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YESTERDAY LESSON

A Thesis
presented for the Master of Arts Degree
in the Department of English
at the University of Mississippi

by

SAMUEL MILLIGAN

May 2017

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ABSTRACT

This is a work of fiction describing a special education boarding school in Southern Illinois.

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Chapter 1.

Last night, traffic on the rainy highway out front was giving me grief like always. The yellow sodium light on the Gwaltneys' polebarn across the road buzzed and made the soaked blacktop glisten and shine warm. I sat on the porch swing hugging my shins when a tanker truck roared by, shattering the air and sluicing up rainwater. People are always flying by our house, always interrupting.

I squashed my ear into Mom's cellphone, spat out my bucket-hat's chinstrap, and then shouted into the mic, "What'd you say, Dad?"

"I said, 'The stars awaken reverence, since they're always present, but always inaccessible.' I read that somewhere, other day. Thought of you, buddy."

The tanker's tires howled back at me, shrinking a little through the woods north of home.

The air hung so muggy that it fogged the storm-window behind me, but I stayed because I really didn't want my voice to wake Mom or have Ryan come snatch the phone to yell at Dad.

"Okay, Dad. Cool. Hey! Speakin' of stars, there's a meteor shower I'm gonna check out

tomorrow. You wanna watch it too and I'll call you after? Maybe it'll help you write a new song!"

Dad said, "A meteor shower? That all makes sense, then."

"What does?"

"I pled with Him last night to guide you. I prayed for nearly an hour after I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"You, buddy," he said.

My cheeks got tight, like they always do when that automatic know-it-all smile stretches up my face. I hated that smile as soon as I felt it. It meant other people were talking through me, internet people, making me snooty about my dad's religion.

"I saw you. You were floating. In a golden light between the racks of a great big ten-point buck," he said, chuckling, getting tickled at himself. "I know, I know what you think. It was wild, buddy. But that's what I saw. You were floating, Ty. In a red robe, arms spread like Our Redeemer."

"Really?" I said, grinning. A real grin, not the smug one. I like Dad's stories.

"Yeah, yeah, buddy, you were. You and your buck stood at the edge of your mother's neighbor's field too. Cotton grew there instead of corn,"—no one plants cotton in Illinois—"and your eyes were shut and you kept waving me on, little man. Yeah. You asked—"

"—Wait, you were home? In the side-yard?" My socked feet shot down to the porch floor. *He's dreaming about home! And I'm in it!*

But then silence went one Mississippi. Two. Three. Dang. Again he feared promises.

Then, flat and distant, he said, "Yours and your mother's yard, yeah. I was there. And you asked me—"

“—So you’re thinking about swinging by? You should! That’d be awesome.”

“Buddy, that’s exactly what the buck asked me, out in the cotton.” Flat again. Glazed.

New tact: “So, uh, are you and Lloyd thinking about booking another show in St. Louis, then?” That’s only an hour’s drive. Mom’d probably let Ryan drive me and him over to watch.

Seconds more silence. Him breathing. Then, “I’m proud of you, son.”

“Thanks. Thanks, Dad.”

“You showed me,” he said, and his voice went tight and wobbly. In my head I saw his stubby chin shaking, blocking himself from crying. “You showed me the answer.”

I smiled again but I didn’t know what I meant by it. “I’m glad, Dad. So hey—”

“—You’d passed on, son.”

Dad. “Dad, I—”

“—I know,” he muttered. “Your eyes were shut because you were dead, buddy.” His voice shot up, breaking, “Without me.” A laugh jerked up but I stopped it at my throat. Stupid laugh. In my head all I heard was, *Shut up and help him, Ty.*

“Dad. I’m here, back home. I’m sitting on the porch. I’m watching the rain muddy the yard. The moon is in the uh, southwest quadrant. It’s waxing gibbous, Dad. Neighbors grew soy this year. Everything’s just like you left it. I’m not—”

“—And I wasn’t there to guide you.”

Yellowy light poured over the porch and into the soaked muck of the yard from the window behind me. Mom woke. My shadow stretched out there too and so did that of the porch banister. Looked like shadow-me sat behind its bars. “Dad—”

“—And. You needed me. You and Ryan Joseph, you both needed me and I—”

“—Pops—”

“—I left my sons godless and forsaken in the valley of death.”

Footsteps thudded inside, stiff then soft. Hardwood then doormat. The knob jiggled.

“Dad, everything’s fine. I’m fine, Mom’s good. Ryan’s okay. Hey, Mom’s comin’.”

“I’m so proud of you, son. You made it to heaven, buddy. *You* showed *me* the way. You make me happy. You always did. I’ll come back for you, Ty. Forgive me if I don’t make it.”

That was last night. Wish I could just take Dad riding with me. It’d chill him out, I think.

I strap on my yellow mildew-stinking helmet and hit the electric start button beside the thumb-throttle. The Kodiak’s startermotor rasps a couple turns and the little 400cc engine between my knees bops to life, making a sound like *bidididididid* that patters off the creek’s steep sandstone banks. I just stopped here to get ahold of Derick to make sure he hasn’t gotten hisself killed yet, but he hasn’t texted me back. Mom will murder me if I waste her minutes calling him, so, since the water’s low enough, I’ll just cruise the creek like always until it takes me to his backyard.

Just show up and hope he’s home. Summertime.

A couple dozen yards ahead, the creek’ll make me pass under Akin blacktop by way of the culvert and then through the Peabody Mine Co. land beyond it—I can’t ride my four-wheeler on the paved roads too long without Officer McDaniels showing up in my driveway later. Derick’s officially off probation at midnight and I’ve got to get him out of the house, away from town before he starts slinging weed and nerve pills for that old freak, Moony, again. Derick’s granddad, Papa Kim, asked that of me before I left their place last weekend. Papa Kim’s been so cool, letting me come over pretty much every day since Dad went back on tour last fall, so I really don’t want to let him down.

I'm gonna haul Derick up onto the Peabody gob piles to watch the meteor shower tonight. Internet said to expect so much falling space debris that it'll churn up a funky light show in the magnetosphere. Derick can't not like that.

A bigrig thunders by up on the blacktop, looks like a two-ton dumptruck. Its turbo whines and sick diesel smoke swirls and stinks in its wake. The culvert beneath it smells nasty too: all the mold down its throat and the frothed up algae scum around its bottom lip, reeking in this heat. The pool in front of it, where the constant eddy against its cement chin has eroded it to deeper than my handlebars, almost drowns out my four-wheeler's engine every time I come through here. But riding under the blacktop by way of the culvert is the only smart way to foil the Peabody fence.

As I'm about to go ahead on, my phone buzzes. Derick! Nope.

It's Coach Wynn. My track coach.

His text says: Ty Im so sorry for your loss. Your daddys looking down on u and he's proud Ty. All of us love u too. Let us know if you need anything. Anything pal. God Bless.

Coach, what the heck?

Dad's on tour. He didn't pass away. He's not a loss to be sorry for. And.

And yeah he's threatened it before, but there's no way he went through with it this time.

Anyway Mom would've called.

She would have.

What about—

—Nope. I mash the throttle and the Kodiak hustles. Pebbles scream as my tires force them into the creekbottom sand. They wreck the water's stillness and try to conduct the Kodiak into my old mud ruts, but I don't want that. Get stuck that way. I stand and rock left toward the

solid stone riffle at the foot of the steepest bank.

What gives, Coach? I mean, thanks for the love, but—

—So, so a couple months back, Derick and I axed up a big windfall hickory upstream of the culvert and made underwater log ramps from it. Even with their help, I've still wallered the creekbed mud out so bad it's dang near impassable. I've really got to create a new path or since Mom works so much and Ryan's never home, I won't see Derick or Papa Kim like until I get my driver's license. And Derick needs me with him. Both do, I think. Derick's daddy OD'd a couple years ago, yeah, fifth grade year, and he's been kind of all over the place since then. Dude can't ever keep his thoughts straight sometimes.

The sandstone creekbed gives way to slurry, so I hit my four-wheel-drive button and turn back into the deeper water, parting waterbugs and sluicing up sandy mud. The clench point is in two yards, where if I don't line my tires up on the slimy logramps I'll fall off and be boned: engine swamped, automatic transmission flooded, maybe drowned out, myself.

The creekwater wraps my rims up to the hubs. It looks like thick tea, and it smells like my basement when my engine's hot crankcase dips in and boils off a murky steam. I hop my feet up onto the seat and squat because I hate getting my socks all soggy.

The butts of both logs rest on the culvert's flat bottom lip. I line up with those logs and goose the throttle. The Kodiak murmurs, half submerged, sizzling water off its cylinder now.

The worn roundness of the logs talks to me through the shudder of the handlebars. The ramp tips jostle away from each other on the lip, but we're good and balanced enough. My front tires emerge as my sunken rear ones touch the ramps. Careful on the throttle, Ty. Progress, lugs biting hickory, churning the brown filth, climbing us out. Floorboards see daylight again.

We're good. We're good.

—See, Dad was so happy last night on the phone. For him. Course, after Mom took the phone from me, I found her in her bathtub red-cheeked and crying. Followed her into her bedroom and hugged her, but she wouldn't say much, just that she loved me and she's sorry.

—But yeah, we're good except the tips of those logramps keep spreading. Rear tires are out the water, slipping a bit. For better traction I hop onto the rear cargo rack, like Superman stretching up to the handlebars, and my right heel lands on the machete I keep sheathed and bungied to the rack in case of feral dogs, bobcats, crank cooks, you name it.

But now the roundness of the logs isn't matching that of my tires. The log tips inching wider and wider.

They're gonna go down in the water, we all are.

I goose it and the ramps run from each other. My front tires bite the culvert rim, slipping on algae but crawling forward anyway. Come on, baby.

More gas. Eyes shut, more gas.

“Go go go go go,” and it works!

The logs shoot sideways and the Kodiak's metal belly makes a sick smash against the lip. Rear tires just spin in the water, not even touching concrete, but I made it. My last, “Go” is still echoing with my engine noise off the culvert's dank cement walls.

I yell, “Hallelujah.” And that echoes too. And echoes.

And it doesn't stop echoing, just, “Hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah,” down the tunnel, same loudness as if from my own lips again and again.

Chapter 2.

That's supposed to mean something. Grandma said it. Whenever she'd pick me up from getting thrown out of daycare at the church, she'd get on to me in the car and I'd repeat it back at her. "You know how to behave," she'd say, so, "You know how to behave," I'd say. But then she told me that's not becoming of a pastor's grandson, that the dead speak in echoes and I ought to respect them. Then I'd say, "That's not becoming of a—" and she'd jam the brakes. Ain't Dad saying, "Hallelujah," to me, though. Nope—

—Wet socks it is. I drop off the side into the ankle-deep water and throttle on as I shove the little beast forward until its back tires deliver us over the brim. My log ramps float briefly until the rippling scumwater drags them down and out of my sight forever, to gather more slime.

My socks squish when I hop back on and get underway.

Engine noise *bididids* louder off the culvert now the exhaust pipe is squarely inside it. It's twenty, thirty yards long and could fit a parade of three Kodiaks riding side by side. In the dead center of the ceiling vault is a manhole, always dripping. Drainage from the blacktop.

But today the manhole flows, hard: an unbroken cylinder of water c

I unstrap my helmet and take its jawpiece in hand to tug it off, but when I slide it over my ears, it slips out of my hand, falling up, clonking on the handlebars, then into the creek.

Jesus.

I rest my head on the cold manhole, no longer leaking its weird water. The creek fills my helmet, soaking the padding. Dangit. Mom's gonna be so scared if she finds out. She needs me now. I wish Papa Kim was here. He'd help.

Maybe Dad is alive. I'm probably dreaming, because, what the heck, my phone tries to launch upward from my hand when I check it. It says Derick says, where you at?

His second text says, *you alrite?*

Third, *ill still be at the big nub around 7 if you wanna come out still. Luv you bub.*

Then it says Ryan, my big brother, says, *Hey dude, come home.*

Not now. Please not now.

Eighteen missed calls from Mom. Three from Ryan. Couple from both Derick and Papa Kim. It's 6:39 p.m. The Big Nub is the name Derick and I gave to the biggest gob pile on the Peabody acres. Best place in Old Log Landing for watching meteor showers.

But I should get home.

But I'm dreaming, or I'm dead, even though I feel everything, like my full bladder. But I've had to pee in dreams before. That's probably what the water pillar was. Maybe I fell off the Kodiak and bonked my head. And now some force is pulling me up, away from that real ground on the ceiling. Toward Heaven, maybe. That's a dream, I think.

When I stand my jeans ride my crotch and my T-shirt falls up, shrouding my face, so I tuck it into my pants and shuffle toward the Peabody side of the culvert's ceiling. As I raise each foot, my shoes press up against my soles, which is the strangest feeling I've ever dreamed. My clothes don't want me.

Got an idea. A test.

A fissure in the concrete ceiling, I mean floor, leads to the edge and I follow it. In the sea-blue sector of the sunset sky, the moon starts to show its face between two long stripes of pumpkin-colored clouds. It has a bite taken out of it.

Here's my idea—Dad would so do this with me: I unzip my jeans and let my pee flow over the rim, and, sure enough, up it goes. Well, down for me, but up up up, arching a long shoestring into the purple-blue-orangeness. It feels so good in my belly and legs that my eyes shut, and my head falls back and I need to laugh, so I do, and I reopen my eyes. Maybe I'll splash the moon. Or those geese flying down there. I swing the stream over at them, but I know those mean old things will dodge it with grace.

Yeah I know, I could very well fall into the sky. My eyes shut themselves again.

But my bladder is about empty, and so is that good feeling. This is usually where I wake up soaked in pee and feeling like I've got to hide the sheets. I bend my knees and shoot the last bit out, and, when it does leave me, there's a trickle, a long one, and I open my eyes to see the shoestring drop and slash straight down the creek above like a carpenter's chalk line. Guess the earth wants whatever's not me.

My Kodiak is still running, but it's starting to sputter. Don't know how long I was asleep, but must've been hours. Long enough to run down the gas tank and set the sun and turn gravity against me. It's okay, though. I'll switch the petcock to reserve mode: enough gas to get to the Big Nub and then maybe Derick's, where Papa Kim'll give me enough gas to get home.

This maybe ain't a dream. If it is it's one of those lucid ones Dad's always talking about.

Could be it's Dad pulling me up to him. If it's not a dream, I mean—

I re-tie my Reeboks extra tight and walk back to the manhole. A sort of ladder leads up the wall toward the creekwater. Eight iron re-bars bent into rings, embedded in the concrete. The

rust stains dripping from the rungs point up, at my four-wheeler, where there're enough bungies in the stowbox to strap myself to it for the ride to Derick's. It might work.

My palm callouses got tender weedeating the ditch at home this morning and now they burn on the cold re-bar rings. Serves me right. Should be home instead of out gallivanting.

Sweat runs down my neck and drips up into the trickling creekwater as I reach for the Kodiak's floorboard. Only just too far. My dang T-shirt untucks and bunches under my chin. I slap at the floorboard and miss. If Ryan saw this, he'd surely tell me how to do it right. Derick would be laughing his butt off.

Dad, you're seeing this, aren't you?

To hell with it, I jump, spin, grab, and the floorboard's hard plastic bites deep into my callouses. The Kodiak's rear shock-absorber sighs, sucking air and oil as it extends. Water courses faster around the slightly raised tires.

I accidentally goose the throttle with my heel as I step onto the nearest handgrip, revving the poor engine until it dies on me. With my other foot in place

. He didn't even have eyes anymore, they'd shriveled and sunk away already, but still I told him—”

“—Derick. Shut up. I'm sorry you lost him, but mine's not gone. He's waitin', so let me—”

“—to open his eyes. Eleven years old in the rafters telling my thawed out dead Pops to open his eyes to see me. You got any clue what that means?”

Squirming my left calf from under its bungie takes my sneaker with it, but I free my leg and it swings down at the stars. My shoe falls into the grass. The strap cuts my ribs and I can't reach its hook.

"Let me go," I shout.

"But he didn't open them," he says.

"I'm leaving!"

"Know why?"

My eyelids burn. His light burns me.

"How about this: Open your eyes, Ty."

I don't want them to but tears well up again. The rubber strap won't give. I grab it tight in both hands and make to limbo under it. It pinches the skin of my chest as it rolls to my collarbone. I kick, but Derick's got me.

"Look, Ty. Look at me."

The strap rakes my ear as I shimmy under it. "No! Let go, Derick."

"Do you really want to follow him?"

Eyes squeezed shut, I still see streaking meteors. I shout, "Yes."

"Go home," Derick says. "You haven't died too, Ty."

He turns me loose.

I swing, gripping tighter. The black night swings beneath my toes.

Then Papa Kim says, "Go home."

Ryan says, "Come home."

Mom cries, "Come home!"

Then Dad, his chin on my shoulder, says, "Son, take me home."

So I turn it loose.

And fall, back onto the Kodiak, where the gascap digs into my spine. The grass waves around me. And the stars gaze down as the meteors, their sons, fall on and on, to burn out white and brilliant.

Last night, traffic on the rainy highway out front was giving me grief like always. The yellow sodium light on the Gwaltneys' polebarn across the road buzzed and made the soaked blacktop glisten and shine warm. I sat on the porch swing hugging my shins when a tanker truck roared by, shattering the air and sluicing up rainwater. People are always flying by our house, always interrupting.

I squashed my ear into Mom's cellphone, spat out my bucket-hat's chinstrap, and then shouted into the mic, "What'd you say, Dad?"

"I said, 'The stars awaken reverence, since they're always present, but always inaccessible.' I read that somewhere, other day. Thought of you, buddy."

The tanker's tires howled back at me, shrinking a little through the woods north of home.

The air hung so muggy that it fogged the storm-window behind me, but I stayed because I really didn't want my voice to wake Mom or have Ryan come snatch the phone to yell at Dad.

"Okay, Dad. Cool. Hey! Speakin' of stars, there's a meteor shower I'm gonna check out tomorrow. You wanna watch it too and I'll call you after? Maybe it'll help you write a new song!"

Dad said, "A meteor shower? That all makes sense, then."

"What does?"

"I pled with Him last night to guide you. I prayed for nearly an hour after I saw it."

“Saw what?”

“You, buddy,” he said.

My cheeks got tight, like they always do when that automatic know-it-all smile stretches up my face. I hated that smile as soon as I felt it. It meant other people were talking through me, internet people, making me snooty about my dad’s religion.

“I saw you. You were floating. In a golden light between the racks of a great big ten-point buck,” he said, chuckling, getting tickled at himself. “I know, I know what you think. It was wild, buddy. But that’s what I saw. You were floating, Ty. In a red robe, arms spread like Our Redeemer.”

“Really?” I said, grinning. A real grin, not the smug one. I like Dad’s stories.

“Yeah, yeah, buddy, you were. You and your buck stood at the edge of your mother’s neighbor’s field too. Cotton grew there instead of corn,”—no one plants cotton in Illinois—“and your eyes were shut and you kept waving me on, little man. Yeah. You asked—”

“—Wait, you were home? In the side-yard?” My socked feet shot down to the porch floor. *He’s dreaming about home! And I’m in it!*

But then silence went one Mississippi. Two. Three. Dang. Again he feared promises.

Then, flat and distant, he said, “Yours and your mother’s yard, yeah. I was there. And you asked me—”

“—So you’re thinking about swinging by? You should! That’d be awesome.”

“Buddy, that’s exactly what the buck asked me, out in the cotton.” Flat again. Glazed.

New tact: “So, uh, are you and Lloyd thinking about booking another show in St. Louis, then?” That’s only an hour’s drive. Mom’d probably let Ryan drive me and him over to watch.

Seconds more silence. Him breathing. Then, “I’m proud of you, son.”

“Thanks. Thanks, Dad.”

“You showed me,” he said, and his voice went tight and wobbly. In my head I saw his stubbly chin shaking, blocking himself from crying. “You showed me the answer.”

I smiled again but I didn’t know what I meant by it. “I’m glad, Dad. So hey—”

“—You’d passed on, son.”

Dad. “Dad, I—”

“—I know,” he muttered. “Your eyes were shut because you were dead, buddy.” His voice shot up, breaking, “Without me.” A laugh jerked up but I stopped it at my throat. Stupid laugh. In my head all I heard was, *Shut up and help him, Ty.*

“Dad. I’m here, back home. I’m sitting on the porch. I’m watching the rain muddy the yard. The moon is in the uh, southwest quadrant. It’s waxing gibbous, Dad. Neighbors grew soy this year. Everything’s just like you left it. I’m not—”

“—And I wasn’t there to guide you.”

Yellowy light poured over the porch and into the soaked muck of the yard from the window behind me. Mom woke. My shadow stretched out there too and so did that of the porch banister. Looked like shadow-me sat behind its bars. “Dad—”

“—And. You needed me. You and Ryan Joseph, you both needed me and I—”

“—Pops—”

“—I left my sons godless and forsaken in the valley of death.”

Footsteps thudded inside, stiff then soft. Hardwood then doormat. The knob jiggled.

“Dad, everything’s fine. I’m fine, Mom’s good. Ryan’s okay. Hey, Mom’s comin’.”

“I’m so proud of you, son. You made it to heaven, buddy. *You showed me* the way. You make me happy. You always did. I’ll come back for you, Ty. Forgive me if I don’t make it.”

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Just show up and hope he's home. Summertime.

A couple dozen yards ahead, the creek'll make me pass under Akin blacktop by way of the culvert and then through the Peabody Mine Co. land beyond it—I can't ride my four-wheeler on the paved roads too long without Officer McDaniels showing up in my driveway later. Derick's officially off probation at midnight and I've got to get him out of the house, away from town before he starts slinging weed and nerve pills for that old freak, Moony, again. Derick's granddad, Papa Kim, asked that of me before I left their place last weekend. Papa Kim's been so cool, letting me come over pretty much every day since Dad went back on tour last fall, so I really don't want to let him down.

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His text says: Ty Im so sorry for your loss. Your daddys looking down on u and he's proud Ty. All of us love u too. Let us know if you need anything. Anything pal. God Bless.

Coach, what the heck?

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And yeah he's threatened it before, but there's no way he went through with it this time.

Anyway Mom would've called.

She would have.

What about—

—Nope. I mash the throttle and the Kodiak hustles. Pebbles scream as my tires force them into the creekbottom sand. They wreck the water's stillness and try to conduct the Kodiak into my old mud ruts, but I don't want that. Get stuck that way. I stand and rock left toward the solid stone riffle at the foot of the steepest bank.

What gives, Coach? I mean, thanks for the love, but—

—So, so a couple months back, Derick and I axed up a big windfall hickory upstream of the culvert and made underwater log ramps from it. Even with their help, I've still wallered the creekbed mud out so bad it's dang near impassable. I've really got to create a new path or since

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We're good. We're good.

Chapter 3.

—See, Dad was so happy last night on the phone. For him. Course, after Mom took the phone from me, I found her in her bathtub red-cheeked and crying. Followed her into her bedroom and hugged her, but she wouldn't say much, just that she loved me and she's sorry.

—But yeah, we're good except the tips of those logramps keep spreading. Rear tires are out the water, slipping a bit. For better traction I hop onto the rear cargo rack, like Superman stretching up to the handlebars, and my right heel lands on the machete I keep sheathed and bungied to the rack in case of feral dogs, bobcats, crank cooks, you name it.

But now the roundness of the logs isn't matching that of my tires. The log tips inching wider and wider.

They're gonna go down in the water, we all are.

I goose it and the ramps run from each other. My front tires bite the culvert rim, slipping on algae but crawling forward anyway. Come on, baby.

More gas. Eyes shut, more gas.

“Go go go go go,” and it works!

The logs shoot sideways and the Kodiak's metal belly makes a sick smash against the lip. Rear tires just spin in the water, not even touching concrete, but I made it. My last, “Go” is still echoing with my engine noise off the culvert's dank cement walls.

I yell, “Hallelujah.” And that echoes too. And echoes.

And it doesn't stop echoing, just, "Hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah," down the tunnel, same loudness as if from my own lips again and again.

That's supposed to mean something. Grandma said it. Whenever she'd pick me up from getting thrown out of daycare at the church, she'd get on to me in the car and I'd repeat it back at her. "You know how to behave," she'd say, so, "You know how to behave," I'd say. But then she told me that's not becoming of a pastor's grandson, that the dead speak in echoes and I ought to respect them. Then I'd say, "That's not becoming of a—" and she'd jam the brakes. Ain't Dad saying, "Hallelujah," to me, though. Nope—

—Wet socks it is. I drop off the side into the ankle-deep water and throttle on as I shove the little beast forward until its back tires deliver us over the brim. My log ramps float briefly until the rippling scumwater drags them down and out of my sight forever, to gather more slime.

My socks squish when I hop back on and get underway.

Engine noise *bididids* louder off the culvert now the exhaust pipe is squarely inside it. It's twenty, thirty yards long and could fit a parade of three Kodiaks riding side by side. In the dead center of the ceiling vault is a manhole, always dripping. Drainage from the blacktop.

But today the manhole flows, hard: an unbroken cylinder of water crashing into the scanty stream below, like a pillar. No sound of falling water, though. Only my engine, and a car passing over the pavement above.

And another. And another, but the water makes no sound.

I don't get it, but the mist it raises feels nice. I slope off the throttle and stop before the pillar to take a picture of it with my phone. It comes back with an all-blue screen. Nothing. No new texts either. Or calls.

What in God's name?

I drop my phone back inside its two ziploc baggies, then my pocket.

Easing back on the gas takes me within five yards of the pillar. Screw it, I'm getting wet.

Three yards. One.

May the circle. Be unbroken. By and by. Oh Lord.

Those words probably aren't the right ones, but they're what I mutter to myself, it's what echoes through my helmet when the angel, or whatever it is, takes me by the armpits and lifts me through the water. My sweat dries. My T-shirt dries. The perfect water does not soak me. I want it to. I wish Dad was here to see this. Could be his chin resting on my shoulder, no angel's.

One by one their. Seats were emptied. When they left you. Here below.

+

I wake to the stink of fungus. My back is flat and damp against cold concrete and I have to pee. Feels like my T-shirt and jeans are being sucked straight up, off my body.

I think I'm lying on the ceiling of the culvert.

I am.

I really am. The Kodiak and the riffling water it stands in cling to the creekbed above. It's darker outside, that purple-gray time before the sun goes down. An angel carried me here. A servant of the Lord. That's all that makes any sense. Dad said it would happen the last night. Said that was why he was so happy.

My eyes want to shut so I let them. *You shall inherit the earth.* Sure enough, it's Dad's voice, in that high, caramel tone he takes on when he's talking just to me.

I unstrap my helmet and take its jawpiece in hand to tug it off, but when I slide it over my ears, it slips out of my hand, falling up, clonking on the handlebars, then into the creek.

Jesus.

I rest my head on the cold manhole, no longer leaking its weird water. The creek fills my helmet, soaking the padding. Dangit. Mom's gonna be so scared if she finds out. She needs me now. I wish Papa Kim was here. He'd help.

Maybe Dad is alive. I'm probably dreaming, because, what the heck, my phone tries to launch upward from my hand when I check it. It says Derick says, where you at?

His second text says, *you alrite?*

Third, *ill still be at the big nub around 7 if you wanna come out still. Luv you bub.*

Then it says Ryan, my big brother, says, *Hey dude, come home.*

Not now. Please not now.

Eighteen missed calls from Mom. Three from Ryan. Couple from both Derick and Papa Kim. It's 6:39 p.m. The Big Nub is the name Derick and I gave to the biggest gob pile on the Peabody acres. Best place in Old Log Landing for watching meteor showers.

But I should get home.

But I'm dreaming, or I'm dead, even though I feel everything, like my full bladder. But I've had to pee in dreams before. That's probably what the water pillar was. Maybe I fell off the Kodiak and bonked my head. And now some force is pulling me up, away from that real ground on the ceiling. Toward Heaven, maybe. That's a dream, I think.

When I stand my jeans ride my crotch and my T-shirt falls up, shrouding my face, so I tuck it into my pants and shuffle toward the Peabody side of the culvert's ceiling. As I raise each foot, my shoes press up against my soles, which is the strangest feeling I've ever dreamed. My clothes don't want me.

Got an idea. A test.

A fissure in the concrete ceiling, I mean floor, leads to the edge and I follow it. In the sea-blue sector of the sunset sky, the moon starts to show its face between two long stripes of pumpkin-colored clouds. It has a bite taken out of it.

Here's my idea—Dad would so do this with me: I unzip my jeans and let my pee flow over the rim, and, sure enough, up it goes. Well, down for me, but up up up, arching a long shoestring into the purple-blue-orangeness. It feels so good in my belly and legs that my eyes shut, and my head falls back and I need to laugh, so I do, and I reopen my eyes. Maybe I'll splash the moon. Or those geese flying down there. I swing the stream over at them, but I know those mean old things will dodge it with grace.

Yeah I know, I could very well fall into the sky. My eyes shut themselves again.

But my bladder is about empty, and so is that good feeling. This is usually where I wake up soaked in pee and feeling like I've got to hide the sheets. I bend my knees and shoot the last bit out, and, when it does leave me, there's a trickle, a long one, and I open my eyes to see the shoestring drop and slash straight down the creek above like a carpenter's chalk line. Guess the earth wants whatever's not me.

My Kodiak is still running, but it's starting to sputter. Don't know how long I was asleep, but must've been hours. Long enough to run down the gas tank and set the sun and turn gravity against me. It's okay, though. I'll switch the petcock to reserve mode: enough gas to get to the Big Nub and then maybe Derick's, where Papa Kim'll give me enough gas to get home.

This maybe ain't a dream. If it is it's one of those lucid ones Dad's always talking about.

Could be it's Dad pulling me up to him. If it's not a dream, I mean—

I re-tie my Reeboks extra tight and walk back to the manhole. A sort of ladder leads up the wall toward the creekwater. Eight iron re-bars bent into rings, embedded in the concrete. The

rust stains dripping from the rungs point up, at my four-wheeler, where there're enough bungies in the stowbox to strap myself to it for the ride to Derick's. It might work.

My palm callouses got tender weedeating the ditch at home this morning and now they burn on the cold re-bar rings. Serves me right. Should be home instead of out gallivanting.

Sweat runs down my neck and drips up into the trickling creekwater as I reach for the Kodiak's floorboard. Only just too far. My dang T-shirt untucks and bunches under my chin. I slap at the floorboard and miss. If Ryan saw this, he'd

machine. No, I know, it's like I'm one of those electric ceiling-feelers on a bumpercar.

I click on the hi-beams. Ahead, below, beyond the lip of the culvert, the sky is a far-off lilac dome with pricks of starlight bursting through from wherever Dad went.

—He did it. Had to've. Or else, why? Why would God send his own off into death alone? My phone shakes and goes dingaling, but whoever it is sure can't give me any answers.

—I flip the fuel petcock to reserve mode. The Kodiak's engine fires up on the first go, and I gas us toward the darkening Peabody side. Its banks are more than vertical, concaving back on themselves into a sandstone gulley.

But near on halfway between me and the bend ahead is a break in the sheer bluff I can maybe ride up. It's a rusty cone-looking seam of clay five or so yards wide, spilling just less than plumb down the bank and ending in a finger of dirt that juts a few yards into the creek. In that dirt stands a giant twisty chestnut with half its hairy roots groping out into the water as if it's pleading with the creek to give back its soil. Some loon, probably Wes Walker and the crazies he runs with, rutted sort of a trail into the clay seam too. It's way dog-gone steeper than I'd usually climb, but Dad's gravity is gonna help yank me up it.

The Kodiak yells when I gas it. At the culvert's end I pull a partial wheelie into the

muddy pool so I don't nosedive and dowse my face, just my jeans and darn socks again. My tires slip in the silty mud, robbed of traction by the skyward tug.

But we're out, onto the first of three sandbars, so I shut off four-wheel-drive and gun it for the seam trail. As I blast through the streams between stretches of sand, the Kodiak feels funny under me, like I'm riding both on a hockey rink *and* the surface of the moon.

I bash into the water again and up onto the last bar, straight for the chestnut at its end. I crank on both brake levers just upstream of the dirt finger. Then I aim my machine at the rocks I have to climb to get to the seam trail. They're as big as microwave ovens.

I hit four-wheel-drive and throttle on. Me and Dad help the Kodiak scramble up the stones, onto the finger, then a hard uphill left into the shallow ruts in the clay. Only now does my stomach catch up with what's going on. Cold sweat on my neck and I belch up bile.

I hit the gas and force my eyes to stay open as I rush down the uphill trail into the near-night sky.

Derick's late.

This Big Nub is twice the height of Walmart, all dirt mounded over gob: a byproduct of the heat the coal companies created, didn't know how to handle, and so hid under earth.

I'm rolled over in my straps, watching my arms hang limp toward the high moon.

I ought not to like this, but I do. It ought to freak me the heck out, but it doesn't.

The meteors should be falling soon.

There're so many stars down there, and Dad was right about them last night, when he said something like, *stars awaken reverence, since they're always there, but inaccessible, always.*

But, tonight, he's wrong. At least sort of.

All I need to do is unhook my cords and straps and I'll access stars. Him too.

"The hell you on, boy?"

Derick!

I undo my forehead bungee and look right, direction of the creek side of the Nub and there he is! Scarecrow shoulders and dumb, lumpy head floating upside-down through the overgrown tallgrass. Got that tore-up St. Louis Blues cap on, of course. That, those rhinestone earstuds, and his butt-eating grin. Lordy, it's good to see him. I pull my arms back up and cross them over my chest strap.

"I know you're not callin' *me* 'boy', boy," I holler at him.

He laughs that hiss laugh that sounds like a happy cobra snake.

"I might be, dude," he says, swimming closer, swaying with the fescue like he's high-stepping with care. He's not the only snake in this grass, though rattlers are rare and it's too dry up here for copperheads, I still worry for him.

I say, "Man, what're *you* on, hoofin' it all the way out here? Hurry up and move, hop on the racks 'fore you get snakebit, dimwit."

Derick hiss-laughs again and does quicken his step. "Kim's Big Red wouldn't start. The Suzuki's jetting is effed up, too. You're lucky I planned ahead on running either of 'em up to the Chevron anyway. Made me start out early."

It's too dark now to make much of him out but his cheeks and his pale bare arms against the blue of his hat and the black of his cutoff thermal tee. "Plus, hikin' ain't so bad. Ain't been let out in a while, ya know?" he says, chuckling. I hope, so bad, he's not thinking his new freedom means slinging dope again for Moony. That'd break me. Papa Kim too.

He wades up, chewing the swirly glass orb braided into his long hemp necklace.

“Hey, bub. I heard. How you—”

And I cry.

It just comes. I’m trying to laugh it away but I cain’t.

My temples burn. And my cheeks. My chest jumps against the rubber strap.

“Dude, I know. I know it,” he says. The Kodiak sinks up at the ground when he sits beside my knee on the rear rack. Can’t see his eyes under his hatbill. “I’m sorry, bub.”

I burble a sloppy, “Thanks,” but I can’t stop crying. He’s the first guy I ever cried to. Yeah, that’s how it works, you cry *to* someone, always, and I’d only ever cried to women. Mom and maybe Granny.

“When my pops OD’d—”

“No! Stop. Dad ain’t—”

“—Shut your mouth!”

He looks up at me, thumbs his hatbill back. His eyes are all whiteness. Like holes in the universe. “Listen. Shut your eyes too.”

I do. I have to. Not because he said so. I just can’t look at those eyes. Nothing’s right.

“Man, when Pops OD’d, I found him. Know where?”

I stutter a line of D’s trying to say, “Derick, stop,” but. Ah.

“Came upon him in the johnboat, up in the rafters of Grampa Kim’s shop.”

What’s he think of these straps? Why isn’t he saying something? I can’t stop crying.

“Curled around a metal feed pail. White mouth, left pant rolled up. Leg black, knee down. Shot up between his toes.”

He stops. Thank God.

I crack an eye, my left, opposite from Derick, and wipe the tears. Can't look at him. Thin fingers of cloud slide in front of the moon. Then, far off left, a white streak slashes half the sky.

The meteors! It's Dad!

Calling me to him, all this. That's what all this is. For me to follow him.

I can't see Derick, just easy light spraying from his direction, soft like moonlight. I see it on my nose tip. There's another meteor. And another.

"Know what he looked like?"

"No, don't say nothin'. Check out the meteors, Derick."

That's why Dad said that about the stars. I can fall into them now. His guidance! I can access them now.

The tears ease up.

All Derick says is, "Listen."

That's where he went. He's up there. Down there, I mean. Dad wants me where he is.

I pull my left foot from under its bungie. Meteorites keeps on coming.

"It was New Year's Eve. Nobody'd seen Pops since Christmas, when he pulled up to Grampa Kim's and busted Moms's windshield, talkin' 'bout, 'I'm seeing my babies on Christmas. I got presents,' and Kim was at church and Moms wouldn't let Pops in and I's standin' there with those brass knuckles you got me for my birthday."

I reach and undo the bungies holding my left thigh. Can't reach my calf yet. Keep talking, Derick. I'll miss you, buddy.

"No joke, I wore 'em and I's thinking he'd see 'em and then he'd kill me. But I didn't have to 'cause he went away. Left presents. Sissy got a Xbox with somebody else's saved-games on it. Gave me a yellow motocross helmet that didn't fit—that's why I gave it to you,

remember?”

He hooks his thumb into the hemp cord and stretches it toward me. “Made me this necklace too. Moms made him go, talkin’ ‘bout Grampa Kim bein’ back soon, gon’ kill him.”

As I unfasten my right thigh bungies, he says, “But he didn’t leave the house.” The soft light sways down toward my legs. Maybe he sees, but he don’t say a thing.

“He just holed up in Kim’s shop and got high ‘til he passed out. OD’d or froze, one.”

Jesus. Derick, why’re you going there? “Buddy, you don’t have tell me this.”

“It’s cool, bub. You gotta hear it,” he says. “I lost mines. And you—”

“—No I didn’t!”

“Listen. So, Grampa Kim don’t heat the shop unless he’s got one of his buddies’ cars to work on, and it was below freezing outside.”

“Stop!”

The meteors slow their show, teasing. This ain’t Derick. I don’t know.

That voice ain’t his, I know that. Flat, not side-mouthed and goofy, “And, well, Kim gave me his old Takamine for Christmas and, with the family stayin’ with us, I couldn’t play it without somebody fussin’,” the straps through my belt loops go next, slapping the floorboards.

Doesn’t throw Derick, though. “So New Year’s Eve I snuck out to the shop with it, fired up Kim’s bullet heater, and went after pickin’ my scales. A half-hour in, the shop had got hot.”

Can’t get my calves without him seeing. Dangit. Dad, I’m coming.

“So the smell came. Like sour dust. And Granny’s cat squeezed inside from the cold. She came and said hello and I petted her and then she took off for the vice-bench. She hopped up there and then on top the tool chest, then the drill press, then that tall black locker beside it. When she jumped up onto the rafter, I knew she smelled it too.”

There's two cutting across my waist and I unfasten them both. My guts feel like they'll spill. I flex my lower-back hard to appear flat against the seat, normal.

“So I laid the guitar by and followed her up. The rafter's just a two-by-four, and—”

You won't stop me, Derick.

“—it hurt my hands trying to do a chin-up on to it, but I flopped my leg up and did it. Stood up, holding the roof beam, wobbling for balance, shakin' the whole truss.”

Meteors start back up, so many just cutting rips in the dark.

“That sent the cat back down and outta sight. Rocked the johnboat too. The stink was worse up there, but I shuffled toward it, laying across the rafters in the middle of the barn.”

Trying to free my right foot, I knee his leg by accident. He touches the cord over my shin.

“What you got these for, dude?”

“I uh. Got dizzy. Felt like I's about to float away. You mind unhooking it for me?”

He does. I'm fixing to fall.

“I feel you. Well stick around, you're about to learn a lot. Know what I said to Pops?”

“Dude look,” I say, pointing to the meteors' white slits in the darkness below us.

“Nah, you look,” he says. ““Open your eyes.””

“No. I won't.” He is a snake. Derick, you are a snake. You won't keep me from Him.

I kick my right foot free, but he clamps down on my shin before it swings down at the sky, free. His hand's like a steel stirrup, unhuman strong.

I shut my eye. But his light isn't soft against my eyelids. It stings.

“No, not you. ‘Open your eyes,’ is what I said to Pops. That's what took me the most about finding him. What I said to him. To his corpse. He didn't even have eyes anymore, they'd shriveled and sunk away already, but still I told him—”

“—Derick. Shut up. I’m sorry you lost him, but mine’s not gone. He’s waitin’, so let me—”

“—to open his eyes. Eleven years old in the rafters telling my thawed out dead Pops to open his eyes to see me. You got any clue what that means?”

Squirming my left calf from under its bungie takes my sneaker with it, but I free my leg and it swings down at the stars. My shoe falls into the grass. The strap cuts my ribs and I can’t reach its hook.

“Let me go,” I shout.

“But he didn’t open them,” he says.

“I’m leaving!”

“Know why?”

My eyelids burn. His light burns me.

“How about this: Open your eyes, Ty.”

I don’t want them to but tears well up again. The rubber strap won’t give. I grab it tight in both hands and make to limbo under it. It pinches the skin of my chest as it rolls to my collarbone. I kick, but Derick’s got me.

“Look, Ty. Look at me.”

The strap rakes my ear as I shimmy under it. “No! Let go, Derick.”

“Do you really want to follow him?”

Eyes squeezed shut, I still see streaking meteors. I shout, “Yes.”

“Go home,” Derick says. “You haven’t died too, Ty.”

He turns me loose.

I swing, gripping tighter. The black night swings beneath my toes.

Then Papa Kim says, “Go home.”

Ryan says, “Come home.”

Mom cries, “Come home!”

Then Dad, his chin on my shoulder, says, “Son, take me home.”

So I turn it loose.

And fall, back onto the Kodiak, where the gascap digs into my spine. The grass waves around me. And the stars gaze down as the meteors, their sons, fall on and on, to burn out white and brilliant.

Last night, traffic on the rainy highway out front was giving me grief like always. The yellow sodium light on the Gwaltneys’ polebarn across the road buzzed and made the soaked blacktop glisten and shine warm. I sat on the porch swing hugging my shins when a tanker truck roared by, shattering the air and sluicing up rainwater. People are always flying by our house, always interrupting.

I squashed my ear into Mom’s cellphone, spat out my bucket-hat’s chinstrap, and then shouted into the mic, “What’d you say, Dad?”

“I said, ‘The stars awaken reverence, since they’re always present, but always inaccessible.’ I read that somewhere, other day. Thought of you, buddy.”

The tanker’s tires howled back at me, shrinking a little through the woods north of home.

The air hung so muggy that it fogged the storm-window behind me, but I stayed because I really didn’t want my voice to wake Mom or have Ryan come snatch the phone to yell at Dad.

“Okay, Dad. Cool. Hey! Speakin’ of stars, there’s a meteor shower I’m gonna check out tomorrow. You wanna watch it too and I’ll call you after? Maybe it’ll help you write a new

song!”

Dad said, “A meteor shower? That all makes sense, then.”

“What does?”

“I pled with Him last night to guide you. I prayed for nearly an hour after I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“You, buddy,” he said.

My cheeks got tight, like they always do when that automatic know-it-all smile stretches up my face. I hated that smile as soon as I felt it. It meant other people were talking through me, internet people, making me snooty about my dad’s religion.

“I saw you. You were floating. In a golden light between the racks of a great big ten-point buck,” he said, chuckling, getting tickled at himself. “I know, I know what you think. It was wild, buddy. But that’s what I saw. You were floating, Ty. In a red robe, arms spread like Our Redeemer.”

“Really?” I said, grinning. A real grin, not the smug one. I like Dad’s stories.

“Yeah, yeah, buddy, you were. You and your buck stood at the edge of your mother’s neighbor’s field too. Cotton grew there instead of corn,”—no one plants cotton in Illinois—“and your eyes were shut and you kept waving me on, little man. Yeah. You asked—”

“—Wait, you were home? In the side-yard?” My socked feet shot down to the porch floor. *He’s dreaming about home! And I’m in it!*

But then silence went one Mississippi. Two. Three. Dang. Again he feared promises.

Then, flat and distant, he said, “Yours and your mother’s yard, yeah. I was there. And you asked me—”

stopped it at my throat. Stupid laugh. In my head all I heard was, *Shut up and help him,*

Ty.

“Dad. I’m here, back home. I’m sitting on the porch. I’m watching the rain muddy the yard. The moon is in the uh, southwest quadrant. It’s waxing gibbous, Dad. Neighbors grew soy this year. Everything’s just like you left it. I’m not—”

“—And I wasn’t there to guide you.”

Yellowy light poured over the porch and into the soaked muck of the yard from the window behind me. Mom woke. My shadow stretched out there too and so did that of the porch banister. Looked like shadow-me sat behind its bars. “Dad—”

“—And. You needed me. You and Ryan Joseph, you both needed me and I—”

“—Pops—”

“—I left my sons godless and forsaken in the valley of death.”

Footsteps thudded inside, stiff then soft. Hardwood then doormat. The knob jiggled.

“Dad, everything’s fine. I’m fine, Mom’s good. Ryan’s okay. Hey, Mom’s comin’.”

“I’m so proud of you, son. You made it to heaven, buddy. *You* showed *me* the way. You make me happy. You always did. I’ll come back for you, Ty. Forgive me if I don’t make it.”

That was last night. Wish I could just take Dad riding with me. It’d chill him out, I think.

I strap on my yellow mildew-stinking helmet and hit the electric start button beside the thumb-throttle. The Kodiak’s startermotor rasps a couple turns and the little 400cc engine between my knees bops to life, making a sound like *bidididididid* that patters off the creek’s steep sandstone banks. I just stopped here to get ahold of Derick to make sure he hasn’t gotten hisself killed yet, but he hasn’t texted me back. Mom will murder me if I waste her minutes calling him, so, since the water’s low enough, I’ll just cruise the creek like always until it takes

me to his backyard.

Just show up and hope he's home. Summertime.

A couple dozen yards ahead, the creek'll make me pass under Akin blacktop by way of the culvert and then through the Peabody Mine Co. land beyond it—I can't ride my four-wheeler on the paved roads too long without Officer McDaniels showing up in my driveway later. Derick's officially off probation at midnight and I've got to get him out of the house, away from town before he starts slinging weed and nerve pills for that old freak, Moony, again. Derick's granddad, Papa Kim, asked that of me before I left their place last weekend. Papa Kim's been so cool, letting me come over pretty much every day since Dad went back on tour last fall, so I really don't want to let him down.

I'm gonna haul Derick up onto the Peabody gob piles to watch the meteor shower tonight. Internet said to expect so much falling space debris that it'll churn up a funky light show in the magnetosphere. Derick can't not like that.

A bigrig thunders by up on the blacktop, looks like a two-ton dumptruck. Its turbo whines and sick diesel smoke swirls and stinks in its wake. The culvert beneath it smells nasty too: all the mold down its throat and the frothed up algae scum around its bottom lip, reeking in this heat. The pool in front of it, where the constant eddy against its cement chin has eroded it to deeper than my handlebars, almost drowns out my four-wheeler's engine every time I come through here. But riding under the blacktop by way of the culvert is the only smart way to foil the Peabody fence.

As I'm about to go ahead on, my phone buzzes. Derick! Nope.

It's Coach Wynn. My track coach.

His text says: Ty Im so sorry for your loss. Your daddys looking down on u and he's

proud Ty. All of us love u too. Let us know if you need anything. Anything pal. God Bless.

Coach, what the heck?

Dad's on tour. He didn't pass away. He's not a loss to be sorry for. And.

And yeah he's threatened it before, but there's no way he went through with it this time.

Anyway Mom would've called.

She would have.

What about—

—Nope. I mash the throttle and the Kodiak hustles. Pebbles scream as my tires force them into the creekbottom sand. They wreck the water's stillness and try to conduct the Kodiak into my old mud ruts, but I don't want that. Get stuck that way. I stand and rock left toward the solid stone riffle at the foot of the steepest bank.

What gives, Coach? I mean, thanks for the love, but—

—So, so a couple months back, Derick and I axed up a big windfall hickory upstream of the culvert and made underwater log ramps from it. Even with their help, I've still wallered the creekbed mud out so bad it's dang near impassable. I've really got to create a new path or since Mom works so much and Ryan's never home, I won't see Derick or Papa Kim like until I get my driver's license. And Derick needs me with him. Both do, I think. Derick's daddy OD'd a couple years ago, yeah, fifth grade year, and he's been kind of all over the place since then. Dude can't ever keep his thoughts straight sometimes.

The sandstone creekbed gives way to slurry, so I hit my four-wheel-drive button and turn back into the deeper water, parting waterbugs and sluicing up sandy mud. The clench point is in two yards, where if I don't line my tires up on the slimy logramps I'll fall off and be boned: engine swamped, automatic transmission flooded, maybe drowned out, myself.

The creekwater wraps my rims up to the hubs. It looks like thick tea, and it smells like my basement when my engine's hot crankcase dips in and boils off a murky steam. I hop my feet up onto the seat and squat because I hate getting my socks all soggy.

The butts of both logs rest on the culvert's flat bottom lip. I line up with those logs and goose the throttle. The Kodiak murmurs, half submerged, sizzling water off its cylinder now.

The worn roundness of the logs talks to me through the shudder of the handlebars. The ramp tips jostle away from each other on the lip, but we're good and balanced enough. My front tires emerge as my sunken rear ones touch the

stop before the pillar to take a picture of it with my phone. It comes back with an all-blue screen. Nothing. No new texts either. Or calls.

What in God's name?

I drop my phone back inside its two ziploc baggies, then my pocket.

Easing back on the gas takes me within five yards of the pillar. Screw it, I'm getting wet. Three yards. One.

May the circle. Be unbroken. By and by. Oh Lord.

Those words probably aren't the right ones, but they're what I mutter to myself, it's what echoes through my helmet when the angel, or whatever it is, takes me by the armpits and lifts me through the water. My sweat dries. My T-shirt dries. The perfect water does not soak me. I want it to. I wish Dad was here to see this. Could be his chin resting on my shoulder, no angel's.

One by one their. Seats were emptied. When they left you. Here below.

+

I wake to the stink of fungus. My back is flat and damp against cold concrete and I have

to pee. Feels like my T-shirt and jeans are being sucked straight up, off my body.

I think I'm lying on the ceiling of the culvert.

I am.

I really am. The Kodiak and the riffling water it stands in cling to the creekbed above. It's darker outside, that purple-gray time before the sun goes down. An angel carried me here. A servant of the Lord. That's all that makes any sense. Dad said it would happen the last night. Said that was why he was so happy.

My eyes want to shut so I let them. *You shall inherit the earth.* Sure enough, it's Dad's voice, in that high, caramel tone he takes on when he's talking just to me.

I unstrap my helmet and take its jawpiece in hand to tug it off, but when I slide it over my ears, it slips out of my hand, falling up, clonking on the handlebars, then into the creek.

Jesus.

I rest my head on the cold manhole, no longer leaking its weird water. The creek fills my helmet, soaking the padding. Dangit. Mom's gonna be so scared if she finds out. She needs me now. I wish Papa Kim was here. He'd help.

Maybe Dad is alive. I'm probably dreaming, because, what the heck, my phone tries to launch upward from my hand when I check it. It says Derick says, where you at?

His second text says, *you alrite?*

Third, *ill still be at the big nub around 7 if you wanna come out still. Luv you bub.*

Then it says Ryan, my big brother, says, *Hey dude, come home.*

Not now. Please not now.

Eighteen missed calls from Mom. Three from Ryan. Couple from both Derick and Papa Kim. It's 6:39 p.m. The Big Nub is the name Derick and I gave to the biggest gob pile on the

Peabody acres. Best place in Old Log Landing for watching meteor showers.

But I should get home.

But I'm dreaming, or I'm dead, even though I feel everything, like my full bladder. But I've had to pee in dreams before. That's probably what the water pillar was. Maybe I fell off the Kodiak and bonked my head. And now some force is pulling me up, away from that real ground on the ceiling. Toward Heaven, maybe. That's a dream, I think.

When I stand my jeans ride my crotch and my T-shirt falls up, shrouding my face, so I tuck it into my pants and shuffle toward the Peabody side of the culvert's ceiling. As I raise each foot, my shoes press up against my soles, which is the strangest feeling I've ever dreamed. My clothes don't want me.

Got an idea. A test.

A fissure in the concrete ceiling, I mean floor, leads to the edge and I follow it. In the sea-blue sector of the sunset sky, the moon starts to show its face between two long stripes of pumpkin-colored clouds. It has a bite taken out of it.

Here's my idea—Dad would so do this with me: I unzip my jeans and let my pee flow over the rim, and, sure enough, up it goes. Well, down for me, but up up up, arching a long shoestring into the purple-blue-orangeness. It feels so good in my belly and legs that my eyes shut, and my head falls back and I need to laugh, so I do, and I reopen my eyes. Maybe I'll splash the moon. Or those geese flying down there. I swing the stream over at them, but I know those mean old things will dodge it with grace.

Yeah I know, I could very well fall into the sky. My eyes shut themselves again.

But my bladder is about empty, and so is that good feeling. This is usually where I wake up soaked in pee and feeling like I've got to hide the sheets. I bend my knees and shoot the last

bit out, and, when it does leave me, there's a trickle, a long one, and I open my eyes to see the shoestring drop and slash straight down the creek above like a carpenter's chalk line. Guess the earth wants whatever's not me.

My Kodiak is still running, but it's starting to sputter. Don't know how long I was asleep, but must've been hours. Long enough to run down the gas tank and set the sun and turn gravity against me. It's okay, though. I'll switch the petcock to reserve mode: enough gas to get to the Big Nub and then maybe Derick's, where Papa Kim'll give me enough gas to get home.

This maybe ain't a dream. If it is it's one of those lucid ones Dad's always talking about.

Could be it's Dad pulling me up to him. If it's not a dream, I mean—

I re-tie my Reeboks extra tight and walk back to the manhole. A sort of ladder leads up the wall toward the creekwater. Eight iron re-bars bent into rings, embedded in the concrete. The rust stains dripping from the rungs point up, at my four-wheeler, where there're enough bungies in the stowbox to strap myself to it for the ride to Derick's. It might work.

My palm callouses got tender weedeating the ditch at home this morning and now they burn on the cold re-bar rings. Serves me right. Should be home instead of out gallivanting.

Sweat runs down my neck and drips up into the trickling creekwater as I reach for the Kodiak's floorboard. Only just too far. My dang T-shirt untucks and bunches under my chin. I slap at the floorboard and miss. If Ryan saw this, he'd surely tell me how to do it right. Derick would be laughing his butt off.

Dad, you're seeing this, aren't you?

To hell with it, I jump, spin, grab, and the floorboard's hard plastic bites deep into my callouses. The Kodiak's rear shock-absorber sighs, sucking air and oil as it extends. Water courses faster around the slightly raised tires.

I accidentally goose the throttle with my heel as I step onto the nearest handgrip, revving the poor engine until it dies on me. With my other foot in place on the other grip, I let go my left hand and swing over to grab the rear cargo rack, smushing my face into the foam seat. Derick'd get a kick out of this too. Gotta look like I'm riding in reverse: face in seat, butt in air, feet on the handlebars.

My back and forearms ache with all the strain. Letting go of the floorboard eases the hurt in my right hand, but I put it to work unlatching the banana-shaped seat to get the bungee cords in the stow-box beneath it. They're a mess of blue, red, and green, all balled in a loose knot. My fingers lace through them like rubber guts and when I lift them the gravity pulls them back. Up, but down. No, away, like the entire world above me.

I feel like a spider disemboweling the poor Kodiak as I yank out those

Dad went.

—He did it. Had to've. Or else, why? Why would God send his own off into death alone? My phone shakes and goes dingaling, but whoever it is sure can't give me any answers.

—I flip the fuel petcock to reserve mode. The Kodiak's engine fires up on the first go, and I gas us toward the darkening Peabody side. Its banks are more than vertical, concaving back on themselves into a sandstone gulley.

But near on halfway between me and the bend ahead is a break in the sheer bluff I can maybe ride up. It's a rusty cone-looking seam of clay five or so yards wide, spilling just less than plumb down the bank and ending in a finger of dirt that juts a few yards into the creek. In that dirt stands a giant twisty chestnut with half its hairy roots groping out into the water as if it's pleading with the creek to give back its soil. Some loon, probably Wes Walker and the crazies he runs with, rutted sort of a trail into the clay seam too. It's way dog-gone steeper than I'd usually

climb, but Dad's gravity is gonna help yank me up it.

The Kodiak yells when I gas it. At the culvert's end I pull a partial wheelie into the muddy pool so I don't nosedive and dowse my face, just my jeans and darn socks again. My tires slip in the silty mud, robbed of traction by the skyward tug.

But we're out, onto the first of three sandbars, so I shut off four-wheel-drive and gun it for the seam trail. As I blast through the streams between stretches of sand, the Kodiak feels funny under me, like I'm riding both on a hockey rink *and* the surface of the moon.

I bash into the water again and up onto the last bar, straight for the chestnut at its end. I crank on both brake levers just upstream of the dirt finger. Then I aim my machine at the rocks I have to climb to get to the seam trail. They're as big as microwave ovens.

I hit four-wheel-drive and throttle on. Me and Dad help the Kodiak scramble up the stones, onto the finger, then a hard uphill left into the shallow ruts in the clay. Only now does my stomach catch up with what's going on. Cold sweat on my neck and I belch up bile. I hit the gas and force my eyes to stay open as I rush down the uphill trail into the near-night sky.

Chapter 4.

Derick's late.

This Big Nub is twice the height of Walmart, all dirt mounded over gob: a byproduct of the heat the coal companies created, didn't know how to handle, and so hid under earth.

I'm rolled over in my straps, watching my arms hang limp toward the high moon.

I ought not to like this, but I do. It ought to freak me the heck out, but it doesn't.

The meteors should be falling soon.

There're so many stars down there, and Dad was right about them last night, when he said something like, *stars awaken reverence, since they're always there, but inaccessible, always.*

But, tonight, he's wrong. At least sort of.

All I need to do is unhook my cords and straps and I'll access stars. Him too.

"The hell you on, boy?"

Derick!

I undo my forehead bungee and look right, direction of the creek side of the Nub and there he is! Scarecrow shoulders and dumb, lumpy head floating upside-down through the overgrown tallgrass. Got that tore-up St. Louis Blues cap on, of course. That, those rhinestone earstuds, and his butt-eating grin. Lordy, it's good to see him. I pull my arms back up and cross

them over my chest strap.

“I know you’re not callin’ *me* ‘boy’, boy,” I holler at him.

He laughs that hiss laugh that sounds like a happy cobra snake.

“I might be, dude,” he says, swimming closer, swaying with the fescue like he’s high-stepping with care. He’s not the only snake in this grass, though rattlers are rare and it’s too dry up here for copperheads, I still worry for him.

I say, “Man, what’re *you* on, hoofin’ it all the way out here? Hurry up and move, hop on the racks ‘fore you get snakebit, dimwit.”

Derick hiss-laughes again and does quicken his step. “Kim’s Big Red wouldn’t start. The Suzuki’s jetting is effed up, too. You’re lucky I planned ahead on running either of ‘em up to the Chevron anyway. Made me start out early.”

It’s too dark now to make much of him out but his cheeks and his pale bare arms against the blue of his hat and the black of his cutoff thermal tee. “Plus, hikin’ ain’t so bad. Ain’t been let out in a while, ya know?” he says, chuckling. I hope, so bad, he’s not thinking his new freedom means slinging dope again for Moony. That’d break me. Papa Kim too.

He wades up, chewing the swirly glass orb braided into his long hemp necklace.

“Hey, bub. I heard. How you—”

And I cry.

It just comes. I’m trying to laugh it away but I cain’t.

My temples burn. And my cheeks. My chest jumps against the rubber strap.

“Dude, I know. I know it,” he says. The Kodiak sinks up at the ground when he sits beside my knee on the rear rack. Can’t see his eyes under his hatbill. “I’m sorry, bub.”

I burble a sloppy, “Thanks,” but I can’t stop crying. He’s the first guy I ever cried to.

Yeah, that's how it works, you cry *to* someone, always, and I'd only ever cried to women. Mom and maybe Granny.

“When my pops OD'd—”

“No! Stop. Dad ain't—”

guidance! I can access them now.

The tears ease up.

All Derick says is, “Listen.”

That's where he went. He's up there. Down there, I mean. Dad wants me where he is.

I pull my left foot from under its bungie. Meteorites keeps on coming.

“It was New Year's Eve. Nobody'd seen Pops since Christmas, when he pulled up to Grampa Kim's and busted Moms's windshield, talkin' 'bout, 'I'm seeing my babies on Christmas. I got presents,' and Kim was at church and Moms wouldn't let Pops in and I's standin' there with those brass knuckles you got me for my birthday.”

I reach and undo the bungies holding my left thigh. Can't reach my calf yet. Keep talking, Derick. I'll miss you, buddy.

“No joke, I wore 'em and I's thinking he'd see 'em and then he'd kill me. But I didn't have to 'cause he went away. Left presents. Sissy got a Xbox with somebody else's saved-games on it. Gave me a yellow motocross helmet that didn't fit—that's why I gave it to you, remember?”

He hooks his thumb into the hemp cord and stretches it toward me. “Made me this necklace too. Moms made him go, talkin' 'bout Grampa Kim bein' back soon, gon' kill him.”

As I unfasten my right thigh bungies, he says, “But he didn't leave the house.” The soft light sways down toward my legs. Maybe he sees, but he don't say a thing.

“He just holed up in Kim’s shop and got high ‘til he passed out. OD’d or froze, one.”

Jesus. Derick, why’re you going there? “Buddy, you don’t have tell me this.”

“It’s cool, bub. You gotta hear it,” he says. “I lost mines. And you—”

“—No I didn’t!”

“Listen. So, Grampa Kim don’t heat the shop unless he’s got one of his buddies’ cars to work on, and it was below freezing outside.”

“Stop!”

The meteors slow their show, teasing. This ain’t Derick. I don’t know.

That voice ain’t his, I know that. Flat, not side-mouthed and goofy, “And, well, Kim gave me his old Takamine for Christmas and, with the family stayin’ with us, I couldn’t play it without somebody fussin’,” the straps through my belt loops go next, slapping the floorboards. Doesn’t throw Derick, though. “So New Year’s Eve I snuck out to the shop with it, fired up Kim’s bullet heater, and went after pickin’ my scales. A half-hour in, the shop had got hot.”

Can’t get my calves without him seeing. Dangit. Dad, I’m coming.

“So the smell came. Like sour dust. And Granny’s cat squeezed inside from the cold. She came and said hello and I petted her and then she took off for the vice-bench. She hopped up there and then on top the tool chest, then the drill press, then that tall black locker beside it. When she jumped up onto the rafter, I knew she smelled it too.”

There’s two cutting across my waist and I unfasten them both. My guts feel like they’ll spill. I flex my lower-back hard to appear flat against the seat, normal.

“So I laid the guitar by and followed her up. The rafter’s just a two-by-four, and—”

You won’t stop me, Derick.

“—it hurt my hands trying to do a chin-up on to it, but I flopped my leg up and did it.

Stood up, holding the roof beam, wobbling for balance, shakin' the whole truss."

Meteors start back up, so many just cutting rips in the dark.

"That sent the cat back down and outta sight. Rocked the johnboat too. The stink was worse up there, but I shuffled toward it, laying across the rafters in the middle of the barn."

Trying to free my right foot, I knee his leg by accident. He touches the cord over my shin.

"What you got these for, dude?"

"I uh. Got dizzy. Felt like I's about to float away. You mind unhooking it for me?"

He does. I'm fixing to fall.

"I feel you. Well stick around, you're about to learn a lot. Know what I said to Pops?"

"Dude look," I say, pointing to the meteors' white slits in the darkness below us.

"Nah, you look," he says. "'Open your eyes.'"

"No. I won't." He is a snake. Derick, you are a snake. You won't keep me from Him.

I kick my right foot free, but he clamps down on my shin before it swings down at the sky, free. His hand's like a steel stirrup, unhuman strong.

I shut my eye. But his light isn't soft against my eyelids. It stings.

"No, not you. 'Open your eyes,' is what I said to Pops. That's what took me the most about finding him. What I said to him. To his corpse. He didn't even have eyes anymore, they'd shriveled and sunk away already, but still I told him—"

"—Derick. Shut up. I'm sorry you lost him, but mine's not gone. He's waitin', so let me—"

"—to open his eyes. Eleven years old in the rafters telling my thawed out dead Pops to open his eyes to see me. You got any clue what that means?"

Squirming my left calf from under its bungie takes my sneaker with it, but I free my leg

and it swings down at the stars. My shoe falls into the grass. The strap cuts my ribs and I can't reach its hook.

"Let me go," I shout.

"But he didn't open them," he says.

"I'm leaving!"

"

Ryan says, "Come home."

Mom cries, "Come home!"

Then Dad, his chin on my shoulder, says, "Son, take me home."

So I turn it loose.

And fall, back onto the Kodiak, where the gascap digs into my spine. The grass waves around me. And the stars gaze down as the meteors, their sons, fall on and on, to burn out white and brilliant.

Last night, traffic on the rainy highway out front was giving me grief like always. The yellow sodium light on the Gwaltneys' polebarn across the road buzzed and made the soaked blacktop glisten and shine warm. I sat on the porch swing hugging my shins when a tanker truck roared by, shattering the air and sluicing up rainwater. People are always flying by our house, always interrupting.

I squashed my ear into Mom's cellphone, spat out my bucket-hat's chinstrap, and then shouted into the mic, "What'd you say, Dad?"

"I said, 'The stars awaken reverence, since they're always present, but always

inaccessible.’ I read that somewhere, other day. Thought of you, buddy.”

The tanker’s tires howled back at me, shrinking a little through the woods north of home.

The air hung so muggy that it fogged the storm-window behind me, but I stayed because I really didn’t want my voice to wake Mom or have Ryan come snatch the phone to yell at Dad.

“Okay, Dad. Cool. Hey! Speakin’ of stars, there’s a meteor shower I’m gonna check out tomorrow. You wanna watch it too and I’ll call you after? Maybe it’ll help you write a new song!”

Dad said, “A meteor shower? That all makes sense, then.”

“What does?”

“I pled with Him last night to guide you. I prayed for nearly an hour after I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“You, buddy,” he said.

My cheeks got tight, like they always do when that automatic know-it-all smile stretches up my face. I hated that smile as soon as I felt it. It meant other people were talking through me, internet people, making me snooty about my dad’s religion.

“I saw you. You were floating. In a golden light between the racks of a great big ten-point buck,” he said, chuckling, getting tickled at himself. “I know, I know what you think. It was wild, buddy. But that’s what I saw. You were floating, Ty. In a red robe, arms spread like Our Redeemer.”

“Really?” I said, grinning. A real grin, not the smug one. I like Dad’s stories.

“Yeah, yeah, buddy, you were. You and your buck stood at the edge of your mother’s neighbor’s field too. Cotton grew there instead of corn,”—no one plants cotton in Illinois—“and your eyes were shut and you kept waving me on, little man. Yeah. You asked—”

“—Wait, you were home? In the side-yard?” My socked feet shot down to the porch floor. *He’s dreaming about home! And I’m in it!*

But then silence went one Mississippi. Two. Three. Dang. Again he feared promises.

Then, flat and distant, he said, “Yours and your mother’s yard, yeah. I was there. And you asked me—”

“—So you’re thinking about swinging by? You should! That’d be awesome.”

“Buddy, that’s exactly what the buck asked me, out in the cotton.” Flat again. Glazed.

New tact: “So, uh, are you and Lloyd thinking about booking another show in St. Louis, then?” That’s only an hour’s drive. Mom’d probably let Ryan drive me and him over to watch.

Seconds more silence. Him breathing. Then, “I’m proud of you, son.”

“Thanks. Thanks, Dad.”

“You showed me,” he said, and his voice went tight and wobbly. In my head I saw his stubby chin shaking, blocking himself from crying. “You showed me the answer.”

I smiled again but I didn’t know what I meant by it. “I’m glad, Dad. So hey—”

“—You’d passed on, son.”

Dad. “Dad, I—”

“—I know,” he muttered. “Your eyes were shut because you were dead, buddy.” His voice shot up, breaking, “Without me.” A laugh jerked up but I stopped it at my throat. Stupid laugh. In my head all I heard was, *Shut up and help him, Ty.*

“Dad. I’m here, back home. I’m sitting on the porch. I’m watching the rain muddy the yard. The moon is in the uh, southwest quadrant. It’s waxing gibbous, Dad. Neighbors grew soy this year. Everything’s just like you left it. I’m not—”

“—And I wasn’t there to guide you.”

Yellowy light poured over the porch and into the soaked muck of the yard from the window behind me. Mom woke. My shadow stretched out there too and so did that of the porch banister. Looked like shadow-me sat behind its bars. “Dad—”

“—And. You needed me. You and Ryan Joseph, you both needed me and I—”

“—Pops—”

“—I left my sons godless and forsaken in the valley of death.”

Footsteps thudded inside, stiff then soft. Hardwood then doormat. The knob jiggled.

“Dad, everything’s fine. I’m fine, Mom’s good. Ryan’s okay. Hey, Mom’s comin’.”

“I’m so proud of you, son. You made it to heaven, buddy. *You* showed *me* the way. You make me happy. You always did. I’ll come back for you, Ty. Forgive me if I don’t make it.”

That was last night. Wish I could just take Dad riding with me. It’d chill him out, I think.

I strap on my yellow mildew-stinking helmet and hit the electric start button beside the thumb-throttle. The Kodiak’s startermotor rasps a couple turns and the little 400cc engine between my knees bops to life, making a sound like *bidididididid* that patters off the creek’s steep sandstone banks. I just stopped here to get ahold of Derick to make sure he hasn’t gotten hisself killed yet, but he hasn’t texted me back. Mom will murder me if I waste her minutes calling him, so, since the water’s low enough, I’ll just cruise the creek like always until it takes me to his backyard.

Just show up and hope he’s home. Summertime.

A couple dozen yards ahead, the creek’ll make me pass under Akin blacktop by way of the culvert and then through the Peabody Mine Co. land beyond it—I can’t ride my four-wheeler on the paved roads too long without Officer McDaniels showing up in my driveway later.

Derick's officially off probation at midnight and I've got to get him out of the house, away from town before he starts slinging weed and nerve pills for that old freak, Moony, again. Derick's granddad, Papa Kim, asked that of me before I left their place last weekend. Papa Kim's been so cool, letting me come over pretty much every day since Dad went back on tour last fall, so I really don't want to let him down.

I'm gonna haul Derick up onto the Peabody gob piles to watch the meteor shower tonight. Internet said to expect so much falling space debris that it'll churn up a funky light show in the magnetosphere. Derick can't not like that.

A bigrig thunders by up on the blacktop, looks like a two-ton dumptruck. Its turbo whines and sick diesel smoke swirls and stinks in its wake. The culvert beneath it smells nasty too: all the mold down its throat and the frothed up algae scum around its bottom lip, reeking in this heat. The pool in front of it, where the constant eddy against its cement chin has eroded it to deeper than my handlebars, almost drowns out my four-wheeler's engine every time I come through here. But riding under the blacktop by way of the culvert is the only smart way to foil the Peabody fence.

As I'm about to go ahead on, my phone buzzes. Derick! Nope.

It's Coach Wynn. My track coach.

His text says: Ty Im so sorry for your loss. Your daddys looking down on u and he's proud Ty. All of us love u too. Let us know if you need anything. Anything pal. God Bless.

Coach, what the heck?

Dad's on tour. He didn't pass away. He's not a loss to be sorry for. And.

And yeah he's threatened it before, but there's no way he went through with it this time.

Anyway Mom would've called.

She would have.

What about—

—Nope. I mash the throttle and the Kodiak hustles. Pebbles scream as my tires force them into the creekbottom sand. They wreck the water's stillness and try to conduct the Kodiak into my old mud ruts, but I don't want that. Get stuck that way. I stand and rock left toward the solid stone riffle at the foot of the steepest bank.

What gives, Coach? I mean, thanks for the love, but—

—So, so a couple months back, Derick and I axed up a big windfall hickory upstream of the culvert and made underwater log ramps from it. Even with their help, I've still wallered the creekbed mud out so bad it's dang near impassable. I've really got to create a new path or since Mom works so much and Ryan's never home, I won't see Derick or Papa Kim like until I get my driver's license. And Derick needs me with him. Both do, I think. Derick's daddy OD'd a couple years ago, yeah, fifth grade year, and he's been kind of all over the place since then. Dude can't ever keep his thoughts straight sometimes.

The sandstone creekbed gives way to slurry, so I hit my four-wheel-drive button and turn back into the deeper water, parting waterbugs and sluicing up sandy mud. The clench point is in two yards, where if I don't line my tires up on the slimy logramps I'll fall off and be boned: engine swamped, automatic transmission flooded, maybe drowned out, myself.

The creekwater wraps my rims up to the hubs. It looks like thick tea, and it smells like my basement when my engine's hot crankcase dips in and boils off a murky steam. I hop my feet up onto the seat and squat because I hate getting my socks all soggy.

The butts of both logs rest on the culvert's flat bottom lip. I line up with those logs and goose the throttle. The Kodiak murmurs, half submerged, sizzling water off its cylinder now.

The worn roundness of the logs talks to me through the shudder of the handlebars. The ramp tips jostle away from each other on the lip, but we're good and balanced enough. My front tires emerge as my sunken rear ones touch the ramps. Careful on the throttle, Ty. Progress, lugs biting hickory, churning the brown filth, climbing us out. Floorboards see daylight again.

We're good. We're good.

—See, Dad was so happy last night on the phone. For him. Course, after Mom took the phone from me, I found her in her bathtub red-cheeked and crying. Followed her into her bedroom and hugged her, but she wouldn't say much, just that she loved me and she's sorry.

—But yeah, we're good except the tips of those logramps keep spreading. Rear tires are out the water, slipping a bit. For better traction I hop onto the rear cargo rack, like Superman stretching up to the handlebars, and my right heel lands on the machete I keep sheathed and bungied to the rack in case of feral dogs, bobcats, crank cooks, you name it.

But now the roundness of the logs isn't matching that of my tires. The log tips inching wider and wider.

They're gonna go down in the water, we all are.

I goose it and the ramps run from each other. My front tires bite the culvert rim, slipping on algae but crawling forward anyway. Come on, baby.

More gas. Eyes shut, more gas.

“Go go go go go,” and it works!

The logs shoot sideways and the Kodiak's metal belly makes a sick smash against the lip. Rear tires just spin in the water, not even touching concrete, but I made it. My last, “Go” is still echoing with my engine noise off the culvert's dank cement walls.

I yell, “Hallelujah.” And that echoes too. And echoes.

And it doesn't stop echoing, just, "Hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah," down the tunnel, same loudness as if from my own lips again and again.

That's supposed to mean something. Grandma said it. Whenever she'd pick me up from getting thrown out of daycare at the church, she'd get on to me in the car and I'd repeat it back at her. "You know how to behave," she'd say, so, "You know how to behave," I'd say. But then she told me that's not becoming of a pastor's grandson, that the dead speak in echoes and I ought to respect them. Then I'd say, "That's not becoming of a—" and she'd jam the brakes. Ain't Dad saying, "Hallelujah," to me, though. Nope—

—Wet socks it is. I drop off the side into the ankle-deep water and throttle on as I shove the little beast forward until its back tires deliver us over the brim. My log ramps float briefly until the rippling scumwater drags them down and out of my sight forever, to gather more slime.

My socks squish when I hop back on and get underway.

Engine noise *bididids* louder off the culvert now the exhaust pipe is squarely inside it. It's twenty, thirty yards long and could fit a parade of three Kodiaks riding side by side. In the dead center of the ceiling vault is a manhole, always dripping. Drainage from the blacktop.

But today the manhole flows, hard: an unbroken cylinder of water crashing into the scanty stream below, like a pillar. No sound of falling water, though. Only my engine, and a car passing over the pavement above.

And another. And another, but the water makes no sound.

I don't get it, but the mist it raises feels nice. I slope off the throttle and stop before the pillar to take a picture of it with my phone. It comes back with an all-blue screen. Nothing. No new texts either. Or calls.

What in God's name?

I drop my phone back inside its two ziploc baggies, then my pocket.

Easing back on the gas takes me within five yards of the pillar. Screw it, I'm getting wet.

Three yards. One.

May the circle. Be unbroken. By and by. Oh Lord.

Those words probably aren't the right ones, but they're what I mutter to myself, it's what echoes through my helmet when the angel, or whatever it is, takes me by the armpits and lifts me through the water. My sweat dries. My T-shirt dries. The perfect water does not soak me. I want it to. I wish Dad was here to see this. Could be his chin resting on my shoulder, no angel's.

One by one their. Seats were emptied. When they left you. Here below.

+

I wake to the stink of fungus. My back is flat and damp against cold concrete and I have to pee. Feels like my T-shirt and jeans are being sucked straight up, off my body.

I think I'm lying on the ceiling of the culvert.

I am.

I really am. The Kodiak and the riffling water it stands in cling to the creekbed above. It's darker outside, that purple-gray time before the sun goes down. An angel carried me here. A servant of the Lord. That's all that makes any sense. Dad said it would happen the last night. Said that was why he was so happy.

My eyes want to shut so I let them. *You shall inherit the earth.* Sure enough, it's Dad's voice, in that high, caramel tone he takes on when he's talking just to me.

I unstrap my helmet and take its jawpiece in hand to tug it off, but when I slide it over my ears, it slips out of my hand, falling up, clonking on the handlebars, then into the creek.

Jesus.

I rest my head on the cold manhole, no longer leaking its weird water. The creek fills my helmet, soaking the padding. Dangit. Mom's gonna be so scared if she finds out. She needs me now. I wish Papa Kim was here. He'd help.

Maybe Dad is alive. I'm probably dreaming, because, what the heck, my phone tries to launch upward from my hand when I check it. It says Derick says, where you at?

His second text says, *you alrite?*

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Then it says Ryan, my big brother, says, *Hey dude, come home.*

Not now. Please not now.

Eighteen missed calls from Mom. Three from Ryan. Couple from both Derick and Papa Kim. It's 6:39 p.m. The Big Nub is the name Derick and I gave to the biggest gob pile on the Peabody acres. Best place in Old Log Landing for watching meteor showers.

But I should get home.

But I'm dreaming, or I'm dead, even though I feel everything, like my full bladder. But I've had to pee in dreams before. That's probably what the water pillar was. Maybe I fell off the Kodiak and bonked my head. And now some force is pulling me up, away from that real ground on the ceiling. Toward Heaven, maybe. That's a dream, I think.

When I stand my jeans ride my crotch and my T-shirt falls up, shrouding my face, so I tuck it into my pants and shuffle toward the Peabody side of the culvert's ceiling. As I raise each foot, my shoes press up against my soles, which is the strangest feeling I've ever dreamed. My clothes don't want me.

Got an idea. A test.

A fissure in the concrete ceiling, I mean floor, leads to the edge and I follow it. In the sea-blue sector of the sunset sky, the moon starts to show its face between two long stripes of pumpkin-colored clouds. It has a bite taken out of it.

Here's my idea—Dad would so do this with me: I unzip my jeans and let my pee flow over the rim, and, sure enough, up it goes. Well, down for me, but up up up, arching a long shoestring into the purple-blue-orangeness. It feels so good in my belly and legs that my eyes shut, and my head falls back and I need to laugh, so I do, and I reopen my eyes. Maybe I'll splash the moon. Or those geese flying down there. I swing the stream over at them, but I know those mean old things will dodge it with grace.

Yeah I know, I could very well fall into the sky. My eyes shut themselves again.

But my bladder is about empty, and so is that good feeling. This is usually where I wake up soaked in pee and feeling like I've got to hide the sheets. I bend my knees and shoot the last bit out, and, when it does leave me, there's a trickle, a long one, and I open my eyes to see the shoestring drop and slash straight down the creek above like a carpenter's chalk line. Guess the earth wants whatever's not me.

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Could be it's Dad pulling me up to him. If it's not a dream, I mean—

I re-tie my Reeboks extra tight and walk back to the manhole. A sort of ladder leads up the wall toward the creekwater. Eight iron re-bars bent into rings, embedded in the concrete. The

rust stains dripping from the rungs point up, at my four-wheeler, where there're enough bungies in the stowbox to strap myself to it for the ride to Derick's. It might work.

My palm callouses got tender weedeating the ditch at home this morning and now they burn on the cold re-bar rings. Serves me right. Should be home instead of out gallivanting.

Sweat runs down my neck and drips up into the trickling creekwater as I reach for the Kodiak's floorboard. Only just too far. My dang T-shirt untucks and bunches under my chin. I slap at the floorboard and miss. If Ryan saw this, he'd surely tell me how to do it right. Derick would be laughing his butt off.

Dad, you're seeing this, aren't you?

To hell with it, I jump, spin, grab, and the floorboard's hard plastic bites deep into my callouses. The Kodiak's rear shock-absorber sighs, sucking air and oil as it extends. Water courses faster around the slightly raised tires.

I accidentally goose the throttle with my heel as I step onto the nearest handgrip, revving the poor engine until it dies on me. With my other foot in place on the other grip, I let go my left hand and swing over to grab the rear cargo rack, smushing my face into the foam seat. Derick'd get a kick out of this too. Gotta look like I'm riding in reverse: face in seat, butt in air, feet on the handlebars.

My back and forearms ache with all the strain. Letting go of the floorboard eases the hurt in my right hand, but I put it to work unlatching the banana-shaped seat to get the bungee cords in the stow-box beneath it. They're a mess of blue, red, and green, all balled in a loose knot. My fingers lace through them like rubber guts and when I lift them the gravity pulls them back. Up, but down. No, away, like the entire world above me.

I feel like a spider disemboweling the poor Kodiak as I yank out those entrails and hook

them to my belt. The seat then goes back on and the thick straps on the front racks come off.

My arms are getting tired so I latch all my bungies willy-nilly to the handlebars, each rack, the fenders, and whatever plastic spur I can find. By the time I monkeybar from the back racks, tuck my heels under the machete, and strap my whole self into position, the sun's pretty near called it a day, seeping only muddy light into my culvert.

I'm a lizard on the ceiling, an upside down Superman buckled to this machine. No, I know, it's like I'm one of those electric ceiling-feelers on a bumpercar.

I click on the hi-beams. Ahead, below, beyond the lip of the culvert, the sky is a far-off lilac dome with pricks of starlight bursting through from wherever Dad went.

—He did it. Had to've. Or else, why? Why would God send his own off into death alone? My phone shakes and goes dingaling, but whoever it is sure can't give me any answers.

—I flip the fuel petcock to reserve mode. The Kodiak's engine fires up on the first go, and I gas us toward the darkening Peabody side. Its banks are more than vertical, concaving back on themselves into a sandstone gulley.

But near on halfway between me and the bend ahead is a break in the sheer bluff I can maybe ride up. It's a rusty cone-looking seam of clay five or so yards wide, spilling just less than plumb down the bank and ending in a finger of dirt that juts a few yards into the creek. In that dirt stands a giant twisty chestnut with half its hairy roots groping out into the water as if it's pleading with the creek to give back its soil. Some loon, probably Wes Walker and the crazies he runs with, rutted sort of a trail into the clay seam too. It's way dog-gone steeper than I'd usually climb, but Dad's gravity is gonna help yank me up it.

The Kodiak yells when I gas it. At the culvert's end I pull a partial wheelie into the muddy pool so I don't nosedive and dowse my face, just my jeans and darn socks again. My tires

slip in the silty mud, robbed of traction by the skyward tug.

But we're out, onto the first of three sandbars, so I shut off four-wheel-drive and gun it for the seam trail. As I blast through the streams between stretches of sand, the Kodiak feels funny under me, like I'm riding both on a hockey rink *and* the surface of the moon.

I bash into the water again and up onto the last bar, straight for the chestnut at its end. I crank on both brake levers just upstream of the dirt finger. Then I aim my machine at the rocks I have to climb to get to the seam trail. They're as big as microwave ovens.

I hit four-wheel-drive and throttle on. Me and Dad help the Kodiak scramble up the stones, onto the finger, then a hard uphill left into the shallow ruts in the clay. Only now does my stomach catch up with what's going on. Cold sweat on my neck and I belch up bile.

I hit the gas and force my eyes to stay open as I rush down the uphill trail into the near-night sky.

Derick's late.

This Big Nub is twice the height of Walmart, all dirt mounded over gob: a byproduct of the heat the coal companies created, didn't know how to handle, and so hid under earth.

I'm rolled over in my straps, watching my arms hang limp toward the high moon.

I ought not to like this, but I do. It ought to freak me the heck out, but it doesn't.

The meteors should be falling soon.

There're so many stars down there, and Dad was right about them last night, when he said something like, *stars awaken reverence, since they're always there, but inaccessible, always.*

But, tonight, he's wrong. At least sort of.

All I need to do is unhook my cords and straps and I'll access stars. Him too.

"The hell you on, boy?"

Derick!

I undo my forehead bungee and look right, direction of the creek side of the Nub and there he is! Scarecrow shoulders and dumb, lumpy head floating upside-down through the overgrown tallgrass. Got that tore-up St. Louis Blues cap on, of course. That, those rhinestone earstuds, and his butt-eating grin. Lordy, it's good to see him. I pull my arms back up and cross them over my chest strap.

"I know you're not callin' *me* 'boy', boy," I holler at him.

He laughs that hiss laugh that sounds like a happy cobra snake.

"I might be, dude," he says, swimming closer, swaying with the fescue like he's high-stepping with care. He's not the only snake in this grass, though rattlers are rare and it's too dry up here for copperheads, I still worry for him.

I say, "Man, what're *you* on, hoofin' it al

But he didn't open them," he says.

"I'm leaving!"

"Know why?"

My eyelids burn. His light burns me.

"How about this: Open your eyes, Ty."

I don't want them to but tears well up again. The rubber strap won't give. I grab it tight in both hands and make to limbo under it. It pinches the skin of my chest as it rolls to my collarbone. I kick, but Derick's got me.

"Look, Ty. Look at me."

The strap rakes my ear as I shimmy under it. “No! Let go, Derick.”

“Do you really want to follow him?”

Eyes squeezed shut, I still see streaking meteors. I shout, “Yes.”

“Go home,” Derick says. “You haven’t died too, Ty.”

He turns me loose.

I swing, gripping tighter. The black night swings beneath my toes.

Then Papa Kim says, “Go home.”

Ryan says, “Come home.”

Mom cries, “Come home!”

Then Dad, his chin on my shoulder, says, “Son, take me home.”

So I turn it loose.

And fall, back onto the Kodiak, where the gascap digs into my spine. The grass waves around me. And the stars gaze down as the meteors, their sons, fall on and on, to burn out white and brilliant.

Chapter 5.

Last night, traffic on the rainy highway out front was giving me grief like always. The yellow sodium light on the Gwaltneys' polebarn across the road buzzed and made the soaked blacktop glisten and shine warm. I sat on the porch swing hugging my shins when a tanker truck roared by, shattering the air and sluicing up rainwater. People are always flying by our house, always interrupting.

I squashed my ear into Mom's cellphone, spat out my bucket-hat's chinstrap, and then shouted into the mic, "What'd you say, Dad?"

"I said, 'The stars awaken reverence, since they're always present, but always inaccessible.' I read that somewhere, other day. Thought of you, buddy."

The tanker's tires howled back at me, shrinking a little through the woods north of home.

The air hung so muggy that it fogged the storm-window behind me, but I stayed because I really didn't want my voice to wake Mom or have Ryan come snatch the phone to yell at Dad.

"Okay, Dad. Cool. Hey! Speakin' of stars, there's a meteor shower I'm gonna check out tomorrow. You wanna watch it too and I'll call you after? Maybe it'll help you write a new song!"

Dad said, “A meteor shower? That all makes sense, then.”

“What does?”

“I pled with Him last night to guide you. I prayed for nearly an hour after I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“You, buddy,” he said.

My cheeks got tight, like they always do when that automatic know-it-all smile stretches up my face. I hated that smile as soon as I felt it. It meant other people were talking through me, internet people, making me snooty about my dad’s religion.

“I saw you. You were floating. In a golden light between the racks of a great big ten-point buck,” he said, chuckling, getting tickled at himself. “I know, I know what you think. It was wild, buddy. But that’s what I saw. You were floating, Ty. In a red robe, arms spread like Our Redeemer.”

“Really?” I said, grinning. A real grin, not the smug one. I like Dad’s stories.

“Yeah, yeah, buddy, you were. You and your buck stood at the edge of your mother’s neighbor’s field too. Cotton grew there instead of corn,”—no one plants cotton in Illinois—“and your eyes were shut and you kept waving me on, little man. Yeah. You asked—”

“—Wait, you were home? In the side-yard?” My socked feet shot down to the porch floor. *He’s dreaming about home! And I’m in it!*

But then silence went one Mississippi. Two. Three. Dang. Again he feared promises.

Then, flat and distant, he said, “Yours and your mother’s yard, yeah. I was there. And you asked me—”

“—So you’re thinking about swinging by? You should! That’d be awesome.”

“Buddy, that’s exactly what the buck asked me, out in the cotton.” Flat again. Glazed.

New tact: “So, uh, are you and Lloyd thinking about booking another show in St. Louis, then?” That’s only an hour’s drive. Mom’d probably let Ryan drive me and him over to watch.

Seconds more silence. Him breathing. Then, “I’m proud of you, son.”

“Thanks. Thanks, Dad.”

“You showed me,” he said, and his voice went tight and wobbly. In my head I saw his stubby chin shaking, blocking himself from crying. “You showed me the answer.”

I smiled again but I didn’t know what I meant by it. “I’m glad, Dad. So hey—”

“—You’d passed on, son.”

Dad. “Dad, I—”

“—I know,” he muttered. “Your eyes were shut because you were dead, buddy.” His voice shot up, breaking, “Without me.” A laugh jerked up but I stopped it at my throat. Stupid laugh. In my head all I heard was, *Shut up and help him, Ty.*

daddys looking down on u and he’s proud Ty. All of us love u too. Let us know if you need anything. Anything pal. God Bless.

Coach, what the heck?

Dad’s on tour. He didn’t pass away. He’s not a loss to be sorry for. And.

And yeah he’s threatened it before, but there’s no way he went through with it this time.

Anyway Mom would’ve called.

She would have.

What about—

—Nope. I mash the throttle and the Kodiak hustles. Pebbles scream as my tires force them into the creekbottom sand. They wreck the water’s stillness and try to conduct the Kodiak into my old mud ruts, but I don’t want that. Get stuck that way. I stand and rock left toward the

solid stone riffle at the foot of the steepest bank.

What gives, Coach? I mean, thanks for the love, but—

—So, so a couple months back, Derick and I axed up a big windfall hickory upstream of the culvert and made underwater log ramps from it. Even with their help, I've still wallered the creekbed mud out so bad it's dang near impassable. I've really got to create a new path or since Mom works so much and Ryan's never home, I won't see Derick or Papa Kim like until I get my driver's license. And Derick needs me with him. Both do, I think. Derick's daddy OD'd a couple years ago, yeah, fifth grade year, and he's been kind of all over the place since then. Dude can't ever keep his thoughts straight sometimes.

The sandstone creekbed gives way to slurry, so I hit my four-wheel-drive button and turn back into the deeper water, parting waterbugs and sluicing up sandy mud. The clench point is in two yards, where if I don't line my tires up on the slimy logramps I'll fall off and be boned: engine swamped, automatic transmission flooded, maybe drowned out, myself.

The creekwater wraps my rims up to the hubs. It looks like thick tea, and it smells like my basement when my engine's hot crankcase dips in and boils off a murky steam. I hop my feet up onto the seat and squat because I hate getting my socks all soggy.

The butts of both logs rest on the culvert's flat bottom lip. I line up with those logs and goose the throttle. The Kodiak murmurs, half submerged, sizzling water off its cylinder now.

The worn roundness of the logs talks to me through the shudder of the handlebars. The ramp tips jostle away from each other on the lip, but we're good and balanced enough. My front tires emerge as my sunken rear ones touch the ramps. Careful on the throttle, Ty. Progress, lugs biting hickory, churning the brown filth, climbing us out. Floorboards see daylight again.

We're good. We're good.

—See, Dad was so happy last night on the phone. For him. Course, after Mom took the phone from me, I found her in her bathtub red-cheeked and crying. Followed her into her bedroom and hugged her, but she wouldn't say much, just that she loved me and she's sorry.

—But yeah, we're good except the tips of those logramps keep spreading. Rear tires are out the water, slipping a bit. For better traction I hop onto the rear cargo rack, like Superman stretching up to the handlebars, and my right heel lands on the machete I keep sheathed and bungied to the rack in case of feral dogs, bobcats, crank cooks, you name it.

But now the roundness of the logs isn't matching that of my tires. The log tips inching wider and wider.

They're gonna go down in the water, we all are.

I goose it and the ramps run from each other. My front tires bite the culvert rim, slipping on algae but crawling forward anyway. Come on, baby.

More gas. Eyes shut, more gas.

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The logs shoot sideways and the Kodiak's metal belly makes a sick smash against the lip. Rear tires just spin in the water, not even touching concrete, but I made it. My last, “Go” is still echoing with my engine noise off the culvert's dank cement walls.

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I accidentally goose the throttle with my heel as I step onto the nearest handgrip, revving the poor engine until it dies on me. With my other foot in place on the other grip, I let go my left hand and swing over to grab the rear cargo rack, smushing my face into the foam seat. Derick'd get a kick out of this too. Gotta look like I'm riding in reverse: face in seat, butt in air, feet on the handlebars.

My back and forearms ache with all the strain. Letting go of the floorboard eases the hurt in my right hand, but I put it to work unlatching the banana-shaped seat to get the bungee cords in the stow-box beneath it. They're a mess of blue, red, and green, all balled in a loose knot. My fingers lace through them like rubber guts and when I lift them the gravity pulls them back. Up, but down. No, away, like the entire world above me.

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My arms are getting tired so I latch all my bungies willy-nilly to the handlebars, each rack, the fenders, and whatever plastic spur I can find. By the time I monkeybar from the back racks, tuck my heels under the machete, and strap my whole self into position, the sun's pretty near called it a day, seeping only muddy light into my culvert.

I'm a lizard on the ceiling, an upside down Superman buckled to this machine. No, I know, it's like I'm one of those electric ceiling-feelers on a bumpercar.

I click on the hi-beams. Ahead, below, beyond the lip of the culvert, the sky is a far-off lilac dome with pricks of starlight bursting through from wherever Dad went.

—He did it. Had to've. Or else, why? Why would God send his own off into death alone? My phone shakes and goes dingaling, but whoever it is sure can't give me any answers.

—I flip the fuel petcock to reserve mode. The Kodiak's engine fires up on the first go, and I gas us toward the darkening Peabody side. Its banks are more than vertical, concaving back on themselves into a sandstone gully.

But near on halfway between me and the bend ahead is a break in the sheer bluff I can maybe ride up. It's a rusty cone-looking seam of clay five or so yards wide, spilling just less than plumb down the bank and ending in a finger of dirt that juts a few yards into the creek. In that dirt stands a giant twisty chestnut with half its hairy roots groping out into the water as if it's pleading with the creek to give back its soil. Some loon, probably Wes Walker and the crazies he runs with, rutted sort of a trail into the clay seam too. It's way dog-gone steeper than I'd usually climb, but Dad's gravity is gonna help yank me up it.

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I bash into the water again and up onto the last bar, straight for the chestnut at its end. I

crank on both brake levers just upstream of the dirt finger. Then I aim my machine at the rocks I have to climb to get to the seam trail. They're as big as microwave ovens.

I hit four-wheel-drive and throttle on. Me and Dad help the Kodiak scramble up the stones, onto the finger, then a hard uphill left into the shallow ruts in the clay. Only now does my stomach catch up with what's going on. Cold sweat on my neck and I belch up bile.

I hit the gas and force my eyes to stay open as I rush down the uphill trail into the near-night sky.

Derick's late.

This Big Nub is twice the height of Walmart, all dirt mounded over gob: a byproduct of the heat the coal companies created, didn't know how to handle, and so hid under earth.

I'm rolled over in my straps, watching my arms hang limp toward the high moon.

I ought not to like this, but I do. It ought to freak me the heck out, but it doesn't.

The meteors should be falling soon.

There're so many stars down there, and Dad was right about them last night, when he said something like, *stars awaken reverence, since they're always there, but inaccessible, always.*

But, tonight, he's wrong. At least sort of.

All I need to do is unhook my cords and straps and I'll access stars. Him too.

"The hell you on, boy?"

Derick!

I undo my forehead bungie and look right, direction of the creek side of the Nub and there he is! Scarecrow shoulders and dumb, lumpy head floating upside-down through the

overgrown tallgrass. Got that tore-up St. Louis Blues cap on, of course. That, those rhinestone earstuds, and his butt-eating grin. Lordy, it's good to see him. I pull my arms back up and cross them over my chest strap.

"I know you're not callin' *me* 'boy', boy," I holler at him.

He laughs that hiss laugh that sounds like a happy cobra snake.

"I might be, dude," he says, swimming closer, swaying with the fescue like he's high-stepping with care. He's not the only snake in this grass, though rattlers are rare and it's too dry up here for copperheads, I still worry for him.

I say, "Man, what're *you* on, hoofin' it all the way out here? Hurry up and move, hop on the racks 'fore you get snakebit, dimwit."

Derick hiss-laughes again and does quicken his step. "Kim's Big Red wouldn't start. The Suzuki's jetting is effed up, too. You're lucky I planned ahead on running either of 'em up to the Chevron anyway. Made me start out early."

It's too dark now to make much of him out but his cheeks and his pale bare arms against the blue of his hat and the black of his cutoff thermal tee. "Plus, hikin' ain't so bad. Ain't been let out in a while, ya know?" he says, chuckling. I hope, so bad, he's not thinking his new freedom means slinging dope again for Moony. That'd break me. Papa Kim too.

He wades up, chewing the swirly glass orb braided into his long hemp necklace.

"Hey, bub. I heard. How you—"

And I cry.

It just comes. I'm trying to laugh it away but I cain't.

My temples burn. And my cheeks. My chest jumps against the rubber strap.

"Dude, I know. I know it," he says. The Kodiak sinks up at the ground when he sits

beside my knee on the rear rack. Can't see his eyes under his hatbill. "I'm sorry, bub."

I burble a sloppy, "Thanks," but I can't stop crying. He's the first guy I ever cried to. Yeah, that's how it works, you cry *to* someone, always, and I'd only ever cried to women. Mom and maybe Granny.

"When my pops OD'd—"

"No! Stop. Dad ain't—"

"—Shut your mouth!"

He looks up at me, thumbs his hatbill back. His eyes are all whiteness. Like holes in the universe. "Listen. Shut your eyes too."

I do. I have to. Not because he said so. I just can't look at those eyes. Nothing's right.

"Man, when Pops OD'd, I found him. Know where?"

I stutter a line of D's trying to say, "Derick, stop," but. Ah.

"Came upon him in the johnboat, up in the rafters of Grampa Kim's shop."

What's he think of these straps? Why isn't he saying something? I can't stop crying.

"Curled around a metal feed pail. White mouth, left pant rolled up. Leg black, knee down. Shot up between his toes."

All Derick says is, "Listen."

That's where he went. He's up there. Down there, I mean. Dad wants me where he is.

I pull my left foot from under its bungie. Meteorites keeps on coming.

"It was New brass knuckles you got me for my birthday."

Chapter 6.

Last night, traffic on the rainy highway out front was giving me grief like always. The yellow sodium light on the Gwaltneys' polebarn across the road buzzed and made the soaked blacktop glisten and shine warm. I sat on the porch swing hugging my shins when a tanker truck roared by, shattering the air and sluicing up rainwater. People are always flying by our house, always interrupting.

I squashed my ear into Mom's cellphone, spat out my bucket-hat's chinstrap, and then shouted into the mic, "What'd you say, Dad?"

"I said, 'The stars awaken reverence, since they're always present, but

I—"

"—Pops—"

"—I left my sons godless and forsaken in the valley of death."

Footsteps thudded inside, stiff then soft. Hardwood then doormat. The knob jiggled.

"Dad, everything's fine. I'm fine, Mom's good. Ryan's okay. Hey, Mom's comin'."

"I'm so proud of you, son. You made it to heaven, buddy. *You* showed *me* the way. You make me happy. You always did. I'll come back for you, Ty. Forgive me if I don't make it."

That was last night. Wish I could just take Dad riding with me. It'd chill him out, I think.

I strap on my yellow mildew-stinking helmet and hit the electric start button beside the thumb-throttle. The Kodiak's startermotor rasps a couple turns and the little 400cc engine between my knees bops to life, making a sound like *bidididididid* that patters off the creek's steep sandstone banks. I just stopped here to get ahold of Derick to make sure he hasn't gotten hisself killed yet, but he hasn't texted me back. Mom will murder me if I waste her minutes calling him, so, since the water's low enough, I'll just cruise the creek like always until it takes me to his backyard.

Just show up and hope he's home. Summertime.

A couple dozen yards ahead, the creek'll make me pass under Akin blacktop by way of the culvert and then through the Peabody Mine Co. land beyond it—I can't ride my four-wheeler on the paved roads too long without Officer McDaniels showing up in my driveway later. Derick's officially off probation at midnight and I've got to get him out of the house, away from town before he starts slinging weed and nerve pills for that old freak, Moony, again. Derick's granddad, Papa Kim, asked that of me before I left their place last weekend. Papa Kim's been so cool, letting me come over pretty much every day since Dad went back on tour last fall, so I really don't want to let him down.

I'm gonna haul Derick up onto the Peabody gob piles to watch the meteor shower tonight. Internet said to expect so much falling space debris that it'll churn up a funky light show in the magnetosphere. Derick can't not like that.

A bigrig thunders by up on the blacktop, looks like a two-ton dumptruck. Its turbo whines and sick diesel smoke swirls and stinks in its wake. The culvert beneath it smells nasty too: all the mold down its throat and the frothed up algae scum around its bottom lip, reeking in this heat. The pool in front of it, where the constant eddy against its cement chin has eroded it to

deeper than my handlebars, almost drowns out my four-wheeler's engine every time I come through here. But riding under the blacktop by way of the culvert is the only smart way to foil the Peabody fence.

As I'm about to go ahead on, my phone buzzes. Derick! Nope.

It's Coach Wynn. My track coach.

His text says: Ty Im so sorry for your loss. Your daddys looking down on u and he's proud Ty. All of us love u too. Let us know if you need anything. Anything pal. God Bless.

Coach, what the heck?

Dad's on tour. He didn't pass away. He's not a loss to be sorry for. And.

And yeah he's threatened it before, but there's no way he went through with it this time.

Anyway Mom would've called.

She would have.

What about—

—Nope. I mash the throttle and the Kodiak hustles. Pebbles scream as my tires force them into the creekbottom sand. They wreck the water's stillness and try to conduct the Kodiak into my old mud ruts, but I don't want that. Get stuck that way. I stand and rock left toward the solid stone riffle at the foot of the steepest bank.

What gives, Coach? I mean, thanks for the love, but—

—So, so a couple months back, Derick and I axed up a big windfall hickory upstream of the culvert and made underwater log ramps from it. Even with their help, I've still wallered the creekbed mud out so bad it's dang near impassable. I've really got to create a new path or since Mom works so much and Ryan's never home, I won't see Derick or Papa Kim like until I get my driver's license. And Derick needs me with him. Both do, I think. Derick's daddy OD'd a couple

years ago, yeah, fifth grade year, and he's been kind of all over the place since then. Dude can't ever keep his thoughts straight sometimes.

The sandstone creekbed gives way to slurry, so I hit my four-wheel-drive button and turn back into the deeper water, parting waterbugs and sluicing up sandy mud. The clutch point is in two yards, where if I don't line my tires up on the slimy logramps I'll fall off and be boned: engine swamped, automatic transmission flooded, maybe drowned out, myself.

The creekwater wraps my rims up to the hubs. It looks like thick tea, and it smells like my basement when my engine's hot crankcase dips in and boils off a murky steam. I hop my feet up onto the seat and squat because I hate getting my socks all soggy.

The butts of both logs rest on the culvert's flat bottom lip. I line up with those logs and goose the throttle. The Kodiak murmurs, half submerged, sizzling water off its cylinder now.

The worn roundness of the logs talks to me through the shudder of the handlebars. The ramp tips jostle away from each other on the lip, but we're good and balanced enough. My front tires emerge as my sunken rear ones touch the ramps. Careful on the throttle, Ty. Progress, lugs biting hickory, churning the brown filth, climbing us out. Floorboards see daylight again.

We're good. We're good.

—See, Dad was so happy last night on the phone. For him. Course, after Mom took the phone from me, I found her in her bathtub red-cheeked and crying. Followed her into her bedroom and hugged her, but she wouldn't say much, just that she loved me and she's sorry.

—But yeah, we're good except the tips of those logramps keep spreading. Rear tires are out the water, slipping a bit. For better traction I hop onto the rear cargo rack, like Superman stretching up to the handlebars, and my right heel lands on the machete I keep sheathed and bungied to the rack in case of feral dogs, bobcats, crank cooks, you name it.

But now the roundness of the logs isn't matching that of my tires. The log tips inching wider and wider.

They're gonna go down in the water, we all are.

I goose it and the ramps run from each other. My front tires bite the culvert rim, slipping on algae but crawling forward anyway. Come on, baby.

More gas. Eyes shut, more gas.

"Go go go go go," and it works!

The logs shoot sideways and the Kodiak's metal belly makes a sick smash against the lip. Rear tires just spin in the water, not even touching concrete, but I made it. My last, "Go" is still echoing with my engine noise off the culvert's dank cement walls.

I yell, "Hallelujah." And that echoes too. And echoes.

And it doesn't stop echoing, just, "Hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah," down the tunnel, same loudness as if from my own lips again and again.

That's supposed to mean something. Grandma said it. Whenever she'd pick me up from getting thrown out of daycare at the church, she'd get on to me in the car and I'd repeat it back at her. "You know how to behave," she'd say, so, "You know how to behave," I'd say. But then she told me that's not becoming of a pastor's grandson, that the dead speak in echoes and I ought to respect them. Then I'd say, "That's not becoming of a—" and she'd jam the brakes. Ain't Dad saying, "Hallelujah," to me, though. Nope—

—Wet socks it is. I drop off the side into the ankle-deep water and throttle on as I shove the little beast forward until its back tires deliver us over the brim. My log ramps float briefly until the rippling scumwater drags them down and out of my sight forever, to gather more slime.

My socks squish when I hop back on and get underway.

Engine noise *bididids* louder off the culvert now the exhaust pipe is squarely inside it. It's twenty, thirty yards long and could fit a parade of three Kodiaks riding side by side. In the dead center of the ceiling vault is a manhole, always dripping. Drainage from the blacktop.

But today the manhole flows, hard: an unbroken cylinder of water crashing into the scanty stream below, like a pillar. No sound of falling water, though. Only my engine, and a car passing over the pavement above.

And another. And another, but the water makes no sound.

I don't get it, but the mist it raises feels nice. I slope off the throttle and stop before the pillar to take a picture of it with my phone. It comes back with an all-blue screen. Nothing. No new texts either. Or calls.

What in God's name?

I drop my phone back inside its two ziploc baggies, then my pocket.

Easing back on the gas takes me within five yards of the pillar. Screw it, I'm getting wet. Three yards. One.

May the circle. Be unbroken. By and by. Oh Lord.

Those words probably aren't the right ones, but they're what I mutter to myself, it's what echoes through my helmet when the angel, or whatever it is, takes me by the armpits and lifts me through the water. My sweat dries. My T-shirt dries. The perfect water does not soak me. I want it to. I wish Dad was here to see this. Could be his chin resting on my shoulder, no angel's.

One by one their. Seats were emptied. When they left you. Here below.

+

I wake to the stink of fungus. My back is flat and damp against cold concrete and I have

to pee. Feels like my T-shirt and jeans are being sucked straight up, off my body.

I think I'm lying on the ceiling of the culvert.

I am.

I really am. The Kodiak and the riffling water it stands in cling to the creekbed above. It's darker outside, that purple-gray time before the sun goes down. An angel carried me here. A servant of the Lord. That's all that makes any sense. Dad said it would happen the last night. Said that was why he was so happy.

My eyes want to shut so I let them. *You shall inherit the earth.* Sure enough, it's Dad's voice, in that high, caramel tone he takes on when he's talking just to me.

I unstrap my helmet and take its jawpiece in hand to tug it off, but when I slide it over my ears, it slips out of my hand, falling up, clonking on the handlebars, then into the creek.

Jesus.

I rest my head on the cold manhole, no longer leaking its weird water. The creek fills my helmet, soaking the padding. Dangit. Mom's gonna be so scared if she finds out. She needs me now. I wish Papa Kim was here. He'd help.

Maybe Dad is alive. I'm probably dreaming, because, what the heck, my phone tries to launch upward from my hand when I check it. It says Derick says, where you at?

His second text says, *you alrite?*

Third, *ill still be at the big nub around 7 if you wanna come out still. Luv you bub.*

Then it says Ryan, my big brother, says, *Hey dude, come home.*

Not now. Please not now.

Eighteen missed calls from Mom. Three from Ryan. Couple from both Derick and Papa Kim. It's 6:39 p.m. The Big Nub is the name Derick and I gave to the biggest gob pile on the

Peabody acres. Best place in Old Log Landing for watching meteor showers.

But I should get home.

But I'm dreaming, or I'm dead, even though I feel everything, like my full bladder. But I've had to pee in dreams before. That's probably what the water pillar was. Maybe I fell off the Kodiak and bonked my head. And now some force is pulling me up, away from that real ground on the ceiling. Toward Heaven, maybe. That's a dream, I think.

When I stand my jeans ride my crotch and my T-shirt falls up, shrouding my face, so I tuck it into my pants and shuffle toward the Peabody side of the culvert's ceiling. As I raise each foot, my shoes press up against my soles, which is the strangest feeling I've ever dreamed. My clothes don't want me.

Got an idea. A test.

A fissure in the concrete ceiling, I mean floor, leads to the edge and I follow it. In the sea-blue sector of the sunset sky, the moon starts to show its face between two long stripes of pumpkin-colored clouds. It has a bite taken out of it.

Here's my idea—Dad would so do this with me: I unzip my jeans and let my pee flow over the rim, and, sure enough, up it goes. Well, down for me, but up up up, arching a long shoestring into the purple-blue-orangeness. It feels so good in my belly and legs that my eyes shut, and my head falls back and I need to laugh, so I do, and I reopen my eyes. Maybe I'll splash the moon. Or those geese flying down there. I swing the stream over at them, but I know those mean old things will dodge it with grace.

Yeah I know, I could very well fall into the sky. My eyes shut themselves again.

But my bladder is about empty, and so is that good feeling. This is usually where I wake up soaked in pee and feeling like I've got to hide the sheets. I bend my knees and shoot the last

bit out, and, when it does leave me, there's a trickle, a long one, and I open my eyes to see the shoestring drop and slash straight down the creek above like a carpenter's chalk line. Guess the earth wants whatever's not me.

My Kodiak is still running, but it's starting to sputter. Don't know how long I was asleep, but must've been hours. Long enough to run down the gas tank and set the sun and turn gravity against me. It's okay, though. I'll switch the petcock to reserve mode: enough gas to get to the Big Nub and then maybe Derick's, where Papa Kim'll give me enough gas to get home.

This maybe ain't a dream. If it is it's one of those lucid ones Dad's always talking about.

Could be it's Dad pulling me up to him. If it's not a dream, I mean—

I re-tie my Reeboks extra tight and walk back to the manhole. A sort of ladder leads up the wall toward the creekwater. Eight iron re-bars bent into rings, embedded in the concrete. The rust stains dripping from the rungs point up, at my four-wheeler, where there're enough bungies in the stowbox to strap myself to it for the ride to Derick's. It might work.

My palm callouses got tender weedeating the ditch at home this morning and now they burn on the cold re-bar rings. Serves me right. Should be home instead of out gallivanting.

Sweat runs down my neck and drips up into the trickling creekwater as I reach for the Kodiak's floorboard. Only just too far. My dang T-shirt untucks and bunches under my chin. I slap at the floorboard and miss. If Ryan saw this, he'd surely tell me how to do it right. Derick would be laughing his butt off.

Dad, you're seeing this, aren't you?

To hell with it, I jump, spin, grab, and the floorboard's hard plastic bites deep into my callouses. The Kodiak's rear shock-absorber sighs, sucking air and oil as it extends. Water courses faster around the slightly raised tires.

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All I need to do is unhook my cords and straps and I'll access stars. Him too.

"The hell you on, boy?"

Derick!

I undo my forehead bungee and look right, direction of the creek side of the Nub and there he is! Scarecrow shoulders and dumb, lumpy head floating upside-down through the overgrown tallgrass. Got that tore-up St. Louis Blues cap on, of course. That, those rhinestone earstuds, and his butt-eating grin. Lordy, it's good to see him. I pull my arms back up and cross them over my chest strap.

"I know you're not callin' *me* 'boy', boy," I holler at him.

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"I might be, dude," he says, swimming closer, swaying with the fescue like he's high-stepping with care. He's not the only snake in this grass, though rattlers are rare and it's too dry

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He wades up, chewing the swirly glass orb braided into his long hemp necklace.

“Hey, bub. I heard. How you—”

It just comes. I’m trying to laugh it away but I cain’t.

My temples burn. And my cheeks. My chest jumps against the rubber strap.

“Dude, I know. I know it,” he says. The Kodiak sinks up at the ground when he sits beside my knee on the rear rack. Can’t see his eyes under his hatbill. “I’m sorry, bub.”

I burble a sloppy, “Thanks,” but I can’t stop crying. He’s the first guy I ever cried to. Yeah, that’s how it works, you cry *to* someone, always, and I’d only ever cried to women. Mom and maybe Granny.

Chapter 7.

“When my pops OD’d—”

“No! Stop. Dad ain’t—”

“—Shut your mouth!”

He looks up at me, thumbs his hatbill back. His eyes are all whiteness. Like holes in the universe. “Listen. Shut your eyes too.”

I do. I have to. Not because he said so. I just can’t look at those eyes. Nothing’s right.

“Man, when Pops OD’d, I found him. Know where?”

I stutter a line of D’s trying to say, “Derick, stop,” but. Ah.

“Came upon him in the johnboat, up in the rafters of Grampa Kim’s shop.”

What’s he think of these straps? Why isn’t he saying something? I can’t stop crying.

“Curled around a metal feed pail. White mouth, left pant rolled up. Leg black, knee down. Shot up between his toes.”

He stops. Thank God.

I crack an eye, my left, opposite from Derick, and wipe the tears. Can’t look at him. Thin fingers of cloud slide in front of the moon. Then, far off left, a white streak slashes half the sky.

The meteors! It’s Dad!

Calling me to him, all this. That’s what all this is. For me to follow him.

I can't see Derick, just easy light spraying from his direction, soft like moonlight. I see it on my nose tip. There's another meteor. And another.

"Know what he looked like?"

"No, don't say nothin'. Check out the meteors, Derick."

That's why Dad said that about the stars. I can fall into them now. His guidance! I can access them now.

The tears ease up.

All Derick says is, "Listen."

That's where he went. He's up there. Down there, I mean. Dad wants me where he is.

I pull my left foot from under its bungie. Meteorites keeps on coming.

"It was New Year's Eve. Nobody'd seen Pops since Christmas, when he pulled up to Grampa Kim's and busted Moms's windshield, talkin' 'bout, 'I'm seeing my babies on Christmas. I got presents,' and Kim was at church and Moms wouldn't let Pops in and I's standin' there with those brass knuckles you got me for my birthday."

I reach and undo the bungies holding my left thigh. Can't reach my calf yet. Keep talking, Derick. I'll miss you, buddy.

"No joke, I wore 'em and I's thinking he'd see 'em and then he'd kill me. But I didn't have to 'cause he went away. Left presents. Sissy got a Xbox with somebody else's saved-games on it. Gave me a yellow motocross helmet that didn't fit—that's why I gave it to you, remember?"

He hooks his thumb into the hemp cord and stretches it toward me. "Made me this necklace too. Moms made him go, talkin' 'bout Grampa Kim bein' back soon, gon' kill him."

As I unfasten my right thigh bungies, he says, "But he didn't leave the house." The soft

light sways down toward my legs. Maybe he sees, but he don't say a thing.

“He just holed up in Kim's shop and got high 'til he passed out. OD'd or froze, one.”

Jesus. Derick, why're you going there? “Buddy, you don't have tell me this.”

“It's cool, bub. You gotta hear it,” he says. “I lost mines. And you—”

“—No I didn't!”

“Listen. So, Grampa Kim don't heat the shop unless he's got one of his buddies' cars to work on, and it was below freezing outside.”

“Stop!”

The meteors slow their show, teasing. This ain't Derick. I don't know.

That voice ain't his, I know that. Flat, not side-mouthed and goofy, “And, well, Kim gave me his old Takamine for Christmas and, with the family stayin' with us, I couldn't play it without somebody fussin',” the straps through my belt loops go next, slapping the floorboards. Doesn't throw Derick, though. “So New Year's Eve I snuck out to the shop with it, fired up Kim's bullet heater, and went after pickin' my scales. A half-hour in, the shop had got hot.”

Can't get my calves without him seeing. Dangit. Dad, I'm coming.

“So the smell came. Like sour dust. And Granny's cat squeezed inside from the cold. She came and said hello and I petted her and then she took off for the vice-bench. She hopped up there and then on top the tool chest, then the drill press, then that tall black locker beside it. When she jumped up onto the rafter, I knew she smelled it too.”

There's two cutting across my waist and I unfasten them both. My guts feel like they'll spill. I flex my lower-back hard to appear flat against the seat, normal.

“So I laid the guitar by and followed her up. The rafter's just a two-by-four, and—”

You won't stop me, Derick.

“—it hurt my hands trying to do a chin-up on to it, but I flopped my leg up and did it. Stood up, holding the roof beam, wobbling for balance, shakin’ the whole truss.”

Meteors start back up, so many just cutting rips in the dark.

“That sent the cat back down and outta sight. Rocked the johnboat too. The stink was worse up there, but I shuffled toward it, laying across the rafters in the middle of the barn.”

Trying to free my right foot, I knee his leg by accident. He touches the cord over my shin.

“What you got these for, dude?”

“I uh. Got dizzy. Felt like I’s about to float away. You mind unhooking it for me?”

He does. I’m fixing to fall.

“I feel you. Well stick around, you’re about to learn a lot. Know what I said to Pops?”

“Dude look,” I say, pointing to the meteors’ white slits in the darkness below us.

“Nah, you look,” he says. “‘Open your eyes.’”

“No. I won’t.” He is a snake. Derick, you are a snake. You won’t keep me from Him.

I kick my right foot free, but he clamps down on my shin before it swings down at the sky, free. His hand’s like a steel stirrup, unhuman strong.

I shut my eye. But his light isn’t soft against my eyelids. It stings.

“No, not you. ‘Open your eyes,’ is what I said to Pops. That’s what took me the most about finding him. What I said to him. To his corpse. He didn’t even have eyes anymore, they’d shriveled and sunk away already, but still I told him—”

“—Derick. Shut up. I’m sorry you lost him, but mine’s not gone. He’s waitin’, so let me—”

“—to open his eyes. Eleven years old in the rafters telling my thawed out dead Pops to open his eyes to see me. You got any clue what that means?”

er it is sure can't give me any answers.

—I flip the fuel petcock to reserve mode. The Kodiak's engine fires up on the first go, and I gas us toward the darkening Peabody side. Its banks are more than vertical, concaving back on themselves into a sandstone gulley.

But near on halfway between me and the bend ahead is a break in the sheer bluff I can maybe ride up. It's a rusty cone-looking seam of clay five or so yards wide, spilling just less than plumb down the bank and ending in a finger of dirt that juts a few yards into the creek. In that dirt stands a giant twisty chestnut with half its hairy roots groping out into the water as if it's pleading with the creek to give back its soil. Some loon, probably Wes Walker and the crazies he runs with, rutted sort of a trail into the clay seam too. It's way dog-gone steeper than I'd usually climb, but Dad's gravity is gonna help yank me up it.

The Kodiak yells when I gas it. At the culvert's end I pull a partial wheelie into the muddy pool so I don't nosedive and dowse my face, just my jeans and darn socks again. My tires slip in the silty mud, robbed of traction by the skyward tug.

But we're out, onto the first of three sandbars, so I shut off four-wheel-drive and gun it for the seam trail. As I blast through the streams between stretches of sand, the Kodiak feels funny under me, like I'm riding both on a hockey rink *and* the surface of the moon.

I bash into the water again and up onto the last bar, straight for the chestnut at its end. I crank on both brake levers just upstream of the dirt finger. Then I aim my machine at the rocks I have to climb to get to the seam trail. They're as big as microwave ovens.

I hit four-wheel-drive and throttle on. Me and Dad help the Kodiak scramble up the stones, onto the finger, then a hard uphill left into the shallow ruts in the clay. Only now does my stomach catch up with what's going on. Cold sweat on my neck and I belch up bile.

I hit the gas and force my eyes to stay open as I rush down the uphill trail into the near-night sky.

Derick's late.

This Big Nub is twice the height of Walmart, all dirt mounded over gob: a byproduct of the heat the coal companies created, didn't know how to handle, and so hid under earth.

I'm rolled over in my straps, watching my arms hang limp toward the high moon.

I ought not to like this, but I do. It ought to freak me the heck out, but it doesn't.

The meteors should be falling soon.

There're so many stars down there, and Dad was right about them last night, when he said something like, *stars awaken reverence, since they're always there, but inaccessible, always.*

But, tonight, he's wrong. At least sort of.

All I need to do is unhook my cords and straps and I'll access stars. Him too.

"The hell you on, boy?"

Derick!

I undo my forehead bungee and look right, direction of the creek side of the Nub and there he is! Scarecrow shoulders and dumb, lumpy head floating upside-down through the overgrown tallgrass. Got that tore-up St. Louis Blues cap on, of course. That, those rhinestone earstuds, and his butt-eating grin. Lordy, it's good to see him. I pull my arms back up and cross

them over my chest strap.

“I know you’re not callin’ *me* ‘boy’, boy,” I holler at him.

He laughs that hiss laugh that sounds like a happy cobra snake.

“I might be, dude,” he says, swimming closer, swaying with the fescue like he’s high-stepping with care. He’s not the only snake in this grass, though rattlers are rare and it’s too dry up here for copperheads, I still worry for him.

I say, “Man, what’re *you* on, hoofin’ it all the way out here? Hurry up and move, hop on the racks ‘fore you get snakebit, dimwit.”

Derick hiss-laughes again and does quicken his step. “Kim’s Big Red wouldn’t start. The Suzuki’s jetting is effed up, too. You’re lucky I planned ahead on running either of ‘em up to the Chevron anyway. Made me start out early.”

It’s too dark now to make much of him out but his cheeks and his pale bare arms against the blue of his hat and the black of his cutoff thermal tee. “Plus, hikin’ ain’t so bad. Ain’t been let out in a while, ya know?” he says, chuckling. I hope, so bad, he’s not thinking his new freedom means slinging dope again for Moony. That’d break me. Papa Kim too.

He wades up, chewing the swirly glass orb braided into his long hemp necklace.

“Hey, bub. I heard. How you—”

And I cry.

It just comes. I’m trying to laugh it away but I cain’t.

My temples burn. And my cheeks. My chest jumps against the rubber strap.

“Dude, I know. I know it,” he says. The Kodiak sinks up at the ground when he sits beside my knee on the rear rack. Can’t see his eyes under his hatbill. “I’m sorry, bub.”

I burble a sloppy, “Thanks,” but I can’t stop crying. He’s the first guy I ever cried to.

Yeah, that's how it works, you cry *to* someone, always, and I'd only ever cried to women. Mom and maybe Granny.

"When my pops OD'd—"

"No! Stop. Dad ain't—"

"—Shut your mouth!"

He looks up at me, thumbs his hatbill back. His eyes are all whiteness. Like holes in the universe. "Listen. Shut your eyes too."

I do. I have to. Not because he said so. I just can't look at those eyes. Nothing's right.

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“—it hurt my hands trying to do a chin-up on to it, but I flopped my leg up and did it. Stood up, holding the roof beam, wobbling for balance, shakin’ the whole truss.”

Meteors start back up, so many just cutting rips in the dark.

“That sent the cat back down and outta sight. Rocked the johnboat too. The stink was

worse up there, but I shuffled toward it, laying across stuff.

Last night, traffic on the rainy highway out front was giving me grief like always. The yellow sodium light on the Gwaltneys' polebarn across the road buzzed and made the soaked blacktop glisten and shine warm. I sat on the porch swing hugging my shins when a tanker truck

roared by, shattering the air and sluicing up rainwater. People are always flying by our house, always interrupting.

I squashed my ear into Mom's cellphone, spat out my bucket-hat's chinstrap, and then shouted into the mic, "What'd you say, Dad?"

"I said, 'The stars awaken reverence, since they're always present, but always inaccessible.' I read that somewhere, other day. Thought of you, buddy."

The tanker's tires howled back at me, shrinking a little through the woods north of home.

The air hung so muggy that it fogged the storm-window behind me, but I stayed because I really didn't want my voice to wake Mom or have Ryan come snatch the phone to yell at Dad.

"Okay, Dad. Cool. Hey! Speakin' of stars, there's a meteor shower I'm gonna check out tomorrow. You wanna watch it too and I'll call you after? Maybe it'll help you write a new song!"

Dad said, "A meteor shower? That all makes sense, then."

"What does?"

"I pled with Him last night to guide you. I prayed for nearly an hour after I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"You, buddy," he said.

My cheeks got tight, like they always do when that automatic know-it-all smile stretches up my face. I hated that smile as soon as I felt it. It meant other people were talking through me, internet people, making me snooty about my dad's religion.

"I saw you. You were floating. In a golden light between the racks of a great big ten-point buck," he said, chuckling, getting tickled at himself. "I know, I know what you think. It was wild, buddy. But that's what I saw. You were floating, Ty. In a red robe, arms spread like Our

Redeemer.”

“Really?” I said, grinning. A real grin, not the smug one. I like Dad’s stories.

“Yeah, yeah, buddy, you were. You and your buck stood at the edge of your mother’s neighbor’s field too. Cotton grew there instead of corn,”—no one plants cotton in Illinois—“and your eyes were shut and you kept waving me on, little man. Yeah. You asked—”

“—Wait, you were home? In the side-yard?” My socked feet shot down to the porch floor. *He’s dreaming about home! And I’m in it!*

But then silence went one Mississippi. Two. Three. Dang. Again he feared promises.

Then, flat and distant, he said, “Yours and your mother’s yard, yeah. I was there. And you asked me—”

“—So you’re thinking about swinging by? You should! That’d be awesome.”

“Buddy, that’s exactly what the buck asked me, out in the cotton.” Flat again. Glazed.

New tact: “So, uh, are you and Lloyd thinking about booking another show in St. Louis, then?” That’s only an hour’s drive. Mom’d probably let Ryan drive me and him over to watch.

Seconds more silence. Him breathing. Then, “I’m proud of you, son.”

“Thanks. Thanks, Dad.”

“You showed me,” he said, and his voice went tight and wobbly. In my head I saw his stubbly chin shaking, blocking himself from crying. “You showed me the answer.”

I smiled again but I didn’t know what I meant by it. “I’m glad, Dad. So hey—”

“—You’d passed on, son.”

Dad. “Dad, I—”

“—I know,” he muttered. “Your eyes were shut because you were dead, buddy.” His voice shot up, breaking, “Without me.” A laugh jerked up but I stopped it at my throat. Stupid

laugh. In my head all I heard was, *Shut up and help him, Ty.*

“Dad. I’m here, back home. I’m sitting on the porch. I’m watching the rain muddy the yard. The moon is in the uh, southwest quadrant. It’s waxing gibbous, Dad. Neighbors grew soy this year. Everything’s just like you left it. I’m not—”

“—And I wasn’t there to guide you.”

Yellowy light poured over the porch and into the soaked muck of the yard from the window behind me. Mom woke. My shadow stretched out there too and so did that of the porch banister. Looked like shadow-me sat behind its bars. “Dad—”

“—And. You needed me. You and Ryan Joseph, you both needed me and I—”

“—Pops—”

“—I left my sons godless and forsaken in the valley of death.”

Footsteps thudded inside, stiff then soft. Hardwood then doormat. The knob jiggled.

“Dad, everything’s fine. I’m fine, Mom’s good. Ryan’s okay. Hey, Mom’s comin’.”

“I’m so proud of you, son. You made it to heaven, buddy. *You* showed *me* the way. You make me happy. You always did. I’ll come back for you, Ty. Forgive me if I don’t make it.”

That was last night. Wish I could just take Dad riding with me. It’d chill him out, I think.

I strap on my yellow mildew-stinking helmet and hit the electric start button beside the thumb-throttle. The Kodiak’s startermotor rasps a couple turns and the little 400cc engine between my knees bops to life, making a sound like *bidididididid* that patters off the creek’s steep sandstone banks. I just stopped here to get ahold of Derick to make sure he hasn’t gotten hisself killed yet, but he hasn’t texted me back. Mom will murder me if I waste her minutes calling him, so, since the water’s low enough, I’ll just cruise the creek like always until it takes

me to his backyard.

Just show up and hope he's home. Summertime.

A couple dozen yards ahead, the creek'll make me pass under Akin blacktop by way of the culvert and then through the Peabody Mine Co. land beyond it—I can't ride my four-wheeler on the paved roads too long without Officer McDaniels showing up in my driveway later. Derick's officially off probation at midnight and I've got to get him out of the house, away from town before he starts slinging weed and nerve pills for that old freak, Moony, again. Derick's granddad, Papa Kim, asked that of me before I left their place last weekend. Papa Kim's been so cool, letting me come over pretty much every day since Dad went back on tour last fall, so I really don't want to let him down.

I'm gonna haul Derick up onto the Peabody gob piles to watch the meteor shower tonight. Internet said to expect so much falling space debris that it'll churn up a funky light show in the magnetosphere. Derick can't not like that.

A bigrig thunders by up on the blacktop, looks like a two-ton dumptruck. Its turbo whines and sick diesel smoke swirls and stinks in its wake. The culvert beneath it smells nasty too: all the mold down its throat and the frothed up algae scum around its bottom lip, reeking in this heat. The pool in front of it, where the constant eddy against its cement chin has eroded it to deeper than my handlebars, almost drowns out my four-wheeler's engine every time I come through here. But riding under the blacktop by way of the culvert is the only smart way to foil the Peabody fence.

As I'm about to go ahead on, my phone buzzes. Derick! Nope.

It's Coach Wynn. My track coach.

His text says: Ty Im so sorry for your loss. Your daddys looking down on u and he's

proud Ty. All of us love u too. Let us know if you need anything. Anything pal. God Bless.

Coach, what the heck?

Dad's on tour. He didn't pass away. He's not a loss to be sorry for. And.

And yeah he's threatened it before, but there's no way he went through with it this time.

Anyway Mom would've called.

She would have.

What about—

—Nope. I mash the throttle and the Kodiak hustles. Pebbles scream as my tires force them into the creekbottom sand. They wreck the water's stillness and try to conduct the Kodiak into my old mud ruts, but I don't want that. Get stuck that way. I stand and rock left toward the solid stone riffle at the foot of the steepest bank.

What gives, Coach? I mean, thanks for the love, but—

—So, so a couple months back, Derick and I axed up a big windfall hickory upstream of the culvert and made underwater log ramps from it. Even with their help, I've still wallered the creekbed mud out so bad it's dang near impassable. I've really got to create a new path or since Mom works so much and Ryan's never home, I won't see Derick or Papa Kim like until I get my driver's license. And Derick needs me with him. Both do, I think. Derick's daddy OD'd a couple years ago, yeah, fifth grade year, and he's been kind of all over the place since then. Dude can't ever keep his thoughts straight sometimes.

The sandstone creekbed gives way to slurry, so I hit my four-wheel-drive button and turn back into the deeper water, parting waterbugs and sluicing up sandy mud. The clench point is in two yards, where if I don't line my tires up on the slimy logramps I'll fall off and be boned: engine swamped, automatic transmission flooded, maybe drowned out, myself.

The creekwater wraps my rims up to the hubs. It looks like thick tea, and it smells like my basement when my engine's hot crankcase dips in and boils off a murky steam. I hop my feet up onto the seat and squat because I hate getting my socks all soggy.

The butts of both logs rest on the culvert's flat bottom lip. I line up with those logs and goose the throttle. The Kodiak murmurs, half submerged, sizzling water off its cylinder now.

The worn roundness of the logs talks to me through the shudder of the handlebars. The ramp tips jostle away from each other on the lip, but we're good and balanced enough. My front tires emerge as my sunken rear ones touch the ramps. Careful on the throttle, Ty. Progress, lugs biting hickory, churning the brown filth, climbing us out. Floorboards see daylight again.

We're good. We're good.

—See, Dad was so happy last night on the phone. For him. Course, after Mom took the phone from me, I found her in her bathtub red-cheeked and crying. Followed her into her bedroom and hugged her, but she wouldn't say much, just that she loved me and she's sorry.

—But yeah, we're good except the tips of those logramps keep spreading. Rear tires are out the water, slipping a bit. For better traction I hop onto the rear cargo rack, like Superman stretching up to the handlebars, and my right heel lands on the machete I keep sheathed and bungied to the rack in case of feral dogs, bobcats, crank cooks, you name it.

But now the roundness of the logs isn't matching that of my tires. The log tips inching wider and wider.

They're gonna go down in the water, we all are.

I goose it and the ramps run from each other. My front tires bite the culvert rim, slipping on algae but crawling forward anyway. Come on, baby.

More gas. Eyes shut, more gas.

“Go go go go go,” and it works!

The logs shoot sideways and the Kodiak’s metal belly makes a sick smash against the lip. Rear tires just spin in the water, not even touching concrete, but I made it. My last, “Go” is still echoing with my engine noise off the culvert’s dank cement walls.

I yell, “Hallelujah.” And that echoes too. And echoes.

And it doesn’t stop echoing, just, “Hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah,” down the tunnel, same loudness as if from my own lips again and again.

That’s supposed to mean something. Grandma said it. Whenever she’d pick me up from getting thrown out of daycare at the church, she’d get on to me in the car and I’d repeat it back at her. “You know how to behave,” she’d say, so, “You know how to behave,” I’d say. But then she told me that’s not becoming of a pastor’s grandson, that the dead speak in echoes and I ought to respect them. Then I’d say, “That’s not becoming of a—” and she’d jam the brakes. Ain’t Dad saying, “Hallelujah,” to me, though. Nope—

—Wet socks it is. I drop off the side into the ankle-deep water and throttle on as I shove the little beast forward until its back tires deliver us over the brim. My log ramps float briefly until the rippling scumwater drags them down and out of my sight forever, to gather more slime.

My socks squish when I hop back on and get underway.

Engine noise *bididids* louder off the culvert now the exhaust pipe is squarely inside it. It’s twenty, thirty yards long and could fit a parade of three Kodiaks riding side by side. In the dead center of the ceiling vault is a manhole, always dripping. Drainage from the blacktop.

Chapter 9.

But today the manhole flows, hard: an unbroken cylinder of watery doo.

I unstrap my helmet and take its jawpiece in hand to tug it off, but when I slide it over my ears, it slips out of my hand, falling up, clonking on the handlebars, then into the creek.

Jesus.

I rest my head on the cold manhole, no longer leaking its weird water. The creek fills my helmet, soaking the padding. Dangit. Mom's gonna be so scared if she finds out. She needs me now. I wish Papa Kim was here. He'd help.

Maybe Dad is alive. I'm probably dreaming, because, what the heck, my phone tries to launch upward from my hand when I check it. It says Derick says, where you at?

His second text says, *you alrite?*

Third, *ill still be at the big nub around 7 if you wanna come out still. Luv you bub.*

Then it says Ryan, my big brother, says, *Hey dude, come home.*

Not now. Please not now.

Eighteen missed calls from Mom. Three from Ryan. Couple from both Derick and Papa Kim. It's 6:39 p.m. The Big Nub is the name Derick and I gave to the biggest gob pile on the Peabody acres. Best place in Old Log Landing for watching meteor showers.

But I should get home.

But I'm dreaming, or I'm dead, even though I feel everything, like my full bladder. But

I've had to pee in dreams before. That's probably what the water pillar was. Maybe I fell off the Kodiak and bonked my head. And now some force is pulling me up, away from that real ground on the ceiling. Toward Heaven, maybe. That's a dream, I think.

When I stand my jeans ride my crotch and my T-shirt falls up, shrouding my face, so I tuck it into my pants and shuffle toward the Peabody side of the culvert's ceiling. As I raise each foot, my shoes press up against my soles, which is the strangest feeling I've ever dreamed. My clothes don't want me.

Got an idea. A test.

A fissure in the concrete ceiling, I mean floor, leads to the edge and I follow it. In the sea-blue sector of the sunset sky, the moon starts to show its face between two long stripes of pumpkin-colored clouds. It has a bite taken out of it.

Here's my idea—Dad would so do this with me: I unzip my jeans and let my pee flow over the rim, and, sure enough, up it goes. Well, down for me, but up up up, arching a long shoestring into the purple-blue-orangeness. It feels so good in my belly and legs that my eyes shut, and my head falls back and I need to laugh, so I do, and I reopen my eyes. Maybe I'll splash the moon. Or those geese flying down there. I swing the stream over at them, but I know those mean old things will dodge it with grace.

Yeah I know, I could very well fall into the sky. My eyes shut themselves again.

But my bladder is about empty, and so is that good feeling. This is usually where I wake up soaked in pee and feeling like I've got to hide the sheets. I bend my knees and shoot the last bit out, and, when it does leave me, there's a trickle, a long one, and I open my eyes to see the shoestring drop and slash straight down the creek above like a carpenter's chalk line. Guess the earth wants whatever's not me.

My Kodiak is still running, but it's starting to sputter. Don't know how long I was asleep, but must've been hours. Long enough to run down the gas tank and set the sun and turn gravity against me. It's okay, though. I'll switch the petcock to reserve mode: enough gas to get to the Big Nub and then maybe Derick's, where Papa Kim'll give me enough gas to get home.

This maybe ain't a dream. If it is it's one of those lucid ones Dad's always talking about. Could be it's Dad pulling me up to him. If it's not a dream, I mean—

I re-tie my Reeboks extra tight and walk back to the manhole. A sort of ladder leads up the wall toward the creekwater. Eight iron re-bars bent into rings, embedded in the concrete. The rust stains dripping from the rungs point up, at my four-wheeler, where there're enough bungies in the stowbox to strap myself to it for the ride to Derick's. It might work.

My palm callouses got tender weedeating the ditch at home this morning and now they burn on the cold re-bar rings. Serves me right. Should be home instead of out gallivanting.

Sweat runs down my neck and drips up into the trickling creekwater as I reach for the Kodiak's floorboard. Only just too far. My dang T-shirt untucks and bunches under my chin. I slap at the floorboard and miss. If Ryan saw this, he'd surely tell me how to do it right. Derick would be laughing his butt off.

Dad, you're seeing this, aren't you?

To hell with it, I jump, spin, grab, and the floorboard's hard plastic bites deep into my callouses. The Kodiak's rear shock-absorber sighs, sucking air and oil as it extends. Water courses faster around the slightly raised tires.

I accidentally goose the throttle with my heel as I step onto the nearest handgrip, revving the poor engine until it dies on me. With my other foot in place

. He didn't even have eyes anymore, they'd shriveled and sunk away already, but still I told him—”

“—Derick. Shut up. I'm sorry you lost him, but mine's not gone. He's waitin', so let me—”

“—to open his eyes. Eleven years old in the rafters telling my thawed out dead Pops to open his eyes to see me. You got any clue what that means?”

Squirming my left calf from under its bungie takes my sneaker with it, but I free my leg and it swings down at the stars. My shoe falls into the grass. The strap cuts my ribs and I can't reach its hook.

“Let me go,” I shout.

“But he didn't open them,” he says.

“I'm leaving!”

“Know why?”

My eyelids burn. His light burns me.

“How about this: Open your eyes, Ty.”

I don't want them to but tears well up again. The rubber strap won't give. I grab it tight in both hands and make to limbo under it. It pinches the skin of my chest as it rolls to my collarbone. I kick, but Derick's got me.

“Look, Ty. Look at me.”

The strap rakes my ear as I shimmy under it. “No! Let go, Derick.”

“Do you really want to follow him?”

Eyes squeezed shut, I still see streaking meteors. I shout, “Yes.”

“Go home,” Derick says. “You haven’t died too, Ty.”

He turns me loose.

I swing, gripping tighter. The black night swings beneath my toes.

Then Papa Kim says, “Go home.”

Ryan says, “Come home.”

Mom cries, “Come home!”

Then Dad, his chin on my shoulder, says, “Son, take me home.”

So I turn it loose.

And fall, back onto the Kodiak, where the gascap digs into my spine. The grass waves around me. And the stars gaze down as the meteors, their sons, fall on and on, to burn out white and brilliant.

Last night, traffic on the rainy highway out front was giving me grief like always. The yellow sodium light on the Gwaltneys’ polebarn across the road buzzed and made the soaked blacktop glisten and shine warm. I sat on the porch swing hugging my shins when a tanker truck roared by, shattering the air and sluicing up rainwater. People are always flying by our house, always interrupting. I squashed my ear into Mom’s cellphone, spat out my bucket-hat’s chinstrap, and then shouted into the mic, “What’d you say, Dad?”

Chapter 9.

“I said, ‘The stars awaken reverence, since they’re always present, but always inaccessible.’ I read that somewhere, other day. Thought of you, buddy.”

The tanker’s tires howled back at me, shrinking a little through the woods north of home.

The air hung so muggy that it fogged the storm-window behind me, but I stayed because I really didn’t want my voice to wake Mom or have Ryan come snatch the phone to yell at Dad.

“Okay, Dad. Cool. Hey! Speakin’ of stars, there’s a meteor shower I’m gonna check out tomorrow. You wanna watch it too and I’ll call you after? Maybe it’ll help you write a new song!”

Dad said, “A meteor shower? That all makes sense, then.”

“What does?”

“I pled with Him last night to guide you. I prayed for nearly an hour after I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“You, buddy,” he said.

My cheeks got tight, like they always do when that automatic know-it-all smile stretches up my face. I hated that smile as soon as I felt it. It meant other people were talking through me, internet people, making me snooty about my dad’s religion.

“I saw you. You were floating. In a golden light between the racks of a great big ten-point buck,” he said, chuckling, getting tickled at himself. “I know, I know what you think. It was wild, buddy. But that’s what I saw. You were floating, Ty. In a red robe, arms spread like Our Redeemer.”

“Really?” I said, grinning. A real grin, not the smug one. I like Dad’s stories.

“Yeah, yeah, buddy, you were. You and your buck stood at the edge of your mother’s neighbor’s field too. Cotton grew there instead of corn,”—no one plants cotton in Illinois—“and your eyes were shut and you kept waving me on, little man. Yeah. You asked—”

“—Wait, you were home? In the side-yard?” My socked feet shot down to the porch floor. *He’s dreaming about home! And I’m in it!*

But then silence went one Mississippi. Two. Three. Dang. Again he feared promises.

Then, flat and distant, he said, “Yours and your mother’s yard, yeah. I was there. And you asked me—”

“—So you’re thinking about swinging by? You should! That’d be awesome.”

“Buddy, that’s exactly what the buck asked me, out in the cotton.” Flat again. Glazed.

New tact: “So, uh, are you and Lloyd thinking about booking another show in St. Louis, then?” That’s only an hour’s drive. Mom’d probably let Ryan drive me and him over to watch.

Seconds more silence. Him breathing. Then, “I’m proud of you, son.”

“Thanks. Thanks, Dad.”

“You showed me,” he said, and his voice went tight and wobbly. In my head I saw his stubbly chin shaking, blocking himself from crying. “You showed me the answer.”

I smiled again but I didn’t know what I meant by it. “I’m glad, Dad. So hey—”

“—You’d passed on, son.”

Dad. “Dad, I—”

“—I know,” he muttered. “Your eyes were shut because you were dead, buddy.” His voice shot up, breaking, “Without me.” A laugh jerked up but I stopped it at my throat. Stupid laugh. In my head all I heard was, *Shut up and help him, Ty.*

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VITA

Samuel Milligan received his B.A. from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale in 2012.