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QUIET TILL THE BOMBS GO OFF

A Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in the Department of English

The University of Mississippi

by

CHRISTOPHER P. ALLEN

May 2013

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## ABSTRACT

This collection of stories discusses themes of identity, masculinity, and the movement of time, both conceptually and literally. Yet while these matters are frequently apparent throughout, the collection is at heart less a unified fictive front, and far more a representation of constantly shifting considerations in form, language, and structure. The arrangement of stories, beginning with the most recently written and continuing in reverse from there, allows for the evolution of artistic intent to become visible over the course of the collection in a way a more conventionally organized group of stories would not.

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## THE ROAD TO WHERE WE'RE GOING

The sun is setting. I feel this river flowing through me—  
its past, its ancient soil, the changing climate.  
The hills gently girdle it about: its course is fixed.

Henry Miller

The axis of the earth will soon right itself; asking Vinnie, who mans the desk at the Parkway Motel, will yield but a single word: prophecy. He cannot state the specifics, however, of the events through which a tilted axis turned untilt is the logical result; only, with the sleepy recollection of one perpetually distracted, will he make obscure references to “a book I once read.” When confronted with evidence that the axis is naturally tilted, and likely to remain that way, he states, “Not according to my sources.” When asked where one may find a copy of his sources, he responds “Can’t help you there.” When shown a copy of the very book in question, he replies, “Must be a different edition.”

There comes a time when one must gather all the books of the world, depending on the season, and either adorn them or deface them with red ink. This determination depends entirely on what corrections—plot, characterization, narrative arc, etc.—are being made.

This tilt is felt by none more powerfully than Mr. Spencer Goodthrobb. An early adopter of a radiosonic cream designed to enhance and embellish the odds and ends of human anatomy, Mr. Goodthrobb also fell victim to a (rare) side effect: he would walk at an axial tilt of approximately twenty-three degrees at all times. Here now is a man perpetually standing in a

strong wind. Relationships suffer. Tasks become tedious. He has his clothes tailored to suit this new slant disposition. His wife leaves him.

Mr. Goodthrobb misses his wife. Misses her more than rain or standing upright. She will return, she notes by letter, when he is no longer at angles with the world. Can he alert her as to when this might be? No, he says, standing alone in their kitchen, reading her words again and again, he cannot. He instructs his lawyers and his bankers and his bankers' lawyers to assess his assets. He is not a rich man, but rich enough. He draws up a variety of wills. In some his wife inherits everything. In others, his children. In others still this inheritance is delivered up to the governments of many emerging nations where, despite its relatively low value, he is certain it will be put to good use.

Mr. Goodthrobb goes to the store and buys a book—*The Amateur Taxidermist*. He writes an inscription inside the cover, along with his name, and deposits it in a used bookstore. He fears it will never be found.

Simone Augustus leans over her daughter as they approach the end of the pier. “Maybe don’t talk to him now,” she says.

Her daughter ignores this. She is focused on the old man using yarn and goat cheese to fish up remarkable creatures from the soiled depths of the bay, some that glow and some capable of an odd croaking song and some bearing vestiges of feathers budding finwise down their sides and others still most interesting of all brimming with a curiosity at their new wetless predicament that stare at the old man with an abundance of eyes. Around them tankers and liners and the gray approximations of dolphins beneath the surface of the brown water come and go and make

waves which lick in the bends of rocks and lap against the beams of the pier. She breaks into a run toward him. He turns at the sound.

“Grandpa!”

He stoops to hug the girl. Simone nods to him. He pays her no mind. The girl begins to speak when he places a finger against her lips. “Not while we’re fishing,” he says. She wrinkles her nose at the smell and falls silent.

“I see you haven’t—“ Simone begins to say when he brushes her lips with the same finger. She stumbles back, pawing at her face. The girl wipes her eyes and looks down at the feetworn boards darkened by blood and bait and the passage of gulls overhead. He faces the sea and tugs the yarn. “Not while we’re fishing,” he says, looping the line around his knobby fist. He prepares to cast again.

When Oliver is hit by the train, he feels nothing. Only later does he recall the thinnest of details: brightness, the sensation of spinning, heated metal. His family gathers at the hospital to be with him. Where were you going? they ask. What were you doing? From his bed Oliver receives fluids, watches television, bleeds, aches, defecates, weeps, simmers, talks to his mother, brother, aunt, father, reads, urinates, breathes, reclines, moans, gnashes, endures, writes notes, pages nurses, eats, listens to doctors, misses the redwalled canyons and the ruddyflushed deserts of his youth, does not get up, does not walk, does not feel well, does not does not, does not anything. His girlfriend leaves him. She says he’s only half the man he was. His mother brings him a book. It’s something about taxidermy.

Vinnie stills works at the Parkway Motel. He spends his off days rummaging through bookstores and flea markets, garage sales and libraries, looking for the text which details the Prophecy. As he believes its title starts with *D-*, as in *Divine Speculation: The Now and the After*, or *Deflowering the Myth of Hypnosis* (neither of which he found, upon inspection, to be the book of his memory), he completely skips over the *A-* section at each locale, thus unintentionally negating any possible contact with Mr. Goodthrobb's scrawled message. So far he's been unsuccessful in his search.

Because Simone had not wanted her daughter, no one else seemed to want her either. Daycares refused their services. Waiters balked. Teachers grew suspicious and angry.

"Why are you doing this to me?" her daughter once asked.

Simone shook her head. "It's nothing I've done," she said.

Once Simone left her on a subway bench. She stopped when she reached the stairs, looked back at her daughter. Her daughter cried, not from fear, or abandonment, but from the knowledge that this cycle of events was somehow correct, ordained, that her mother belonged apart from her.

She was still sitting there, occasionally sniffing, hours later when Simone returned.

"I used to be young," Simone said.

Oliver's copy of *The Amateur Taxidermist* is not Mr. Goodthrobb's copy. At least not initially. It is only after a significant period of convalescence, during which the book is accidentally thrown out by Oliver's mother, that Oliver is moved to seek another. He considers the prose reassuring and removed from any dramatic intention, an instructional for transforming

carcass to canvas. To him it exists beyond the forward stretch of time (it had originally appeared in 1972), encapsulating as it were a tone and temperament safely separate from and never again possible in contemporary reality, and more specifically his present circumstance. He is comforted in its obscurity; it is the sort of quiet book whose existence goes unknown forever, making neither shake nor shiver in the reading world.

In the bonecellar stale of a used bookstore he discovers it wilted and crumbling on a shelf beneath a thick layer of dust. The aisles are barely wide enough for his wheelchair. Still he can't reach it. He calls to the proprietor and when the proprietor fails to respond, Oliver uses a curtain rod propped in the corner to knock it down. He buys it. He sees Mr. Goodthrobb's words. He reads them and then looks at his body and wonders why he has not been made whole.

Mr. Goodthrobb still ponders the book he sent out, where it's been, where it's going, who's been reading it. Still diagonal to everything else, he takes life as a series of dreams from which he cannot awake. Sometimes his wife comes back to him. When she does it is a cause for celebration and gaiety. Sometimes she does not.

Simone's father deposits each day's catch in a tub with just enough water to ensure survival. At home he separates them into individual containers which he stores in an unused bedroom. There is no light inside and the air is bad. Some he's had for many years. He retrieves them when he is lonely, sits on the floor in the living room and talks to them, the oldest of whom whose colors and feathers have faded and dulled to nothing. Most often these are the ones who have mastered speech. "Answer me," he says, and they do. They always answer him when he is angry. But it is when he is quiet, disturbed, when he lays on his side and asks forgiveness, holds

himself like he is holding a lover, when he makes unwell sounds, that they are silent, stonestill, except for one, whose many eyes have grown over, who possesses a fleet of tumors along its flanks, one who sleeps more than it eats, one who says, “Hush. Hush. There is comfort to be found.”

Vinnie doesn't believe what he reads in the astronomy textbooks. He's given up on finding his book, but has had printed a number of pamphlets based on what he remembers. However, there is a copyright dispute with the printer, so regrettably the pamphlets remain uncirculated.

Simone and her daughter encounter Mr. Goodthrobb streetside on their way to the market one evening. “He's *leaning*,” the girl says loudly. Simone shushes her.

“Quite alright,” Mr. Goodthrobb says. “Perfectly natural for children to comment.”

“That's some lean,” Simone says.

Mr. Goodthrobb nods.

The girl leans forward in an exaggerated manner. “Stop that,” Simone says to her. “What if you get stuck that way?” She looks at Mr. Goodthrobb. “My apologies.”

“Of course,” he says.

The girl, frowning, slumps her shoulders. Simone pinches her arm to straighten her.

“Goodness,” Mr. Goodthrobb says.

“Always something,” Simone says. She pulls her daughter along. “Good day to you.”

“Just a minute,” Mr. Goodthrobb calls. He squats beside the girl and whispers *You will become a self that fills the four corners of night. Everything is meant for you.* The girl smiles. Simone frowns.

“That’s enough,” Simone says. “Come along.”

Mr. Goodthrobb, feeling vigorous for no reason he can discern, listing in his shoes and grinning, topples forward in his manner, toward home and the certainty of looming night.

Then one day the axis of the earth does indeed right itself. Just like that. Earth sans tilt. Mr. Goodthrobb rejoices as he is the only person correctly vertical now. The oceans cough up their water. Mountains slake softly. Only the rivers are unaffected. For this the cartographers are at least somewhat thankful. But they are hiding all the old maps. No one goes out anymore. The cities are built on latticeworks of ruin. The dead have not returned. The rigidity of roads fades and the asphalt sinks into itself. The rivers are unaffected. Foreign stars cluster thither beyond the atmosphere. The dead have not returned. The rivers are strange and unafflicted. Fogbanks cup our bodies in heavy otherwhite clouds along the shore. The rivers make promises. We gather beside them, changed.

## THE ARMADA SINGS A SONG OF ABSOLUTION

The Tabernacle of Eternal Peace Junior Choir was traveling through the city that day in a long yellow bus to a regional qualifying tournament when another bus, not dissimilar in size, but gray and marked with white stenciling reading JUVENILE CORRECTIONS DEPARTMENT, hove to alongside. Delinquents, Mrs. Winstone said. Give them berth.

Dutifully Mr. Winstone steered left. Just then the sliding windows of the gray bus lowered, and the delinquents, with frowns and yellow eyes, fired several volleys of grapeshot that peppered the length of the choir bus.

Beat to quarters! Mrs. Winstone cried. She stowed her songbook and produced a rusty cutlass from beneath her seat. Rath Gordon opened his backpack and drew out a brace of pistols which he strapped about his narrow chest. Creed McGrew tied his hair up with a ribbon given to him by Sophie Smith. Beef Cooper, big for his age, sucked his teeth, secured a swivel gun pointing starboard to its base and made it ready. Little Tommy Ferdinand beat time on his tiny drum.

Mind the fuses, Harvey Owen said as he passed the grenados Amelia Currier was assembling to the front.

From the grim mute belligerents grappling hooks came bursting forth through the door and windows. All hands stand by to repel boarders! Mrs. Winstone called. Mr. Winstone scowled, tightened his grip on the steering wheel. From his many pockets he had taken caltrops and tossed them over his shoulder so that they littered the floor and shone dully in the light. The windows fogged under Beef's breath. They could all smell his anticipation.

A surly degenerate began to pull himself along the rope. Rath shot the boy through the eye, and his body fell limp and was crushed by the wheels of his own bus. Little Tommy Ferdinand took a ball through his arm and fell against Beef as he lit off the swivel gun. The shot went wide. As the buses closed with one another Mrs. Winstone thrust her cutlass through the window. She whooped and her mascara ran.

Hold fast, Mr. Winstone yelled as the buses collided. Harvey Owen was thrown forward and partially out of the mangled door. Beef Cooper caught his foot and dragged him back inside.

Amelia died painting flowers on the sides of her grenados. There was no time to mourn her. Between the seats Creed McGrew and Sophie Smith copulated in the manner of those whose bodies sparked with the proximity of death, until Mrs. Winstone slapped at them with the flat of her cutlass and urged them back to their stations. Sophie Smith was soon afflicted with a wonderfully barbarous head wound.

Harvey Owen was the next to perish. His blood gave peril to motion as the bus pitched and rocked. Another salvo took out the Tabernacle's front passenger tire and spidered the windshield. Mr. Winstone screamed a woman's name. It sounded like the keening of love.

Once beyond the city limits the gray bus fell back as quickly and surreptitiously as it had appeared. Those left among the choir settled into the dull routine that occupies the space between battles. Weapons were stowed. The dead and dying were placed in the rear under blankets and the wounded and the well resumed their seats. Now wheeling through humid day, listing heavily and trailing smoke, slick with blood and the waters of the body, this vessel and those aboard, intrepid hearts all, sailed on.

## THEY CALL THIS ROMANCE

There is fire above us, and below. From the outskirts of provincial Evreux with its cathedral and Roman ruins. Over the flat black earth of Haute Normandie, across the softer black of the Channel. We follow the beams to London. Soon. You are asking if this sort of anticipation is unusual. I tell you it is expected, but the truth is that I do not know. Heroes do not think of such things and if I am to be a hero then I cannot think of such things. I check various gauges, dials, levers. You begin to describe the geology of the cliffs at Dover, over which we pass in darkness. I do not answer when you ask questions. You continue your geological musings. Then we are detected, then the searchlights wake and you have nothing else to say.

The coastal batteries open up. Their fire arcs in a terrible geometry around us. Searchlights lattice through smoky talcum clouds. You are laughing. You believe defeat is an animal without wings. London drawing near. Presently. We descend. Release. The bombs leave us without hesitation. The roar of the engines is tremendous in our ears.

There is light everywhere now.

On the ground an observer, a man perhaps, is urging his family to safety. In this grim moment he may embrace his wife, kiss her while incendiaries tumble around them. Quickly, he tells her. Mind the children. I shan't be long. As she hurries away he tucks his hat beneath his arm and remains in the street. He watches the sky. He imagines us above. We are to him but a sirensong, a promise of flame, the detonation to come. In the years following the war he will not speak of this instance with all its tumult, when he hesitates to seek safety in our presence. Only when the world has adequately passed from this age into the next will he confide in someone, his

children, grandchildren, confess that he wishes he could return to that moment just once more.  
The bombs. He will say he could have felt them fall forever.

Against the London night marked with smoke and firestorm he stands among the rubble.  
The ordinance we spill fractures concrete, buildings and sidewalks, incites tinder, shatters glass.  
Excites sirens into further chorus. Our bombs breach waterlines, uproot trees, crater holes in  
streets. Cause people huddling in tunnels and basements to shut their eyes and inhale sharply.  
Take breath away.

## SCENES FROM A SILENT MOVIE

To describe you in a detail:

Your breasts are small. They are inconsequential as breasts go. They do not advertise themselves. They are shelves for poetry. They are where eyes light and where a phrase like *the whole of the wideness of night is for you* may safely loiter. In addition to their more abstract uses they are also immensely cuppable.

In fiction:

I pulled a lizard's head off. I have never felt worse in my life. I stretched until the neck gave way. I cried as I pinched my fingers. It lived on your wall and snapped at the slow worm of time. Perhaps it slept while you slept. Perhaps it sang when you arrived. Perhaps you did not hear that song. It was so small. Your heart is a kiln. Everything inside it hardens. This is what you do to me.

In metaphor:

My heart is a cur dog too old to hunt.

In promises:

I promise you like water in whose mouth good ships sunder skutterwise.

I promise you the heart is a wound that never stops.

I promise you the tongue is a beast of texture. The tongue is a hostage I've tied to a root wall. The tongue is a gnarl the squares of my teeth refuse. When we are apart the tongue is unoccupied, it is without words, there are particular things even now it cannot speak.

In official statements made to third parties:

Your breasts are small, but they are not without merit.

In your absence:

I will swim in the Sea of Galilee. I will keep time with the fieldworkers' songs. I will shake the night like a blanket. I will make new promises to all the pretty girls and I will swear them by your name.

## SNAPPIN TURTLE

Grandpa died when the bingo hall collapsed, some say smited, others not. Grandpa was a man with pepper in his blood, he rode the dawnhorse lame, pried open the fist of evening and cupped himself with it. Some nights they brought in a dancer, she moved like a razor, had a bowl for hips and saucers for hands. When she passed by the old men cried bingo and interrupted the game.

She saw Grandpa corner-nested, pounding his cards with a felt caress, danced over, said, "I can see you're almost full of fire." Grandpa told her, "All I need is wood." He fell on her razor; she saw to his wounding. His neighbor at the table was shaped like a bear, or maybe bears were shaped like him. Grandpa wasn't shaped like anything except a narrow sweetgum branch and wrinkled as a river.

"At my age it takes awhile for the blood to flow," he said. They danced.

Then the wind came from over the lake, a terrible wind, disgruntled, and then the wind came from under the pines, and then the wind, the wind came from somewhere nobody could reckon, carouseled across lawns, shimmied down long beet-red streets, lingered and sighed in the hushed damp windows of lovers, moved on when the sight grew too much for it to take.

At first the tin roof banged like two possums in a washtub. The lights shone sour, then not at all. The walls took a fright and trembled, a man shouted "Beans in chili is blasphemy!" Another stood up, tainted with gingham, said, "Sometimes at night I wear women's deodorant; it smells less lonely that way." The structure was baffered, the roof peeled back, calling, Come and see! to the inappropriately tall, and the old men cried bingo and interrupted the game.

Grandpa found himself illuminated by unspecified sources of light. He squeezed the dancer down to her dermis, said, “My circulation is adequately stimulated,” while the place fell in all a crumble, stacked up rubble like a revival gone bad.

The dancer was a mystic, she died with a mumble on her lips. Grandpa had wrapped himself around the beam of her leg, a sheet of stone draped over them, while reporters scurried to capture the events, cameras panning across reminders that every moment, no matter its ferocity, will be surrendered, pausing here, and here, here, someone claiming, “It’s a shame, these folks, struck down like that,” while Grandpa, unnoticed in the frame behind, gripped that pale medicine, held onto life with both hands.

## COUPLING SONG

The old man in the hill gave his woman an elder branch.

It was fine.

She carried that branch like a bucket; she put herself in it at dawn.

She drew down night like a mountain.

Like a door.

The old man gave her smooth pebbles. They were used like glass and put up in jars.

He gave her a river with a braided tail.

He said, I did it myself, even the knots.

And look, he continued, how the cataracts divide the mountains  
moving through night like a door.

She said, the knobs of my knees are plenty.

I will hold you in my throat like a secret.

Now I rode down the mountains long ago.

I battered every rock I found, bathed in the river and nothing else.

This is your fine elder branch:

I will take your hand.

I will hold it like a compass.

I will make the blood bone sing.

From our corners I swear the field dust will rise like smoke.

## TRANSMISSION FROM BEYOND THE WALL

My friend—we'll call him Roger—likes to disseminate facts. Sometimes they're lies. You never know which. He collects them like some people collect commemorative plates or those little spoons from truck stops. Everything he says sounds like a bit of trivia or philosophy or wisdom, and he says them with such conviction and spontaneity it's like he's an odd sort of prophet just plucking them out of the air. He tells them to anyone who will listen, and once spoken they hover in the background of every conversation he has.

Giraffes, he says, pulling me aside at the bar, have two hearts.

Why are you telling me this? I ask.

Because you need to know, he says.

The French have five different words for umbrella, depending on the inclinations of the person carrying it, and six different words for mushroom.

Root beer was introduced to America by Caribbean immigrants during Prohibition. You can imagine the disappointment when everyone realized it wasn't actually beer.

Sometimes his trivia is most distressing. "They've isolated green fluorescent proteins in a small Pacific jellyfish, which they're splicing into rabbit zygotes in order to create rabbits that glow green. Fucking green," he says, grasping my arm. "Think about what they're putting in our salads."

Large order primates are inclined toward lewdness.

A dog's elbow is called a nodule.

Nobody cares about the pancreas.

The first sadomasochist massage parlor in Waukegan opened in 1897.

In certain circumstances, especially those involving scurvy, masturbation has been known to cause prolific hair growth on the palms, as a result of a ketamine deficiency of the B9 histamine receptors and a subsequent stimulation of the adrenal axis.

Love is gratuitous.

Racially insensitive postage stamps, until the late '70s, adorned the bulk of Bolivian, Danish, and Egyptian mail. Studies showed that the Cambodian postal service, when not committed to genocide, celebrated one of the most ethnically-inclusive postal operations in the world. The Dutch refused to participate in the study.

We're standing at a party and Roger asks, "That girl over there—do you think she's familiar with the reproductive structures of the slow loris?"

"No, Roger. I don't."

He claps his hands. "Jackpot," he says.

He once told a woman he had witnessed the going under of the evening land.

"That explains so much," she said.

When Bruce Springsteen visited Honduras he was referred to as El Jefe. Since then he has insisted that all Spanish-speaking escorts he hires refer to him as such.

The Republic of Texas had a navy once and celebrated only a single ship in its entire fleet. Unfortunately it sank soon after its inauguration, having never left Galveston Bay, due to a tragic collision with a schooner full of orphans.

"That's not true," says a girl who overhears him.

"If it's truth you're interested in, Dr. Tyree's class is right down the hall," he says.

She frowns.

Random studies concerning survivors of the Titanic showed, on average, evidence of the presence of three different intestinal parasites. Studies concerning survivors of Whitney Houston's *Bath Time Safety* video series were inconclusive...because there weren't any.

In the 1700s, pirates averaged 8 months a year at sea.

I asked Roger once how he's so successful with the women.

"I wear fancy underwear," he says with the gravity of an oncologist. "That way they know."

In the 50s Betty White produced a sex tape. It was seven minutes long and didn't have a plot.

Formicophilia is the sexual interest in having small insects crawl on your genitals.

Prince spent six weeks at an aviary performing research so he could state with authority that doves do, in fact, sound like that when they cry.

You fuck like a champ has no place on a Valentine's Day card.

For years the joke at the Astoria hotel was that the wait staff would masturbate into the clam chowder. The lobster bisque somehow escaped scrutiny.

Roger informs me he found a strip club in Memphis where the girls will sleep with you if you pay them enough. "I'm confused," he says. "Am I fucking strippers or watching prostitutes dance?"

The Louvre recently voted the Dogs Playing Poker series of paintings to be "relevant to the artistic evolution of Western Civilization." They plan on exhibiting the entire set beginning in July.

**SORRY ABOUT THE HERPES** is the third most commonly requested cake decoration in Nevada.

When the term was originally invented, BFF stood for “Best Fucking Friends.”

Roger tells a girl he’s been on several dates with that the female orgasm is a myth.

“In your bedroom, yeah,” she says.

The average adult human can hold his or her breath for approximately one minute. For reasons still unknown to science, this time is miraculously extended by up to three minutes immediately following coitus. Scandal rocked the International Free Diving Association’s annual tournament the year this discovery was made. The contest rules have since been amended.

“Atypical polyhedrons,” Roger says. “Where would we be without them?”

Pirates had hairy palms.

Botswanian lumberjacks are currently experiencing the highest rate of unemployment ever recorded in the history of their noble trade.

Roger is telling me about a new fiction market that’s just opened up when a former girlfriend taps him on the shoulder. “What are y’all doing?” she asks.

“No story here. Just two guys on a couch,” Roger says before turning back to me, his eyes big. “Fantasy erotica! Dwarves and elves—“ he raises a finger “—but never together.”

“Why not?”

“Well that’s the question, isn’t it?”

Doggy style doesn’t work for people with short femurs.

On occasion Roger gives back to the community by volunteering to spend time with underprivileged youth. During the last outing he and his little buddy built a barbecue pit out of wood. The boy looked at it suspiciously. “Are you sure this will work?” he asked.

“I don’t hardly see how it could fail,” Roger said.

Two thousand five hundred newborn babies will be dropped next month.

Sometimes, when Roger's with a girl he really likes, he breaks it off with her before she has the opportunity to do so to him.

"Why do you do that?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "To her I'm just like all the other boys," he says. Then he tells me that the most common graffiti found at Sea World are the words **RELEASE THE KRAKEN** written on the squid tanks.

## REGARDING THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES

My father was not, by default, a competitive man. In his sophomore year at university he had surrendered a mini golf championship to a freshman on the grounds of a controversial ball diameter ruling. While a junior he abandoned his hope of making the swim team when he became convinced another swimmer, an amputee, had an advantage due to a decreased drag coefficient. He turned instead to long afternoons spent reading and watching films. He gave up entirely on anything requiring an inner drive to dominate, either physically or mentally, another person. This meant even simple tasks like parking at the grocery store or making a dental appointment became trials, which he faced with dread and uncertainty.

But then he discovered *Pumping Iron*.

The documentary ignited in him an interest previously unknown in bodybuilding and, due to a slight misunderstanding of the opening scene, ballet. My mother and I stood by as he purchased books and films on both subjects and converted our front yard into a large, open-air gym. The rusting hulks of weights soon squatted like scrap iron among geraniums and petunias. Our mailbox doubled as a point of balance which he wound himself around in ever increasingly alarming stretches.

By now my father was in his 40s and, rather—terrestrially abundant. He refused to wear a shirt during workouts, stating that it “restricted the physical creativity” which he considered “the source of his poise and grace.” His pale bulk, morning and evening, could be seen striking sad arabesques and inappropriately pirouetting near the birdbath. He appeared as a large bright stain

against the green of the yard, grunting and bugling while he shuffled weights around. Our neighborhood rang with the music of his exertions.

My mother watched this, horrified. She was not surprised when her casseroles were suddenly no longer welcomed at the Ladies' Auxiliary weekly luncheon. Formerly cordial encounters with neighbors over trashcans and mailboxes grew awkward, tainted by silent accusations of some breach of neighborly decorum. Our street provided my father with a built-in audience similar to one he was certain he'd eventually face on the competition stage. He stood near the road and flexed and posed at the passing cars. School buses were his favorite. He'd hold a position as the children crowded together to watch him through the tiny windows.

It was only a matter of time until someone called the police.

My father, warned about harassing motorists and gyrating in the direction of schoolchildren, returned to his previous ways. Parking lots grew troubled. Appointments loomed. He burned his books and instructional videos in the backyard. He hauled his weights to the city landfill. Thus dispatched, he retreated soundly inside himself.

I've often thought about how his passion seemed to vanish, not in a single great instance, but in the slow manner of the perpetually dimming. Sometimes, I lie in bed at night and pretend I'm Flash Gordon. This is a passion of mine, and I am never going to stop.

## THINGS MY FATHER BUILT

When I was young my father, for reasons still unknown to us, decided to quit a lucrative executive job and start his own business. We were shocked to hear his plans. He had no skills to speak of and knew no other trades to pursue. So we held our breath and waited for whatever might come.

The early coffins were the worst. My father was a student with desire as his only teacher. He had decent tools. He put these to use. But the measurements came out wrong. What was intended for someone exceptionally tall would end up being exceptionally long only on one side, and what was meant for larger people would creak and buckle while I sat in it as he and his assistant, Carlos, lifted it. Despite these things, my father increased the rate at which he built his coffins. My father told Carlos the angles were finally beginning to make sense.

It wasn't long after my father set up his business that he ran into problems. Storage space was in short supply, since the only building he could find to rent was also the smallest building on the block, so he stacked the coffins on the sidewalk outside his shop. People wrote in to the local newspaper to complain.

My father began painting his coffins in bright colors. From a distance they looked like awkward canoes.

My father ordered a new sander for the shop. He never told us what happened, but he came home early the first day he used it, bleeding from his scalp and missing part of his shirt. We found the grinder the next day by the trashcan with the cord severed and body cracked in half. My father stated he was unhappy with the sander's performance.

The first coffin my father sold was for an old man who had lived close to the river with no sort of family. Someone from the county office came by to make the purchase.

"You paying for this luxury coffin with tax money?" my father asked as he worked up the bill.

The man from the county waited a moment before replying. "To be honest, you're the cheapest in town. Only makes sense to go with you."

After he left, my father peeled off all the price tags from the coffins and spent the rest of the afternoon replacing them. When he printed out the new ones, they were two- and three-hundred dollars more than they had been.

"Luxury costs," my father said. "It has to."

The coffins my father built continued to multiply.

"They'll sell," he said. "People will realize."

Meanwhile he had taken to making smaller coffins, baby-sized, which he also painted a variety of colors. These boxes required less space and could be stored inside the full-size coffins. Some no bigger than a shoebox, they were also the only ones that seemed to turn out right.

"These are the most important," my father said. "These are the ones that count."

Watching him labor so, while I sat in the corner and peeked out from behind a book, I believed him.

## EVOLUTION

We were celebrating the new addition of *Quetzalcoatlus* to the museum when it happened. The model itself was fascinating—wingspan around ten metres, bodyweight close to two hundred kilograms, one of the most complete fossilized skeletons ever discovered wrapped up in a specially crafted bionetic shroud. For the realistic representation of a Late Cretaceous azhdarchid and the public's viewing pleasure, the brochure read. It hung from the ceiling in a temporary home so that we benefactors could admire it. Above our table it loomed. It looked very expensive and very delicate.

The main course had just been served when a raucous call sounded. Buckwell, our host, paused in the middle of the toast he had been making, then continued. It was the sort of noise that, however disturbing and unsettling, one might attempt to ignore, with the knowledge that others present would also attempt ignorance of its being, so that everyone involved could pretend away whatever indiscreet and unwelcome thing had spoken it. Only when a cry rang out a second time did heads tilt, silverware clatter onto plates, into bowls. Buckwell, something of a prophet, was the first to suspect.

I'll say, he said, pointing at the reconstructed form overhead.

The *Quetzalcoatlus* shuddered slightly. It clacked its toothless mouth. The long neck, the wings, strained against the cables holding it in place. It swung on the end of its chains.

Panic did not curl itself about room. We simply watched the events unfold. Inspired? Perhaps we were. The creature rocked with prehistoric dignity. The first of the cables broke loose. Bits of ceiling fell on us. It fell white like snow or dust. Then another. Another. These

lines trailed from the beast like troubled streamers. When the wings came free they beat wildly, birthed great airy gusts the force of which we felt on our faces. When only one cable remained, we held our breath. We willed it to snap because that was the spirit of the moment moving within us. Free yourself, we thought. Free us.

So it did. The final tether popped and the creature dropped toward the floor before righting itself. It looked down as we looked up. The whole of us felt immense and immediate, like parents seeing their newborn pterosaur fly for the first time.

The creature tried to roar in a cracked voice and then burst through the glass plates of the roof, unwombed, into air it did not know, towing cables like umbilical cords behind. The shrill note it repeated was softer now. It dragged along the rooftop. More glass came down. Unstable flight corrected into unstable falling. We ran to windows and saw it stand up on the lawn, expand its lungs, take in the world. It stepped into the street. It walked on all fours.

Buckwell gathered us to his side. He laid out plot, counterplot. We must, he said, bring the creature back. There were reputations at stake. Large sums of money. Our money, he said. Our dignity. This is an insult. The natural order has been sundered. It must be put right. We agreed with him. The women were sent away. They wept for us as they descended. Their voiced echoed in the stairwell.

On the second floor of the museum we raided the Society for Reconstruction and Southern Rehabilitation's Civil War exhibit. Tables were upended. Depredations ensued.

Goddamn you carpetbagging sons of bitches, Reynolds shouted. We deprived the Society's exhibits of their firearms, several Colt 1851 Navy revolvers, a Sharps rifle and enough Springfield muskets for all. Cruces came away with a cutlass of sorts. He told us what it could do.

What can it really do? we asked.

He showed us what it could do.

Outside we stopped. There were many of us, mostly without names. We took our heading. The beast was bound for the north. It ran and leapt into sporadic flight, only to crash back down on unsteady legs and continue running. A few of us fired at it, but unaccustomed to our new armament, we missed. Buckwell surmised the creature was tired, or hungry, or distraught. Stanley, who had once been six months into a psychology degree before switching to sports ministry, agreed. See how it only flies for short distances, he said, before having to walk. It's weak. It cannot sustain flight.

Louis insisted we count our buttons before departing. He insisted. There were many. Reynolds removed his shirt to avoid the counting.

Pants are tallied as well, Louis said.

Put me down for one then, Reynolds said. He discarded his shirt.

And so the days passed. Our quarry kept its distance, lurching, crashing. We crashed after it. We made Wichita before hunger set in. A string of cafes, diners, truckstops marked the miles thereafter. While we ate Arthur stole wheel weights from vehicles in the parking lot and cast bullets for us in a contraption he had found at the museum. We don't know where he got the powder but he kept us supplied in both. Cruces oiled his cutlass and flirted with the waitresses.

The feeding of the beast was a curious enterprise. It seemed not to know the edible from inedible. It chose, among other things, items listed following on which to chew, gnash, gnaw:

The hood of a truck

A tire

A phonebook

A clothing catalogue

A small child (male, aged approximately six years, speared through abdomen by the creature's beak)

Air (we assumed it was snapping at insects, but given the distance, this theory remains unverified)  
A chicken (also speared)  
A cow (not speared)  
A telephone  
Acorns

That's ridiculous, Stanley said as the creature approached the tire. It doesn't have any teeth. It could never eat that.

Topeka. Reynolds befriended an attendant at a gas station and then relieved him of his shirt. Then he fell back in with us. Louis studied at him, pulled out his notebook and made a notation.

We scored no hits on the creature, though we shot and shot and filled the corn and soybean fields with smoke. Someone was always shooting. Cruces brandished his cutlass. Arthur picked up our fired Minie balls as he found them on the ground.

Slow grew the days. We lost two men in a bar fight outside Omaha. We took them out of there. We took them with us. Their bodies lie in shallow graves.

Arthur played a waltz on a plundered accordion. We did not dance to Arthur's music. Still he played on. If our beast heard, it gave no indication. Arthur played his waltz for weeks.

Cruces was missing a finger at least by now, perhaps more, but he kept his gloves on so we could not see. The finger he sold to a gypsy woman for three dollars and a can of shoe polish. He had the most radiant shoes.

Aberdeen, Nebraska, has been home to three minor league baseball teams since 1920. They are: the Boosters, the Greys, and the Pheasants. The town is the third largest, by population, in the state. Among several notable residents, one in particular stands out, Dale Schornack, news anchor at the Sacramento News10. Storybook Land, located in lovely Wylie

Park, tempts visitors with a castle, a carousel, and the opportunity to scale Jack and Jill's tragicomic hill. A moat and a miniature train add to the ambiance and spectacle. In addition, one may find the Land of Oz also located there, courtesy of L. Frank Baum's brief tenure as a resident and newspaper columnist in town. A certain editorial he authored on January 3, 1891, reads: *The Pioneer [newspaper] has before declared that our only safety depends upon the total extirmination [sic] of the Indians. Having wronged them for centuries, we had better, in order to protect our civilization, follow it up by one more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth.* The Land of Oz also offers "a simulated tornado experience with special lighting and sound effects."

We journeyed on. Renewed.

The creature stopped to eat and was harassed. It found no comfort or sustenance except that which grows inside us living beings all. Buckwell sent a .58-caliber ball through the membrane of its wing. This is the moment, I believe, when it realized the anxiety of pursuit. It flew away. We searched for blood but found none. It landed soon after, and we were waiting, we persisted in its shadow.

A houseful of widows in Minot, "crime capitol of North Dakota." Surrogate darlings, apex paramours. Oh, how we danced with them. A three-legged cat Louis befriended and Reynolds demanded we eat. Always behind the beast. It urged us forward. It tore us away from the passion of the frantic and the forsaken, which is a fierce and inspired passion and only exists in moments, never in time extended. For that, we knew there could be no capture. Only reckoning.

Reynolds, now calling himself Renault, sang forlorn songs in French as we crossed the border into Canada, songs that if written down would be misspelled and missing accents marks.

Chanson juste pour toi,  
Chanson en peu triste je crois,  
Trois temps des mots froissées,  
Quelques notes et tous mes regrets,  
Tous mes regrets de nous deux,  
Sont au bout de mes doigts,  
Comme do, ré, mi, fa, sol, la, si, do.  
C'est une chanson d'amour fané,  
Comme celle que tu fredonnais,  
Trois fois rien de nos vies,  
Trois fois rien comme cette mélodie,  
Ce qu'il reste de nous deux,  
Est au creux de ma voix,  
Comme do, ré, mi, fa, sol, la, si, do.  
C'est une chanson en souvenir  
pour ne pas s'oublier sans rien dire  
S'oublier sans rien dire

A running gunfight with customs agents ensued after Louis attempted to count their buttons. Between the beast, and ourselves and the Canadians, we formed a trifecta of pursuit. Arthur, nursing a hangover and gutshot, set fire to a stable and the horses ran out with cinders in their manes and the smallest horses burned fastest and the agents quit the field to recruit them and to dampen their flesh and perhaps deliver them. We crept away and left Arthur lying near the road. I loved him as I loved my mother then. I wept.

The weather turned cold and our accoutrements proved inadequate. Our coats were thin. The creature no longer attempted to feed at all. It conducted its locomotion with the gravity of a forced march. Stanley told us it knew what we wanted.

It can smell the stench of us, Stanley said. We stink like hounds. Like inevitability.

Je ne sens rien, Renault said.

The brothel near Regina was warm and welcomed us. We stayed as the habits of the beast would allow. We were there only a short while.

These nights were long. I kept a knife in my boot. I held it up and I cut the dark. I hid a knife in my boot and I felt it heavy against my leg when I walked. Powder and ball ran low. That put an end to our shooting.

Around Saskatoon our man Cruces met with a better swordsman than he. We mourned his loss. The man who killed him wore a headdress. He had stolen it from an Indian. We kept moving. A tornado touched down on the plains in front of us and we stopped. The creature stopped too. Together we watched the black cloud eat up the land and everything in it. We understood that appetite. We appreciated it.

We will not be forgiven of this, Stanley said, as we raided the ruined houses for stores. The survivors sat mutely to the side as we struggled under the weight of their belongings. Louis carried a sack full of eggs and a loaf of bread under his arm. Thank God I'm an atheist then, he said.

We encountered the boreal forests of the north after a time. We looked like blight moving through the trees. Days of travel given to fighting snow and ice. This cold was unknown to us. The creature struggled when it walked. So did we.

Some time near dusk we cornered the creature next to a stand of poplars with a wide low valley at our backs. Exhausted, it stopped and faced us. Robbed of flight. We came within ten metres of it and Buckwell fired the Sharps. The creature pitched but did not fall. A volley from the rest of us and it collapsed. Louis fired once more while it kicked, and it quit kicking and looked up at us with the eyes of a woman. Renault tore at his clothes. Buckwell dropped his rifle. The others stamped and moaned and rubbed themselves with snow. I knelt down and met its eyes with mine.

Then it died, as everything does, awkwardly.

That night we squatted before our fire and ate the last of our rations. The wind blew across us. Buckwell began a speech by telling us we were believers in progression, in the mastery of ourselves, but he quieted and did not finish. The uneasy truth of the hunt, when the baying has lulled, when we hurray no more, descended upon the camp, nested in the corners of our being. Men now without order or purpose. What sort of men could we be called? Already snow collected on the carcass, which we had left lying obscenely splayed on the open plain after we cut out its heart. Seulement on le voit, Renault said, cradling the organ in his arms, seulement on connais. Soon it would be obscured completely. A terrible suspicion lingered over us. Each regarded the fellow next to him with intent. After awhile the fire became a center from which we radiated out, unable to tolerate its warmth, unwilling to share in the company of our brothers. Soon we had backed far enough away that we could only see hints of one another in the darkness. There is a concern among us. We wait silently for the man who might, given the opportunity, fill the hollow of his bones with air. We watch for sign that the shape of his heart is growing. We worry that his skin is a blessing, a deceit, that whatever it conceals threatens flight.

## CLOSE TO WATER

Bobby pulls himself through the water like he's climbing a ladder. For a moment I see him as he was fifty years ago, tall, unstooped, his body still solid with muscle. He has a slight ache in his shoulder from high school baseball he's not ready to recognize as chronic, a tan from baling hay without a shirt. A scar from a wayward coil of barbwire snakes around his left arm and spreads across his chest. Girls don't seem to mind. My grandmother certainly didn't.

Now he is an old man, not broken, but breaking down. He still has his memories and a good sense of balance. He no longer dances or chews tobacco and he hasn't been on a tractor in years. He sold all the horses and the cattle but he's kept his garden, which he tends with an earnestness that might just be heartbreaking.

Bobby cuts himself shaving. He refuses to use an electric razor, and many mornings I've come over to help with the garden and found him standing in the bathroom, his face and shirt spotted with blood. His hands don't always work right, my grandmother tells me quietly. He's not ready to admit it. She doesn't dare offer to help him. She pulls me through the darkness of their house, toward the kitchen. It's barely light out and she's already got something on the stove.

He told me once that a feller who couldn't shave himself wasn't good for much of nothing. Sometimes, when I'm wiping his face off, pulling a clean shirt out of the closet for him, I wonder if he's right, if he's willing to accept those repeated nicks as a penance for the unsteadiness of his hands.

Today my grandmother has driven over to visit her friend, Mrs. Mulray, and I am watching Bobby as he wades across the stock pond behind the house. His own father dug it years ago for cattle long since gone and now Bobby makes frequent use of it after a travelling doctor told him the rainwater it caught would be good for his rheumatism. My grandmother has given up trying to stop him. Sometimes when I can't sleep I'll drive out here and just sit on the bank. It's a good place to think. For Bobby it's a good place to remember.

"Boy," he tells me, and just the sound of his voice is like hearing the passage of time made audible. He clears his throat, spits onto the bank. The tobacco's gone but the habit is still there. "This water's goddamn cold."

"Yessir," I say. He steps into a deeper spot, raises himself out of the water slightly, then settles back down. He's focused on the fencerow, just like that, and as he is apt to do, tells me about it.

"You know I built that fencerow with your daddy. Cut all the wood for it ourselves."

"Yessir," I say, which constitutes most of my half of our conversations.

"It's saggin in spots. Need to take a look at it before long."

"You plannin on cuttin the wood for it this time too?" I ask, and I'm instantly sorry. This isn't the sort of thing to put before him, because he'll see it as a challenge. I can imagine my grandmother saying how I shouldn't get him too wound up about doing things the way he used to.

"Somebody's got to," he says, spitting again. "I'll get the chainsaw out when I'm done here. Make sure it's ready to go."

"I'll do it," I say. "We won't be workin on it till a few more days anyway."

"No sense in puttin it off."

I nod, hoping he'll forget the whole thing. Sometimes he does that. Go back twenty years and before, and he's spot on, can tell you about the shoes he was wearing the first time he rode in an automobile. Ask him about something that happened last week and it's a toss-up whether or not he'll remember. I figure I can take care of the fence, buy the lumber in town, get it fixed myself before he decides it's got to be done.

Bobby turns and makes for the far bank.

"Your clothes are over here," I say.

This time the spit lands closer to me than I like. I take a step to the left.

"Hard to be grumpy when you're naked, ain't it?" I say. He stops, makes a face, comes toward me. He tries to keep up his scowl but it breaks into a smile. Joking with him like this is rare, but good when it happens. It feels a little like we're sharing a secret, and when it comes to secrets Bobby is a bear trap. He doesn't let anything go.

Bobby's skin is white, blindingly so, and wrinkled. He's wearing a dingy undershirt and boxers. I don't ever know what to think, seeing him like this. The hair on his arms is gray. The hair on his legs is gone. I hand him his pants. He totters a little as he pulls the jeans on. Next his shirt. He snaps it closed and motions for his boots. He stumbles once on the way back to the house but he rights himself and we don't speak of it.

In the kitchen I fix him a sandwich and pour him some coffee. Lunch is one of the few things he'll openly let me do for him. I suspect it's more from my grandmother's routine over the past forty years of always having him food ready than any willingness on his part to accept help.

I wash the dishes as he sits at the table and stares out the window at the oak trees shading the yard. I get the feeling he's looking at something I can't see. I pour myself a cup of coffee and sit down beside him.

These past few days with Bobby have been rounded by my own predicament. I wonder what a younger version of him would have done in my place, when he was still more full than empty. I try conjuring up the boy I had never known, picture him standing in a doctor's office three counties over with his head down and a crying girl on his arm. Try as I might, I can't do it. I think he'd have resisted the easy way of doing things out of sheer principle if nothing else.

He knows something is wrong. He's sharper than he lets on, still able to pull it together when he sets his mind to it. I can't remember a time when he was the one to first approach an issue, though, and I know if I keep quiet so will he. When my grandmother returns I say my goodbyes and head into town. First stop is the diner. I'm not hungry, wouldn't be even if I hadn't already eaten with Bobby, but I told Laurel I'd meet her here. I've been living with her since I left the university, except that last night she asked me to consider finding some place else to stay from now on.

She's waiting in a side booth by the window. A plate of picked-at toast and a glass of water is in front of her. She looks up as I sit down across from her.

"Hey."

I nod toward her. "How's it going?"

"Don't," she says, bowing her head. "You can't act like nothing's wrong."

She's been impossible to talk to since we found out.

"I'm not acting like that."

Laurel pushes the toast toward me. "Eat," she says.

"I thought you wanted to talk."

"I do. But you should eat something."

I take a slice and chew on the corner. I'm nervous and it shows. "So what have you decided?" I ask.

"This isn't just my decision."

"You acted like it was your decision."

She drinks her water. "I don't think you're taking things seriously. I didn't think you were last night and I don't think you are now."

I manage to swallow the toast. My stomach burns and I've started sweating.

"You're not willing to discuss anything," she continues. "You've got one thing to contribute and—"

"I said I'd pay for it," I say, repeating myself, regretting the words as they come out.

"You're such a fucking asshole, Cory," she says. "You can't say you'll pay for it like you backed into my fucking car."

"I'm only trying to be supportive."

"That's not supportive. That's being an asshole."

By now the family in the booth closest to us is watching. I reach across the table and grab Laurel's hand. I squeeze. She winces.

"Quieter," I say. I let go.

"An asshole," she says again, rubbing her hand.

The toast has stuck in my throat. I take a drink of her water. "I don't know what else to do," I say.

"That's because to you there's only one answer."

She's right. To me there are no alternatives. The truth is I don't love her and the idea of having a child with her makes me nauseous. But I can't tell her this. I can barely admit it to myself.

"I going to have this baby," she says suddenly. "I'd like it to be with you, I really would. But I'll do it without you if I have to."

"It'd still be my child," I hear myself saying. "Something I would have to live with and pay for."

Laurel makes a face. "That may be the most disgusting thing I've ever heard anyone say."

I don't pretend otherwise. "It is what it is. You know my feelings on the matter." I slide out of the booth.

"And you know mine," she says as I walk away. "Congratulations. You're going to be a father."

I can't remember when I started calling my grandfather by his first name. People look at us funny when they hear me, addressing him so, but that never seemed to bother Bobby. He's always been a bit different like that.

If I'm honest, I don't really mind the thought of having a child. I see babies all over the place now, notice them in a way I hadn't before. This has been going on for a few years, since even before I was with Laurel. I've never told her about it. She'd get the wrong idea, and the last thing I need is her thinking I might secretly want a kid. She—Laurel, I mean—was never supposed to stick around this long anyway. But like the story my mother tells about me learning to ride on a girl's bicycle with streamers dangling from the handlebars and then my insistence on

riding it way beyond what was appropriate, I tend to get stuck on something and have a hard time getting loose. Laurel's no different.

Between Bobby and now Laurel, I can feel the movement of time like a current around me. I'm not worried about old age so much. It's leaving behind me the things I've grown up with that scares me. All time really translates to is change, made worse because it's a change that can't be undone. The inability to go back, to realize that every moment is nothing more than memory, bothers the hell out of me, and I figure it's got to bother Bobby too, or would, if he ever thought about it.

I decide to head back to my grandparents' place because there's really nowhere else for me to go. When I get there I see my grandmother through the screen door, on the couch, watching a soap opera. I hear noises coming from the back room.

My grandmother waves me in. "Didn't think you'd be back over here today," she says.

"What's the noise?" I ask. I don't sit.

"It's just Bobby. He's diggin through some boxes. Lookin for something."

We hear a crash, Bobby's voice. My grandmother shakes her head.

"What on earth is he lookin for?" I say.

"Ain't no tellin. I know if he makes a mess he'll be right back in there cleanin it up."

"He been at it long?"

She reaches for the remote, turns the television down. "Maybe an hour," she says, looking pointedly at me. She leans forward. "Between this and the pond I don't know what to do with him. Every day it gets a little worse."

I touch her shoulder. "Things'll work out."

"I hope so."

Bobby yells something unintelligible again. "I'm gonna go check on him," I say.

In the guest room my grandparents use for storage, Bobby's got cardboard boxes open, contents scattered around. There are clothes and dishes and a stack of high school annuals that must have belonged to my father and stuffed animals I vaguely remember as being my own.

Bobby doesn't notice me.

"Hey, old man," I say. "Whatcha got goin on in here?"

"I'm lookin," he says without lifting his head. He dumps things pulled from boxes unceremoniously on the carpet. If my grandmother knew he was dropping dishes like that she'd be furious.

"Easy there," I say as he lets go of a heavy platter from waist high. "Tell me what you're lookin for and I'll help."

"You wouldn't know it if you saw it."

"Possibly. But if you told me then I'd know, and I maybe I could help you find it."

Bobby grunts. He does this when he doesn't want to answer me about something. I once roofed a shed with him and spent the entire time asking him questions I knew he wouldn't answer just to see how long it'd go on. He grunted the whole afternoon.

He hesitates when he gets to one box, holds it like he's thinking, places it to the side with much more care than anything else so far. I peek over his shoulder and see his uniform folded up in it. A few years ago he insisted, over my grandmother's protests, to take it from the closet and pack it up.

"You know I married your grandmother in that," he says, pointing to the uniform.

"I reckon you told me."

"That was a long time ago, bud."

*Bud.* This is *my* Bobby, the one in the present. The one I'm watching grow old and age and disappear right in front of me. When he calls me something like *bud* or *boy* there's always a lonesome pitch to his voice, like he's suddenly very tired. I wish I could tell him about my problem but I don't want to waste this moment. Not on something like that.

"I guess it was," I say. I watch his face change as he mentally shuffles through the past.

My grandmother is the only person I know who can make Bobby laugh with regularity. Seeing them together makes me feel good in a way I can't name. I guess the best way to describe it is to say when my grandfather found out that doves mate for life, he never went dove hunting again. My grandmother told me that about him once right after he'd gotten out of the hospital for kidney stones. I've never forgotten it.

Bobby goes back to digging. I'm not sure at this point he knows what he's looking for, but he's not slowing down, so I wait quietly for awhile before slipping out.

Back in the living room my grandmother is still on the sofa. She shakes her head when she sees me. "How is he?" she asks.

I notice she hasn't turned the volume on the television back up. "Still lookin. I finally gave up and left him to it."

"He'll come across it."

"He been back in the pond?"

"Not since you left."

I scratch my chin, unsure of how to ask my next question. "That's gettin pretty bad, ain't it?"

She nods. "You know he helped his daddy dig it way back when. Doctor says sometimes he goes back to that time in his mind. Said as long as Bobby is gettin around okay there

shouldn't be a problem. But Lord, Cory, I'm worry about him goin out there when nobody's home. What if something happened?"

"I'm out there quite a bit with him."

"I know that, but you're startin back to school soon. You can't be with him all the time and it ain't right for you to have to be."

"Momma and Daddy—"

"They know about it."

"They don't talk to me much anymore. What do they say?"

My grandmother shrugs. "There's nothin they can say."

If I'm not careful I start thinking about my child. I haven't talked to Laurel since the diner, but I know she'd answer if I called. She says she loves me but I think it's more the *idea* of us she loves. That's true enough for me. I'm just not ready to give it all up. Not that I've got much to start with. But for Laurel to get what she wants, I have to let go of the present. I have to accept the limits of my ability to hold on to time. She'll grow big and fat with our baby inside her and I'll think back to nights of being wadded up with her in the backseat of her car or curled around her in a sleeping bag on the banks of the Ouachita and know all the babies and all the love in the world won't be able to take us back to those moments, those feelings. Being with Laurel feels like giving up.

I was twenty-two or twenty-three before my grandfather began to age. It started with his skin going soft and his arms thinning. He took longer getting up after he had sat down. Sometimes he tottered a little when he began to walk, before his legs caught up with his body and he regained his balance. In his shirt pocket he carried with him a little notebook, and at the

end of every day he wrote the events of that day in it. He'd been doing this for years. The incident that finally made him stop happened downtown at the feed store. He was trying to look something up and his hands got to shaking so bad he dropped his little book and someone said *Goddamn, Bobby, you're an old man*, and everyone laughed and later one of the men made a big show of carrying several sacks of feed to Bobby's truck because *Bobby, I'd hate for you to drop these too, you decrepit sumbitch*. And Bobby laughing because the men were only joking, but also knowing they were right and hating himself for it.

After that Bobby put all his notebooks in a five-gallon bucket and stuck them in a closet somewhere. I think about those notebooks every now and then, with all their history, just sitting there, forgotten to even the people whose lives are recorded in them. I keep waiting for Bobby to have a good day, to be sure of himself just one more time. I hope he takes those notebooks to the feed store and uses them as tinder. I hope he burns the whole goddamn place down.

I catch Bobby in the garage this morning. I slept at a friend's house on the couch and my neck is stiff and my clothes are wrinkled. He doesn't mention my appearance. He's dumped a coffee can full of rusted and tangled fishhooks on his workbench and sorts through them. He places them in tiny, meticulous piles according to type and condition, but I don't know why he's doing it, because Bobby doesn't fish. I don't think he even owns any poles.

"Lemme ask you something," I say, sitting down beside him.

He holds up a clump of hooks. "Ever seen the likes of such?"

"I don't know what you ought not just go buy new ones."

"These'll do."

“Think the fish’ll get tetanus?” I ask, and part of me wonders if he even knows what tetanus is. It’s ridiculous, really. Old and stupid aren’t the same thing, even if a lot of folks treat them as such.

Bobby grunts. The hooks catch on him and stick lightly but his hands move in such a way that they can never find true purchase. Soon his hands are streaked in thin pale lines where the dryness of his skin has been disturbed.

“I wanna ask you about Laurel,” I say.

“That the girl you’re seein?”

“She’s been at me to do something I ain’t entirely sure I want to do. You ever been in a situation like that?”

Bobby spits in a cup he keeps for just that purpose. “Lots of em.”

“How you know what’s the right thing to do?”

“You don’t. Least not at the time.”

“Ever been like that with grandma?”

He looked at me then like he’s discovered something new about me. Or maybe that I’ve discovered something new about him. “I went with your grandmamma long afore we ever got married. Her parents never did approve. Hell, they sent her away for a summer about a year after we started seein one another.”

“What’d you do?”

“Nothin. She came back in the fall and we picked right on up. Reckon by that time her people thought there was no sense in trying to stop us. Her father did tell me he’d have her married to me or me run out of town one.”

“So you were always sure.”

“Bout her, yeah. Still I wonder sometimes if I ought to have done something about them sending her away. That weren’t no good at all.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Don’t know,” Bobby says, his fingers still working at the hooks. “Guess you can be sure about some stuff but not others.”

“Must have been tough seein grandma go like that,” I say. “Not knowin what was goin on with her wherever.”

Bobby takes the piles he’s made and with a single motion sweeps them all together. He picks the jumble up and drops it back in the coffee can. The hooks clang when they land. He stands up, stretches, rubs his belly through his shirt. Looking out the window, toward the driveway, where my grandmother should be pulling in at any minute, he says, “It wasn’t easy.”

Then he walks out the garage door into the yard and disappears around the side of the house. I put the can on a shelf over the bench and follow him.

Bobby took a fall yesterday. I guess it was bound to happen. My grandmother found him in the backyard. He smiled up at her. “I was beginning to think your soaps were never gonna be over.”

“Why didn’t you holler?” she asked him.

“Falling was bad enough,” he said. “I sure as hell weren’t gonna tell the world about it.”

That night my grandmother sat down with my parents and me and told us she was going to hire a sitter for Bobby. He didn’t say anything, just rocked in his chair. He refused to look us at, though. My grandmother wiped her eyes and said it was necessary.

“Just an accident.” I find myself saying this as my parents nod thoughtfully along with my grandmother. “He doesn’t need tending to like that.”

“He needs somebody,” my mother says. These are the first words she’s spoken to me since Laurel phoned to tell her about the baby. My father still hasn’t said anything to me. “It’s too much for your grandmother.”

“So I’ll start staying over. There’s no sense in having some stranger around the house all the time.”

“It’s just during mornings when I’m gone,” my grandmother says. “And a few days in the evening.”

“Heck, I’m here in the mornings,” I say.

“Your grandmother appreciates it, too,” my mother says. “But it’s not enough. And what happens when you go back to school?”

“I don’t come to babysit him,” I say. “I come because I enjoy spending time with him. Don’t make it sound like he’s somebody’s obligation.”

Bobby grunts in his fashion. My mother continues. “Just the same it’s probably best for someone more qualified to be here. You can still visit, you know.”

“Has anyone bothered to ask him what he thinks?” I say.

My grandmother puts her hand on my shoulder. “He knows it’s for the best.”

“I don’t see how with y’all treatin him like he’s helpless.”

“He’s not helpless,” my mother says. “Just...diminished.”

“I think he’s doin just fine,” I say.

“That’s because you don’t really know what he needs,” my mother says in her special way.

I stand and walk to the kitchen without reply. The light is off. I hear my mother apologizing to Bobby. I hear my father say it's for the best. Through the window a spot of moonlight peeks in. The kitchen feels impossibly lonesome.

I've never told anyone before that I've seen him out there sometimes at night, wading quietly across the pond in his sleep shirt. His hands are large nets held below the surface, pushing against the weight of the water, like he's searching for something he's lost. I've sat there on the hill overlooking and watched him move back and forth. Often a breeze shakes the rushes growing along the bank. In the moonlight the surface of the water looks scales and sheds its skin with every ripple. I feel sorry for him, and I'm ashamed of myself for feeling this way. I like to think I can understand his need for coming out here, that his inability to hold on to time is much like my own. Sometimes I wonder if he's scared of dying. I've thought about joining him in the pond. But to what end? I know for all his searching that what he's after was never really hidden, which is just another way of saying it can never be found.

## GEHENNA, DESTINATION

The first cases were reported in the spring, unusual, since the majority of historical incidents sharing what appeared to be a viral commonality were recorded as occurring during the sonorous fugue of autumn, predominantly. We attempted a comparison of current climate conditions with those of the same months pertaining to our past examples; our measurements, given a lack of accurate data for dates prior to 1907, were imprecise. I have taken to writing letters to various public officials requesting funding for additional studies. I tell them this outbreak must be contained, for we are doomed as lovers and satellites of love if it continues.

Their replies promise diligence. They are careful men.

So far it appears only women are currently infected. We are unsure as to the significance of this; the susceptibility of males is unknown at this time. As a precaution we have excused our female employees from work until further notice. Minor indignation has been recorded on their part.

The eleven known cases have been brought to our facility, seven by air, three by car, and one by train. I conducted a preliminary interview with the most symptomatic of the patients myself. Presented here is a brief transcript as I remember it:

“How do you feel?” I asked.

“Alone,” the patient said.

“And why do you feel this way?”

“Because he’s gone.”

“Who?” I asked.

The patient shook her head. She turned away from the table and stared at the wall. I allowed her several minutes before I continued.

“Who?” I asked again.

“My husband.”

“And where is he now?”

She gestured with her hand. “Boston. On a business trip.”

“When will he return?”

“I don’t know. A week.”

I noted that the patient was becoming visibly distraught. She tapped the tabletop with one hand and wiped at her eyes with the other. I held out a box of tissues. She took one.

“That’s not so long, is it?” I said. “Surely you can tolerate one week away from him.”

“It’s different this time,” she said. “I have this strange feeling. Like I may never see him again.”

I could sense my colleagues beyond the observation mirror, knew they would be scribbling furiously on their notepads. The patient blew her nose into the tissue. I underlined *visibly distraught* on my own pad.

“But you will,” I said. “And soon.”

“I know that. In my head, I do. It’s just that the rest of me doesn’t.”

She fell silent. I checked my watch; we’d been at this for about ten minutes. “What about phone calls? Surely it’s some comfort to talk to him.”

“He’s very busy,” she said. “Even talking on the phone doesn’t really help.”

“Because he’s not physically present?”

“It only makes things worse. I need to see him.”

“If I asked you what you think this means, what would you say?” I asked after a moment.

She hesitated. I imagined I could hear the scratch of pens come to a halt beyond the mirror.

“I miss him,” she said.

I phone my wife soon after the interview is over. I hear water running in the background when she picks up. I tell her she should limit her exposure to the public, friends, even relatives. I tell her that now is the time for patience. She agrees without knowing why. I am comforted by her trust in me.

Ours experiments so far point to the relapse we feared. Troubles we thought long eradicated, only dormant, perhaps, reawakening. Trembles wrack the bodies of patients to whom we can offer little comfort. What is it to miss someone? To long once more for company? It seems a sensation both familiar and unnatural.

Something stirs within those of us observing this change. Simplicity complicates. Our world is beginning to ache again.

It is agreed upon by our administration not to go public with information regarding these cases just yet. Our collective hope is that containment and isolation (given that the disease appears to spread through contact) may be sufficient in controlling and eventually eradicating this problem and thus render such disclosure unnecessary. It does no good to create panic, to remind everyone how things once were; they cannot, should not, be that way again. Such rekindling is dangerous. In it is held the topography of our demise.

Despite our efforts the sickness spreads, adapts itself much like a virus to new opportunities. In shopping plazas across the country women hold crude approximations of newborns in their arms and gesture toward the sky. Their men if they have them find it difficult to render aid. They watch while the women collapse on sidewalks, against cars, into the arms of passersby. The sickness is no longer secret now.

Weeks pass. The media is wild about this new disease. The early days of a few individuals roaming their neighborhoods, weeping and calling out names, are gone. Now entire blocks are clogged with people crying out for the lost and dead. There are reports in the far north of men who have succumbed to the despair; as of yet these reports are unverified. Our facility, its capacity having been reached some time ago, has stopped receiving new patients. We turn them away, hear them wailing as they retreat into the city.

I am curious to the point of agitation. There seems a bitter satisfaction in their distress. I wonder.

At night after dinner my wife reads the newspaper to me. She's disgusted at the behavior of the afflicted.

"It's ridiculous," she says. "Can you imagine? All these people acting like savages. What's gone is gone." She folds the paper and places it on the cushion beside her. "Simply ridiculous," she says again.

I recline in my chair, rub my eyes with the backs of my hands. I am relieved that we appear untouched in the midst of such an epidemic.

The cure is simple. Upon being reunited with her husband, the original patient I interviewed recovered completely, as did others under similar circumstances. But they were altered nonetheless, shaken by knowledge they'd spent years forgetting. Even with the most successful cases we were merely trading the sick for the scarred.

And what of those whose missing did not return? Or those lamenting the truly dead? There is no treatment for them.

Meanwhile the streets run with grief. A passion for the inflammable follows. Cities burn like watchfires ringed by lonely dark.

A pattern emerges from the bedlam: desire; necessity; denial. These feelings last for a yoctosecond, zeptosecond, hours, days, fortnights, lustra, exasecond. They stretch for miles in America, kilometers in Europe, furlongs on racetracks and rods in the parlance of surveyors. Beyond the atmosphere terms like astronomical units and parsecs are bandied about.

My time interweaves with the ill I encounter. I fear we are struggling over the same distance with pace as the only discrepancy. But it doesn't do to think of this, and so I hold myself together.

As a gesture of wellness my wife disappears for days and then reappears in the arms of strangers.

This is unnecessary, I tell her. No one thinks you unwell.

Still, she says, applying lipstick, arranging her hair. All this commotion excites her. She moves electriclike. It certainly can't hurt anything.

Why did we originally choose to stop wanting? When did absence disappear? No one remembers the details. Some say it was an act of natural selection. Adapt or die. Treatises are being written. In our current situation, theories of evolutionary protocol abound.

Sometimes, at night in bed, when I feel my wife asleep beside me, I send my mind in search of a long dormant memory. In it I am about twelve and very anxious. My mother works nights. Her absence terrifies me; my father does not know what to do. Our solution is to allow me to sleep on the couch while my father watches television. My mother calls just before my bedtime. It seems these simple reassurances of contact are enough to comfort me. During later years when the world has left such things behind I hide the shame of having needed this reassurance from others like it's a secret or a mystery.

My wife rolls over, moans softly as she slides an arm across my chest, and I make myself forget again. I feel slightly peculiar, from both my memory and the thought that she could just as easily be lying next to someone else, uttering the same sighs, the same sweet sleepy coos. They are not my music but hers and her ability to share them, more or less at will—something I had never considered until now—is paralyzing. Others had heard them, surely; if so, what does that mean? My face is any face, my ears, any ears.

This, her body against mine, scaffolded by night, feels like a trespass in ways I cannot describe. I am any number of lovers, I am finding out. I fall asleep thinking of her attended by other men.

There is talk these days of the initial outbreak. It seems the inability to halt the apparent future has given my colleagues a newfound appreciation for the past. What could we have done? Is this our failure? Our triumph? Such questions are never realized, however, not consciously. They survive in dreams, subtle pangs, momentary panic. But morale must be a constant to which we assign every available courage. No one speaks but for eventual deliverance.

Sources note the very first woman was not one of our initial eleven, but actually a dental hygienist from Omaha whose case went unreported for some time. Our men in Denver who finally documented her claim the grief she experiences is so powerful, even those around her who have not personally known loss are pressed into mourning by her pain. There are stories about her husband and his disappearance, but I cannot remember the details. If he is alive and knows of her love, how does he feel? How would I feel? I think I know, but I cannot say with certainty.

You wait for me most evenings, meet me at the door when I get home. We are possessed by foreboding now as the situation reveals its scope. Fewer uninfected remain every day. We sit with the windows open and listen to those less fortunate searching for completion. Their cries are loud but we do not see them like in the early days. Don't be afraid. You are not the one they want. Nor am I the one they want. How lucky we are to have escaped such madness. On the couch we hold each other. Evening rages. The newspapers are slowing. Television broadcasts overwhelmed. Why aren't we speaking? Have we only our thoughts now?

*Want me. Want me.*

Outside the moon bursts white. The nude bulbs of stars hang dimly in their sockets.

Our city has so far escaped the fires. No one is sure how. The buildings beg ignition; it is all we can do to keep our bodies from sparking as we go about our paths. I am sorry my presence here is still required. I've lost every desire to treat the ill. Instead I spend days pretending to read charts and case studies while avoiding people. I draw pictures of meals we've eaten together, beds in which we've slept, skies under which we've lolled.

I think about you often now, my love, and how we agreed that you might be safer somewhere else, across the sea, where the sickness has not spread. I will join you in Carcassonne as soon as possible, but I cannot say when that might be. I feel better knowing you have left the danger behind. That you are safe now in a way you cannot be here with me. I am comforted by this knowledge every night, as I remove my tie, my shoes, when I lie down in our bed and spread my limbs across the sheets. The light in the bathroom is on because that's how you left it, and I do not have it in me to turn it off. In your new, temporary home, I imagine you've been asleep for some time. You are living in the future by several hours; if this is true then I exist, presently, only in your past. You sleep in Carcassonne while I lie awake in America. When you departed I wanted to follow you across the ocean. I wanted to grind the Pyrenees between my teeth until the chalk of their ribs dusted the world. I wanted to rest beside you and say things only traveling lovers may say. But I am here in this Midwest city, where the snow has not stopped since you left, where every exhalation is a promise of combustion, in this city, this terrible place, and you are so very far away.

## DOMINION

That summer it was so hot the trees began to die and the grass curled up and whole landscapes recently flush gave themselves to dust and ruin. Each morning when Maddocks awoke he poured himself coffee in a chipped mug he had bought on vacation in Mexico and took it to the porch where he watched distant machines fell trees and tear up great gouges of earth. Their noise buzzed like a sore in the air and the men who ran them worked nonstop in shifts throughout the day. By now they had moved on to Thompson's land and were busy giving it what Thompson called "the treatment."

"No such thing as virgin timber any more," Thompson had told him while they stood in line at the diner a few days before. "Hasn't been since the 20s. Did you know that?"

"Nope," Maddocks said. He marveled at how Thompson wore overalls everywhere. He'd even seen the old man show up to a wedding in them.

Thompson bobbed his head, his red wide face given to creases and patches of rough white whiskers. "They came in, cut it down and hauled it away. Took the land right off whoever owned it if they had to. Wasn't nothing could be done."

"That's a shame," Maddocks said. He always felt strange when he talked to Thompson. At his best Thompson struck him as the sort of man who ought to be looked up to, imitated in some way in the areas where Maddocks figured himself to be culturally deficient.

"You know what the worst of it was?"

"What?"

Leaning in until he was close enough for Maddocks to see the curly white hairs that flowered from his nose and smell the wintergreen snuff on his breath, Thompson snorted deeply and swallowed. "They was yankees what did it."

He arched his head back to allow this revelation time to register. Maddocks shrugged. Thompson began rooting around in his pocket and pulled out a wadded mash of bills layered with lint and empty peppermint wrappers.

"Just the same," Thompson continued, "when the time comes, you'll sell. We all will. Money's too good."

By now they'd reached the cashier. Maddocks counted out his money and put it on the counter. "Put money in thy purse," he whispered.

"What's that?" Thompson asked.

"It means I need my trees, Mr. Thompson," Maddocks said over his shoulder. "I'm partial to the shade."

Thompson laughed and clapped him on the back. "Between you and me," he said, once again drawing up the space between them, "I already leased fifteen acres. Looking at the other twenty before it's through."

Maddocks tilted his head to the girl behind the counter whose chest shook as she smacked her lips and rang up his bill. He wondered if he stuck out to her as not quite native. He was always wondering that about people. Despite having lived in the area for most of his life, beside men like Thompson he could have easily been from somewhere—anywhere—else. He read a lot, avoided sports, didn't ride horses, couldn't weld or fix a fence. He lost the only fight he'd ever been in and his two step was a far cry from passable. Before he left for college he thought himself noticeably different from his friends, neighbors, and when he returned he was

certain of it. That all he really wanted were these facets of an imaginary lifestyle applied to him made his failure to appropriate them even more obvious.

“Do me a favor,” he said to Thompson when he had taken a toothpick from the holder. He dug between his teeth, felt the small particle of food with his tongue before swallowing it. “If they ask you tell them there’s a rare Asian beetle making the rounds on my property. I’m tired of them hassling me.”

“Hell,” Thompson said, letting the debris from his pocket fall to the floor. “Don’t tell em that. They got a fondness for anything that sounds exotic.”

This morning on the porch while he watched the loggers work, for no good reason, Maddocks felt slightly ashamed of himself. His trailer, hauled from his father’s deer lease to its current location and now rusted in place, squatted like a ripe tumor behind him. His older model pickup lazed in the yard like a lesser growth. Gibby’s car parked next to it. Yesterday he had seen men in brand new trucks heading toward Thompson’s increasingly bare land, and he wondered what it was like to drive such a nice vehicle without worrying about making payments for it. He was poor but educated, and after thinking about it he decided that an education made being poor that much worse. Working at the gas station. Sticking with Gibby all this time. Not at all what he’d planned for but what he’d allowed himself. The recent timber boom meant there was money to be had from the land his father had given him, but at the same time he also felt to part with it violated the spirit of the person he wanted to be. He was trying to reconcile it, though. He was trying like hell.

Gibby was still in bed when he came back inside. She'd kicked at the covers until they were mostly on the floor and now she lay across the mattress with outslung limbs. Her nightshirt stuck to her.

"It sucks so much sleeping like this," she said, pulling the material away from her body. "Can't you do something? It's so hot in here."

"I could put a shirt on," he said.

"Very funny. I don't know how you can live with no air conditioning."

"It's a trick I learned from an old Indian friend of mine," he said, watching for the dark blush of areola beneath her shirt as the fabric settled over her again. "Wear less clothes."

Gibby crossed her arms. Maddocks glanced away. He didn't want to give her the satisfaction of catching him staring.

"Well she *was* a stripper," he continued.

She waved at the missing blade of the ceiling fan loitering above. "At least fix that."

"Buy the parts and I will."

She was quiet for a moment. He knew what it was about and dreaded it. "You know the timber man's supposed to come by today," she said.

"Tell him we're not interested."

She turned so she was sitting on the edge of the bed. Her panties were a blaze of color against the whiteness of her body.

He stared openly.

"You like that?" Gibby asked, smiling. She enjoyed being wanted.

"Maybe I do."

Gibby stood up and stretched. “Too bad,” she said, bending down to pick up a pair of shorts. She put them on. “It’s too hot for that sort of thing.”

Maddocks frowned. “Are you working today?” he asked.

“Not today,” she said. “Kathy told me the salon’s closed until the gas leak’s repaired. Figured I’d head into town, do some shopping.”

“Bring back an AC,” he said. He pretended to wipe his brow and fling sweat on her.

“Gross.” She picked at the clothes lying on the floor. “I need to get ready.”

“I’ll be waiting here on you when you get back,” he said. He turned to leave.

“You wanna go?” she asked. He loved the way her hair curled naturally around her face. She’d laugh at him when he wove his fingers through it, tugged on it, call him silly and odd when he’d tell her how it reminded him of this poem or that. He wasn’t always sure she was joking.

“Gonna stick around here. Make sure no one steals our trees.”

“Quite the cowboy. Defending the ancestral homestead.”

He thought about that. “Goddamn right,” he said.

Maddocks slumped in the recliner with another cup of coffee. He would wait until Gibby had left for town before he started reading. He often read while he was alone at the trailer. Novels, biographies, even some of Gibby’s romances with the big chested men halfleering at equally big chested women on their covers. He’d skip to the sex parts and not feel bad about it. Sometimes he’d encounter something new that he’d want to try with Gibby. He’d dog ear the page.

Another new pickup rolled into the yard and shone healthy in the sunlight next to his own blighted truck. He tried not to want more than he had as he listened to the door swing open and then slam.

He leaned toward the window after a moment and watched the timber man hesitate on the porch, watched him regard the state of the trailer and the raggedy screen door he was about to open.

That's right, he thought. We're just poor folk out here. Got no sense. Guaranteed to sell cheap.

A knock.

"Who's at the door?" Gibby called from the bathroom.

"Timber man."

Gibby appeared wrapped in a towel. She was barefoot and her hair hung in limp wet strands. "Well open it. You can't leave him standing there."

"You open it," he said. "I've got no business with him."

She frowned, decided to show him who he was dealing with, and crossed the room to the door. She swung it open just as the timber man was about to knock again.

"Hello!" she said, stepping to the side so he could pass. "Come in, come in. Honey, we have a visitor."

The timber man started at the sight of Gibby in her towel. "Ma'am, I'm sorry—" he began.

"It's quite alright," she said. The timber man came inside and stood flustered. He held a stack of folders against his chest. Maddocks noticed his long sleeves, tucked in shirt, the khakis that puddled against the tops of a dirty pair of workboots.

“Mrs—,” he said, tilting his head to her.

She cut him off. “Oh, it’s not missus.”

The timber man kept his eyes on her as she beamed at him. Maddocks didn’t care for his expression. He hated the way Gibby could make him feel like the least important person in the room. She’d always been able to do that.

“Maybe you ought to go put some clothes on before your towel gets away from you,” Maddocks said.

“That would be a shame,” Gibby said.

The man cleared his throat. “Certainly would,” he said.

Gibby stepped lightly back toward the bedroom. “I suppose I really should. It was very nice to meet you, Mr—?”

“Bennett,” the timber man said. “It’s Bennett.”

“Well I’ll let you two talk. A pleasure, Mr. Bennett,” she said, disappearing down the hallway.

“Delightful,” Bennett said when Gibby had gone. He continued to stand.

Maddocks coughed. “If you’re finished taking the slack out of your pants sit down and let’s hear what you’re selling.”

“Oh, certainly,” Bennett said. He sat on the couch and took his time rolling up his sleeves. He began shuffling through papers. Sweat appeared on his forehead and began to creep out from beneath the armpits of his blue dress shirt.

“Sorry about that,” Maddocks said. “Hotter in here than it is outside.”

“Quite alright,” Bennett said. He picked up a folder. “As I’m sure you already know I’m with Santabarb Timber. We’re expanding operations in this area and we’d like to talk to you about the timber on your land.”

“I appreciate the opportunity,” Maddocks said, “but the answer is no. I’m not selling you anything off my property.”

“Now, Mr. Maddocks, hear me out.”

Maddocks drank his coffee in a long slurp. “I’m hearing you. I don’t think you’re hearing me.” He pointed with the cup toward the kitchen. “Coffee?”

“No, thank you.” Bennett produced a brochure. Maddocks saw that it had already been written on in pencil. “If you’d take a look at this—“

Maddocks waved it off. “Saw it the first time your people stopped by. Told them the same thing then,” he said.

“If you’d tell me some of your concerns, Mr. Maddocks, maybe I could help you out with them.”

Maddocks shook his head. “It’s not a worry like you’re thinking. I’m not trying to save some endangered possum or a shrub that only sees fit to grow in our brand of dirt. Maybe it’s a matter of not wanting my land looking like it’s been shelled by artillery after y’all have cleared out.”

Bennett picked at a pale streak of mud on the toe of his boot, powdered it between his fingers until it drifted down to the carpet. He did this with the absentness of a man unused to dealing with someone he could not immediately charm. He brushed his hand off on his pants leg. “Mr. Maddocks, I can promise Santabarb will do right by you. We’ve contracted with several forest management groups to ensure a minimal impact on the environment. We’ll make the roads

and we'll clean up after ourselves when we're done. We certainly won't leave the land resembling anything like a warzone."

"You say that, but I've seen your clearcuts. Looks like you sent a troupe of blind men in with chainsaws then threw dynamite at what was left. Naw sir," Maddocks said, scratching his forehead. "I don't believe I'm interested."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"It'd be nice if y'all would take no for an answer and leave it at that."

Bennett nodded slowly, like he was dealing with a child who had disappointed him. "We can't force you to sell us the land," Bennett went on. "Or even the timber on it. You know that. But I can tell you that when all your neighbors have money to show for their acreage and you don't, you'll regret it. Sure as I'm standing here."

Maddocks forced closed the leg rest of his recliner. He took his hat off and adjusted it back. The gesture made him feel better. Confident. Growing up he'd watched his father do it over and over, like a habit or compulsion, until his mother had complained his father was rubbing bald spots on the side of his head. His own hat had a smooth spot rubbed along the edge of the bill where he pinched it between his thumb and finger. No baldness yet.

"I can work for any money I might need," Maddocks said. "You have a good day now."

Bennett held out his hand. Maddocks shook it.

"I'm going to leave these with you," Bennett said, placing a large manila envelope on the end table. "There's some informational sheets, and one of my cards if you change your mind."

He let the screen door slam behind him as he walked across the yard. Maddocks turned when he heard Gibby behind him. Even in a faded t-shirt she looked beautiful.

"That go as well as I think it did?" she asked. "I didn't hear no yelling."

He said nothing.

“Alright then,” she said after a moment, sighing. She snagged her purse off the table and began rummaging through it for her keys.

“They’re by the door,” he said. He imagined Bennett driving down the road in his company truck. He went back to his recliner.

Maddocks’s parents lived less than a mile away down a blacktop road that wound through pine thickets and occasionally stands of hardwood. The logging began near Thompson’s place and spread out until, like Maddocks had feared, it resembled a landscape taken to task by fire and steel. He passed several semis on his way, each hauling a load of pine. He wondered how much they were worth.

Their house was brick, small, tidy. His mother tended to the yard. When he was younger Maddocks had gathered the eggs every morning from the chicken coop that now sat empty off to the side.

He knocked on the door. After a moment his father opened it.

“Hey there,” his father asked. “What are you up to?”

“Just stopped by.”

“Come on in. Your mother will hate she missed you.”

Maddocks went into the living room and sat down in the recliner. His father pushed aside several pillows and stretched out on the couch.

“She in town?”

His father shook his head. “Your aunt’s. Helping her go through the attic.”

Inside the house was cool and dark. Maddocks could hear the air conditioner running.

“Y’all getting on okay?”

“Good as ever,” his father said. He reached for a glass of tea on the table. “So what’s on your mind? You usually don’t stop by during the week.”

“I’m off today,” he said.

“Uh huh. What else is there?”

Maddocks hesitated. “Fellow from the timber company came by again today.”

“I figured as much. They’ve been comin and goin around here these past few days. Can’t move without steppin on one of them.”

When Maddocks didn’t reply his father went on. “You still not wantin to sell?”

Maddocks shook his head.

His father drew his finger across the perspiration on the glass like he wasn’t sure what to say. “You know keepin it just to keep it ain’t no good reason.”

“I know it,” Maddocks said. He fiddled with the arm cover on the chair.

“I give you that land how many years ago? So you’d have something to start with. I ain’t gonna start tellin you what to do with it. I understand you’ve got certain feelings on the matter. But it’s something to think about.”

“Don’t get me wrong the cash would be nice,” Maddocks said. “I’m just tired of things changing. I grew up running around those woods. My whole life they’ve been here. Now they’re cutting them down and soon—after the ugliness of their clearcut fades—it’ll all be pastureland. I’ll end up sounding like grandma when I talk about it, telling everyone what the last century was like.

His father laughed. “Everything changes, son. That’s life. But if that’s the way you see things then don’t sell. That simple. You alright for money?”

“Yeah, yeah I’m fine. That’s part of it. I don’t *need* the money I’d get from it. Are y’all alright?”

“We’re getting by. I can give you some if you need it.”

Maddocks put his hand up. “Naw, but thank you.” He twirled his hand above his head. “You can always sell the timber off this place, right?” He stopped laughing when he saw his father’s face. “That’s a joke. I’m being funny.”

“I know,” his father said.

Maddocks got a feeling inside him like the egg he had eaten for breakfast had grown arms and legs and was trying, in one direction or another, to escape the confines of his stomach.

“Tell me you didn’t.”

“We haven’t signed anything yet. It’s just a possibility at this point.”

Maddocks’s shoulders slumped. “Alright.”

“Hey now,” his father said. “It’s not a done deal. Even if we decide to go ahead it would only be selective cutting. Wouldn’t be taking it all.”

“I understand.”

His father sat up. “Oh come on now. It’s not what you’re making it out to be.”

“I know it isn’t. Can’t help it. Don’t you feel strange, looking around, seeing how nothing’s the same as it was when you were a kid? Even things you had control over. They changed and you either didn’t or couldn’t notice. Then when you did it was too late to do anything about them.”

“You get the strangest notions sometimes,” his father said. “You’ve got to let things go eventually. Hell, I can’t even remember that far back.”

“It’s because you’re getting old,” Maddocks replied, but the truth of that statement kept him from laughing at what was a usual joke between them. His father said nothing at all, just picked up the television remote and flipped through the channels.

“You want to watch a show on sharks?” his father asked after a moment.

“Sure,” Maddocks said. So they did.

On the way home Maddocks saw Thompson checking his mail and pulled over. Thompson craned his head inside the cab, as though breaching the invisible barrier of the window was necessary before communication could take place. Maddocks halfslid to the center of the bench seat. He felt the holes in the seat snatching at the edges of his backpockets. Already a halo of heat budded around his face.

“Howdy,” Thompson said.

“Howdy,” Maddocks said, pronouncing it *high-dee*, the same way Thompson said it.

“I imagine you was just up the road. How’s your momma and daddy?”

“They’re doing alright,” Maddocks said. “Momma’s in town.”

“Look at this,” Thompson said suddenly. His head, irresistibly, punctuated the direction he was pointing by tilting idly to that side. “Look what they done to my pasture. Dug ruts deep enough to drown a cow in.”

Maddocks glanced at the field. From where he sat it resembled one large tract of mud with the lonesome arms of branches curdling forth from its mire and the discarded bulk of lesser

trees and clumps of brush piled high. “I didn’t know you were letting them drive through your pasture.”

“You know the worst part about it?” Thompson asked. He spat on the ground.

“There were yankees involved?”

“Squirrel huntin is done,” Thompson said without hearing him. “Damn shame, that is. Used to be I could walk ten feet into them woods and kill five or six at a time without goin a step further. All gone now.”

“You’re welcome to hunt my place,” Maddocks said. He tried to feel sorry for the old man, but it was difficult. Thompson had invited them in after all. Mostly he wished Thompson would talk about something other than timber. Lately everything was about timber. Maddocks could barely stand it. Like a man worrying an upset tooth, though, even he couldn’t leave the subject alone. He kept coming back again and again to it, as though to confront it, stand opposed, struck a chord within the soul of the man he wanted to be.

A semi drove by drowning out the conversation. “You ought to consider selling,” Thompson told him when it passed.

Maddocks drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “No, thank you. Had enough of that.”

“You’re not turnin into one of them activists, are you?” Thompson asked. “They’re all over the news these days.”

“Lord no,” Maddocks said. “Naw sir. I’d just rather keep things as they are.”

“You ain’t old enough to think like that,” Thompson said. “Listen at me now. Just consider what I’m sayin.”

“I appreciate it, I really do. I figure if they’ve sold you on it, though, Mr. Thompson, there’s no hope for the rest of us.”

Thompson sighed. He gave one of his snorts, spat again. “Ain’t always easy. But you do what you can to get by. Bonnie and me, we worry about you sometimes. We just don’t want you to miss out.” He stepped back from the truck. “You ought to get inside where it’s cool.”

Maddocks moved back behind the wheel and put the truck in gear. “Headed to the house right now. You take care of yourself, Mr. Thompson.”

“I’ll do that,” Thompson said. “Look after yourself as well.”

Maddocks adjusted his hat and pulled out onto the blacktop. Before he rounded the corner he looked in his mirror and saw Thompson still standing beside the mailbox, like a statue or a painting of a man who in his life had seen too much, and also probably not enough.

Back at his place Maddocks left the keys in the ignition and got out of the truck. Gibby had not returned yet. He walked past the house and entered the woods between two broad pines and watched the light fall away as he drew farther from the yard. He came to one of the few oaks sprinkled throughout the thicket, and deciding it as good a spot as any, curled up against the base of the tree and set his mind to dreaming. Even with the heat pressing down on him like a physical thing after awhile he fell into the weird sleep of one finding rest in an unfamiliar bed. He was so very tired. Small things in his mind: Gibby peeking at him from around the shower curtain and Gibby laughing as she washes dishes. He does not see his father but his mother stirs endlessly a tea pitcher in the kitchen of his youth. Power lines along the highway run and run forever. He steps around the plaster skin and brickbones of the demolished corner store where he spent his afternoons as a teenager, cawing at the girls and talking himself into love. He skips rocks at the

old quarry where they swam during the summer until the water itself turns to stone. From the blacktop he could hear the humrubble of trucks while against him the roots pressed into the thin of his body and he slept on.

## THE MEDICINES ARE IN THE WATER

We meet at the agreed-upon time in the park. She brings a small dog I've never seen before and wears an enormous hat. I motion toward the dog. I ask if it is hers.

"It certainly isn't," she says. I can see she's offended. The dog is wearing the sort of collar a truck driver or a construction worker would choose for it.

I offer her my hand. She refuses to take it.

"It's a lovely dog," I say. "I should hope to own one like it some day."

"You're lying," she says. The dog walks in front of her. She looks like she is slowing a chariot when she pulls on the leash.

So I endeavor to be honest. "I do not care for small dogs. But I could like this one."

She shakes her head. "This dog does not need your approval."

I try again to take her hand. I brush her knuckles and she recoils.

We walk for a time without saying anything. A storm is blowing up. The trees rattle. They block the sky from our view.

She leans into me. Her arm slides against mine. I float.

"I will love you until yankee bayonets cease to govern Texas," I say.

"You're foolish," she says, but I think this pleases her.

She begins walking and I follow. The dog sniffs everything.

"For a man in love you haven't even commented on how I look today," she says finally, patting her (new?) hat with her free hand. She smiles. The result is like an axe from heaven hitting me in the chest.

I take hold of her arm. I turn her until we are facing each other. I regard her from top to bottom. I linger at her breasts. I sigh when I follow the line of her legs from the ground up to her waist. The lovers on their blankets show up in my vision like shadows on her skin.

In case there are any misconceptions regarding the details, the lady with the dog is my wife. I met her in the park because she will not let me come home. To whom the dog belongs I do not know. But I have my suspicions.

Where I live is subject to some dispute. If you were to look me up in a phonebook, you would find a perfectly ordinary street number on a perfectly ordinary street. If you looked at my driver's license you would find the same information printed upon it. If you asked my best friend, in whose guest room I've been sleeping, he would give you an entirely different set of perfectly ordinary street numbers located on yet another perfectly ordinary street. If you ask me personally while I'm still thinking about the park, then I would tell you my home is on a grass-stained blanket, my home is bent at the knees, it is folded around a woman like a shape at angles with itself.

I go to the hardware store in the rain where I purchase a hammer and a chisel. Then I drive to the other side of town in traffic as thin as fingernails.

I park the truck in her parents' driveway. Her father steps out onto the porch to greet me. I tip my hat to him.

"It's no good being here," he calls to me.

I carry the hammer and chisel to the oak tree in their yard. I mark a spot about chest high.  
“I’ll only be a minute,” I say.

The tree is stained with rainwater. My first attempt at carving does not work out.

“Leave the tree alone and get out of here,” her father says.

I stand in the rain and continue to practice with gentle strokes. The hammer makes an uncomfortable noise.

Her father again urges my departure. He is not interested in our former friendship. I am his daughter’s unwelcome ornament.

I work quickly once I get the hang of it. Her father goes inside the house, comes out with the black powder rifle that hangs over the mantle. Through the kitchen window I see her mother talking hurriedly on the phone. I walk back to my truck and throw the tools on the passenger seat. Her father stays on the porch. He keeps his powder dry.

“She told me you asked about the dog!” he yells as I start the engine.

I am gone before the police arrive.

There is a story inked above the urinal in the department store downtown. Few people shop there anymore. This story is about a man who insisted that love was the medicine of the world. In it his wife falls ill and takes a new lover and he is forced to watch her convalescence, the way she glows while she is healing. I would like to find the fellow who penned this tale and ask him about the hurt inside me. I do not think I will ever find him though because no one shops there anymore.

I try calling her from a payphone. When she doesn't answer I order her mountains of balloons. When she releases these outside I watch from where I'm parked on the street. I send her cards I hope she reads. I buy more chisels. I take banners proclaiming my love and spread them across all the roads I know she drives. I cry until my eyes are glass and my throat is swollen and I tell no one.

I'm often curious about the lovers I saw in the park. There were so many. They were built from limbs and motion. Did they have permits? Were permits necessary? Who was overseeing their entanglement?

She agrees to meet me at a location she knows well and to which I have never been. She's waiting for me in the parking lot when I arrive. The dog is not with her. I do not bring this up.

This place, she tells me, has springs in which the Native Americans once bathed. She says in the 19<sup>th</sup> century their healing properties were known in places as far away as Europe.

We walk along a trail. She is taking me to the springs.

I gather wild orchids as we descend deeper into the forest. I show them to my wife but she remains uninterested. After awhile she speaks.

"You thought the dog was mine," she says.

The trees have dried out from the rain. Their natural color is much lighter.

"I do not want to talk of dogs," I say at last. I think about the tree at her parents' place. One day I hope to lead her to it and show her what I've been unable to say. I'm almost certain she will understand.

“I want to come home,” I say.

“Perhaps when I’m better situated.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“You will. I’ll let you know.”

We lapse into the silence I know is a disease. I throw the orchids away. My wife does not notice and I am embarrassed because of it. We continue hiking.

“The first spring is just up ahead,” she says.

We place our things around the edge when we arrive. Before I slip into the water from the surrounding rocks, she whispers to me. She says I am not honest with her. I tell her love is the only thing worth lying about. The weight of her voice settles into the nests of my ears. Here is a truth for her after all: water falling anywhere makes a sound all water can hear.

## ACROSS THE RIVER

Perhaps it was the spirit of his great-grandfather, dead some time and buried behind the house, the selfsame man who claimed to have killed the last Comanche in Texas, whispering to him on his birth night, but whatever the reason he had been born a wild thing and when he came of age there were no horses left to steal and the natives were all gone. At sixteen he took to banditry in the only form left to him and ran dope in his pickup from Fort Stockton to San Angelo. He began spitting like the cowboys in the movies and wore his hat mashed down low on his head while he sold half-pound bags of Mexican swag to industrious students at Angelo State University. He fought boys and later men and lost as often as he won. After the first two broken noses his parents refused to pay any more doctor bills and now his nose sprouted crooked and his left ear cauliflowered and he appeared as though assembled from ill-fitting parts.

After a few months of being small time his contact in Fort Stockton told him if he wanted he could score a much larger deal. All he had to do was meet some men in the desert. He thought about this, decided he had no good reason not to do so. He agreed in the manner he'd adopted, spitting followed by a short nod. He went out that night to celebrate but he could not find any girls that were willing except the ones he had to pay for and he did not want that so he decided to wait. He felt sorry for himself when he went home horny and lonely and he made a promise to have a woman when he was done with the deal.

A week later he woke early one morning, dressed and combed his hair. He counted out money from the locker beneath his bed. To this he added what he kept rolled up in a plastic bag and taped above the doorframe in his closet. He left his wallet on the dresser and went into his

parents' room. He took a .22 pistol from the drawer of the nightstand. They were both up and gone already, his father to the Yates field and his mother to her sister's in Midland. He stopped at the gun cabinet and pulled out an old single-shot .410. He felt around until he came across a box of shells. He stuffed a handful in his pocket and then he closed the door behind him.

In the kitchen he filled a green Thermos with leftover coffee and went outside to his truck. The pistol he tucked in his waistband and the shotgun he stood barrel down in the floorboard. He set the Thermos next to him on the seat. His tires stirred up dust as he pointed the pickup south toward Sanderson. Already the day was hot and he tipped his hat up to wipe at the sweat and his shirt stuck to him. The radio was off and the windows rolled down and he nodded to the few people he passed on his way. One of them, a girl he went to school with and had never said more than two words to, made him feel awkward when she waved and held his gaze until he'd passed by her yard. For a moment he considered stopping and going back. He figured it was no use and kept going.

He drank coffee straight from the Thermos. His pockets were heavy with shells and these pressed into him while he sat. He liked the way they felt. He liked the gun in his belt and the shotgun beside him.

He turned off on a dirt road before getting into Sanderson. It snaked through chaparral and mesquite and he followed it for about a mile. The road crossed an old wash marked with patches of dirty water, then ran parallel with the dead riverbed before ending at a stand of cactus and scrub oak. He parked at the edge of an arroyo with deep sides. A shell fell from his pocket and he scratched around the seat for it.

He waited awhile before he spotted another truck approaching over the hill from the direction opposite he had come. He got out and placed the shotgun in the bed where he could get

to it in a hurry. His shirt draped over the pistol and he made sure it was secure before retrieving the money from the cab and placing it alongside the shotgun.

The truck pulled up and stopped. Three men got out and walked toward him. One was smiling and the other two carried guns. He hooked his thumbs in his belt loops to keep his hands from shaking. These men made him nervous. He spit, moved his body slightly so he felt the pistol dig into him.

“Hey, *hombre*,” the smiling man called to him.

“You who I’m supposed to meet?”

“Who else out here?” the man asked, but before he could answer he noticed movement among the scrub oak and then the gunshots started.

The man fell forward and his friends ran back to the truck. They crouched by the wheels and fired at nothing they could see.

He dove into the arroyo after the first round of shooting. He managed to bring the shotgun with him but left the money behind. He propped against the top of the embankment and settled in like he’d seen on television. There was movement next to a live oak toward his right and he fired, watched the way the barrel was shaking and knew his shot had went wide. He slunk down into the ditch to reload. He’d barely inserted the shell and closed the shotgun when it went off into dirt next to his feet.

“Goddamnit,” he said, and dug another shell from his pocket. He fumbled with it. He wondered briefly if he was a coward.

By now the gunfire had slowed from its opening pace. He crawled back to the top of the ditch. One of the men by the truck saw him and shot at him. He ducked his head and shot back. “You sumbitch! Why you shooting at me? I ain’t with them.”

They continued this way for close to two hours. He'd stick the gun up over the edge of the ditch every so often and fire to let them know he was still game. Noon came and brought with it a heat that burned his skin and made his shotgun hot to the touch. He didn't start to worry until he noticed he was sweating less and his head felt cloudy. Then he tried not to think about.

He caught one fellow sneaking up the wash from the west toward him and he pulled his pistol and emptied it at the man. The man retreated the way he had come and did not return. He realized he had no more ammo for the pistol and frowned. He dropped it beside him. It rolled down into a small pool of stagnant water where he heard it splash. The coffee was still in the truck but he had no way to getting to it, and he wasn't sure if it would even do him any good. Every time he tried to look over the edge of the arroyo another round of shots would send him back down.

He considered the water behind him, felt what his father called waterlust tug at his chest and decided he had no choice. He fired again—one of his last shells—and slid down to the water. It was a puddle no bigger than a dinner plate with a greasy film floating on top that smelled foul. He fished the pistol out and tossed it to the side. His shirt came off and he stretched it out over the surface of the water. He sucked water through it again and again until he started retching. Then he draped the wet shirt across his back and returned to his place at the top of the embankment and waited.

Less than an hour later he knew something was wrong. His guts were rolling. He tried counting his ammo to keep his mind off it. This scared him worse than all the shooting and he made up his mind to try to reach the highway. By now spots were appearing in his vision and his tongue felt fat in his mouth. He kept low as he moved back east. He hadn't gone far when the cramps hit him.

He dropped to the dirt and undid his jeans. He pushed them down and had barely cleared them before he was going. He felt weak and had no choice but to lie on his side and wait for it to end. When he thought he was done he pulled his pants up and went on. Not twenty feet later the same thing happened.

It was slow going after that. He dragged himself along the wash with his britches down, leaving a trail of watery shit behind him. The walls had shallowed and forced him to stay hunched over as he moved from fear of being shot. Overhead the sun came down on his bare skin and he felt himself reddening. Some tree the kind of which he did not know with limbs and leaves like human hair draped across his path but offered no shade. The shotgun finally dropped from his hands and he did not stoop to retrieve it. The cramps were constant now and the intervals between his goings shorter. He had given up trying to keep the mess off him. Sweat softened the leather of his boots and dirt stuck to him like new skin. He managed this awkward shuffle until he tripped and went down and did not get back up. His eyes closed and he felt his body betraying him.

The room was cool and dark in places beyond the window's reach when he woke. Sunlight spoke through the curtains and razored thin strips of light across his bed. Dust trapped in this light made the room feel like it was held in perpetual motion. His head hurt and his mouth was dry. His stomach felt like he'd been kicked in it.

When he tried to sit up he found he could not. His limbs were weak and refused to move properly. He twisted his head to look around. The room had bookcases along the far walls and a small table with a bowl and rag on it next to the bed. A ceiling fan circled slow and moved no air. His hat hung from the back of a chair near the door and his boots were nearby.

The covers were pulled up to his neck. He shrugged them back and realized he was in clothes not his own. As he did so the door opened and a young girl came into the room. She noticed him watching her and went to the bed.

“You’re awake,” she said. “I was beginning to wonder.”

He swallowed. It was painful. “Where am I?”

“You don’t remember?” she asked. “You were awake when they brought you in.”

“I don’t remember nothing,” he said, thinking about the scene at the arroyo. He wondered if they were all still back there, shooting at one another. He tried not to be glad he wasn’t.

“Chenché was checking the fences when he found you. There’s no telling how long you were out there before he brought you back.” She sat down on the edge of the bed.

His lips were cracked and dry. He licked them. “That was mighty kind of Chenchee.”

She nodded. “He’s a good man. Capable.” She smiled. “I’m Abilia.”

Up close she was prettier than he had thought, dark hair, eyes he couldn’t quite make out. Her shirt was tight against her and he grew embarrassed when he noticed this and looked away. She smelled like cinnamon and horses.

“Am I still in Texas?” he asked.

She laughed and reached for the rag on the table. She dipped it into the bowl and began wiping his brow. “Of course you are. Did you think you’d been kidnapped and sent to Mexico?”

When she touched him he jumped and his burnt skin blushed and he was made aware of just how spare his new clothes were. “My pants,” he said. “And the rest of my clothes. Where are they?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “We had to get rid of them. You were—you had, I mean—“

“I get it,” he said. Shamed. “I remember that.”

“It’s nothing to worry about,” she said quickly. “The sun—“

“I drank bad water.”

“That will do it, too.”

He cursed himself in his head. “How long I been here?” he asked, hoping she would leave soon.

“This is your second day,” she said. “You’ve been keeping water down since yesterday morning.” She stood up, placed the rag back on the table. “You must be hungry by now. I’ll bring you something.”

“Sure,” he said.

While she was gone he tried to turn himself back into a man. He couldn’t picture any of the outlaws on television in their beat up hats and with pistols hanging from their belts being found under the same circumstances. There was nothing dignified about his situation. The more he thought about it, the more he decided he should’ve made his stand at the arroyo and accepted what might have come.

He had propped himself up against the pillows when Abilia came into the room carrying a tray of food and a pitcher of water. An older man in a faded shirt and dirty boots followed her. She put the tray on the bed and stepped back.

“This is my father,” she said. “He wants to know how you’re feeling.”

Lee picked up a tortilla and spooned frijoles and chunks of tomatoes onto it. He took his time folding it before speaking. “I’m feeling much better.”

She spoke to her father in Spanish. He nodded. “My father wants to know your name,” she said to him.

“Tell him it don’t matter what he calls me. I’ll be leaving soon enough. I appreciate the hospitality.”

Abilia shook her head. “He’s interested in business with you. He doesn’t like to talk business with strangers.”

“He’s got a lot of plans for a feller who don’t say nothing.”

Abilia smiled. “He prefers to speak Spanish. You understand.”

Her father pulled her to him, whispered something. She shrugged. “He asked if you would tell him your name.”

He shook his head.

“He wants to know your name,” she said again. “Just tell him.”

He pointed his tortilla at the man. “Can he talk or can’t he?”

Abilia’s father walked across the room and dragged a chair over to the bedside. He sat down. “My name is Estefan,” he said.

“Well, hell,” he said. “Mine’s Lee.”

Estefan crossed his legs. Behind him Abilia stepped back into the hallway. “Son,” he said, leaning forward. “I know what you are.”

Lee felt his stomach roll. He couldn’t say why. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I know what you do. I know what you sell.”

“You don’t seem like the type to be interested in that sorta thing,” Lee said.

“I’m not,” Estefan said. “It’s more about what you can provide than what you can sell.”

“I ain’t sure I follow.”

“It’s simple, really. You make money by dealing. You hold *those* deals,” he said, “on my land.”

Lee said, “This the first time I been out here. I ain’t big time like you’re thinking.”

“I know exactly what you were doing. You weren’t the only thing Chenché found out there. Regardless of the frequency of your visits to my property, you are still making money. And I believe it would be in your interest to share some of that money. With me.”

Lee started to spit. He realized he had nowhere to do it and swallowed. “What if I say no?”

Estefan put his hands together like he was praying. “I hope you don’t. It would be unfortunate if certain people found out where you were.”

Lee put the last of his burrito down on the plate. “Like the assholes who were shooting at me?”

Estefan shrugged. “I doubt they would appreciate your attempt to infringe upon their business.”

“I ain’t infringing nothing.”

“Something tells me they won’t see it that way.”

“What’s to keep me from just walking out of here?”

Outside the sun had turned into an orange glow. Lee heard an engine start. Estefan pointed toward the sound. “Chenché would stop you.”

“Yeah, I done heard about Chenchee. Top hand, is he?”

“He is what he is.”

“So what’s the deal? You expect me to stay here until—?”

“Until you come up with the money. Or can convince me you’re good for it.”

“There’s a problem,” Lee said. The plate upended as he turned in bed and the burrito landed on the floor. Estefan picked it up, brushed it off, and put it back on the plate. “I lost all my money. The day you found me.”

“Then you’ll have to come up with something else.”

“You’re awfully brave to sleep with someone under your roof who don’t want to be there.”

“I’m not worried, son.” Estefan said.

“Chenchee again?”

Esteban nodded. “He’d follow you even if you killed me. He’s that sort.”

“Sounds like he’s good for a little bit of everything.”

“Chenché is a rare one,” Estefan said. “A hard worker.”

Lee wished he had his hat on. “You putting a lot of stock in him.”

“You’ll forgive me for saying so, but I doubt Chenché would have problems with someone so recently recovered from very nearly shitting himself to death.” He paused. “Or someone so young.”

Lee said nothing.

Estefan stood up. “Think about it,” he said. He picked up the plate and walked to the door. “You can let me know tomorrow. I doubt you’ll feel much like trying to leave before then anyway. This is good business. I make money and you get away. There’s no reason not to go along with it.”

He pulled the door closed behind him. Lee kicked back the covers and had to rest before he got them fully off. Then his stomach began hurting and he curled up and tried not to move.

The next morning Lee felt a little better. He woke early with his stomach settled. He drank the last of the water in the pitcher. Some time in the night Abilia had brought in clean pants and a shirt and he put these on. The clothes were big and draped on him. He pulled on his boots and finally felt like a man when he took his hat and centered it on his head.

His steps were loud on the wooden floor and he came out of the hallway and into the kitchen. Abilia was at the stove. He smelled peppers and heard meat sizzling. When he cleared his throat she turned around, her long dark hair shining. He couldn't take his eyes off her hair.

“Good morning,” she said, gesturing with the spatula she held.

“Morning,” he said.

“Did you sleep well?”

He wondered if she knew what her father had asked of him. “Well enough.”

Abilia took a skillet off one burner and set it on another. She wiped her hands on the apron she wore. “Are you hungry?” she asked.

Lee shook his head. “Don't think I'm up to breakfast yet. I was wondering if I could speak to your father.”

“He's out riding now,” Abilia said. “He likes to go early.”

“Figures,” Lee said softly.

“What's that?”

“Nothing,” he said. The kitchen was attached to a study. Lee saw a leather chair put together with cow horns by a small fireplace. A whisky bottle sat on a nearby table and a newspaper lay scattered with it. A framed portrait of Abilia stood by the bottle. “That the old man's chair?”

“Don’t let him hear you say that. My mother bought that chair for him. He spends most of his time there.”

“Where’s she?”

Abilia stopped tending to the stove. She waited until she caught his eye. “She’s gone.”

“Alright,” Lee said. He watched her cross the floor toward him. Today she was in a dress that seemed too small, but with his hat on and his guts quiet he didn’t turn away. He made sure she noticed him looking.

She stood so close to him he could see the tiny hairs on her skin. “You certainly look much better today.”

“It’s the hat,” he said.

She giggled and pressed herself against him. He stepped backward.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “There’s no one here.”

He dialed through his mind searching for a response. Television hadn’t taught him anything about this except it was supposed to be easier than it was feeling. “Ain’t nothing wrong,” he said.

“Then don’t pull away.” She put her arms out and hugged him. His hands moved up slowly until they were touching her back.

“People in your line of work make a lot of money,” she whispered when he’d finally built up the courage to nuzzle the hair curling close to her ears.

“Not what you’d think.” He suddenly felt uncomfortable, like when he’d see boys at the show trying to pull girls into the alley that ran alongside the theatre.

“It’s enough,” she said. “More than we have here. You’d help *me* if you could, wouldn’t you?”

Lee pushed her away. "I'm going outside."

"Come back if you change your mind," she called.

He promised himself he wouldn't as the screen door slammed behind him.

In the yard he came upon a late model pickup with dents in the fenders. A barn hunched next to a well-used corral. A short squat sun-darkened man appeared at the back of the pickup. He propped a shovel against the tailgate and began unloading sacks of feed. He had the look of a man damaged, like a tree worried at with a dull axe that grew back in spite of such bother, in the routes provided by the scars. Lee went to him.

When he saw Lee he put the feedsack down.

"You the feller that found me?" Lee asked.

The man nodded. "That be me."

"Then I'm obliged to you for that. I reckon that also means you're the feller who's supposed to be keeping me here."

"You the *mamón* who supposed to be kept?"

Lee spit. Chenché watched him, amused. "I reckon you think you can keep me," Lee said.

Chenché shrugged. "That's a question, no? A good one."

Lee glanced at the shovel. He wondered if he could bash Chenché's head in with it before Chenché could stop him. He wondered if Chenché could bash in his.

"Some people," Chenché said, seeing Lee notice the shovel, "they have to know. Because they can't stand not knowing. They go their lives always having to know."

When Lee said nothing, Chenché smiled. "Is that you, *mamón*?"

Lee suddenly felt the sun on him. Sweat ran down his back. He wondered why he hadn't noticed the heat sooner. "I figure a question like that has its time. It'll happen when it does."

Chenché nodded and went back to unloading feed. Lee stood there feeling like he'd just been a part of something far bigger than himself, beyond his ability to reason or comprehend. Chenché ignored him until he turned to leave.

"There are horses in the barn, *chivato*. You can ride, no? Or is the boots only for show?"

Lee stopped. "I can ride. Just fine."

Chenché began laughing, a deep sound that did not stop. "You never find the keys to the truck. But there are horses, yes. Remember that."

"If I need a horse I'll be sure to tell you about it. You can saddle it for me."

This only made Chenché laugh harder. "We have a problem with *desesperados* coming across, stealing horses. Sometimes I sleep in the barn. You want a horse, you wake me up, okay?"

Lee started back to the house. As he walked he could hear Chenché working behind him. He found a rag and a can of wax in Estefan's study and spent longer than necessary polishing his boots on the porch. He didn't speak to Abilia when she brought him lunch and he didn't speak to Chenché when he came to bring Abilia the mail. He wouldn't admit to himself that Chenché scared him, but never took his eyes off the man while he was near.

Around noon Estefan returned. Lee met him in the corral.

"You sent your daughter to talk to me this morning," Lee said. He'd been thinking about it all day. When Estefan didn't respond he continued. "You know what kind of man that makes you?"

Estefan lifted the saddle from the horse and dropped it on the ground. He wiped the horse down with the blanket as he spoke. "Abilia is her own person. I did not tell her to do anything."

"Chickenshit," Lee said. "You and that *pinche* sumbitch you got working for you both."

Estefan clucked his tongue. "This is much simpler than you're making it."

"I don't have any goddamn money."

"Then contact someone who does. A man doesn't stay in your line of work without knowing someone. You are a man, aren't you?"

"You can always send Chenché to find out."

Estefan swatted the horse on the rump and it trotted off. He picked up the saddle and started towards the barn. "I hope that won't be necessary."

Lee stepped quickly in front of him. Estefan frowned, grunted as he shifted the saddle in his arms. It was the closest Lee had seen him to angry. "You're serious about this. You ain't letting me leave," he said.

"Son," Estefan said, "I don't think you know just how serious I am." He placed the saddle gently at Lee's feet. "Pick that up and take it to the barn."

"I ain't toting shit," Lee said.

Over Estefan's shoulder Lee saw Chenché taking notice beyond the corral. The man dusted his hands off and waited. Lee looked back at Estefan.

"There's a tack room on your left as you go in. You can put it in there," Estefan said.

"You're a son of a bitch."

"Don't forget the blanket," Estefan said softly.

Lee hoisted the saddle to his waist.

"See?" Estefan said. "You understand. This is good business."

That night they ate dinner on the porch. Abilia had kept her distance since the morning and Lee was grateful for that. Chenché had disappeared into the barn or some other place and Lee kept a watchful eye turned toward the yard. He sat with his back against the wall and listened while Estefan told Abilia about the stock he was expecting to take to auction. The way they acted like everything was normal drove him crazy.

“I’ll do it,” he said suddenly. Estefan and Abilia looked at him. “I’ll do it,” he repeated. “It’s the only goddamn way I can get out of this crazy place.”

“That,” Estefan said, “is wonderful to hear. We’ll talk numbers tomorrow.”

Abilia stole glances at him for the rest of the night. He wished he could separate her from all this, that she could be something she wasn’t. When it came time to carry in the dishes she pulled him aside after Estefan had entered the house.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But thank you. This will really help us.”

“Certain it will,” he said.

“You don’t understand. We—my father—owes money. You’re going to take care of that.”

Lee spit. He didn’t manage to clear the porch and it splatted against a wooden post. “Goddamnit,” he said.

Abilia took his hand. She put her face beside his. “You can still have me. If you want.” She pushed his hat up off his forehead. “I would like that.”

He craned his head back away from hers. “Sounds nice. But I ain’t bedding down with someone I can’t trust, and I reckon you’d hump a lame mule if you thought it’d benefit you.”

She let go of him and he moved past her. Before he went inside he said, “If you’d like you can go ahead and tell your daddy I called you a whore. But I get the feeling he ain’t gonna mind that so much right now.”

He left her on the porch, looking angry, confused. He put his dishes in the sink. Estefan, elated by the news of payment, had retired to his chair, whisky glass by his side.

“I’m going to bed,” Lee said.

“Yes, yes,” Estefan said. “Tomorrow we’ll deal. You’ll see you’ve made the right decision. It’s good business for both of us. You understand that, don’t you?”

“I understand it just fine,” Lee said. He went to his room. He heard Estefan pour himself another drink. He thought briefly about Chenché out there in the dark, maybe in the barn, maybe lurking somewhere in the yard. He decided some things a man had to do if he wanted to be a man. He took his hat off and crawled into bed.

With the moon coming in through the curtains and the sharp edge of night husbanding shadows around the room Lee waited until he heard Abilia finish washing the dishes and the door to her room creak shut. He’d kept his clothes on and now he slid from the bed and padded toward the door. Even in socks his movement made more noise than he liked. He jammed his hat on his head and carried his boots under his arm.

He heard Estefan snoring before he saw him. Outlined in the dim light the man lay slumped over in his chair. Lee put his boots down and went into the kitchen. He opened drawers and winced as they screeched on their tracks until he found what he was looking for. Estefan snorted once and Lee started, froze where he stood. When Estefan resumed snoring Lee let out

his breath. A number of knives lay in neatly ordered rows and he selected the largest. He left the drawer open and walked into the study.

Estefan's head doddled on his shoulder and his mouth hung open slightly. He made a sound like a creature newly born. Lee hesitated. The knife felt heavier than he thought possible in his hand. He knew Estefan's idea of good business kept him from considering the possibility of this happening. A dozen movie scenes played in his head and though he tried, he couldn't come up with any that included a moment like this one. He knew he was not as strong as he wanted to be. He thought of Chenché mocking him in the yard. He thought of Abilia and her dark hair and the body he tried to ignore. He imagined her lying in her bed in a simple cotton gown. Her eyes open and her mouth whispering to him. If he put the knife down he could go to her and hold her. He could have her. Maybe Estefan would accept him, and instead of trying to hold him up would welcome him and give him a place from which he could do business. Then again maybe Chenché waited for him outside and there was no way to be free of this place except through this.

His free hand planted on Estefan's temple. Estefan woke but did not struggle. He drove the knife into Estefan's neck, again and again, until he had hacked out a hole the size of his fist. Estefan never made a sound. There was so much blood. It covered him and the floor and everything he could see.

Lee vomited. He let the knife drop and fell to his knees and threw up. He knew he was crying but could not stop it. This is not how he'd imagined himself reacting. When he managed to collect himself he stood.

He eased the door open and waited until he was on dirt before sliding into his boots. The moon washed the yard in a white haze and he scrambled across it feeling exposed. He told

himself Chenché would not really be in the barn. He told himself if Chenché was in the barn and tried to stop him he would kill him and take a horse anyway.

He eased the big door open. The interior was dark and he could not see past the thin spill of light. He listened until he was sure Chenché was not there. He had grown brave enough to step inside when he heard the voice, quiet and insistent.

*“Esto sera nuestro tiempo?”*

No more words came. Lee stepped back and pushed the door shut. He lit out across the yard and down the driveway. He did not stop or turn. The dirt was hard beneath his boots. He came under an awning of live oaks and lost the moon and fell into shadow.

## RESURRECTION

They had come out of the eastern hills moving west and stopped where the big pines grew and the spiny fruit of sweetgums cobbled the ground. They were not gypsies but gypsy-like, pulling away at dawn from the only home Milendra had ever known with all their belongings packed into the trunk and only a fair sense of direction. Her mother looked for money in a variety of ways, from telling fortunes in the backseat of their car to offering cures for the mundane—warts, ingrown hairs, colicky infants—before finally settling on selling eggs from the chickens she raised behind their renthouse and working the nightshift at a local gas station.

Because it was summer Milendra was out of school and because of the heat she usually wandered down to the lake a few miles from home. The road she followed was slow with traffic and mostly dust and by the time she reached the water from her calves to her toes she was the color of pale bone. She washed her feet off and often went swimming. The water was cold because the lake was spring fed, famous for its temperature, in fact, but if she paid any attention to this beyond reading the brief message posted on the bulletin board at the park's entrance she never showed it. To her the lake was an escape from a house without air conditioning, somewhere away from the chickens and their stink and her mother and her mother's ways which she feared but did not understand.

“Watch yourself at that lake,” her mother said one day when Milendra was leaving.

“It's a family place,” Milendra said.

“Family place. What's that mean? All kinds of people have families.”

“It's a decent place. Nice folks.”

Once, many years ago, at a festival they'd attended at dusk out in a cow pasture, someone had given her mother a jar of clear liquid that smelled and tasted slightly like peaches. Her mother drank it and declared it ambrosia and while in the eclipse of its effects confided in Milendra as they sat reclined against the side of somebody's car she sometimes, even often, felt like a mole scrabbling down a tunnel filled not with roots so soft as to be mistaken for feathers brushing the skin and earthworms and the comfort of damp soil but instead with shards of glass and slivers of razorwire where the roots should have been and hard dirt and where the worms had teeth. Milendra saw her mother's eyes and tried to pull away but her mother held tight, brought them nose to nose in silence for a moment, then vomited onto Milendra's face. Milendra cried out and wiped at herself as others looked on shocked, while her mother sat back and started to laugh. She was still laughing when someone came to take Milendra away and clean her up.

"You know what I mean," her mother said.

"Yes, ma'am."

Her mother giggled. "Don't be a goose. Meet any boys out there?"

"No ma'am," Milendra answered. She reached into a pocket for the arrowhead she'd found. She'd been saving it for days.

"You know about those boys."

"Momma, I do—"

"Then you know what'll happen."

Milendra sighed. She waited. Her mother leaned forward across the table.

"My sister thought she knew about those boys. Thought she knew right up until the time she realized she didn't. That's why you've never met your aunt. They still haven't found all of her."

Her mother's small white hands punctuated the words with distinct chops and slices through the air. Milendra felt sick to her stomach. She always did when she heard this story. She'd carry fear around with her for days afterward, shying away from both men and boys like a creature harried to caution by the baying of distant hounds.

"They're not our people in these parts. Not hill people. Just remember that."

"Yes, mamma," Milendra said, but she wanted to yell at her mother, tell her they were not really hill people themselves, whatever that meant. There was nothing special about their despair. They were less than a generation away from poor white trash and everybody knew it. Mildred's own grandmother had told her as much before they'd moved out.

Mildred held out the arrowhead. "Look at this," she said, offering it to her mother.

Her mother took it from Milendra's palm and studied it closely. "Where'd you get this?"

"Found it near the lake. There's a sign up talking about Indians who used to live there."

"Native Americans, dear."

"I figure it came from them."

"Most likely," her mother said.

Mildred waited for her mother to return the arrowhead. When her mother pocketed it instead, Milendra stepped back toward the door.

"Milendra," her mother called as she was leaving. Milendra stopped. "I take care of you, don't I?"

"Course you do, mamma."

"Alright," her mother said, turning to the stove. Milendra thought about saying something else. She didn't.

Milendra followed the road as it wound around the lake. The trunks of the trees and their lowest limbs were coated white with dust and the leaves hung like dull ornaments without any green at all showing. She passed several families setting up for picnics or camping and to these people she waved, but the large groups of rowdy young boys gathered nearest the lake she avoided and did not look at. It wasn't long, though, before they noticed her, and while most were content to catcall, a few of the bolder ones approached her. She kept her eyes down, her mother's story still fresh in her head, upset with herself for being so afraid but unable to do anything about it. They followed her for awhile, talking amongst themselves, sometimes to her, telling her to wait, slow down, stop moving. She wanted to go back to where she found the arrowhead, had planned on it, but it was in an area away from the main body of the park and she was frightened to be there with these boys behind her.

Eventually the boys trailed off, sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs, until only one was left, a tall skinny kid with cutoff jean shorts and a mole on his chest. He matched her steps easily and kept pace with her as they hiked around a good-sized portion of the lake. Once he stopped to pick a flower and tried to hand it to her, but she refused to look at him so after a bit he threw it down and they continued to walk.

“Hey,” he said finally. “You don't talk much.”

She shook her head.

“Why don't you wanna talk?” He stepped in front of her and blocked her path. He blocked her again when she tried to go around him. She stood very still.

“If it's cos you think I'm like the rest of them, I ain't,” he said. “Tell you what. I'll take you to a place I know. Sometimes you can find arrowheads.”

She looked up at this, surprised.

“Not always,” he said. “No promises or nothing. But we can look.”

She thought he’d eventually leave if she didn’t say anything, but he stood digging his toes in the mud like he had nowhere to go.

“How do you know about the arrowheads?” she asked eventually.

He smiled at her. “Been comin here for years. Lots of folks know. That’s why they ain’t so easy to find.”

She was frightened, but interested just the same. In the back of her head she heard her mother’s voice. “I can’t go,” she said.

“Why not?” he asked. “Saw you down that way the other day. Say you can’t.”

“You were spying on me?”

“If it’s in public it ain’t spying.”

Milendra pulled at a leaf hanging over their heads. The branch shed its dust on them like counterfeit snow.

“Hey, now,” he said.

“I’m not going,” she said.

“Suit yourself. One thing though.” He fished around in his pocket and came up with another arrowhead. “Found this one after you left the other day. You take it, maybe you believe me when I say I’m a nice feller. Maybe you’ll talk to me a little more next time you’re around.”

“I never said you weren’t nice,” she said after a moment. She wondered what her aunt had been like. Why her grandmother never mentioned her at all.

He took her hand and pressed the arrowhead into it. “Just the same, take it. I’ll be here tomorrow, same time. Come out and we’ll go huntin.” He winked at her.

“I think I’d best be going home,” she said.

“Sure thing. Need a ride?”

“No, thanks.”

“I’ll walk with you, then.”

She didn’t know when she’d joined him in dragging her feet through the mud. This wasn’t what she was supposed to be doing. She ignored him when he used his big toe to flick mud on her leg.

“Isn’t necessary, but thanks.”

“You sure? I got my daddy’s pickup today. Might not have it tomorrow.”

Milendra thought about it. Thought about her mother and her stories. Thought about the long walk home through the dust and the heat.

“Just you taking me?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure.”

He grinned. “Come on then.” He started walking and she followed. She refused to let herself think of anything but putting one foot in front of the other, stepping precisely in the footprints he made by going before her.

“So you’re comin back tomorrow, right?” he asked as he pulled up in the driveway. She’d tried to get him to stop on the road but he insisted.

“I don’t know,” she said, looking out the window as her mother came out on the porch. “I really need to go.”

“You have a good one,” he said. “Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow.” He waited until she’d nearly gotten to the house before driving off.

“Who was that?” her mother asked, wiping her hands on a filthy dish towel.

“Just someone giving me a ride,” Milendra said.

“I saw what it was.”

“That’s all it was, momma.”

Her mother slapped her in the face with the dish towel, and it took a moment before she realized she was being dragged inside the house by her own hair. While her mother was screaming about boys being the death of her, she found herself repeating her dead aunt’s name in her head, conscious of the weight of the arrowhead sitting lightly in her pocket. That’s all she could do. She’d never been beaten before.

Melindra saw him wading in the swimming area with a group of boys when she got there. He waved when he saw her and she waved back. He got out and walked over.

“So you decided to come,” he said.

“I had to.”

“How so?”

She fingered the arrowhead in her pocket. She felt her body aching. “Just did.”

“Glad you could make it then.”

Milendra looked at the boys. “Just us going, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah.” He took her by the elbow and guided her away from the group. “But let’s get gone before they really notice. They’re hell about spying on people.”

They hadn’t gone far when his hand slid down from her elbow to her wrist. From there with some difficulty he managed to get his hand in hers.

“You don’t make it easy to hold hands, you know that?” he said.

She mumbled something.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“I’ve never done it before.”

He stopped walking. “Really?”

She shrugged. “Just never have.”

He scratched his head. “What else hadn’t you done?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Kissin?”

Milendra smiled. “Now I know I’ve never done that.”

“Not once?”

“Nope.”

He chewed on his lip for a moment. “Want to?”

“We’re holding hands,” she said.

“I mean kissin.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Just because.”

He considered that for a moment. Then he pulled her roughly to him. His hand burrowed under her shirt while his tongue, unfurled in her mouth, pressed to extraordinary depths. She waited quietly for him to finish. When the moment was over he stepped back, confused.

“You okay?”

She nodded. She could see the water still clinging to him in strange shining patterns. She could feel the dampness on herself where he had leaned against her.

“You sure? I thought you wanted me to do that.”

“Yes,” she said softly. Then, stronger: “Again.” She went to him, and he, startled, responded with less intensity this time. She moved her hands over him in ways that surprised both of them, but while her passion grew his quailed, and unsure of himself, he soon broke away.

“I think I gotta go,” he said. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “See you around.” He left her and trotted back toward the lake, disappearing into the undergrowth. She could still hear him moving long after he was out of sight.

Milendra walked over to a large sweetgum and sat down at its base. She felt like anchoring herself to it, so as not to ever have to move, the day hot around her and the tree offering little shade. The memory of his body was already vaporous, shifting constantly in her mind to form people not quite him, like clouds jumbled and reassembled until their true nature so cunningly concealed was forgotten. She concentrated on pulling him together, the mole on his chest, the lavender half-moons of his fingernails as they smoothed imaginary wrinkles in the fabric of her skin, the soft fuzz around the edges of his ears, until complete once again in her mind, he turned to her, saying *Come with me*, waited for her hand, shimmered when she stepped forward. He smelled of dreams and lake water, and as she drew closer she grew warm and faint and her breathing seemed to stop. She was certain death had not come for her at all as her mother promised, instead being finally and eternally relegated to the place of all old fears outgrown, but if indeed it had and she was dead, with the wind out of the north and sweetgum balls dropping around her like fat green stars, then she was already being reborn.

## CASUALTIES

In the time of our fathers, the old days, before the drugs and sex and violence took over (or maybe only while these things remained muted, relegated to dirty motels and back room scandals) the park service still took care of the recreation area, still painted the bathrooms and swept them free of cobwebs and spiders, cleaned the paddle boats and cut the reeds that grew near the edges of the lake. This was back when families still came out to swim and picnic and camp overnight. There were showers and a concession stand and beyond the lake near several of the campsites the ruins of an old sawmill that began operating in 1902 and shut down in the 1920s. These crumbled over time into low walls and strange ziggurats with rusted steel bones that pointed to the sky like an exposed skeleton. A few years ago a boy named Halp Lerry had slipped and fell from the top of one of those ziggurats and landed on a piece of rebar. They shut the lake down for two months after that.

We were there the first weekend it reopened.

It wasn't the same, though. Not because of Lerry—he wasn't anything more than a name our parents warned us with—but because of the time. We had missed the passing of an era somehow, could only hear stories and remember what never was for us, and if we hadn't missed it completely, we were witnessing its last desperate shudders. The park service didn't paint as often, only trimmed the growth near the shore at gradually lengthening intervals, stopped sweeping out the bathrooms completely. Our parents, perhaps trying to salvage a part of their past, if only a tiny one, continued the tradition their own parents had started: setting up camp in the morning, swimming until lunch, then a hike while everyone waited for the sun to go down

and the campfires to spark and appear around the lake like a hundred waking eyes. At the fire pits where the barbecue was smoking our fathers gathered to drink beers with one-syllable names and held council while their children ran around them playing and their wives laid out silverware and paper plates. Their own parents had spoke of communists and Cubans and fire in the sky, but our fathers only talked about simple politics and the current baseball season. They ignored the change occurring around them, what had happened and was happening, even as they were forced to bring their own barbecue pits along because the ones provided by the park service were rusted through and useless or to rid the toilets of spiders for their wives and daughters. They endured this without comment, other than a little grumbling, for to speak of it was to recognize it, and recognition equaled a powerlessness to stop time which they did not care to admit. In their eyes, recognition equaled death.

We didn't know about any of this then, at least not in any tangible way. We marched down the trails the forest was gradually taking back, cut ourselves on briars strung between the trees like snares, waded through the reeds along the mushy shore of the lake, looking for snakes and slapping the mosquitoes we found on ourselves into smeared red spots on our arms and necks. Our fathers, to us, were nothing more than distant figures, no more real than the faces we pretended to see in the shadows beyond the campfire at night, identities we might one day become, tall and broad and obscured by time in a way that precluded us from ever knowing the boys they once were or the men they had grown up to be.

The day we realized they were not so far removed from us as we thought was the same day we discovered girls. It wasn't a sly sort of discovery but an explosion of sensation and longing we felt first in our bellies, a warmth that spread to our crotches and our faces and buzzed in the tips of our fingers and made us blink rapidly as though we were trying to erase the

image from our minds, purge it from our eyes, our hearts, our loins, and when that didn't work we gave ourselves wholly to this new transformation, a metamorphosis into strange creatures with gaping mouths and lolling tongues. That morning, however, when we unlimbered ourselves and crawled from our sleeping bags into the sticky heat of dawn, we knew nothing of what was to come.

Breakfast, unlike our nightly meals, was an affair for individual families, each father rising early to prepare bacon and eggs for us and coffee for themselves. We woke and ate enough to satisfy our mothers, then carried the rest of our food from camp to camp, gathering in strength, eating on the move like harried soldiers, wiping our hands on our knees when we finished. We haunted the shores of the lake, barefoot and wild, until we were covered in mud and stinking algae. We fought Indians in the shadow of the sawmill ruins, darted between the rebar lances, and when we tired we sat down in the forest and rested.

“They said he got caught making out with a girl right before he fell,” Michael said.

“I heard he jumped,” Tommy said.

We listened intently. Tommy and Michael were a year older than us. They knew things.

“He didn't jump,” Michael said. “You don't get a piece and go killing yourself.”

“A piece of what?” I asked.

Michael frowned. “You know, a piece,” he said. “It means a kiss.”

We didn't understand why a piece of a kiss would make someone jump to their death, if that's what he did. We didn't understand it at all.

“They also said he didn't make any noise when he fell,” Michael said.

“They sure know a lot,” Tommy said.

Michael shrugged. “That's what I heard. I wonder which one he fell on.”

We all glanced around.

“This one,” Michael said after a moment, pointing at a shaft of rebar. “This is the one he fell on.”

“No it ain't,” Tommy said. “He fell off some of them concrete blocks. There ain't no blocks close enough to here.”

“Then which one is it?” Michael asked.

“Look for the one with blood on it,” Petey said.

Tommy laughed. “Won't be no blood left on it.”

We picked ourselves up and began looking anyway. Tommy remained sitting. Undergrowth had reclaimed many of the shorter rebar poles. These we dug out of their green tombs, ignored the thorns, the poison ivy, searched because we had something to find.

“Found it,” Tanner said. We gathered next to him. Tommy came over and knelt down, carefully rubbing his fingers along the metal. We waited.

“Rust,” he said at last.

“Uh uh,” Tanner said. “Blood.”

Tommy looked at Tanner.

“Dried blood?” Tanner asked.

Tommy shook his head but said nothing. We grew silent, glancing from ruin to tree and vine, then back to the rubble that littered the ground and seemed to waiver and dissolve before our eyes. We wondered about Lerry, the girl, about the pain of death we knew we'd never feel, yet were so close to now, close enough to see the red tint of its passing hidden under layers of rust in front of us, to smell it all around us, heavy and slow and deep, able to hear it in the stillness of the day and in every movement we made.

Finally Petey whooped like an Indian and took off towards the lake. This jarred us from our thoughts, and in a moment we were after him, adding our shrill boyish cries to his, so that the woods filled up and poured out a song of life, a challenge flung in the face of the dead boy Lerry, who had for a brief time threatened to engulf us with his memory and drag us under the wet black dirt on which he had passed from this life into the next without so much as a whisper.

We caught up with Petey near the edge of the lake. We dragged him down in muck and played like pigs until we heard a voice say, "What are you doing?"

We quit wrestling, still caked in mud and the slick scum that coated the edges of the lake. We looked up and saw a girl, taller than any of us, standing barefoot on the bank. We untangled ourselves from one another and wiped our faces off. It was Michael who spoke first, in a low voice without looking at the girl.

"Just playing Indians."

"Aren't you a little old for that?" the girl asked. She chewed her bottom lip, and when she stopped, I could see bright red stripes where she'd stripped the skin away.

It looked almost like lipstick.

For the first time in our lives we felt shame. It was an entirely new sensation, one that bowed our heads and caused our cheeks to flame and our hands, without our knowledge or direction, to scratch absently at the mud drying on our arms.

"Well?" she asked again.

"We were just playing," Michael said.

She snorted. "Boys."

She stood there for a moment, taking us in, five boys old enough to respond to her presence but too young to understand why, while we took her in, a girl in cutoff shorts and a

halter top, the kind of girl we saw in the parking lot after school and on weekends going into the movies when it was late enough for us to be coming out, the sort of girl we had begun to dream about and even think about sometimes if we weren't careful. Our eyes wandered over her in different directions: traces of pink polish on the toes of her right foot, her hands constantly worrying the hair falling over her ears, the small blond hairs that grew on her stomach and disappeared into the waistline of her shorts.

We stayed this way for some time. She was like nothing we had ever seen, long necked and high rumped; rather, she was the first girl we'd ever really noticed, seen as an individual creature freed from the restraints of childhood intolerance by adolescent curiosity. We watched as she stepped forward, slowly, as though she was descending a staircase in some grand ballroom, perhaps for one brief moment herself enchanted with the memory of a time when nothing really mattered. She dipped her right foot partially into the mud, pulled it back and said, "That's disgusting."

She turned and left us with nothing more, not a glance or a gesture, wiggling her toes in the grass as she went. None of us knew why we felt like following her or why we continued to think about her after she was gone. We watched her getting further away, until she rounded the tip of the lake and disappeared into the trees. We waited until she emerged on the other side, near the swimming area and concession stand, tame places compared to territory we claimed. She melted into a group of girls and then we could no longer distinguish her from the others.

"She's in high school," Michael said.

"Only a freshman," Tommy said, but even he was slightly awed by the encounter. A new world had been discovered. We were ready to explore it.

"I'm thirsty," Michael said after a moment. "I think I want something to drink."

We nodded. Michael climbed onto the bank and cleaned himself as best as he could. We did likewise. We didn't speak, following the path she took around the lake. The distance wasn't long and before we knew it we had arrived at the concrete dam next to the concession area. The dam was dry now, the lake shrinking away year after year, high walls on three sides overtaken by roots and vegetation. On the side open to the lake ankle-deep mud extended to where the water began. We dropped into the dam, crossed it and peered over the ledge with only the tops of our heads visible.

The beach consisted of gray dirt and random patches of weeds, nothing more than a clearing where the grass had been cut back and the ground hardened so much it was almost like rock. It was further from the water now than it had been, and the grass that remained was high and thick. From where we were we could see the girls on their blankets, visible and on display.

They lay in rows like the wartime dead, with knees and arms poking up, some pale as desert bones, others baked the color of sand. We watched them, waited for the sudden flash of color that concealed the objects of our scrutiny, twin mounds clad in exotic patterns that came into view like flowers shifting in the wind, with what we imagined as tiny rosebuds perched on top, held snug against them, round and hard and insignificant, watched, as Michael said, "I heard they were hollow in places," their soft warm bodies, hollowed out, waiting for us to make them whole.

## ANTBEDS

He was in the backyard doctoring antbeds when the pain began. He knew right away what was happening, told himself he was too young for it, had been too young the first time he'd gone through it, but there was no stopping the sensation that began in his chest and spread down his arm. If he was honest with himself he might even admit he had been expecting something else to happen sooner or later, because that's how life worked, at least for poor mechanics, and the fate of poor mechanics throughout history proved him right, of poor men in general, like his father, but that kind of thinking was no good now, so he tried to concentrate on what it was he should be doing, tried to think around the pain and fear that made him stumble as he headed for the house.

The sack of poison slipped from his fingers. He watched it fall, spilling out on the ground, smelled that strange warm sweet smell it had. Details previously relegated to background were now being disclosed to him at a frightening rate: the sound of a tractor in the distance, the slick green sides of the birdbath where no birds bathed, the dryness of his mouth.

He didn't remember it being like this.

The surreal clarity of his senses draped him in panic. He tried to hurry and tripped, sprawling facedown in the grass. He couldn't get up.

He imagined dying with a dirty face, still smudged with grease and half a day's beard on him. He reached for his back pocket where the red rag stayed. They would say he was as poor in death as he had been in life, and for the first time in his life he knew they would be right. With this secret fear in his mind he passed from one world into the next, and the red rag beside him,

never reaching his face, erupted in color on the ground. It was several hours before his wife came home and found him, the discovery of which she relayed for years afterward to anyone she could catch listening, made unbearable by her matter-of-fact tone, her steady eye contact. She ended each story the same way, leaning close, strangely intimate, pausing for just the right length of time before saying, “He’d been there awhile. The ants got to him before the paramedics did.”

The children were dressed and assembled beside their mother, waiting for their turn to view their father. A gospel recording looped itself in repeated playback over a small radio set up in the corner. When she felt enough mourners had gathered, she whispered instructions to the children, and they followed her single file through the crowd to where their father lay. They took turns leaning in to see him, straining on tiptoe, some of the older ones hesitantly touching his skin or mouthing a silent goodbye. One boy grew worried when he saw his father’s face, the absence of familiar smudges he’d often been allowed to help rub off with the grainy orange stuff giving his father the look of a stranger. He protested loudly this was not his father, until his mother came over and shoved his head in closer. “It’s him,” she said. But the boy did not believe her, and he crept back later to inspect the body once more. Only the discovery of his father’s hands, still stained with dirty nails, half-hidden beneath the sleeves of his funeral coat, convinced him otherwise.

Later, in the parking lot, the children stood quietly while their mother finished talking with the family, except for the boy, who had been inspecting his hands since his revelation. He looked with suspicion at his brothers and sisters, aware now how easily any of them could be an imposter. Finally he approached the others with his arms out in front of him and his fingers

spread and indicated they should follow his example. When they did not he grew angry and pulled at them and they flinched and balked. He demanded to see their fingers. They looked to their mother, who ignored them, and frightened by the boy's insistence, they hid their hands and turned away.

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