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Invisibilities and Other Prayers

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INVISIBILITIES AND OTHER PRAYERS

A Thesis Presented

by

RYAN MATTHEW HABERMEYER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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M.F.A. Program for Poets and Writers

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And finally, I wish to express my love and gratitude to my wife for her endless support.

*For we are but of yesterday, and know nothing,
because our days upon earth are a shadow.*

Job 8:9

At the heart of all beauty, lies something inhuman.

Albert Camus

*Won't somebody tell me, answer if you can!
Want somebody tell me, what is the soul of a man.
I've traveled in different countries, I've traveled foreign lands
I've found nobody to tell me,
what is the soul of a man.*

Blind Willie Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

The question of influence on a writer seems a nebulous undertaking. My academic background is divided between American and Spanish Literatures – specifically, my undergraduate work focused on Southern fiction from the modernist period, and 20th century Latin American fiction. Padgett Powell, William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Barry Hannah, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Isabel Allende, Clarice Lispector, Juan Rulfo; these are writers I greatly admire and whose influence, I believe, can be felt stylistically, if not thematically, in this collection. And more recently there have been other, mostly European, writers: Bruno Schultz, Italo Calvino, Günter Grass, Mercé Rodoreda, Juan Marsé, and Franz Kafka, for example.

By no means do I classify myself a “magical realist” or “surrealist” or even “southern” writer (I’ve spent a cumulative four days in the South; four days that gave rise to two stories in this collection – “Scales” and “Valdosta, Gone to Ash”). What I admire most in these writers is the scope and breadth of their imaginations: the dimensions they are

willing to explore, and what seeming absurdities and eccentricities of human nature they are compelled to portray. In reading these fictions, I've come to understand the greatest resource a writer has is his or her imagination and the necessity of moving fiction, *pushing* fiction, towards the unknown limits of the imagination while trying to balance writer indulgence with reader suspension of disbelief.

Yet it would be foolish to say that the environment surrounding my first undertakings in fiction contributed nothing to the thematics and obsessions of this collection. I attended Brigham Young University; I was born and raised a Mormon and religion is a major influence on my writing. In workshops, I've been told my fiction is "abstract", "esoteric", "overly mysterious", "confusing", and my personal favorite from visiting writer Valerie Martin, as "having all the uselessness of a dream." I agree with some of this criticism: I can be abstract; I can omit plenty in the narrative that leads to mystery and confusion. In part, this is a product of my religion. When you are raised to believe that there is absolute truth and any portrayal of the human condition must be extolled for its virtues and not its vices, mystery and abstraction become an asset. Too many Mormon writers fall victim to a strict moralistic approach in fiction. Though perhaps a generalization, it has been my experience that with Mormon writers, and at Brigham Young, the idea is that literary fiction must sell a particular moral didacticism. Fiction, like scripture, must convert the masses. I've attempted to push my fiction away from an authorial, religious voice and do what Hemingway cautioned: understand the characters, *not* judge them. To me, fiction isn't about marketing conversion; it isn't about writing thematicized moral sagas, and it certainly doesn't culminate in a singular epiphany. It is about the human experience – its nastiness and its loveliness, the violence and the tenderness, and the wondrous grey area of moral ambiguity.

I'm interested in negotiating the space between naturalism and the fantastic, the absurd and the utterly human; how to materialize the uncanny events of uncommon lives into something tangible, something believable – that's what I'm after. Are my characters and situations extremes? Probably. Donald Barthelme said, "In order to achieve the impossible, you must be willing to attempt the absurd." I believe that. My characters go through absurd and often horrific situations because I'm not interested in writing John Updike stories where doors are slammed and somebody pets a cat before walking out into the snow for the grand finale; good for John, but not for me. I'm interested in characters pushed to the limits and seeing not only how they survive, but how they respond when the stability of the environment is questioned. Like Flannery O'Connor, I find that it is in the extreme circumstances that people discover and reveal their identity. O'Connor utilized this principle of the "unreasonable use of the reasonable" to drive her characters towards grotesques that revealed humanity at its most vulnerable and weakest, but also with the faint light of something holy, something divine. It is a feeling that I strive for in my own fiction, a feeling I wish I could duplicate more often.

Much of the atmosphere I attempt to create derives not only from characters, but from landscape. I've always considered the majority of my landscapes to be "betweens": grounded in details that feel familiar, but always out of identifiable reach. This may derive from years and years of driving between California and Utah and watching the desert for endless hours and wondering what in the hell was beyond those plateaus. There's a part of me that wants to believe that my stories exist somewhere beyond there.

Of course, there is also Mexico. I spent two years in Mexico, so many of the landscapes in this collection feel "Mexican" in my mind's eye, but only a recreation of the Mexico I know in the Yucatan Peninsula. The story "Valdosta, Gone to Ash" is a product of

Mayan mythology and Southern landscape. While on my four-day-tour of the South, I was reading *The Popul Vuh* and how the gods created the first men from mud, and then dissatisfied with their praises, wiped them out with a flood. The next men were made of wood, but as they were stubborn and wouldn't speak, they were burnt. And so forth, and so forth. The streets flooded regularly in the Yucatan due to the lack of drainage systems. Over a two-year span I grew accustomed to see people throw things into the water-logged streets during tropical storms and watch it float away. Combine that with all the old women I saw in the South and there you have it.

Only a few stories are set in a particular location. I loathe the contextual baggage and expectations associated with landscape. If you say, "This story takes place in Iowa" then as a writer you are *bound* to re-creating Iowa to appease your audience; I hate that. The audience doesn't deserve the comfort of having an identifiable landscape. It's too easy that way. I don't want readers to know where and when they are. I want them to feel a genuine realism of the environment, but environment for me has to be disjointed: a landscape of the West, but using speech and/or customs of the South; European names, but lodged in seemingly American suburbs. To this end, the landscapes of the collection grow increasingly vague from the first story to the last. We start in the South, and move further and further West until the West is no longer recognizable. Landscapes become, as the title suggests, invisible.

In the end, my business is telling stories. I don't write about race, gender, or social class issues; I write from the gut. I look for the uncomfortable feeling in a story and let it ride. I want you to squirm a little; I want you to laugh, and I think it's good if you have your heart broken regularly. I want you to think these are characters you're not sure could ever exist. I love my characters because of that: because they are the kinds of people I wish I met more often.

VALDOSTA, GONE TO ASH

In a flood we had, we saw Grandmother Pennfelder rise out of the current and comb her hair on the sandbar before making her walk through the grey streets to what was left of our newly wedded plantation. Water dripped from the burial gown and she looked like a broom in the attic but still carried that damn bouquet of marigolds and rosemary. Nobody else watched her. It rubbed my rhubarb thinking how this aimed to be a long evening.

I stood in the doorway in suspenders with the revolvers and a Confederate scabbard, drinking Muskoka Pale and Grandmother said *none of that Muskoka shit* and introduced me to little sips of whisky.

When I was warm from the whisky I said, “Grandmother, I believe you were supposed to remain deceased.”

She didn't answer.

It was that hour of night when rain fell sad and nameless.

Alba was nude in the tub. Water spilled out the edges onto the parlor floor. She didn't look very wifey. She sucked bullets and balanced them on her stomach. "When you see those thieves coming you just start shooting, you hear?" she said. I kept practicing the little sips of whisky.

"It's no thief. It's Grandmother Pennfelder."

"Wasn't she supposed to remain deceased?"

"That was the arrangement."

"Shoot her anyway," Alba said.

The wedding gifts had either been lost in the wind or stolen by vagabonds. The parlor was empty but for the tub and Alba. With all the rain, the walls now had a queer touch, a kind of reverence. Alba admired with great pity the gold on her finger and the curve of my naked back there in the doorway and probably knowing that she owned a piece of that curve.

The flood waters were turning more and more to muds. A crowd gathered on the sandbar to lob offerings into the deluge and hope their lives would not schlep before their season. A pregnant woman heaved what would never be her child's first pair of shoes. Old men hobbyhorsed down the steep and leapt like mutilated birds into the current, swept away without ever being kissed. The Judge who had married us not four days prior in a chapel that had collapsed mid-ceremony stripped down to socks and wading into the current, let himself be carried off. Others had come for the fine sounds a mud brings: the rippling, the murmur.

And now Grandmother Pennfelder.

Grandmother Pennfelder didn't make conversation but sat on the porch and smoked furiously. What had we done to her to make her rise out the water the way she did? She

looked perplexed as an old shoe. Muds reached up to her elbows in scattered patches. She wiped her nose with a wrist.

“If only there were more floods to help us forget our disappointments. The wonderful thing about almost dying is that you don’t remember.”

Ah, dear Grandmother.

The muds pulsed and turned, coughing up waste: piano strings, clocks with no hands, a newlywed mattress, a saddled horse, mother oak trees flinging young leaves into the sky, toddlers in tiny periwinkle suits, a record player on loop playing Leadbelly, empty caskets, a light bulb still clinging to the last of its glow. It washed down roads, patient as muds do. I explained to both Alba and Grandmother how the only policy for floods was as followed: there existed a *No Dead* clause on items inserted *into* the flood but it was open season to fish out all the beauties a flood brings, the news of which made Grandmother scowl.

“I wasn’t dead,” she insisted.

We watched more bodies float by. Elderly or young, we could not tell.

“We should name the faces that catch the glow of moonlight,” Alba said.

Woman of fate, our dear Alba. Like if the exact number of stars equaled the sands of the sea equaled the number of nations God had promised Abraham.

Crabs, what a woman.

She was still ignoring Grandmother Pennfelder. After all, she was perturbed I had failed in my first order as husband. Once the chapel had collapsed, the Judge married us in a ditch with the crows. We kissed. I promised her the world. She said all she wanted was Grandmother Pennfelder sloughed off. Sloughed off? Yep – maimed, crippled, brutalized,

mashed silly; didn't matter how, just see to it. Who can argue with a wife when it's your wedding day?

Turned out Grandmother Pennfelder had winnowed herself. We found her in the wedding bed, appearing deceased.

"Smell her," Alba had said.

I got a whiff. She didn't smell dead but I nodded anyway to please the lady.

But what to bury her in? Then the flood. Two days we wondered. Alba refusing to take off the dress because she demanded to enter her virginal bed in the proper manner. Then I stole Alba's wedding gown off her back and dressed Grandmother Pennfelder in it and lifted the corpse down the embankment and let her slip under the current only to return and find Alba nude in the tub aiming the revolvers, telling me our marriage was an act of payola. Oh God, the words that lady knew.

I avoided looking into Alba's eyes. Maybe I feared her small patches of hair and mine would come together and give rise to more little hairs. I stumbled towards her in the dark to kiss her but she was not to be kissed. She had the tallest flay of red hair for three miles and eyes that were worn from too much laughing at all the wrong things. Cigarette ash sprinkled her mentionables. Her eyes fluttered with sleep, the lids closing then jarring open. She sighed without grace. Something inside me wanted her in that tub all the days of our marriage, her life gently ruined by sighs that made her heart unrecognizable mush.

"I miss my wedding gown," she said. "I could feel my heart beating beneath the lace so fast I thought it might go to cinder."

"It's an ugly thing," said Grandmother Pennfelder. "All frilly and not for brides. Not for a woman."

"Then come out of it, lady."

“It warms me to consider your misery, child.”

For a moment it occurred to me that Alba had it in her to kill Grandmother Pennfelder. Often I had seen her spit on flowers at the farmer’s market. Once I had seen her crush three ladybugs in her hands. She told dirty jokes to schoolboys at church.

I couldn’t muster the courage to ask Grandmother Pennfelder for the gown. There had been no other choice than to dress her for her deadness. The dead could not be given to the dead naked. Only Grandmother Pennfelder was no longer deceased, but miraculously smoking cigarettes on our porch.

“When is that woman going to knob your rooster?” said Grandmother Pennfelder.

I hadn’t the heart to tell Alba. She wasn’t acknowledging Grandmother Pennfelder, I believe, on account of the bouquet and gown, bitter married woman to the end, my God. It is in those moments when the floods call for a Moses and there is no guitar for comfort and there is a *wife* giving names like *Hannamoiselle* to the floating deceased and her bouquet and gown have been given as alms to the *recently demised* when a man must think of what he would lob into the flood had the village pimp not stolen his door. What could I offer? Sins, and nothing less. What were my sins? Sins of the Have, Sins of Intention. I kicked small dogs dreaming. I held hands with war veterans and lied of acts of heroism. I took my bride’s wedding gown and put it on Grandmother Pennfelder and put Grandmother Pennfelder in the flood when I thought she was dead but only sleeping. Amen.

“My God, the things I have forgotten,” whispered Grandmother.

Standing in that doorway space of between while a grandmother recently involved in a *coup d’état* stretches on your porch in the dress of your still flowered wife, with dignity, without fear, gives a man pause to consider the waste of his days: never once had I run down

the corridors of University library kicking in the rows of sleeping heads, never wrestled a monk, never made love to a woman who knew how to extinguish fires with a laugh.

When the cigarette was finished I looked at the empty hands. At Alba. At the tub without water. I polished the revolvers with whisky spit.

“Grandmother Pennfelder thinks we should have an heir,” I said.

“Grandmother Pennfelder has been sloughed off,” Alba said. She said all was intercourse. She said old women needed the knife and when a knife was too much to ask there were always fists.

Mucho whisky was consumed.

We reloaded the revolvers

When Alba fled to the bathroom to drink herself pretty in preparation for her night of nights as a wife, Grandmother Pennfelder stretched out in the tub. She rang water from the hem. We watched a crowd of nobodies and foreigners wandering aimless on the sandbar.

“What chance do you have of being remembered without an heir? I wouldn’t give two slaps for the sight of your offspring, but Jesus H. Jesus, *something* should be done,” said Grandmother Pennfelder.

The color had not all been taken from her. She had a touch of lavender. What could have been done? We are not what we are on a day of muds. Looking on her, I remembered Grandmother at the pinnacles of her existence: hands blue as newspaper after a rainstorm; whistling a radio jingle while mending old shirts she hoped Grandfather’s dusts would someday fill; pressing her below the lip of water just after dawn for reasons I would not remember, her whispers synchronized with the current: *only the beathen dies anonymous...only the beathen...*

Sighs of muds swelled with the peculiar chorus inside my head. Suddenly, I wanted that heir.

I went down into what was left of the road and pushed across the grey stretch of neighborhood. People pulled away heavy slops of mud as if fortifying themselves in foxholes. Others brought sandbags. A few preachers now stood on the sandbar trying to convert the muds to Jesus. Valdosta was going under.

Not half a mile from the house, a woman stood on the embankment holding an infant wrapped in a bed sheet. She turned in awkward circles and was crying.

“Have you seen my baby?” she said.

I lit the last cigarette. I looked over my shoulders; then carefully descending the embankment I let my fingertips into the water and shook the mud from them. I went back to her.

“Sorry, lady. What did it look like?”

She pulled open the bed sheet. It was filled with mud, mud shaped like an infant. The face was a mess with no definable features: no eyes, no ears, no nose, no mouth – just a slop of mud made to look like a baby.

Without saying a damn she thrust the mud baby into my arms and scuttled down the embankment. I yelled after her. She stood there watching the muds rush pass. Then she stepped in and floated for a good second, then was lost.

“Jesus H. Jesus,” I said.

I waited there for a good hour turning in twisted half-circles. The sun tried to slip through the darkened gum that was the sky but was defeated. I drew a little face on the mud baby and held it close.

Before long it started to dissolve. I got on my knees and eased it into the mud. It was still slipping apart. I got handfuls of mud and massaged it into the infant.

A man came running in my direction. "Over here!" I screamed. We rubbed more and more mud. We were both sweating. The baby was getting fatter, but still unraveling.

Pretty soon there was a crowd of young mothers and widows and children. We shaped elbows and jawbones, the fat of neck. A navel revealed itself. Night stretched into an endless ribbon of mud. We dug ourselves into a basin, the infant growing larger and larger. Crawling out the basin we looked at what we had amassed: a heap of muds and straw and weeds in colossal repose. Gaped mouth. Writhed fingers. Beneath it an undisturbed puddle of milky water which seemed the residue of some curious memory.

Of course, the Infants lost since the days of Bolle, said one the elders.

When the sun rose the crowds came to petition miracles: a blind man wishing to hold a blind fish, a woman seeking the name of her lover engraved in honeycomb, a poet wanting to know the four words necessary for rainfall. Infant Bolle sat there masterful, a towering slop, answering them in an awful silence which became all of ours.

Swathed in muds up to my elbows, I returned and found Alba inside the tub. I stole looks at her lady mentionables. Not a trace of mud dribblings. There was no water in the tub. She looked drunk. Inside the empty room it was all warm, as if someone had skinned an animal.

"What have you done with the bridal gown?" she said.

"Where's Grandmother Pennfelder?"

"Don't wash yourself," she whispered. She coughed beer suds on my chest, peeled dried mud from my shoulders.

"Grandmother Pennfelder?"

“She was remembering too much. I led her back into the flood.”

“The flood?”

“We held hands. It was pretty. She was a delicate woman. The shame was the only bone she never broke was her neck.”

Alba prepared herself in the shadows. She found a clean space where together we would make ourselves soft and helpless.

I smoked another cigarette. Then another. I repeated: We are not what we are. We are not what we are.

I didn't move. I searched for the revolvers. It went dark.

Alba said, “Our lives are taking shape. I can feel it.”

I gazed out the window. A hummingbird had caught itself in the screen. I cut out its heart and watched it beat seventy-two times in my palm. Between blinks it went to ash with the rest of Valdosta.

SCALES

Syd waited for the seagulls on the deck of Big Edgar's beach house with a copy of *Macbeth* and a shotgun. A cigar clamped between his teeth and he looked like a general: something mean, something noble. He scratched at his thick beard filled with sand. The radio played music, those damn ballads he loved. He turned up the volume.

He wore a pair of khakis, bare shoulders ripe in the sun. Fingernails raked across his stomach, that sad little belly. He remarked in silence how much weight he had lost. He was attempting to dry out in Swansboro. Syd worked on a fishing yacht. Fish hands, fish face, fish smell tattered and branded on his clothes.

He had refused sleep for weeks. Such fish. Such goddamn fish and goddamned sand his life had become. He had a lovely wife, my roasted artichoke. Yes, such cigarettes and sand and fish.

And for nothing. Big Edgar was kicking them out at the end of the week: Syd and his wife, Lynn. Lynn and her husband, Syd.

He had devised a series of plans.

He would keep her – however improbable. Sequestered. Marooned. It didn't matter. Away, that's what mattered. There were living conditions he was prepared to accept. Others he would not humor. She would need to be tied. On post-it notes he sketched how her figure would look bound with pantyhose. He paced for long hours. God, how I once loved her, he thought. She had once been such a savory girl. And now in this southern daylight he had let her slip. He felt stretched. Swansboro would soon become nothing more than a remembrance. They were moving forward with new, separate lives. He was headed to Chicago, and Lynn, his wife, to Portland. It had been decided.

The shotgun rested on his shoulder. He turned bullets between fingers. He enjoyed their touch. He came back to that sweet woman Lady Macbeth and assured her all was well. He read to the seagulls in a loud voice. He drank beer, cursed the seagulls, and fell asleep with the idea of waking up to a welcomed hangover. He was no outdoorsman and even less a cowboy. But he had a gun and wanted to feel.

The seagulls fed. They danced. They fought. He read them King Duncan and Banquo. An old couple passed through seaweed. He had emerged on the deck most mornings exactly as he was now, pausing in his reading to watch the birds and listen to the ocean lull. One wave across another in unison, like bodies, converged and departed.

Lynn opened the screen door wearing pajamas and a tank top. It was high noon. Her sandy hair frayed with too much salt water.

Big Edgar is here, Lynn said.

Now?

At the door. You have the money?

What is today?

You forgot, she said.

He protested: he had not forgotten. Syd sucked at the cigar, smiled, then said: Tell him I'm sick. Say that I'm dying.

I'm not lying for you.

Money's on the counter. You tell him, he said, disgusted. He felt betrayed.

Big Edgar says there's a guy on the beach pretending to be a pirate selling fish to locals. He says to keep an eye out, she said.

What the hell for? he said. She said there were already too many loonies about. I haven't seen any pirates, he said. He looked around the beach. It was remarkably empty. You've gone loopy, he said. Too much sand in your hair, too much sun, wife, he grinned.

We need milk, she said.

I'll take care of it, he said. No worries, no worries, he smiled. After all, I am your husband.

He raised the shotgun and took aim. Such pretty damsel birds in the sky.

Morning passed into dusk. He found Lynn in the kitchen where he chewed nails and avoided looking into her eyes. There were plastic bottles of cleaning supplies and other disinfectants spread over the counter tops and tile floor: stain removers, deodorizers, glass cleaners, bleach, toilet bowl cleaner; sponges, rubber gloves, rags, mops, scrubbers, buckets, paper towels, swirls of odors humming through and through Big Edgar's southern beach palace.

I want this house to look like we never lived here, she said. Like no one ever lived here. Just memories and photographs, isn't that sweet? she said. Her knees bent, and slowly she merged into the floor as her body scrubbed back and forth, back and forth. Syd went out on the deck and pulled off his shirt. He listened to a twelve string blues recording, considered dancing. Lynn was singing: *Goodbye microbes, goodbye mold and microbial bacteria!*

Come out on the deck with me, he hollered. Dance with me.

Instead, she danced herself into another room and continued her cleaning.

Lynn had not told Syd about Big Edgar's decision right away. She had waited a few days.

Such a meticulous woman, he considered, too damn pleasant for her own good.

God, the end of the week, was all he had said when he heard the news. He stared at his Lynn, feeling dried of all emotion. Words made him feel drugged. They had spoken little about taking time apart: Syd was going to Chicago. Lynn was going to Portland where she would live with their daughter. She wanted to read books and seclude herself in the back of a library next to a window overlooking a river. She wanted to collect dust in her hair and yellow along her elbows and wrists.

It will give us room to breathe, she had said.

Yes, breathe, all we do is breathe, you are so concerned with air and breath, he said. Then he had gawked at her and she left the room. Always air with you! he had shouted. He poured himself a drink to celebrate his emotions. They did not speak for nearly a month and by then it had been decided.

Why was he going to Chicago and his wife of almost twenty years to Portland? he wondered. He still loved his wife. Wasn't that enough?

I love you in bits and pieces. Like a game of scrabble, she told him.

And you are my roasted artichoke, he said, my flesh of peach. He tried to hold her but she refused.

Don't talk nonsense, she said.

Looking at her he considered their careless love. Over time, memories had become his ulcers and gray hairs. It didn't make sense to live how she wanted, with cheap motels mints as their only recollections of their failed marriage. Inevitability was, after all, inevitable.

He had always been faithful. Yet he could not deny that in their shared lifetime they had drifted long ago to become mere strangers at a cocktail party, more interested in the variety of hors d'oeuvres on platters than each other.

He considered holding her for ransom. How much could he fetch for her like? What kind of man would be interested? Oil tycoons, street hustlers, men that played the mandolin? He would put something over her head so she couldn't see. Paper grocery bags. Yes, ransom. Then he'd do things to her. Things. He wasn't sure. God, what a world this is, Syd said. He needed her to listen, to feel. He would do something.

She called him an anemic little superman, so many pet names and he wanted her to see. Always willing to dole out kisses on his cheek or neck, never his mouth. How he craved and wanted them, begged silently for them without words.

But he knew he would never. He was well-mannered; he took pride in husbandry. His idea of indecent behavior was comprised of pissing off a railing onto a tide of seagulls and pigeons. He read Shakespeare and listened to Brahms. Pissing was the most excitement he had had in years.

The end of the week, Syd said again. Another morning was giving way to early afternoon. He ate cereal. It dripped off his chin.

Yes, we'll have to start packing. What kind of weather is it in Portland? she asked.

I don't know. We could rent another beach house together, he said. They have good sand in Oregon, you know.

She looked unimpressed with his knowledge. She said, This one feels like home.

You don't find sand erotic, do you? How strange. You see how strange we are?

Please, Syd, the dishes, she said and smiled at him with a very wifely grin. She was such a wife, he thought.

At night he wandered through the kitchen barefoot. He opened cupboards and closet doors and counted cans of fruit and creamed corn. He enjoyed displacing her arrangements. He looked for things to discover, things he could claim as his own: a nail, a loose board, pocket lint or dirt from the potted plants. He made phone calls after midnight and breathed heavy into the receiver of unknown residents. He said things like *take me to your leader* and *I am a man destined for passion* then hung up the phone and watched the stars. He hid old pieces of bread and fish in the chimney, under loose stones of the fireplace mantle. It would drive her mad: Where is that smell? I smell that, Syd, that fucking smell, where is it coming from, goddamn it Syd, can you smell that? And behind his smile he would hear *fuck* and *oh sweet hell* and *mother of God* screamed at the walls and for hours he could watch her search.

He stood at the foot of her bed in silence. He came to understand her way of sleeping. Stroking her hair. Let his mind wander, let it drift into fragile places.

He paced Big Edgar's deck. He kept the radio low. Under this southern humidity it occurred to him. The first in his series of plans. Primary Juncture. *Fat Possum Blues: Gluttonize my old lady*. If she were fat enough, these old planks wouldn't hold. He would need to stuff her full of greasy foods. She would fatten quick. He got on his knees and tested the wood. Tools were procured. He sweated all night loosening bolts and screws. He hacked support beams to near splinters. With any amount of luck she would slip through and break an arm or leg. Maybe something more serious: her neck. I love her neck, the shape of it, he thought. Like an orchid petal. Paralyzed for life. And Syd: the hero to save her.

He brought *King Lear* to the deck early the next morning. By afternoon he had moved onto *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. When he was bored he threw on a pair of flip-flops and a shirt and walked to a sporting goods store and stood looking at the fishing equipment. He

purchased a map of the United States and measured the distance between Portland and Chicago. It was a little more than two thousand miles. When he checked an atlas he discovered it was exactly 2,118 miles.

She was not gaining weight. He had pinched her fat a few nights earlier while she slept. The measurements were not to his satisfaction. Please don't leave, he whispered, please, please stay. The next evening while they ate cold barbeque he said, Dig into that coleslaw. I like you a bit chubbier. Eat up, wife. She told him to fuck off. He smiled and caressed her non-existent love handles. She ignored his attempts at affection. No matter how hard he tried to plump her, she wasn't that kind of girl.

He had beers at Captain Jack's until he felt flushed.

He got in a bar fight. It was a simple thing.

Why are you drinking, pal? a gruff looking man had asked him. You have an ugly face.

I'm plotting ways to maim my wife. For love, of course, Syd grinned. He drank from his mug and watched the dark man in the corner play the guitar blues.

Perhaps just an old fashioned beating was due, Syd considered. Secondary Juncture. *Crippled Buzzard Blues: Main my old lady.* Assault the point of origin. Shattered knees? He had heard stories of high-ranking officials in the Irish Republic Army crippling traitors with vodka bottles. Lynn drank plenty of vodka; however, she did not believe in political organizations. No, no, no...it was in the neck where he had to deal his love blow. He had already frequented the library and studied books on human anatomy; he had outlined diagrams, even colored them with pencils. He counted vertebrae, found twenty-five in one book, thirty in another. Best injuries were between numbers nine and twelve. Paralysis. Loss of taste and mobility. Recollection of old memories when vertebrae four was broken. She

had such brittle bones. And her neck...with his married hands...such perfect bones for breaking.

The gruff bar patron muddling with questions turned out to be a sailor and would not stand for maiming of any kind. It was very simple. Syd lost. He had bruises across his chin and the backside of his ears. Someone had to drive him home.

He swam naked in the water just off the shore of the beach house.

The bruises went plum. He softened and drifted with the tide.

When it was over, he fell on the sand and gazed helpless and worried at his stars. Sand filled his pores and he felt abandoned: it was a heavy universe. He suddenly wished Lynn were an epileptic. Goddamn God, he thought. That would have been divine: a woman with passions and fits. Her love now was a little less pleasant than second-hand smoke.

He mulled over Portland and those 2,118 miles. He had done the math three different times. It was close to twelve million feet. It was a long way to walk, such distance and poor feet.

And guilt.

He could not live like that.

She asked him to sleep in her bed that night. She said nothing about the bruises.

They had made love only twice in the last five months. The experience was grueling. He was not afraid to be intimate. But there was something. Some virginal nakedness.

They lay in bed with the sheets pulled over their bodies. The house smelled sterile. Syd listened to his pulse. Lynn breathed heavy. He felt her breaths.

Beth thinks it's bizarre, you going to Chicago and me to Portland, she said.

It feels different. Don't you feel it? Seems we should be having an affair, not a separation, he said.

It could be romantic, Syd. We could write letters.

I have terrible handwriting, he said. Then he said, I'll have to buy new clothes in Chicago.

They have nice clothes in Chicago.

He waited. You smell like bleach, he said. He took her hand and brought it to his nose. He let it drop on his chest where it did not move.

She waited. I feel thin and worn, she said. I am bleached. She laughed.

You look young. Look at yourself. You're forty-four, he said.

Do you think Beth will tell? Do you think I'll feel old in Portland?

She won't notice, he said.

I saw the fat man today on the beach, the pirate with the fish, she said.

What did he want? Syd asked.

She shook her head. He wanted to sell fish, she said. I didn't ask. He was dressed like a pirate, God it was the strangest thing, she said.

These southerners, he said.

Syd got out of bed and stretched in front of the bathroom mirror. He splashed water on his face and got a drink from the faucet. He went to the window and looked at the ocean. A couple was lying on the sand, wrapped in a sleeping bag next to a fire. An old man went by jogging.

I don't know any mothers that live with their daughters, Lynn said.

We're not so strange, are we?

I'm like Middle C – just there, Syd. I'm unsure how else to exist.

It could be worse, he said. There are worse things.

That sounds just like you, she said. She was quiet. Come to bed, please?

He came under the sheets and she moved towards his body. His feet were sore. Tomorrow he had decided he would walk more. He would walk up and down the beach and over sand and maybe even take the yacht into the middle of the sea and practice walking on water to render a conversation with God, and then practice his drowning and breathing salt water. He would keep walking until he reached at least a hundred thousand miles. He wanted to know what twelve million feet of separation felt like.

Tertiary Juncture would be coming to fruition in a few days. *Dig in my Mad Foaming Taters Blues: Poison my old lady.*

He moved into her with hands and tongue. She welcomed it: teething on his bruises. Disinfectants followed Lynn wherever she went. If he looked hard enough, he could see the molecules grow little legs and feet and with their flat hands erase his footprints from the tile. Syd felt guilty. Day and night she scrubbed. He imagined her naked and the three of them – Syd, his roasted artichoke, and the disinfectant colonies – all swimming in crazy love-making. She had him draw skulls and crossbones on the doors of all rooms off-limits. He stole glances of her. She wore red. She held her eyes down and brushed the hair from her face, the way a young girl does before a date. She sweated and he watched.

He had been to a hospital and demanded a viral strain of lupus or lime disease, something to cultivate, something degenerative. Some of the nurses laughed. Another screamed terrorism and called security.

Please, he begged. I love my wife, I love my wife, you see, you understand, he told them.

Security came. Syd lost his shirt and made it back home to watch her clean out their lives and scatter it on the deck. Milk cartons and empty yogurt containers. Cigarettes and

some pot and bottles of vodka and Chinese containers. Their lives left to the wind and seagulls.

He envisioned the poisoning moments. For a woman as delicate and refined as Lynn, it would be proper. There would be vomit. He would stand ready to hold the hair out of her face.

He found numbers in the phonebook for several beekeeping ranches in Florida. A hornet sting could send her into anaphylactic shock: seizures and temporary paralysis, foaming, the subtle turn of color in her face – blues and purples and blacks, her tongue a full spasm and hanging flat out of her mouth as she swallowed and choked on it, gagging, biting it off and the blood, aqua and yellow spit in an array bubbles and vomit, tiny bubbled floaties, yes horrible and yes yes sweet. Hospital beds. He alone would hold her steady.

The first ranch knew nothing about hornets and dealt strictly with bees. The next number he tried a woman answered.

Do you sell hornet nests? Syd asked.

Excuse me? she said.

I need to cultivate some hornets. A colony, if you would. Do you sell them?

She hung up.

He threw the phone against the wall and listened to the sounds it echoed before and after it shattered.

The sun set purple and orange. Syd on the deck. The ocean calm.

There were more than a hundred pounds of fish on the deck. They were still writhing, their mouths open then closed, closed then opened. Lynn watched from the other

side of the glass. Her gaze made him feel like the incomplete husband he wished he would never have to be.

Who would just leave fish? Syd said. He was standing with his shirt off and a cigarette.

She said, The southerners. I swear to God it was a pirate Syd, it was a goddamn pirate, she said.

Jesus, Syd said, what kind of people are these? They're sick, my God, he said.

He looked out over the beach. He looked at the other beach houses. Then he saw the pirate. He was two houses over. He was a fat man draped in a crimson red coat hauling two black fish nets through the sand and up the stairs to another deck.

Ahoy! the fat man shouted. He waved his arms and signaled to Syd.

Syd shook his head, puffed at his cigarette.

You a fisherman? the fat man yelled.

What the fuck am I supposed to do with all this fish? Syd yelled.

The ship, it's down! Down at sea, the poor bitch, may she rest in peace. Pirates cannonballed her into the depths of the ocean where she will forever sleep, he said. Pirates, lad, pirates!

What am I supposed to do, goddamn it? Syd said.

Gut them, the fat pirate bellowed.

Syd looked. He leaned against the rail. Suddenly, it made perfect sense. Gut the fucking fish, he thought. Pirates? he shouted. He fat man nodded. Syd smoked. You know I played for the Pittsburgh Pirates once, little league. Third base. Some thing, little league, Syd said.

But the fat man was already gone and there was nothing but breeze and ocean and sand. And fish. Syd watched him trudge through sand and haul the black nets of fish and wondered as he became nothing more than an imaginary dot along the purple line of the horizon.

He searched inside and found a knife. It took him more than four hours to gut the fish. Their heads in one pile, guts and fins another, the pink flesh on wax paper gathering flies. He sweated in the cloak of humidity. At some point he told himself to quit and he felt bent and twisted in the deep rays and breeze but he moved his body forward and leaned more into the wind, shook water from his hair and bathed in the crude tingling of his hands. His fingers pruned. He cut fingertips and nails with the knife but let them bleed, ignored the red and sugary blood, enjoyed the salty discharge of pus. He felt raw and privileged.

Night fell over the beach, the stars filling the sky like eyes painted over a blank canvas.

Syd huddled in the deck, exhausted. He had never felt so satisfied in all his life. He had even forgotten the shape of his Lynn. Now, a swimming pool of fish flesh and entrails. His nose felt dry. His fingers burned and beneath his nails they were bleeding.

Early morning blanketed the sky.

The house was empty.

Syd lifted himself off the couch and stood at the screen door. He viewed the deck.

The fish were gone.

Hundreds of seagulls devoured and fought over the remains: flesh, guts, cartilage. They had eaten the eyes. Only the skeletons remained.

He chased them away, flapping his arms like a windmill. They scattered onto the beach leaving a trail of sand and feathers and scales in their wake. Syd moved meticulously,

gathering the heads and whatever wet slops, cradled them in his arms like a baby. There were rose petals on the deck mixed with the fish scales and guts. He stepped on thorns.

Lynn was sitting in the corner. She didn't speak.

'They're all gone, he whispered.

Inside, he went to the sink. He saw the empty cleaning bottles.

I've used them all, Lynn said from the deck. It's finished.

He held his hands under the faucet without turning on the water. He rubbed the tender tips of his fingers. He brought them to his nose and it made him shudder. It made him feel clean.

He went back on the deck. There was the knife on the floor. He held the knife, its uncertainty. He looked at Lynn. He threw it over the rail.

Syd held dead fish. Scales dripped slowly between his fingers. They were so cold and in the sun. He held what was left, what was between, what was between. There was no sound.

Then Syd threw gulps of gills through the torn screen door. He heaved them in silence.

At dusk came her low sobs. He pulled her to him, held her tightly. Her fists thumped hard against his chest and holding her close it was like a Tango. Rumba, rumba baby; my love, my love. She broke away from him and huddled in the corner, a broken animal. His sweet muse. Then sometime later in the night, with her sobs as his only rhythm, Syd began to dance and dance and dance.

WITHOUT NEBRASKA

“Remember,” Iris said, “this is Nebraska – everything happens when you forget to breathe.” Full of beer and ready to scream, Iris knew her business in Nebraska. People pray your name here without consent. There is an hour in every day when the walls inside your house get slick and with a single word you can make it rain and later the rooms fill with light and you swim through doorways and out windows on those yellow beams. The plains stretching into oblivion make you adore gravity. Nebraska makes you grateful you can’t escape the earth, at least not on your own terms.

We had come to Nebraska for the fires. Instead we found cigarettes that wouldn’t light.

We ate losing lotto tickets.

We yelled to know our voices were still within us.

We watched raccoons place bets on themselves and scamper between passing big rigs.

We danced down the isles of an abandoned church.

We sucked apple slices but did not feel wise.

We found a freckled boy and kissed his cheeks until he ran away. We did not report ourselves to the authorities. We felt guilty.

We drank wine coolers with Iris's grandfather. After eleven bottles we called him Fat Oswald. We listened to his stories of what was beyond Nebraska. Without Nebraska we'd never remember the lies we had told to cover up other lies. "Is there any other way to live?" he said.

We set fire to Fat Oswald's trailer. This was supposed to tell us something about ourselves. I had to know if Iris was the saving kind, if her heart faded to blue in the February sunshine, if when we danced in her kitchen she would always smell like cayenne pepper, if her singing in the doorways was better with or without rum.

We waited on the steps of the old church now converted into a pub called the Church of Leo's. The bartender called himself Herb. "But can we call you Leo?" I said. He told us to sit on the steps. We drank warm beer. Unlit cigarettes stuck to the saliva between our lips. Ice melted down eighty miles of highway that cut through the earth like an old scabbard. Iris looked up at the last of the stars. Her tongue unfurled, waiting to catch the coming ice storm.

"This is the end for us," said Iris, "No more romancing. Never again, never Nebraska."

Fireflies dropped out of the sky and crushed under our thighs. In the distance we could see the last phosphorescent glow before morning; Iris smelled of an old campfire. I pulled ashen strands of hair out of her face and the strange nubs on her shoulder blades pulsed like two ogre eyes and I kept thinking she was inching towards heaven without me.

“What are these for?” I whispered, fingering the nubs over her shirt.

She wouldn't say, but I figured she was trying to grow wings. She had grown tired of feeling her heels scrape dirt and corn, tired of climbing the water tower and asking what it was like to lose gravity. Two nights ago it had rained and we were lying in the middle of road tasting the rain. “Where does rain come from?” I said. Iris said it was all the old women from the days of Fat Oswald that hadn't saved their tresses and when they got to heaven the Virgin hung their heads in the clouds and caused them to weep for an eternity.

We saw hogs lifting into the sky. Cars swerved across the icy road in a desperate ballet. Windshields shattered. A semi of livestock had flipped. Cornstalks uprooted. Hogs in flight.

“Yep,” said one of the barflies.

“Whoa,” said another.

Then it was quiet. For more than an hour Iris helped pull the wounded into a ditch with the hogs. Wandering through the wreckage, my bones ached. I lent a hand to nobody. To feel close to them I nibbled shards of glass. An entire family dressed for what must have been the Governor's Ball huddled in the ditch, the mother cradling a torn stalk of corn like a newborn. I felt cheated that they had such feeling and I didn't; I felt cheated that I hadn't been invited to their gala and suddenly feared that were I to attend the joint-chair committee man – because there is always such a sonfabitch watching that every goddamn step be done *properly* – would know I didn't belong and kindly escort me into an unmarked room and into the arms of a large Polynesian sort with hands that would crush my skull even if I sang him hymns of his native land and worse yet, I would be just his flavor.

Truth and shame are the only things you feel in the throat.

Suddenly, I never wanted to leave Nebraska.

Suddenly, I wanted my piece of shame to carry me through to the end.

The road was littered with hogs: some chewed in the grill of the semi, others grazing on debris in a ditch, others still hung in the sky from the impact – drifting, perhaps laughing.

A husband sat on a tangled mess of steel and rubber, his face smeared in grease. He watched the hogs. Ten minutes ago there had been seven. Now he counted forty. He said, “The world mutates when we aren’t willing to watch it.”

Behind us a young girl was in the road. “Do you know her?” I asked the husband.

“She doesn’t belong to me. Not my kind but I would follow her yet.”

The girl tucked in her wounds and bled between the fingers. Puttering in the middle of the road, she rubbed mulch and dirt specks from her wounds that hung out her abdomen like Christmas tinsel. I had never seen anything so gentle. Coming closer, I could hear her reciting poetry. She walked in circles holding her wounds without regret. Without looking at me she asked for a cigarette. I said, “It’s bad luck to smoke when you’re bleeding. Haven’t you ever watched old black and white films?” She looked at me like I was nobody’s son. Her eyes twisted like enormous corkscrews, her face shiny like one of Iris’s porcelain Japanese dolls.

I gave her the cigarette. I watched her try to smoke without ever lighting it.

I wanted to believe this was Iris devolved into the child she had forgotten and sometimes it takes a moment in Nebraska to get us thinking like humans again and to quit thinking we want to be something divine.

The husband took a nickel from his pocket and tossed it into a puddle of ditch water. “A nickel for her fate, you see? On Fridays during her seventeenth year the boys will bring her dried dandelions.” He threw in another nickel. “Her firstborn will be cross-eyed but eye

candy.” I emptied my pockets and found no nickels. The husband put a hand on my neck and smiled. He kept tossing his nickels into the puddles:

She won’t find autumn leaves beautiful.

She won’t love Italians.

In her old age she’ll kiss hitchhikers in exchange for rumors of distant cities.

When things went dark I brought the poet child to the Church of Leo’s. Iris was nowhere to be found. We waited on the steps. I kept listening for the sound of nickels sinking into the water. I pulled closer to this young girl. Lying crooked, my body questioned into her, her breaths supporting the weight of us.

ME AND MY MEXICAN, CHAMPAGNE

With each visit to the whorehouse the contortionist remembered less and less. He forgot his fear of swimming ponds. He forgot it was an eleven mile distance from the whorehouse to his domicile and he had a poor complexion for hitchhiking. He forgot the lyrics to “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” He forgot that exchanging insults with one’s woman in public invalidated fucking on the weekends.

Undressed to boxers and suspenders, the contortionist drank beer in the hallway with Champagne, his guardian Mexican. Champagne said everybody had a guardian Mexican; they just had to know where to find it.

The contortionist kept several memories scribbled on a series of index cards folded neatly inside his suit pocket and guarded with a Lady Derringer. It was Champagne’s duty to read them aloud after the sexing: Once when I was eleven, I plucked out my pubic hairs because they offered me a glimpse at foreboding manhood. Once a girl named Aryelle passed me a note inside the classroom which read *Do you like me?* and I scribbled back *Sorry,*

your thighs are too big. Once I prayed in Mexican and it whispered back. Once I put my head between the thighs of a Jesus woman and felt the Jesus slip right out of her until I numbed but days later I could still not turn the bathtub water to gin and numb again.

These are terrible memories, said the contortionist.

Nobody told you to get out of bed in the morning, Champagne said.

I need a stage name, said the contortionist. He loaded and unloaded the Lady Derringer.

You'll forget it tomorrow, Champagne said.

I could be famous.

You're not even a contortionist. You're fifty-seven. You're scrawny. Anybody's bones will twist funny at fifty-seven.

Goddamn you, said the contortionist.

The contortionist didn't frequent the whores for the sexing. It was the feat of being unraveled he preferred: how when untangled on the floor, stretched and conquered, he adhered to the laws of nature.

Someday Champagne would teach the contortionist how to be an orphan – that was the arrangement. Champagne had been an orphan all his life and was now so old that at any moment the contortionist expected him to grow a pair of wings and gently rise off into the distant cities. Or maybe he would meet his demise at the county race track betting on all the wrong horses, wooing all the perfumed ladies, telling the same stories about horses whose names he no longer remembered and jockeys that always seemed to get run out of town for sleeping with the perfumed ladies. Someday Champagne would slump over like a sack of old onions. Someday, the contortionist would be forced to remember his own memories without the satisfaction of a buffer.

They lived in Muldrue, east of Winnemucca. There were no lampposts. There were no women with grand dreams. There were men in underwear watering lawns. There was an ice cream parlor with sixty-seven flavors of which the contortionist had tried four. He felt the inability to eat every flavor of ice cream like a child had held him back in life. When he stood on the town limits he knew this was that last refuge before a forgotten stretch of earth where men often went to be fed on by crows or turn into cruel homosexuals. He'd seen them walk out there.

Behind the bordello was a farmhouse and acres of corn. Before dawn, little Pietra and her family watched as the contortionist and Champagne climbed onto the barn and start shooting off the Lady Derringer like a couple of outlaws.

We are not here to make love to your daughters, announced the contortionist.

The papa signaled to his silver-haired Pietra who retrieved a shotgun. He loaded once, fired into sky, did not load again. After a time, they went back to bed and left the contortionist and Champagne to their outlawing. At sunrise, they straddled the barn roof and watched a crop duster drift above the cornfield.

Someday I'll be a cowboy and lasso that plane. Soon as I get the nerve, the contortionist told Champagne.

Champagne said, What if you get carried off?

The contortionist said, Then we drift into another sky.

Once home the contortionist found his woman naked in bed with a Shirley Temple and after trying to fold himself into the child he once was, he consulted a dictionary and considered the likelihood of recrudescence.

The contortionist's woman was a divorcée. When necessary, she could be salty. She obsessed over black and white horror movies. Marquee posters were thumb-tacked to every wall in the house. She watched every scene on mute, inserting the abridged dialogue herself.

'They don't kill people in the movies like they used to, she said as he undressed. He stood half-naked, watching her watch the film.

Maybe nobody will get killed this time, he said. Maybe suddenly everything will be different.

You're getting grey, she said without looking.

Where?

Around the edges.

What edges?

The edges.

Oh, he said.

He stood in front of the mirror trying to find what edges. Maybe he should get fat, he thought. Horribly fat. Maybe he should scream. It was a terrible thing to stand in front of a mirror alone.

Would you ever hold me like Dr. Caligari? I bet he has soft hands, she said.

He sat on the edge of the bed. Is this the one where they kill everyone?

No, she whispered. You know they never kill people in movies like they used to.

While she slept, he crouched in the doorway and practiced contortion sequences – the Screaming Peter, the Nodding Elizabeth – wondering: If he could fit inside his own palm would he find lightness? And if in lightness find dignity? What he wanted was that feeling of linger on the inside, that linger the same as he felt when holding a thumb firm to her larynx while she slept and her thumb to his to see if their breaths measured a similar loneliness.

The contortionist purchased a lasso and a new full length mirror. When the clerk gave him a demonstration with the lasso he said, You can haul some serious pussy with this.

At the pub the contortionist drank club soda and surveyed the crowd but determined there wasn't any *serious* pussy in this town.

Evening came, and he bathed unnoticed in an ugly foam of water. When the water had circled the drain he went on the porch and informed Champagne he had no clothes for the gala. Moths had taken residence inside the house. They had chewed his suits and ties.

I've shattered all the light bulbs, said the contortionist, but late at night I can still hear their cocktail parties, their philanderings.

Champagne helped him dress for the gala. What do you know about romance? he said, shaking his Mexican head.

The contortionist didn't watch romance films because he feared big somethings in his heart. He loved his estranged daughter primarily because she had never been able to whistle, but also because the previous daughter – who had leapt from the cathedral window – could do nothing but whistle lying in the road as passersby came for nine days to kiss her cheeks and comb her hair and wonder what became of her child in-utero. They rumored how it was a word that had caused the infant to slip from the womb mid-leaping and it pained him to think of her, lingering in the air, forever a child and never to age, hanging awkwardly below the stained-glass cathedral windows, a kind of drowning the way she fell, and even now when he considered it there was the taste of seaweed on his lips. Only recently had the contortionist resumed with whisky because when hiccupping he remembered the ache in his bile.

He mentioned nothing to Champagne, keeping his romance on the insides where he knew it belonged.

At the gala, the divorcée pretended she didn't recognize him and the contortionist flirted with the housewives per Champagne's suggestion.

What should I tell them?

They're housewives. They believe anything, Champagne said.

With a nippy red-head, he introduced the two of them: This is me and my Mexican, Champagne, the contortionist said.

Charmed, she said. She let him kiss her knuckles.

The contortionist did the chatting. He reminisced about his performance in the Youth Theatre Troup as the trio of corpses in *Julius Caesar*. She seemed bored until he confessed his niche for being a contortionist.

Let me see something, she said. She tried to suck martini olives through the gap in her teeth.

I got nasty moves, lady, he smiled.

The contortionist cleared a space at the bar. He rolled his sleeves, as if to say, This one's for Jesus. He couldn't get his knees to bend right for the Whispering Francis. He cursed gently. There was a scattered, pitiful applause. Champagne was getting sauced.

Give us a moment, said the contortionist. He smiled weakly. He tried again. He froze up: his neck wouldn't twist, his back went stiff, his elbows turned the wrong direction, his throat dried and made pathetic cries when his fingers got lodged in his belt loops.

When the crowd had dispersed, the red-head unzipped his fly and stuffed in a few dollar bills with a wink. The contortionist asked the bartender for a whisky sour.

This isn't an open bar, lover-boy, said the bartender. He was a few dollars short. Champagne shrugged. There wasn't even club soda.

In the parking lot, Champagne introduced him to the husbands.

These gentlemen want to see the Bushkanov, hips and all, he said.

Before the contortionist could answer, they had put their fists to him. The husbands made him bleed from the nostrils. They were careful around his belly parts. Champagne watched. He scribbled down the memory on the index cards. The contortionist wasn't sure who was more surprised when his bones wouldn't break, he, the husbands, or Champagne. It ended when Champagne pulled out the Lady Derringer and fired four times into the air.

I'm broken on the insides, Champagne, said the contortionist, struggling to his feet.

They limped to the vehicle. Champagne said, We must endure plenty to keep our charm.

The divorcée says I'm repulsive.

You have charm.

Really?

No.

I'd make a good father, wouldn't I, Champagne?

Just as long as you never breed, he said.

Champagne drove him home and helped him into bed. He brought a chair to the window and promised to stay through the night.

You're the best Mexican I've ever known, the contortionist whispered.

Romance, Champagne said, only means something when you hurt on the insides.

In the whorehouse, he could not throw Champagne down a flight of stairs without getting guff from the whores. This in spite of the revelation that throwing himself down the stairwell yielded no broken bones.

We should call you Mr. Nebulous, Champagne said.

The contortionist deemed it unusual his bones would not break. He chopped wood but never found the courage to flinch. Wandering the park, he broke the neck of a duck and watched it float in the pond, curious when a father and toddler duo would not exchange smiles and nods with him.

At the dinner table he announced he would be known forthwith as Mr. Nebulous.

His divorcée laughed. You're as harmless as toast, she said.

I got my belt notched on this, said the contortionist, as if to say, My shit smells worse than yours.

Two weeks later he returned home to find the faces cut out of the horror posters and her suitcase packed.

I need a man that remembers, she said. I need a warm body that's breakable.

But you're a divorcée, said Mr. Nebulous.

She said, Living is an uncertain bargain.

Once the ex-Mrs. Nebulous had abandoned him, Mr. Nebulous lured Pietra and her sister to rummage through boxes to help stir memories of her. Mr. Nebulous let the girls sleep in the attic. In the morning they breakfasted lukewarm coffee and toast. He chewed very carefully. They seemed disinterested. He asked that they put on the ex-Mrs. Nebulous summer dresses.

What do we get in return? said Pietra.

All I have left is Champagne, said Mr. Nebulous.

You can't give away a guardian angel, said Pietra's sister.

He's a Mexican, said Mr. Nebulous. And I renounce him. I renounce Champagne.

The summer dresses came well past their feet but Mr. Nebulous rolled them up to get a glimpse of their legs. He winked at Pietra. He had to restrain himself not to hug her in the neck. From the corner he watched them dance to commercial jingles on the radio.

Champagne assisted him in removing all the furniture the ex-Mrs. Nebulous had ever touched and heaving it into the swimming pond behind the house. They preserved two rocking chairs from Civil War times and perched at the end of the driveway smoking pipes belonging to the ex-Mrs. Nebulous's deceased grandfather.

You're finished as guardian, Champagne. I can't do anything about you being a Mexican, but I disown you here and now.

This is lovely tobacco, said Champagne.

It's a shame the man has been dead a hundred years. It's a shame he was only ever good for his tobacco. What a sad way to be remembered.

There was a drawer full of it in the dresser. It's at the bottom of the pond now.

Goddamn it.

And I don't do swimming, said Champagne. He stretched and nodded gently. It's a tough world out there for orphans, he said. He walked to the edge of the pond. For a moment Mr. Nebulous was afraid he'd just keep walking right into the water. Maybe he'd see Champagne walk on water tonight; maybe he'd see him drown.

That's the end? Doesn't it have to go in writing? said Mr. Nebulous. He felt the quiver in his throat.

Unlike the best of men, I am not a lawyer.

Mr. Nebulous snatched the pipe from Champagne's mouth. He punted it into the water. Then, with a running start, he used the last of his strength to heave the rocking chair into the pond. They watched it sink.

I didn't think it would really sink, he said. I never imagined, he whispered. He couldn't stop blinking.

Yep, said Champagne.

I got no woman, Champagne. Even a divorcée wants nothing to do with me. Tell me just this once. Tell me, what would a Champagne do?

Take a lukewarm bath, he said. Call all the women you've ever loved. When you awake in the middle of the night, without hesitation, wet the bed. Nobody ever feels lonely in a wet bed.

Mr. Nebulous spent his days sitting on the barn roof behind the bordello, lasso at his side, alternating gazes between the crop duster and Pietra's farm people. The papa bathed reading his newspaper. They prayed together in the front yard, kneeling, their hands gripping clumps of dirt. The mother hummed spirituals when she defecated. They wore matching pajamas. When nobody was around the youngest child spoke to the scarecrows. Whenever he caught her, the papa slapped her, yet she never flinched.

He had run out of bed sheets. They had made an awful stink of fire. His hands were not so dainty for laundry. The women at the stores frightened him with their talk of thread count. They had him chased off the property. It was only days before he'd be out of whisky sour. And then it wouldn't matter – sheets or no sheets.

Nobody was around when Mr. Nebulous finally got the itch to attempt a lasso of the crop duster and losing his footing, tumbled off the barn into a flatbed of corn cobs. He lay there for hours until Pietra poked at his foot with a stick.

You dead? she whispered.

Mr. Nebulous didn't answer.

She whispered again: If you're not dead, blink nine times. Mr. Nebulous thought he was in one of the ex-Mrs. Nebulous' movies. That was when Pietra began hollering *there is a dead man in the corn*. The papa poked at him too until Mr. Nebulous squirmed.

Slaughter a hog, said the papa. The sumbitch is alive.

He helped pull Mr. Nebulous to his feet and they hobbled onto the porch. Head to marbles Mr. Nebulous was covered in a flaky residue.

I can't feel my toes, said Mr. Nebulous. His eyes were pale circles of vomit.

I thought you said he was dead? said the mama.

This man can't feel his toes, repeated the papa. Before Mr. Nebulous could protest, the papa had taken off his shoes and was massaging his feet. This is what my grandfather said they did during the Great War, the papa said. It got so cold in that Kraut land that their toes were falling off if you can imagine. You ever seen a toe fall off, sombrero? Wouldn't want to. A man can't fight with his toes falling off, that's gospel.

I stink of corn, said Mr. Nebulous.

It's all part of the experience, said the papa.

My bet is that men that work in kudzu never have to deal with this shit, said Mr. Nebulous.

Silver-haired Pietra brought out lemonade. Mr. Nebulous looked her down to up and tried to imagine all the little hairs between. She stayed there on the railing, staring hard at the sun the way dogs do when they get the itch to gnaw something awful.

We'd better wash off, said the papa.

At the sink he took Mr. Nebulous by the hands and began to lather him up to the elbows. Mr. Nebulous paid little attention, his eyes fixed through the window on the mama and Pietra. They had roped Jarvis the hog in the back legs and were dragging him through

the mulch toward the slaughtering ground. The mama kicked Jarvis repeatedly to keep him off balance, maybe to get some final screams out of him. Soon they were both kicking him, little kicks only a woman could give.

We're far from civilized, sombrero, said the papa. He scrubbed between the webs in Mr. Nebulous's fingers, scrubbed around his wrist bones and girly elbows.

The mama punctured the throat and watched the blood spill. Pietra watched too. They waited for the squeals to give their last melody. The odor of blood was something reminiscent of his years as a boy – the smell of old shoes in his father's closet.

The papa kept scrubbing Mr. Nebulous's palms until they were raw.

Men don't care about the civilized any longer. You hear me, sombrero? Just read the newspaper, the papa said, read about all the infection.

An odor of burning hog flesh and hair came through the open window. The mama and Pietra had covered the body with hay hoping to burn away the hair. When the flames were gone Pietra used the back end of a knife to scrape away crusty hair from Jarvis's hide.

Men don't even know how to hold their own women any longer. Can you believe it? said the papa. He was rinsing Mr. Nebulous's hands. There was a puddle of water on the floor and Mr. Nebulous couldn't take his eyes from it.

Do you even know how to hold a woman? Here, let me show you, the papa said. He straddled Mr. Nebulous from behind and began to rub his neck. The mama and silver-haired Pietra were gutting Jarvis now. Puddles of blood had attracted the chickens and crows.

See there? Feel that? That's holding a woman, said the papa.

Mr. Nebulous said, You are very kind.

You can bust my chops for the archangel Gabriel, but don't call me uncivilized, said the papa. Man, believe it, sombrero. I know they say it is our strangeness that keeps us from

being inhuman, but I say it is our civility that makes us neighbors. Take our daughter. She has manners. Show him your manners, he said.

The youngest child balanced on her tip toes and curtsied.

Yep, manners. We call her June Bug.

Yep, she's a dish, said Mr. Nebulous.

She's not of age.

Yeah, she's a dish. June Bug. Alright.

Mr. Nebulous ate roasted Jarvis with them. He drank whisky with the papa. They cursed; they shot their guns at small animals that ran back and forth between the water ditch and the corn.

When everybody was in bed June Bug made her way through the screen door onto the porch and found Mr. Nebulous. She huddled on the steps, knees brought up to her chin to stay warm. Without speaking she walked next to Mr. Nebulous and eased the lasso from his grip. She cinched it around her waist. She looked Mr. Nebulous in the eyes. Then sputtering her lips like an engine propeller she stretched out her arms and galloped off the porch and turned circles and figure-eights in the grass. She had almost made it into the cornfield when Mr. Nebulous gripped the rope and gave a few soft tugs.

Easy now! Easy! he yelled. But June Bug kept flying, slipping into the thicket of corn stalks. Mr. Nebulous let himself get pulled in, zigzagging through the rows, the sweet leaves brushing against his face, the smell of dirt on his chin as he fell and picked himself up.

When he finally caught up with June Bug she was sitting cross-legged, tearing away a husk and making him a little crown with the leaves. Out of breath, he lay his head in her lap. She held him there. She held him close.

He said, Sometimes my heart is incapable of enduring its fullness.

THE FERTILE YELLOW

We're getting pregnant tonight, my wife says. She places a hand over the soft mid-section of her abdomen. You remember, right? Don't keep me waiting, baby. Baby, baby, she says. She is dancing: hips and shoulders, swaying, swaying.

I stand waiting. Wives and pregnancy are terrible things.

Murderer, murderer, she whispers. Her smile is nothing but raw gums. Kiss, kiss, she says. She nibbles at my earlobes. She grins, knife in hand. It's after midnight and Claire is sending me out for eggs and vanilla. She insists: do not forget the goddamn eggs, Jack.

I love my wife. How do you walk around as a murderer? Like you own it, I suppose.

Ann gloats. Give her your seed, give her that seed, Jack, she says.

I go to the stairs and listen to the rain.

These nights have given way.

I have been delivered into mad bouts of pregnancy.

We had to lose the cat. Litter is sterile. There were consequences to consider. We mustn't spawn tiny thalidomide newborns.

Claire held the picture close to my nose. The fingers were mangled and chewy. Remember it, she said. Claire wants children with fat toes, not ones with nubs and stumps. She wants them to play the piano. She wants to be able to suck on them.

It happened months ago. She yelled and I listened. I was trying to ruin our marriage, she said. She bit. I still have the marks, trophies, errant reminders, call them what you wish. She cornered me with a rolling pin. I can remember not wanting to touch her because I was afraid for the baby. You could just begin to see the bulge in her stomach, the belly button in its first days of poking out like a miniature nose. Careful, I whispered.

But it happened there anyway – right there with arms circling, screams and kicks like the mad cries of Spanish *conquistadores*. She miscarried from hurting *me*.

Then everything was pale and cold and ambulances and Claire bleeding. I had first imagined puddles of blood from a miscarriage, blood to fill a room – there wasn't. I was amused at how clean the bathroom tile gradually appeared as Claire kept soaking it up with sponges, one after the next: green scrub, green scrub, yellow sponge, purge – water, blood, fleshy intangibles – she let all of them slip off her fingers into the garbage, down a drain.

I took a chair, acted as the man. Calm. Supportive. I lent a shoulder. She rose like a wave, lay there, bent on the tile, immobile.

By the time the ambulance arrived, I swear, and let me tell you I swear to *God*, she had been on her feet for twenty minutes making those damn sugar cookies. Even without the ingredients, she was trying to make them. By then there was nothing left to do but cry and say *God* and *damn* and *fuck* and *shit* and hold each other.

Yes, yes! I say. The goddamn eggs!

I pull the sweater over my head and let the hood cover my ears. I look like a turkey. Claire rolls her eyes. Ann laughs, cradles the unborn child still wrapped in her skin, the dead weight of water and uterus and child a veritable solar plexus.

Ann is her younger sister. She is fat with someone's child. She's been living with us since the second trimester, eating our saltines and E-Z cheese, plowing through bottles of salsa and sticks of salami. People talk. In the beginning, Claire asked me to spy on her.

See what she buys at the store, what magazines she reads, how often she goes to the bathroom. I want to know everything. I want details, Claire said.

It was brilliant. I kept tabs, scribbling booklets of information. Today they are buried in drawers hidden from my wife. She cannot read my chicken scratch and it is better that way. She wouldn't understand the horrors of her sister.

They are like two dirty nuns, sharing gossip, remembering their dead father. They use fingers to lick chocolate frosting from the bowl. They decide on baby names. I'm not invited to participate. Claire rolls chocolate over her jungle tongue. It's dark chocolate because that makes Claire fertile. There is a long list of holistic remedies for women of Claire's size. There are ways to conceive, you must know: raw steaks and three glasses of whole milk every day for a month, a three hundred percent increase in cabbage consumption and no Mexican food on Friday nights. I've even tossed four hundred pounds of rock salt on the roof, an omen to the gods, any gods. I was up there for two days, evening it out, rimming it around edges and rain gutters until our house looked like a giant margarita. I have met with professors of strange languages, African, Near-Eastern, professors of cultures. I know the remedies.

There are pie tins and mixing bowls all along the floor. Cigarettes butts, torn recipe pages wet with oil and flour. Claire chews nuts. These nuts are strewn over the counters:

blanched almonds, blisters, jumbo cashews, pecans, filberts, glazed redskins. One month's worth of nuts every two hours.

We are still awaiting our answer from the gods.

Ann wafts the smoke from Claire's cigarette out of her face complaining that smoking kills. This, of course, is my fault.

Ann says, If this baby pushes its way out of my vagina to be subject to a lifetime of humiliation and retardation, I'm going to blame *you*, Jack. This baby isn't going to live in my uterus for nine months, Jack, then shoot out my vagina, *my* vagina mind you, Jack, to be retarded. I won't have it, she says. Can you listen, Jack? Then she glares. The rain falls in quick bursts. Sometimes it's difficult not to imagine Ann's vagina. Sometimes I have nightmares of the thalidomide babies falling instead of rain.

Ann likes the word vagina. She is obsessed. Her vagina must not be excluded from any civilized conversation. Ever since she's been pregnant she's been using the word freely: noun, adjective, sometimes even a verb. My vagina dilates ten centimeters when the baby comes, she says. I vagina-ed to the store, have you ever vagina-ed like that before? What a vagina day, don't you think? Or when driving: what the hell were they thinking that cross-eyed vagina vagina? It aches, it's sore, it burns; my vagina's lonely and talks to me at night; it needs a father.

Lately it seems Ann is eating dinner for three and on more than once occasion I've looked under the table to make sure she's not sneaking it any scraps.

I feel for her. Christ, I really do.

But now my business is the goddamn eggs, the vanilla.

Oh God, Ann, Claire sighs. Perhaps she regrets extending her the invitation to stay with us until the baby comes. She shakes her head and then smiles at me. Just bring the

goddamn eggs, she smirks. She blows a cloud of smoke towards Ann who gets up screaming about her uterus and Claire laughs. Claire is like that.

I am a man consumed of details: two miscarriages in nine months, eleven visits with her gynecologist, three wet nurses, six on-call mid-wives, four meetings with an unlicensed pregnancy specialist and fourteen office visits at the fertility clinic. We don't speak of the miscarriages. If it isn't her ovaries, it's something else: my penis is *too* erect my sperm *too* fertile or we're not in the right position I don't feel clean enough to impregnate morning is the best time to conceive but only after four shots of Listerine three flossings mid-day is a productive hour so leave work and drive forty-eight minutes in gridlock traffic. Feel stale, loathsome, tired; you want a baby, right?

Amen.

Listen. Listen.

Listen, Jack.

Or maybe my balls are retarded, my briefs are suffocating my testicles so either I'm killing them or producing retard sperm with three heads and no tails which swim frantic, obsessed, burrowing into the walls of her tubes like they're stoned, grooving with picks as they listen to Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young.

It's someone's fault, make no mistake: her goddamn eggs, maybe a faulty uterus, lame balls, a dysfunctional penis – there are ways to find out, things to be done, pages and pages of tests and scientists to hire to analyze our data. But I'm not that kind of man. We love each other, we do – a romance someone ought to make into a nice, clean comedy with fits of passion. But sometimes it just isn't enough to tear each other down while you cling to hope. You need the soft love, the kind my father used to talk about, the kind you only hear

about in movies like *From Here to Eternity*. When we go to the doctor, it can be unbearable to listen to him, to each other. The anticipation kills us. Marriages can be like that.

Claire pulls me close, presses my lips to her neck, hands at her sides, feeling her, smelling smoke and perfume, watching the glittered spackle of sugar dance across her lips. She laughs, hesitates to speak, then feeds me fingers of chocolate batter. She glides them around the rim of the glass bowl: one finger for Ann, two for me; chocolate that drizzles off her nails.

Then we are motionless. Her face looks stretched, ageless. It lasts seconds and then I know we've held each other too long. She knows, too. I move outside into the rain, the smell of her skin on my lips.

Lucelli's has been in the neighborhood for generations. It is one of those small-town grocery marts men go to lose their minds and feel-up girlfriends behind a row of potato chips. It is full of discounts and menthol cigarettes, liquor which sell at a two-hundred percent mark-up to teenagers and the cheap ice cream sandwiches, the ones my father used to take me out for as a kid.

I'm expecting a crowd. I find Bud, a stack of empty lawn chairs.

They're running behind? I say.

Bud shakes his head. Stopped, he says. Closed down. Not even a finale.

No?

Bud nods. He sucks and chews the cigarette filter, hands deep inside his pockets. He itches his face with a fat finger. The rain gets heavy.

They're finished? I ask.

Finished. Christ, he says. What do they think we'll do now?

I can only shrug, look helpless.

Lucelli's belongs to Mom and Pop. Mom was raised here, spent her beautiful years milking cows, collecting eggs, hoping for golden ones to sell to fairies and princes. Pop was a failed door-to-door salesman, loved his wife, loved the land, wanted children, something to hold and call his own. She bore him chicken farms instead.

The process comes from Eastern Europe, from the villages. Mom and Pop have made it a regular deal. Every month like clockwork the glass silo next to Lucelli's is flooded with sixteen thousand gallons of yolk. There is a raffle. Somebody in town gets fifteen minutes to soak. It is all tradition. You might have read about it, seen our photograph. We became famous in the *North Star Gazette*: a mythical, cutting-edge society. Community of the future, they say. The photographer's name was Cuthbert. I remember his silly little English tie, the tweed jacket. Do you see the man in the upper corner of the photo? The man with a white baseball cap and muddy sneakers? I am that man. You know me.

People come to watch. Women take their children, husbands. Grandparents and lovers bring lawn chairs; they even make love in the bushes. We pretend not to hear their old skin clasp together as it carries on the jesting wrestle. The process is approved by the County Health Department. Recommended, even. The miracles of sanitation explored through yolk. Sixteen thousand gallons of thickly stirred swimming yolks. When it fills we just watch and take in the odor. We look for our liquid faces in the foam. We wait silently, thinking our lives mean something more than they do. We watch whatever lucky bastard with envy. We hold our breaths. Then everything is vacuum-sucked dry. Sterile, spotless, fresh. Nobody speaks with the raffle winners once it's finished. They are so far beyond us, language doesn't feel appropriate. Claire has a cousin who won the raffle. Spent the rest of his summer in a chicken coop telling tales with the roosters and stealing eggs from the hens. Eventually, they evicted him. He's a dumbshit, really. But the women love him. He swore by

that yolk. Knocked up three girls. Couldn't be happier as a father, taking care of all those babies. They published his story. People love the damndest things.

Once I drowned in that yolk. I climbed unsuspected up the silo and belly flopped.

Claire didn't believe me. She turned rabid at the thought of me inside there. She wouldn't listen. But it was true. It happened. Only she didn't want to believe. She wouldn't make love to me for weeks.

Baby, baby; believe, you got to believe.

Ann believed. Ann always believed.

It was drowning. It was not swimming or snow angels. The yolk rose, swarmed over me and lolled like a child's tongue over a lollipop.

Outside Lucelli's they had cheered, God, how they roared. Crowds of them, wild with lust. Huzzah! Huzzah!

Except Mom and Pop. They were livid.

And then the glass shattered.

Yolk spilled like a tidal wave into the streets – a massive swell of fertility. Women could have come to bathe in it; just a touch to make them lush with pregnancy. It could have sanctified their wombs and I would have simply breathed on Claire and she was going to conceive. I glided through the waves, raised from the dead, charged with a head down, shoulders tight and those arms of mine like rubber, stretched and reaching. My head swelled like a balloon and my body, wet and slippery tried to wiggle free, lunging in a sea of fertile yellow.

Tonight the dairy section is about empty. I stand there for almost an hour, surveying the nothing.

Pop approaches, glum eyelids. We having problems tonight? he asks.

No, Pop, no problems, I tell him. I show him empty hands as an omen of good will.

You know the wife can't take any more episodes, he says, points a finger at Mom at the register. I wave and she ignores. Nearly killed her the last time, he says. I can't have her dead. She's no good to me that way, Pop says.

Right. Of course, I say. I assure Pop everything is under control. I am only coming for eggs and vanilla.

No more yolk? No more wash? I ask as he leaves.

Finished, he says.

There are ten rows of eggs packaged neatly in their gray cartons: Grade A, large and medium, white and brown, hundreds to choose from. I'm not sure if there's any difference. In the end, they're all just embryos. The gallons of milk look depressed: skim, non-fat, buttermilk, 1 %, 2 %; a world of lactose at my fingertips.

I'm hoping for Grade AA, something with a punch. Nothing. I stay with the eggs, brown and white, open six, seven cartons until I find twelve that look immaculate, the holy grail of eggs.

There is a woman next to me with a cart and child, a tall woman with curves and a prominent chin and a boy, about a year, maybe two, who doesn't resemble her in any way and I can't help but wonder what in God's name she's doing with a boy. He stares at me. He's been coerced into coming here, duped into putting on his pajamas and out of his crib. His eyes are entirely smug, peeved at my sudden appearance, perhaps at my neurotic necessity to look through carton after carton, frantic, desperate calm written on my face. He's gnawing through baby carrots, orange flesh hanging around his lips. He does his best to frown.

He is tossing carrots onto the floor. He grunts, and when his face tightens all the blood rushes up, higher, higher. The size of it paralyzes me. It is like a giant tomato waiting to have a knife thrust into it. I hold out an egg between two fingers and display it for him, a great white nodule gleaming like a cancerous polyp. It falls on the floor and shatters.

Uh-oh, the boy says. He giggles.

I take off my shoes and sit, Indian-like. The tile is cold. After a few minutes I'm well into my second carton, a nice thick layer of yolk spread over the floor. Steady it roams, like an amoeba. The mother gives me a fat, disgusted look. I drop four more eggs. An even two dozen.

Then standing, I crunch the shells into the yolk and whites under my bare feet, creating one layer of mixture and spread it around. I dance. It continues to move, slow, deliberate. When the dancing picks up, just when I'm beginning to feel the music, the woman moves to push the cart. She looks, terrified, picks up her pace. The boy keeps throwing his carrots. It's his smile that gets me. Maybe the carrot up his nose.

I was a hockey player in high school, but with the egg in my hand damned if I don't give a full wind-up like Sandy Koufax and hurl that son of a bitch egg right at his face where it connects just above his left eye. His head whips back; there is a sound: like bone split over rocks, and it comes down, that gargantuan spectacle, snapping forward and he screams, his mother falling into hysterics and the egg is still exploding everywhere – bits of shell, yolk and egg white – all of it suspended in that singular moment. He's covered in yolk and tears. The mother takes him in her arms and pulling him out of the cart, she runs.

I can't even be sure of what I've just done. I feel like I am hanging from wires on a stage of papier mâché. What I do know is that the average conception rate among women is just over six percent. Claire has printed reports from the library, stacks of them taped to the

walls of our home, the telephones, all on the national fertility rates among women. There were 8,192,000 pregnancies alone reported in the United States last year. Black women in Ohio age twenty to thirty-four were the most fertile women in all of the United States, boasting a rate of sixty-two percent. More than forty percent of all pregnancies were reported as unintentional. *Ohio*, of all places.

The house smells of burnt cocoa, filtered cigarettes, and rum. Ann is wound in a tight ball on the couch. I have my carton of eggs, bottles of vanilla, a pink citation slip from a police officer who was kind enough to drive me home. Only disturbing the peace, no need for panic, he said. He was gentle with the cuffs.

In the kitchen I glance at the eggs blank, stare at them somber. What will she do with them tomorrow, God and only God knows or does she even bother?

Perhaps the roof needs more salt.

I hold an egg, delicate, lovingly, burst it under my palm on the counter into shell and whites and yolk.

There was a time after the miscarriage, with Claire, after Lucelli's, after a night in county jail, a time before the rock salt, before the start of Ann's third trimester. I went around the neighborhood and borrowed three dozen eggs, accepted condolences from her close friends who knew about the miscarriage, felt guilty for myself. Then I sat on the kitchen floor and shattered them, each carefully and precise, just like this one here. I stripped naked and lay on my back in the bits of shell and yolk practicing my snow angels, the way I would teach my little boy in the winter months. That is how Claire found me: her yellow angel. She smiled and we made forgiving love in it. It was something else.

I can't bring myself to make snow angels now. Claire is upstairs. She is waiting. Instead, I take an egg and swallow yolk and shell and white in one slick swallow. It goes down, but only with effort.

I pull the blanket over Ann, kiss her forehead and wish her a goodnight, even though I know she cannot hear me. She holds my fingers, pulls me towards the sofa, asks me not to go, asks me to come to bed. She is asleep. I stare into her open eyes. She understands.

I go up the stairs. I make the walk slow, each step, every movement owned. The sounds of floor boards pressing remains preciously held. Looking back, I see her rise in the darkness of living room walls, like a wave. I might have let her pull me. In another life, that might have been possible.

Tuesday nights Claire waits for me naked under the sheets, soft music, dim lights, waiting for me to savor every corner of her body, treating her like a melted chocolate candy bar, the folds of her skin, the smell of her neck, the thin areas and the thicker ones, loving them all, loving her more if she could only get pregnant and I could rub her beautiful, round stomach, lick her belly-button, suck it out.

She is there in the darkness. No music, just Claire. All of her. I remove each piece of clothing with thought, fold them carefully. I pause for a final smell. They have no odor. But Claire: she is blooming.

I drift into her warmth, naked bodies, wading between sheets and skins, unaware of consequences and expectations. We are making a baby, two murderers, creating life. In the blackness I see her body as strips of connected flesh and words of I love you.

Tell me you love me, I say. Tell me I am your husband.

She hesitates.

Tell me you love me, I say. I hear her swallow. Her lips are fat as watermelon.

I attempt to ingest her shoulder. Kisses are painful. It is a treacherous task to find the corners of her mouth, align them correctly. I kiss her, willingly. This is heroism, but only if you know marriages. Waiting to feel her in the gully of my stomach, where she will be safe, where I can carry her through to term, both of them: wife and child. Mounting her from behind, watching the slope of her back ascend up, condense into shadow.

I put all of her in my mouth: bones and sinews, whatever fits. Her tongue, greying in the moonlight, fights back. She refuses to surrender quietly.

It takes time to swallow her, cradle her in me: the dusk and bliss wound, like a yolk wedged deep in the gallows of our throat.

OUR FAMOUS SUNSHINES

There is piano rubble in the ditch and Old Ben weeping. He sits there, stubborn as grass: slightly befuddled, Buddha-like, on the fringe of mystery, a worn and dusted loon resisting the urge to become famous. The temperature is just right for men to become famous. Seekers of fame we are. Some men are prone to skepticism, but I do not believe in isms, orimps and other midgets for that matter. I believe in the pure order of fame. I once lost two fingers in an alley outside Sioux City to pool legend Minnesota Fats. Sometimes I flaunt that: *I'm the man Minnesota Fats shimmed*. The biscuits of the story are this: he always wanted to be Kansas City Fats, but there was already one of those so he had to settle. I, however, am one-of-a-kind fame.

There is a nasty tortoise sun out today. A scarecrow looms behind him in the brush. She wears a wedding dress. She and Old Ben make a wonderful pair. Strange birds perch on what's left of the piano frame waiting for something to happen. Waiting for Old Ben to cross the threshold of the famous so they can peck out his eyes.

And the piano, Fats, let's not forget the piano. Few have seen a flying piano. Those that survive such visions have been burned at the stake in Tuscaloosa.

Old Ben seen it. It must have been something to see her fly. Strapped in the flat-bed one minute, defying God and nature the next. Flying. That's only a part of what's gnawing at Old Ben. He refuses to blink.

She ain't dead, Old Ben says.

He means, of course, the crushed hag under the piano rubble. This is a road of nobodies and ne'er-do-wells. A road where women get killed by flying pianos. Hard to say if they piano had motive. Newspaper tycoons and jack-me-off-journalists will say it was matricide. But let us be men of honor. The piano deserves the presumption of innocence. Now, there *was* something peculiar about the way she flew. I seen her fly. Spectacle is the key term. Spectacle of the bowels wherein all Fame is born.

Strawberry and the kraut known as Übrick cross the road and stand in the rubble. He lights a Sunshine cigarette and hands one to the kraut. The goddamn German has been on us for a month and we can't shake him. Sometimes we like him around cause his voice is like a broken toy. Mostly, we're looking for an opportune time to shoot him but they done took away our *pistolas*.

She was no good anyway, Strawberry says.

In my country, the kraut says, we love our women.

Old Ben's fat belly heaves. He snorts like he means it. One look at Old Ben makes a man grateful for heart attacks. He has to suck in his gut to make left-hand turns. He buys shoes with the laces tied in such incredible knots the undertaker is going to have to put that bone saw to the pedal. He watches women's figure skating because he likes to critique the butts and choreography. Brooding fat men uneasy of fame – does the world need more of

them? Fats, yes. We need heart attacks. Something to remind us there's justice yet in the world.

He pounds on the broken piano keys. A wire snaps. The sound is as unbearable.

Sonfabitch. She metamorphosized into music, Strawberry says. Nothing but notes scattered abroad, he yells. Think of that trajectory, he smiles.

She's a smorgasbord in the air.

I'm hungry, says the kraut.

Pass me one of those Sunshines. They looked confused. Goddamn commoners. The cigarettes! I yell. God, what would these men be without me and my famous manners?

Old Ben is praying. He wants the hag to be dead. He'd dream it if he knew how. For Old Ben, the hag's death means God is God and God is famous and no one else and he picks his miracles as he pleases and the world resides in complete order. Old Ben can't be responsible for seeing a flying piano murder a woman. Even less the idea she has become dust or music. Think about that: Old Ben living out his days, driving to work everyday to sell tickets at the rodeo booth, listening to Hank Williams, image of the hag crushed by the flying piano on repeat in the thin fabric of his mind. Fats.

Old Ben led a comfortable life of obscurity to this point. Closest thing he's been to famous was a vacation to New York City twenty-seven years ago taken by his more delicate half. Told her not to go. Warned her. There's an air that looms New York City. Seven months pregnant. Knocked flat on her ass in the subway by Sydney Poitier. Bought her a pastrami on rye and a ginger ale. Signed her pregnant belly with a felt pen. Hasn't washed herself yet. Sits at home and watches all his movies, stares at her skin and what is left of that smeared ink. And the baby? Well, they never talk about it.

We survey the ditch for limbs.

Jesus Christ, he weeps, she's all around us!

The spectacle is wearing him down.

This here is hallowed ground, says Strawberry.

Why?

Copulation. I fornicated with the hag long ago.

Sometimes words make terrible sense. Spectacle. Evolution. Copulation. I wonder where we're heading. Sometimes, with a man like Old Ben or a fellow like Strawberry, it's better not to have a piano at all, or even the onus of fame, but a *pistola*, with two bullets: one for him and one for the first man that asks, *Why'd you kill that poor sonfabitch?*

So we idle. We smoke our Sunshines. Fame is a whole lot of sitting around waiting for the world to crumble in your hands and make sense of the pieces. We eat, we smoke, we pass bullets and kidney stones; we drink whisky, we screw, we dig our own graves without remorse or knowing why, only that we must, lying comfortably in that pine box waiting to make sense of it all. From a line of famous men I descend: Hopscotch McKinney who invented the Eskimo kiss; Sugar Mae and Vernal, men who have whittled and women who have held long duels with rainbows; Aunt Glenda, Rufus McGovern, B.B. Mack who conversed comic books with the deaf children. Fame is my blood.

We rest our laurels at the Honey Lime Diner to brood fame. Old Ben fiddles with scraps of paper. Letters to Jesus. I'd shoot Old Ben myself for a look at those letters, only no one trusts me with a *pistola*. I am not a man for religion. Once I approached a preacher about my famous ways. What a suck of cock. I wonder how men decide their path. Do they wake up and get a smell of themselves and decide, yep, I'm a suck of cock? My God.

I would have liked to have taken that poor hag out on a date, the kraut starts up.

Well she's no good now, says Strawberry.

Our ashes can be put in a jar and grow together.

That's noble of you, but pretty fucking dumb.

Tell me about her hair, her family name, how did she treat birds, did she sing in church, did she have garden knees, did her secret wrinkles smell like sunshine and brandy... We could have had a home in the Balkans...

I stare at Maxine to ease my sufferings. She's the snot-nosed waitress with hips a man should die for. Fats! She throws them into that billy goat strut of hers, *va-room! va-room!* like a beat-up vacuum cleaner and all we want to be is filthy carpet, or hell, we'd even settle for the dust bag at this point. Maxine smells like country-fried steak and exhaustion. She smells like all the things I could never have.

Being famous makes the food taste queer. Every morsel that graces my lips is saturated with fame. I eat famous eggs, famous flapjacks with maple syrup, coffee and twists of bacon with grease rimming the edges of my lips – all brimming with more fame than I could ever imagine. These people in this diner don't understand. Perhaps it's better not everyone is famous. They'll never know their toast is bland and ordinary.

Old Ben waits for the piano to mend. He cherishes his anonymity. He spent his days in the war loading bombs and dropping them all over the Japs and never once did he pen his name on the outside of those bombs like the other fellows who wrote their hometowns so all the little Jap kids covered in toxic grime and bleeding from shrapnel could see that the God who dropped the bombs from the sky went by the name of so-and-so and he lived in Kansas or Little Rock, population *fuck off*. Sometimes Old Ben wrote poetry on the bombs so when they tried holding their guts in place at least they could see the beautiful words. He left the poetry anonymous. That takes gonads.

I step outside for a Sunshine. The cars seem to slow down to get a good look at the famous man standing outside the diner, the famous man smoking his famous Sunshine cigarette. They know, they know – they can smell it. The payphone rings. Someone undoubtedly calling for the famous man. Maxine sees I'm busy. A message is taken. She doesn't bother to look at me. We're all uncertain of our lives. Semi trucks sound their whistles and I tip my cap in salute; the lizards bow with respect as they cross my path; even a baby giggles in the arms of a mother while her man fills up at the gas station. Someday, she'll lean back in a cushioned chair and say, "Remember that blistering day when you saw your very first famous man..." and that is about as close as they'll ever get to fame; it is such a fleeting disaster.

Inside the diner there is Maxine and those hips and there is silence. I smoke a few more Sunshines and watch a whole lot of *nada* turn into a little bit of *nada* pouring over a landscape of *nada*.

Old Ben collects bandanas from the motorcycle crew, socks from kids, belts, neckties, sweaty t-shirts that say *I Love Lady Bird Johnson*. He even gets a bra from a vixen and stares at it like, *What in god is this for?* The crowd turns anxious. They've seen Old Ben do crazy. But now maybe they can feel it, like I do: they can feel Old Ben on the verge of famous. We watch Old Ben don the clothes. Bra strapped across his head like earmuffs. It's been a while since he's had titties that close to his mouth. Fame bless him. He waddles across the road. Three cheers for Old Ben! Was he going to play a tune? Was he going to reenact the piano flying? Pray to Fame?

Fats, no.

Old Ben crosses the road with outstretched arms. Cars swerve. Gasps. Burnt rubber. Old Ben steady. One foot after the other. Prayers ready.

He's like a Jesus, someone says.

He doesn't have arms stretched like Jesus.

Not *the* Jesus.

He's a damn fool.

I want his shoes.

Get some water to throw on the road. We better be sure he can walk over it this time.

Funny, he doesn't smoke like a Jesus.

Or bang women the way the Lord does.

Old Ben has sex?

Christ...

Maybe this really is God's country.

Naw, too much corn. God can't stand the crows.

No one hears the rig. It cuts across our visionary path and there is no longer noise: just a whole mix of *nada* circulating. No one asks where Old Ben is. We all see the sky. It is full of clothes. They dance through air. Socks make love to shoe strings, t-shirts wrap erotically around scarves and neckties. Cars slow, people line the ditch, stick their heads out windows. Kites bow in reverence. All sorts of clothes flying in the strange air.

Someone has to fill those sleeves, put legs in those pants, tits in that bra. Fats, she would have to be young to have the courage to put tits in a bra that has felt the pleasures of this wind. That's the biscuits. Flesh is a fate more cruel than *pistolas* and *nada*. Who can say but that the days are slow and eventually they put us in the dirt.

We stand very still. The crowds filter inside, back to their nobody eggs and somebody coffees, the tasteless virtue of their unknown lives. The road of nobodys and

somewheres has gone cold. Hallowed ground? I don't think so. We are left empty. There is the scarecrow in the wedding gown. Poor girl. Just keep smoking; just keep smoking this Sunshine, I whisper. Things blur. Fame turns fuzzy. It spreads out like I have never seen before: a whole stretch of *nada* turned yellow, turned silent, disappearing in my hands.

YONDER RISE AN OCEAN

A posse of fat men in Elvis jumpsuits teaches him how to smoke outside the Motel Xanadu. He is seven. They demonstrate the finger-flick and wrist-snap ash removal maneuvers. They make him believe in Gods that breakfasted and other desert things: mountain peaks rising to kiss the moon, rocks that sing love ballads, sand streams that tell the future. That Elvis grin is something for the tabloids. He remembers how he loved those men. If he found them in his desert today he would shoot out all their teeth. The speedometer read 92 MPH. He felt old. The desert was idle. Must be near hundred-ten. He narrowed his eyes and watched an '82 Ford Galaxie 500 cruise by at 97 MPH. The Elvis men always told him focus let a man to survive. Remembering bode him well. He was an honorable officer for the Highway Patrol. Immigration specialist. It was him that watched the invisible cities burn from a distance. It was him that smoked cigarettes without filters and breathed like men of the West. He hunted Mexicans. This was what he did. Nothing but dry plains and dust for miles. He wished it were night so he could see the rainbow neon lights of dying cities, smell the love of cheap

women. He hacked phlegm. Rolled down the window and coughed himself onto his highway. His eyes were momentarily blinded by the sun gleaming off the '82 Galaxie windows. The reflection of light troubled him. Sometimes he stood naked and flexed his muscles in mirrors. Only when she asked in Spanish. *Por favor, Mac, por favor.* Always, she plays with his tongue saying he can never make the proper *rr* sound. She tries probing it with pins to make it curl and even wipes his tears with a fist. Naked, she says things like, I need to lose fat. In bed he twists her curves and watches her stroke the bruises along her neck made by his knuckles. He feels the rubber skin on her back where he put a cigarette. In bed he says, I like your fatter parts, don't tell me too fat, don't sell me that bullshit, he whispers. In bed she stares deep into him with those *señorita* eyes. She pulls his eyelids back, digs nails in his groin. He says: fat fat fat. She pulls and bites his tongue with incisors, then molars, and says, Yes, yes, yes, yes. His *señorita* with pale *señorita* eyes, a wide flat mouth for kissing, for eating Navajo fry bread at 5 A.M when she prepares coffee with bourbon because he says so. She kneads the dough, showing off her sad and unexplainable teeth. You need steady hands, she says. The oil spurts when the dough is added, burns her thighs. Just as he hopes. *Qué carroña*, she says, rubbing away the oil with a fist. Shit. Fuck. She falls to her knees. He moves to her with soft hands. She resists, clearly wanting to be his strong desert woman. He licks the wound. She goes quiet with forget. Later, *Señorita* slices open an orange chili pepper. They eat the seeds. Lick to make you forget, he says. He doesn't forget. On the highway he was just another Joe. His town had seven hundred large – he was the only law he was aware of. They called him Sheriff, others used Boss. MacDougal, they said. Call me Mac, he smiled. That meant Big Boss Man. He was a desert man, not a liar. The others lied, the ones that crept through rivers and inside sewers, slipping past numb nuts on patrol. Shit would get done if they had never discharged him, he said in the bars when nobody listened, when only

his face in the mirror spoke with his face he could feel. He drank free booze because they feared when he walked into a room, fear like stink on a monkey. He hadn't boozed in days. When he stopped, it was only to put gas in the vehicle and then resume driving. He had circled the desert four days. Nothing moved; everything was where it should be, untouched, even the lizards asleep in the cacti shadow. When the sun was out, the desert flattened. It was when the stars emerged that things expanded. Like all desert men, he loved the stars. Why else try and shoot them out of the sky? He brings *Señorita* once. She hates guns. He says, Goddamn it, now shoot. Any star, shoot any of them. The one you blow out of the sky is yours. She cries. He holds her hands. They wait for the sun to take away the stars. Silently, he despises her. Now the sun bled down, enough to make him squint. Somewhere out there in that sand and brush some kid was building a bomb, Mac thought. Government was always doing something with the land. If it wasn't taking down Indians, it was building bombs. Some smart ass kid from back East was out there right now putting it all together. Could have been him. He could have done things different. Law school, politics, art history, even. Might have ended up building a bomb out there somewhere, doing math, calculating distances, adding casualties together with a smile. Instead, applications denied. He ended up here: land of his roots, his inheritance, sowing his seeds, planting his oats, flicking cigarettes and trying to start fires. He only started one that he could remember. It is with a Medicine Man off his route. They get drunk and light a fire in a ditch. Smoke for miles for people to wonder. Big son of a bitch with orange flames. That damn Indian strips him naked and paints him with all sorts of magic. But even suddenly holy he can't fix the leaking roof at her place. He lies awake and counts the drips. Three thousand, seven hundred and forty-two. She snores. He stands under the leak with an open mouth. His body swells like a moat. Later he moves to the window for a cigarette. A woman across the rail sits on the porch nursing a

baby. In the street a dog limps across the road before it is ground into the grill of a passing truck. There is a sound, the way a Thanksgiving turkey noises when it has been crushed by a mallet. He does not love dogs, but other men do. Someone must love them. Two punk kids gawk. They stand around the fleshy mutt pieces. They count the steps from one smear of blood to the next, from one patch of innards to the next. Fourteen. Holy shit! That's a dead mutt. Then they count again. In the morning, he knows there will be birds. He loves the way they spiral, eyeing the dead. He stands in the shadows, watching the punks. He is the *coyote azul*, the large white fucker who dreams in Spanish. There must be something more than this, all this seduction, this violence, this madness, this redemption, there must be more, there must be nothing. The road ahead of him thinned to an invisible grey point. Is that where the desert ends? he thought. The Galaxie rolled forward. 92 MPH now. To nobody he said aloud, I feel like a cactus: split open across the gut, slowly evaporated. A voice crackled over the radio. Plateaus smothered the distance. They grew legs, stretched, walked about. He knew you had to be fast in the desert. If you glimpsed at the right time, from the corner of your eye, that was the best way to see unsuspecting things. The mountain rock was red then yellow then orange, finally brown. It changed with every cloud. It reminded him of a man he knew – Wes Lansing. Wes believes in everything. An anti-nihilist. He is the one who tells Mac about the bombs. Wes is about six-seven and three-twenty last time he sees him, draped in cotton sweaters full of holes. Looks like a pale ogre. Tells Mac he was driving one night along the highway and his car breaks down. Starts walking. Nobody peruses this highway. This highway, it's death. Only a man like Wes has a mind to walk. Wanders across the fences and up the plateaus. Follows an orange light, craziest orange light he'd ever seen. Says over the plateau are rows of power generators and heavy machinery rising out of the earth, metallic shimmering teeth, draping steel jaws. Military stuff. He doesn't bother to look

around, scared as hell as he is, but he thinks they were building a bomb. Then Mac hardly sees Wes again. The government doesn't catch him. Wes is too smart for that. Moves to Idaho, they say. Could have been him building that bomb, Big Boss Man. The both of them, he and Wes, working together, wearing glasses, fetching coffee and waiting to evaporate the invisible cities. The desert seemed so terribly flat without a city in the background. Nothing but dust and tumbleweeds, dead lizards and a dried sun. Something was out there. Across the plateaus. Somewhere. Coyote must be out there too. Coyote is *very* tricky, according to his little girl. Coyote buys kegs of dynamite every goddamn morning. Where does he get the resources? And there he goes, hoisting it across the desert. It's in a black barrel and marked with skulls and crossbones. TNT. His eyebrows slant together, the tricky devil. His little girl shudders. She knows Coyote's business. Coyote positions the keg in a giant rubber band sling. He waits at the entrance of a tunnel: sly, suspecting Coyote. They both hear running Roadrunner. *Beep. Beep.* Mac feels bad for Coyote. Where do they make those rubber bands? his little girl says. She has braids, dark eyes. In Russia, he tells her. It's what happens to socialists. They make thousands of rubber bands. After eleven years their fingers fall off. That's why there are no old men in Russia. He drinks coffee and booze. She offers to scratch his daddy back. She has nails like a mama. She shakes her head at the cartoons, naughty Coyote, chews nervously on chocolate munchies cereal. It's disappointing when she tells him she doesn't need him to pour the milk. I hope he falls, his little girl says. She says, I like to see him disappear. He tells her not to say that, tells her it's rude. Then she blinks, so curious, asking if Coyote would *really* eat Roadrunner? She points to the knife and fork, the napkin around his neck. She closes her eyes at his lapping tongue. Mac puts a hand on her back and assures her no, never, not ever, not never, glowworm. The usual game after watching Coyote is cleaning his guns. He uses her tiny hands to scrub the barrel, the difficult places to reach

inside, her little fingers moving in and out. He shows her bullets, teaches her where to aim, how to make men full of holes. She calls him a funny Daddy. She helps him memorize sections of a map, crossroads, highway numbers. She tests him with Spanish words, kisses his cheek. Her mommy is asleep in the bedroom. His little girl says she can fly like roadrunner. No, not when mommy is sleeping. Yes! Yes! Who cares that mommy is sleeping? Mac says okay, he wants to see. She stands on the couch and balances to the edge. Her eyes spin wide and glossy. Then she jumps, floating, falling, one try after another, landing hard, vibrating the walls. Another, another! You almost had it. You were just about to fly! She beams, arms stretched, worn thin with flapping. He takes her in his arms, presses her tight, forgetting that she pisses herself at night, forgetting that she wakes up and screams from nightmare to the point that he wants to muzzle her. She tries to fly away, laughs, but he cages her in his hands. Soon, she becomes an expert at flying when he is away, always away, even flies past mommy who doesn't utter his name any longer, won't look him in the eye and before tuna sandwiches mommy gets hit and she hits him back with a skillet, breaking his jaw and even whenever he circled the desert in the afternoon, he felt the thunk in his jaw, especially when he laughed or chewed. He stopped at the diner for lunch. All he drank was shit coffee. He poured in bourbon and hoped it pinched in the glands. The served beef was tough. Lunches were reasonable. No talking required. Over dinner his sister calls him a hard-ass. He visits at least twice a month. She's the baby. Her husband is a dipshit. But Mac enjoys the kids; they discipline well. The oldest is seven with long blonde hair. She has his mother's cruel eyes, sunburned red skin like him. She believes whatever he says so he tells her stories about the highway. Questionable details. Heroic shit. Sister tells him he ruin lives. He gnashes the undercooked carrots and wades through oily peppers. It's just a job. It's about the law. He's only secondary. She says the law is blind. She looks at Dipshit for

support who remains mute and feeds the baby. Kudos, Dipshit, kudos. Mac doesn't want to talk. He comes to complain about the dinner, to get off the highway for a change. He comes for fried garlic potatoes and cold beer that don't give sob stories about why they're about to be digested. But doesn't he have heart? Who can say anybody has a heart? He can't answer her. Emotions complicate things. She could never understand. She never sees things at an angle. She only sees head on, sees face down. So she says, she says, she says. Emotion gets people killed. Sometimes people just can't listen no matter what. Mac knows he has heart. He says this to the mirror each morning. I say, you say, she says, he says, they say. Who the fuck are any of them to simply *say*? Sister comes to see the new apartment. You can't open the door to the refrigerator and the oven at the same time. At night the faucet drips and the walls creak. Sister says to get a *senorita* to clean. So, *Señorita* comes by once a week and gives the place a shake. Some days they fuck while the birds perch on the windowsill. When it's over, she teaches him Spanish. They fuck again when there's moonlight. He holds her, thinking of the one that isn't coming back. He knows that if you wait long enough guilt will always pass. He smokes with his shirt off in bed. She leaves. He waits in bed smoking more cigarettes. The warm ashes on his chest keep him awake for hours. He learns to ignore. Maybe she'll never make it through the door again. Maybe somebody will find them, maybe someone won't find them. Who then will tell him in the bathtub that he smells like a freeway? Who will she have to braid her hair and massage her pudge? What use is the tile if there aren't their naked bodies shivering? When they finish, Mac watches the puddles ripple. Wes once says how he drifts off the highway and finds water. No bones, no machinery, no orange light, not even sand and tumbleweed – just a blue blue ocean in the making. He tells Mac he is sure they are importing an ocean. Imagine it. One bucket at a time. The government men wear silver suits and are careful not to spill a drop. What leads him to the

ocean? Follows the smell, follows yonder. Into the idle. Where nothing listens, where nothing moves, where now two Mexicans smoked cigarettes on the hood of a van. When they eyed Mac, they scurried inside the van. Ho, ho, ho, motherfuckers. Mac circled back around. When he strolled towards them they made whispers and he kept strolling, Ernest Borgnine-like, none of that John Wayne-pussy-footing. What an ugly sun, spreading down his face. He felt its ugliness trickle inside. One of the Mexicans was wearing a cowboy hat. License and registration, the usual, he said. Mexican numero one looked smug with his black hair and yellow teeth. Inside the van it smelled of urine and vomit. The cowboy muttered in Spanish and reaching into the glove box, handed over the papers. Identification, Mac said. Mexican numero one, this Yellow Teeth, looked at him like he was a damn idiot salesman auctioning rice in China. It was only for a moment, but Mac felt stupid. The kind of looks Wes got. Poor Wes. He was a good friend. The Mexicans said, No identification. Whose van is this? The stupid grins endured. *De quién pertenece el camión?* Now Yellow Teeth was surprised. Son of a bitch had never heard a white man speak Spanish. The racist fucker. It was ignorance like that which got men killed on a highway. Yellow Teeth and Cowboy opened the rear doors. The Mexicali bunch was crammed inside like sardines. They must be related to Cowboy because they were all wearing matching hats. Such an odor of stale piss. Total *carroña*. A coldness pinched Mac in the gut. The youngest of the lot with long hair and eyes brown as beans stared at him. Someone called her Alondra. They shuffled single file into the ditch, most of them a fit of mumbles: *Güero, güero, no hombre*, a man said, *Qué pues, güero, qué pues, cuidado, no hombre, no hombre*, a woman said, shielding her face from the wind, and then another, *Mira, mira, güero, güero. Qué carroña es ésta, guey?* The little girl pointed at Mac and wiggled herself giddy, *El güero coco, el güero coco*. But she had been told too many stories of *el coco*, the boogeyman. Mac crouched, tussled rings of her hair. Rubbed her cheek tenderly

with a finger. She giggled, this little girl, dark as honey. The women were quick to hide her in their clothes, call out *güero, güero, cuidado, cuidado*. It made him want to let the whole lot go, even Cowboy and Yellow Teeth. He was *el coco*. Or the *El coyote azul*, the one who stole dreams. The sardines resumed their positions inside the van, except Alondra who drank muddy ditch water greedily. She tried washing the dirt from her face and bare toes when Yellow Teeth smacked her on the head and kicked her hard in the gut. She choked on her tears. There were screams. Mac lifted her into his chest. Grandmother Mexico was crying *güero güero*. Mac turned and started to run off the highway into the desert, Alondra tucked under his arm like a chili pepper. He didn't see what followed, didn't see as they fell on him as birds of prey in spiral zags and devoured without words, without sounds.

TRUCKEE RIVER BANDIT

Bare knuckle brawl on the Truckee River. He smells of fish and pillage. A goddamn Viking. We bite, we scratch, we slap like two faggots. He kicks in my fine harp of ribs – it feels like singing in a choir. Under different circumstances I might have slashed his tires and pissed in his gas tank. Instead I get thrust into the Truckee and pulled out bleeding. His fists pummel me. I can see the tenderness on his warts. Warts are the soul of a man. He spits at Winston, my pet boa. There are insults exchanged. Clearly, it is his privilege. Every man is entitled to a few.

Life is a goddamn parade until Vikings kidnap your daughter.

My wife knew Vikings. She knew just about all there was to know on burning oil and roasted lamb skewers and when a simple pillage escalated into a razing; she knew the hymns to Freyja, how too much plunder creates a bellyache. She listened to public radio broadcasts and wept over missing children reports. The world is an inevitable massacre. Here's the thing

about Vikings: they will steal your children. They will seduce your wife. Never cross paths with a Viking mother. Run. If they fall in love with your wife...applesauce...you're finished.

When the deed is done, he sweats and I smirk with more bravado than William Holden. Sonfabitch is grinning. Thick Noorish beard. Never trust a man with a beard. Suddenly he doesn't seem such a Viking. When is a Viking a Viking? That's the applesauce. Perhaps he was a Viking-in-training. I don't know their recruiting techniques, much less the breeding rituals.

I crawl through sand. His woman gasps, "My God...My God..." She is shielding her offspring from my reach. *My* offspring. She is like any mother, I suppose. With one eye open and blood in my mouth she looks like a memory of my wife, only flimsy and dreamlike.

Silence permeates the sky, now a purple bruise. Everything is dark and empty and the Truckee spills water onto a desperate sand. My head feels full of maple syrup.

They've left me to my solitude.

I wash off the blood, find a cigarette, analyze the markings in the sand. I take inventory: Winston is unscathed, a few firecrackers still dry, a *Redman Championship* baseball bat. My canoe, the *Sally Anne*, is splintered on the sandbar. A trailblazing geriatric sold her to me outside a grocery mart in Tahoe City. Thirty bucks. I inquired of him an oral history of the canoe: conquests, battles, previous owners of the famous ilk, how many times it had been home to young lovers offering virginity to the Truckee gods. His drunk eyes met my drunk eyes. I was tired of the old tales, the ways of the world, the apes and chimps and the Big Bang and all the rotten things in newspapers, the truth of porno flicks. I wanted a world without physics. I wanted to see Tahoe meadows and the Truckee fizz into a brilliant weirdness. I confessed to this trailblazer I had lost the ability to be amazed.

He hurled his breakfast into my *Sally Anne*.

“We’re past the age of miracles,” he said.

I study my reflection in the ripples. These bruises always fade. Irish likes to say it is the same as getting bit by a dog and just when you stomach the nerve to bite back you realize there never was a dog but your own teeth. Irish has never been bruised in his life. Irish is a certified fucking loon.

“Goddamn, Winston. Did you see which way he was heading? Goddamn.”

Things have slipped. I never feel myself these days.

I’ve heard of curses. The Inverted Pelvis, Curse of the Bamboo Teeth, Mexican Blood Wedding; crimey, even Salomone’s Curse which no man has uttered since Gerald Ford took office. Something about a river and how water ripples to ripples reminds us all things erode.

Cursed? Hell. I am privileged.

These men don’t know what it is like to miss the other side of the bed. They’ve never seen Baby Girl’s face in the ripples or etched on a sandbank. Goddamn, I’ve wrestled with men in suits, hell, they scare the bejesus out of me and all a man of my rub is trying to do is keep it inside. The women, too. I’ve slapped women and left them my business card which emphatically states: *Frisbee Needleman – Moralist*. Yet I do not find myself above temptation. I spent a week in Malta, Idaho cooped up in The Clinton Burris Motel during a thunderstorm. The sheriff was a small dude named Gus Bellings who carried a shotgun bigger than him. He came by on the hour to make sure we all kept sane. Strange rains in Idaho. I brought a girl to that bed and felt how thin she was and stared into dimmer eyes than my own. We held ourselves through rain and wind and drank unspeakable amounts of Benny’s from the can. Honorable Gus wanted to arrest me for pervading the innocence of the state and all I could think was, Christ, look at how goddamn *thin* the girl is! Look you

sonfabitch! Even after she was screaming, I had to hold her still to make sure she didn't crumble to dusts.

Frida Wynerhousen, known to the locals as Madame Butterscotch, finds me stretched on this holy ground. She means well. Sad ole river wart and proprietor of the *Big Nevada BBQ Hut*.

"You look like a man aching for a blowjob," she says. She has big salt and pepper tufts shooting out under her beret. In gilded lettering across the front it reads *Born to Rape*. Her face is like an uprooted tree. Black licorice skin. I say nothing of the Vikings or my Baby Girl.

"I like the taste of my blood at sundown," I whisper.

She laughs and makes like she understands. For my sake, she will not call me a martyr until night comes. We walk the half mile upstream and sit inside the Big Nevada. Not a soul in the joint, dust everywhere, whole damn place filled with chickens. There's an axe in the corner stained with blood. "Haven't the pity to kill them," she says.

We make the chat, listen to Elmore James. Place smells of chicken shit and she says she is waiting and I say for what and then she starts looking helpless then suddenly rambling on about how she almost made love to this Elmore dude a hundred years ago in a St. Louis nightclub. "I was ready to surrender my panties, you know, but some things just aren't meant to be..." We light a few skinnys. We drink beer. Her eyes get tired of watching me. Mine are heavy from the sight of her. A stiff breeze would have blown her into a dark talcum powder.

"My husband was ugly," she confesses. "Ugly as cardboard. But he could make flapjacks."

"A curse lasts fourteen years, they say..."

"We made love with the lights on."

There was something about the way she says *made love* that gives lumps all through my throat.

“I can spell Hoodoo for you, cowboy, but I’m just a bad woman feeling good.”

“...my wife listened to Gladys Knight...”

“...goddamn Knights of Columbus...”

“... my wife farted in the shower when she bent to shave her legs...I used to wait outside the door and listen for those sounds every morning just to know it was her, just to be able to say I knew something about her the world couldn’t know...”

“...we’re good people you and me, the type that never get to living...you know me like the underside of an armpit, cowboy...”

“My wife had retard eyes.” This is not a lie. I don’t know why I blurt it out to an old woman like Madame B except that it feels genuine. Maybe I am looking for respect. They *were* retarded, the kind of eyes I could only compare to Corwin the Retard whom we watched drown in the pond behind the railroad tracks when I was a boy. We filled his pockets with stones to see how long he could walk before we knew he wasn’t like Jesus.

“When will I know I’m drowning?” he had asked.

“When your legs grow heavy with water,” we told him. The last things we saw were his lips blowing bubbles. That was the first time I was amazed by sight of water.

How do you promise your life to a woman with eyes like Corwin the Retard? There are braver things than this. You believe the moon is the moon and wedding dresses aren’t meant to stay on and never open your eyes during a screw. Fortune is never so kind.

Madame B puts on beads and an old flapper dress, dances around a barstool then tries to straddle it and almost falls. Her hands go on me. She bites my neck. I bite back.

“Oooo...he’s a cougar. Say it; say *‘I’m a cougar.’*”

“I’m a cougar.”

She leads me over to the cot and sitting me down starts to twist her shoulders. Her body makes noises like an old rickshaw. She bends over and I can see her old butt cheek. Damn, it is old. My head is ringing. I can’t find the words.

“Try these on, baby,” handing me dusty jewelry. “These belonged to my Clovis. He’s coming back for me...somedays, someday...” She rummages through a mess of boxes and other shit. She wants me to smell like her Clovis. “That’s it, that’s it,” she whispers. I sit there in awe, my bruises so heavy. “I used to bewitch men with my hips. See these hips? Look at them.” It takes her a minute but she finally swings her legs up and over the cot and sits in my lap, straddling, still writhing with the music, lips curled with drunkenness.

“What am I doing here? Jesus...” I say.

Her finger hushes me. She kisses my neck. She kisses my bruises and her wrinkles are silly and warm. She sways there in my lap, old bones trying to find their way. “That’s right; say my name, say Madame...”

“Madame.”

“Oooo...that’s my name.”

She pulls down the top of her dress and her tits hang dried as raisins.

“I appreciate your concern.” I don’t have it in my heart to touch them.

Her legs clench tight around me, suddenly unwilling to let me free almost as though she has been here in this moment before and her head is thrown into my chest, rocking us back and forth, back and forth, her nails into my skin and through my hair, pieces of me that I hope she’ll save for later and admire in the dark and Elmore on that guitar, tearing it to pieces, chicken squawk filling the room. She passes out but I hold her anyway, try to move her hips so she can feel...shit, I don’t know what she wants to feel. Human, maybe. I keep

that lap dance going for what seems weeks, holding tight to our bodies, not only because it is all we have, but we are holding onto former lives.

I used to fish glances of my wife's reflection in motel mirrors. Her scent filled the highway gas stations, her voice somehow with me when I fell asleep on park benches. *Lost*, they said. Hell, Vikings don't lose their bearings. *Wandered off*, perhaps. When I found my way back to the Truckee, there were faces of all sorts in the waters.

Irish lost his wife to Baptists in Tulsa. What a fuckling. He lives on the edge of town with a dog named Boots. The dog has amputated legs and gets its exercise strapped onto a wooden plank with plastic wheels. The mutt leads *him*. I've seen it. In his apartment there is Benny's in every corner and a wedding dress on the floor. He stares at it until sunset, then wanders the Truckee all night like a coward. Maybe he's waiting for it to fill out with another woman. Maybe he's found a hair follicle and is waiting for evolution. Sometimes he drapes it over the windowsill in case she has the urge to jump again he says. Fuck all. What else can he do? There's no sense asking a man like Irish what the hell. He'll shrug his shoulders and say *focus*.

Irish is a goddamn loon.

My wife used to keep a vial of gunpowder under her pillow. There was no fuse. We were both afraid of matches. We didn't point fingers when the roof exploded. Two days later she had me thrown out. "Frisbee, we've ballooned into a maelstrom of difficulty," she whispered over the phone. Nine years of marriage and now the roof was blown to shit and all I had to show for our holy union was a copy of the Styx album *Man of Miracles* and a scorching case of hemorrhoids the doctor attributed to stress.

Maelstrom? No shit.

Had to be Vikings. We had reconciled. The world moved forward. But who can expect an empty bed with windows open goddamn *open* and police say it's an international affair with Vikings and to retrace our steps maybe we just aren't viewing things fucking *adequately* and we have to read *between* things in motion and they don't understand the evening news wants to make your name a famous mockery if only there never was that *single* look awry that day at the park when every face was a Viking face we could all say was chance.

Focus.

It's like that dream I have: me the sperm swimming up the birth canal and fighting off the others with a slingshot tail, asphyxiating some of the lessers, a microscopic act of genocide as I maim and slaughter my way through the mob whose little mouths wriggled: *isn't this some shit? isn't this warm? but applesauce: this is a lonely fucking ovary...*breach the egg, atom-bomb those chromosomes, nothing left to do but curl and suffocate.

"It is a stolen season," Irish has told me.

What a fuckling.

No one expects Vikings. There's no protocol. It happened fast, and what can you do? Wake up in the middle of the night, the other side of the bed is cold, a bulb is out, the smell of Thor's hammer is everywhere and it had to be a Viking raid. There was a child's music box and no little fingers to turn the key...maps of Norway and Colorado...strange fabrics in the closet...a torn letter...ale froth on the rugs...odd blonde hairs scattered on the bathroom tile. She was a brunette, wasn't she? Her cigarettes were all over. I couldn't bring myself to pick them up.

Back on the Truckee, it all seems like a dream. I make through the water like a grammar school renegade. The evening is waiting. This is the Truckee, that moment where my heart swallows heavy in my throat, bruised, a star twisting eye, a rush of honor and bravery meets

love, meets piss, meets heartache, meets hope. The world my old man dreamed of: standing in awe of desert weirdness watching it go from dusk to midnight to orange to clueless and back to weird.

Baby Girl doesn't seem like Baby Girl from a distance. Her hair is different. Goddamn Vikings always trying to make their captives blend in. But she is there on the riverbank. I had followed the markings in the mud and dusts, the omens in the sky and found my way to this moment. No one had seen me come through the thicket. Winston dangles from my neck. I crouch there until things grow dark and fill with a terrible silence.

She smells different when I put my arms around her. She looks at me, somewhat terrified, but when our eyes meet things make sense even though her eyes aren't the Baby Girl eyes I remember. When I ask if she knows who I am, she looks confused.

"Is that your snake?" she says.

I pull Winston off my neck. "Yours now."

She giggles. Winston flecks his tongue at her hand with those kaleidoscope eyes.

Baby Girl gets nervous. "I need to pee," she says.

It breaks my heart: no one to hold her hand while she pees. "Where's mom?" Baby Girl points to the trees. "The savages..." I lift her in my arms and we make for the bushes. She shows me two teeth she has lost.

"That's a *big* snake," Baby Girl says. She isn't afraid.

"Swallow you whole," I laugh.

"Not me," she says, eyes big as dumplings. "What's his name?"

"Winston. He's your inheritance."

"What's *inheritance*?"

"Never without dignity."

“Can I hold him?”

“Let’s pee first.”

I turn my back and unzip. I stare at the moon slowly appearing in the disturbed sky. Baby Girl looks lost. “It’s okay,” I nod, “try like me. Go ahead. Your mom doesn’t know what living is.” What the hell, I think. My father taught me how to piss standing up and damned if I couldn’t teach my own daughter if she wanted to.

She pisses all over her legs. I pull off my torn shirt and wipe her clean. Then I help wash her off in the Truckee.

I pull a lock of hair out her face and position it carefully on her shoulder just like it had been in the picture frame before I smashed the glass. I bend down and kiss her shoulder. Kiss her neck just to remind myself I am alive. Baby Girl looks sullen and swallows hard. She trembles in my hands.

I rummage for loot and information in the bags. There are no maps of Scandinavia, no Viking food, no prayer books to gods. Towels, some booze is all. Books my wife would never read. It is strange.

“Where does mom keep her cigarettes?”

“She doesn’t smoke.”

“She’s always smoked.”

“Dad smokes.”

“The Viking?”

“He smokes when he’s at school.”

“Probably a goddamn tenured professor of assholes.”

“Daddy says not to take the name of God in vain.”

“Don’t call him daddy.”

“He’s *my* daddy...” she whispers.

Just then, the two of them slip out of the shadows and brush. The Viking must have caught my scent. For a moment they stand there topless – dumb as drywall. I am on my third cigarette. Baby Girl has sand all over her face. This is it. The night is suddenly warm. My old wife has on red cowboy boots. What the fuck have they done to her? She moves her hands to cover her breasts that are now heavier than I remember, her tresses of hair a different shade, about to scream, probably from joy, from seeing I am here to rescue her, to kill this goddamn Viking who has ruined our lives.

“Get some clothes on. This is a raid.” I reach for her.

“Oh my God...*who?*...” she gasps. Even her voice has been altered. The Vikings must have beguiled her with some noxious potion. I look at him. He moves that woman feigning my wife aside, taking off his glasses. I wonder if he used them only after sex, as if screwing my wife made him blind.

“Somebody...” her voice cracks.

The Viking catches me unaware. It takes a few punches to notice how strange he looks. Scrawny. Tattoo even. Fuck. No blonde hair. No pelt of skins. No beard. His face holds a kind of frightened wonder. It is depressing.

“We could have you arrested...what have you done?...my God...” she is saying.

Baby Girl cries with her mother. Please take her away, I think. Don’t let her see. Hit me again. Please. I live for it. This is all I have. You sonfabitch. Drown me. Please. I will ruin your life...I will ruin your life...

The coward hits me. Goddamn novice. They had sent the scrum to deal with me. More punches. Things pop. Things split. I reach for the *Redman*. It comes down across my back. Baby Girl hysterical. Winston slithers about and the woman screams *Kill it! Kill it!*

Redman goes up and down. Winston is silent, brave. It feels like popcorn kernels ricocheting in my guts. The rest feels floating. I spit blood. I am so disappointed at the shoddy physical stature of this Viking, a pissant amateur probably on his first razing ever, that I do not think to move.

Even when everything has settled their bodies quiver with fear. The Viking looks about to cry. It is all my doing, all my undoing.

“Pervert!” the wannabe Viking yells.

Eyes pull open to relieve the night. I’ve pissed myself. The Viking hasn’t stuck around to watch me bleed. Winston’s corpse is quiet, the leathery skin split. I try putting him back together. I look for reeds to bind the loose flesh. “We need alchemy, Winston, a wizard to mend you...” I push the two severed ends together and out spills orange. I open his jaws and gently place the forked tongue inside his tiny mouth. Give him two quick breaths. “Breathe goddamn you! Breathe!” He is all hush. “Do you remember which way they headed? Do you remember, brave Winston?”

Strewn cigarettes litter the sandbar. They taste like my old wife. It *was* her. It *was*. Pull my shirt from the sand. It smells of Baby Girl’s piss. Hold it to my nose. The smell is on my hands. I held her in these hands once.

Sirens. Lights. Voices. I am not in the mood to answer questions. I lie low with the current. Wading through the waters. It’s a kind of falling.

I toss scraps of the *Sally Anne* into the Truckee. Almost immediately she is swallowed by the water but I hold her steady, wading upstream. Winston’s lifeless form wraps around my neck. Further ahead a strange glow lights up the Truckee. We move waist-deep through the ruin of water, slipping between shadows and other ghosts.

“Nothing will stop us,” I whisper. “Nothing.”

FISHING PENNY

Penny used three fingers to wedge the last moon pie into her mouth. I had sore fingers from feeding her all night. Her eyes were sleepy with dreams. Christ, I didn't even know why or what or who or when in hell but she was getting naked, a woman half my age, and I had sore fingers to say nothing of my ribs. Clothed, she wasn't much to look at. But Saunders! yep, naked as campfire she was becoming a vision. If we hadn't been in love, or in the least trying, I would have had every right to shoot her just under the curl of her lip. Lucky girl...and I led her on believing we had no cares in the world.

But men didn't come to the Lady Bird Motel without cares. Hell, if God had owned up to his word about wiping all the tears from our eyes and eradicating suffering like he did the Germans...that poor Lady Bird. It was rank with memories from sailors and evangelists to misfit brides. The Lady Bird had that taste, cousin to misery, like warm rain on a summer night without having an ounce of strength or sheer will to put an end to it. It was the crowning jewel of our town.

Penny yelled, stripped down to skin revealing little boy Superman underwear she bought at the drug store for \$1.99 a pair. She had a whole goddamn collection of them: Batman, Wonder Woman, the Hulk, and some local magician by the name of the Zephyr who had had his face put on the front and back and it scared the dickens out of the whole goddamn town. I thanked God that when she pulled off her pants it wasn't Zephyr's face stitched on her crotch staring back at me.

"Jesus, don't you ever wear clothes?" I said.

Penny drank wine and screamed, "You don't scare me!" and snatched the last bits of moon pie, slamming the bathroom door. I heard water running. I bent on the floor and looked up at the ceiling, pulling my own clothes off as I closed my eyes.

I had come to the Lady Bird as ritual; for ceremony and sacrament. I came to be with Alabaster Dufree and Cat Mulroney and Lubbock, the only friends I knew in the world. I came like every other man to work out my own demons or be overcome by them – whichever was my pleasure at the moment, though usually it was the latter. And I wanted to be in love.

Hours later Penny emerged from the bathroom and kissed me and then stood back and we looked at each other's naked bodies with grave curiosity. "You fat goat," she said, touching me. She stood at the window dumb as bathwater.

We spent hours watching rust on the metal staircase, the dust coughed up from the earth and the air was so meaty and ripe with juices it made us want to stab at it with pitchforks. It was morning. Early sunrise at five A.M. Sunrise would turn to afternoon, afternoon to dusk, dusk to night...but for now, we watched. We watched the desert. The thorns, the dust and dust and dust. Shit, there wasn't nothing else. The black shape of abandoned chemical plants like mouths waiting to be fed; the lingering scent of radiation and

I never knew what radiation smelled like, but it must have been out there. People had just left. Got tired. Left town. Left the Lady Bird. Left us with dust and cigarettes and girls that devoured moon pies.

Penny smiled to keep from laughing and the neck of the wine bottle dangled at her hip between two fingers. She had pelicans on her mind. An insistent little roach, she had prodded at me all night between cigarettes and confessions, adamant that I divulge every secret I had about the universe, about pelicans, about presidential assassinations. She threatened to tie me to the bedposts and ravage me or lop off my Johnson or set fire to the room if I didn't give away the mystery of the pelicans. And Penny did not bluff.

"We're out of moon pies," she mumbled. It was seven A.M. I wanted to be in love and Penny needed someone to confess her dreams. We were little more than tired strangers, but we led ourselves on believing we knew our lives, knew each other. "Moon pies, moon pies," she muttered. The wine was almost gone. I wished we had whiskey. But Penny was a refined woman, full of imagination and I had a poor liver on account of old war wounds. My best years had been spent playing the piano all over Europe for soldiers: Reds, the French, the Krauts; whoever would listen. War scared the bejesus out of me.

Penny said the fruitiness of wine was good for my poor heart. And Penny knew. Like the time I had those headaches that made my jaw swivel and cold sweats like someone lodging ice down my throat which never melted – and I was afraid to breathe or sleep and Penny fed me spoonfuls of honey and I told her the honey would nest in my throat and I'd be coughing out wasps in no time and we would have to leave the west and move to Florida where we could live in peace with the wasps. Penny had laughed and called me a jackass and how she adored men that were willing jackasses and she didn't seem to miss her husband Lubbock and reassured me that such a thing had happened, but only once, and only to a

Queen in Burma and I shouldn't worry...And Penny was naked and beautiful and full of dreams in our motel and she drank wine and laughed and I whispered over and over how I didn't have a care, no, not a care in the world...

I knew this was wrong. But then asking myself, I wondered if there was a right thing. Was there *some* answer, *any* answer? Penny was some man's wife. Lubbock's wife. And yet that didn't make it right or wrong and it seemed like there should have been some definite solution, something hard like a bullet or a wound to determine the nature of such a beast as intimacy, God, even a sharp dull pain to the leg would have sufficed. Intimacy with another man's wife meant everything in the world because it wasn't the woman at stake, but the pride of the matter and such pride usually ended in pistol fights or knife brawls where someone discovered what they really had in their tar-thick heart. And I couldn't stop. Not with Penny. It wasn't even sex, never sex: just staring at our naked bodies, wondering the possibilities. I went to the window and pulled the shades and peered through them below. "Do you think they can see me?"

Penny said, "Can who see you?"

I squinted hard. "All of them..." Penny shrugged and turned on the clock radio and jumped up and down like a giddy school brat because they were playing Neil Diamond and she said every time Neil Diamond was played lovers fell madly in love and California got one inch closer to falling into the ocean it was so powerful. Penny said she had to dance. Lovers always danced and didn't I feel like dancing? and suddenly I was *her* cherry and what a goddamn screwy world it had become in a matter of eleven seconds...

Dance? Dance? What in hell...No. I grinded my teeth and bore it out trying to look mean.

We *were* being watched: Lubbock and Cat and Alabaster, all of them spying and me spying on them and me and Penny just marbles in the mix doing what we had always done, what we had learned made us survive. All things eventual at the Lady Bird, all things: no escape, not for us.

“Does this place not have a soul? Or is it just me?” I said.

Penny said, “I’ll call take-out for a soul. Someday. Maybe in a hundred years I’ll earn it...”

“There must be someone out there...”

Penny danced behind me, pale in the light, rubbed her skin on my skin making a scratchy sound like peeling caramel apples from wax paper. She pulled the blinds open.

“You’re thinning,” she said, pinched my sagging flesh.

“I’m still here.”

“They can see me all they want. I got nipples big as plums,” she laughed and for a brief pause in the universe, I felt safe with Penny. We laid parallel on the floor with our temples pressed together, hair rubbing, her feet one way and mine another. I scooted down to her navel. When I turned, her girlish bush tickled my cheeks, my lonely chin and made me wish I could grow a beard. Yet in the end, it simply reminded me that nothing grew on nothing.

Penny confessed her dreams. How she wanted to see Vegas and work in the casino pool halls dressed in a one-piece bathing suit and a red blazer racking the 9-Ball tournament games in the orange plastic triangles. She loved to watch men break at pool. “You never know which way the balls are going to spin or how or why and it just leads you on to knowing physics is a load of shit,” Penny told me – it was all magic and fortune.

“What will I do?” I said it without caring, without even giving a damn but laced with the kind of tenderness Penny would find inviting.

“You’ll smoke cigarettes and play the nickel slots with my earnings and I’ll join you at night. You’ll move to Vegas with me, right, lover? You’ll get out of this place, see the world. You leave this rot, for me, right, love?”

“Can’t, Moon Pie. Who’ll watch the motel when I’m gone?” Penny smiled and pretended to understand but I knew she hadn’t a clue. Penny had dreams and she berated me with every last one, about the dogs frolicking in a yard that would never be run under the wheels of a mini-van and the picket fences and the babies and children that smelled of poppy’s and germaniums and never of weeds and canker. Penny’s dreams were the things of madness and how do you put down a woman that dreams so big? I hadn’t the heart. When she started singing Beatles songs it took every ounce of courage and will not to muzzle her trap.

I watched Penny sleep remembering how someone had told me dreams were bits of our breath escaped from between our teeth and sucked up the nose where they traveled into our brains and became our dreams because they were the things we could never say or hadn’t the heart to believe. And that was the crowning difference between a dream and a prayer: the dream echoed and the prayer faded.

The smells of the Mexican bakery drifted through the window and I thought how the roads winding to the bakery were all Mexican – Calle Mayor running parallel to Friar Street and towards Plaza del Diamante and across Dapplegrey Park and into Calle Roblas and bending into Avenida Pescadora, T-boned into Via Carnales and how all the streets in this town wound and bent and converged into one street, like a snake eating its own tail, young kids always snooping under porches of abandoned homes looking for gold, layers of

pipes and underground libraries hidden by the world, the panties absconded by teenage lovers.

I gazed past the desert, past the old chemical plants and black wiring, past the dust. It was wide territory out there. Unchartered. This wasn't a place that time had passed over, that war had ravaged or insanity reigned. This was land and people time had forgotten and worst of all, it had been done willingly.

And me and Penny waited for our lives to change.

Penny brought a new bottle into bed. Drinking wine younger than myself made me feel like an unpolished relic.

"When I was young," she said, "we used to drink from broken bottles. We held them high above our heads and poured it like a fountain, like the ones in France."

I said, "I've been to France. You're not missing much..."

"...and whoever caught the most shards in their mouth was the winner and it was like finding a penny and you made a wish."

"Sounds ridiculous to me."

"It was ridiculous," she said.

"You probably wished for a prince. Don't lie," I said.

"I wanted to storm the Bastille and see the lights of New York City and Paris,"

Penny said, lost in her own silly eyes.

"Ain't that the rub."

"And babies," she laughed "I would name my baby Blitzkrieg the Wonderful, you know, like that man Ivan the Terrible, only mine would be a *Wunderkind*...but I can't bear the thought of bringing a child into the world with my husband alive. You'll kill him for me, won't you?"

God. Listening to her was pulling teeth. I considered how I had only played the piano and how many men had I sent to their deaths with only the sound of my music haunting their footsteps? I had rationed cigarettes in the trench. There was that kid from Albuquerque singing ballads and dancing in the trench, got his eyes up too far and had his head blown apart. Bloodied the whole goddamn carton. Damndest thing was he never stopped singing: gargles out his throat, the pitter-patter shuffling of his feet twitching in mud.

“And if I had a baby...” Penny kept saying, “And if I had a baby...”

I kept one eye on Penny. I had not reconciled with God but Penny was the kind of girl to make a man religious. Made me want to confess my crimes – even imaginary ones – if only to get over this fear of her stealing eyes and those murmurings she had of stealing my rib like Eve, to rise in the Judgment, when all things would be set to order. Those with ribs, those without ribs and everyone in between. Rise in the Judgment...I kept repeating it because it had that certain sustaining sound that gave a man purpose.

My hands ran all over Penny, under her breasts and over the sharp angles of hips, wondering if while I slept she had given my ribs any consideration, if she was any good at prying at getting her fingers in difficult places. Or if she had any thoughts of rising as well. One of us had to. I let my hands massage her ribs and if I only knew which one they had conspired to steal, I would take it back...I goddamn would.

I circled down the stairwell, Penny watching from the window. Rust on my hands. Poor Lady Bird was near her end. Windows shattered. Door frames splintered and grey. Where had all the dust been bred? Doors opened and doors closed, only wind between them. Weeds and moss everywhere, covering all shadows. Each step made a sharp pain in my

arthritic knee the only thing to do was curse and praise the Lord: Shit, God, shit, God, shit, God, shit.

“Just a swim,” I had told her. She had a terrified look on her face, the kind women at train stations put one when they said goodbye to men going off to war. Those eyes of concession – of will, of mind, of certainty.

There was green mulch in the pool. I had a quick swim, smoked a cigarette. The algae and mulch stuck to my skin, dried there with the wind and I hadn't a care. It glued tight to my skin and I peeled the mulch off my eyelids, wondering when it would be time to peel away my eyes. Evening passed to night. The shift of light opened the courtyard from the glare and I saw beyond the empty motel rooms and past the street to the Grand Masque Theatre. It lay in ruin. Steel beams sprouted from its dark shape and twisted up and tangled with weeds, the paint was worn to bone, windows were shattered and those left were smeared in dried soap. Newspapers circa 1970-something filled the gutters. The doors were bound with metal chains and a padlock and the marquee said NOW PLAYING: DOUBLE FEATURE – DELIVERANCE & IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. I had seen Cagney play a mobster on that screen and Rita Hayworth a Spaniard. I lost my virginity inside the Grand Masque. I was seventeen and shipping out the next morning. First stop the Krauts, three months and then to the Reds. She bought the tickets and brought me into the darkest corner where I fumbled with her bra and garter straps and I was terrible with her tits and couldn't get anything right and made the cheapest and most pathetic love to her, never taking my eyes off the screen and Ingrid Bergman. We both felt that we had graduated to some higher plane of existence. Three weeks later I got word from home saying that she had been run under the wheels of a freight train and I was strangely relieved she would take those memories of our night to her grave.

I held my memory in silence there for hours. Damn near all the memories I ever had I played over and over again. Around midnight Alabaster sat next to me and popped open a beer. “You want?” he said.

“No. The liver,” I said.

He said, “Take your peace. Just don’t get sentimental later.” Alabaster was old and a professor of socio-economics at the college. He discussed mating rituals of African canines who maintained monogamous relationships to the same bitch their entire lives even in transmigration patterns confusing as all hell. Alabaster purported that if the world went monogamous, economic systems would thrive under the less hostile social and psychological conditions, thus paving the way for unbridled free trade and the end of neo-misogynist capitalism.

Cat slouched his way down the stairwell carrying twenty pounds of fish chum in plastic buckets and dumped it into the swimming pool. He fetched two more buckets. Cat had lean muscles, the kind stripped away by sun. This continued for seven rounds until there was nothing but the scent of slime and chum burning our nostrils. Cat used a net to stir it in with the algae and weeds. Then he used a finger. Then a hand. Elbow deep. Some of the fish still had twitching mouths. He slapped his hands, smelled the chlorine on them and said, “Steady our hands, O Lord.”

Alabaster polished the revolvers, whistled in the quiet. A group of teenage boys and young girls were screaming across the way at Stan’s Auto & Gas, using the hoses as pistols, falling in the dust playing dead, playing in love.

“There they go again,” Cat said.

“Look at these faces of faces of faces,” Lubbock said. He had slipped into the chairs between us unannounced, a skeletal man. He wore a pale look on his face, made awkward by

a wry smile. He drank a beer and after three, displayed his wounds with pride: a blue and purple rope burn along his neck, his latest of many suicide attempts. Merely a small portion of what he had suffered for Penny's love. "She'll have me back," Lubbock said, smiled when he looked at me. Drownings, asphyxiations, car accidents, pills, boredom, extreme exposure to the elements; poor, Lubbock – he had failed them all.

Poor Lady Bird. Sing that song.

"That's a goddamn *beauty*," Cat said.

"I read in the paper today about a man combusting on an operating table. Burst into flames like the Holy Ghost had let a goddamn fart inside his bones. Turned him all to ash. Isn't that a slap in the face? Ex-wife even flew out to be with the ashes. If I had only considered such a thing..." Lubbock said, eyes extinguished: the yellow sickly eyes of a dog after a good lashing. He let each of us feel the burn, how it was still warm on our fingertips. "Sparks, goddamn sparks," he whispered.

"That takes determination," I said. "Sparks are hard things to come by."

"You did good, Lubbock," Alabaster said.

"What can I say? I love my wife," Lubbock said. He itched the raw, scarred flesh.

The law of averages said one day Lubbock would succeed. I had cautioned him not to question the universe and these things happened, just as Abel killed Cain and God had thrown the world into utter chaos by resting on the seventh day and there was no explanation for the grossly inexplicable and otherworldly – you simply let it take you for the ride and hope to God and even that Buddha fella you survived.

"To another year of infamy," Alabaster said. He toasted the swamp water chum with his beer. We were all standing around the pool now, watching the fish rise and bubble in the algae water.

“To sleepy motels and old theatres,” Cat said.

“And God damn the Mormons who ate their children first while coming across the plains hoping for the springs of eternal youth,” said Alabaster. “And the Jews for their nepotism, the socialists for their idle lasciviousness, the capitalists for the ways in which they destroy culture and breed worry and doubt amongst us all.”

“To sperm in waiting suffering delusions of grandeur, may our aim be right and true,” Lubbock shouted.

“Amen,” someone else said. We had our heads bowed and didn’t even know it.

“This isn’t a goddamn sermon,” Alabaster snapped. And thus began the tirade of injustices.

“I seen a woman give birth to nothing but water.”

“I seen a marble bust of Caesar wink at the Pope.”

“I seen the tits of the Virgin Mary burnt into a piece of toast in Paraguay.”

“Hell, we all know no one here has been to Paraguay. Keep it honest,” Alabaster growled.

“I seen pennies fall from the sky and people open their mouths like slot machines to greet them.”

“I seen an orphan in her underpants crying at the world because there was no one to dry her socks.”

“Underpants. Crimeny,” someone whispered, as if the combination of *orphan* and *underpants* was more than he could bear. These were all we had in the world. These were what we held to with such gusto it nearly killed us. And whoever said that it was in the quiet hearts, the immutable ones, where the most sorrow was trapped didn’t know shit about fishing.

“For Adam’s rib, may it rest in peace,” I said, but it came out more like a howl.

“Jesus, you’re thinning, Red,” Alabaster told me.

“Terrible how it happens,” Cat said.

Without giving it much thought I told the story of the pelicans: how they had come out of the sky without warning, barreling forward into the pavement. Crowds of women and children, sheer pandemonium. Shattered skulls and broken necks and some said it was a mating ritual, females perched waiting for the alpha-males to triumph the waters of pavement and others said they were starved and fishing and it really didn’t matter because when the feathers had cleared the bodies were left to litter the streets and no one cleaned them because it was the natural order of things and what could they do but go mad?

“What do you think we did to deserve seeing such things?” Alabaster said.

“We left the womb. We were the brave,” Lubbock said.

Cat said, “We didn’t love hard enough when we were young to have it kill us in our age.”

And then I felt Penny’s breath behind us and she was naked except those damn Superman underoos and crying: she had heard the whole goddamn mess. I opened my arms and felt like that poor wolf from that fairy tale whose stomach was filled and sewn up with stones and I think he eventually drowned and all things at the Lady Bird were eventual.

“Jesus, Penny,” I said, “you’re no good for this place, no good at all...”

She cried in my arms. We all looked at each other, thinking about that poor son of a bitch bursting into flames and disintegrating, knowing that not only his time but his passion had come; and the surprise on the doctors’ faces as they inhaled molecules of him, how the wife asked for a kiss from each of them to taste her husband one final time. I could see it in

their eyes. In that silence we were like brothers: *If I only had the determination of a spark...If I only had the determination of a spark...*

Then the fish were all dead and their bodies had floated up.

Alabaster issued the revolvers and I let Penny hold mine and held my hand over hers.

“Steady our hands, O Lord,” Cat whispered.

We opened fire on the water and fish, our eyes closed with the frustrations of children. We did our best not to get wet. Penny fired like a madwoman, reloaded and fired again. She discarded her Superman underoos exposing all her worth and mystery but we were all watching her eyes. There was no telling. They were sweet. They were nasty.

The world seemed to stretch like a very worn and troubled elastic band and for the first time it seemed real. A soft glow hung just below the rooftops, a green radiance, almost seeping out of the desert’s mouth: it lurched down slowly in the courtyard over us. It moved with the shadows, and slowly, as if undressing, began to take shape.

Penny held her revolver steady and fired at the water. Fish sprang out; they flopped onto the cold cement and we crushed skulls under our heels. Guts exploded. Water bathed our eyes. Her naked swaying was precious. Penny fired at everything that moved. Everything that didn’t move. And we waited in that darkness for the natural order of things to overcome us.

BURIAL POOL

To John Bennion

Nobody had seen her slip across the border. Nobody had listened to her whisperings at the train stations, or through the deserts; nobody believing her when she said there were birds overhead without wings, how she remembered the taste of nightmares or the colorless eyes of cowboys that had danced with her to the jukebox when she was a child. Nobody had seen her find a way inside my bed. I let her stay. It wasn't every night the woman you see from a fleeting glance through the café window or playing a few notes at the piano bar, the woman you know you've followed before amongst the transients at train stations and into an empty movie theatre, the woman you want to believe follows you; that woman does not find her way into your bed through accident. Yet on the eighth rainless night of winter, Isla awoke a somnambulant and stood at my window under the dirty moonlight and discovered her finger was bleeding beneath the nail.

The carcass of a dead peacock lay in the road gathering dust, its color dimmed by the heat. They had been dying all night. Isla spoke quietly in an elusive manner, rambling nothings like, “Perhaps the peacock is dreaming us. You see, in other lives it was our job to dream the animals into being and that is why we’re given to live these lives: because of what we had done in a world less than this.”

Between cigarettes we listened to old whisky ballads coming from the guitars of bluesmen down on the Nanchés riverbank. Their voices mingled with a congregation of a thousand plus two dressed in grey delivering themselves into the waters of the Nanchés and the hands of our resident baptizing Commandant. A lull of hymns rose and fell, faces gazing West toward a mute divinity.

I was no man of faith. I had it on good authority the baptisms were highly irresponsible. The religious never considered anything. What of the souls left in the water? Sure a baptism sounds lovely – wash away everything you don’t love – but once something has been earned, it can’t be undone, no matter how much we try and forget. Thousands of luckless fools came every day through the railways, all looking to lose pieces of themselves in a town so miserable that it had forgotten its own name.

These bluesmen jabbered on the riverbank with liquored voices. Each night I witnessed this old duel unfold. Two men with guitars ancient as teeth trying to teem the soul of the other by fingering chords. One song followed the next. When they spoke it was the sound of gravel spilled in a pail:

“I seen a woman I almost loved throw herself from a bridge and fall without sound and when we searched for her all we discovered was a feather and each time I hear birds sing at morning I think today I might fall in love.”

“Third to last woman I made love on the Nanchés turned to broken glass under me.”

The other sang his blues.

*Beneath a slendering tree
once I died and nobody saw
when I bled I was told to find a way to bleed a little more.
I'm stripped down, baby.
I'm torn down.
Stripped bare with the ground.
And people die this way, when the little girls can't be found.*

So we listened: holy waters and shadows, humming shadows and waters.

I had taken residence in the two-level apartment complex after my children had grown old. It had been deserted some years prior but age sticks to age the way bird shit looks for bald heads and even though anyone could see it was slowly sinking into a delta of mud as tribute to some foreign god, I made myself comfortable. I still paid the rent every month. On occasion I wandered the floors and hallways, uprooting rotted floorboards in search of mementos; through the deserted rooms I passed slowly over mattresses that kept their fluff and clocks that ran aimless and the occasional mirror that had been abandoned strangely unshattered.

The Nanchés bent through a few roads and then emptied down under the apartment. Only once had I ever drifted down into the cellar, beneath the ground to hear the waters as they spilled into the belly of the earth. But it was silent. The landlord used to say that people started to leave when the baptisms began. “All the dead souls left in the water, drifting about, pooling here, resisting the ease of being sucked into forgetfulness.”

“Where do they go when the waters dry from their bodies? How do they remember? What happens to those pieces of soul they leave in the water?” Isla asked, looking down at the congregation of the baptized. I wouldn't tell her. Not because I didn't believe, but rather

because she struck me as the kind of woman that loved such things and I didn't want to spend my days with the bluesmen on the riverbank waiting for a memory of her to rise from the ripples.

Dusk twined over the isolated mulch of desert. I couldn't sleep; I worried which animal might be dreaming me and frustrated at the unlikelihood I would dream it back. Leaving one of my eyes open, I watched tiny flakes of blood fall from her wounded finger and drift across the room.

"It's nothing," Isla said. Since she had noticed the blood she spoke with the tiniest slur of the tongue.

"I've never seen blood behave that way."

Her eyes opened and she turned the slender question of her spine towards me. Caught in the moonlight was the long milky scar down her neck, disappearing into heavy breasts. "It must be my dreams searching for others."

"Perhaps we should notify a priest. It's something that only happens to exiles," I told her, feeling the eye of her navel watching me.

Fell the lavender hours, full of silence. It is the quiet hearts that have the most to hide and I descended from a long line of men with no faith in the quietness of their own hearts. To converse with an exile means relating stories not meant to be spoken and becoming vulnerable creatures on the mattress capable of love and other insults. Nights like these had led women like Isla to witness hurricanes of rosemary and men who hiccupped coins; it had caused revolutionists to recount ancient scars, and here I was without any and yet she had found a way to bleed, perhaps from pity, perhaps her way of subtle mockery.

More blood flakes danced across the room, a whole constellation sweeping into the bed lending it both warmth and anxiety. I held her hand in mine.

“We could make the bleeding stop.”

“It doesn’t hurt. Perhaps I’m meant to bleed to death tonight.”

“You haven’t a face for melodrama. What do people do at night when they can’t sleep?”

“They find strangers and make love until they’re senseless.”

“To cure boredom.” I pulled the cigarette from her lips and made the tip glow. My finger stroked hers. “It would only hurt a moment. Enough for the wound to burn to a pinch. Minimal scars.”

“And what have you done that I should be reminded of you when I’m with other men?”

“Tell me how they made you bleed before tonight.”

At once I felt ashamed. But she was a foreigner and born out of something I didn’t know. Unable to give up her body to me, I was entitled to such memories. There was nothing left but to survey the dishonesty of her nakedness.

The sickness wasn’t in the sight of her scars. Jigsaw slices of skin tied her together. Yet how the moonlight smiled on those milky stretches covering her back and legs as we walked over the rooftop to let ourselves sweat, entering the bed with gentle sighs like errant children. Later she beckoned me to caress them. I studied her scars carefully, pulling, stretching, my eyes weighed with sleep.

“It’s my face!” I cried out suddenly.

She looked languidly at the blend of shadow and scar impressed on her skin. I went for a closer look, trying to discern details of what seemed to be the thin outlines of my face involved in a terrible weeping fit.

Isla said, “It happens.”

“My God. I never knew how old I was. Those tears don’t seem genuine.”

Isla refused to acknowledge that it was truly my face. I wanted to know their history, but she again refused. That was their horror. The unknowing. Whose hands and whose pleasure? Whose eyes had seen her body opened? The room was knotted with heat and I was left to the whims of thought: Had she screamed, and for whom? Had she been forced to drink her tears from the hands of her betrayers? I gently stroked my favorites on her inner thigh, wondering why she had deserved this.

“Was it a knife that made these? Or were they hands?”

She wouldn’t say, even though I knew she carried a knife everywhere. I had found it while she slept, wrapped in old newspaper.

“You won’t tell me because of the things you did to them,” I said.

She said, “Sometimes the only way I can remember their faces is to look at these scars. But it isn’t every night I find their hidden faces.” She lifted my hand to a scar between her ribs. “From here I bled saltwater as a girl into a tub and my mother filled buckets and emptied them into the street until the whole town flooded and that’s how there’s a city beneath the Lake Tulosca.” She showed me others: how a flower had bloomed from one, how from one in her neck she had begun chaffing away to salt, and how when she pinched another snow would fall.

“Your lies are rotten.”

“And if it were a lie, then what? Truths are far more terrible. Go ahead, tell me one.”

I considered the worst of them. “When I was nine we killed a boy in the lemon orchard behind a sawmill. He cared for the peacocks. People would give him a dime just to stare into the colored eyes on the feathers to know who they would marry or if they would be rich. When it was finished we smoked cigarettes around his body like it was a campfire.”

“What did you use?”

“Rocks, whatever our hands favored.”

“Why?”

“We weren’t sure if the noise of the dead is any different than the noise of the living.”

Silence hung between us.

Isla said, “How does the truth feel?”

“Worthless.”

Isla said, “Nothing is more painless than a lie.”

“Maybe what I’m looking for is guilt.”

Before dawn the finger was still bleeding, but aside from an occasional glance we had all but forgotten it. Wind kept its steady moan between the decaying concrete of old buildings.

“We could sing lynching ballads and whorehouse songs,” I said. “A contest. The first to forget a line loses. If I win you confess the memory of those scars. And if you win, I’ll allow you to bleed to death on the floor.”

“Whorehouses are for the easily discouraged.”

“I’m unlucky at most things.”

“Even shit gets to dance on occasion.”

From the window I watched her walk barefoot down the ravine and into the Nanchés. Drift and return, drift and return. Nobody paid her any heed. The bluesmen played louder and the Commandant shouted praises to the Lord. Widows fat as September rose out the water; transients wandered in from the train station smoking their cigarettes as the scene unfolded, the terrible expressions of couples that only moments ago had exited the

movie theater; and behind them, lost children and the crippled. Rusty automobiles pulled along the ravine and left on their headlights, the men and women stretching out on the hoods drinking cheap wine. Once while taking my adopted dog, Mrs. Fitz, for her nightly amble, a group of newly baptized widows approached me petitioning a dance. Each of them complained of a terrible weightlessness and wanted some act of lewdness to restore at least the memory of their sins. We danced barefoot until the mud rose past our shins to my pant cuffs. There were other ways of living: without prophecy and the laying on of hands, without beer at the Taco de Noche, without children that drowned themselves for humor, without women suffering the osteoporosis of the pelvis; but God intends to lie each of us in an unnoticed tomb. The only hope was for a judge at that big glass table in heaven to speak a foreign language so that no one would discover the man I had become from the child I could no longer remember.

Exile meant having the memory of a place in your mouth but unable to feel it in your hands.

Isla's knife had an ancient workmanship. I carefully eyed the blade, noting there was no blood stain which meant she had not cut herself. Then what? I wanted some means of remembrance – of this night, of her silhouette between the sheets.

Grasping the knife tentatively, I made a thin cut to my finger under the nail, the same as hers. I waited, believing only momentarily that such an act would connect us. Of course, it didn't. In fact, the mere touching of the blade made me feel more distant from her. I deepened the cut, drawing the blade from to the first knuckle. It closed quickly until all that remained was an invisible mark. I unbuttoned my shirt and felt between two ribs. When I felt the hotness I smoothed the blade around until I was sure the scar would bear her image and when the coolness emptied throughout my chest I knew it was finished and lay in the

bed, amazed at nothing. My fingers slipped into the wound and I could feel where the scar would take its shape. It was an insignificant thing; children had done worse. I touched the wound. It would feel the same through the night, and I would carry it with me into my dreams, even if the bleeding there would be alone.

Standing in the doorway she laughed. “Don’t worry,” she said, “that knife never kills anybody.”

And then she was gone.

Nights gave themselves to morning and mornings delivered themselves to the night in shame.

I kept her knife on the nightstand. Over months, the cuts were made with less and less precision. They always scarred. Even when I dreamt her face and the labyrinth of her scars, waking up I could only etch fragments of me over me: these eyes around the ankle bone; this brow fit for caterpillars on a palm; this unkissed mouth on my forearms; the anonymous love handles on my anonymous love handles.

Each night Isla walked these halls, naked, but she never came to my window; I never saw her again. Often, when rising out of bed, the faded sunlight would catch the arrangement of discolored flakes of her blood on the floor. I followed them into bedrooms and closet spaces and down into the deepest stairwells of the apartment building and found nothing but the chance imaginations of my mind. Sometimes I thought I heard her between floorboards gasping for air or on the other side of a wall, laughing or singing in the tub. But it was only the slow pull of the gods beneath the apartment, their silence and mine converging as together we made the decent from the stairwell into the wet stink of earth.

FRUSTRATIONS OF A COYOTE

She gave me for my pains a world of sighs;
She swore, in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange;
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.
- *Othello* I: iii

Chef dragged the body through mud and weed. He limped to a halt, surveying the blue rot of clouds. Something was eating at the insides of his leg, something burning, something raw, a coldness; he felt the tearing. He almost passed out, waited miserably for his end. His hands fumbled inside the damp pockets until they produced what he craved: the last of the cigs.

“You want a lick, pal?” he said, turning towards the body spackled with grains of sand. A clump of seaweed hung from its neck. “Didn’t think so,” he coughed. He jammed the cig in his mouth. Smokes Moses, the cig was wondrous. He mumbled, sat on the body as to not wet his keister in the mud. His eyes spied drifters on the road, others lounging on the

sands below, a team of *idiotas* all of them. His words were a fine course of slurs lost in echoes of nearby ocean waves.

A jogger passed, eyed the two of them: Chef and the body.

“You got problems, man? You look like you’re having problems,” he said.

Chef looked up. “We all got problems.” He couldn’t get the cig to light. He eyed the jogger, wondered if he could drop kick him. He checked the heels on his boots.

“Your friend there looks toasted.”

Chef propped the body up, watched the head loll about the shoulders. He stuck his fingers between the lips and parted them into a toothless smile. Chef grinned. “He’ll manage,” he said.

“Jesus... You all there in the head? You need something, pal?” the jogger said.

“Yeah,” Chef said, “you got another cig? Or a goddamn match that’ll light?”

The jogger sprinted down the road. Chef laughed, slapped the body across the knee.

He peeled off a chunk of his own cast, wiped the chalky dust on his pant leg, peeled more until the skin was exposed. He looked away. It smelled of old tortillas and salty breeze. Smoke filled his lungs and awoke the nerves. He could feel the sutures slowly rip when he jerked suddenly. He gazed befuddled, laid on his back, the stick of mud on his fingertips, eyes blurring, wondering how in God he had ever arrived at such *idiota*.

Chef’s head rested on the lifeless chest. He tried concentrating. He thought he heard the dead man talking. “Say again?” he said. Nada. He inched closer to the parted lips. “Speak up,” he said. Sure as God, the man was dead. What a shame, Chef thought.

Middle-aged and pretty much worn to guts, Chef had decided it was time to do something with his life. He had settled on drowning. The past few weeks, those since his woman Annabelle left, had been spent in an alcoholic haze, late-night *Telemundo*

programming and PBS telethons, crashing his car into a lamppost, arrested for indecent exposure, released on bail; he had even snorted a line of coke but all it gave him was a vicious headache. He had sagging man tits and had lost his woman who was out driving the desert somewhere, using his bleeding heart to power the engine.

Smoking his cig and squinting his eyes with helpless cheer – the last of his passions – he tried hard to remember if the dead body had given him the wound or if, perhaps, he had given it to himself, when suddenly, as if through divine intervention, he remembered his woman, a fall of sorts, a scream, a hospital bed, weeks of frustration, then stumbling up the beach with the intent of casting himself into the ocean. Smokes Moses: what a fouled up, magnificent world we cling to, he thought. He closed his eyes and met a whole new chorus of suffering.

He surveyed his inventory: the cig in his mouth, a few sticks of gum he had swiped at the newsstand, clothes, a busted leg and the new dear friend, Kashmir: dead, lying in rot and sun at his feet. Nowhere from here but up, he told himself. “It’s all *idiota*,” he said looking around him.

Oh sweet, sweet Annabelle, he thought. This mess was all her doing. Girlfriend of four years. Moved out. Abandoned him to an assortment of Silver Surfer comic books, cans of creamed corn and what she hadn’t raided of his Jethro Tull albums.

He still had the Navy, however. He worked as a recruiter every other weekend. Ten years earlier he had gone AWOL: jumped ship off the coast of Portugal hoping to “find himself” when all he ended up finding was a scorching case of VD, an aborted kid, cheap whisky and the recurring tirades of his father who lectured him every time he phoned asking for money: “If you wind up dead the government won’t pay for the funeral so you might as well stay alive for the rest of us. Think of the family, son.” Chef had haplessly agreed and

philandered about distant cities on a bicycle for years. He offered to shine shoes, peel potatoes, be a grunt; whatever it took. Times were pressing and the Navy quickly reinstated him. Now he did what he could to take his mind off things: he shot pool, drank whisky, scorned new recruits, gave whopping lies about the naval academy and live action combat, considered ingenious ways of scamming the government, none of which ever panned out.

Then came Annabelle. Her name was actually Margaret and he had settled on her but had always wanted a woman named Annabelle, a discrepancy she could never get over. Mystery was such an atrophy of the senses, he thought, which probably helped explained why he was numb and cold and in pain with only a single cig left, dragging a body through a ditch.

Now it had come to drowning.

If there was one thing Chef knew, it was water. How saltwater was denser than freshwater and the pH should never dip below 8.0 or you felt your skin itch razors; how drinking a quart of saltwater will turn your pupils yellow and spit snot from the corners, your piss napalm orange; how it took a two-hundred-twenty-pound man an average of forty-three minutes to sink to the bottom of the ocean. A woman at one-forty just twenty-eight minutes before the muscles gave up.

Atrophy of the senses, he thought, pulling a finger through the mud. All else is *idiotia*.

He forced himself to remember the details. He was good at remembering things.

He had hobbled up the beach looking for a keen spot to finish the deed. The leg was swelled inside the cast. It was a shoddy job and with some effort, he could pry the rim of the cast open just to peek and see the stitching, the slur of purples and yellowed hues all swimming together.

The waters were grey. Thank God for the busted leg, he had thought, drifting out and feeling light, the waves calm in spite of all hope that they would rage – it will sink me like a stone. But even when he tried to sink and despite all efforts to drown, he couldn't. He floated miserably.

Then the smell. Smokes Moses, that smell. The breeze had tried to push him back to shore while the tide did its best to suck him out. And then that smell, that rank, lingering odor. The body. A fellow traveler, Chef had thought. Perhaps a castaway or some fool out to drown himself in his pity and there was his opportunity at redemption: Chef, man-hero – he would save the body from certain death. He would show her...he would show her good. The fleshy bulk tossed in the waves, a grand thing, Chef observed, floating careless, a giant harpoon of sorts.

The two of them washed on the sand like pieces of luggage. Chef performed CPR but to no avail. The poor sap, he thought – drowned. What a way to go. Then it struck him at how handsome the man looked, despite the fact that his face was a mangled pot roast. And yet *still* noble. Then he realized drowning itself was not for the scum of the earth, but a noble profession and he wished he might have succeeded so that someone could have found him washed up on the shore days later, that someone might have taken the time and care to apply CPR to his corpse.

A sorry *idiot*, that these ill days should be mine, he thought.

Kashmir, the stiff, had gone too far and undoubtedly leaving them no choice, had to be drowned. The note said as much. It was stuffed inside the mouth, tucked under a lip and reasonably dry. *Apologies. Kashmir, a man of good taste gone too far. Hanged, shot, and finally drowned.* *Apologies*, it read.

Yes, such a pity, Chef thought. But as his father had warned: “One man’s waste is another man’s rhubarb.” Chef mumbled, straying up the beach and dragging the corpse in his wake: all else was *idiot*.

The rest was a blur. A moment passed admiring the face. Noticing the unspoken sadness in his eyes. At times when he pulled he could not be sure if he was pulling Kashmir or if Kashmir was pulling him it was such a dizzying effort. Stitches torn to their limits, falling, cursing the body. Off the side of the road, looking for cigs to ease his delirium.

Sitting in the muddied ditch, Chef turned Kashmir on his back to greet the sun with honor. His belly was round, as if he had swallowed a balloon, the skin a blistered red apple. Patches around his forehead were chewed; no doubt some bird had gotten to him. Such ruthless scavengers. The lips were mad, the eyes swollen.

“Poor, poor, Kashmir,” he said quietly. “I almost saved you.”

Chef tore the shirt off his back. He rung the sweat. Then he wiped his boots and stared at the sun. He tied a knot around Kashmir’s wrists with the shirt and hauled him through dirt and then dark sand until they reached the curb of a gas station. “Apologies, Kashmir,” he said before dragging him across the pavement. He felt the burn in his leg. He propped Kashmir’s corpse against the pump. Jammed the butt of the cig between his lips. He found a discarded truckers’ hat in the trash and pulled it over Kash’s head. He tried to force his eyes open but they wouldn’t. Water logged. Two tears in a bucket – fuck it.

“Be good now,” he told Kashmir. “I’ll bring you a Slim Jim. Try not to look suspicious.”

He bought Fritos and asked for a pack of cigs and a dollar in gas.

“You haven’t got a car, pal,” the cashier said.

Chef looked out the window at Kashmir, legs sprawled at the pump. “Just give me a break, will you,” Chef muttered. “Some fucking luck.”

“Can’t sell you gas without a car.”

Chef slammed loose change on the counter, all the change he had used to try and drown himself with. There must have been a few bucks. He wasn’t good with numbers.

“Then just the cigs,” he said.

“I’ll give you a buck’s worth,” the cashier said, forking over the cigs.

Chef used the payphone. Numbers at random, numbers from memory. John Wayne voice on the other end. Chef whispered into the receiver. The voice answered. Chef tried to get all the information out of him he could, wept as he divulged he and Kashmir’s location, the man on the other end a tone so soothing, and suspicious, yes, conspiracy? yes...the sounds of the voice on the other end reassured him that there was a conspiracy at work, the Governor was involved, perhaps even as far stretching as the Dali Lama. Speaking made him slightly delirious and he had visions of the jungle while he stood there, a cry came out of him, a mumble like *justice for the inflicted*.

Back at the pump he leaned next to Kashmir who slumped to one side. He filled the gas in a Biggie Size soda mug. He brought his face close to the gasoline, took a clean whiff. That smarts, he thought.

“Fucking-A, we’ll blow this village sky high, won’t we Kash?” he grinned. Kash wasn’t listening. The hat had been stolen or maybe just blown away. Even the wind is against us, Chef thought. He ate Fritos. He offered some to Kashmir then handed over a cig and lit one of his own. Everything smelled like burnt rubber and piss.

“Sorry about the Slim Jim,” he said. He nudged Kashmir. “Goddamn fascists in there. We’ll take our business elsewhere.”

He stood, cupped his cock and gave the mile-high salute and spit on the pumps.

He dragged Kashmir by the tattered shirt into a sandy knoll and they waited in the sun.

He went back for the mug of gasoline, careful not to spill a goddamn drop.

Shadow of a car swept over them. Hum of an engine. Chef was on his back. Cig butts scattered over his chest. Smokes Moses, his head rang blue. It wasn't until the engine purred that Chef realized the last cig had crackled down to a nub and was beginning to burn the knuckle. The horn blared. Chef teetered on his good leg, adjusted his pants and tried to give the man a finger to suck on but forgot which was an insult and which was a come-on. The last thing he needed was crazed homosexuals on the belt loop of his soul...or maybe, he thought, it was exactly what he needed. It was a rusted blue Chevy Impala. Chef saw it was nearing dusk. The sky was tossed with lavender and thin streaks of clouds. Things were turning grey even as he stood.

“Hey, hombre!” the stranger behind the wheel screamed, throwing down the horn again and sending a tornado of noise rattling through Chef's ears. “You need a hand? Don't be shy now!”

Chef didn't answer. He couldn't think of anything to say. If he had, it might have been to tell the man to get him another cig or to piss off: he was too busy being a hero. But instead, he said nothing. He couldn't see the man's face. Cars shot by, a few birds circled above his head as if waiting to pluck them both up. He limped over, pulling Kashmir with him. Smoke came out of the Impala.

“I got gas,” Chef mumbled. His leg felt mad with itch and fire shooting on all cylinders.

“Hell, get in, hustler. Fuck gas,” the stranger said.

“You the one I phoned?” Chef asked. He was nervous. Impalas were the vehicle of choice for conspirators.

“Phone? Fuck all. Don’t believe in ‘em. Look here, I know want when I see it. You want a lift or not?”

“I want a cardiac arrest.”

“Amen. Get in, hustler.”

Chef pulled open the rear door and using up the last of his strength he dumped Kashmir’s corpse across the leather interior. Bundles of newspaper filled the floor. He collapsed into the passenger seat without a word. The Impala sped off.

They drove for what seemed like days. “I know when people are in need. I have a sense for that kind of thing, soldier.” There was smoke everywhere and where there wasn’t smoke there was newspaper. The stranger, probably a good twenty years Chef’s senior, had a cigar clamped between his teeth and two cigs smoldering away in the ashtray. Though his features were darkened, Chef could make out the thick beard. Black cowboy hat with a silver band. Hands with veins shooting off like railroad tracks.

“How goes it, soldier?”

“Busted up...” Chef mumbled.

“You look like you need a stiff drink to wake the dead,” the man laughed.

“...on the insides...” said Chef.

“Hell, soldier, on all sides,” the stranger chuckled.

“Name’s Chef.” He shut his eyes tight, opened them and waved away smoke.

“Gabriel Fishmonger. Guess you could say I’m your guardian angel tonight.” Each time he laughed it shook the whole interior of the car and he bounced up and down in his seat like a schoolboy. “Have some jerky, it’ll do your mind right,” he said, offering a handful.

Chef cleared his throat. “The body’s mine. I found it. I was going to save it...going to...but now I haven’t got any more cigs.” His head begin to clear, the pain drifted, although he could still feel the saltwater and other vermin creeping about and infesting the insides of his leg. It burned. He rolled down the window, let the breeze wake him.

Fishmonger looked at the body. “Sure as hell is, hustler. I wouldn’t try to take him from you. I know the pride of a saving. Believe me. Been there. They try and take that from you, too.”

“Who?” Chef said, confused.

“Oh, Lord, these women,” Fishmonger muttered and his voice trailed on and the Impala boldly raced forward at higher and then higher speeds. The highway became a grey bullet, trees a memory. Everything turned to dust.

“I didn’t kill him,” Chef mumbled.

“Of course you didn’t,” Fishmonger said. “I could give two shits if you did. Sometimes a man just needs to be killed.”

“Found him in the ocean,” Chef said. “Goddamn hero, right?”

“Shit, they don’t make us like they used to.” Fishmonger bit down on the rusty dog tags hanging around his neck, hacked out a laugh. “They need more men of our kind. Goddamn, you fool, what in the hell were you doing out there?”

“Drifting.”

The stranger eyed Chef. He smiled, nodded slowly, patted him on his good leg. “I hear you, friend. Been there myself. God sure does work in mystery.”

“He’s a heavy son of a bitch. But he’s all ours...” Chef said, the smile breaking over his face as he leaned his head back in the seat.

“He sure is. You going to survive? You look busted up good.”

“Woman,” Chef said.

“You must be a military brat. Hot dog,” he grunted. “That’s how I knew you were good for it in that dust. We’ve seen worse, you and me. We seen the trenches of war. Goddamn. Corporal here. Run out by that goddamn woman. You know the kind, pal. You know the kind.”

“Thirteen days,” Chef muttered. He tapped the cast.

“Shit...first days are the worse. Things start to turn around day twenty-seven. Then it all fades. Except the taste. That taste never leaves.”

“What taste?”

“Never mind. You’re delirious. After she left I lost all sorts of time. I don’t even know what year it is! Ha! You know what I’m saying, hustler?”

They must have driven for damn near hundred miles. The road grew dim, slendered into dirt. The back tires spit gravel and dust. When he was conscious he felt like it was a bad dream and kept trying to fall asleep, and when he was asleep it was a nightmare and he kept trying to wake himself up. Soon they were the only car on the road. It was beyond night. At first it seemed they had passed into a strange land but as Chef pried his eyes open he realized it was the desert. He recognized the town as the same one his Annabelle had run off to – perhaps some cruel coincidence, this Fishmonger’s sick idea of a joke. He suddenly wanted to kill the man, the coward, but he couldn’t even move without his limbs dissolving to jellyfish. His brain was a melted Ice Age. He thought of his Annabelle. Just five days earlier he had watched her make pancakes and fall asleep on the sofa unwittingly, oblivious to him cataloging her every move on scraps of paper, receipts, movie ticket stubs. The windows were open, the front door unlocked. But he had liked it better out with the bushes and sand.

He liked the feeling he could enter at any moment and curl next to her, make her scream, that cursory feeling that at any moment things could evolve.

He ignored the pain in his leg. He chewed his lips. Sucked saltwater from his shirt. The inside of the car smelled like sweaty laundry. Cig butts littered the floor. They drove until everything was grey and waste and what wasn't waste slowly turned grey and then it spread into endless miles of red dust and thin lines of trees crowding in the distance of a barren landscape.

Occasionally Chef turned to make sure Kashmir was still with them. He felt vaguely heroic at the sight of him rolled in a heap of warm leather interior, but still cheated that he had only rescued a dead man and there was nothing to show for it. Maybe he'd still get his name in the newspaper.

Fishmonger's house was a speck on an enormous sheet of land. The roof was on the verge of collapse. The windows had all been shot out. An outhouse stood about twenty yards in the distance along a weeded path. Inside, the rooms were chill. "See if you can throw this down," Fishmonger said, tossing Chef a bottle of whisky, then launched the bundle of newspapers overhead into the corner. "Bullseye," he grinned. "That'll wash you right out clean." Chef swallowed what he could and wheezed, almost losing the nerves in his stomach, feeling them crawl back up his throat only to swallow them in a second wave of warm fluid. He winced, peeling back the ridge of cast and gazing at the swollen flesh. "Pour some whisky on that shit." Fishmonger nodded with encouragement, lighting another cig and sitting on the sofa with his legs sprawled. The sofa was in ruin, the mattress burned through and twisted with melted springs. Magazines littered the floor, newspaper clippings tacked on the walls. A broken-down stack of cardboard boxes, oily rags; a television set lying on its side with the screen kicked in and a photo of a woman taped over the hole.

“All we get are Mexicans on the TV out here anyway,” Fishmonger shrugged.

“You said it, cowboy,” Chef said.

“Tell me about that busted leg, soldier.”

“Spying on a roof. She’s a tough one, my broad. You know from a skylight, all women look beautiful. Somehow, some fucking way...It’s the damndest thing...” he said.

“Oh, *Gawd*,” Fishmonger laughed. He nodded. “You see that car yonder?” He pointed into the meadow at a Ford pick-up showered in rust. “That was hers. I have a kid come piss all over it once a week. Sometimes he slashes a tire, uses the crowbar on the windshield. Most of the time he pisses. Name’s Quint. He pisses a Q-shape in the flat-bed. I seen him do it. I just sit here and take notes, smoke my Reds. Yep, I’ve never seen anything more lovely than a naked woman in a flatbed Ford.”

“That’ll do it,” Chef said.

“Place was hers. Ours. Shit. *Was*, mind you. I took up residence in the shed off yonder. Doesn’t smell like her out there. You know what I’m saying, hustler?” He slapped the wall, caressed it and gritted his teeth. “I figure an earthquake will take it all down when it comes time. What do you say? You think we get those out here?”

“Got to be one every couple hundred of years,” Chef said.

Fishmonger took a swig from the bottle, gave a stern nod of approval. “That’s all I’m looking for.” When he finished his drink he tore the picture off the television, went out through the screen door and pissed on it. Then he set it on fire, watched the flame rise, and then die out. He came back inside, zipping up.

“What do you figure now, friend?” he said. Fishmonger lounged on the sofa. Chef shrugged. He was having a difficult time understanding why Fishmonger kept referring to

him as *friend* and *boy*. But *hustler*...he would take hustler. They waited in an awkward silence for about ten minutes. "I figure we better wash that body," Fishmonger said.

Chef watched as Fishmonger pulled the corpse out of the rear seat and slung it over his shoulder like an elk. Chef hobbled inside behind them. They spent the whole night washing it clean.

"Fucking-A," Fishmonger said. He seemed to relish the sweat. "We're some goddamn heroes, aren't we?"

Chef feigned a grin.

"What a lovely fucking treasure," Fishmonger said.

The following evening they held a candlelight vigil with a few of Fishmonger's acquaintances, scabs mostly, men Chef recognized had come and gone in life and either didn't know it or were just beginning to be hammered across the face with the sad realization. Prayers were offered. Chef bowed his head and picked his nose. The corpse lay in a wicker trunk donated by a widow. The crowds approached, bid their farewells and placed coins over Kashmir's eyes and into his mouth, bidding him a safe passage through whatever world he had passed into.

"Better give this fucker a beer!" Fishmonger laughed. He put a six-pack in the trunk. Later he planted a fat kiss on Kashmir's cheek. Few laughed with him. They were a solemn bunch, gazing mysteriously, almost shell-shocked, all admiring the corpse.

"...notice the softness of the hands..."

"...surely a religious man..."

"...how the women must have loved him..."

“...and the eyes, the way they sink like a passing tide, such a good-hearted husband...”

“...the ringlets of hair: an unspoken nobility...”

“...teeth like God’s elbow grease...”

“...*if* he had teeth...”

“...I can imagine those teeth...such wonderful gums...”

“...soul of the man...”

“...only when a man dies do we see what they truly loved...”

“And what did this love?”

“The narcissism of a journey...”

“I seen stranger...”

“What?”

“Just stranger than a drowned man. Seen a fat man sprawled on a roof. Dead as sewer swamp. Damn near fell out of the sky, they said.”

“Well did he or didn’t he?”

“What?”

“Fall out of the sky?”

“Hard to tell. The eyes lie...”

Chef wore Fishmonger’s cheap suit he had been married in years earlier. He drank beer, wished it was him in the wicker basket: an honest drowned man, gone too far, given someone – hell, whomever – no choice. And while he knew this was pitiful, this ceremony, disgraceful, perhaps, it was all he had in the world, and it was the last of dignity, if nothing else.

When the ceremony finished Chef once again felt cheated. Like two young but visibly wounded bucks, he and Fishmonger smoked unfiltered cigs, swapped war stories, laughed about what kind of man Kashmir might have been. Later they buried him at the neck of the woods in a quiet rubble of dust and cactus needle. They wet the earth with buckets of water. Chef smoked and watched while Fishmonger worked the shovel and pick axe, his bare shoulders ladled with sweat heaved against the night.

After, they hobbled together across the field. They took shelter inside the beat-up shed and waited at the window. Fishmonger manned the rifle, Chef the cartridges of bullets. They looked at the moon and waited for coyotes to breach their perimeter.

Chef's eyes were heavy. An echo of gunfire ripped across the sunless morning. Then pain danced up his leg, up his groin to the rest of him. More gunfire, and then Fishmonger's shadow cast over him. Chef gazed at him standing at the window: shirtless in suspenders, rifle in his hands. His eyes did not stray from the field.

"Here they come...yes, Lord, here they come..." he said. "The enemy arrives for invasion."

Slowly, the sun emerged. Fishmonger drank whisky, fired in erratic intervals. Chef watched. Birds flew down. Soon their black feathered corpses lay atop those of wounded coyotes. Feathers littered the plain. The coyotes fed on birds, devoured their own, unearthed pieces of Kashmir. Chef propped his busted leg on a stool, watched the coyotes circle and retreat.

"They're moving...such amateurs..." Fishmonger whispered.

Chef watched the glow of sun as it drew from behind the clouds, illuminated Fishmonger's eyeballs. Shadows crawled down his dark skin, sunshine down the rifle barrel, shadows washing the desk strewn with newspapers and bullets, over a worn and dust-beaten

coat draped with medals sewn loosely on the flaps, finally over Chef's own dust-baked fingers. Peculiar sun. He smelled the fingers. They smelled of Kashmir. A whole mess of *idiot*, he thought.

Fishmonger fired at more feathers. The echoes drifted until they were echoes of echoes. Together they watched the field open with light like a wounded heart. The coyotes writhed in slow circles, snouts lifted. Fishmonger fired again. The coyotes scattered, collected together again at the treeline. They charged, dug around the corpse, slowly uprooting him, sniffing, sending clumps of dirt into the air.

Fishmonger pressed the rifle barrel through the slit in the window. "Faith binds us," he said. The coyotes regrouped on the plain, charged. "Faith in Kashmir. Faith in coyotes. Faith in the trigger. Faith sustains. And so God abides..."

Soon Kashmir could be seen emerging out of the earth, as if being born, tufts of hair flowering. The corpse shuddered in the breeze. Flies swarmed, laid invisible eggs. The coyotes fought for scraps. Fishmonger fired six times in rapid succession. "It's as though he challenges me. The nerve of such a man," he whispered. Chef tapped the cast. No echo. He stared into the treeline. Fishmonger sighed. "We best bury him again," he smiled, as if he had intended this all along.

Chef watched him stride up the dust path hauling a bucket of water and shovel. The sun beat over his shoulders. Coyotes watched patiently.

Fishmonger returned, the water bucket full of loose bone fragment. Two rags were supplied, dipped in alcohol. They cleaned the bones until their fingers ached. Chef studied his fragments carefully, wondering what piece of Kashmir he had been so privileged to touch. A jawbone, where prophetic words fell off his lips, a femur that had carried him

down streets to movie houses and cigar parlors, his pelvis wherein rotated his heavenly hips. He cleaned, trying to unearth his own reflection in the dense bone.

When night covered Fishmonger rested. He laid the rifle across his lap while he polished his medals with spit. When there was no more spit he drank whisky then polished again and when the bottle of whisky was emptied Chef watched him chew the insides of his cheek and use the bloodied saliva to wet the tiny gold stars. Sleep bit Chef and he dreamed of nothing but Kashmir's hair growing out of the earth like a beautiful weed.

The wind pulled Chef's eyes open. It was just past sunrise. Light filled the shed, blinded him. He was alone. The walls of the shed were smoothed. He saw the empty bathtub, cans of old food in tin containers and rusted forks, buckets of water, bullets on the floors and windowsills, bottles of whisky, a rifle, and Fishmonger's smell of a worn baseball mitt. Chef waited, trying to stir his senses: where he was, what he was doing. He did not remember how many days they had passed in the shed. They had pissed in empty whisky bottles now discarded on the floor. Between his teeth were shreds of salted jerky. He hobbled to the window, looked out and saw nothing but sun glint on the pickup and then dust and starved cactus.

The wind blew hard. Fishmonger's shape was thin in the distance. He buried the polished bone, collected anew that left by the coyotes. Chef clutched the rifle into his shoulder pocket. He aimed, drew the sights. Fishmonger smiled, pathetically unaware. Chef tried to decide which area was the most vulnerable. He settled on the throat. "*Pow...*" he whispered.

He rummaged through a dresser drawer filled with old relics: postcards, photographs of women, photographs of a mother holding a baby; a broken watch, socks, honorary

medals, unopened letters. He sat back in the chair and sweat. He felt a truly miserable specimen.

That night Fishmonger did not return. Chef waited alone, counted the coyotes on the ridge. He cursed the stars. The following morning they did not speak when Fishmonger came through the door. He tossed the pick axe and shovel into a corner. Chef immediately went to work on the new assortment of bones. Fishmonger seemed to terribly thin, curved like a sickle. He had a black smile, dark hands. For the first time since Fishmonger had picked him up in that ditch, Chef looked into his eyes. They were like two moons. The glow of each inner pupil radiated a certain cleverness, a sickly hue of waxy banana peels.

Fishmonger ate from a can of beans, alternating between his fingers and a bent fork. “They’ve been trying to take him all morning. Trying to flank us from the east. God, what I would give for another rifle. Heavy artillery. The sons of bitches,” he laughed. Sweat fell from his brow. He sat on the stool, lit a cig. He lifted the rifle and fired three shots. He handed it to Chef to reload.

Chef shielded his eyes from the sun. “How many?” he said.

“Oh, there’s enough. Kashmir is our stewardship. We must not fail him.” He sucked in a breath then pulled off his shirt, stretched. Chef suddenly felt the inadequacy of his own presence: his wretched fat body, his plum-dropped eyes and there Gabriel Fishmonger, a sweeping shadow cast on the walls: immense, the measure of all things. Fishmonger kicked at the bottles of piss, sniffed the ones full of whisky and drank.

“I can’t see shit,” said Chef who fumbled to get the bullets loaded.

Fishmonger shook his head. “That’s a damn shame. They’ve been on the beat all morning.”

For the next twenty minutes Fishmonger defended Kashmir's corpse. Chef didn't say, but he envied the coyotes. There was a sense of heroism in what they did, the circling and twisting, the fearless charge. Either that or a whole mess of *idiotas*.

"They've got bad eyes, them coyotes. I've hunted all messes of shit: boar, that Bigfoot fella across the Pacific Northwest, hunted the stars, even, but nothing like a coyote."

Chef said, "That doesn't make sense. How do you hunt the stars?"

Fishmonger leaned back, breathed deeply. He took off his hat, scratched his head. "Shit, I don't know." He seemed more frightened than upset. "Someday you'll learn never to ask a question like that."

"You ever caught one?"

"Christ, you ride a man's gonads."

They leaned back in the chairs with their smokes.

"What's the name of the woman who burned you?" Fishmonger grunted.

"Annabelle," Chef said.

"Tell me now, you ever castrated a bull? Shit, neither have but I could get over a woman by the name of Annabelle. Shit. *Annabelle*." Three more shots rang out. His voice faded into the explosion of more gunfire. Shells scattered on the floor as if afraid.

Fishmonger rolled his tongue over his lips and gums.

"She said she wasn't ready to fall in love," Chef muttered.

Fishmonger laughed. "Boy, you're all full of piss and vinegar." He took down more whisky. "But they are something, aren't they? One of mine left to travel the world. Jesus, mother of Mary weeping on the cross..."

"I said let's get married, said I wanted my babies to look like her and she said we needed therapists and psychiatry."

“Therapy is alright. It can be therapeutic,” said Fishmonger.

“I’m in the Navy. I’ve seen war. *Psychiatry*. Goddamn masochists.”

“Mormons, huh?”

“No, masochist,” Chef said.

“Yeah, I’ve known all kinds of Mormons. There’s a guy up yonder the river, big chap with cankers all around his lips. Each canker’s like its own little smile. That’s just the way the world is, I suppose: some people have cankers, and others, well, others get washed up on the ocean shore.” Two more shots rang out. “That Mormon, he bred hogs. Ole Gideon Porth. Had a woman to die for. But his business, his true love, was hogs. They eat their young, you know that? The hogs, I say, not the Mormons. I don’t know what Mormons do for food.”

Fishmonger lit a new cig and continued about how he bought hogs for years from this Mormon cowboy, how he always tried to charm the wife, a little gesture here and there and how she would smile and coo and they would wait with a glass of lemonade for the husband to fetch the hog meat. “I used to wait for her from the window at nights. Used to watch. She come up the road, naked like a goddamn nymph. And when she came I pretended I was asleep. Every time. Let her crawl into bed and never breathed a sound. Just to watch her come up the road. Christ, Jesus: for the life of me I can’t even remember her name. What a sham.”

“And then what?”

“She was such a nymph, you know? She was a mess. Left me in ruin.” Fishmonger loaded bullets. “That’s when I knew he would kill her. Did it on the Sabbath, dressed for sacrament and all. I came up the trail, saw the end of it. Fed her to the hogs.”

Chef swallowed hard. “Jesus.”

“Oh, he ate them hogs later. Didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of a single digestion. He invited me. I felt I owed it to her. Two of us made a meal of it. It was the one way I could feel close to her again. Part of me wonders how she still might hold on to my insides. When the bile comes and the acids, how she clings to my liver, my tracts of bowels, praying, resting on my insides. Desert love. That’s what I think about when I think how she left me, so quick she left without an ache, left me with nothing but piss and wind. How do you like that? They always find a way, don’t they? Shit...” Fishmonger laughed. “Abstinence is no paradise.”

He fired a round into the sky. The ridge was empty. No coyotes, no sign of Kashmir. Fishmonger lit a cig. Smoke filled the shed. Chef’s eyes felt like they were bleeding. Fishmonger held a photograph. He lit the corner, watched as it became ash in his hand. Out on the plains the coyotes twisted in their mutilated circles, moaning the loss of poor Kashmir.

The stars were full as Chef hobbled out of the shed. The nightless night was idle and there was nothing but wind and the dark sweep of tumbleweed. He came to his knees in the clearing just over the ridge not thirty yards from the shed. The night was blue, the stars golden explosions. He rubbed dust between his fingers, smelled the dry ache of earth Kashmir had once occupied.

The coyotes drew close to him. Chef growled. He spit. His hands scoured for rocks but found none. They came with lapping grey tongues, dragged them over the back of his hand offered in peace. Chef pawed at the dust, pulled back weed and dirt only to discover the glint of old copper coins, those Kashmir once had stuffed in his mouth and placed over his eyes in death; and then his bones: a scrap of femur or clavicle, a jagged edge of jaw,

perhaps, a tooth. It had a filling. Chef smiled. Such an *idiota*, he thought and Chef held to what remained.

The coyotes seemed confused. They circled around him. Chef pressed himself into the long strings of weeds, buried his face in dust. He gazed about quietly. Fishmonger was on the tin roof. Rifle slung across his shoulder. Chef limped across the field. He went down on his belly and crawled. He sweated. The coyotes howled and bore bloody gums.

Fishmonger watched. "Salvation!" he screamed.

Shots echoed. Clumps of dirt sprayed near him. Chef limping. The deadness of his leg slowing him down. Coyotes followed, allowing him to stumble across the plain. He tried to escape into the trees but the coyotes circled him off. The cast throbbed. His fingers tore it to pieces. Sutures popped. Pulling away clothing until naked. Full of sweat. Bent and drooled on his thigh, licked his forearms. Stumbling awkward on all fours. Coyote whimpers. Jabbed by wet snouts. Unleashing his own snapping jaws and gagged howls. Face-planted into brush. Fishmonger's voice echoed behind him: *Salvation! Salvation!* Chef looked around him. He tried screaming but found only greedy laughs. Fishmonger reloaded. Palls of dust gathered under Chef. The coyotes danced between the bullets and Chef with them, taunting Fishmonger with cackles and howls. As the gunfire ripped across the clearing Chef could hear Fishmonger's cries: *Salvation! Salvation! Salvation!*

SLEEPING IN CANDELA

Between sunsets the streets flooded and the apartment wives feigned as eels and were lost to the alleys. We watched them drift aimless, dissolved by nap time to reflections. Those of us left behind alternated between heavy sighs of relief and attempts to change our fortunes by kicking dogs.

My girlfriend had taken to the waters and left me with a wife across town and a dog named Bogotá. I ate grapefruit from her fridge and lined barstools on the sidewalk and resumed fishing. I resumed boozing. I would drink until my dick turned red if given the chance. My father, the Colonel, kept the secret on the red liquor dick. Now he's in the laughing house. Says he invented the chicken egg. It is no small thing that we must unlearn the feelings of our fathers.

The fish weren't biting. For days, all I reeled in were lost fishing poles.

I scribbled down a list of wants: a large woman, ouija board, mounted boar's head that killed my best friend, friends that are not dead, old ladies that coo my name instead of

“Bingo!”, the Styrofoam wig heads my mother once kept in her closet where I practiced first kisses.

I painstakingly copied the list. I kept boozing until enough bottles were emptied. Then I threw them into the flood and watched as they drifted off.

Mother named me Reno Reno. The name was meant to take me beyond this town. Once I hitchhiked through Winnemucca and there was little but herpes and smiles and men getting knifed for their shoes and shot for their corduroy jackets. They ate mutton that tasted of discarded tires. I wish I had returned with the bullet wounds to prove it. I’ve spent my life avoiding fatal encounters with postmen and snow angels and any man that whispered he wanted to toy my collectibles in the Route 44 Diner restroom.

I have tried hard in many accents to fear myself.

After three days, a few of the bottles returned empty. I punted Bogotá off the roof and watched him paddle away. I did not weep. Inside the apartment I took a shit on my girlfriend’s rug thinking, *We can make this work*, and proceeded to clip from her newspapers the lingerie models, wiping my ass with them as a gesture of fidelity.

When the waters receded a groom came up the road hauling a mattress and singing whorehouse ballads. His tuxedo was torn, his skin spackled in grime. He leaned against the building façade and tried to light a cigarette. I held the match and he leaned in. His thumbs were a strange plastic, his beard smelled of old cheese. He was quiet. As if existing in a world without thumbs meant nothing to him. It’s a raw bargain without thumbs. Better mulligan, better not shit on the neighbor’s lawn unless someone is still willing to shake your hand.

Reaching into his coat pocket he handed me a photo of a bride. She had a dumb-luck smile and fancy hair. It looked cut out of a cheap magazine, the paper slightly damp.

“She doesn’t convince me she’s a marriage type,” I said.

“Read the back,” he said.

In all lower-case letters it said: *Following the night of rains the woman in Candela finds herself strangely asphyxiated with bridal desires.*

“Which way is Candela?” he said.

“Pick a direction.”

He said, “The women must be lovely in Candela. I found her in my tuxedo pocket and it was damp so I followed the water.” He continued, itching at his beard, “We’ll find a church, I suppose. And we already have a mattress.” Each time he brought the photo close to his face it dropped because of the plastic thumbs. Finally he clenched it between his teeth. He stood there for some time.

“You have a name?”

“Lecavalier,” he said.

“Candela’s a far way off,” I told him.

“Must be. Must be.”

I cast the fishing line into the ankle-deep puddles. “You don’t know what you’re missing.”

He walked slowly out into the street, got on his knees and began studying the markings left by the mattress in the mud. Pretty soon we were each down there with our noses in the mud looking for which way Candela might be. Occasionally, he would dip a plastic thumb into the mud and dab the tip against his tongue. We scoured the path for three blocks in the direction he had come and came up with no leads. Lecavalier sat on the curb in helpless resignation. I used a squeegee to clear a spot near the gutter for the mattress. We lay there like some old married duo, listening to the other blink.

“Do you imagine the rain washed it away? Do whole towns wash away?” he said.

“No, it’s always raining in Candela. They’re used to water. People there, they just sleep all day because of the rain.”

Lecavalier said, “That explains why after a night of rains she’s itching for a wedding.”

We started fishing again. He drank my liquor but I did not notify him of the red liquor dick syndrome: how if a man wanted it done right there were squirms and writhes and gentle hip bucks, there was kneading the groin into the barstool. All for the pride of saying, *I am intoxicated. I shall not remember.*

Before dawn we caught the first fish, a cichlid. It wasn’t much to gawk over, mostly scales and yellow eyeballs. “Looks South American,” Lecavalier said.

“How do you know?”

“It’s got the eyes.”

Ripping the hook out of the jaw tore off the head. So we hooked it into what was left of the guts and flung it back into the muddy road to see what we could catch. We did this near a thousand times. Turned out fate wanted us to have a thousand some-odd cichlids. “There must be a grotto of these sonfabitches,” he said. Soon we watched as a seagull flew down and wrenched the cichlid carcass from the hook and carried it off to a telephone wire. It swallowed the fish whole, as if mocking us. We repeated the drill with another fish, the same result each time: the seagull barreling down to snatch the carcass in its mouth and digest it on the telephone wire. Lecavalier held the photo of the bride in his hand, gazing between her and the seagull.

“Suppose we shoot it,” I said.

“Do you know what a bride loves? I’ll tell you,” he said, “because I’ve been to nearly a thousand weddings: a bride is enamored with doves.”

“Doves?”

“Doves are birds, you follow?”

“So?”

“Well, doves and seagulls must be cousins. If we could get a whole sky full of seagulls, it might just lure her to us.”

“Why doves?”

“They’re majestic. And when they sing, it is impossible to resist their cry.”

“Coo.”

“Huh?”

“Birds coo.”

“Whatever the hell,” he said. He started pacing the sidewalk. “If we could get enough seagulls and train them to cry her name, it might just lure her to us. Think of it: a thousand seagulls singing her name.”

“Sounds romantic.”

“Majestic.”

“What was her name anyway?”

“I don’t remember.”

We watched the seagull perch on the wire for a good hour without any of us moving. It was silent. Then it disappeared behind rooftops. Lecavalier tried cawing for the next three days but it never returned. He didn’t sleep. He didn’t move. Every now and then I itched his nose even when he pretended like it wasn’t a bother; I pulled oily crusts from his hair after the wind had blown through.

It wasn’t until the morning of the fourth day that Lecavalier hooked one of the seagulls when it swallowed three cichlids twined together. When I awoke the bird was turning circles in the sky, the thread of fishing line pulled taut with Lecavalier standing

barefoot on the mattress, his hands wrapped gently around the pole, giving slack when necessary to which the bird soared higher, and reeling in until it was just a few feet away. It made raspy noises as if phlegming its insides out.

It circled for hours. “Well goddamn it, I hope its wings don’t fall off,” Lecavalier said.

When it finally did land, Lecavalier teased it for days with fish scraps, managing to inch closer and closer and slowly build trust. He named it Earl. In the late hours, he encouraged it to caw with the right tones – *Nina! Nina!* – because that was how he had named the woman in Candela. There were more than a handful of times I awoke in the predawn hours and heard the two of them whispering and giggling, and when suddenly alarmed by my presence they reverted to bird dialects in which they might have been plotting my death or discussing the ancient secrets of how to pleasure a woman in Candela.

With the wedding day fast approaching Lecavalier decided it would be best if he tidied himself to resemble a proper groom. I found an old suit two sizes too small in my girlfriend’s closet. There were dead flowers in some of the apartment flower pots and though a single dead flower is something to cry over, a thousand will melt a heart. In one of the armoires washed down the road we found some rubbers which Lecavalier pocketed saying there was no telling what kind of gals they raised in Candela. He looked like an awful prince.

“You need a shave,” I said.

In her vanity cabinet was a straight razor like in the barber shops. There was no ointment. We used water from a spigot outside the apartment to dull the burn.

Lecavalier lay his head in my lap. It was just the two of us on the sidewalk, stretched on that mattress. Night descended. I pulled a comb through his hair to better see the shape

of his face. I started soft, massaging his cheeks and throat after each lick of the razor against the tender skin. Lecavalier wasn't enjoying the burn.

"Tell me something. Tell me anything," he said.

"Did you know the male cichlid carries the babies in his mouth until they're ready to hatch? I had a fish tank as a boy. All my father would buy were cichlids. He was fascinated by anything with gills. It's the females that are the nasty ones in the cichlid communities," I said, pressing the razor firmer and firmer along his jaw. "They ram the heads of rival males as to disgorge their young. I used to watch how many times the males could resist the females and save their eggs. I would count them until I got sleepy." I rinsed the razor in the gutter water and began to repeat the shave. My hands trembled around his lips. "Sometimes I woke up in the night and stood over my parents' bed while they slept and watched their mouths open and close. I would place fingertips inside their mouths and wonder if I could fit inside. I'd even put their fingers inside my mouth and think I would shelter them. Nothing is ever the same when we remember it, is it?"

Lecavalier looked into the blank sky. I held the beer cans for him while he drank so it would go down smooth. "She's not coming, is she?" he said. He tried holding onto the photo. It kept slipping through his plastic thumbs. Lather dribbled down his bare neck.

"Candela is a rotten place," I said. "My wife is from Candela and she's the kind of woman that would fuck dirt to make a garden grow."

"You have any pictures?"

"Sure. I got plenty of photos of wives and would-be wives."

Rummaging through the closets we found a cardboard box full of photos of wives and girlfriends and all the other something-er-rathers I had loved. "Tell me their names," Lecavalier said. So I made up a thousand names for him. Ayanna, Elise, Edith,

Gabriela... We burnt photos of the ones he didn't prefer: me holding the photo while Lecavalier held the matches uneasily, terrified of those moments when our fingers did not accidentally touch. I kept wondering if when the matches burned out if Lecavalier would be there in the darkness to light another, or if I would be left with all these photos. Maybe he was thinking the same thing. We took turns envisioning his wives, by sunrise each memory of them forever collapsing into a single point of grey.

INFANTILE

In the beginning it seemed like a phase. Walk through the door and there is the toddler tearing off the neck of a stuffed bear, the cotton insides soaking up the urine. Urination is a civilized term. There is a dignity evoked. But the toddler is pissing out of spite. Some friends of ours have a toddler, but theirs gnaws on shoes.

There were hours when it was actually cute. The way it would run around the house naked, my wife chasing after that little pissing pecker flapping like a windmill. Yeah, cute. Look there – the toddler pissed in the VCR; it pissed in the electrical outlet, on the shutters, the antique coffee table, the Christmas ornaments; it decorated the wallpaper with its unique style, such an artist!; it pissed on the dog which caught pneumonia and died. So we bought a hedgehog. It pissed on the hedgehog, too, and hedgehogs don't need a reason to die. So we upgraded, bought the toddler a little plant and some flowers. Urine is great fertilizer, the guy at the nursery said. Get ready for some beautiful flowers. My wife had always wanted prize-winning plants. She has favorable hair and photographs well in the shade. And the toddler,

well, in spite of the pissing, it had a way with smiles. We tried to put it on a schedule, make sure he only pissed on the plants twice a day. I explained the principles of saturation. The flowers were incredible. We plucked a few and put them on the graves of the dog and hedgehog. We let the toddler out in the yard every so often so he could say goodbye in his own way.

When it started pissing on books we knew it was out of spite. I'm a professor of anthropology; my wife is a librarian. She knows books; she used to steal them in middle school and was revoked library cards in three states before coming clean. Now she mans a counter and spots potential book rapists. She carries mace and is often swept away into fantasies with alphabets and leather bindings and font size. She loves the Russians. I think that's why the toddler's pissing relieved her in the beginning: that piss was sunshine for the soul. She said the toddler needed an outlet and this was his way of expressing he wanted to be a scientist, not a gomeril science which, she believes, anthropology undoubtedly is; but a genuine scientist – the kind that saves lives. I said it needed a brother, you know, something to wise it up, box its ears from time to time. I couldn't slap the kid; that's not right. That's why parents continually breed – to get the kids to slap each other around and take care of the dirty work they only wish they could do. But sometimes, sometimes, I wished to slap the pissing toddler. Right on his little pecker – not out of spite. No. For pleasure.

So we gave the toddler some scissors. It would chew for hours on the blades, but never bleed. Fleshing out drool, amused with its own tongue. We encouraged it to run. Even when the scissors rusted from piss, it kept gnawing, gnawing, never bothering to run. So I gave it matches. We lit them together and I pressed them into the toddler's hand. It giggled when the flame burned down. Pissed all the flames out. After the scissors and matches, it

would run to the vase and piss again. But it always managed to save a little extra for the books. Especially Tolstoy. Don't ask me why, but this kid hated Tolstoy.

But our toddler wasn't just one-dimensional, I mean, this was our offspring after all, and we were educated people. So it wasn't pissing *all* the time. In fact, when he got bored of pissing on those lazy summer evenings, he went around and clubbed things. Since we could remember, the toddler had carried a club. It was even smart enough to make notches on the handle with its little teeth for all its conquests. It was like our own little Visigoth and for a time we called it Björger, the Visigoth. It might have been appalled by its name because one night we found our encyclopedias and volumes of *The Complete History of the Roman Empire* on fire in the yard. Parenting is all about reminding yourself of the success, and there was some pride that night even though the ashes made my wife cry and I spent the evening collecting them all into an urn. Marriages, as anthropology demonstrates, can have success, too.

The toddler made all kinds of friends with the club. True friends. It knew how to sniff out a conspiracy. We started going to birthday parties. The toddler seemed to gravitate towards the madness of those events. A call back to the wild. Usually we found it chanting in the crib before we'd leave for the park. It knew all sorts of solemn mumbles and prayers, Latin and otherwise, and once at the park the toddler would start his pillaging. The rest of those parents couldn't get enough of it. "Ahhh...isn't it cute? Aren't they just adorable they way they tease and play?" Once it clubbed a little Hindu girl and dragged her under the swing set. We watched as he fended off a few jackals trying to scavenge his prize before really having his way with her. That was the first time I started to question if it was really my seed, I mean, I've *never* been so inconsiderate to the needs of a woman before. There was a lot of sand. The toddler was just messy.

Something had to give.

A few weeks later, I found the toddler in bed with my wife. I was in the bathroom in boxers, talking myself up, applying cologne. It had somehow managed to blindfold her and get her topless. At first glance, it seemed to be playing dumb, just lying there, ogling over her breasts. There were glasses of wine and my cigars. It was even using all my foreplay moves so my wife wouldn't know the difference.

It was a fair duel. I really laid into the toddler. And that's how we discovered its secret.

When we made the toddler cry it stopped pissing. And not just making it whine – we had to lace into the shitkicker to make the trauma run deep. It wasn't an instantaneous result, but after a few good wails it was as if the thread of neurons and synapses tore and that was the end of pissing. Naturally, the effects only lasted a few hours, so we had to maintain a constant rotation. Crying didn't help with the clubbing, but we didn't want to strip him of all individuality. Besides, we were optimists.

We instituted a no affection policy. The toddler was to be held by the longer rings of hair or, in some exceptional circumstances, by the neck fat. Any coddling or safe-keeping constituted a violation. No soft voices. No cooing. No Eskimo kisses or blowing on the toddler's belly. No giggling to make it smile or laugh. No more children's books – pure Dostoevsky and Dickens a la my wife's suggestion. If he warranted something cheery, we'd read a few pages of Kafka. If the toddler went twelve hours without a pissing spree, it could be granted one hug. If it went twenty-four hours, then a kiss. A whole week meant we'd take it to the park and let it club and ravage some unsuspecting little girl. We might even give it some raw lamb.

In the beginning, I won't lie, things were rough. But we held fast to our moral integrity. This culture is depraved of moral integrity and what else can a parent hope for but

to convey to their child a distinguished set of moral principles? In spite of opposition, we were proud. The toddler was evolving. Instead of pissing in the coffee beans, it would wait and piss directly into my mug when I wasn't looking, and just a trickle, just to let me wonder if there was really piss or simply my imagination. Of course, sometimes, we went to extreme measures to be sure it didn't cry – for the sake of the flowers. They were really something in those days. The mums came in purple and yellow bunches, the germaniums reeked of sunsets. With some carefully distilled piss, we even got a few orchids to bloom and I about did a somersault. The toddler, however, wasn't too jovial coming down off the crying, so his pissing was wild and uncouth which forced us to tie it up to the old dog chain and shorten the radius so no matter where he scrambled and pissed, the flowers would stretch their petals to reach that golden trickle.

The most difficult aspect was finding new ways to make the toddler cry. *We* had to evolve. It wasn't a matter of simple pinching or name calling. No, we tore off its toenails, we plucked its eyebrows, we waxed the peach fuzz on its back. We sucked on its toes until they were numb and it stumbled on its face like a narcoleptic puppy. We picked its nose and didn't let it eat the snot. We spiked its food with habanero peppers; we bought porno mags and showed it the tits it would never suck from. We bought strobe lights and taped its eyes opened, we danced horribly to old Salsa records and made it watch; bought hot and sour soup from the Chinese restaurant to scald its tongue.

I spent long nights studying the toddler. Its behavior reminded me of the Gun 'dük tribes of southern Africa. For weeks we left him there, chained, as I observed the perimeter of the pissing blueprints. They were remarkable. They seemed the prayers of an ancient descent, evoking pleas to fertility gods, war deities, and rain spirits. The toddler, as the data undeniably proved, craved resistance: fidgeting against sleep whereupon it slipped into

recantations of hero myths, heroes who rose against the imperialist powers; its vomit was even arranged into detailed pictorials on the decline of Western Civilization since the advent of the skyscraper.

Small breakthroughs occurred every day, some more remarkable than others. The toddler found affection for its feces and urine. Not so scientific. Initially, I found it a coarse digression. However, science did prevail and I understood it was not another plea to the gods for deliverance or some barbaric outcry, but a plea for companionship. I began collecting the excrement while the toddler slept and stockpiled the urine in jars. I used the softest stool samples to craft little figurines in the shape of male deities, allowed them to harden in the sun and then freezing the urine, sculpted those into female counterpart deities. I then laid them out for the toddler. I surveyed and documented which he gravitated towards so I might have a better understanding of his religious beliefs beyond the hypotheses I was drawing from the pissing diagrams which were becoming increasingly difficult to interpret. Even after the female deities had melted down, the ingenious toddler bathed in the waters as some sort of cleansing ritual. On the technological side, the toddler displayed a proclivity for architecture. Soon the toddler was crafting its own tools and beginning to horde its feces in the hopes of building weaponry and other advanced tools and structures such as a sundial, a hammer, and even a wheel. It constructed a miniature model of a city, complete with arches and an underground sewage system. I was even bestowed a key to the city, a token of gratitude I did not soon forget.

My wife started to cave. She tried to undermine my authority by stealing unauthorized hugs and kisses during the midnight hours, cradling the toddler, sponging it in the bath with cool water. She even let it piss over her clothes because she said she missed the

smell. I tried being affectionate when no one was watching. I held the toddler next to my heart and let it listen to the beat. It was unnatural.

Other parents praised our methodology. “How is your toddler so wonderfully unique?” they inquired. We smiled. They were especially fond of the figurines and marveled over them and the toddler’s ingenuity for artistry. Someone suggested we open a school. Oh, our vanity! God, we *were* such wonderful parents then. So we did. We kept all the toddlers on the same program as our Björger. They were free to wander and communicate; a routine of occasional discipline every few hours in order that I might collect my data and perform my analysis. Most of the tactics became subliminal, which pleased us both academically and emotionally.

It didn’t take long for the toddlers to wise up. Egoists that we were, we did not see it coming.

They staged an uprising.

In the chaos, my wife and her books were taken hostage. Decrees were sent forth. They demanded a sacrifice. Until a satisfactory one was performed, first editions were burned on the quarter hour. I stood by helpless. Then, in desperation, I made the exchange: my livelihood for my wife, the librarian. The toddlers agreed, but not before they torched and sullied the rest of her library to show they meant business and any attempts at a coup would be dealt with accordingly. They demanded my data and exclusive rights to the figurine gods. Tearfully, I accepted. That was when they bound me with strange putty. I was gagged for a time with a diaper but have been allotted these few whisperings.

The basement is frigid. The only warmth is the fading scent of their stale urine which does little more than rouse the curiosity of my body hair. A delight. A mockery. They have

encircled me. I can see wondering eyes. How long before they wield iron? How long after that will plastics bow to them as flames to water? They do not fear carbon bonds.

The chatter of their primitive weaponry escalates. They probe with organic needles and other blunt objects and I swallow hard to keep from screaming. The Visigoth toddler cradles me in his arms. I feel immobile, yet strangely, I don't wish to move ever again. The shadows of the deities fling against the basement walls, the crackling of fires in the background, my data lost into smoke and ash. The toddlers sing and dance. My son draws close and holds me. We shudder. We twitch. We writhe. Little feet quiver. And then my hot stream of piss is between us and I know it isn't out of spite, but love. We feel flimsy, like boiled eggs. Our pulse echoes around the room. One. Two. Three.

A SIMPLE TWITCH

It was December and Jules was leaving.

He turned the pocketknife between his fingers. It was a curious knife, wondrous workmanship. How did the knife get such delicious keen edges? he wondered. Perhaps some things were just born that way. Jules watched him scrape the mulch under his nails. He watched the handle turn, amused, the blade thick as a slice of steak. His eyes were heavy. How long had he been awake? He couldn't remember. He had been waiting for her. The room slowly dimmed. He watched from the corner of his eye. What he wanted was something to take his mind off his wife, Jules, who was leaving.

Outside the snow fell in heavy bursts. Two rabbits humped alongside garden shrubs. The mounds of snow formed dark shapes. He took solace in the snow, its blanketing sweep. The branches of the juniper tree bent with the awkward weight, branches cut at sharp angles like crooked elbows and wrists and his eyes spun nervously between the juniper and Jules

who raised her shoulders in an arc as if to say, *I am*. How she glared at him, how she hated him, he thought.

He had caught her in the act of leaving. Her eyes spilled out the surprise. Sadness flushed her cheeks. He sensed its coming: a connoisseur on most matters close to the heart. Yet he stood helpless, a silhouette and no means to stop it: his Jules was leaving.

It has nothing to do with our baby, she said. He opened, closed the knife. She said, Put that knife away. It makes you look like an ass, you know.

He squinted his eyes, muttered. A fit of nervousness brewed over her. It was probably due to his threat just minutes earlier to run off with the baby and sell it on the black market. He grinned.

How about China? he said. I bet I could get ten or twenty large for a kid like ours. He toyed some more with the pocketknife.

Don't talk like a pimp, she said. You don't even like Chinese food.

He snapped the knife shut. You're such a savage, he said. He chewed his nails. He said, At least I can use chopsticks. She was silent.

I've always been honest with you, she said. He was quiet. Perhaps I've lost my soul, she whispered. She stood at the window with a thin grey shawl wrapped around her shoulders. He watched her open her eyes wide for the sun. She whispered over and over. He wished she would have yelled. It would have been respectable for her to yell.

He said, You can't simply *lose* a soul.

Liar, she said.

Oh, Jesus, he said, we're a helpless bunch. He sat on the floor, legs crossed like an Indian. He watched her closets and drawers empty. Later he brought out a bottle of liquor

and the pocketknife, set them on the floor. Let's negotiate, he said. We can be adults about this.

You're sick, she said.

He said, I'm willing to negotiate.

She could not begin to understand, he thought.

Her name was Jules because her parents had loved the Beatles and in time she became his little polythene girl. He had met her in a bar. She had laughed at his caveman smile. They had shared warm beer and garlic sticks and he told her he was hopelessly in love despite the insanity of it all and would swear on her name to love her forever and one eternity. Check that, he smiled: two eternities. I'm drunk tonight. She laughed and he knew they ought to be lovers.

He rubbed garlic butter over her lips and she sang a blues ballad on a small stage with a cowboy. Later, he fought that same cowboy in an alley behind the bar for her love and thus began his long obsession with pocketknives. She had wiped the blood from his mouth and then they wrote vows on napkins and stuffed them in her brassiere. She said she accepted his unreasonable love and made him swear on forever.

It's unreasonable, she had told him.

You're so wonderful, he had said.

He no longer remembered when their evenings became without praise. Sometime after failed baby endeavors and the juniper tree withered and all they had left were brown leaves which they watched for comfort. Children will taint my view of the world, he confessed and they cried together in the darkness. Soon he came to realize he misunderstood everything about her and even when he tried it was no good – she did not want to be known: he had imagined her as the girl who loved ice cream sandwiches when in fact she preferred caramel apples; it

was petunias and never white roses, Dallas and not Dynasty, airplanes and sky, not mountain gulches. How could I have misjudged her so? he wondered. How can anyone be enthralled with the sky when there is ocean? People don't simply wake up and exchange lives, do they? Can they? When did everyone get to break the rules, when were convenience and apathy the norm for madness and discontent, he wondered.

She wrapped herself in heavy blankets and locked herself in room for days. Months passed between seeing her face. He spent hours with the pocketknife, sometimes sitting by the fire on a rainy Sunday evening, opening and closing the blade, stepping onto that summer lawn in bare feet and stabbing at a watermelon, the sugary sap oozing, licking it off his fingers, hand aching from chaffing the hilt, thinking of what it would be like if the watermelon were a nun because nuns were the most apt creatures on earth to be stabbed. She watched him from the window, joining him only once to stab at the watermelon and never again because it felt so right, so deserving and though brutal, it was full of hope and he poured them cognac and promised, This will jar your senses, this will relieve you, and then she poured and he drank. Later they got drunk together and made a baby without either of them knowing. In bed he held her, cradling her stomach. He said, Fathers are born for suffering. We are. We have that luxury, he said and she stroked his hair.

And she listened. Eyes closed but still full of movement.

Then she looked at him, exhausted of breathing.

She watched old movies when he was gone and during dinners of heavy wine and soft cheeses she admitted to being in love with Rock Hudson and Errol Flynn. She wore pretty dresses she bought at thrift stores and boutiques and said lovely words like *belle* and *dame*. She challenged him: You old string bean, to which he called to her as a *slut* and they considered it a date.

He bathed her when she came to her seventh month. She sang lullabies in the bath water, held herself under for long breaths to surprise him because he seemed so shallow. *Is it time? Are there contractions? Did you throw it up...again?* His hands moved over her swollen breasts, her bloated stomach, a bulge of swallowed water, nothing inside but water, he said. Floating. Sunnyside up. Down there, he looked, she could be buoyant.

Now in December she was strangely desperate. He had failed at convincing himself: there was nothing that could be done. Defeat, he repeated in his head, defeat, my mother didn't raise some goddamn loser, a phony, a hack.

You're a dreamer, he told her. You've always been a dreamer. That's your problem. Too much romance eats at the mind.

She said, You're a boy.

He considered how they had slept together the previous night as man and wife, feeling her curves, how she let him in, what a mother she was and how they laid there together, bent as question marks.

You hate me, he said. That's what this is about. Always your hate.

Hate is a flexible word, she said. Believe me: you wouldn't know what to do with yourself if I did hate you.

We're cruel people, you and me. Go on, tell yourself it isn't so. This is what we do when we do it. These are our lives. Tell me we aren't cruel? The suspense if making me mad, he yelled.

I won't give you the satisfaction, she said.

He threw a book which she caught, tossed it on the floor next to him, then moved slowly to the doorway to be quiet and watch. He read the book title: a Louis L'Amour special. *Love and the Cactus Kid*. There were whole volumes and sacketts on the walls, the

complete tales of Hopalong Cassidy. *Bowdrie Rides a Coyote Trail, Desert Death Song, Showdown on the Hogback*. Her favorites, *Far Blue Mountain* and *That Triggernometry Tenderfoot*. She was leaving him those. He would get L'Amour and those feelings, those memories, those ink and words; they were his prize, his piece of her. She would get...what would she get? he thought. The house? The right to tear up his lawn and curse his name in circles of her women friends; his barbeque grill to roast little burgers shaped like his skull; the right to use the bathroom first on Sunday mornings; his soul...she could have the soul.

He revealed the pocketknife, catching the anxiety of her eyes. He twisted it between his fingers as if to say, *This is your end*. He left his hands at his sides where she could see them, opened the blade and stroked the dull edge with his thumb, said *what* and *what*, never once daring to look her in the eye. His legs were heavy, he complained.

The branches of the juniper swayed. The snow outside fell untouched.

He said, You know the thing I remember most about us was how you made love. Just like a canary: always noise and noise but no one to listen.

You won't keep me here. You rotten son of a bitch. I know you. I know you, goddamn you. She packed the suitcase. *Their* suitcase. *His* suitcase. Yes. *His* suitcase. It was the details which counted now. All else was cruel.

Fly little bird, he said. I'll see you at a motel later tonight. Or at your mother's. We'll see.

She said, You can't stand the thought of me out in the world, can you? That's what eats at you the most.

Go fuck a cowboy. I have the heart in this relationship, let's not forget, he said. She did not deny it.

Jules moved past him down the hall. He felt no urge to touch her. Doing so would only bring her closer and he wanted to despise her, he wanted to pummel her but couldn't even muster the words out of his throat. Then he felt the terrible need to hold her tight and never let go.

Are you taking the baby? he asked.

Of course I'm taking the baby.

And there it was: her prize. For him L'Amour; for her, their seed. His seed. *His* little man. He told her to go to hell. Then she cried and he felt drowned with guilt. She was near the doorway but he was close, so close that if he only stretched his hand he could have touched her, even felt her, and ended it, but he did not. He wanted to be mean, swallow it and ruin her with his cruelty. But he couldn't. He didn't even have pity for her, not even pity. The more he tried to hate her, the more desperate his determination was to keep her there with him.

Her cries softened. He became aware of his surroundings: the dry creaking noises of the floor boards and door hinges, the smell of the smoldering ash where she had lit a fire earlier with toilet paper and he convinced the neighbors not to phone the Fire Department. He saw her lunge for the baby. He wedged himself between their three bodies. He felt her breath on him. Warm garlic memories.

Baby, he said: baby-Q, baby-Q, baby-Q, don't you leave me, and he reached for them with his simian hands and she whispered, I can't. Please. Don't make me do this. You understand, please understand. He told her they could cry it off together like they had before. She held the baby.

You can't leave, he said. He fingered the pocketknife. The blade snapped open and they both knew the sound. Please, please, please, please...

She hit him just below the eye. It made a sound like celery split over a wood counter. From instinct, he reached out and hit her across the jaw. A simple twitch. Nothing less. Motion seemed to still and the great brass wheel that turned the universe slowed, everything was so goddamn incredibly slow to him and all turned to a sea of glass and childish rhyme: *three little orphans jumping on a bed, one fell off and split his head. And shattered into glass. And shattered into glass.*

She nearly dropped the baby. He gripped the pocketknife and prepared for war. Then he felt sick and dropped the knife when he saw her stand to her feet. He quickly folded into apologetic tenor.

I love you, he said. It was the only apology he knew. On his knees he grabbed her hand and kissed it. She had the smell of ginger and immediately he felt warm and safe. She was hysterics. She screamed, tried to move. He tugged at her arms, reached for the baby. She slapped at his body and pulled away.

He said, Give.

She said, Don't take my baby.

They pulled.

The baby tore.

It tore and did not bleed it was such a perfect tear. They come around so rarely. She said, My God, and he said, *What a tear!* because it was a simple thing and there was no mistaking a tear, there was that noise: the uprooting of an old tree, oozing sap, the soil sifted like flour.

They were quiet after the tear. He held an arm and she had a somewhat baby clutched close to her breast, a somewhat baby without an arm or leg because of the tear.

Then from the tear spilled more babies, hundreds and then thousands flooding out, spilling like miniature seedlings from one simple and perfect tear.

She screamed. On their knees, with babies sprouting like a fountain, they lashed out with greedy hands and fought over them. He ran armloads into the closet. Thief! she screamed, and accused him of taking the beautiful ones. He hid others in the nook of the curtain. He tucked his children into his pockets and she threw hers into the suitcase saying, these are *mine*. He envied her.

What a perfect tear, a goddamn perfect tear, he laughed. Fate was so kind, but not even fate could plan such things. Jesus, the workmanship of such a tear. He eyed it carefully, held the baby to the light and felt them spill onto his lap. God must be a deranged toymaker, he said.

But she was gone. He followed her sound up the stairs, footprints leaving odd noises, enough to make him believe she had been taken up by angels. The bathroom. The bathroom door was locked. He rattled the brass knob. Water was running.

Jules! he screamed. Two hours. Jules! but again no answer. Midnight.
Jules...Jules...Jules...

He smoked cigarettes and leaned his back against the bathroom door. Minutes became three days and he did not sleep. Occasionally he went to the edge of the stairwell and gazed down on his torn heap of babies scattered over the floors. Some were curled into corners with limbs convulsing, others scurrying like rabid creatures across the floor, afraid of the light, through the cracks of the floor they slipped and were lost. Where did they fall into? he wondered. He watched them sit still for hours at a time, completely motionless but for their blinking eyes.

He left to buy cigarettes which he slipped under the door to Jules and she slid the filters under the crack when she had finished her smokes. She never spoke. He talked aimless: They say on the news the winter is going to last all through summer...Charming, isn't it?...There are dead celebrities...The newspaper food critic gave a lovely review on the smoothies at the mall...

Behind the doors the children cried for their mother. Jules. Jules. Jules. He whispered above the running water: There are children dying here, children and I can't feed them – they want a mother and I'm afraid my nipples will turn raw...

In a matter of days the babies were dead. They must have suffocated from the heat, he thought. He considered that perhaps it was *his* carelessness but knew on his insides it was hers: she refused to feed them; she had let them die. Her cruelty. He spent an entire day carrying their bodies into the snow and buried them under the juniper tree. He sweated. Even with the falling snow which was more sleet, he sweated. They smelled like old leaves, their skin wet and squeezed between his fingers as old soap when he grasped them in handfuls. He named each one to lighten the mood but it brought him no peace and he quickly ran out of intelligent names. They were buried with the roots, safely tucked away for no one to ever see, imagining them writhed with the roots, little babies of bark and sap, rings of sprouting hair-weed. What kind of fruit would they bear? Wonderful pomegranates. We are fathers. We are born for suffering. We have that luxury, he whispered. We are not given to remembrance. What have I done? What have I created? he whispered into the door.

He comforted Jules with the news: Remember waffles at Flaubert's Pancake House...with the syrup you like, those berries...you broke your leg and we never felt the pain...I had to bury them, Jules...I'll cut you bitch, I swear I can cut holes in you like newspaper...I've named the ones with blonde hair...with no hair...with blue eyes, your

eyes, or are yours green? I've never cared to notice...do you know my eye color, I bet you do, you think you know everything...why won't you answer me? I'm sweating...did you know that? Did you? I'm tired. I'm cold, and I love you...how can you be so sure?...

His fists slammed the door. He read from the collection of L'Amour titles. An entire night was passed trying to pick the lock. With the point of the pocketknife he began to peel back the layers of paint. First the paint, then the splinters. It took two days alone to strip the first layer. He was meticulous. Then he burrowed. Like an animal: with fingernails and teeth and cursing her name. The hole was small, but he did not lose his steam and with each splinter it gave him renewed hope and he swiveled the hilt until his palms were numb. All he wanted was to see. Christ, would she let him see what she was doing? What she had done? She was teaching them to walk, to say filthy words while others sang Sunday School songs, how to pay the rent, the secrets of managing adultery, the disgruntled apathy that stems from majoring in Art History in college, flaws in the Blitzkrieg of Poland; she reviewed 401K benefits. God, he pleaded, let me see, let me see...His Jules. His stolen babies. They were all that remained and what a father he wanted to be. He paused for cigarettes and watched the snow fall, the juniper branches collapse with the weight, sometimes slammed his fist against the door in frustration. I'll cut you all to pieces, he yelled and imagined her flimsy and dream-like, stabbing holes in her as though she were carbon paper and watching the wind pass through her.

The pocketknife breached the door at morning. He cleared out the space with his tongue. Some light passed through. Splinters ran out his mouth. He wedged his eye wedged against the hole. He saw shadows pressed to shadow. He heard water and it washed over his bare feet. Inside it was teething with babies: thousands, their eyes all staring back at him. Pear-shaped. Wounded. She had been busy tearing them to pieces. Hundreds, thousands of babies

and he watched as she breast fed them in bunches. She was killing them – slowly. Maybe she didn't know it, he wondered; maybe she knew all along. Envy bit his tongue and he felt bursting with that sensation of want. The water washed over his feet. It was nothing like the sound of the ocean. It was dried. He watched their shapes floating. Another wave of warm water. It reminded him of that melted feeling, like a hand slow to cover a face, the burning of hyacinths, or sand kindled in sand.

He blinked. And there was nothing. Looking through the hole there was nothing at all. Old floorboards and rust crusting the exposed pipes. Scraps of the L'Amour novels covered in mud and years of wear. A broken window. When he concentrated he could still hear the sound of rushing water, but only if he concentrated. He eased down the staircase avoiding with his bare feet the rusty nails which sprouted out of the floor like wicked teeth.

He gazed through the window. There were not even shadows. Slums. Trees. A gutter waiting to be filled by sunlight. Juniper branches. The light exposed a vast nothingness.

Outside he collapsed into a cushion of snow. His eyes turned and watched the sky pass. He was exhausted. He watched the sun as it moved to set, thought of how he might one day take a child outside to show him sunbeams, study their shape, explain physics and psychology, debate whether the sun descended upon them as an ignominious end or climbed towards the stars in triumph.

The snow dissolved, once bloated with thickness and now a transparent sea of glass rising to fill under him.

He waded through rising water which bred puddles large as lakes.

He felt his body become light. Jules. Jules. Jules. Do you remember when we tore the babies? Oh, yes, tearing the babies, that seems like lifetimes ago...the snow was heavy and everything was without sun...

Water enveloped him. He resisted the urge to sink. He wanted to be buoyant. Through the window and all around him he saw their eyes watching. Snow melted and water rose around him. Beneath the surface he could still see them as he crouched in his grotto: their eyes terrified, unblinking.

WUNDERLING

Nayda is not well. The womb is a purple throb, almost unnoticeable in the dark. It huddles at her feet in yesterday's newspaper, fat as an old woman's fist. Tufts of steam slip out the mouths. Small hairs catch the moonlight, appearing as cricket legs. We aren't sure how long it has been lying in wait: dreaming us, seducing us.

"A fallen womb," Nayda whispers.

I put my hand to her belly and feel the echo. It must have fallen out sometime during the night. Hers. Mine. Our wunderling. I wish it were mine. But mine is yet inside me; mine smiles until it creates the stretch of me. I put my mouth over her bellybutton and blow. Empty. Yes, Nayda's womb has befallen her.

"We could name it, couldn't we?" she says. "We wouldn't have to get rid of it?"

There is nothing in the room but the old radio and the wunderling. Sometimes we listen to the radio, sometimes to the breathing womb. Three. One. Nothing. There it murmured. Three. One. Nothing. Nayda fears the radio which informs us it is the season for

wunderlings. We do not call the specialist. There is an odd smell. She doesn't think I know. Ever since the womb abandoned her, Nayda smells like old corn husks. We decide it is safest for each of us to sleep on the floor with one eye open to avoid further desertions. Who is to say our mammaries won't follow? Our hearts have not been decentered as often as is necessary. Nayda suffers from toothaches and other spells and sometimes can be sent into a blur for days and say nothing but the Lord's Prayer on rerun.

"Perhaps it wandered in from the rain," she says. She is full of all manner of invention. She wants to believe she is whole; it's understandable, but altogether detestable. As she shies away from the moonlight, it reminds me that all too often I awake to find myself on the beside; the commonplace of my existence. There were days I wished I had been raped to dilute the inevitability of morning. Nothing ever becomes of me. Nayda doesn't know how I have fallen in love with an unknown caller whose only voice is a dial tone that tells me nothing about myself in a way of wanting to feel the beneath of nothing.

We spend the afternoons ruminating the womb's potentialities. Stewed with chastetree berry and tansy leaves. Pickled in brine for Sunday evenings. Are we being punished? Are we terrible people? Or are we just enduring what has been done in other worlds?

How curious a thing it was, our wunderling, how shameful it wasn't. It had been too long since my last dose of shame.

Nayda fears wunderling offsprings. She sips blue cohosh tea with pennyroyal leaves. She makes an account of her worst sins even though she doesn't believe in sin. Reading pornographic romance novels to comatose widows at the nursing home. As a substitute teacher she confiscated necklaces from the girls in the German club and wore them every night hoping to dream their dreams. She sometimes watched the lights blink on the suicide hotline control switch. Instead of writing down all her fears and painful memories on scraps

of paper and burning them at Girls Camp, she wrote dirty phrases: *Just once I'd like a man to fuck me like an instrument. Just once I want to be pulled like harp strings until I unravel end to end.*

“What if we found a man to impregnate the womb...” she wonders.

I tell her, “Maybe it fell because of a man.”

The sleeping Nayda doesn't know I have wedged myself half-way inside the womb.

At dawn the womb bleats. We take turns massaging its misshapen edges. Sometimes I press too hard and can feel the knotted middle. It makes me hungry. After a few days it looks engorged – expanding with every throb, frayed hairs twitching. Nayda hums nursery rhymes. It expels little coughs. It bites playfully. Nayda coils a few hairs around her finger and wrenches free tiny sprigs. Lost to her sleep, I unravel twists and folds of the wunderling. I lay them on the floor and watch them try to find themselves. Cupping several in my hands, I wait to hear their secret whisperings. Before they dry out I knead them back into a wombly shape.

Later it watches me. Pauses. Breathes. It has the stink of little boy feet. It doesn't wash nicely. Mostly it limps towards my womanlies. I open thighs, then close; taunting, smiling. The knot inside me tightens. I use the cigarette tip to singe the wunderling underbelly.

Just the other night I awoke and found Nayda sucking on my bellybutton. She left a large purple ring. She said she had no choice. She tells me her nipples are raw from trying to nurse the wunderling and she craves sucking. She wanted to know what my womb was doing. I had only pretended to be asleep. I had listened to her whisper foul curses at my womb in languages that no longer existed, demanding that it abandon me. Of course, mine didn't listen. She lies awake all night with a butterfly net and a spoon, fingers a-twitch. Sometimes she gazes out the window, sometimes she stretches on the floor. Everybody's time comes –

sooner or later, every life falls into a liminal space of neither mundane nor extraordinary, but terribly unexplainable.

In the beginning we worried about the health of the wunderling. Almost immediately we noticed fat spools wrung around its hide. “Do you think it needs exercise?” Nayda said. We tied it with the dead dog’s leash but the wunderling was terrified of sunlight and wouldn’t budge through the doorway, suctioning itself to the stairwell.

Weeks later, the womb has nearly dried out. Nayda pulls off brittle crusts and rubs them between her fingers into flakes. I watch as she massages the womb with Vaseline until it glistens the way flowers do when trying to survive a winter storm.

I’ve seen what she feeds it: used tampons, condoms, anti-birthing ointments sucked from her fingertips. The womb has a delicate interior and rejects all nourishment, spewing little gruels along the floorboards that Nayda hasn’t the heart to clean up.

She won’t tell me but I know she’s been eating near-eastern delicacies hoping another womb will grow inside her. “Spices won’t do you any good. It’s old wives tales. Fallen things don’t have the will to evolve,” I tell her.

“It must have left something behind when it loosed its way down. A slip of skin, a knotted twist. At night I feel them wandering about my ribcage and spine searching for the center of me. Don’t you understand? I feel them.”

She deep-fries long curls of dough and fills them with creams before hording them in the freezer. She tells me they’re not substitutes but growing distrust of Nayda has made my morning showers become self-induced gynecological exams. I ought to know what it would be like to have a womb seduced and befallen, but I have never once felt the presence of my womb, something that makes me strangely jealous of Nayda’s condition.

Soon every movement feels bland. I find Nayda lurching through doorways and down hallways mimicking my sway, the pucker of my lips, the way my jaw pops when I recall a sad memory. She attempts to synchronize our laughter. At night we lay the womb between the two of us and hold hands like lost sisters.

“We could share,” she whispers. “Think of how the world grows cruel with pettiness.”

She cries into the node of my armpit and I let her press an ear against my belly to listen to my womb throbbing in its own tangle. I should know better: at morning Nayda has contorted herself into a cruel bend of knees and jawbone and elbows. I haven’t the courage to undo her.

Another morning aches itself out. Nayda walks with an awkward tilt. She grows a lazy eye. She says she dreams only half dreams these days. The emptiness of the womb is taking its toll.

Discolored fluids blotch the floorboards. Discharge on the windowsill. I look at the womb. It must have been planning an escape. *Miscreant. Foul. Ambitious.* Or suicide? I don’t know. Nayda applies iodine and hydrogen peroxide, tempers its sighs with a lullaby. We watch the wunderling dream the other half and do our very best not to consider who must die in a halved dream. Suddenly, I want to wring it between my fingers into pulp.

Nayda squats over the womb. It howls when she gets close. It doesn’t want to go back. She attempts all manner of insertion positions – the free-standing Murphy, Russian Eagle Eye, the inverted Hollinshed – things I’ve never seen and things I regret cannot be unseen. Nayda barks orders at the womb to reenter her womanlies. The womb stares, slightly befuddled.

I tell her, “We should kill it. Before it gets too fond of itself.”

“We don’t have a permit for its disposal.”

Nayda paces the room in crooked circles. Her breaths shallow as not to disharmonize with the womb. I don’t warn her of the hazards of synchronization with fallen things: once a man held conversations with candle flames; a woman gave birth to a rainbow. There are so many things we don’t understand.

Inside her, tightness fills the void the wonderling left behind. Nayda thins; the skin around her underbelly sinks into itself like a doughnut hole. While she sleeps I prod it with a finger, reveling in its entwined shape. I trace an outline with a fingernail of where I would commence dissection. This gives me the opportunity to avoid remembering my own womany fillings or the fact that my underbelly is a soft pudding that I like to scrape with a fondue fork.

We tie a string around her ankle and nail it into the floorboards, fearful she might be swept away by heavy gusts of wind. Tears fall but only out of a single eye. Taste is limited to a single gland on her tongue. She paces the floors in half-circles in slightly teetered limps. We warm polished garden stones in the fireplace and before they can cool, press them down her throat hoping to restore her balance. Nayda smokes cigarettes until her gums bleed. She drinks the Southwark Dark Lager he left behind and imitates his grunts.

Stretched on the roof, Nayda waits for a rainstorm to soften the ground for her leap. Her fall is a kind of turn. She hangs there, slightly awry, a delicate stranger. When it’s finished, she limps around the house, resigned to the anonymous glow of Wednesday.

AND THE WHOLE NEVER HEALED

The house was in its final agony. Vine and rot had descended and now every floorboard and loose nail and splintered banister seemed determined to thin itself into an invisible point between soil and horizon. Dalinda seldom left, fearful it might collapse without her. Even then they would not have noticed her. Hers was an existence unnoticed. The boy she had kissed played a broken banjo and her underwear went missing every day between high noon and low noon, and whether stolen or lost she never could say, rather only understood how this was the sad concerto of life: to curl into the window frame and let one leg dangle and pull the other close to suck the kneecap and gaze at the foothills and remember they were not hills but the tombs of giants but every day the world flivvered a little less and to breathe meant knowing the thing at the end of the road was merely a shadow you had loved in some other world full of sun. So came the yellowed evenings with Dalinda in the window and all was without taste and a queer noise hummed the walls and she whispered to no one, *Tell me the things between living and remembering.*

Nothing spoke back.

Another night: *Tell me the things between living and remembering.*

It was an old foundation, this government subsidized mansion. Poor wallpaper and terrible plumbing, inherited through a B-clause. It could be anything in the walls. Father inspected. Counted out the rhythm of heartbeats.

A giant, he mumbled.

There was hush. Some groans. Not the average giant, Dalinda prayed, something more, something...*something.*

Oh, the poor baby, the poor thing, whispered her mother. She scuttled to the vent and hunched close, tried to determine the color of its pupils. They're glowing like a bowl of silver fish, she smiled. Dalinda watched, searched for the discolored pupil, imagined her reflection flicker like a coin in rain.

You're all seeing things. There's nothing there, said her brother, Honeycutt.

Sun faded. Shadows ate up the room. The sounds had stopped. Maybe he was stuck? Was this their chance? someone said.

Go outside. See if he's coming out the chimney, her mother said.

I'd sooner hump a ream of sandpaper than stand in *that* heat. Her father tried to pose authoritative. He had lady hips.

Our dear Melville, her mother said.

Dalinda hated this pet name. It was phony.

Her mother rambled how the giant must have been caught in a river current as a toddler and sucked through the belly of the earth only to be spit out into their pipes a grown man looking to mate. Her father said she was crazy and more than likely he was out drunk and went snooping for tail where he wasn't wanted and got what he deserved.

What he deserves is a good neutering. I know giants. I've made love to giants, said the grandmother.

Don't be such a tart, Grandmother, Dalinda said.

Filthy slut, filthy slut. Your babies will be ugly, Grandmother said. She glared. She looked like a sick rainbow hung in the sky too soon.

Dalinda scuffed across the floorboards in tiny steps, hoping to avoid compressing the giant's otherwise fragile memberments. She huddled into the corner where she could be closer to the vibrations of its breaths. They were slow and tasted like her father's whisky. When no one else could, she could feel his laughter under her feet. She imagined pulling him free and chaining him in the yard: Melville lifting great loads of wash above his head, assisting Honeycutt with a carburetor in the garage, flossing his teeth with the ribcages of large hounds.

Soon there was a smell.

Perhaps he's rotting, Father said.

Grandmother Balthazar shrugged. She wasn't even their grandmother but some woman they brought in off the streets and not even old but terribly wrinkled. On occasion, she stole Dalinda's underwear. This was no secret. Everyone stole from Dalinda. She had the face for it. Grandmother Balthazar was the least obvious and the most frequent. She wore as many pairs of undies as she could. Dalinda tried to reason, saying she probably snapped the elastic to remind herself she was living.

Life without underwear isn't so terrible, her mother had once said.

It's humiliating.

You're melodramatic, darling. Think of the perks. At slumber parties you'll never have to share a sleeping bag; cats will hate you; painters will swoon for you; grandmothers

will always envy you. She placed her hand on Dalinda's shoulder: Don't live life with a grudge.

Dalinda didn't want envy. What did she want? She troubled her own mind for such answers. For a time she had wanted to be like the little girl in the newspaper, the one who had swung too high on the swing set and doing an atomic cherry bomb managed to turn herself inside out. But the newspaper was full of lies. Not a thing left to trust. Not her father who hadn't held her tight when she was a baby. A strong wind knocked her out of his hands and she didn't fall as much as she had floated and that was how they discovered she had no heart. They brought her to a cardiologist and he listened and ran tests and said *these things happen* and someday before her eleventh birthday he assured her the heart would grow in properly. But it never had.

Her mother had been hysterical at the thought of Dalinda's heart as one of the *smallest* things: what will she do when she stands in front of a mirror and sees braces? or when her pet rabbit dies? or when boys bring her flowers that wilt from her touch? or that mole on her neck sprouts black hairs? or when the sound of her first gunshot causes the hair on her neck to quiver? or when she discovers there is an end to the rainbow? and she'll be the freak without tears and she'll never get to say *I have a broken heart*...she'll only get to say *I have a broken. I have a broken.*

All sounds mocked her. Dalinda harbored affection for them in spite of this. They couldn't be cheated. Not the endless bowls of macaroni stirred slowly, mine. Not toads by the pond, mine. The screech of car tires on sand, mine. Lumberjacks hacking stumps to their deaths, mine. The rhythmic lull of a pregnant woman's womb she listened to while they slept at the park, mine. Ice freezing to a bridge, mine. She wanted to hear something terrible. She waited. She wanted to scream.

There had been rumors. Like she had been born with a hole in her chest where birds nested or how she had a golden heart whose pulse was like radio static and reminded you of all the past lives you lived but were just out of reach, like ripples swallowed in ripples.

And birds fly in and out laying marble eggs, they said.

And when she breaths tiny flecks of gold come out her mouth, they said.

And when it rains water passes right through her, they said.

And the hole never healed, they said.

In the sink her father found red hairs. He found them on the bed sheets and pillows.

Holding them to the light he said he couldn't take this living much longer.

Something fishy is happening, he mumbled. When did it become the season for giants?

You're talking crazy, her mother said.

We'll have to weed this giant out. I want him alive, he said.

Grandmother Balthazar said, Giants are a nasty business.

Quiet you. Or we'll start rebuilding your coffin.

Cocksucker, cocksucker, she whispered.

They smoked cigarettes in twenty-four hour rotations. We'll suffocate the sonfabitch, father grinned. They tried to lure him out with old folk ballads like the library manuscripts suggested. The giant endured. His sole purpose is to torment me. And I am like Odysseus, only no one will write poems about me when I am old and gone, father said.

Oh, God, said mother.

The carving commenced at dawn. With sledgehammers and butcher knives they cut into the walls, working as slow, vicious surgeons, worried of hacking poor Melville to pieces or crushing his lovely bones unrecognizable. Sweats and dusts overcame their faces. Father

plowed forward, wall to wall, and covered in dusts until he looked like a snowman left out too long in the rain. They shared cigarettes. At morning the skies looked hurt. The world felt smaller and smaller. Sounds haunted them and even their own breathing was a pain they had to endure. Nights were passed sleeping inside the hollowed-out spaces, insulation and moldy wood scraps hung low over their heads and they dreamed it was discarded intestinal tract or loose flaps of skin as the ever-elusive Melville made his escape from one wall to the next.

These are the scraps of him, Honeycutt was fond of saying. He held invisible particles clenched tight between two fingers close to his eyes.

What do you think?

An eyelid.

Perhaps elbow skin.

Keep at the labor, children, keep at the labor.

The girth, the dignity. Undoubtedly one of the Nephilim.

Lady, I haven't come for some dead giant, Honeycutt muttered. He had such an idiot grin, Dalinda thought.

Fools, it must be a tooth, said another of her nameless siblings.

All the pieces were collected in a jar and mother banded a beautiful yellow ribbon across it which read *Our Dear Melville, Giant of the Civilized*.

In darkness they huddled close into those gutted walls and each sibling took turns telling a tale of Melville or another giant whose corpse had grown to become the pregnant shape of foothills.

What will you do with your share of the giant?

Honeycutt said, I want to use his heart to power the engine of my car. I bet you didn't know that giants were the exiled men of our history. Shepherds of the soil. Loved the

earth more than women and cast out for it. When they wandered the earth would cling to their feet and the rest of their bodies just grew to mimic their feet.

Cocksucker bullshit, said Gran.

Please, Gran, said Dalinda.

I hope your womb falls out, she whispered, smoking her cigarette. Dalinda couldn't stomach to look at her in her nightgown. The fabric was so thin she could make out every wrinkle, every lip of skin that folded and slipped.

What do you name a car of that caliber? said father.

The Jesus-Mobile. Heart of a giant but running on the spirit of the Lord.

Where in the hell are you going to drive?

Beyond the west and maybe some beyond that, Honeycutt said. Find a new ocean. Maybe I'll have the pleasure to name it after myself or something I'd like to name myself.

I tell you what *I'll* do, said father. I'll have his head. Before I gut it clean I'll spend time opening and closing those eyes. And then I'll clean it out and lie on the insides and watch the horizon and see if I can't see past the stars. Maybe I'll charge folks a nickel to see the moon through the eyes of a giant.

What else?

Cut him to pieces and ground him down into glue and give to the hobos to sniff. Maybe then we can find it in ourselves to love horses again, someone said.

Hack off the flesh and whittle the bones into baseball bats for the Parks & Recreation Services, someone said.

Grandmother?

I'd like to hold myself in his palm, she whispered.

Mother lay there like a thin stick of bark waiting to be snapped. He'll be my ticket to the carnival, she said. I want to learn how to swallow the swords. They'll come to see me. They'll come to see if I will bleed.

Dalinda didn't say. Maybe she would never tell. Perhaps a kiss. A kiss from the deceased giant. The same as ice cubes pressed down her throat, slowly melting away. A single kiss to make her scream and rid the want of wholeness.

When the last wall fell, they stood motionless in silence. Dust circulated and there was nothing from the nothing. The grey façade of the town spread below them, powdered in a dirty afternoon light. The wind was chill and only then did Dalinda notice fall had passed to winter. Father blew the cur from his nose into his hands and slapped his cheeks with a sigh. Shrugging his shoulders like he didn't care, Dalinda watched him wipe a tear from his eye. He would have to return to his life, she knew: wandering about the house, conversing in riddles in languages he didn't speak, opening doors and closing them, the very act of breathing a kind of penance to some nameless god.

There wasn't a word until they saw him.

It couldn't have been their Melville. Honeycutt spotted him from their roost on the crumbling house. He shrieked like some wild animal and jumped, rolling over the patches of dead lawn. Father followed, the boys next. Mother, even Gran. Not Dalinda, she with the trembling hands, they mocked. It wasn't their Melville perusing the streets. Just a somewhat man with a jawbone keenly archaic in its shape. Yes, vaguely tall. Yes, he smelled similar to the giants of old. Surely the offspring of *some* Olympus. They fell over him, tongues lashing about their mouths. When it was finished they laid the body on the kitchen table. They were sweating. They were pleased to have had such difficulty bringing it through the disheveled doorway. Mother yelped when the corpse was too large for the kitchen table.

How blessed we have become, she cried.

How blessed.

Father did the carving. It was a strangely soggy corpse and Gran suggested they hang the pieces on the clothesline to dry. The little children toyed with small bone fragments and loose ends of flesh that fell by the wayside, arranging miniature puzzles of him on the linoleum. Mother was delighted.

He is both massive and humble. Our very own ouroboros, she wept.

Father did his best not to hack the corpse unrecognizable. Honeycutt put himself in charge of labeling the cross-sections with post-it notes identifying *leg, hip, love handle*. He was a fine addition to the yard and her younger siblings raced through the hanging slabs as if in a maze. Never laugh at a dead man children, her father said, never laugh at a dead man.

Past evening the first of the onlookers had come and gone. There was a tiny handwritten banner which proclaimed: *Melville, Giant of Tomorrow*. Some came curious of the odor, others threw religious parchments and shouted curses that were meant to endure for several generations. There were chefs seeking ground spices for rubbed meats, carpenters curious if there was enough bone to fashion a gazebo. Some offered money, others their grandmother's pearls in exchange for scraps. Most left empty-handed, their only fulfillment stemming from a makeshift lemonade stand across the road. After some negotiations with the lemonade children, father procured a partnership. The price of lemonade was increased and as compensation, each customer was allotted a morsel of the giant remains from a community grab bag: fingernails, strands of lips, polished joints, etc.

Dalinda watched from the balcony. Night came. The wind passed through her. It left her numb. Behind her the empty room held old sounds. She let bits of plaster crumble in her hands. Here was where he laughed, and here he cried, she thought, stepping through and

through the empty spaces. Every moving shadow betrayed her. She held in her hand a few phony pieces of the somewhat tall gentleman, now dismembered on their lawn. The sting of lemonade clenched inside her. She closed her eyes. She knew in some history of the world something was born out of nothing. And then she felt a scream without memory rise in the darkness of her throat, blooming as she gave it the world.

WHAT GETS CAUGHT IN THE SAND

Rumor was he had taken shrapnel to the brain. I got the telegram to be at the train station where all the other wives and lovers would gather. I got new perfume and mixed it with some of the old stuff so my Noah would remember my smell. Some little boy across the street had warned me that prisoners of war had firecrackers lit up their noses and their foreheads buffed every morning to make them unrecognizable. But I didn't care – my Noah was coming home. My hair had gone to noodles and I had a new pair of pretty yellow shoes and a blue dress. I had read somewhere that men returning home from war liked to see their women in blue because it reminded them of the ocean.

Hordes of them filed out the gates, those vast sheets of khaki cut like Christmas cookies: men hobbling on crutches and others with white bandaged heads, some with legs, others without nostrils, wounds we could see and those we would never know about. It was like being at the zoo during a botched fire drill and seeing all the escaped animals wander aimless

and us women trying to corral them into our arms and devour them with kisses before they realized their newfound freedom.

No sign of Noah. His official title was surveyor. Land and sea. Sometimes he fished. I had black and white photographs. He worked for the Bureau of Conflict. He wasn't even supposed to write anything down. Just survey and remember little nuances.

I ate the last of a caramel apple and watched all the men moving past me get swept up by the kisses of old lovers, get tangled in voices and in the arms of children. None of them was my Noah. I closed my eyes and thought of tearing off his clothes when I saw him, thoughts of basting him with kisses right there on the train tracks.

Then the station was empty. The floor was checkered and shiny; I could see my reflection and it took every bit of courage not to burst into tears. Or scream. I had a few good bottled screams left.

A man approached. You McBride? he said. He spoke like a Brit. He kept his distance. It wasn't until after I said yes that I saw he was holding a shipping box. I wondered if there was plastic bubble wrap inside. As a girl, my mother said each bursting bubble was the advent of a dream and for every one left undone it would slowly grow into a nightmare. I wondered if I got my hands around them would they pop? Standing there, I felt that I knew nothing about myself.

The Brit handed it to me, tipped his cap like a drunkard and walked away mumbling.

I held the box in one hand. It had the correct amount of postage and all the government symbols and other paraphernalia – including Biohazard warnings and Greenpeace stickers. It said EXPRESS SHIPPING. But it was so god-awful small. My first thought was, how did they managed to fit Noah inside? He was a crabby man and claustrophobic.

Then it struck me: these were his ashes.

I sat there with that vision in my head: my poor Noah, his face muddy sore, blown to dust by a bomb and then sucked into the nostrils of the enemy and breathed out on winter nights. There was dust all over the lobby floor. I choked back whispers of *Noah!?* *Noah!?* hoping there was a particle of him down there. By now he had to be scattered all over the world. Little pieces of him in soups and laundry and little boys' hands mingled with snot and invisible molecules of him lost at sea, swallowed by humpback whales with the plankton, lost on a carnival ride with young lovers or in a vat of cotton candy where he would spend the rest of his days spinning with exhaustion and hoping to be plucked out and wedged in the gum line of mothers who cheated on their husbands.

I sat on the bench for a long time. I couldn't move, I couldn't even cry – I had forgotten how. So I imagined crying and imagined what those tears must feel like, cried myself away until I wasn't Lizzy McBride, but some other woman on some island with an ocean at my command; someplace far away where I wouldn't have to breathe the ashes of my former lover.

My womb tickled when I managed to read the telegram. It said: OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT DELIVERY. Then it said my name in big bold letters that looked like caged animals. It read: *The Government regrets to inform you your husband was injured in the line of duty. Please make the necessary adjustment. Please accept our condolences for this inconvenience. Government Bureaucrats. Bureau of the Bureau of Conflict Affairs and other Official Miscellanea.*

Injured. *Injured?* I didn't even remember what that meant. I tore at the box. I was crying. There was no bubble wrap. Inside was a mouth. Noah's mouth. I would have recognized it anywhere.

And it was a mouth: lips and teeth and a tongue and the lips were like an ocean wave pulled apart at the foam. The front two teeth were crooked. Inside it smelled like war dust.

My tears stopped.

Then the mouth moved. It gasped! Then slow breaths.

Jesus Christ! I was suffocating in there, it said. It had a low voice, not at all like my Noah. But then I remembered: war changes a man.

He leapt out of the box and into my arms; then he showered me with kisses. He was kissing me like before when we were teenagers and made love, only now he was flopping: over my neck, my cheeks, my eyelids. He felt like hairs bristled over my face.

I couldn't breathe. It was borderline hysteria. I made noises like a toad. What's wrong, baby? Noah said. What's the matter? What is it? he asked. I couldn't say. I knew what was wrong. Noah was a mouth in the palm of my hand. I couldn't bring myself to be the one to have to tell him. I didn't want to be the one to spend nights applying chapstick. He was so proud to have made it home alive. He hadn't even noticed. He just kept kissing and kissing.

I threw up.

Noah smiled, said not to worry. Shit, I've seen worse, I've seen a poetry of vomit on the battlefield, he laughed. Goddamn, do you think I've lost weight? he asked. He walked me back to the car tucked in the nook of my elbow. I held him, it, what was left of him...whatever...until we got inside. I almost passed out.

You happy to see me, babe? he said. He stretched his lips out on the seat interior. I didn't say anything. He was quiet and smiling. Jesus Christ, I thought, what else *could* he do? I lit a cigar for him, the one I had bought at the drug store. There was another one for me, but I wasn't in the mood.

I threw up again, this time all over my pretty yellow shoes.

There was still caramel stuck between my teeth.

We had met at a club as teenagers. He was going to be a rock 'n' roll star with the band *Stealing Little Fingers*. They were going places. He played bass; he sang backup vocals. He was a crafty little magician onstage. My Noah had long greasy hair that would go unwashed for days, who drank beer and I couldn't. I was in love.

When the show was finished he let me sip from his beer, but not too much; he didn't want to take advantage of me. Not now, anyway, he had said. He smiled like a Neanderthal. I thought it was cute how he was too clumsy to actually club me with the microphone.

I wrote my phone number on his chest with lipstick. I told him I didn't believe in doing conventional romance and he said I'd get over it. I kissed his cheek and told him to call me.

It was the wrong phone number. All night I lay awake thinking how he must have been driving himself mad calling that number, hoping to talk to me but only getting Gino's Pizzeria. Fantasies of meatball subs, heavy on the marinara. He could practice his kissing.

The next time we saw each other I was a year older. I still couldn't drink beer.

He said, Give me your address. I'll wait at your window.

I said, Sure. I used lipstick again.

By then I had run away from home. I gave him the address of the apartment across the street. Late at night I watched him pace the curbs and gutters, befuddled, pissed off to no end, banging on doors, making threats, finally getting arrested for public disturbance.

I went to see him in the pokey. I didn't post his bail. I said it was better this way. We held hands through the bars. I told him we could have steamy conjugals and the guards could watch and score us like at the Olympics. He told me he was going to become a surveyor of world conflicts and give up the rock 'n' roll lifestyle. He wanted to see things.

We pressed our lips through the bars and kissed. He said we should get married and have babies that smelled like us.

I thought, We could live like this forever.

Noah was back to his old tricks in a matter of days. I could hardly stand the sight of him. A part of me had expected him to be shell-shocked, dazed, anxious, depressed, maybe even perversely violent; but it was me who was all those things. I didn't sleep. When I rolled over, there was his mouth on the pillow: snoring, teeth grinding. He had that sometimes lovely odor of chewed cereal, that odor, which, I will admit, late at night when he breathed on me, made my throat tickle with ecstasy. I almost smothered him that first night. But he was so small, so cute, somehow. He was a little miracle: finding ways to snore in his condition.

Noah watched baseball, cheered for the underdog; he drank foreign beer. At dinner he waited in my chair and bit my ass when I sat down, yelling, *Gotcha!* He phoned his mother, told her she should come out for a visit. I said now wasn't the best of times and he laughed saying I might be pregnant. I wanted to smack him but there wasn't even enough to fit across my hand. He tried his luck at gardening, pool maintenance, fixed brake valves; he even shagged softballs in the league at the park, skipping over the ground tearing up patches of grass. He said he had thought about trying out rock 'n' roll again.

Stealing Little Fingers on a comeback tour, he smiled. How about it? I'll handle lead vocals now, he said. Most of the other bandmates had died or gone insane. Mustard gas, Noah said.

I laughed at him. No one uses mustard gas, Noah.

You don't know anything, bitch, he said.

His teeth were staring. There was grime on them. I couldn't see my reflection.

On the nights he was around we played porno-scrabble and he sucked spaghetti out of a bowl. It was god-awful to watch him eat. His teeth stained with the spaghetti sauce and I looked at the crooked things – it was like blood all over them.

But there were also those things Noah had never done before: he hissed at the mimes; he helped the blind get into taxis. It was odd.

At night, I went out in the yard and shattered our wedding dishes against an elm tree. I held the pieces in my hand. They weren't much bigger than Noah. I buried them under a soft patch of mud and raspberry vines.

On the street corner was a bakery. Inside was a baker big as a dugong. He had a wormy smile and a face like a snogget. And hands. God, those hands. Big as catcher's mitts. Places and skin to get lost inside. I watched him make pastries. I was terrified. What if he saw me? What if I strolled inside and gave him a tease, made my first attempt at flirting in years? What if he held me? Then what? Would I say *I am the woman married to the mouth does that qualify for free pastries?* Can I please have free truffles and feed him as a form of love-making? Please? God, please?

When I came inside Noah saw the juice on my fingertips.

How about those raspberries? It's the season for them, he said.

I didn't answer.

Newspapers gummed against the rain gutters. I gazed through cold binocular lenses. Cyclists with no care for chivalry hummed by. An old man in his apartment complex played both sides of the chess board, changing clothes and acting out personalities for each move. 6Q flushed her toilet four hundred times before dinner hoping to decode government conspiracies that were aloof in radio waves. A small boy cowered in a closet trying to make his mother and father's shoes walk together as they argued in the adjacent room. Someone in

the alleys had a thing for firecrackers. The snogget baker lived in that complex, too. He left the curtains open. He must have noticed me outside his bakery, or maybe he had remembered me when I came for orange rolls. He watched thousands of work-out videos. Just watched them. He wore sweat pants and headbands and just sat there, sweating. After each work-out he'd throw away the sweaty clothes in a dumpster. Even the shoes. I scoured through the mess looking for them, smelling them.

I never missed his showers. Those lathered hands, the bubbles like a thousand small moons orbiting his fat. I watched his fingers juggle the fat. I wanted to fry them like sausages. Fingers fat like cigars. I wanted to tear them off and smoke them with a glass of bourbon.

We women lie to ourselves all the time. First we say we don't need men. We'll make do with a voice, hell, even an echo. But right there was what every woman needed – a man with enormous hands. We had it all wrong. We didn't need heart and soul and spine. We needed a lock of hair, a groove in the palm, a fingernail to dig into our flesh. We needed hands; we needed skin. Skin that had a bit of grace, skin we could wrap ourselves in and dream, swim, suffocate. I wanted an elastic man. A man I could go home to every night and cocoon myself in his skin. I wanted him to grind nutmeg into my pores, I wanted him to batter me into dough and pummel until the sun went blank: really, really hurt me.

Sometimes my sighs shook Noah awake during those long nights and we engaged in an ensemble of petty love-making maneuvers. I listened to his filthy talk, put him all over my body, in all the places he wanted to be. I lay there on the bed, helpless, feeling him dance and scurry over my navel, my pubic bone, his tongue flecked against my gums like scurvy, tearing at my breasts with his little teeth, down and then up my legs and between them. He

pinched. He bit. He flossed with my woman hairs. He cackled. I was caught somewhere between a dream and the change of the ocean tide.

Making love wasn't like it had been before. Noah had become talkative. I couldn't shut him up. He said, I want to fuck you, I want to fuck you, baby, let me fuck you, honey...He had never said anything like that before the conflict. I wondered what had happened to my old Noah, if they had found the other pieces of him somewhere on that battlefield and if he would be expedited to me, one bit at a time. What if they had mixed up this mouth with some other mouth, swapped memories, even, and I was making love to a complete stranger, a POW who deep down didn't want to screw me, a little housewife; me, Candy Cane; no, he wanted to screw his old flame, *Mary-what's-her-cunt*, and deep down, whoever this stranger was drove himself mad thinking about the other girlfriends he had left behind, everything not caught in the sand. Jesus, then what? I pictured Noah in the trenches – slowly evaporating. Maybe he had shipwrecked one night and drowned, swallowed by the ocean and digested, his mouth regurgitated at morning. I tried not to dwell on it, lying there with him, trying to feel even the slightest sensation of his touch while he sweated and sweated.

I closed my eyes and cried, joining him, saying, Yes, yes, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me...

Then Noah said he was bored. He missed the action of a conflict, the smell of battlefields, the noise of things roasting. He missed holding dying men in his hands. It's me, isn't it? I shouted. You don't love me!

No, baby. No, no, no. Candy Cane, listen, listen. It's just the war...he paused. The war is war, you know? he told me, huddled neatly in my lap. It's like a fucking nasty bass line, he said. At night the skies are purple and gold with flares, bullets don't look like bullets but

like fireflies without their butts; people are dying, people don't cry for their mothers but for the grocery clerk they knew, or the ugly woman that sat on the park bench every day and fed the ducks; you pick up the cigarettes of dead comrades as you flee a enemy fire zone, best to take a cigarette from the men that get shot in the head. Those are the smartest fucking cigarettes you'll ever smoke, he laughed. Even when I went MIA and in that POW camp...even that, he said, had the smell of war and I was alive. And when they tortured me, God. All I could think of was you. *You*. I mean that too, babe. I wouldn't say that to just anyone. I only ever thought of you in those moments. But in that torture there was *feeling*. You know that *feeling*, babe?

I didn't. I had never known passion like that.

Noah said, It feels like holding a bullet in your hand and watching it bloom. Not explode, but just open slowly. That's the feeling of war. You know what I mean, Candy Cane? After the raids, when we reached the bunkers, while we caught our breaths, we made sure we had our ears. For some reason, the ears were always the first to go. Goddamn savages. There was so much sand out there. Can you imagine the anatomy of sand? Endless, babe, endless. I've seen it. I've seen men fall down on their knees in that sand and scream without ears. They were shouting: *They got our ears buried! They got em buried in the sand! I can hear em. Our ears! Our fucking ears, men!* They'd dig for hours. No one would call after them. Christ, can you imagine those nineteen year-old farm boys going back home without ears? Christ, the poor girls we left behind, he said. Christ, the poor cows.

That night, and only that night, when we made love, it felt like Noah was holding me.

And that scared me.

I needed to get out of the house. I couldn't take my eyes off the mailbox. Everyday, I thought about what might come in the mail. If another piece might arrive...Would we glue it back on? Scotch tape? Would we wait for the others? Would I have to love all the pieces separately? Mondays: bellybuttons. Thursdays: kneecaps. I wasn't equipped to love that way. My mother phoned and she told me, Well, you can't expect everything to come back at once.

I wanted the government to mail us an ear. In the supermarket, I would stare that the men with big ears wanting to suck those lobes. I'd never watched an earlobe move before, but now they were sensuous things. I saw the ears of small children and wanted to box them, burst their little eardrums and make their blood run cold. I dreamed of bloodhounds sleeping by fireplaces, I dreamed of eating endless platters of rabbit. I wanted the sons of bitches out on the front lines to give us back our goddamn ears. Just one. I needed something to scream into.

I took a baseball bat to the mailbox.

Then me and Noah watched it burn.

The government didn't do a goddamn thing.

I spent my days at a department store in a little booth next to the old women underwear. I sometimes wondered if I would ever grow old enough to have to wear such things and it gave me a small glimmer of hope that living to be that old would provide some sense of adventure. Tucked away in my little booth I wrote love letters for strangers and the despondent. I had discovered my passion for words. Like how the Ps were sinister and the Qs curled and it made me think of lemonade and tire swings; or how when I traced the lines of a Z it felt like coming with a complete stranger and how when I spoke the letter G it made my nipples erect.

For a few dollars total strangers came to me and I wrote letters to their loved ones: teenage boys to their school teachers, married men for their secretaries; once an older woman even asked that I write a letter to her dead husband.

Address the letter to God, this old woman said. He'll know where to find my Mitchell. It nearly broke my heart. Later, I helped her pick out underwear and a bra. I had to fasten the clasps myself. It was cruel.

I kept her letter. I kept them all.

Noah said it was desperate. Not desperate, I told him, just sad.

He said I was stealing their memories. But I wasn't stealing. They were there for the taking. If not for me then they would be lost, they would float about the universe with no one to hold them. It wasn't stealing. I was saving them.

The first thing I missed was his hair. It wasn't even the sensation of pulling my fingers through it. It was the sight of what it had once been. He had worn it straight up, like a cockeyed rooster. Noah even used to walk like a rooster, bobbing down the street like he wasn't a nobody or somebody's jackass – he was mine. My insides churned for him to make noises like a rooster. A wild, Chilean thing. I wanted him to open that godforsaken mouth and unleash an immoral “*KA-KAW!!*”

I could live with the pain of knowing things passed. I wrote that all over the walls in lipstick. P-A-I-N. Pain is not such a tricky thing when you see it sprouting over your walls. It was no longer invisible. There were so many invisibilities and other prayers, who knew they had to be felt in passing?

I pretended to be asleep early in the mornings when he awoke. I closed my eyes tight, hoping he would perch on the windowsill and let loose that *Gallus sonnerati* within him. But hope was a surefire way to get a soul in a pickle. So I went out on the prowl to complete

my Noah. I started with the baker's apartment. He always left the door open when he dumped the trash. Rummaging through trash and cabinets I stole discarded band-aids full of skin film and scabs, eyelashes off the countertops, shaving cream residue from the sinks, used Kleenex snot, half-swallowed bottles of cough syrup, dandruff off the pillows. Then I looted shops and business downtown: cuticles and clipped nails from podiatry bathrooms, waxed back hair from the masseuse parlors; at the beach, I collected the saltwater sweat from surfers bathing in the public showers; pubic hair from the male urinals at the department store. I put them all in a glass jar with some hydrogen peroxide and a few drops of my own blood and spit and waited for things to evolve. I put it under the lamp hoping the light and heat would do something. I whispered to myself things would evolve, things would evolve, things would evolve...Sometimes in bed, when the mouth-Noah opened, I would take a few drops on my fingertips and wet them on his tongue because there was nothing else to do and evolution was the bane of all things living.

Noah ate his cereal in silence. He had been brooding for days. I longed for the times when he would scream; but now screaming took effort. Once, right before he had shipped out, when I threatened to leave him because he was going to war, he got drunk and screamed: You bitch, you fucking whore, I'll cut you all to pieces if you leave me, I'll carve my face on your stomach so you'll never be rid of me. He wasn't lying. He had a big knife and nice hands. I would give anything to have that face carved on me now. We could press against a mirror, just the two of us: me and that scar. Now there was nothing to do. I couldn't get lost in his eyes, lull myself away in the part of his hair; I couldn't watch his fingers twitch.

Noah said, I think we should have a baby. He said it would make me feel holy.

We haven't been holy for some time, I told him. I thought about the idea of a baby.

It was a strange holiness, I considered. The kind you get when you steal a quarter off the

collection tray and know that you're one step closer to hell when just seconds earlier you were one step closer to God and all that heaven mumbo jumbo.

Of course, having a baby meant complications. Noah said not to worry. We would audition men to batter me up. Jesus, Noah, I said, I'm not some whore. I chewed the insides of my cheeks, oddly amused. I let it go on for a few days, feigning disgust, bottling up the wonder. What kind of men? I asked one night. I pictured the men at the crosswalks with enormous ears. I pictured men with huge eyelashes I could swing from like Tarzan. What I would give for hairy legs...

Priests, Noah said.

He had a point. Priests were clean; they were holy. I wouldn't mind having a baby with a priest, I thought. The problem, I told Noah, was finding one. But Noah said, No worries, because he knew a guy.

So we auditioned a priest.

When it was finished we sat awkward on the bed sheets trying not to smell. I cradled my belly. Then I asked the priest to pinch me. I cooed, Will you burn a cigarette against my nipples? Will you bite me? No, forget that, I know biting. Could you please just slap me? He laughed. That goddamn priest just laughed.

I want you to hit me, I said standing over him. He laughed again. I told him I was serious. He clutched his rosary and wiped his shiny bald head. I tried to wrest his hands from him, ball them into a fist, get the fingernails loose to tear me to pieces.

You heard me, I said. As hard as you can. No more fuck me, fuck me, fuck me...I looked into his paper thin eyes. Hit me, goddamn you! Hit me, baby Jesus! Hit me, cunt! I screamed.

I lay quiet on the floor.

When I blinked, I saw his footprints fade away. The smell of Jesus sweat went with him.

Hours slipped towards minutes.

I pulled threads from my blouse and tried curling like them.

There was nothing growing on my insides.

I crawled along the floor and leaned against a wall. My thighs were bruised. I felt like a sweaty sugarplum. Noah said he needed his bath. I didn't look at him. I went to the kitchen and got wine. We crawled together into the bathroom. He had me test the water.

Not too hot, Candy Cane, he whispered Not too hot, too hot, too...

Steam rose. I slipped fingers under the water, swirled them around and around. I drank wine. Noises in the street drifted in and out, the scuttle of Noah's teeth against the porcelain. I closed my eyes and listened to ripples kiss the water. I rimmed a finger around the wine glass. The walls rose up around us, our insignificant shadows flung against them.

Then Noah got the call. Second tour of duty. He was the finest surveyor there was. I watched him pack a suitcase: underwear, bullets, canteen, binoculars, bullets. All he said was, Boy, I got great instincts for this kind of work. He seemed somewhat resigned to this new fate, but I couldn't be sure what that fate was. Maybe the Bureau of Conflict was taking him away from me because he had seen too much. I didn't see him off at the train station. Before the taxicab could even make it to the end of the block I threw up in the doorway, but this time it was only air.

For weeks I lay awake in bed tapping my stomach, trying to will the seed of the priest into existence. I wandered out of the house late at night stumbled in at early mornings completely

unaware of where I had been and what I was doing. I wandered into the bakery hoping to be blinded by cinnamon. Instead there was the baker making his bush-league pastries.

You have liquor?

We're not a pub, sunbeam, he said.

I watched him pound the dough and make strips of it. His fat hands moved quickly. I told him he could lay me out on the counter and sprinkle all the sugar and flour and nutmeg he could dream of.

You wouldn't like it, he said, shuffling without even giving me a glance.

I don't even know your name.

Go home, sunbeam. You're not enough woman for this place.

I stood there like a dumb popsicle stick tossed in the gutter. Outside there was a rainbow. I stared at it for hours, wondering if this was the moment I had been waiting for.

The train station was empty, full of dust. I sat near the tracks, feeling the vibrations hum under my skirt. I felt the emptiness inside my belly. The world was full of echoes. Something had to create them all. Another mouth would come. Foreign mouths, noble mouths, liars, lovers, mouths with memory loss and mouths that could pack a nasty kiss...beyond these walls was an infinity. They would come. They must. I would stretch those lips all over my dry spots. I would have him lick up all the pieces of me. I wanted him to turn me rosy.

I waited there under the color of faded sky. Light drew to a pinch and in the distance I heard the humming: the sobs of us women, caught in the litany of our evolutions.