car before he pulls into the driveway and tell him that I love him.

Junie blew a long stream of smoke from her nose and flashed a wicked smile at Kimberley. "Your mother tried to fool me, too, you know. Always carrying on that good girl act, going to church on Wednesdays and Sundays, praying at night."

"What are you talking about?"

Junie sat up straight and pointed her cigarette at Kimberley. "I'm talking about William's car in your driveway every night, sometimes well into the early morning," Junie said. "And you want to fool me, want me to believe my niece isn't screwing in my



sister's house while I sleep next door. Don't be like your mother, Kimmy. Don't be a coward and a liar. Don't be a self-righteous bitch."

"I would never," Kimberley shouted.

Junie snuffed her cigarette in her remaining coffee. She picked her purse up off the floor and slammed it on the coffee table.

"Why do you always get like this?" The wind screamed through the gaps in the windows. "I'm not Mom, Aunt Junie." She could hear her heart beating in her ears and before she could stop herself she wept.

"Why are you crying?" Aunt Junie said.

"Because you scare me when you lose your mind and say whatever you want."

"I only speak the truth," Junie said, pounding her knee with her fist.

"Mom says it's because you still love him," Kimberley said.

"I'm sick of your mother telling my stories. I bet she didn't tell you that she was at home with your grandparents, writing love letters to your father, her goddamn English teacher, while I watched Brendan bleed to death. I don't know if he was alive or not. He was just a hole and some teeth when I got to the apartment we shared."

"You shared an apartment? I thought you said you were my age?" The revelation distracted Kimberley from her sudden emotional outburst. She leaned back inside the house and watched Junie lick her lips.

"I was," Junie said. "You're a pretty girl, Kimmy. I was a pretty girl, too."

The parallel made Kimberley's stomach hurt, and suddenly she could see the man on his knees in the middle of the bare wooden floor in the apartment, blood dripping onto his hands, his face a crater where the upper lip, nose, and eyes had once been. She could

hear the choking sounds he tried to make after he heard her open and close the door. She could see him reaching out blindly. She could smell the gun powder in the room.

At night, Kimberley's best friend Michelle brought two bottles of wine. She opened one and took big gulps straight from the bottle and laughed when Kimberley pulled a dusty wine glass from her mother's china cabinet and washed it in the sink before filling it. Kimberley envied Michelle's freedom, the way she could just show up drunk and unannounced with two bottles of wine at the ready, the way her hair fell effortlessly around her face, like tulip petals around the stigma.

"Why does it never feel like I'm drunk enough?" Michelle said.

That's what Kimberley wanted, to move through life like a goddess, fearless and unyielding.

"I feel like a mountain sometimes. Or an avalanche. Do you know what I mean?"

Kimberley didn't understand, but she nodded anyway.

"It's like I'm stuck, but sometimes—or always, I guess—I'm tumbling. I'm tripping over all of this shit. And one day I'll settle. Or maybe I'm settled already and I'm just waiting for the next tumble. And there are bodies trapped within me."

Michelle lifted the bottle to her lips and spilled some wine down her shirtfront as she drank.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?"

Michelle put the bottle on the table and looked up at the ceiling. She rested her hands on her knees. She looked like Kimberley had always imagined Hera would look: all long bones and sinewy. Kimberley watched the muscles pulse in Michelle's jaw.

"I don't know," Michelle said. "I don't know."

After waiting in vain for Michelle to say something else, Kimberley turned on the television and flipped through the channels. She wanted to say something poignant to Michelle, something as cryptic and pithy as Michelle's avalanche simile, but she could think of nothing to say. Instead, she related Junie's visit in the morning, exaggerating Junie's madness by saying things like "she flew into a rage," and "I thought today was going to be the day she snapped," though she didn't really believe any of her lies. Before long into the telling, the softness in her speech betrayed her affection for her aunt, and so she ended her story abruptly, saying "it was crazy."

"I wish you weren't so nice," Michelle said. "I wish for once that you'd just be a bitch."

Kimberley thought this a joke and laughed a bit too loudly until she realized Michelle was serious.

"I can be a bitch," she said unconvincingly.

"Don't listen to me." Michelle picked up the wine bottle and read the label. "I'm just drunk. I think I need a nap."

Aunt Junie believes I'm a bitch, Kimberley thought. She watched Michelle grab a pillow which she hugged to her face as she spread out on the couch. On the table Kimberley noticed that Michelle had spilled some of wine on the doily her mother had crocheted the previous winter. Seeing the red splotch on the doily angered Kimberley,

and for a moment she thought about taking the pillow from Michelle and striking her with it, telling her to be more respectful of others' property. She thought of her mother's hands working slowly in the evening under the light of the table lamp. She closed her eyes and tried to remember her face, the calm her mother had while making the doily. It was like looking through a dark smoky room, and for a moment Kimberley feared that she'd soon forget her mother's face entirely. But then, perhaps because of her fear, Kimberley could see her mother's face, the soft lines at the corner of her mouth, the wide, slightly downy, chin glowing in the lamp's light. She could hear her mother cursing after sticking her finger with the small crochet hook. She could smell her mother's orangey smell.

"I need to let it go," she whispered.

She opened her eyes and watched Michelle watching her from the couch.

"You okay?" Michelle asked.

"I'm okay." Kimberley laughed nervously and said that Michelle had better be rich because she was going to make her pay for that doily. The joke felt hard, like she was coughing it out, but it seemed to convince Michelle that Kimberley was fine because she laughed and hugged the pillow again. In minutes Michelle was asleep.

Though she felt alone, Kimberley was glad that her friend was sleeping. It emboldened her in a way that she didn't understand. It was like waking up and learning that the gods had departed. With that thought, Kimberley opened the other bottle of wine and stepped outside into the warm night, and listened to the cicadas buzz in the trees overhead.

She sat down in the middle of her driveway, beside Michelle's Toyota, and took big hard swallows from the bottle of wine until the rotten taste made her gag. She hated it, drinking this sour stuff that turned her lips and teeth purple, but she'd done it anyway and now she could feel the buzz settling in. She lay down on her back and watched the moon shine overhead, and, with the trees and houses obscured by night, she felt like she might lift up from the earth. What would Michelle do? Kimberley wondered. Michelle would have the bottle down to its final drop and she'd be ready to drink more. Michelle would be off somewhere, barreling down dirt roads at fifty miles per hour with her windows rolled down and the radio screaming into the night.

Kimberley sat up and looked up and down the street. She watched the television's cold blue light leaping on the neighbor's blinds across the street. She wondered if the person behind that television was someone like her, a scared girl stuck with a friend who'd passed out drunk on her couch, a girl who was little more than an afterthought, whose only hope lay in the search for happiness in the fiction of other people's lives. She lay back down in the driveway and tried not to think like this, but it was too late. Kimberley thought of her parents, how they had left her alone in an empty home so, she thought coldly, they could experience Europe without the burden of a teenage daughter, how they only called on Fridays, and always at two or three o'clock in the morning, right after Kimberley had fallen asleep, how they sounded so much happier over voicemail than they did when she answered, how they were always on their way to see something new and wonderful while Kimberley was stuck at home with a car that barely ran, waiting for friends to pick her up and take her where they willed. She was alone, abandoned. She was drunk, lying in a dried puddle of oil.

She heard a car gaining speed at the end of her street and knew that it was him, William, and that he'd hit the sudden hill soon and would stop in front of her house for a moment, to recover from the exhilaration the small jump would instill in him, that he'd soon pull into her driveway. And there it was, the sound of his bumper scraping against the pavement and the sigh of the car as it lifted off the ground and fell. She heard him stop and curse, his voice soft yet harsh against the dead night. Maybe he would neglect to see Kimberley lying in the driveway and would crush her as he pulled in. She hoped for it, so that her parents might see what they'd done to her by leaving her alone. Did they know nothing of the dangers she faced?

"Tough day?" William asked from his car. She heard his tires rub against the curb in front of her house, and she thought she felt the ground quake when he slammed his door.

"Where were you today?" Kimberley said. She refused to look away from the moon, and when William was close enough that she could see his face, she watched the ghost of the moon burn behind her closed eyes.

William crouched beside her and touched her cheek with the back of his hand.

"You sick or something? Drink too much?"

"What if I did?" Kimberley opened her eyes and found William sitting cross legged beside her, turning the bottle of wine around in his hands. He sniffed the mouth of the bottle and then he dumped the wine into the grass beside him.

"I went to the skatepark with Greg and Adam."

"Good for you," Kimberley said. "You remember the new guy I was telling you about? Tim? Well he came over this morning, and he brought his guitar." The lie felt good when it came out, like she'd been burning all of her life just to say those words.

"You're a God damned good person. You know that?" And then William was up and walking into Kimberley's house.

When Kimberley entered the house, she found Michelle standing with William in the kitchen. The wide neck of her shirt was pulled down over her right shoulder, her bra strap falling down with the shirt and the lace lining her bra's cup clearly visible. She leaned into William, exaggerating her intoxication, and feigned an apology.

"I thought you'd be here," Michelle said. "You're *always* here."

William took a drink from his glass of water and looked at Kimberley over the half wall separating the kitchen from the living room.

"Should I leave?" he asked.

"I saw you today" Michelle said. "I didn't know that you skateboarded. Is it hard to skateboard?"

"For some people."

"Will you teach me?" she asked.

Michelle touched her cheek with her index finger and smiled at William.

Kimberley saw William smile back, and she hated them then.

"Is my house the hookup spot, or what?" Kimberley asked. The words sounded petty and she felt cheap after she'd spoken. She faked a laugh, but it hurt when it came out, and she saw William turn away from Michelle and scratch his neck. Michelle bit her lip and let her hair fall down in front of her face. They wanted her to feel guilty for

calling them out, and she did feel guilty. But why should she? This was her house! She was in love with that boy and Michelle knew all about it. She wanted them out, out, out of her home, and now. And then, without understanding why, Kimberley wept.

Kimberley lay in her bed, terrified and unable to sleep. A shadow crawled over her window and she heard someone's voice outside, whispering in the night. She pulled the blankets up to her cheekbones. She hated herself in these moments, felt ridiculous and childlike, and she tried to calm herself by breathing deeply and humming a Jack Johnson song, but the sound of her voice in the dark startled her, and she was worse off than before. She imagined that she heard footsteps in the hallway and she held her breath, hoped that the intruder would assume that the house was empty. She grabbed her cell phone from her nightstand and clutched it to her chest, felt her heart beating against the phone. She wished, now, that her mother would call, would tell her that Germany wasn't working out, that they'd be home soon. Or maybe Kimberley would tell her mother that she wanted to live in Germany with them, that she was sick of Oklahoma, the stupid heat of summer, Aunt Junie and her nightmare stories about sex and death and love and hate. But Kimberley hated German; when her parents started learning the language, the hard guttural sounds were to her more like the noises Michelle made when she drank too much, bent over a toilet with her hair falling into the water, than anything meant to convey meaning. If Kimberley gagged when her father practiced German, how could she possibly survive a country full of people speaking like that?



She heard the footsteps again, but this time they were real. A man whispered in the dark as he moved through her house. This is what it's all led up to, she thought. This is what Mom wanted when she left. This is it.

As the footsteps neared, Kimberley looked around her room, at the teddy bears lined up in a row on the small bench against the wall under her window, the Christina Aguilera poster tacked up beside the window: childhood loves she could not relinquish. She looked at her blue walls, the way the paint's gloss reflected the light of the moon breaking through the cracks in her blinds, at the cork board filled with pictures of Michelle and Tim, the only photo of William up near the right-hand corner. She wanted to say it one last time, before the person in her house came to murder her, that she loved William. She thought that if she could see him now she could tell him what she'd felt during these weeks when they were alone together in the house, watching bad movies and cooking for each other in the evenings.

She recalled a night when William had come over. They played card games in the living room and then, because Kimberley was scared that this fragile thing she held with William might soon break, she left him in the living room, saying that she needed to use the bathroom. But she went into her parents' room instead, and lay on the bed, sniffed her mother's orangey smell in the pillow case. She waited for William to follow, and there he was, suddenly, on the bed with her, his head on her stomach. They lay there for an hour, whispering together in her parents' room, like children fearing discovery. She could have told him, then, that she wanted him to stay with her that night. She could have told him that the only moments she'd felt happiness since her parents had left were those spent

with him. But she said nothing, and after the hour passed she stood up and they returned to their card game. It was almost as though the moment had never occurred.

Now, in the dark and empty house, she listened to the advancing footsteps. They sounded slow, hesitant, and unsure as they moved through the hallway. She would be gone, soon, she thought. She would be a body hanging over the edge of her bed. Aunt Junie would find her first, and she'd stare down at her niece's body for a long time, distrusting the vision, thinking it a side-effect from her medication or her mental illness. She'd hold onto the doorjamb and lick her fat lips and say something, "Blue Eyes? You all right, honey?" before moving to stroke Kimberley's hair. And then she'd turn the head and see the face, ruined and blown out, the blood congealed on the floor where it had pooled in the night. She'd see Kimberley's hand outstretched, reaching blindly for her phone. Junie would smell the gun powder in the room.

Kimberley's lips trembled, and she reached up and touched them. Through the dark she could see the figure appear in her doorway. She heard her heart thundering in her ears and feared that the intruder could hear it as well. As he approached her bed, he seemed calm, patient and resigned, and it comforted her. She closed her eyes and heard him crouch beside her bed, heard him breathing.

She closed her eyes then and she knew that everything would be fine. This is what I want, she told herself. But the fear remained.

## Warriors

Notice the leaves of this tree as we pass. Isn't it strange that they are still green and thriving while the rest of the trees are changed for autumn? I've been watching this tree for three years and each year it does the same thing. It's an elm just like its brother there, see? Yet for three years now I've seen this tree's leaves maintain that hue until the first frost of winter comes blasting them off their branches. If I had a fear of God that might mean something to me.

Yes, but it can't mean anything to you, you understand? Just because you have God does not mean that this anomaly that you've witnessed for the first time in your life will mean anything. Oh, I'm sure there's some "empirical nonsense" to back it up. Don't

start lecturing me about God! God doesn't mean anything. God is an empty expression. Can't you see I'm trying to show you something? I'm slipping, aren't I? Let me try again.

One day I was standing beside that tree back there and just looking at it trying to understand its perpetual green when something mystical happened to me. As I was looking at that tree it became something else. I don't know how else to explain it; the leaves were no longer leaves, the branches no longer branches, the trunk something unearthly. It was as if any concept of treeness had completely escaped my intellectual grasp and this tree became a living, breathing, moving thing. The tree was an alien creature and I a stranger on an unrecognizable world, pissing myself. It was like seeing an orange sky for the first time. No, that's not it. It was like encountering the word "the" and hearing only a barbaric grunt. Or any word for that matter. That's not it either. I know: it was like seeing waves of sound come crashing down upon you. Well of course you don't know what that's like. You only know it when you experience it, God damn it. So I saw the tree as a being. Is this madness? I wondered. And as soon as I saw the thing as a being, the revelation subsided and the tree was once again a tree. It's something I've never researched for fear of discovering that I am in fact a madman, but I believe there is something to it. I just don't know what.

Maybe it's something to do with the noticeable absence of walking bodies in Oklahoma since we've been back? Tell me how people walk through the streets of Saint Louis. Like they do in Bricktown? But Saint Louis is certainly much larger! Proportionally, then, there is a hell of a lot more foot traffic, yeah? Just as I thought. I need some assurance that some places in the U.S. still have a healthy pedestrian population. Where are all the kids? You know I went to Wal-Mart the other day and

couldn't find a single kite? Not a fucking one. Everything's digital now. Even the action figures have internet access.

We're going to have to cross the street here without any help from that crosswalk indicator light. It's been broken since I moved here. Did you see that guy turn in here without so much as a glance in our direction? The contentedly unseeing. Only one or two out of twenty of these drivers will respect pedestrian right-of-way. We're safe now but we'll have to cross again later.

Yeah, it's nothing like Baghdad, but at least the Iraqis didn't drive so fast. Remember how Pink would smash into people's bumpers at almost thirty? I know they were orders, but you have to at least acknowledge that he was a billion times more fucked up than the rest of us. Look, all I'm saying is that when you drove you slowed down before tapping their bumpers, yeah? See? Well Pink only decelerated as a result of the collisions. Worlds apart in sanity, man. I know it's not right remembering him like that now, but what can we do? What the fuck else can we talk about, you and me? We are warriors, man. A warrior can't just step out of battle and into American civilian life. These people are aliens to us, you know? They're nuts. You know what my mother wants to talk about when I see her? Celebrity housewives. Who gives a flying fuck about celebrity housewives? I try telling her about Pink and she just tunes me out clicking all over her God damned facebook. There are parallels I try to draw between him and me, you know, to try and show her that I'm not coping. But what am I saying? Pink was way worse than us.

You're right; it's the same with all of those guys that fought at Fallujah. But Pink had some funny ideas. He was convinced that a kid he'd shot had cursed him. He told me

that his platoon was sweeping houses after the initial assault when it happened. He kicked open a door and there stood cowering before him a whole group of people waiting there and they all were shouting, waving their hands and shouting *Allahu akbar* and such—probably blessing him for coming in to save them or cursing him for destroying their city. He stood in the door and thought he saw one of them flash an AK, but he couldn't tell because of all of the noise and flailing about. And then he saw it again and he didn't know what was going on so he engaged them right there and killed every one of them. When they searched the bodies he found a child lying face down in his family's blood. There wasn't a gun anywhere. Nerves, man; what can you do? That's what I told him but he wouldn't shut up about the fucking thing. Everywhere we go he thinks he sees this kid. He says he was the only one who engaged, but I don't believe it. He checked the rest of the house and when he found nothing he went into the parents' bedroom and wrote "Fuck all Iraqis" on the mirror with the mother's lipstick. It was his first operation. Then two weeks later you and I were on the rooftops of Baqoubah.

I'm sorry if I've upset you; you know how I get carried away with the old stories and accidentally say hurtful things. If it's any consolation, your grey vest is very handsome and it goes well with your black t-shirt. You're also one hell of a friend to put up with me. You're right, I am getting too sentimental. Thank you. Let's smoke those cigarettes now.

I love how you always carry with you enough hand-rolled cigarettes to see you through the day. Do you remember Lalish? Some nights before going to sleep I remember that ancient woman shouting Kurdish at us and feeding us fruits. I used to give her cigarettes which she'd smoke when no one was looking. The eternal earth-mother.

I'm certain I was in love with her granddaughter and her cumin seed breath. You're right; they were a bunch of devil worshipers. But maybe the devil's not so bad, hey? And they sure did like you, you big bastard. Do you remember in Sheikh Adi's tomb when we tied knots in that satin hanging from the walls how all those little beautiful brown kids clung to your sleeves and kept begging to know what you'd wished for? You didn't even look at them when you said it was a secret and they still loved you. You didn't wish for anything, did you? Your silence just confirms my suspicion. I kept wishing that I could speak Kurdish to tell the earth-mother's granddaughter how much I loved her. She's probably married to some big coward who refuses to let her dance to her Hindi songs now. Ah well. That's life for you.

The smoke of Baqoubah. The dead facedown under ten inches of rocks and sand. The downy faces of the dead. The dust smoking from bullets dead in—what? Was I talking to myself again? You're right, let's not think of Iraq. Baqoubah floats in, Baqoubah floats out and we're done with it.

You seem to be handling this massive slope better than I. Would you believe that I carved out this trail single-handedly? You'd have done it single-footedly? That's a sick joke. I'm not even sure if I should laugh at that or not. But I am glad to see that you've retrieved your sense of humor. And I'm a bit shamed to see you faring so well on this terrain. Even stepping on a pebble is excruciating even though all of my limbs are intact. Your right leg is gone below the knee and I'd be willing to bet that you can still dance. You can? Well I'll be a sad son-of-a-bitch. This is going to sound pathetic, but could you help me over this concrete slab?

All right! Back on level ground. If I'd stayed in Lalish I could be walking the whole city barefoot right now without a care in the world. I should have deserted you dogs right there in Adi's tomb. Women don't even look at me anymore. Can you believe that? Who'd blame them? I don't even like to look in the mirror. Yes. They should at least be respectful. But I stopped fighting for them when I met the earth-mother. Her granddaughter and I could be walking barefoot through the fallen leaves on the edge of the village right now. When nobody's looking I could remove her scarf and watch her auburn hair blow in her face and stop her hand from brushing it out of her eyes.

What do I really think would happen? I think Baqoubah never would have happened, that's what—at least not to us. No. Look, you can't draw a parallel there. Why not? Because that girl Du'a was stoned to death in Bashiqa, not Lalish. They stoned her not because a Yazidi fell in love with a Muslim, but because the town is populated by half-brained inbreeders. That kind of thing would never happen in Lalish. Lalish's Yazidis wouldn't dare. Bashiqa is a festering pustule. Bashiqa, without ever being touched by the war, looked worse than Fallujah after Pink and those boys tore that city down. When I vomit after drinking too much I am reminded of Bashiqa; when winter comes in with its deformations and icy rot I think of Bashiqa; there, that squirrel smashed there on the road and the monster who obviously swerved to hit it are reflections of Bashiqa. Do not compare that W.H.O. disaster to Lalish.

I can tell by the look on your face that I'm getting mean again. Why don't you tell me about dancing. Where is it that you do this dancing? In the barrios! No kidding? At least Iraq taught you that a good time can't be found in stuffy places. I remember when we first met how you couldn't distinguish a good beer from piss. Remember that



cold week when we hiked through the blasted plains of Diyala to Baqoubah? Pink kept throwing little pebbles at you and you just ignored him until one of them broke the skin on the back of your neck. Remember what Pink said? It didn't make any sense to me—none at all—when you turned around with that horrifying look on your pathetic boy face. "Money," he said. "Money and martinis!" and you tackled him and stood over him kicking his kidneys. I remember dust flying everywhere and before it cleared I thought he was trying to pull your feet out from under you, but he just laid there and took it. I bet you still haven't had a martini since then. Money and martinis. You're crazy too, you know. Dancing with hot mamasitas every night, despite only having a left foot.

Let's talk about something else. Thinking about you having a good time is depressing me. The sunsets are terrible here, don't you think? All the trees block the best part, when the sky bursts into flames and it feels like we're standing upside down—like the real world is somewhere up there in the chaotic blaze and we're just dreamers or souls lost in a heaven we've destroyed. We'd better pick up the pace or we'll miss my guy. I'd say we have about twenty, twenty-five minutes before the sun sets completely and he takes off clubbing with his woman. Let's cut through this alleyway.

All roads should be like this one. There's something so intimate about alleyways, don't you think? Yes, it does seem a bit creepy. But I think it's because these backyards are so rarely used. I like to imagine families gathering back here, people who know our faces and love us, running to the fence or just standing on their porches and yelling good days to us and offering us beers and hotdogs and hamburgers. Or some who hate us encouraging their brute dogs to leap the fence and attack. But look there, even the dogs in these backyards seem lethargic. Have you ever seen a dog so apathetic? I can somewhat

understand its reluctance to bark or bound toward us, but it doesn't even scratch its fleas. And we can see that it has fleas from over here!

When I was growing up in El Reno me and my friends would hold down as many alleyways as we could. One time we came up on some huffers spraying spirals and shaky triangles on the side of a friend's garage. I think we all felt like that was our alleyway, like those bastards were somehow depreciating the value of our property or something, so we hurt them. There were five of us: me, Jimmy, my sister Allie, Chris, and Jeremy. They were only two. Allie kept telling us that we should leave them alone, but we never listened to my sister. I remember picking up a two-by-four and hitting one of them in the face as hard as I could and then running when he fell. I can still see the blood spread over the gold paint on his face. While I was running I looked back and saw my sister kick that guy two times in the head before she followed after me. I've never told this to anyone, but I ran home without stopping and wept in my backyard with my sister for probably an hour before we finally went inside. We had an apricot tree in the backyard just like that one. The next day Chris and Jeremy told me that Jimmy doused one of them with lighter fluid and tried to ignite him by throwing lit matches at him. I guess that stuff only works in the movies though because apparently the matches kept extinguishing when they were thrown. We never spoke to Jimmy after that. Don't laugh, man. I'm not making this shit up. Why am I telling you this, anyway? I guess because that was the first and only time I used a weapon in a fight before Iraq. Even as a kid I was destined for this life.

Now that we've left the alley I'll spare you the sappy stories of my childhood. I don't know why I was worried about crossing this street earlier. I guess I move much more slowly when I'm by myself.

I had that insurgent with the RPG in my sights before he fired. Yes, I did. You were huddled beside me on the rooftop terrified because we all get terrified at some point when we recognize our mortality. It comes without warning and we weep and freeze because we see another scared boy on the opposite side of the battlefield staring down the length of his rifle hoping to kill us before we kill him and in that moment we just want to be back home with our parents as children again believing that war is a thing of the past or else something cinematic and beautiful. So you were frozen, probably thinking something like that or just not understanding why you jumped every time a bullet struck safely a few meters away. But that's not why you were frozen. And I was frozen too. And we were frozen for the same reason. Miller was loading Franklin's M240 a few meters away and I was staring at a kid through my scope who was going to kill us before we killed him.

Can we rest on this bench for a few minutes before continuing? Let him wait. We're warriors. We deserve a rest. His woman takes a long time getting ready, anyway, so we should be good.

I never stopped blaming you. I don't know why you and Pink went at it that day but it ruined everything when we got into Baqoubah. I know you haven't forgiven yourself either. But listen for a minute, okay? I want to tell you something that I should have told you a long time ago.

0935 our company arrived in Baqoubah and stood in the same spot where they would later find thirty dead men and women buried in a shallow grave. Pink pissed blood beside a shelled BMW that still had the manufacturer's paper glued to the hood. At

around 1000 I engaged an enemy walking through the street shouldering an M16. He was smiling when I opened fire. STA platoon reported movement and shots fired on civilians a hundred yards north of our position. I know you know the details, but this is how I've got to tell it. This is how it's been with me all this time so just listen.

We moved forward fifty yards and engaged a group of insurgents holed up in a small shop. I could see a civilian in one of the windows through my scope. He was dead and he looked as miserable as any dead man. You took cover behind a palm tree a few yards ahead of me with Pink who was moving slowly from the pain in his kidneys. I lined up a shot and fired but, for whatever reason, Pink moved and there he was suddenly in my sights and it was too late: the trigger was pulled. And only I knew it. I'm not making this up. This is what happened. I know they shot him too, but I was the first and as far as I'm concerned I was the last. And then he was another dead man. And I kept telling myself that you had done it. That if you'd not fought with him the day before he'd be just fine and never would have died. If I hadn't hated you in that moment then we would have been killed right there because you were standing like an idiot over Pink's body weeping like a baby and you two looked just like you had when you were kicking him only now he was dead. And you dropped to your knees and took off your helmet right there in the middle of the shooting and I killed them without even blinking.

And then we were running into a house climbing up the stairs to the rooftop and I was somewhere else while my body carried me behind the low wall on the roof and set my gun on the lip. And then I was back and you were shaking beside me with blood all over your gloves and I could see the snot on your upper lip in my peripheral vision and I wanted to tell you to shut up. But you never tell a soldier to shut up in that situation

because one day you'll be there too and then I realized that it was my fault and I froze. I watched the kid pull the trigger and saw the rocket soar freely toward us. I could have killed him a hundred times, but I didn't. When the rocket hit I was overwhelmed with the scent of cumin seeds and then I woke up hurting from my toes to my cheeks and you didn't have a leg and Miller and Franklin were dead.

I know what's done is done, but it was my fault. It was all my fault. Fuck "forgive and forget," man. I ruined your life! Where do you think we're going? Nowhere, he says! Ha! We're walking to the depot to pick up our guns so that we can put the barrels in our mouths and pull the fucking trigger, man. That's where we're going. Feel the warped wood of this bench and look up at the darkening sky because we're moving toward oblivion. Christ, would you shut up already? We're dead, man. We've been dead for years. Now look, it costs fifty for enough rocks to keep us and I've only got forty. Tell me you've got ten.

## Homecoming

Jonathan found himself sitting beside the potted schefflera plant on the rear porch of his ex-wife's house. The sun sat in its midmorning position, breaking up the reds, purples and oranges of dawn, shining on the overgrown acreage and the white two-story house. A layer of red dirt moved over the concrete porch, and he wanted to get up from beside the poorly watered plant and sweep everything down. But he knew that there was a certain degree of distance a man must maintain when visiting an ex-wife, and so he let the dirt crawl across the concrete porch and cling to the wooden columns which he remarked to himself were in dire need of a paint job. He looked out into that stunning daylight and followed the golden splashes of the sun glinting off of a thrush's wing-tips as it danced above the overgrown field. Gusts of wind were announced before hitting

Jonathan by the rippling dried grasses in the field which bent toward him, and by the mournful hum from his old tool shed. He watched the door to the tool shed swing open and close with the wind before the dirt on the porch swirled up into his eyes and nose. He turned then from the barrage of dirt and looked at the paint peeling from the door behind him. She's somewhere behind that door, remembering. Death comes in the night and burrows so deep in your skin that people smell it burning from your sweat when you get out and walk among them. You've got to wash that stink out, he wanted to tell her. You've got to wash it out. He licked his lips and spat when he tasted dirt. When she walks through this door, does she see him standing out there in that field squinting in the sun? Jonathan closed his eyes and imagined his boy running through the field with the dog occasionally popping his head up over the tall grass.

“That's what she sees, I guess,” he found himself whispering. Walk through this door, Emily. Make yourself real. He stared hard at the door, clenching his jaw and holding his breath, hoping that he could push her over the threshold simply by willing it. But the door remained closed.

The tool shed buzzed in the wind again and Jonathan turned his attention to it. He could see the piece of metal siding, the source of the wail, vibrating with the wind. He wanted to stand up and turn the doorknob to the house behind him, to search for a hammer and a nail to secure the loose piece of siding. He wanted to smile at Emily as he walked out into the sun with a few nails held between his teeth and his hammer swinging in his hand. But he knew there would be no tools in that house, knew that she'd resigned herself to this decay. He knew that he could not have smiled so easily even if there were. Those days had gone. He looked down at the thin layer of red dirt on the porch and

imagined his old combat boot prints in that dirt, leading up to the door. The empty tool shed moaned after him. Next to it sat his ex-dog's doghouse, falling to pieces beside a hedge of wild, uncultivated blackberry bushes.

"Milo," he shouted. "Milo. Come here, boy." He kept this up and whistled a low whistle until the sun was a little bit higher, but nothing stirred within the dilapidated doghouse. He missed that dog. You're gone now, then, somewhere with my boy. Jonathan heard a mockingbird start his catalogue of songs. My boy. Rolling deep in the field with you now, Milo. His name. We've got to say his name. Give an old time bark for him, would you? Tell him his daddy's here, visiting. "Raimey," he said. There it is, now, burning on these lips. Bet they felt it fifty miles around. Death speaks, they're thinking. Well, let Him speak.

Jonathan patted down his breast pockets for a crumpled pack of cigarettes and he thought of the dog and imagined burying the creature. Because he was a hopeless man, he would always imagine this burial being done in the rain, with flashes of lightning arcing through the sky. He would almost see the dog and then it would be covered by the night and the mud that Jonathan had just dumped on top of the dog. And there, Jonathan imagined, was his boy sitting atop the dog house, weeping over the shovel's cold earth-scraping scream, his face hidden in his hands. Just speak to me, Jonathan imagined he would have said. This is not the hardest thing. He imagined this scene as he sat smoking on his ex-wife's porch and it did not sit well. What he wanted was to imagine the ritual occurring in a day not unlike this day, the sun burning a little high on the horizon, the birds singing over the dried brush, the souging of the trees beside the house, the dog fully visible, and Jonathan's boy saying goodbye.



The thin screen door clattered against the doorjamb and he could hear his ex-wife's hard voice landing heavily upon him.

“What you come up here for, Jonnie?”

She smelled of sweat and tobacco. He breathed in her scent for a moment before letting it out in a sigh and turning to her. She wore a stained pair of tight jeans and a black t-shirt. Her hair was tied in a small warrior-esque ponytail. Her body was still firm with the muscles of her manic youth, but those muscles looked heavy now, as if they had simply resigned. She moved stiffly as she brought herself down to the step beside him, glancing briefly at him before looking out over the field. Jonathan followed her gaze and lit another cigarette with the one he'd been smoking. Does she see him there? He held the freshly lit cigarette in front of her and she looked at him hard for a moment before taking it.

“Damn it, Jonnie. You got to stop looking at me like that.” She stretched her thin, muscular arm out so that she was leaning on the wooden column. “I gave you a question, now. Answer up.”

She was a smiley woman when she wasn't frowning, Jonathan thought, though it wasn't so easy to see anymore. Jonathan scratched at an ingrown hair on his neck and squinted in the sun before speaking.

“You're not still using, are you, Emily?”

Emily looked out over the field and Jonathan again followed her gaze. At the edge of the fence line a cow stared back at them, chewing the cud. The carcass of the old pickup truck they had killed during that wild amphetamine-jumping night was rusting in the center of the field, its doors open and hollowed by the flames of the previous decade, the

dried grass in the field wrapping around its skeleton wheels. He remembered that the back of her head had been shaved then, her bangs had reached down to her chin. He looked at her tired face, whose left eye was more open than the right, and he had difficulty remembering her euphoric gaze as the flames had risen higher. They had made love in the tilled field with the truck burning only a fistful of yards away from them. The Casualties screamed, "I hate all this fucking fucking stupid world," over the truck's speakers before the tape deck had died. Jonathan did not agree with The Casualties; he had loved that truck, he had loved his boy, and, he thought, he might have loved Emily.

"You're a son of a bitch, Jonnie," she said, stooping to sit beside him on the porch. She reached into Jonathan's shirt pocket and took a cigarette from his battered pack. "You may think that you've got everything figured out, that you're the stronger of us two. But you're really just a coward, running off like you did, leaving me here to rot in this piece of shit. You weren't the only one with problems, you know, but mine are sorted out now. The hard way. You done gone off and run away from me for that beautiful brown bitch to fix yours, so why do you got to keep coming here?"

"Well, it doesn't do any good getting worked up about it, anyway," Jonathan said. "What happened to Milo?"

"None of your damn business. That was my dog. If you cared so much about him then you should have come up and taken him."

"Jesus, Emily. I just wondered about him is all. Just making small talk."

"Yeah, well, keep on wondering." She took a deep drag from the cigarette. "And fuck Jesus," she added as an afterthought. "He's dead."

They were silent for some time, neither looking at the other. Jonathan heard the piercing cry of a hawk and turned his head to see if he could spot it. There it was, perched on the t-bar of the clothesline, not even fifty feet away from the two. It twisted its head and looked down into the filthy baby's crib below. There must be a field rat in there, Jonathan thought. He had expected Emily would be looking at the hawk with him, but when he turned his head he saw that she had been staring at him the whole time.

“You want to say something to me,” she said, squaring her shoulders and planting her feet firmly on the ground.

“Well,” Jonathan said, “you may as well start cleaning up some of this mess out here. I’ll help, you know. Hell, I’ll do it all if you’ll let me. I don’t know how you go on living like this with all these reminders sitting around you all the time.”

“I don’t need any of your God damn help,” she said, turning away from him and crossing her arms. “This is my house and I’ll keep it the way I like. You just go on, now, and let your whore fix you up. She’s doing a bang-up job.”

“You’re crazy sometimes. You know that, Em?”

“I know it, Jonnie. I’m nuttier than a whole God damned pecan farm. I’d have to be to put up with you. But one of these days you got to leave me alone.” She snuffed the cigarette under her boot and blew the last of the smoke out of her lungs. She stood and pulled open the screen door. “If you’re not going to leave then you may as well come inside and drink some coffee. We can at least pretend that you’re not pestering the shit out of me.”

“I want to feel of the sun on my skin for a minute or two first.” Jonathan reached up and brushed the red dirt from the column beside him. “It doesn’t have to be this way,

you know. You and me, we could have worked through it if you'd only listened to me. You know that, right?"

"So I do," she said. "You remind me every goddamn year." She let the screen door hit the doorjamb and she sighed as she sat back down beside Jonathan. "But it's a crock of shit, Jonnie. You hear me? Your mind ain't right. You remember things wrong." She kicked the heel of her boot against the stair step, knocking loose a clump of dirt. "'Married in the eyes of the beneficent beholder' my tit," she muttered. "My left tit, you motherfucker. Can't we just be done with this? Say what you need to say and get. You're not doing neither of us no good."

Jonathan stood and walked toward Milo's doghouse, stopping occasionally to pull goat head stickers from where they stabbed him through his pant legs. As he approached, a crow took lugubrious flight from behind the blackberry bushes. Jonathan bent down to look into the doghouse. Grass grew in the dirt that the dog had kicked into the doghouse, and goat head stickers were everywhere. Through the cracks in the wood he could see a small cloth doll he had forgotten Emily had made. He picked it up and turned it in his hands. Its stuffing was coming out and one of its legs was gone, but it still looked like he remembered it: an upside-down cross sewn into his chest; spiky punk-rock hair; sewn onto the back of its uneven jean jacket was a crooked capital A inside a shaky circle. He had an urge to pocket the doll, but he suppressed that urge and dropped it in front of the doghouse.

He stood up from the doghouse and picked some berries from the blackberry bushes. They were sweet and seedy, and the dark juice staining his fingers reminded him of the time that he and Emily had bloodied Rick's mouth in front of his wife and kids

after the accident, the blood gushing from where his bottom teeth had cut through his lip. It was like a dream that opened up in the middle of an upper binge, and for a moment he wondered if it had been one of those false memories. But his knuckles bore the scars from where he had connected with Rick's teeth. And where has that gotten us? What can you do with a woman like her? You give her everything to help her out of Death's swampy trail, and she ends up neck deep in it anyway. Jonathan stood in the grass that reached up to his knees and watched Emily staring at the crib from the porch. Look at me, Emily. There is still life here if you'd just look.

"Emmy," he said. "You still boil your coffee? Juana doesn't let me drink coffee anymore on account of how it makes me sick, you know. But I always did like your coffee best, Em."

"Do you see that you're killing me, Jonathan?" She was standing with her arms crossed as she yelled across the yard. "Do you think I want to relive this? Why can't you just get on and leave me alone?" She opened the screen door and waited for him. "Well? You coming or aren't you?"

Inside, he turned to see the giant black assault rifle he'd stenciled onto the back of the door.

"Don't ask about the God damned gun, Jonathan. I don't want to do this with you again."

"Christ, Emily," he said. "We're not kids anymore. At some point you've got to see that we were just a couple of dumb shits. And that's all. It wasn't our fault."

"I've got to see, he says. *I've got to see.*" She pushed past him and turned left at the end of the narrow hall where it broke off to the kitchen and the living room. The interior of the house was the same as he remembered. In the middle of the hallway a giant face of George Bush inside of a stenciled Mil-Dot crosshair was painted on the floor. The center of his face was worn down almost to the bare wood boards of the floor by what he assumed was Emily's habitual pacing. Looking up, he saw the coat rack he'd made by hammering a handful of nails into the wall. From one of the nails hung a studded leather jacket he'd never before seen. He tried it on, hoping that doing so would help him remember, but the jacket was too big for him. While he was pondering the jacket, he thought he heard the sound of a child's weeping coming from the living room, and he found himself running into the room, stumbling over a stack of books at the end of the hall. But as soon as he entered, the sound ceased. The wall opposite him was dominated by two floor-to-ceiling windows, some of whose panes were replaced with duct tape and thin squares of plywood. He looked out the window and saw the dirt road that led to the house. A pair of birds hopped from the hood of his car to the roof and back. There was a rough voice rising within him, demanding that he answer why he had come here. You son of a bitch, it said. You've come here for a reason. What was it? Look at yourself in the reflection of that window, damn it, and tell yourself why you're here. You've got to pull yourself together before you start to retrace these steps, Jonathan. Now what was it? Look at yourself. Look at yourself, Jonathan.

"Hey. You're that guy Emily was talking about, aren't you?" Turning from the window, Jonathan saw the owner of the voice sitting up from the couch he had neglected to see against the opposite wall of the living room. The man was tall, in his early thirties

or late twenties, with a collection of carefully considered piercings in his nose and lips. His hair was in a limp mohawk that Jonathan could see had been shaped by the man without the help of a mirror.

“Who the hell are you?” Jonathan asked.

“I’m The Wastrel.” Jonathan’s aggression didn’t seem to faze The Wastrel. He stood up from the couch and folded the blanket that had been covering him.

“Sorry for taking up the whole couch,” he said. He ran his right hand through his crooked mohawk and leaned backwards on his heels. “Em told me. About the kid, I mean.”

“Just because you're fucking her doesn't mean you know anything about me. And that’s a God damned stupid name you’ve got.” Jonathan leaned against the wide window frame as he spoke. He wanted to hit The Wastrel, though he could not understand why. It was fine for Emily to have a boyfriend. Death flees from one like him as from the laughter of a—but never mind that. He knew she needed somebody, but the longer Jonathan looked at the punk’s yellow teeth and naked chest adorned with what Jonathan thought were self-inflicted scars, the more he wanted to run at The Wastrel and strike him down, give him some real scars.

“Relax, man. We're on the same side here.”

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

Jonathan held his breath and counted to ten. After he reached ten, he breathed in the mildew of the living room, felt the heat from the sun fall on his face, watched The Wastrel drip onto the floor.

"You sick or something?" Jonathan asked.

The Wastrel's hands were wisps of golden hair.

"I'm just waiting," The Wastrel said.

"For what?"

"For you to fuck up, like you always do."

"Look, you prick. We lived here, Em and I. We made love in this room. Many times. Probably right where you're standing. We were married." Jonathan could feel his hands shaking with anger as he spoke. The entire time he stood talking with The Wastrel, the voice inside of him was yelling, Why are you here? Why are you here? Ignore this dumb fucker and focus, Jonathan. Focus.

"Emily told me that you two never did get married."

"Well, no, not if you mean that a person has to be married by the government in order to be considered married. But she was my wife, you little shit," Jonathan said.

"But not legally, though. Right?"

"Look here." Jonathan held his fist up. "If you say one more word I'm going to punch you right in the mouth."

"There's a voice on the wind," The Wastrel said. "If you close your eyes you can hear it whispering to you. His gauzy voice will wake you."

Jonathan closed his eyes. He listened. "Death," it said.

"What the hell, Jonathan?" Emily said from the entryway to the living room. "I'm not some piece-of-shit waitress bitch. Get your ass in the kitchen if you want your coffee."

Jonathan looked back to The Wastrel, but he was no longer standing at the couch. Looking out the window, Jonathan could see him, now wearing the leather jacket from



the hallway, walking up the dirt road, his hair spiked straight up. He seemed to be whistling.

“Is he off to work, or what?” Jonathan asked.

“For fuck’s sake, Jonnie. Shut up and get in the kitchen.”

In the kitchen Jonathan noticed that there were no dirty dishes piled in the sink. Stickers of different punk bands covered most of the walls and a big fat “Punk is Dead” sticker was plastered to the center of the cracked wooden dining table. The refrigerator had yellowed from the age and smoke, and Jonathan wondered what kind of foods hid in there now that the field was out of service. He looked down into his cup of coffee at the silky texture that he’d only known to come from boiled coffee beans. He fished out some coarse grounds floating on the top of his cup before taking a drink.

“I don’t like that guy,” he said. “You could do much better, Emily.”

Emily stood from the table and walked to sink. Resting her elbows on the counter, she grabbed the faucet and leaned forward until her forehead touched it.

“How does Juana deal with you? With this?”

Jonathan turned the cup in his hands and let the hot coffee spill onto his knuckles.

"She does all right," Jonathan said. "On the good days, at least."

Emily didn’t speak for some time, and Jonathan saw a tear catch the sunlight when she straightened up and opened the tap. She filled a glass with water and swallowed it down quickly before speaking.

“This is what Hell is like, Jonnie.”

"Don't I know it."

Jonathan looked up at the clock hanging upside-down above the refrigerator. All of its hands were missing but it was still ticking.

"It wasn't our fault," he said, but he couldn't hear the words falling from his lips, couldn't feel the hot breath as it rolled off his tongue.

After dropping the glass in the sink, Emily walked up behind Jonathan and wrapped her arms around him. He could feel the sticky saliva from her weeping mouth on his neck, could smell the sickly smell of Death lurking in her breath. There's my boy rolling down her cheeks, sticking to the corners of her mouth. Haunting me in love. There's my boy. Does she see him there?

"You don't know what this does to me, seeing you here every year," she said. "I watch you walking up the dirt road and I sit in my room with the gun in my hands for an hour. That's how long it takes for me to keep myself from killing you, Jonnie."

Death moves as a whisper.

"Would that help?"

"You don't understand," she said. She moved from him and leaned against the refrigerator. "You're the worst sort of scum on this planet, Jonathan. It's true. But even you deserve a second chance. That's what I tell myself every time you show up, and after that hour I believe it."

"I'll do anything to help you," he said.

She said something else, but he was not listening. He would do anything to help her. He imagined himself holding the pistol in his hands, feeling that once-familiar weight as he turned it around and wiped away the red dirt coating it. He'd give it to her then, switch off the safety, and cradle her hands in his to quell the shaking.

### Paul Bunyan and Davy Crockett Build a Guitar

Growing up, Francis and Toby were often mistaken for brothers. They shared the same lost expression every time they emerged from a building into the burning daylight, shielding their eyes and stopping for a moment in the doorway to look quickly into the sun before pushing out into the wild world. They both wore their hair long enough for it to be big and curly, which is why people often called them the afro brothers. They enjoyed the solidarity they felt when called brothers and often introduced each other as such. But Francis never much liked Toby; hated, in fact, the way Toby would repeat phrases he thought clever, breathing with his mouth open a few seconds between each utterance, and then saying some damn idiotic thing like, "We are eternal," first as a

statement and then as a question. And to make it worse, when Francis would say something truly clever he'd find Toby squinting at him and giving him a condescending smile with only half of his mouth, as if to say that Francis were the one speaking nonsense. But there were times that Toby seemed all right, like the times when he said nothing and just nodded his head when Francis talked, or the times when Toby would show up with destroyed guitars he'd found peaking out of dumpsters. And furthermore, despite his dislike of Toby, Francis felt somehow responsible for his fake brother. Francis was, after all, the elder.

After school, Toby moved five hundred miles away to live and work on an organic farm outside of Portland, telling Francis on the day of his departure, "Goodbye, brother. This is goodbye? This is goodbye. Forever goodbye." And Francis had hoped it was true, that it was forever goodbye. He threw a party to celebrate Toby's departure two days after Toby had left, and he felt that he had somehow been freed. The morning after the party, he emerged from his house and glanced into the sun, breathed in the dewy morning air and was overtaken by a kind of easy laughter he'd never before known. He was free. Finally free! But his happiness guilted him, and within two months Francis had made it a habit to check up on Toby every Saturday evening.

"If only you'd *thought* about the consequences," Francis said on one of those Saturday evenings. Toby had just been dismissed from the farm for growing marijuana with the tomato plants.

"I know," Toby said. "We make mistakes." Francis could hear Toby breathing from his open mouth into the receiver. "Mistakes? Yes, we will always make mistakes."

"Would you stop doing that? You sound like a fucking nut, you know that?"

"I'm just saying that we make mistakes."

Francis pressed his fist hard against the receiving end of the cell phone. He walked to the guitar on his workbench and checked the tension of the cam clamps holding the top, sides, and back together while the glue did its work. No glue run-out. This guitar would sing.

"What are you doing, anyway?" Francis asked. "For money, I mean."

"Oh, don't worry about me. I don't need money. I'm taking a break from all of that," Toby said. Francis listened to him breathe and waited for him to repeat that last statement, but Toby said nothing.

"From all of that? What's that supposed to mean, for Christ's sake? You've got to eat, don't you?"

"There's food aplenty in the wild, Francis. If you know the plants and herbs it's easy to survive out here. You look around and all you see is food. It's a smörgåsbord."

"So you're Paul Bunyan now?"

"You're Paul Bunyan," Toby said.

"What?"

"Paul Bunyan worked with wood is all. I'm Daniel Boone. Davy Crockett. Yeah, Davy Crockett."

"Okay, whatever, Toby. You're Davy Fucking Crockett," Francis said and hated himself for wanting to laugh with Toby. "You do realize that idiots die all the time trying to be survivalists, right?"

"Don't worry, Francis. I'm not an idiot."

It was too much for Francis to hear Toby say those words, and he found himself laughing wickedly before he could stop himself.

"Why's that funny?" Toby asked. His voice sounded boyish and frightened, and Francis felt like scum for laughing like that. But why should he feel bad? Toby was the very portrait of an idiot. Francis couldn't help that. Nobody could.

"I'm not an idiot, Francis? I'm not an idiot."

"No, Goddamnit," Francis said. "You're not an idiot. It's just... Davy Crockett?" He laughed and Toby laughed with him.

"I'm thinking about taking a vow of silence," Toby said.

"I don't want to hear about it."

"Don't be like that, Francis.

Francis sat on his bar stool behind his workbench. He stroked the grain of the unfinished guitar in front of him. "Forget it," he said.

Toby cleared his throat and breathed into the mouth piece.

"So," Toby said. "Met anyone?"

"Not this again."

"I'm serious, Francis. You need someone." But Francis wasn't listening. The glue had set on his guitar which meant that it was time to finish the fret board. And he had great plans for that fret board.

One week passed without being able to reach Toby. And then another. On the third week Francis began work on a new Koa wood guitar. He finished sanding the edges of the two quarter-inch-thick planks and held them together against the window looking

out from his shop and onto his lawn. Though it would mean he'd made a minor miscalculation, he almost desired the evening sun's bursting through the seam between the two planks as he held them up to the window. The wild fiery wood grain, its horizontal striations alternating between blood reds and earthy browns broken vertically by massive black strokes each spaced a hand's width apart, almost convinced Francis of the existence of God. To see the sun break through that soul-rending pattern—what divine revelation might he witness then? But the edges were flush and no sun peaked through, so he glued the seam and clamped the two pieces together.

When he turned away from his workbench, he found Toby standing at the opposite end of the workshop, turning a bench plane around in his hands. Francis nearly mistook him for a bum. His shaved head and his sweaty long-sleeved shirt hanging down almost to the knees of his shorts made him appear insane and childlike. And there, at his side, was, in fact, a teenage child, her head shaved and her clothes loose like Toby's. It wasn't until Francis watched Toby make crude carving motions in the air before touching the bench plane stupidly to his forearm that Francis knew for certain this bald man was his brother.

"Stop," Francis yelled. "For Christ's sake, don't do that!"

Toby put the bench plane down on the shelf behind him and smiled. He reached up and touched his bald head, stopping for a moment at the stubble of his hairline, seeming, Francis thought, to realize for the first time that his hair was gone. The girl took Toby's hand and kissed his knuckles before moving to one of the four guitars hanging from the peg-board against the wall. She yanked it rudely from its mount, sat cross-legged on the floor, and strummed the detuned strings with her thumb.

"I hope like hell that this child is your daughter, Toby."

"I'm not a child," the girl said. "I'll be eighteen in November." She continued strumming the guitar, making up chord shapes and humming a whiny song that made Francis's head hurt.

"Hello Francis," she sang. "My name's Stasia. It's nice to meet you. You're a beautiful person. We're all beautiful people." She strummed the strings rapidly, ending her song. "This guitar sounds horrible."

Francis looked at Toby, watched him fumble a chisel and catch the thing right before it could impale his flip-flopped foot.

"Goddamnit, Toby," Francis said, taking the chisel from him and putting it back on the shelf. "What the hell is going on?"

Toby rubbed the back of his neck and rocked on his heels.

"He thought you could help," Stasia said.

"Is that right, Toby? Help you with what? Pedophilia?"

"Don't yell at him," Stasia said, putting the guitar face-down on the floor before walking to Toby. "He's taken a vow of silence. And I'm not a child. My parents have agreed to our union."

"Your union?" Francis poked Toby in the chest. "Your *union*? What the fuck is going on here? When did you go completely bat-shit?"

He watched Toby lace his fingers near his navel and look down at his feet.

"Vow of silence, my ass. How does this girl know who I am, Toby, if you're not talking? Huh? How did you get here without talking?"



Stasia slapped Francis's hand away from Toby's chest. "You don't understand what love is. Not that it's any of your business, but Tobias and I are on a higher plane than you. I communicate with his soul, where no words are needed. It's not funny, you little man."

"Oh, I see. You're both insane," Francis said. "I can't help you with that." He picked the guitar up off the floor and inspected the nut and the saddle before deciding no damage had been done. "I made this thing for Nels Cline." He returned the guitar to one of the stands in his peg board. "This isn't some commune guitar here so show some respect. And his name's not Tobias. Isn't that right, Davy Crock-of-shit?"

"All we need is a place to stay," Stasia said, but Francis knew that she had money on her mind.

"Are you on drugs?"

"Absolutely not." She put her hand to her stomach as though she had just been kicked. "We're believers in purity."

They were junkies. They had to be. Well, she was, anyway; Francis was sure of it. Despite his frustration with Toby, he thought him incapable of sinking that low. She was right about one thing: Toby was, in fact, pure—idiotically so. Francis never doubted his brother's desire for divinity. Only fools could believe in such a thing, and Toby was the greatest fool of all. Of course he had taken a vow of silence! Who but Toby would do something so monumentally stupid? She must have seduced him—that was the only explanation; must have humped the words right out of him. Once she learned that Francis made a lot of money there was no stopping her. And here they stood, hands outstretched. Were it not for her, Francis could have been Toby-free for the rest of his life.

"I'm not harboring a runaway and a child molester. You can forget about it," Francis said. And you can beg on the side of the fucking highway if you need money so badly, he wanted to say.

"A child molester? He's your brother," she said, acting shocked.

"He's not my brother," Francis said. He heard the weakness in his voice as he said it, the break in his speech when he spoke the word brother. Toby turned away from Francis and pretended to count the tools on the metal shelf jutting out from the peg board. His breathing was labored and Francis could hear him stifling sobs. "Okay, stop it. You can stay for one night. One night!"

They stayed for weeks. Stasia pulled her weight, at least, though the same could hardly be said of Toby, who moped about all day looking pious. On the second night, after they'd eaten a meat loaf Francis prepared, Stasia washed the dishes and whistled a song he thought he recognized. He looked across the table at Toby, who smiled down at the wood and ran his finger along the burl grain as though he were solving a labyrinth. Toby looked up at him and he knew that his brother wanted to ask if he'd built it.

"Yeah. I built it," he said. "Right around the time you left."

Toby nodded and resumed his game. So, Francis wanted to say, are you two taking off tonight?

"I had a lot of time to myself, so I built this. Remember that tree down by the Hernandez place? The one looked like it was bursting from the inside?" He knocked on the table with his left hand. "This is it."

Toby bit his bottom lip and scratched his earlobe.

"Don't cry about it, now. I didn't fell the damn thing. I'd've left it there too if it was up to me." He heard Stasia's song repeat, descending into a mellow breeze-like set of lows and then leaping up into a higher register. He turned his chair so that he could watch Stasia wash the dishes. When she scrubbed a plate her hips moved in such a way that he could not help but think of her as anything but woman. November wasn't that long off, after all. And they say that women mature more rapidly than men, anyway, so intellectually she was probably at least in her twenties. He pulled his upper lip between his teeth and chewed off a piece of dry skin. "It is beautiful though. Once it's worked and polished."

Her song stopped and he looked up from her hips to see her watching him. She rubbed her hand over her head and smiled. When she looked away Francis couldn't take his eyes from the drop of water running down the side of her neck and into her loose t-shirt. The erection that she caused saddened him. It had always been like this: Toby and his beautiful women—Francis and his wood. How many times had his heart been broken by women who knew him only as Toby's brother?

In his peripheral vision he could see Toby watching him watching Stasia; he could see that damned idiot smirk on Toby's lips. Look what I've caught, it said. Tell me how well I've done.

"I hate that God damn smile of yours. You know that? I never have liked it."

Toby put his cheek to the table and continued tracing the burl. Toby would not buff away the big greasy stain his face would leave after standing from the table; Francis knew that he would probably look down at it long enough to notice that his face was oily and then he'd grab his cheeks between his thumb and index finger and squeeze, running

his hand from the base of his eyes to his chin, as though his face were a cloth from which he could wring the oil.

"So what is it you see in this clown?" he asked Stasia. "And don't tell me it's his purity. I'll puke my guts out if you say a word about purity." She continued washing the dishes with her back to him, but he could see from the way her cheeks puffed out on the sides that she was smiling. "And if you tell me it's the other thing then I'll drive you to a toy store where you can get any size you like."

When she turned to face him he saw that she was indeed smiling. But it was the smile of a lunatic, her teeth clenched so tightly together that he thought he could see them buckling from the pressure. A vein running seemingly from the back of her skull to the ridge over her right eyebrow bulged and her face flushed. She lifted a plate from the sink and held it over her head for a moment before slamming it to the floor.

"Look here, you motherfucker," she said, bending down and fumbling with the shards of ceramic. When she found a piece the size of her fist she stood and walked to him. "Do you know how hard it is," she said, "to keep from putting this through you?"

So this is what goodness gets you, he thought, murdered by a woman who would rather risk cutting herself on a piece of broken glass than take a knife from the sink.

"Yes! It's his purity—his divinity," she shouted. "Feel like puking? Then puke, damn you. Puke!"

"I'm just giving—"

"Stuff it." She dragged the piece of plate across the table. "Not a word. Look at your brother." He did so. Toby seemed at ease there, his breath clouding up on the table before vanishing. But Francis could tell from the way he kept his mouth open while he

breathed that he was nervous. Not nervous enough to speak, however; to stop this unstable woman from opening Francis up in his own kitchen. What sort of divinity stopped a man from helping his own brother?

"That's the face of God," she said.

"All right," Francis said. "Stop waving that thing around before you cut yourself."

"I'm not playing games here," she said. "I could kill you right now. He knows I'm capable."

"For God's sake, Toby," Francis said. "Say something."

"He knows I won't hurt you. If he spoke he'd tell us to meditate together to work out our differences. Isn't that right, Tobias?"

Francis watched Toby close his eyes and pretend to sleep. What a coward, he thought.

"He is saying it to my soul: 'Go and commune,' he's saying. That's the only solution," she said.

"Toby," Francis said. "Stop your holy bullshit and calm her down."

"Get up."

He did not know why, but he obliged. He could have easily restrained her, but he did nothing. She led him to his bedroom and pushed him through the doorway. This is it, he thought, gutted by a schizophrenic teenager. It was odd how serene he felt; as though he'd known all his life that this day would come, that Toby would be his undoing. She pushed him onto the bed and moved the piece of ceramic from her right hand to her left.

"Not a sound," she said. And then she unbuttoned his jeans. He couldn't remember a time a woman had handled him so passionately.

Toby seemed to exist less and less as the days passed, stepping out of the house to take long walks just as Francis and Stasia staged their fights. At times, while he pushed his very soul into her, Francis thought that he loved her. When he lay in bed at night he began to feel that his umbilicus was unraveling and that his bowels were forcing their way out. In his workshop he could do nothing, so consumed was he by the thought of her. That Toby didn't speak both delighted and enraged him; that silence seemed to permit his affair and scold him for it simultaneously. Though Francis could see the smile fading from his brother's face, he wished this would go on forever.

One night Francis heard Toby and Stasia whispering from the kitchen. Toby's voice sounded alien to him, and he thought for a moment that they'd planned everything from the start to end in violence. He feared briefly that they would burst into his room with guns at the ready, Toby finally revealing his secret hatred for Francis, how he'd dreamt of this night from the time they were boys. But that was Hollywood nonsense. Stasia shouted something and then the discussion ended. The front door opened and closed, and Francis could hear Toby weeping embarrassingly. This was it, Francis thought. The madness was over, and it had hardly even begun. Thank God for that.

But what would he do now without Stasia? Their bodies had fit together so perfectly that he worried there would be no other woman for him. Never mind her insanity. Never mind her youth. Love transcended all. Surely she felt the same, he thought. In the morning she'd be back, ready to take their relationship to the next stage. She'd cast Toby aside for his much more handsome and intelligent brother. It made sense

that the only thing that could shake Toby's vow was perhaps the woman who urged him to it. The thought comforted Francis, and he fell asleep to the sounds of Toby's sobs.

In the morning, Francis found Toby slumped against the wall opposite the bed.

"You're up," Toby said. "Are you up? You must be up."

"I'm up, Toby. Christ." He sat up in his bed and swung his legs over the side. "No more vow of silence, then, Davy Crockett?"

"Please don't start in on me. I've had a hell of a day and the sun's just come up." He pulled his knees up to his chest and crossed his arms on top of them. "She's gone, Francis."

"That'll show you to let the dick do the thinking." Francis stood from his bed and walked to Toby. When Toby neither stood nor returned his smile, Francis felt that he was opening up like a wound. "She can't be gone for good," he said. "Where would she go? She'll be back."

"I was so lonely out there when I decided that I'd take my vow of silence. It's impossible, Francis, living like that. I needed somebody to talk to, but everyone in our commune was so encouraging about my decision not to speak. And then she got me alone and told me that it didn't count if I talked to her. We were soul mates, she said. You can't blame me for loving her, Francis. That life's impossible. Impossible? Impossible. People outside look at you like you're nothing. Like you're worse than nothing."

"Well, you're talking now." Francis scratched his stomach until the skin turned bright red. "Get up. I'll show you how to make a guitar while we wait for her to come to her senses."

"You won't kill me, will you?"

"Christ! Guitar building's not that dangerous."

They walked out of the house together and paused for a moment to look into the sun. Outside, Francis grabbed Toby by the shoulders and looked at him like he'd never looked at him before. Aside from the shaved head, the resemblance really was uncanny. Toby's lips, thin and permanently pulled downward at the edges despite his constant smiling, were just as Francis's. Where Francis's eyebrows arched, so did Toby's. The only major difference was in their noses, but only because Francis's nose had been broken when he was a teenager.

"God damn," Francis said. "We look like a couple of twins, you and me."

Francis let go of Toby and walked the length of the yard. He liked the feeling of the dewy grass between his toes in the morning before getting down to work. A couple of birds bathed in his bird bath, and he listened to their playful chirping. It smelled of maple outside, and Francis breathed it in deeply. Maybe his next guitar would be a maple solid body parlor guitar. Or maybe he'd make an old baroque guitar, using only his hand tools. Wouldn't that be something? He walked to the fence, passing the bird bath and frightening the birds. The neighbor's dog jumped up from the porch and bounded to the fence.

"The thing is, Toby," he said, "there are some battles that just can't be won. Take the Hernandez tree, for instance. I tried so hard to work it into a solid body but the burl was just too weak for it. I even tried bracing it with the carbon fiber, but as soon as I tightened the strings the damn thing started warping on me."

"No, Francis. You don't understand."



"But I learned from the experience. I turned that burl into my first dining table. And it's beautiful."

When he finished his walk around the yard, he made his way to the small workshop. At the door Toby stood in Francis's way, putting his open hand on Francis's chest to stop him from entering.

"Listen," Toby said. He was running his hand over his bald head as though he still had hair. "I never told you, but I damn near died after I got fired from the farm. I got shackled up in this stinking hospital down in the ghetto, Francis, dying from a disease I can't even pronounce, but I still got out and waited outside the places you called me every weekend so you could tell me I was a failure and, you know, I believed you. Sometimes I wanted to die in there, but I kept pushing on, Francis. Kept pushing on. Because the only time I've been happy was when we were brothers. I know I'm a disappointment to you, always have been, but I know you care, Francis. You must care? You must."

"Don't get like that," Francis said. "You're not a disappointment. You're just different is all. Some people just can't get past it. I tell you what," he said. "If you can't stand being here with us when she comes back then I'll buy you a ticket to anywhere you want to go. You can take a vacation, for once. I'll help you get your start." He knew he sounded smug when he said it, but he didn't care. He was smug.

"But I am a disappointment, Francis. I am. I did something bad, Francis. Real bad. Well, I didn't do it, but I let it happen so I may as well have done it. I was lonely and sore at you is why I did it. But I'm not mad now. Okay? It's just that when I saw the way you looked at her I couldn't go through with it. It's the first time I've seen you so happy, and

I'd give anything for you to be happy. I thought it would work out, that she'd let it go. I should have known better."

"What are you talking about?" Francis said, "What is all this about?"

But he knew. It all made sense now, the nutty girl, the shaved heads, the argument in the night, the palpable lust for money the first night. He could hear Toby speaking, but the words made no sense. He'd been played. Toby's face was close to Francis's, and Francis could feel spit touching his lips as Toby pleaded. Without thinking, Francis grabbed Toby by the throat and threw him down into the grass. He pushed open the door to his shop where he found everything as he thought he would. The guitars and all the months of work and love he'd put into them, his hand tools, the first things he'd crafted before building his first guitars, even his diagrams and notes, everything was stolen. Tens of thousands of dollars, gone. Only the Koa clamped to the work bench and the bandsaw remained. He unclamped the Koa and heard Toby enter the workshop as Francis sanded away the excess glue.

"I didn't want for it to come to this," Toby said. "I didn't want it to come to this? I didn't."

Francis ignored him and drew the shape of the guitar on top of the wood before starting the bandsaw. This is what it feels like to have your heart destroyed by a lover, he thought.

"Now listen here, you moron," he said. But before he could continue he was weeping. The tears seemed to pour from him and his legs buckled beneath him. "I'll kill you. I will."

"Do it," Toby said. "I deserve it for all I've done."

Francis lay prostrate on the floor, howling as he wept. "Why?" he tried to say. "Why?" But soon the grief gave way to another emotion, one with which he felt more at ease. He handed the Koa board to Toby. "Take this and cut around the outline. Not too close. I can always sand it back down if you fuck up outside of the outline."

Toby worked the bandsaw with his hands and face near the blade and Francis considered telling him to back up a bit.

"Are we okay?" Toby asked.

"Yeah," Francis said. "I guess we are." And for a moment he believed it. He felt himself calming down as Toby worked the wood. The sound of the band saw passing through the wood made him feel like he was a part of something grand and eternal. The sweet smell of the Koa sawdust emboldened him, and he imagined a future in which he and Toby might work together always. The speed of guitar output with two workers meant a hell of a lot more money. He nearly sang. Paul Bunyan and Davy Crockett Guitars. That's what they'd call their company. But as he watched Toby work, his face so close to the blade, Francis remembered the serenity he'd felt on that morning after the Toby-less celebration, how the sun had seemed to shine only for Francis, how the grass had shaped itself to his every step, how the scent of maple had flown in through his nose and out through his mouth like a breath delivered straight from God. He put his hands on Toby's back and told him he was doing a great job. But one hard push, just one hard push, and Francis would be free again. Forever free.

### Dust of My Dust

Thomas dropped yesterday's mail in a pile beside his coffee cup on the kitchen table and worked his cheeks between his hands. Through the kitchen window the moon was so bright that he could see the fallen leaves blowing across the neighbor's driveway. He raised the window and breathed in the chill air; it was an air that brought on memories of skateboarding through the dead streets of midnight, drunk on bourbon or high on marijuana and valium, free in a way that only the screams of crickets in the dewy grass and the rapping of multi-ply wood against concrete could convey. Closing his eyes and breathing slowly the midnight air, he could hear the sounds echoing through the streets,

distant like his pulse thumping behind his ear on sleepless nights. To be young again.  
Christ, I'd kill to be young again.

Thomas would get like this some nights, rising from the bed and taking one long look down his fat nose to his wife, Mira, and her Ambien slumber, before walking through the house to whisper memories to the paintings hanging from the walls. On some nights he'd push his wife until she'd roll onto her side and then he'd pull her butt to his groin and circle his arm around her waist, he'd kiss the curve of her neck, smell his breath mingling with her sweat. In the kitchen with his eyes closed, he moved his mouth and imagined holding her as he'd done in his youth, resting his lips on the roll of fat on the back of her neck, pushing her hair out of his face with his left hand, the opium sickness nestling deep in his stomach. The nights stretched out like taffy in those days, and he'd feel his gut sweet with the dopesick and his arms would wind around the world and his face would drip into her hair. The days of surrender. A scratching sound at the front door woke him from his dream, and he took a sip from his coffee as he stepped into the hallway leading to the door.

“Go on,” he said. “Get.” He watched the door for a moment and listened to the scratching until it stopped. The raccoons, at least, knew that there was still fight in him. He imagined their small fingers, like stretched and hardened tear drops, probing the lock, the raccoons' noses pushing in and out, trying to sniff out the door's secrets. Through the kitchen's entryway, the moon's light fell on Thomas as he stood in the hallway watching the doorknob for signs of movement. And then, like an explosion, the lock turned and the door flung open, feeding Thomas the image of his son, Damon, his head shaved and a new tattoo of what looked like a roach breaking through some poorly drawn muscle

tissue on his neck. He stood there hanging onto the doorjamb for a moment, and Thomas could see behind his son a taxi pulling away from the curb. They watched each other through the dense night.

“Jesus,” Thomas said. “Is that really you?”

Thomas held his coffee to his forehead to feel the reality of the thing. His hands shook as he watched Damon holding onto the door like a dead man who refused to release his final breath. Thomas mouthed the word "youth" and Damon seemed to reach out for it as he slid off of the doorjamb and stumbled into the house. He took a few steps toward Thomas before falling to the ground and vomiting on Thomas's cotton slippers. Look at this kid. All the world opening their sloppy lips for him, and here he comes spilling back in like some homeless Christ. Thomas took a sip from his coffee and watched Damon breathe ripples into the pool of vomit beneath him.

“You're going to be all right,” Thomas said. But I'll be damned if I'm cleaning this up for you. “You'll be okay. Should I wake your mother, then? She can take you to bed. Clean you up. God, she'd be blubbering if she saw you like this. Is that what you'd like?” Thomas took a loud sip of his coffee.

“Fuck off, pop,” Damon said into his vomit. “Can't we save the agony for morning?” He coughed out a sick little laugh, his cheeks lifting upwards, his teeth shining. There was unparalleled beauty in that smile and its death laughter. And then he started retching.

“Boy, I've missed you,” Thomas said, a hitch catching in his breath. He rubbed his left eye with the heel of his palm and looked at the designs in the tears he'd left behind. “You're a good kid, Damon, and I love you.” Thomas looked down at his

slippers and turned his feet over one after the other to assess the damage. What a long time, indeed, Thomas thought. And for what? He looked at the family portrait high on the wall leading up to the second floor. He hardly looks anything like me now without his thick black hair, he thought, looking back down at Damon.

“But, you know,” Thomas said with a heavy sigh, crossing his left arm over his chest and pointing the coffee mug in his right hand at Damon, “you’ve got to knock this stuff out. Sooner or later you’ve got to kick this thing and get your stuff together. You’ve got to focus on your art, you know. That’s the kind of thing a father’s supposed to say, so I’m saying it. Don’t get all bent up about it, now. It’s how I feel and I’m not ashamed of it.”

"Oh, you're one to talk," Damon said into the soiled floorboards.

"Leave it be, Damon."

"Like Hell," he said. "You're the one who asked *me*."

"You shut your mouth, boy." Thomas lifted his foot and pushed his heel into Damon's shoulder just hard enough to give him a little shot of pain.

Before Damon had the chance to respond, Thomas turned his back on him nervously and walked into the living room, watching his feet as he did. He could see the outline of the television up against the back wall and he thought about turning it on so that Mira wouldn't wake to the sound of Damon heaving in the hallway. Thomas heard Damon retching and it made him feel as though the world was opening up within him. If I feel like this, how would Mira feel seeing him there like that? She'd drag those long nails across my face, I'm sure, saying that it's my fault, all right. He sat on the couch for a moment and leaned forward, reaching under the couch and placing his right hand on the

worn baseball that rested there. He brought it up to his nose and sniffed it in the dark living room with his eyes closed before sighing and putting it carefully back underneath the couch. Six years, he's gone. Six years. His hands up in front of his face and my fists reigning down upon him in fury. And why? A shudder ran through him then and he felt tears stinging in his eyes.

He stood up from the couch and walked to the fern beside the window. Looking over his shoulder, he could see Damon lying in the floor under the light in the hallway. He turned the leaf of the fern over in his hand and tried to see, through the darkness, the spores on the underside. But he's come back, now, he thought as he let go of the leaf. This may be your only chance.

He took a pack of cigarettes from the coffee table in the center of the living room and lit one with one of the matches from the matchbook he kept sandwiched between the plastic and the cigarette pack. He took a few drags and placed the cigarette in the ashtray sitting on the armrest of the couch as he sat back down. My son, he thought, the sculptor. "Oh, he doesn't visit much. He's a big guy in Chicago, you know. Doesn't have much time to get down here anymore. Sends us some money now and then, though. Good kid." He tried to remember how many times he'd said those very words at dinner parties and on the golf course, how lonely he had felt every time. But he is here now, he thought. And what am I doing? Sitting in the dark? After placing the pack in the front pocket of his blue cotton robe, he returned to the hallway.

"How's your sculpting going?" he asked Damon after a moment of awkward silence. "You said some snob in San Francisco paid something heavy for that one you let me seal your tooth inside, right?"



"Something heavy.' Jesus."

"That was a lot of fun, wasn't it? I thought it was anyway, but then you—" he let the sentence trail off, shaking his head and grimacing. "Well, I didn't understand then, did I? What you were really doing, that is."

Damon sneezed, spraying spit and vomit on the wall in front of him and on his father's slippers beside him. He sat up then and wiped his face with the sleeve of his long undershirt.

"This how you reason with yourself when I'm gone? Fill the air with bullshit so you can feel good about your shitty life?" Damon coughed into his sleeve.

"Not so loud," Jonny said. "You'll wake your mother."

"Fuck, Pop. Give me a glass of water or something. I'm dying over here and you want to remember a fake past with me."

Thomas watched Damon take off his shirts and put them on top of his mess in the hall. It frightened Thomas to see the self-inflicted scars on his son's torso, the long smooth lines running from shoulder to shoulder, the nonsensical brands layered one atop the other all running from his navel to his sternum. Some of the scars were fresh, and he could see clear lymph reflecting moonlight from the open wounds.

"Water, man." Damon shooed his father away. "Water."

Thomas shook his head walked into the kitchen to fill a glass with water. Thomas looked out the window again and tried to hold onto that feeling of youth he'd felt earlier by breathing in the damp night air. It was not the sweet surrender of night that he smelled, however, but the sour smell of Damon's hot sickness. Where is it gone? Thomas asked himself. *I'd be safe and warm if I was in LA. California Dreaming.* Let's give him

the chipped glass, Thomas thought. Watch him worry it with his lip. Bite it, maybe, I don't know. Ah, Jesus, Thomas said quietly to himself, putting the cup back in the cupboard with a clatter. He'll probably cut himself and stomp back out into the night. Mira would never forgive me. And why should she, anyway?

"Saw Matthew at the airport," Damon said from the hallway. "Crazy asshole. That's where I've just been, at the bar with Matthew. I didn't really plan on coming here, but—well, there wasn't anywhere else I could go."

Thomas tried to focus on the sound of the leaves rustling in the parking lot, but seeing Damon again after so long brought back the old yearning for freedom, for that time before Mira, before Damon, that lonesome euphoria on cockroach-infested couches, the music blaring from a room he never seemed able to reach. He wanted back that embrace of nothingness, when everything seemed possible even while lying wasted on the floor. He wanted back. Maybe I should ask him again, he thought. Tell him I threw my back out or something. We can get so loaded that we'll just forget it entirely, and then Mira can have her son back, and I can tell my boy how to avoid the things that I couldn't avoid. And maybe I can finally show him off at the golf course. Thomas filled a coffee mug with water then and walked into the hallway where Damon was sitting, with his eyes closed and his head tilted back against the door behind him. Seeing the bend of his neck and the jut of his Adam's apple made Damon appear vulture-like to Thomas. He's like a twig, this son of mine. He must be on something heavy to be looking this bad. His eyes are like the hollow pits of the decaying.

"What are you on, Damon?" he said.

"I'm just drunk, is all. Like I said, I ran into Matthew at the airport and convinced him to miss his flight." Damon opened his eyes for a moment and smiled at Thomas before closing them again. "He's leaving his wife. I always suspected he was gay." Damon stretched then and leaned back against the door to the closet under the stairs.

"You're not on anything, then?"

"What do you want from me, man? I told you I'm just drunk."

Thomas thumped his chest with his thumb. He sat down beside his son and handed him the cup of water. Damon downed the water before letting the cup roll onto the floor.

"Your mother doesn't listen to me anymore," Thomas said.

"She find out your whole piety game was a load of shit?"

"I try to be good, Damon. I try. God knows I try."

"When are you going to stop lying to yourself? You don't know how to be good," Damon said. "Nobody does. But you're worse than the rest because you think you know."

"Okay, enough. It's not like that anyway." But Damon was right. Thomas did think he knew how to be good, and he always tried to show others his way. So what if he strayed from the path? Every soul will succumb to wickedness eventually. The point was to always try to be good even while failing.

"I'm getting old," Thomas said. "They say you get more spiritual as you get older. I think it's true. It means that you become more accepting of things. You see the world fattening and you just stop caring. You look outside one morning and you wonder what the hell happened to all of the children, but it doesn't matter to you because you realize that it's all right, that you'll die soon. In the news you read about kids dying from playing

videogames too long..." He felt himself launching into one of his rambling diatribes and he stopped himself. "The pain is what conquers everything, though. There's the physical pain, yes, and that is enough to blot out the rest on its own. But then there's the pain in your soul. You remember things—"

"Jesus Christ, Dad. You haven't become more accepting of anything but your own shittiness. We both know what you're working up to, so just ask already. I don't want to hear about your fucking moral failings right now. I don't give a damn about your rationalization." Damon slammed his fist against the closet door behind him. "Just ask."

"I just wonder, you know, if it's making you happy, these small-time sculptures. You never were one to be happy with something like that. Laura sent me a letter saying that she hadn't seen you in a few months. That's why I ask."

"Really? You can't face yourself for even a second?" Damon tried to stand, but he was too weak.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah? Fuck off, then." He closed his eyes. His breathing sounded strained to Thomas, and he winced occasionally at some unseen pain.

"It makes me happy enough, Dad," Damon said after some time. "I don't know why we have to talk about these things that mean nothing now, but if you insist on doing it could you at least turn off the light? I don't know how much longer I can make it with that goddamned light burning like the fucking sun over us. I'm not going to lie; I'm in a lot of pain right now and you're only making it worse."

Thomas's knees popped as he stood to turn out the light. When he switched it off, he could see through the cracks in the blinds in the living room at the end of the hall the

small light of the rising sun. He took his pack of cigarettes from his pocket and tapped it into his palm before retrieving two cigarettes. He handed one to his son, who took it into both of his shaking hands. As Thomas held the match before Damon's cigarette, he couldn't help but notice how skeletal his son looked in the scarce light of the match.

"How are you doing? I mean financially." Thomas asked, lighting his cigarette.

"Can we not?"

Wicked Visions, Thomas thought. What a terrible name he's given those wonderful sculptures. He'd received one of the replicas in the mail a few weeks ago and he hated it, how the detail of the old man's face had been compromised by the miniaturization so that instead of looking weary and lost as he carried the dying child in his arms, he simply looked like an expressionless baboon. He remembered weeping when seeing the original. The sores on the child's nose and the old man's terrifyingly wrinkled hands holding the child away from his body in a way that could either suggest disgust or hopeless confusion had ruined Thomas. Sometimes Thomas dreamed of that sculpture, of the old man rocking to and fro with the child in his hands, begging God to take him instead. The sculpture was a masterpiece, and Thomas would say as much to any who would listen. But when he received the pewter cast replica of the thing, he found its lack of detail so appalling that he locked it away in the bottom drawer of his nightstand without ever giving it another glance.

"I don't think they're getting your stuff right, those people that do the replicas." He scratched the grey stubble on his face and watched as flakes of dry skin fell down into his coffee.

"I don't care."

"Well, you should," Thomas said. "You're an artist, for God's sake. If you don't make a stand then nobody will. Your work needs proper representation, Damon. Your vision is important. To people like me, your vision is important." He took a big drink of his coffee then and cleared his throat. "There are times, Damon," he stopped and looked up at the ceiling. "There are stories I cannot tell you. At times I want to just say—to just drop everything and go down. Go down to that place where you feel—that place where the world is just this thing, you know? This thing. This thing that wants breaking. I guess."

"I know what you're doing, Dad, and I'm sorry but I can't get you any."

Thomas sighed and slumped forward. "Yes. You're right about me, Damon. You're right."

They sat there in the darkness smoking without speaking for some time. Thomas watched the cherry of Damon's cigarette flicker to life as he dragged on it, but it seemed like his inhalations were short and stuttering. This is all right, Thomas thought. Sitting here in the dark, feeling my son's warmth emanating from a few feet away, it's all right.

"What would you and Mom do if I died before you did?"

Thomas really looked at him then. The idea was absurd, he thought, but the more he looked at Damon, the more the idea lost its absurdity. Of course he looked wretched, but Damon always had his ups and downs. Hadn't he? Sure he had. That was the mark of his artistry.

"I'm just messing with you, Pops," Damon said. "I'm just fucking you up a little."

But was he really? Thomas had always thought his son invincible, but now that he looked down at him struggling to pull the smoke into his lungs, he thought for the first time of his son's mortality. From illness he would probably never die. Thomas's cousin

William had lost his liver to drugs and alcohol and was still kicking thanks to his transplant. But if I were to push him out somehow from the house there's no telling what might happen. He imagined having to identify his son's body splayed out on some metal table at a morgue, his eyes so hollow with death that his absence of soul would just be screaming out. No, Thomas thought, you can't let that happen.

He remembered seeing his son lying face down in the puddle of his own vomit after stumbling into the house just a few hours ago, his head bald and the skin of his face so tight that his cheekbones seemed to be breaking through. It was as if he'd seen Damon as he truly was for the first time, this child whose heart was visibly beating in his bare chest as he leaned back against the door under the stairs. Suddenly Thomas was weeping loudly there beside Damon, completely unable to stop himself.

"Damon," he started, but the sobs grew heavier now and he found it impossible to continue. Again he tried and again he was denied. He looked over at the silhouette of his son and he thought that he could see the boy's skeletal anatomy pounding through the darkness. Damon's shaking hands seized Thomas as he reached forward and touched his son's arm. The smell of the vomit underneath Damon's soil-stained shirts was incredible now, like death himself was sitting right under Thomas's nose.

"Damon," he tried again. Where has reality been hiding all this time we've been talking? Where are the words that have been burning in my center since I pushed you out that time last? "Damon," he said. "All I wanted," he began, but the words were mangled by the snot and tears that were running down his face and he was sure that Damon didn't hear him. I'm sorry, Thomas wanted to say, looking toward his son shaking in the darkness.

“I know,” Damon seemed to be saying from behind the glow of his cigarette. Did he hear it or did he not? Thomas wondered. The sun was creeping into the living room behind him and he could see how loose Damon’s boots were on his feet. But Thomas could see nothing else of Damon with the sun as low as it was. He stared at the cigarette burning through the dark and waited for his son to speak over the sobbing.

At times, the cherry would almost stop glowing and Thomas would wonder if his son had dozed off to sleep, refusing to believe the alternative, and Thomas would lean forward a bit and grasp his son’s arm tightly. Thomas was terrified at these moments and he’d curse himself, sure that he was dreaming and that he’d wake up somewhere far from this place, Damon still lost somewhere in his art and thriving with his girlfriend Laura who would send Thomas letters stuffed with secret photos of the two, enraged at himself for being so hard on his son who was so much like Thomas.

He felt his tears salty and his breath sour, coming through in wicked spasms, and he tried to tell Damon the truth, that he was a cold son-of-a-bitch whose sole desire was reverting to that time of freedom, before Mira and Damon. But he loved this wrecked boy. He closed his eyes and asked God for the end to this horrible nightmare. When he opened his eyes he knew there was no escape. The cherry from Damon's cigarette grew so dim that it appeared to be nothing but the illusion of the sun reflecting off of a sliver of glass. And then, with a deep hollow intake of breath, it would light up again.



## Shrewd Peddler Walks Coyote Trail

### Rage

Shrewd Peddler was on stage together for the first and final time at the Chama Music Festival. Christ, we were stinking-drunk and just plain filthy from sleeping in a moldy tent and waking up too late to shower. We set up in the large fenced outdoor area of Chama's only bar and grill, Zuni Spirit. The back of Zuni Spirit opened out on a small stage decorated with cheap Navajo and Zuni pottery replicas. I watched James drag a chair across the stage roughly behind him with his right hand while he cradled his guitar like a child in his left arm. His guitar screamed feedback through one of the amps the

Chama Music Festival folks provided, and he unplugged the guitar and smiled like a boy who'd been caught burying his sister's stuffed animals in the back yard.

"Nick's pissed," he said.

"Clem told me there'd be a drumset. It's not my fault."

"I don't give a shit. Just know that we kind of fucked him." He sat down and turned the volume knob down on his guitar before plugging it into the amp again. He lit a cigarette. "What's our set list?"

"I don't know, man." He handed me his cigarette and I took a few drags before returning it. "We'll figure it out as we go, I guess."

"Come on. We need a plan or we'll look like a bunch of dicks."

"We already look like a bunch of dicks," I said. "We *are* a bunch of dicks, for God's sake."

"Yeah, you're a dick. They don't know that, though." He put his cigarette between the strings at the headstock and strummed a chord. "We can do Segue first and then Satanic Jazz and then we can unload some of our jams on them—Funk Lust, Jamnasticle."

I held my hand out in front of me and watched it shake.

"Look, man," James said. "If they don't like it then fuck 'em."

I looked out over the small crowd. A bunch of ex-hippies drank specialty brews from a local micro brewery's set-up at the rear fence, and two men in front of the stage passed a small pipe back and forth. I watched one of the men hold the pipe down by his waist until the other took it. I smelled the marijuana smoke rise up to the stage. For eleven o'clock in the morning, the place was almost packed, which excited me until I saw

the waiters set up the brunch buffet in the small room behind us. Nikola kicked his chair across the stage and cursed at me when the chair toppled.

"I don't know even why am I here," he said, his Macedonian accent thickened by his hangover and his morning drunk. He put his hand drum on the floor and pulled his long hair into a ponytail before picking up the chair. "You told me there was drum set, but look, no drum set. You fucking fucker. And why we are playing this fucking early?"

"Yeah, Nick," James said, growling like an old blues singer, "get angry."

We tuned our guitars then and insulted each other, James insisting that my d-string or b-string was sharp while I told him that both of his were flat. He was right, though. He had an ear for that kind of thing. Nikola pounded rhythms on his darbuka, making it impossible for my tuner to get frequency readings, so I finally conceded defeat and relied on James's judgment.

"Look at the old man," James said while I checked the pitch of my strings one last time.

My father, the supplier of our unbreakable high, walked through the rows of folding chairs and stopped to talk with anybody who would listen. When he made his way up to the front of the stage, the pipe smokers laughed with him and shared their marijuana. From this height I could see, for the first time, his bald spot like oblivion there at the crown of his head. His long hair seemed brittle then, like it would all come splintering off his head if the wind blew just a little harder. He looked up at us and said, "Dudes!"

I breathed in deeply and looked out at a long-haired man, probably a dentist or public accountant, in a pearl-snap shirt and pristine blue jeans standing and smiling

conspiratorially at me, his bored wife standing beside him drinking what looked like a Bloody Mary, the teenage daughter pulling at her mother's wrist, the girl's face full of boredom and affected angst. Behind them, Clem Jones, the guy who ran the festival, looked at us from the sound board. He looked defeated, his head of grey hair sinking between his shoulder blades, and he gave a pained smile and stuck his thumb up at us. I felt defeated, too, then, and wanted to throw my guitar down and scream obscenities into the microphone, to tell those people to get the hell out of there, that they'd gathered around the poster boys of failure, that we were wasting their lives, that we were all cowards, that a war was raging on the other side of the world and how dare we sit here getting drunk at noon playing music while innocent people were slaughtered daily. I wanted to tell them that I knew they were responsible for the war, that I knew they had stockpiled bottled water and powdered milk after the twin towers fell, that I knew the word "Muslim" meant to them "not human." But I didn't say those things. James leaned back in his chair and growled, and Nikola said something in Macedonian. It was time to play.

Leading up to the most destructive of my wasted years, I'd earned a reputation as one of the best drummers in my region. But drums have no melody, so I picked up a guitar and tried out my voice. What a disaster that was. Our music could have been recorded in one take and it would have all sounded like the same funk song. When I'm brave enough to listen to the recordings we made in my bedroom during those years, drunk on cheap tequila or whiskey and high on marijuana most likely tainted with meth, I immediately regret the listening. The degree of my alcoholism and the severity of my drug use over those years can be measured by the progressive destruction of my voice

and the sloppiness of the rhythms playing. I can only imagine how the poor bastards in the audience felt as I screeched songs about religion:

Jesus Christ got bored of being your Lord,  
so he chilled with me and Satan.

Mohammed's spirit was there and we all shared  
in the infinite nature of the Brahman.

"We're all the same," said the man with no name,  
and we transcended space and time,

songs about war:

That skeleton hand of the self-righteous  
will lead you to an oil stream,

about alcoholism:

Goodbye sobriety.

But that was a different era in my life, a dumber one. So I sat in the padded chair provided by the Chama folks and I strummed like a punk rocker on three or four jazzy chords while singing badly and spitting on the old hippies in front of the stage. James crawled up and down the neck of his guitar like a madman and I could see the old folks cringe when he changed modes in the middle of his solo. Nikola played professionally, as always. When Clem asked us to play the only song of ours that he liked

I'm feeling sad, baby,  
in a euphoric kind of way,

I refused and our set was over. There's nothing else to say about that but that James and Nikola retreated to the car and got bombed for the next five hours. I stole liquor from the bar behind the stage and eventually joined them.

That night a musical duo by the name of Jebediah and Ashley sang about love. Fat Jebediah could play, but Ashley clearly dominated the act. She sang like the wind at night when you hear it pushing through your window panes, and we all swooned when she faked her romance with Jebediah. I stared her down with the old lusty eye, but she never made eye contact with anybody but Jebediah. After they finished, Nick told me he thought he was in love. James made a crude joke, but I could see she'd moved him as well. The headliner, a guy named Levi Squelch, jumped up on stage after Jebediah and Ashley and sang about nothing. He looked like a fatter more punched-up Bob Dylan, singing rain and sunshine, dropping Aristotle's name here and Stalin's there simply to finish the rhymes. The more I watched him rocking back and forth up there, the more I hated him. His guitar, an absurd replica of Woody Guthrie's, with the words "This Thing Makes Love" written in fat black letters, almost drove me to violence. The hippies sang with him, though only few knew the words. James had a flask of whiskey which he shared with Nikola and me, and when we tired of Levi Squelch's stories about birds and walking through crunchy grass we returned to the car and played through our set again with the windows rolled down.

### The Absence of Love

I ran into Levi Squelch at Clem's place the next day. His jeans were torn in the left knee and he wore sunglasses and a battered cowboy hat. He smelled of bad cologne

and sweat, and he spit on me when he spoke. I didn't yet know that he'd stolen Ashley from Jebediah the previous night, that Ashley had simply told Jebediah, who I imagine whimpered his objections, she was going to see Levi Squelch and that she'd be back later, that Jebediah knew "later" meant sometime after noon, that their budding music career was absolutely over. I didn't know those things, yet I couldn't bear this man stopping me at the gate and telling me with that smirk on his face that he liked one of our songs.

"Good song," he said. "Sounds like something I wrote when I first started."

He put his hands in his pockets and waited for me to speak, but I was blazed and starving, having only eaten a few loose bits of marijuana from a poorly rolled joint, so I said nothing. I had no reason to hate this man, but I did so without remorse. He looked like a parody there, in his blue shades concealing a black eye, his hyper stylish torn jeans and his new cowboy boots. He looked like a parody and the old hippies would not shut up about him, even when they were talking with him. It may have been jealousy that led to my hatred of him. I'm not sure, but hate him I did. And as I looked at him I realized he looked a little bit like I might look when I am his age, the large nose, the self-loving smirk, his veiled eyes. It was like looking at death, or something worse than death. In that face was the absence of love.

I turned away from Levi without saying anything and made my way to Clem's house, to the promise of food. But I stopped when I reached the door, with one foot on the steps leading up to Clem's house and another on the ground. I looked through the screen door into the kitchen and saw Nikola eating a burger. Clem's wife smoked a cigarette beside Nikola. Her black hair was cut short and she wore a thin floral dress that

did nothing to hide the fact that she wasn't wearing a bra. Nikola said something to her and I heard the two of them laugh. And then she ran her fingertips down his left bicep.

I turned to see James stumbling through the wooden gate without even acknowledging Levi Squelch. He was so drunk he almost fell as he passed through the gate. And then he did fall, right before reaching the steps. He picked himself up and sat down on the step behind me, and he laughed his high-pitched country laugh.

"The old man is scared to touch a guitar," he said. "You're a mean son-of-a-bitch, Chris."

Looking across the yard I could see my father standing behind Clem, nodding his head to Clem's guitar playing. He loved the music, but anyone could tell from watching him that he couldn't wait for the song to end so that he could speak poetically and scientifically about what the rest of us had already first-ordered. He loved the music, but I knew that he was not yet *enjoying* the music, that he wouldn't enjoy it like we did until he wrecked his inhibitions enough to scribble down cryptic poems about some unspoken heartbreak and speak them over the music with his eyes closed.

"We need to get out of here," I said to James. "Nikola's going to fuck himself into a grave if we don't."

"Hyawhyawhyaw," James said.

New Mexico, I thought. We're in New Mexico and we're just as fucked as we were in Oklahoma. I watched James clench and unclench his jaw while he swayed on the porch step.

"Why'd you quit boxing?" I punched him in the shoulder and put my fists up in front of me.



"It ain't fun," he said.

"Shut up, man. You were awesome." I stood up and shuffled my feet like I'd seen him do once in a match with a kid who called himself King. King went down in the first round. People who call themselves King always go down quick like that. If you see a tag on a bridge that reads "King," you can bet it was drawn by a scrawny kid with a big mouth that's just waiting to be punched shut.

"Yeah, well let me hit you in the head a couple of times and we'll see how much you like it."

I looked into the kitchen and saw Clem's wife walk out of the room, stopping at the door to smile back at Nikola before pushing through. Nikola held his burger in front of him and watched the door through which Clem's wife had just moved as though he were expecting her to reappear and laugh at him for taking her flirtation seriously. He put the burger down on the counter and looked through the screen door at me.

"Don't do it," I said.

"Fuck you, man," he said. He leaned against the refrigerator and picked up his burger again when James and I entered, though, so I knew he was glad I'd made the decision for him.

From the yard I could hear Jebediah and Ashley starting up an acoustic jam. Somebody picked up a banjo and joined in and the music sort of moved through the house like a train through a tunnel, picking up speed and reverberating as it filled the room. James slapped a cold burger on a bun and I began feeling lower than I'd felt the entire trip. I started thinking about suicide and what would be the quickest and most painless way to die, and I imagined what looks the faces of all those old liars out there

would wear if they heard a loud pop and came running into the house to find me bleeding out on the kitchen floor.

Behold the Divine

Stoned and drunk, we pulled off the road to piss and admire the valley below. My father took a joint from his pocket and we smoked it while we watched a farmer a few hundred feet below us, at the base of the valley, inch across his field.

"That's us," I said, emboldened by my drunk. Nikola grabbed a fist-sized stone and threw it down into the valley.

"Reminds me of home," Nikola said. "Getting high on mountain with friends. Crazy shit."

My father told a story about hiking Tsaile Peak with a group of his students. One of them, a big Navajo with a face like a volleyball, wore snakeskin boots and carried a heavy electric guitar all the way to the top. Everybody gave him shit all the way up the mountain, questioning his nativeness, calling him a fool. But at the campfire the teasing stopped and he played the guitar without an amp. Everybody listened though nobody could hear over the crackling cedar in the fire. Something about the story made me decide that we needed to climb one of the mountains behind us.

"We've got to climb it," I said.

James leaned against the car and lit a cigarette. He always hugged one arm close to his chest when high, making him look feeble and old, though he was only my elder by a year. I watched his faded Jimi Hendrix shirt ripple in the wind.

"I ain't doing it," he said after he finished his cigarette. But we were already moving by then, beckoned by the mountain.

My father wheezed the entire way up the mountain, realizing for the first time, he later told me, that he was getting old. Nikola's mother called him from Macedonia and they shouted at each other over the phone while we climbed.

It wasn't actually climbing, I suppose, and it was probably more of a hill than a real mountain, like the Wichitas are really hills compared to the Rockies. But the hike was brutal in our varying states of intoxication. James called me a motherfucker repeatedly and it took everything I had to stop myself from vomiting on the way up. We followed a narrow coyote trail which circled maybe three times around the mountain from the base to the top.

"You crazy asshole," James said when we'd gotten far enough ahead that Nikola and my father couldn't hear us, "making me do this shit all the time. Your dad's going to have a heart attack, you mean bastard."

"It's good for him."

"You don't think right," he said.

"I mean the climb is good for him. He's been dying to do something like this since I was a kid."

"Well, I won't have nothing to do with it," James said before cutting through the weeds and vanishing into the deep woods where he startled an elk. We didn't see it, but we felt its thundering gait and we thought that the mountain was shaking us loose. I walked the rest of the way alone, angry with James for not understanding. The clouds blocked out the sun and under the trees it felt like night. I stopped and listened to the

sounds of the mountain, the crunching of branches under my father's and Nikola's feet, the sighing of the trees in the breeze, a wasp buzzing past my ear. It felt like life on that mountain, and I realized then that I'd never before known what life felt like. When Nikola and my father neared enough that I could hear their conversation, I ran further on ahead until I found myself at the top of the mountain.

I sat down on a fallen tree and closed my eyes. Someone came up behind me and touched my shoulder, and I feared that an Apache had found us out on his land and that he'd have us all in jail for trespassing. But it was only James.

"Feels weird up here," he said.

Nikola and my father shouted our names and we led them to our spot at the top of the mountain. My father wheezed for a few minutes and then he lit another joint. James pulled a can of warm coke from his pocket which we passed with the joint. The trees were so dense that it seemed evening rather than shortly after noon, even with the sun free of the clouds, and it smelled clean up there, like we'd missed a rain storm. An indescribable taste lingered in the air, almost sweet and metallic. We had stumbled accidentally upon something sacred, I think, and we spoke in whispers at the top of that mountain. At one point I tried raising my voice, to challenge the mountain, but it felt wrong. We all tried it, but we couldn't stop whispering. We all smoked cigarettes and we each left one unsmoked at the base of the most gnarled tree, returning to the earth what the earth had provided. Drunken madness, perhaps, but it was the only way we could find to recognize the moment as sacred.

We nodded at one another and Nikola hummed a Macedonian drinking song. Five or so miles away Jebediah and Ashley played mountain tunes in Clem's yard, and here we

were on the sacred mountain barely able to hum any louder than a whisper. I imagined Clem complaining about our disrespect and our drunkenness as though our wrangle with life were somehow tragic evidence of the general decline of the things that are and the things that are to come.

"They've lost the music," I said. "Or they've lost the thing—you know?—the thing that resonates in the middle of a good jam, the invisible thing. Like oxygen. Air. That feeling you get when you drum on the back of a guitar and keep slowing the rhythm until it gets so slow that your heart stops for a second."

"You need to stop getting high," James said, and Nikola laughed. My father smiled and looked from my face to James's and then to Nikola's.

"I mean it. Those fuckers have lost it. That Levi Squelch doesn't have a soul. You can feel it in his music. And these people love him because they don't have souls either."

"You're thinking about it too much," James said. "You'll go crazy thinking like that."

"Like a whirling dervish," my father said.

"Fuck," Nikola said. "I think I told Mom I am high."

We laughed at Nikola, and James stood and led us out of those woods at the top of the mountain. Emerging from the trees was like emerging from a dream. The world was loud again and we found ourselves standing at the lip of a sheer cliff. From this vantage point, the mountain seemed massive and terrifying. My father smiled at us and said something which seemed impressive then, something I cannot recall. He probably just said, "Dudes!" as we looked down from the mountain to the car no bigger than my thumbnail.

"I'd forgotten this," he said, then. "I'd forgotten this." He looked up and pointed to the snow-capped peak of a mountain that may have been in Colorado, and we knew what we each of us thought: some day we will climb that mountain. Some day we will step out of this haze and put hand to stone until we reach that icy peak, where music is the wind snapping at your face.

## God Will Hear You

Bikram had been driving for over an hour to the temple for Amrita's birthday. He had expected it to be in the bosom of the city, but as he followed the directions Amrita had printed out from the Internet he found himself surrounded by wild pasture land accented occasionally by houses with broken windows and greying siding, and barns with forgotten equipment rusting in overgrown fields. He stopped.

“Can't you even print out a map without messing something up?” he said. “Give it to me.”

His wife crumpled the paper and threw it at the windshield. He watched her cross her arms over her chest and turn her head away from him after she'd done it. He knew if she wasn't already crying that she would be soon; she was always crying about

something. As he watched her, he couldn't help smiling. It was wrong to laugh when she cried, he knew, but he found the display so unbearable—her little hands clutching at her biceps, the small muscle in her jaw bouncing, the spit clinging to her lips as she parted them to send out a shuddering breath—he found these things so cute that he could not help but laugh.

“Okay, I'm sorry,” he said. He reached across the dashboard and grabbed the crumpled map. After straightening the thing out, he licked his lips and looked it over, mouthing the directions and running his index finger over the highways and streets they'd driven. He'd followed them exactly as written.

“These directions say I turn right there,” he said. “It's just dirt!” No, he thought. It does not look right. To his left, a group of cows scratched their heads against the barbed-wire fence and moved around in their slow jaws the cud of the plains.

"Then turn right," Amrita said.

“Look,” he said, “I'm not driving into the middle of nowhere. People get murdered all the time by crazy rednecks on roads like that one.”

“Oh, Bikram!” she said after looking once again in his direction. “Look at the cows. So innocent.”

He ignored her and looked to his right at the deep red, packed earth road.

"It's like Nepal."

"But out here you can scream as loud as you want and nobody will hear you."

"Have you ever seen so many bunched up like that?" She unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned over his cracked rubber armrest.



“Look at them while you can,” he said, frowning over the map. “They’ll be sizzling on grills by Independence Day.”

“They’re just staring at us.” She made cow sounds and waited for them to respond. After a few seconds of that she laughed. “You think I could get out and try to feed one?”

How irritatingly simple-minded. To Amrita the world was a giant present waiting to be unwrapped. He wouldn't go so far as to call her stupid, but he wondered sometimes if she perhaps had suffered head trauma at some point in her childhood. He looked at her taunting the cows and tried not to smile, but it was no use. Touch the cows? Feed the cows? Sure, why not. Never mind that they're beasts large enough to crush you. In Nepal he'd seen it happen; a small German boy fleeing his family to chase a cowherd and his four or five cows had set them running, trampling the cowherd until he could do nothing but wheeze. He'd followed the Germans while the rest of the village gathered around the dying man, had watched the Germans try to bring an ambulance to the cowherd, speaking slow English with policemen who pretended not to understand.

“Thousands of lazy cows in Nepal and you never said a word but now suddenly you’re interested.”

“They're so fat,” she said.

“Almost fat enough to slaughter,” he said. “And then all the fat rednecks can die from heart attacks and come back with the bad karma they deserve.” He laughed and turned the map over to see if anything was written on the back.

“This is the right address?” He held the map in front of her and pointed. “You sure you didn't get the numbers mixed up? It's always something with you.”

"It's the right address."

"Just look at it, will you?" He shook the map in front of her and let it fall in her lap when she refused to take it. She could be an infuriating woman when she wanted to. How he'd managed dealing with her all these years confounded him now that they'd settled into this life in which she never seemed to listen to anything he said. In college, he thought, he'd been too busy to notice. But now that they were stuck with whole days away from work together and few friends to keep them occupied there was no denying that they were in something of a slump. Perhaps they'd never been right for each other. As if she'd read his mind, Amrita opened the car door and climbed out, letting the map fall to the gravel road. She turned down the dirt road to which the map had pointed and walked a few meters before breaking into a wild run.

"Incredible," he said. "Absolutely incredible."

He knew that she hadn't the stamina to run very long, so he waited until she slowed to a rapid walk before turning down the road after her. She bent over for a moment to catch her breath, but then she started running again when she saw Bikram following her. Her shawl lifted up and trailed in the air behind her, it was so light. He felt odd following her like this, like a predator holding off capturing its prey until the creature had lost all hope of escape. He goosed the engine just enough to pull up alongside her, and when they made eye contact she covered her face with her shawl.

"Hey Bhagavan," he said. "Stop being such a lunatic and get in the car."

When she didn't respond he pushed the clutch and revved the engine. She was immune to this threat, however; it was not the first time they'd played this game. It was clear to him that trailing her with the car was pointless; she wanted him to get out and

walk the dirt road with her, to feel that sense of nostalgia for his mother's home, a feeling he'd lost long ago, after the flat screen TV and the queen-size bed with the pillow-top mattress, the computer that booted instantly into its operating system and which only hanged when he ran benchmark tests to show off its unused computational power to friends. He would not give in to her petulance. He would not. He repeated this to himself as he pulled the car into the grass and turned off the engine. He climbed out of the car and ran up behind her.

"You're so mean to me, sometimes," she said when he caught up to her. "It's like you're an old man suddenly. Like you're my grandfather instead of my husband."

It was true. He sometimes felt exactly that way.

"Well," he said, "we're not kids anymore."

"I know. You always say that." She adjusted her shawl so that he could see her face. Her cheeks were red from crying. "But I still feel like a kid. Don't you?"

It was a question he preferred not asked. Much of the time, he thought, he felt just as he had at twenty-one. That much was true. And he feared, in fact, that he would never feel the understanding he'd always assumed came after one passed a certain age. But there was also the sense that one must mature, must behave like an older and wiser person after passing into another decade regardless of how young one felt inside. There was a social obligation, at thirty-two, to behave more maturely and sternly than at twenty-two. How odd that she, the elder by two years, she with her premature grey streak in her hair and the almost imperceptible wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, should not understand.

"Let's go back to the car," he said. "I'll follow the directions without being mean. All right?"

"Jesus Christ, Bikram," she said. She'd learned it from him, saying Jesus Christ like that, and it made him smile every time she said it. "I don't want to go anywhere with you."

After a few minutes of walking, however, she turned around and headed to the car.

The directions proved correct. Within minutes they came to a large gate with a huge ॐ written on each side. Bikram was not a spiritual man, and so he expected the sight of the temple to bore him. But its appearance, a cheap knockoff of the thousand-year-old relics in Nepal, captivated him. The brass roofs were gone, of course, supplanted by flat concrete. The stone steps had likewise been replaced. And where was the smell of sweat? The bustle of people? Where was the sticky residue of centuries emanating from the stone bricks of the temple? There was no life here; it was, to Bikram, the antithesis of a religion meant to unite people with God. Bikram thought that this temple would soon be ravished by the ebb of time—not of a thousand years, or even a hundred years, but perhaps twenty. The thought cheered him.

"Looks like a Hindu outlet mall," he said. "What do you want to bet that's black market money?"

"Stop it," she said, rolling up her window. "Somebody will hear you."

"Who's going to hear me? There's nobody here but us. We're the only Hindus in Oklahoma dumb enough to come to this place."

She pulled down the sun visor and checked her eyeliner in the mirror on the opposite side.

"God will hear you," she said.

What a place for God. He looked out from the open window to the concrete-cast statues at the base of the stairs. Three-headed Brahma sat on a plastic lotus petal on the left side of the stairs and a bored-looking four-armed Vishnu, his eyes staring off into the void and his mouth hanging idiotically slack, stood beside him. The statue of dreadlocked Shiva standing on the other side of the stairs was Bikram's favorite, though; it looked like somebody had taken the head from a Bob Marley statue and glued it to Shiva's body, which danced with one foot fixed atop what appeared to be a paint-stripped lawn gnome.

"Oh God," he said. "Look at this place. I don't even want to go inside. It's probably a sin or something to even set foot in there."

She dabbed her eyes with a tissue and pushed the sun visor back up against the car's ceiling.

"Can't you just do this one thing without complaining?" she said.

That was her favorite line in these situations. Last week she had forced him to have dinner with all the people in the world he hated using that line. Just a few days ago she'd used it to make him explain car insurance to her mother—her mother!—who can't tell the ignition from the dimmer switch. *Can't you just do this one thing without complaining?* It was her final warning, and it always worked. Ignoring it meant suffering through her feigned catatonia, watching her sit motionless in the car for hours, refusing to leave her seat no matter how much Bikram yelled.

Somebody had written the word "fags" across the parking lot in huge black spray-painted letters, he saw after leaving the car. Where did he come from, the vandal who tagged this lot? The only home with any habitation potential he'd seen for miles stood a hundred feet from the temple, and that shabby little single-wide trailer was the home of a pandit, no doubt.

"Looks like the pandit's a thug at heart," he said, but she wasn't listening.

He began feeling a bit saucy out there in the parking lot. His wife stepped out and her shawl fell, exposing her waist to him. Sure, she'd gained a dozen or so pounds since they'd first wed, but the curve of her hip had not diminished with the gain. He watched her turn and clutch at her fallen shawl and he wanted to reach out and grab her, which he did. He pulled her close then and tried to kiss her. She would have none of it, however, and she managed to worm her way out of his embrace.

"You're so unromantic," he said. She opened the door for him and pushed him into the temple when he tried again to kiss her.

The interior of the temple brought Bikram back to his days at the Microsoft office in Kathmandu, that stinking mildew closing in on him, the lights flickering overhead, the sound of dripping water in some hidden corner of the place. And there, to his right, were three cubicles with cheap plastic chairs facing the dirty white wall, each separated by a thin sheet of plywood painted sky blue. Cubicles in a temple, for God's sake! Rednecks everywhere, he thought. Rednecks everywhere. It felt good, though, being right about this place. He could see the disappointment blooming on Amrita's face as she took it in, chewing her bottom lip and lifting her naked feet to see the grime she'd picked up from

the oily concrete floor, frowning at the washroom to the left and the stained underwear drying in the giant plastic sink.

"I'm not washing my hands," he said. "Not in that." He sounded smug when he said it. He knew he did.

She was going to cry. Right here in this filthy temple entryway, she was going to cry. He could see by the way she was clutching at the shawl over her bicep that she was going to do it. He grabbed her by the shoulder to try to stop her, but she slipped away and moved to the sink. Her tears reflected the light flickering overhead as she moved.

"It's not so bad," he said, stepping beside her at the deep plastic bucket of a sink and washing his hands with hers.

"It's horrible," she said, "and you know it."

He held her hand in his under the water and pretended to scrub away a stubborn bit of dirt. The sink was clogged, he realized, and he watched it fill with murky water. He looked up into her watering eyes and tried to apologize, but he strayed for a moment too long from her to the cubicles, saw the patch of oil on the floor at the entrance to the temple, and smelled the chlorine-stinking water filling up the sink in front of him. He cupped his mouth with his hand and turned from her, but it was too late; he was seized with laughter.

"Just stop it," she said, shaking her hands dry into the sink. "You've won."

He reached out to her and said that he didn't mean to laugh, that the place whether she believed it or not disappointed him as well as it did her, that secretly he'd wanted it to be something like home. All lies, of course, but he did want the infernal laughter to cease

so he tried to convince himself they were true. She walked away from him and hesitated a moment in the the large wooden doors leading into the temple's central chamber.

"I love you," he said, urged by that odd compulsion that forced these words from him every time he'd hurt her.

"Shut your stupid mouth," she said. "Just shut up, for once." And then she left him there, drying his hands on the underpants hanging from the lip of the sink.

He'd stolen her from her father. When he was drunk enough he'd boast his theft to anyone who'd listen. And he felt like a thief, but in a good way—like Robin Hood. Sometimes he wished he could see the tall bastard's stony face the instant he'd found out that his daughter had been granted a fiancée visa and was on her way to the United States with the half-American kid from down the street. Eventually her father learned that Bikram enjoyed telling others the tale of Amrita's liberation. When her father called to scold Bikram for it, Bikram could hardly listen he found her father's rage so hilarious. That was Bikram's problem; he thought everything a joke.

Idols lined the walls of the central chamber. To Bikram's right a square pedestal held twenty or so smaller idols. Each had been carved by an unsteady hand, the kind of thing a tourist might find spread out on a blanket in Kathmandu, their faces indistinct squint-eyed blocks and their crude bodies differing only in the abstract designs painted upon their torsos; Bikram recognized not one. He lifted one of the idols and turned it over in his hands to find a Made in China sticker at the bottom.



"Do not touching." He looked up to see the pandit sitting cross-legged beside one of the legitimate statues along the back wall. The man's genitals peeked out from the opening of his dhoti. "You can worship from back, yes?"

Bikram dropped the idol and found Amrita running her index finger along the lines left by the casting machine on the elephant trunk of the Ganesha statue. She held up her finger to show Bikram the dust.

"Do not touching, please," the pandit said. "Statue are very expensive." He watched them for a moment and then he picked up a book and chanted mantras with his eyes half-closed.

"You'd better not look up at Vishnu when you kneel to pray."

"He'll hear you, Bikram. Stop."

"If I wanted to see that much penis I'd rent a porno," he said.

"Can't you just do this one thing without complaining? Just this once?"

That killed him, it really did.

"Just this once," he said. "Just this once. Forever this once."

It was happening; she was preparing to go catatonic. He could see it in the way her eyes fixed on an abstract space between the two of them, in the general slouch she adopted, her mouth opening slightly, her arms flopping down to her sides. She crumpled to the floor with exaggerated force. It was graceful, honestly, the way she let herself fall to the floor, slapping the palms of her hands against the concrete to distract the eye from the gentle touch of the back of her head to the shawl she'd somehow managed to bunch up into a makeshift pillow. She'd intentionally hiked up the skirt of her sari so that her panties were visible, and he did his best to adjust her legs to prevent the pandit from

seeing. She resisted him, of course, but he had learned that her hatred of being tickled diminished that resistance. One finger in the bend of her knee was often all it took.

It felt like Oklahoma in there, all open and hollow. He wouldn't admit it to Amrita, but he sort of liked this part of the temple. The way the pandit's voice echoed off the concrete floor, all throaty and full of something like authority, reminded Bikram of college. He recalled the parties that almost always ended with some kid in baggie jeans getting punched; recalled the hours smoking bowls in front of the television while Amrita plugged her ears with cotton and spread her notebooks and pens out on the bed for her infamous study sessions. He tried remembering classes, but could only summon watching Amrita scrawl notes in her fat binder at the front of the room during Sanskrit I.

"I wish you wouldn't do this." He sat down cross-legged beside her and watched the pandit rock with his prayers. "You remember Dr. Abbhishek? 'Hé Rama. Hé Ramau. 'Hé Ramai.' Did he ever teach us anything else?"

"Sir." The pandit was standing now, pointing the book in his right hand at Amrita. "You are needing help?"

"It's nothing," he said. "We just need to give her time."

"I cannot call ambulance from here." The pandit walked to Bikram and stooped down beside Amrita. Bikram could see his hairy scrotum peeking out as he squatted. "We are outside limits of the city."

This is what she wanted, to embarrass him in front of this disgusting pandit. She wanted to watch him writhe there, explaining his wife's strangeness to this supposed holy man, trying to ignore the man's genitalia. She would taunt him about it later, mostly by

saying that she, for one, didn't notice the pandit's nudity—her way of suggesting a sexual bond between the two men.

"What's with this place?" Bikram said. "Why's it look so filthy in the entryway?"

He regretted asking it, knowing, as he asked, what would follow. The sneaky bastard recited his sales pitch then, his balls drooping closer to the floor as he told Bikram about the temple's constant struggle with a local band of midnight marauders who smashed up the larger idols and stole whatever they could carry. He was grateful, then, for Amrita's feigned catatonia; had she been awake she'd have written the pervert a check right then.

Bikram could leave her there, he realized suddenly. He could simply take the car and disappear, for good. There was another woman, his coworker Jamie, who would fly with him if he asked her. Hadn't she hinted as much, anyway, when she'd grabbed his hand in the office and spun the wedding band on his finger? There's a lot of room to get lost, she'd said. He imagined what Jamie would do in the temple. He saw her standing in front of the gods and kneeling—but that wasn't Jamie. He shook his head and imagined her again standing in the doorway with a cigarette in her mouth, waiting for him to finish up with his wife.

Could he do it? Could he leave her there with the pandit? Could he hand her father the victory he so craved? Of course not. Jamie was simply a flight of fancy. He loved this woman lying motionless before him. He loved the swell of her breast as she reluctantly pulled oxygen into her lungs. He loved the thick scar on her cheek from where her grandfather once struck her with the handle of a sickle.

"Just shut up," he said to the pandit, "and help me carry her to the car."

The pandit made a fist with his left hand, but it was clear he was more shocked than outraged. Probably the first time he'd ever heard another man treat him like a human being, Bikram thought.

"I can see," the pandit said, touching Amrita's forehead, "she is more religious than you."

They had to lay her across the back seat, so stubborn was she in asserting her catatonia. Bikram handed the pandit a twenty dollar bill and shooed him away, as though the man were a beggar. It should not have surprised Bikram when the pandit spit on his foot, but he stood dumbfounded, his hands reaching out dumbly to the man, who walked away from the car and into the temple.

"Unbelievable," Bikram said. "Absolutely unbelievable."

He heard his wife stirring in the back seat.

"He could have at least returned the twenty." He heard the car door open and close. "You're awake now? No more funny stuff?"

"I'm more religious than you," she said, walking past him and toward the temple. The sun was burning overhead and he could smell the warm yeasty smell of sweat in her wake.

Bikram feigned a smile but he couldn't hide that the priest's remark had upset him. And what did that mean, anyway, to be more religious than another? It was a game the stupid son-of-a-bitch probably played with all the men who entered the temple, a ploy to get a few extra dollar bills. He looked up at the frayed triangular flags flapping from the top of the temple and then he followed Amrita to the temple's steps.

"I hate birthdays," she said when he approached. "Don't you?"

Every year, the same thing. What did she want from him? Last year he threw her a party and she accused him of having an affair, right there in the living room in front of everybody after he sang happy birthday to her. And the year before that she cried the entire day without telling him until they'd gotten into bed that she felt underappreciated by him. So maybe he'd forgotten her birthday that year. Was that any reason for her to make him suffer the entire day without explaining a thing until it was time to sleep? He'd not slept a wink that night, he felt so ashamed.

He wanted to say something but there was nothing to say. She led him around the temple. As they came to the rear, Bikram looked out at the woods a short distance off and felt suddenly very tired.

"Do you remember that time we went hiking? On our way to Pokhara? Remember that filthy stream?"

She did.

"I remember pulling an apple from that tree for you and watching you chase it downstream when it fell from my hands," Bikram said. "Do you remember?"

He could see them there, the sun filtering through the trees behind them, the plastic sacks lining the banks of the stream, the sickly sweet smell of rotten fruit. The last thing he'd wanted was for either of them to have a single drop of that putrid stream sully them, yet there she went plunging into it, the water rising nearly to her knees.

"And Fishtail Mountain off in the distance. And then how terrified we both were when the hang-glider zoomed overhead before disappearing behind the trees." He put his hand to his brow and noticed he was sweating.

“That was a good time.”

He looked toward the trees then and tried to imagine Fishtail Mountain on the horizon. He could see in his periphery that she was looking with him.

“It feels like only a dream now,” Bikram said.

She sat down with him and rested her head on his shoulder. Maybe it was time to tell her that he often daydreamed about fucking his co-worker, Jamie. Would it matter? he wondered. Would it really make a difference?

“I'm sorry I said you have a stupid mouth earlier,” she said.

He looked down at her. Her upper lip was perspiring under the hot sun. She closed her eyes and put her arms around him.

“It's all right. Let's go.” He stood then and brushed the grass from the seat of his pants. She stayed seated, looking up at him.

“I didn't mean it,” she said. “It's just that when you say it like that when I'm mad at you it's like you're just saying it. Do you know what I mean? It's like you don't even know what you're saying.”

“I know.”

Bikram watched her face bunch up like a raisin as she brought her fist to her lips, trying to bite back the tears that he could see were already slipping out. She stood then and turned around to see the grass clinging to the seat of her sari's skirt. Bikram brushed it off for her and they continued walking around the temple.

She brought the shawl over her head, to hide her face from him. It was almost noon and he could feel the heat coming off the temple's bricks. He reached out and touched them, quickly withdrawing his hand afterward. He looked over to Amrita to see

if she saw how hot the bricks had been, but she wasn't looking at him. He could tell by the way she was looking down at her feet that she didn't really want to let the conversation get away as it had and this annoyed him.

"Do you even know what love is?" she said.

The weeping woman, again. Christ, it was always like they were players in a Hindi serial. He wanted a break from this. Just this once he wanted a break. He looked out across the parking lot to the trailer that he assumed belonged to one of the pandits.

"I hate that question," he said, grabbing her shawl and tearing it away from her face. "Don't you realize that people have been trying to define love for centuries? Nobody knows what love is! Nobody!"

"That's not what I mean." She threw her shawl down on the ground and ran to the car.

He watched her climb in and slam the door behind her. She could go nowhere, though, because he had the keys. He looked down at the shawl clutched in his left hand, watched it blow in the wind. It was nice standing alone out there, facing the tree line with the sequins sewn into her shawl reflecting the sun up at him. He could stand there all day, he thought. There were yogis who would stand in one position for years, sustaining themselves on some invisible energy, they said. He could do that here. He could simply stand here until the world ended. Yes, he could be happy with that.

He walked to the car and turned over the engine. He could see that Amrita was weeping, but he ignored her. She said something to him, something meant to hurt him. He tried to listen to her, but he could not concentrate; as he drove over the gravel leading

away from the temple, there was a question forming within him that he'd never known before, and he thought, "What is it? What is it?" But it would not reveal itself.



## Elohim

ויהי כאשר התעו אתי אלהים מבית אבי ואמר לה זה חסדך אשר  
תעשי עמדי אל כל המקום אשר נבוא שמה אמרי לי אחי הוא:

–Genesis 20:13

It was my last year in high school and I drank as though God commanded it while Mom worked overnight at the 7-11 on First Street, where the addicts and whores converged from the time her shift started until she left. I walked most nights down dead midnight streets that ended in cul-de-sacs or else empty fields with thistles and what I thought was canola reaching occasionally up to my knees, and I sang with the dogs howling after me. By all accounts I had gone mad that summer, before classes had even begun; my father had died earlier in the year after drinking a can of soda too quickly (a

freak case of soda pop asphyxiation) and with his death came the revelation that my mother had been fucking nearly all of my friends during her work shift. Perhaps because of my mother's break room blowjobs I loathed sleep in those days, the dreams that followed: dreams of cocks and cunts and cum blooming on bed sheets. Everything was pornography to me then, and I wanted an escape. So I walked the lonely streets. So I drank. So I stumbled on, always searching—for what, I'm not sure.

I searched bookstores during the day, while my mother slept and my friends mummified Shakespeare in Senior English. My favorite bookstore was called, simply, Used Books, the only business open in the middle of a defunct strip mall. A fat woman with a hairy chin ran the place, though saying she ran anything is a gross exaggeration; dusty books loitered on the shelves like morphine junkies attempting orgy, and the books customers had taken from the shelves and placed on the coffee table in the middle of the reading room remained there indefinitely or until I stole them. I never learned her name because she never spoke a word to me or any other customer who entered the store. Instead, she would hunch over her desk and lean into her book as if the passage she had begun reading the moment anyone neared contained the answers to whatever questions haunted her. When one wanted to buy a book from her, she'd take whatever amount handed her and point to a wadded ball of plastic sacks by the door before returning to her book. Every book assaulted you with the scent of salami once opened, which led me to believe that not a page in the store had been unturned by that massive woman. What a mind she must have had. How I envied her!

When I first realized her potential genius I resolved to one day engage her in an argument the likes of which she could not resist. For weeks I read the most impossible

books I could find, books that assumed the reader knew by heart arguments made years prior by writers whose names I could not begin to pronounce, understanding no more than a few passages as I forced myself from cover to cover. Never in my life have I felt so absolutely deficient. Often, as my eyes moved across the pages of those impenetrable books, I contemplated suicide; retardation, I thought then, was a waste of human resources. I switched to fiction for no other reason than self-preservation. After reading the books whose titles I refuse to this day to repeat for fear that my ignorance of their subject matter may indeed reveal me just as mentally deficient as I'd suspected, fiction seemed child's play. Narrative was my break from the *real* stuff. Sometimes I felt so guilty for taking such long breaks from the impossible philosophy texts that I would weep, so certain was I of my retardation, which made me read that much more of the fiction that pained me. It wasn't until I'd come across "Hunters in the Snow" by Tobias Wolff absolutely covered in the woman's greasy thumbprints that I recognized the complexity of fiction. The pages that showed the most wear were those in which Tub admits to Frank that he'd lied about his glandular problem and reveals the disgusting extent of his gluttony. This was it, I thought, the perfect argument. A hundred times I must have read that story before deciding I was ready.

I entered the store with the book in my pants and moved through the aisles of stinking and dusty shelves. When I was sure she could not spy me I unzipped my fly and retrieved the book. Ah, I said loudly enough for her to hear, I've been looking everywhere for this. As I approached the counter I was overcome by such an intense heat that I thought for a moment I might pass out. By the time I put the book on the counter I was

drenched with sweat. She put her hand out for the money without even looking at the book.

"This is my favorite book," I said. My voice came out little more than a whisper and she smiled at the page she was reading. "There's one story in this book that I simply can't get enough of." After a moment of silence I mentioned the title and she stiffened. Her eyes stopped their passage across the page then and I knew I had chosen wisely. "Oh good," I said, this time more forcefully. "You know it." I leaned against the counter and pulled at my chin. "Don't you find it interesting that Kenny, the man we initially hate, appears almost saint-like by the end, killing the old man's dog, we learn, so as to spare him the pain. He's presented as an emotionless sociopath at first, but by the end, after we see his sacrifice—I mean killing the dog is a sacrifice because we can read into the act that he puts on about hating first the post, then the tree, and finally the dog a sort of mask for the pain he feels when he finally does kill the dog. He works himself up to it, I mean. He is the tragic character: so good; so misunderstood; whereas Tub, the wronged protagonist, turns out to be among the vilest characters in any of the stories in the collection."

How revoltingly sexual, I'd wanted to say, that scene in which Tub sucks down the dripping pancakes. But my words dried up in my mouth then because I realized as soon as I said the thing about Tub's being so vile that I was wrong about the woman. She hadn't dissected the story at all. The reason Tub's pages of confession were so stained lie in the grotesque physical presence of the woman before me: to him she related wholly. Tub was the literary expression of her inmost soul. I could see her reading behind the counter with the lights off, wiping tears from her face as Frank allows Tub his gluttony; I could see her turning back to read it over again and again, desiring that a friend do for her

what Frank does for Tub. It was clear to me then that her hunger for books was merely an extension of her gluttony. How foolish I'd been not to consider that. Instead of engaging her in intellectual discussion, I had enraged her. Never before has a woman given me a look so full of loathing as did she. I thought for a moment that she might lift the book and strike me. Feebly I apologized, handing her a wadded ten dollar bill, and ran from the shop. I never doubted her genius, however, and I continued hoping that one day I might more tactfully engage her.

The encounter established within me a deep faith in the power of books to define a person. I believed that we are each born with indefatigably pulsing questions, questions indefatigably pulsing like a disease, and that the answers lie only in the works of fiction penned by masters. Because of this belief I respected the shopkeeper and her constant quest. She was, like me, a searcher. To me she had given intellectual birth. My admiration for the woman was so great that I more than once confused it for love: virgin mother replaced whore mother. One might think that my embarrassment would keep me away from Used Books, but nothing could be further from the truth; I felt now instead that we'd bonded through the accidental insult; that we'd come to know each other most intimately, and this without ever the real exchange of words. I continued to see Used Books and Used Books continued to see me. I stole her inventory with such passion that by the end of the week I could stack the books nearly to the ceiling.

And then I met *him*. The day burned up from the parking lot concrete outside of Used Books where I was crouching beside my car, reaching under my driver's seat for a pill I'd dropped. And then he was there, standing behind me like a shadow, pointing at the pill on my floor mat and saying, "That what you looking for?" before I grabbed it and

chewed it up right in front of him. I said thanks or I coughed and turned to look at him, at his sideways ball cap and his crooked Superman tattoo reaching up from his collar to his jaw line, and he scratched his forearm. I knew right away he was an addict; I saw it in the way his pointed chin trembled right before he spoke; the way his nostrils flared while he worked the muscles in his jaw; the way he massaged his throat to relieve some imaginary tension.

"Get a ride to my apartment?" His voice seemed to rattle in his throat. He had that smile you sometimes see on the faces of beggars when you strike up a conversation after giving them your unopened Taco Mayo burrito and the last of your pack of cigarettes; it was the smile of God—the smile of a liar. He wanted either to rob me or befriend me, and I knew the former was more likely. But what did I care? If I'd learned anything from my blunder with my virgin mother was it not that we are all of us forever alternating between saintliness and villainy? Who was I to judge!

I looked across the parking lot to Used Books and caught the fat woman, soul of my soul, watching us from her post behind the counter, stroking the fuzz on her chin with the knuckle on her index finger and holding an open book with her forearm against the junction of her breasts and stomach. She was doing something odd with her opposite hand, slapping at the air as though she were unsure of the reality presented before her. It wasn't until I looked back at the addict that I realized she was waving to him, and he to her.

"You know each other?" I asked. It shames me to admit that I seethed with jealousy.

"No way," he said, smiling at her in a way that suggested absolute intellectual equality.

His name was Terry. I'm a hippie, he said after he climbed in the passenger's seat, and then he removed his ball cap and laughed. He looked like a worm without the hat, his pale shaved head reaching up to a soft point. Aside from the soft crown of his head, there was nothing delicate about his features: the eyes were bunched up like berries perched unsteadily atop a crooked twig of a nose, which appeared to have been smashed into the narrow space above his cracked lips, the bottom of which jutted out so far that the top lip seemed almost nonexistent. I tried hard not to stare but it was impossible; never before had I seen a man so hideous. I was so troubled by the shape of his head and the state of his face that I wished he'd put the ball cap back for no other reason than to soften his looks, but it was clear from the way he kept running his fingers over his razor burned scalp that he was happy to have it off.

"Any lotion?" he asked, leaning close to me so that he could see his head in the rearview mirror.

I tried to tell him no, but just as I opened my mouth I was stricken by the smell of his aftershave, like vomit from a stomach loaded only with cheap whiskey, and I gagged. When he heard me gag he readjusted the rearview mirror so that I could see the ceiling of the car and then he leaned as far away from me as he could, as if to apologize for his wretchedness. I feared then that I'd judged him as unjustly as I'd done Tub and by extension my plump and blameless intellectual creator. Who am I to judge! I railed in my

mind. A greater man would see the beauty in Terry despite his repulsiveness. I willed myself to look upon him with love.

He smoked my cigarettes on the way to his apartment and tried on a pair of old skate shoes I'd left in the back seat. I'd landed my first kick-flip with those shoes, dropped in on my first half-pipe; a child could part more easily with his favorite stuffed toy than could I with those shoes. Watching Terry stuff his monstrous feet into them tore at my heart so fiercely that I contemplated retrieving my socket wrench from underneath my seat and bashing in his face with it. How outrageous, my desire for violence. Strength lays in one's ability to perceive beauty and do good, I reasoned with myself. Once he managed to fit his feet into the shoes and lace them up he seemed more content than I'd ever seen a man, and when I realized that he would not remove them I told him he could keep them. How rewarding, that simple act of selflessness. I felt that I'd been freed. I felt lifted. I felt good. Through the rest of the drive he smiled—at his new shoes, at the way my dashboard sounded under his drumming fingers, at National Public Radio, which was the only station I could bear hearing, so pornographic had the pop stations become.

At one point he reached into his pants and I feared that he would either pull out a gun or his penis—I'm not sure which I had feared more—but he only retrieved a paper towel damp with his sweat. He unrolled it to show me a thumb-sized bud of marijuana. It was a special kind of bud, Terry said, illustrating how it glistened with resin and telling me to be quiet so that I could hear the paper towel peeling away from it. He kept on about the thing, explaining hydroponics and how isolating the female from the male increases THC production. I didn't listen to much of what he said, though, because the way he vocalized his words almost exclusively through his nose irritated me; the more he spoke,



the more I felt that I'd something stuck in my throat. It took everything I had to stop myself from coughing. But the little bud intrigued me, and I kept glancing over at it while he spoke. That is us, I thought, stewing away in genital sweat, waiting to be consumed by fire.

When we arrived at his apartment complex he handed me the bud and thanked me for the shoes and the ride before hurrying out of my car and shooting me a peace sign. He leaned all of his weight against his apartment door and then turned the door knob, throwing himself inside. The complex looked like an old motel, with fat window units buzzing in the lone windows of each apartment, a small puddle of water rippling underneath each unit. A tattooed couple stared down at me from the second floor, both of them shirtless excepting the woman's sports bra. I watched them watching me for a while and then I drove home where I smoked the marijuana and read the same paragraph of a Borges short story until I fell asleep.

I ran into him the next day outside of Used Books. He was smoking cigarettes on the bench by the door, and he squinted when he saw me. The expression only made him look even more hideous than he had the day before. Looking down at my favorite shoes strangling his feet now infuriated me. How could I have been so stupid to throw away something so dear to me? It wasn't kindness that saw me so readily relieve myself of my prized shoes, but his aggression; he'd been menacing, the way he shoved them on his feet right before me without even asking for permission. A brute! That's what he was. A hideous God-forsaken brute. I watched him with such hatred as I neared the entrance to

Used Books. By the time I reached the door it was clear that he wasn't sure if he recognized me or not, so I tried to walk past him and into the bookstore.

"Maebry," he said, clapping his hands and laughing as I neared. When I didn't say anything he shook his head and pulled his hat down over his eyes. He apologized, saying he thought that I was somebody else. He chewed on his bottom lip nervously and I saw that he was missing one of his front teeth, which was incredible since he'd just yesterday beamed a full set idiotically at me throughout the entire ride to his apartment. And how putrid his smell! Like he'd soiled himself and attempted to cover the stench by drenching himself in his awful aftershave. How I wanted to pass him then! My hand was on the sticky metal door handle; with a shrug and a strong pull I could have moved through that door and continued my search. What wrong is there in leaving such a man as he behind? Surely, there was none. So easily could I have ended it by simply allowing him to believe he'd mistaken me for another. And what should stop me but my own sense of stupid compassion. We are all of us saints, I thought, and rubbish. Be now a saint: lift the rubbish.

I held onto the handle of the door and watched his hands shake in his lap. A loose page of a pornographic magazine blew up against Used Books's window and he turned and looked apathetically at the full-page spread of a fat man penetrating a fake-breasted woman. Perhaps I was projecting my own issues onto him, but he seemed then just as fed up as I with the inescapable barrage of pornography, his lips pursed so that, with his great underbite, he looked as though he were trying to cannibalize his nose. I assumed that such a facial contortion could only be an expression of disgust. It never occurred to me that I could have been wrong. Instead I saw something of a brother, albeit a much uglier

brother; we were both isolates, searching for—well, still I do not know. But searching nonetheless. Running in search. Fleeing, even.

I'll admit that I felt ill when the parallel struck me, though I no doubt attributed my nausea to his stench. I actually swooned. And how evil I felt for my irrepressible revulsion. It was clear to me then that I loathed him without reservation. Oh! What guilt consumed me at this revelation! How absolute my atrociousness! What manner of man hates another simply for his wretched existence? I did! *I do!* The guilt. The guilt! Damn the guilt! It was the guilt made me abandon my hope of escape and sit down on the bench beside him.

"I never told you my name," I said. When he still seemed not to trust his memory I reminded him that I'd given him a ride.

"Oh yeah," he said, smiling again, showing off his missing tooth. "Good bud?"

I told him it was, indeed, good bud, and we looked at each other silently for what seemed like an eternity. Finally he spoke.

"Your name?"

"Right," and just as I was going to tell him my name I remembered the paragraph of the short story I'd tried reading the night prior, and the name in that paragraph, which I'd mouthed each time I reread it until I felt I'd perfected the pronunciation, jumped from my lips: "Mir Bahadur Ali."

"Oh," he said, taking off his hat and scratching the razor bumps.

"My mother's from Arabia. Well, I mean Saudi Arabia." I couldn't believe the garbage I spoke. "You might think we're all brown but most Saudis are white. Like you."

"You can speak Arabic?"

"Sure," I said. "I'm fluent in five languages." I was out of control, but the lies felt good. It was like God was speaking directly through me. With just a few words I'd established myself as that elusive *somebody*. I could see it in the way Terry looked at me after I'd said I could speak five languages. He envied me. He respected me. I was, to him, a person worth knowing. Why his admiration should matter, I'll never understand. But it did.

"Speak some," he said.

I cleared my throat and obliged. Like the lies the words came flowing out of me.

"That was beautiful." Perhaps they were, in fact, the words of God. "Like a song." And just when I thought the man could not possibly appear more foolish, he began to weep. He did it quietly at first, swiping at his eyes and hiding his face with his cap, but before long he had given up any hope of hiding his emotion and he was bawling so loudly that the fat woman, my bosom's blaze, so sacred her heart, actually stood from her chair behind the counter. How dreadful, that look of motherly affection. What loathing I felt for Terry, then!

"Why him?" I said.

Terry choked on his tears and tried to confess something. He leaned close, sputtering nonsense, but I could make nothing out but the words *I did it*, and those only because they seemed to be his mantra. I'd have none of it, though, so repulsed was I by his stench compounded now by his foul breath.

"Jesus, man."

Terry nodded grimacing into the wind. Maybe he'd crashed face-first to his apartment floor yesterday when he'd thrown himself inside. That would explain the

missing tooth. If he did it daily it may explain his battered nose. What nonsense! Here he was crying babe-like in front of me, and all I could think of was the Goddamn gaping hole in his mouth. There my soul's counterpoint stood not twenty feet from us on the opposite side of the glass, her eyes wet and her hand to her bovine mouth, and all I could do was despise this wretch. That's when it hit me: Terry was my salvation.

Of course! Just as easily as I'd made him weep I could certainly make him smile. She would see me as his savior—a real gentleman, a man for whom the self is nothing but a vehicle whose purpose is the distribution of happiness to the meek. If she saw that I could hold within my heart love for one as hideous and as miserable as Terry then surely she'd learn to trust me. I could be her Frank. I could be her Frank! Yes, the prospect initially disgusted me, but the reward—pure and innocent love—outweighed the sacrifice.

I peered beyond the gross curtain and saw Terry for the first time as a man who needed me as a friend just as I needed him as a tool to pry open that woman's chest so that I may cup her pulsing heart. I began to feel that the Lord does indeed work in mysterious ways and that everything—Dad's death, Mom's whoredom, my drinking and occasional drug binging—had led me to this saintly duty. I was the mouthpiece for The Voice; I was, in fact, a good person; I was the Chosen One. Don't worry, I told him. Everything will be fine.

Despite Terry's hygienic challenges, the apartment was cleaner than any I'd before known. Of course, there was little in the apartment that needed cleaning: nothing stood in the living room but a small couch; the bedrooms housed no furniture whatsoever—Terry and his roommate slept in sleeping bags and left their laundry folded neatly on the floors

of their respective closets; and the kitchen utensils consisted of exactly two of everything: two drinking glasses, two spoons, two plates, two bowls, and so on. Never before had poverty seemed so tidy. It was something to behold.

In the kitchen Terry's roommate heated some soup on the stove and asked what we were doing there. I am not ashamed to say that he was the most beautiful human being I've ever seen. He was like carved and polished exotic wood—there's almost no other way to explain his beauty. To this day I believe that even the most homophobic white supremacist would instantly be transfixed by that man's beauty. His black skin seemed poured onto the perfectly symmetrical bone. When he moved any muscle in his face his skin reflected the light like velvet. He was physically perfect: evolutionarily two steps ahead of the rest of us.

"Bahadur?" He asked when Terry told him my name. "Never heard that one before."

He stirred the soup and drummed on the stove with his free hand. After a while of that, it became clear to me that he was waiting for me to ask for his name, so I did.

"Names are for Christians," he shouted, whacking the soup pot with his wooden spoon. "Moors don't have names. We have titles. You might know that if you weren't always colorizing your world." Was this nonsense? It did not matter to me. His fervor roused me; there was something charming about the way he spoke so softly and calmly a speech he'd obviously given to anybody who asked for his name. I felt good listening to him attack me. I could feel myself smiling stupidly with Terry.

"Oh you think that's funny, huh? What do you know about yourself? You think you're American?" I was compelled to shrug. "Well you are not. *American* refers to a land mass. Where are your naturalization documents? Huh?"

"He likes the sound of his voice," Terry said walking into the kitchen. He looked into the soup pot and pulled on his lower lip. "Don't we have nothing else to eat?"

Kamil threw the spoon at Terry, striking him in the chest.

"Bitch, you got the nerve to bring this settler into my house who commands that I tell him my name? You're a royal ignoramus, you know that? Inspector Deek over here's shaking you down and you don't have half a mind to see it. Go ahead, Deek the Geek! Shake him down. Throw this errorist motherfucker in jail."

"He's not a cop." Terry rubbed the area where the spoon had struck him.

"Sir," Kamil said, pushing Terry away with his left hand, "if this is police business you must present your warrant and you must identify yourself as dictated by United States law. Otherwise you can get the fuck out. And yes, I just told you to fuck off. Knowledge of the law is a beautiful thing. Did you know that I can call you a fucking pig if I want to? I can tell you that you're a fascist motherfucker who might get shot by a more ill-minded person if you reach into your pocket and pull out a gun, too. I'm not threatening you. I'm unarmed. I don't carry a gun, not because I don't believe in my second amendment rights, but because I'm a convicted felon on account of your fascist prick brothers weighed my pipe *with my weed*. Twelve ounces, my ass! Never mind that I never leave the house when I smoke or that I only do it once a week. You can't use that as evidence against me, by the way, because you've entered my home illegally. Never mind that *I am a responsible marijuana smoker*. Nah. Fuck that. I'm a black male so I must be

a felon. Got to have some way to maintain legal slave labor." He stared at me. "You deaf, piggy?"

"You see what PCP does to the brain?"

"If you leave then I'll let it go, but if not then I'm going to press charges. I'll say it again: if you're a cop then you must present a warrant and identify yourself or leave my house. Five seconds." I would have left then, but I was so terrified that I could not move. I was stuck. I watched his lips move and feared that at any moment my bladder would release its contents. What power this man held over me. I felt as though God himself were pinning me down through his voice. He counted to five and I held my ground against my will. But he said no more of his philosophy after reaching five.

"There," Terry said. "It's done."

As soon as he had begun his rant he had ended it. How absolute this man's control of his world. After a minute or so of waiting for Kamil to do something—anything—he whistled a short melody and turned off the stove.

We sat cross-legged on Kamil's bedroom floor and ate the soup—Kamil and I from the bowls and Terry from a small coffee cup which he refilled thrice before we finished one serving. The soup tasted of chlorine from the tap, it was so watered down; but I finished it without complaint and I even said that it was delicious every time Terry stood to refill his coffee cup. They knew it was anything but, and Terry responded each time by saying, "All I know is I'm starving."

"Wonder why," Kamil said.

Terry looked from his coffee cup to Kamil and then to me. "Burned my damn tongue," he said. "You always make it too hot."



"You know this dude feels sorry for you, right? You look sick, Terry. Smell like shit." Kamil put his bowl on the carpet, letting some of it spill over the edge. "I can barely eat this sitting next to you."

Terry hunched his shoulders and said something into his cup that I couldn't hear.

"What? Speak up, man." When Terry didn't speak, Kamil said: "I swear, it's like you never progressed past fifth grade." He laughed. "A fucking child in an ugly ass grown man's body. God's one sick son of a bitch."

"I said it's the soup smells!" At this Kamil roared with laughter, stopping only when the people next door banged on the wall.

"You're a regular clown, you know that?" He slapped my arm. "Don't you want to laugh when you look at this motherfucker's face? When we were put together at first by NarCom I used to get scared when he'd walk through the door. Sometimes I thought I was having a nightmare."

"What's NarCom?" I said.

Kamil looked hard at me then, studying my face. "We're addicts," he said. "And before you give me any damn pity, I'm not ashamed. I'm a better person because of it. I know more about my existence than any motherfucker who's never experienced what I have." He stopped then and made a fist with his right hand.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Narcotic Command's a recovery program. I'm this dumbshit's big. I've been sober for five years."

"Congratulations," I said, not sure how to respond.

"It's not even hard when you have to look at this motherfucker every day. Just one picture of him could keep the whole world clean." He cleared his throat and ate some of his soup. "How long have you been sober, Terry? Four hours?"

"What a friend, this guy," Terry said.

"You're right. A real friend would be on the phone with Thompson right now. You're a threat to yourself, Terry. I could get you back in there in just a few minutes."

Kamil looked at his bowl, and I at Kamil. I could not stop myself; his beauty demanded an audience and I willingly obliged. The longer I watched him the more convinced I was that he was the earthly embodiment of the divine. If anything could be greater than the divine, in fact, it was Kamil. Intoxicated—I was intoxicated by his indescribable perfection. Beloved, Kamil, the longer I watched. How does one relate the divine? Kamil—that's how. One must be witness; must first-order the music vibrating from the very depths of his infinite soul; must crescendo tympanic surge of plutonium rocket burst to irradiate loins—

"Speak some Arabic," Terry said.

So eager was I to please Kamil that I forgot entirely my inability to speak Arabic. He looked up finally from his bowl and repeated Terry's command. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I exhaled. I inhaled. And then I spoke my fictitious language, shouted it, even, as God compelled me. Love, I urged through the guttural nonsense. Love!

"Moves you, don't it?" Terry put his coffee cup on the floor and showed me the gap in his teeth. "What'd he say, Kamil?"

"Surah sixteen," Kamil said. "God gives honey to those who ask harvest from His bees. Something like that."

The same heat that had struck me when I'd engaged my massive creator struck me now. To think that I could deceive him, of all people! Did my stupidity have no bounds? And yet he'd not smirked nor shook his head while I'd spoken. He'd given no sign whatsoever that he knew I was spewing nonsense. In fact, he had nodded as I created the words; had closed his eyes at one point and put his hands together as though in prayer. I realized then: He is. The word of God. How mighty!

"I like honey," Terry said.

"You take too much." Kamil pulled a crumpled cigarette pack from his jeans pocket and held it in his hand for a moment. He removed a bent cigarette then and pinched it unlit between his lips. "One cigarette," he said. "Only one. Every day, just the one. And even one is too many." He lit the cigarette and took a drag.

"I only take what He gives. If you want to be mad at anyone, be mad at Him."

Terry watched Kamil smoke his cigarette. I felt ghost-like then, and for a moment I feared that I'd dreamed my own existence, that I was nothing more than a convergence of energy whose sole purpose was to witness this most intimate of moments.

"If He delivers honey then why make me suffer?" Terry said.

Kamil looked at me, asserting my existence, and spoke to Terry: "You take from another, motherfucker." He snuffed his cigarette in his bowl and stood. "I work until three. Figure it out by then."

I ask myself sometimes if I allowed Terry's death, if perhaps I even willed it. Almost as soon as Kamil closed the door Terry asked me if I wanted to see something cool. He seemed then like he could have been my hideous kid brother; so full of wonder, his skinny slug-like bottom lip curling up onto his mustache stubble. How terrifying and sweet that smile. Of course, I said. Show me something cool. How could I have known what would follow? But I must have known. I must have.

He led me into the bathroom and pulled down the medicine cabinet from the wall, pausing just before removing it to waggle his shaved eyebrow ridge at me so that there was no mistaking his cleverness. From the alcove in which the cabinet had rested he grabbed a small black leather bag, much like the case my father had used to carry his shaving brush and double-edged safety razor when we went on vacations before he'd died. It looked so much like my father's, in fact, that I had to choke back the tears that threatened to burst forth. Of course I knew what lurked inside that bag. But seeing it there out in front of me, the spoon and the syringe and the baggy of meth—I'm not sure why, but it made me hard. When I recall this moment I often attribute my erection to my body's need to ensure proper blood flow to the lower extremities, as it does when you've been sitting in the same position for any length of time. But it so perfectly coincided with the sight of "the works," as Terry called his tools, that I can't help but think I was (perhaps still am) a very ill man. Why did I not stop him when he cooked a dose right in front of me? Why did God not compel me to stop him?

I take from another.

Why describe Terry's death when all that's needed is to say, simply: Terry died. What matter is it whether or not I fed him a second or third dose of the methamphetamine

he'd squirreled away behind his medicine cabinet? Terry died. I washed him and carried him from his place of death to his bedroom. I hugged his hideous stinking form. I wept as I wrapped him in his sleeping bag. In that sleeping bag he slept for what may have been anything from a week to a number of years.

Yes! I, too, injected the drug into my own veins. As did Kamil, who retched for hours after opening the sleeping bag. Suppose we did it to mask the pain of Terry's death; how foolish then, we? Not only could we not forget, soaring as we were on the methamphetamine, but every second seemed to intensify our awareness of his death so that his presence in the room was all that could keep us from succumbing to the fear of his ghost. What incredible illogic! And yet we accepted it as valid; carrying his body into whichever room we occupied; speaking to him as though he were still there; coaxing his holy ghost, which is how we began to regard him, so greatly had our love for him grown. Not an ounce of his flesh seemed to decay. And that same stench that had followed him through life remained in death. It's impossible to say how many times we bathed his dead body to remove that vile smell of aftershave.

How I wish that eternal nightmare were not imprinted so firmly in my memory. If I close my eyes I can see Kamil huddled over a pile of notebooks, only resting from his recording of the prophetic vision long enough to inject again from our communal needle. I can hear the pencil whispering the words of God. And there, resting against Kamil's foot lies Terry. Where am I? Sitting on the couch? Watching "From Dusk Till Dawn," my mouth stretched so wide that it feels it will tear when I see the vampires playing the bodypart guitars? Sometimes Kamil calls me Terry and for a time I believe that I am that man. Perhaps I am his ghost delivering to Kamil the words of the divine. This feeling of

ghostliness lasts until he realizes he's calling me by the ghost's name. And then I gasp, feeling that I've been created anew by my maker whose voice resonates through my heavy shell. "Bahadur," he says. "Terry's dead." And then he touches the corpse and we start the madness over.

How long? It seems as though it happened so far in the past and for so long that it must have been the entire life of another man passed. And sometimes it seems that it is happening as I recall it, and I fear that I've never left that apartment. The most absurd thing of it all is that the longer Kamil and I lived so, the stronger we believed in our divinity. Despite that madness, I *still* believe that we were prophets of the divine. Who but God could teach us during that time to love a man as we loved the wretched Terry?

And what came of my massive woman? Reeling from the oblivion of union with the divine I one day escaped the apartment to seek once more my intellectual mother. I would tell her, finally, what she meant to me. Perhaps I found her. Perhaps I hugged her tightly and wept into her massive bosom while she tried in vain to push me away. Perhaps I muttered unintelligibly my love for her and felt myself die when I recognized her great disdain.