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Tools of Ignorance

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Tools of Ignorance

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts
The Creative Writing Workshop

By

Nicholas Mainieri

B.A. University of Notre Dame, 2006

May 2011

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For my parents.

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The Tools of Ignorance

Stories

A Simpler Creature

Pop loved two things, but I inherited his affection for one of those only. He read me bedtime stories during the off-season. The last one always came the night before he left for Spring Training. By the time his career ended and he had more time, I was too old for the stories, or at least I believed myself to be. So we watched the evening games on TV. If a hitter lined out to short or left or whatever, it went something like this:

“Alas,” Pop would say, “poor Yorick.”

“That was George Brett.”

“Round ball, round bat, you square it up. Right?”

“Yeah.”

“Best you can do. Hit it perfect. You’re still out.”

“Still out.”

“See what I mean?”

“Who’s Yorick?”

“Nothing compared to a line out.”

“But who is he?”

“I’m just saying that the greatest writer of all time couldn’t even come up with a better reminder for us than a line drive out.”

“You’re weird, Pop.”

“I know,” he’d say, patting my knee. “Someday you’ll see.”

Pop had a cup of coffee in the big leagues. Started in left one game with the Detroit Tigers, went 1-for-3 with a walk, and got sent back down to Triple A later that night. He blew out his elbow sometime after that, lingered, and never made it up to the big club again. Soon he went to teach at the same high school as Mom.

Some of the other teachers had one of those beer-league softball teams. I recall that they begged Pop to play. When I think about it now, I know why he was reluctant to join. You age, and your talent wanes. When you've performed at such a high level it's hard to accept yourself as this older, diminished man. But Pop was never good at saying no. He became their first baseman.

Before Pop's heart attack, Mom and I would go to the games. His swing was still beautiful in the way that only left-handed swings can be, graceful and violent all at once. Often, he'd hit the fat, white softball out of the park, and I'd watch him round the bases. When he crossed the plate, he'd stop and look and smile, just for me in the bleachers. He knew, even then, that someday I would understand.

I've ended up having a much longer big league career than Pop did. Many years longer. I'm certain, though, that I'm not the elegant player he must've been. In many ways I am a simpler creature. I never loved the books. I hit right-handed. I catch. I strap on the tools of ignorance, crouch in the dirt, and take foul tips off my body. But that's what I've been good at. Today, I could've sent my team to its first Series since 1945. I swung, and the third baseman didn't even need to move. I think about all the good things that came before today, and there were lots of them, but my final season ended with me not getting a step out of the batters' box.

Bird Shot

As the cold mist stops and the light comes up, two ducks drop out of the fog, and the boy turns to Dex. “Keep your fucking head down,” Dex hisses, and so the boy stares at the boards in the blind floor and checks the shotgun safety. He feels it before he looks, each end of the safety button a different color, and red means go, red means go, and the boy stares again at the blind floor, keeping his head down. Once there was a water moccasin seven feet long in the blind, what Bill used to say. No snakes this morning. The boy made sure. Bill would like that, if Bill could know he remembers.

“Take ’em,” Dex says, and the boy rises to see the ducks, their webbed feet stretched for the water and the wooden decoys. The ducks juke, panicked. The boy tries to get the butt of the gun up to his shoulder and his cheek against the stock, but it’s awkward going, like when he gets a shirt stuck around his head while putting it on—the tough grass built up high around the blind and all of it taller than he, and the gun seems too big, a .12 gauge, when all he’s ever shot before is a .20 and at skeet only. Before he gets a look down the barrel, Dex has all three of his shots off, each one so loud that the boy’s nose starts running, and both ducks cartwheel into the water. Stuck in the grass in front of the boy is one of the green plastic shells, breathing smoke.

“What happened?” Dex asks, and the boy shrugs. He’s been told: You don’t make excuses. Bill told him that. Dex told him that. Papa told him that. “Next time don’t be such a pussy,” Dex says. He whistles, and Girl climbs up out of the blind and makes a running jump for the water. The boy watches her through the air, her black coat shining, and hears her splash. Dex goes,

“Shit, one’s still alive,” and stares at the boy. “Kill it before Girl gets there. Good practice,” he says. “Get up on the bench, don’t hit the fucking decoy, don’t hit our fucking dog.”

When they were all at the camp, Bill took the boy out to go fishing, waking the boy up, saying, “Get up, little dude,” what he always calls him. This was a year ago. They left Girl whimpering at the door. “Too much a puppy,” Bill said. They walked down to the dock where all the families with camps over here tie up their pirogues and flatboats. The dock—long and rickety, a tin overhang—curves out into the bayou, what’s foggy early and always makes the boy think of a swamp where dinosaurs live. The trees growing out of the water don’t have any branches or leaves. They look like that petrified wood from show-and-tell. So old it turns to rock.

Their flatboat was at the end of the dock, and the boy started running for it. He wanted to beat Bill, who had all the gear. In the early morning dark the boy thought it was maybe a tall, skinny person standing down at the end, maybe something else, he wasn’t sure what. He skidded to a stop when he got close, and the bird turned around, the spike of feathers at the back of its head flicking. The bird was taller. It stood on legs of big, black scales and had a gray body, long neck, and beak like a sword. Its eyes were tiny and bright and yellow. The boy stood there, certain that if he moved something would happen. They just kept looking at each other. Then the bird’s eyes darted up at Bill, and the bird spread its wings and lifted to wheel out of the dock, lurching over the water and up into the fog like a pterodactyl. Bill clapped the boy on the back. “A blue heron.” He dropped all the stuff into the boat and helped the boy get in and said, “I never seen a bird do anything like that before, like it wanted to be friends.” Bill smiled so the boy knew something funny was coming. “Or maybe eat you.”

* * *

Standing on the bench in the blind and looking out over the grass, the boy can see all the decoys floating. He's waited so that Girl is almost back to the blind, paddling with the already dead duck hanging from her mouth. The other duck flaps a wing, turning and splashing in circles. Dex says, "Hurry up," and the boy gets the shotgun up against his shoulder, remembering how Dex told him not to aim, to just put his cheek against the stock and look where he wants to fire. He squeezes the trigger. The gun booms deep down in his ear and the air smells like smoke, but the gun hardly hurts his shoulder at all so he knows he's done well. The bird shot sprays across the duck, little splashes like a handful of dirt thrown in the water, and the duck floats. "Good," Dex says. "But it don't count, the duck's already in the water."

Girl clambers into the blind, dripping wet and huffing around the bird in her mouth. She drops it on the floor. The duck, how it's flopped against the boards, is smaller than the boy thought it would be, like it shrunk when it died. Blood fills one of its eyes, but that's it. Dex calls it a teal. "Need to get you a mallard or a widgeon," Dex says. "The big ones."

At home last night, Papa and Dex were yelling at each other. They get mad all the time now. Dex got kicked off the basketball team. The boy heard Papa say a week ago that Dex was smoking grass in the school bathroom, strike one, and yesterday Dex got in a fight in the hallways and didn't lose. The boy figures it only takes two strikes to get kicked off the team. They were screaming at each other, Papa and Dex, and the boy knew how Dex felt. Papa doesn't understand him at all—that's what Dex says at night in the bedroom they share, just whispers it. In the middle of all the yelling Dex ran out the front door, and Papa, still angry, turned to the boy, so he decided to run out after Dex. Dex made for the truck. The boy whistled for Girl. If they were finally running away from home, he wanted her to come with them. Girl came out of the dark

from whatever it is she likes to do, and as Dex started up the truck, the boy held the door open and Girl jumped in and then he got in. Dex floored it out of the driveway. The gravel kicked up underneath.

The boy wanted to know if they were running away, because some nights Dex whispers about that, too, but Dex said, “Don’t be stupid.” Bugs swirled in the headlights. Dex didn’t talk for a long while. They stopped at a half gas station, half casino to fill up, the boy waiting in the car with Girl. When Dex finished pumping gas and got back into the truck he said, “Kill us some birds in the morning.”

The boy looks at the teals, hanging from a long, U-shaped piece of metal Dex took out and hooked on the wall of the blind. Dex put their heads in at the wider end one at a time and slid them down so their necks fit through but not their skulls. One on top of the other they hang there. The boy takes a shell out of his coat pocket and pushes it into the gun, feels it click into place. He checks the safety, makes sure it’s on, and stands the gun in the corner. Girl cries a little bit. She wants more ducks. It’s quiet for a long time, and now Dex goes, “Hush,” and the boy hears them, too. They honk up there. Geese. The boy can hear them coming closer in the fog. He can trace their path through the gray just by listening. Dex tries to call the geese in. He doesn’t sound at all like they do, but the boy doesn’t tell him this. The boy watches the sky and listens, and they pass straight overhead. He can feel them there, just on the other side of the sky, a thin blanket between them. The geese keep going, their honks getting quieter and quieter until they’re gone for sure. “Damn,” Dex says. He eyes the fog. “Bad day for us.”

After a while soft pop-pop-pops echo over the water. Faraway. Out there something is dying. “Someone’s having luck,” Dex says.

* * *

After they got to the camp last night Dex made them dinner, taking out those powdered biscuits Papa likes so much and frying bacon. The boy sat in the chair and rubbed Girl's head and wondered why Papa or nobody ever stuck any pictures up on the walls of the camp, just that fake wood wallpaper. It would be nice to have pictures up of all of them. Maybe a picture of Bill in his uniform. Maybe even some pictures of Mama. The boy has some of those in the bedroom back home. He could bring them.

Dex brought over the food on paper plates and sat on the couch. The boy shared his bacon with Girl. Dex got up and went to the little fridge and took out one of Papa's beers. The boy watched, didn't say anything. Dex drank it fast and got another. It was quiet in the camp. Something outside croaked.

Earlier at school in computer class the boy had looked up a video of where Bill is. He'd been curious, and the video was easy to find. All he did was type in the name of the country. He watched all these soldiers walking through the mountains, and there was snow everywhere. Every time the boy thinks of Bill over there he pictures him in a desert. But they have snow. Right now they do. The boy looked at all the soldiers, at all their faces, but the video was too fuzzy and they all seemed the same. Then the soldiers started running through the snow, and the boy heard the guns, quiet pop-pop-pops. Then the video skipped and the soldiers were somewhere else, and the boy wondered if this was because somebody had been shot and they couldn't show that on the Internet. The teacher had come over then and what she said to the boy was that it wasn't something he should be watching at all and made him stop.

The boy has only seen snow once in his life, and even if Bill's maybe seen it more, it's probably not that much. The boy sat on the chair and patted Girl's head. He figured that one of

the worst things about being over there for Bill has to be the cold. He asked Dex what he thought. Dex took a gulp of Papa's beer and waited and went, "If we don't think about him if we don't talk about him he'll be okay." He took another gulp and said, "The only things you lose are the things you care about so just shut the fuck up."

When Dex fell asleep on the couch, the boy got up and went to the door. He left Girl inside and walked down the dark trail, pretending he was going down to the dock to go fishing. He felt the mosquitoes all around him but ignored them. They bite no matter what. An orange lamp mounted on the overhang at the beginning of the dock threw some light out, and the nutra-rats moved in the grass, a few of them. The big one, back humped and long tail stretched out flat in the grass behind it, chewed on something. Two young nutra-rats, the size of squirrels, wrestled with each other, rolling around, tails swinging, and squeaking some, too. The boy thought about going to wake Dex up because these things could be killed for five dollars a tail. But he watched them some more and decided not to. He took a step closer, and the big one lifted its head and then scurried to the bayou and slipped into the water. The little ones quit their wrestling and darted after it. The rats moved slow on the surface, and the boy began to think about what might have been underneath, maybe a gator sliding quiet along the bottom watching those feet kick. He felt something big in the dark behind him, pressing in, about to swallow him up. He ran to the camp and felt it closing the whole way.

He got inside, out of breath, cheeks hot. Girl licked his fingers. Dex was still asleep. The boy didn't want to go to the cots in the dark room in the back of the camp. Dex was right here, so the boy got onto the couch next to his brother and closed his eyes.

Girl has stopped her crying. Dex doesn't speak. Water no longer drips off the teals' feet. The boy

looks at his boots against the boards and imagines Bill looking at his own just the same, but he can't figure if there's sand or snow under them. He tries and tries, but he can't get it right. He wants to scream, but he can't do that, either.

“Okay now,” Dex says, and the boy keeps his head down. “Three of 'em. Gonna circle round to land right in front of us so just wait till I say so,” and there are his boots against the boards, and Dex says, “Take 'em,” and the boy stands up seeing all three of the ducks. Dex gets his shots off before the boy has raised his gun, but all the birds still fly, rising straight up. When they're right above the boy he tilts his shoulders like he's catching a fly ball and squeezes the trigger, and on the third shot the middle duck crumples, wings collapsing into its body. It drops out of the sky, turning gently over and landing in the water. “You crunched it,” Dex shouts, clapping the boy on the back. The other two ducks flap off and vanish into the fog. The boy wonders what they wonder. Just fell out the sky, they'll think.

After a bit Girl comes dripping through the grass and drops the duck to the blind floor. Stone dead and wet. Its feathers are speckled, white and brown. “A widgeon,” Dex says. He picks up the bird and slides it into the metal U, and the boy's widgeon is bigger than both of the teals. They pack up and get into the flatboat where it's been tied to the blind under the grasses. When they get to the dock, Dex takes a left turn down the bayou and says they're going up to the club. Dex's friend defeathers all the rich folks' ducks.

After the boat's tied up, the boy and Dex take the three ducks to the little tin shed where the guy works outside. Dex trades him some of Papa's beers to do the ducks. Beyond the shed are all the lodges, big log cabins, just far enough away. Here, against the shed, is a table piled high with everything killed in the morning. It seems like thousands of birds, all of them dead and wet and shrunken, even some geese with their long black necks and the white slashes around little black

eyes. The guy has to rip the feathers off all of these, and the boy finds that hard to imagine. The rich people are going to eat all these birds, and the boy finds that hard to imagine, too.

The guy takes the widgeon, sets it on a clear space on the table, and chops off its feet with a cleaver. Then he takes the duck to a caldron over a flame. There's melted wax inside. He holds the duck by the head and dips it up to its neck in the hot wax. He lifts the duck out and dunks it into a bucket of ice water. The whole time he and Dex chat. The guy takes the duck in the hardened wax to the table. He grips the duck at each end and real fast slams it down against the table's edge one, two, three times, cracking the wax. When he tears the wax off a piece at a time it rips like Band-Aids and the feathers come with it, loud, and in places the pale skin of the widgeon's breast has torn, and the purple meat bulges through. The boy places his hands on his own chest.

When all three ducks are done they get into the flatboat, and Dex takes them to the dock. It's barely even lunchtime. Girl jumps onto the dock, and the boy follows. Dex hands him the ducks, their naked bodies hanging from the metal U. Dex gets out and takes all the gear. Girl runs after him. The boy lingers. He watches the bayou and the trees that are like petrified wood. There is the weight hanging in his fist. He waits and wishes. Nothing wheels out of the fog like a dinosaur. Nothing lands next to him. He turns and runs after Dex.

Whose Will They Be?

See the girl, walking down the cold street in her top and skirt, navigating the ice in her heels. She comes to the club to look good, not to find a place to hang a coat. She should stop and look here, above the door: *Ave*, Old Woman in the Window, *morituri te salutant!* Oh, I wish I could laugh.

The girl goes in, and this music in the floorboards beneath my feet, she feels in her ribcage. The people everywhere gyrate. The lightshow changes with the throb and pitch, strobes, and each frame of the room looks filled with a bunch of enraptured corpses. The girl didn't want to come out tonight, but she did, and she looks good. The way these things go, yes.

She sends text messages to her friend. How else to find her? The friend waits by the bar, so the girl crosses the dance floor, and the cadence of light slurs—arcs of red, yellow, and blue. Some man's hands grab at her waist, and he tries to fit his body to hers, pelvis to backside. She pushes through the crowd and he falls away. The room is hot. People are wet.

Her friend has a drink waiting. Something fancy. The friend places her cheek against the girl's, a mock hug. The girl takes a sip of her drink and then puts it back on the bar, not in the mood. She's polite, though, and shouts her inaudible thanks. The heavy music fills her mouth.

The friend grabs her by the arm, nodding at the dance floor. Smiles. But the girl has seen him out there now, a beam of yellow lighting upon the nape of his neck and the characters tattooed there. You see them everywhere, these characters that mean something in another language, a language that's got not a thing to do with the boy's history or bloodline or anything like that, and he's got them inked into his skin all the same. The girl knows the feeling of his

abdomen beneath her palms, the way his breathing goes harsh and then stops altogether until he finishes, but she never learned the meaning of the tattoo. He dances, hunched around somebody. They turn, and his hands plunge down her thighs. He's the reason the girl didn't want to come out tonight; he's the reason her friend desired her to. A familiar story, yes. Already this girl has started to think the club maybe isn't a place for answers. She's begun to feel she no longer fits. But she yet doubts these feelings. She decides against pointing the boy out to her friend. Instead she lifts her drink from the bar.

Out on the floor, a different boy spies the girl and her friend. This boy wears glasses, bobs his head. He mostly disdains alcohol and drugs and anything else likewise formulated. He knows the girl from class. She holds her pen differently than he does. Sometimes she pulls the hood of her sweatshirt up, like she doesn't want anyone to notice her, but he does, don't you know. The girl takes furious notes. She never speaks up. The boy suspects that she's very smart though they've only spoken a handful of times. Regardless, these few cordial moments were enough to offer virtual friendship on some website. There are plenty of pictures. And he knows the girl is single because, after all, this is available information. This boy could spend his nights at home, in the dorm. Video games and such. He could extradiate himself there from the party, but he doesn't. This is the kind of place in which others appear to find fulfillment, so he continues to try. But as he bobs his head to a beat that demands much more, he knows he's living in the penumbra of it all. He senses something similar in the girl—he wants to. He feels it when she scribbles in her notebook, when she turns to watch people speak if they offer something in class. When he's alone, he imagines that the girl waits to be pulled from this world. He imagines she once had no choice but to become part of it, and now she can find no escape. But he can be that escape, he thinks. It'll all become clear to her once it happens, like silt settling to the ocean floor,

and he pushes towards her through the people.

The boy doesn't yet realize that all the others here, whether they've acknowledged it or more likely have not, are just as desperate as he, and the party is only their despot. Even if they are compliant, the music is such that it forces itself onto them. Forces itself into them, yes. The music originates from turntables in the booth raised to look over the crowd. The DJ stands there, his heart overworked, synthetic drugs screaming through his veins. The light show is like fingers inside his skull. Sometimes they dig, and the pain reaches down his spinal cord. He listens in his headset, pushes switches, draws music out of vinyl and circuit. The DJ experiences his own accelerating trance, one made of the music, the lights, and the velocity of his heartbeat.

The music sounds like a metal factory that's been hammered down into decibels and shoved through wires and launched from speakers, and it reverberates here in my floor. I never sleep. I sit at my window and watch the cold, dark street. It's empty now, save the cars, all parallel to the curb. If you were out there it'd seem the quietest place you've ever been. But that sort of thing never lasts long, does it, as now a man appears from an alleyway. He wears a shabby winter coat and stocking cap, and he avoids the cones of streetlight. At the windows of the cars he raises a flashlight and peers in. This man lives in a van, stuffed full of every blanket he's ever found, parked permanently behind an abandoned warehouse. And he does this almost every night, taking his flashlight to look into the university students' cars. He knows two things: many of the students come from rich families, and many of the students are careless children. At the window of a sleek little car he raises a small device and presses a button and the glass shatters into pebbles. He reaches in and removes the iPod that had been plugged into the dash, and then he returns to the alleyway and disappears.

I watch through my window as though I am suspended in a jar. If you ask how I can

know all these things, what happens beneath me and in the street and the city around us, I answer that these things have always been true. And if you ask what I want, considering that I also know what'll come to pass, I can only answer that I wish I were dead. Every woman and every man understands this at some juncture. That's true. True as anything. Just as it is that the DJ beneath me strikes music from vinyl like water from rock, and the students at the bar play roulette with their parents' credit cards.

The girl and the boy with the glasses are there, at the bar. Her friend wandered off after swallowing a pill. She offered one to the girl and to the boy, but they declined. The girl by now is on her third drink, and she and the boy shout into each other's ears. She struggles to hear anything he says, but she's at ease. Not because of the boy from class, though. Don't you see? The other, the one with the tattoo, has receded to the periphery, and the drinks cloud that vantage even further. She grabs the boy with the glasses by the hand and pulls him to the dance floor. Earlier in the night she might have noticed the brief resistance.

The boy, for his part, is relieved when the girl turns to dance with her back to him. She won't see the way he bobs. He's conscious of his facial expressions, and she won't see those either. She seems to press herself into him and the music without any effort, and she dances aggressively because that's what the beat demands. The boy is bold enough to grab her by the hips, and she rubs her ass against him, and if the ways we dance don't indicate the direction we're steering things, then I don't know what to tell you. The boy concentrates on not getting an erection. He fails. He concentrates on mimicking the girl's motions and is certain that he fails. But she's still here so he sheds some apprehension. He says to himself that he'd shed more with a drink or two—he can justify it now, yes. But there's no lull in the music to take the girl to the bar. Finally, he shouts into her ear, asks her if she'd like another drink. She nods, but continues

to dance, and he makes his way to the bar.

The boy with the tattoo on his neck has watched them. He knows the feeling of the girl's tongue on his stomach, knows she can't be silent, roommate or no roommate, and these qualities are braided into every one of his sentiments, inextricably so. A slight anger snaked into his belly while he watched green lights glint in the boy's glasses. Their dance pantomimed something intimate and therein became something intimate itself. The anger is surprising. It raises doubts. The boy with the tattoo leaves his own partner, not a word to her. He won't allow himself to go to the girl, walking to the men's room instead.

In there the walls and the floor are of obsidian-colored tile. The music reaches insofar as the walls thump. Steady, unchanging. The room seems empty at first. He goes to a urinal, and in the space beneath the first stall, a pair of black boots and a pair of tall heels point at the toilet. The rhythmic shuddering of the ankles strapped into the heels suggests what you'd already know, the tempo the same as the beating bass line. The boy imagines a skirt lifted onto the small of a girl's back, the smack of skin against skin.

He turns from the urinal to the sinks, and a kid with glasses exits the farthest stall. They look at one another. The girl cries out over the beat. The kid with glasses grins and raises his eyebrows, but this attempt at something mutual jerks on a primal cord within the tattooed boy. He hits the kid in the face as hard as he can, and if not for the toll of the beat he might've heard the pop of cartilage breaking in the kid's nose. Alcohol numbs the knuckles already swelling. He'll feel them in the morning. The kid has fallen, and his hands have gone to cover his face and the broken glasses. The boy stands over him and hits him again through the hands. He stands up straight and backs off and watches the kid lie there and bleed—this kid only unfortunate enough to have poor eyesight, to also wear glasses. For the boy with the tattoo, this solitary act of

dominion feels good. Yes, it feels very good. And any question he held concerning the fact of his own existence is quietly put to rest.

Inside the stall, the man has heard the scuffle, the body thudding against the floor tiles. He doesn't stop screwing the girl. Before this, she gave him a pill to take.

Out in the club, it's taken someone a quarter of an hour to notice that the DJ has fallen over, stiff as plastic. While this person, some official of the club, hunches over the dead man, the music remains the same trance it has been, but to those in the crowd, the throb and pitch helix toward the crescendo they want, and the wash of sound and light obliterates all that they wish for it to. The DJ is dead, but the music continues. The party doesn't belong to the musicmaker, does it? It doesn't belong to the dancers, either, and it certainly doesn't belong to the club. Vessels, honey, and the party has other homes.

By the bar, the boy with glasses has their drinks and makes for the dance floor. The light strobes, black and white, and in each frozen composition he can't find the girl. The light changes. He still can't find her. He won't, and although I can see her while he cannot, we both share the same knowledge: every night out is hopeful at its origin.

See the girl, meandering down the dark street to her car, clutching herself. It's begun to snow. She's lucky for this. The cold will wake her up. And, on this night at least, she'll sit in her car waiting for it to warm long enough that she'll be able to drive home safely. She will get into her bed, feel pleasant, and fall asleep. Tomorrow, she will wake up fine.

Rockets

My son wrote to me while he was over there.

I clutch the printouts of his emails while I sit on my back porch. The first snow drifts, big wet flakes, and the dark of the ravine sucks them away. I think of one letter Travis wrote not long after he got there. He tells me the truck broke down, and they stopped to fix it in the middle of the dark and hard desert. Baghdad does not yet glow, but it is out there somewhere, beyond the unseen edge of everything. In my mind there are no stars. The moon is a soured thumbnail, poking through the sky.

Sudden and soundless, three lines of fire rise from the far side of the horizon. The rockets claw through the deep vault, and my son and his fellows, standing outside the truck, turn their faces heavenward. I imagine how Travis's rifle becomes weightless, his helmet no heavier than the one I used to watch him wear on Friday nights. The rockets sear the nighttime sky as they pass, silent and without incident. Their graying contrails fade. Right then, Travis writes, it was easy to believe the rockets were something else. Fireworks that didn't go off. Something like that, Dad.

I wore my waders and stood in the river as the light rose and filled the aspens along the bank. The aspen leaves, red and gold and orange, seemed to warm me, but I knew the snows would come soon. This was two mornings ago.

Once I had two brown trout in my wicker basket, I waded out of the river and up the bank

to my Jeep and drove home along the mountain highway. When I arrived, a man was sitting on the front steps of my cabin, waiting with his knees to his chest, his forehead on his knees. As I pulled into the gravel lot, he jolted like he'd been asleep. His car, a little blue sedan parked in the space alongside Cabin B, bore out-of-state plates. Odd, I thought, to be here this early if driving from Wyoming.

He stood and raised a hand in solemn greeting. He was youngish and tall and wore a down vest, flannel shirt, jeans and boots. His hair was a mess, and the beginnings of a beard shadowed his face. His eyes, though, were clear and cold like mountain lakes. They were eyes perfectly aware of something.

I gathered my rod and basket. "Morning."

"Do you have any vacancies, sir?"

The three cabins are set back from the road. The Rockies rise all around. "I've got nothing but, this late in the season."

I led him inside, and he waited while I put the trout on ice.

"Nice fish," the stranger said. I could tell he wasn't a fisherman.

I took the clipboard out of my desk. The key for Cabin B. "Name?"

"William Otis," he said. "But you can call me Billy."

"All right, Billy." I scribbled and handed him the key.

"What's your name?"

"Harold Lawrence." Then, with a grin, "But you can call me Harry."

He offered his hand instead of laughing. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Lawrence."

He suddenly seemed very young. His handshake was not firm. Travis was a boy when I taught him to look people in the eye and shake their hands firmly, let them know you are really

there. When he was still little enough to do so, he'd point it out to me if an attorney at my firm remarked on his strong handshake. Travis had been eager to make me proud then.

"Mr. Lawrence," Billy said, "would it be all right if I paid you in cash?"

I watched him fidget with the wedding band around his finger, slip it off and on again, before I answered. I didn't ask him what the matter was, what he was running from. My life had become such that I didn't worry about, nor was I concerned with, other people and their problems. And in addition to this, I understood the complexities that went along with fucking something up. "Yeah, that's fine," I answered. "How long will you be staying?"

He jammed the ring back onto his finger and then stuffed his hands into his pockets.

"Three days? It might be longer yet. I don't know."

"Sure," I answered. "But I'm closing for the winter in a week or so. You'll have to be out by then. Snows come and the pass closes and you're stuck."

"Okay." He took out his wallet and removed crisp bills. I noticed at least two credit cards, slid into their slots.

"I'm grilling these trout later if you'd like dinner." I nodded in the direction of the back porch.

"Okay. Thank you, Mr. Lawrence."

He went out the screen door, crossed the gravel, and took only a shoulder bag out of his car. He glanced at the mountain highway and then went into his cabin.

I shuffle through the letters with my frozen fingers and come to the one in which Travis mentions his mother. Travis has been writing her, too, but he doesn't tell her what he tells me. He claims that she'd only worry. Travis informs me that she could hardly watch his football

games she'd worry so much.

I never knew that about Anne, but I might have guessed it. I knew she was also there on those Friday nights, when one hundred yards of brightly lit grass contained everything I cared about. But she sat somewhere else in the bleachers. We didn't seek each other out. I thought about her less at those games, too, even though we were closer in proximity than we were at any other time. I watched Travis play, and that was enough.

He was thirteen when Anne and I divorced. I gave up practicing law. Moved out of the city. Opened the lodge. The only times I could see Travis anymore were our silent fishing trips every other weekend and his Friday night football games. Under those lights Travis was reckless and frightening, and it was as if there, on the field and at an untouchable distance, he was something else than the kid I saw during our weekends. It was like he had another *him* buried inside, and the violence of the gridiron suited it, and the games were the only times he'd let it out. I never experienced this side of him up close, but I knew it was there, just beneath the surface of his face as we fished and he stared at the river waters, chewing silently at his lip. I'm certain he never let his mother see it, either. But on Friday nights I could watch him live, truly live, if not be a part of that life myself.

In another letter Travis tells me there is a kid in his squad who played football at Cherry Creek in Denver, who won the State Title the same year Travis's team lost in the semifinals. Sometimes, he says, we joke about what might have happened in that game if we had played each other. I like that, Dad.

I had spread foil over the grill, and the trout filets sizzled in butter there and smelled good. The sun began to pool on the peaks, and I was tipsy by the time I heard the front door open. I went

inside, and Billy was walking around the room, observing the pictures over the mantel. Pictures of me and Travis and his mother. Billy turned and opened his mouth as if he had a question, and I bolstered something inside of me, something that would allow me to tell him it was none of his business. But he paused and closed his mouth and didn't ask anything.

"Go on outside," I said. "I'll get you a beer."

We sat in the darkening evening, watching down the wooded ravine. I got up to tend the grill and spoke with my back to him. "You didn't come up here to fish."

Billy waited. Then, "What makes you say that?"

"Saw you didn't have a rod."

"Right."

I didn't press. We ate quietly.

Afterward, I heard a branch snap on the slope and knew the bears had come. I got up and walked to the railing, motioning for Billy to come over. I put a finger to my lips. Down the slope from the porch the mother black bear trundled into view, sniffing the air, her cub sulking along behind her. They come by sometimes, and I like to watch them. The cub used to roll around, leaves sticking to his fur. He's older now, rangier. I sometimes wonder about the bears, about the daddy. If it is just these two. If this is the way nature intended it to be for the bears.

Soon the sun drained out of the sky altogether, and the bears slid off down the slope and disappeared.

Billy whispered. "That was great."

I nodded.

"I've heard that fishing helps people." He continued to whisper. "That it's therapeutic. Do you think so?"

I thought about it. I examined my life in those few soundless moments and could not say if it had helped me. I thought of the last time I'd wanted to go fishing with Travis, the last time I'd wanted to go with anybody, and fishing seemed a thing to do and only that. I shrugged.

"I think I'd like to go fishing," Billy said.

I cut him off before he got any further. "I'm not a guide."

His eyes widened and he shut up. I took a breath and felt like I'd ruined the good feeling the bears had brought.

"Okay," Billy said. Then he said thank you for dinner and went back through my cabin to his own.

My face is numb in the cold, but I'm not ready to go in. I think about the river, how some of it will freeze. We were supposed to go fishing the day before he shipped out. He showed, but not early enough to fish. He'd been up late with his buddies, drinking, saying goodbye. And that was okay. I just wanted to see him. But in one of his last letters Travis says he wishes we went fishing that day. He says, I remember hitting the snooze and I hate myself for that. I'm sorry, Dad. He says, I missed too many things back then.

I was up early this morning, moving about in the predawn gloaming of the cabin, pacing the hallway and the living room but not searching for anything. I went out back and held Travis's letters and thought about rockets crossing the sky, lines of fire. But, I thought, no matter how quiet the rockets seemed, no matter how peacefully they passed, they would land somewhere. Sooner or later, they would explode. Would the beauty of them in their passing be worth it?

I smelled frost on the ground though I could not yet see it. I set down the letters and

weighted them with my coffee mug and went inside to get my coat. My head felt stuffy. A hike, I thought. Fresh air.

The sun was just up and it lay across the mountains. Above the treeline the peaks burned with colors to match the aspens. I started for the trail down the ravine. The lights were on in Billy's cabin. The cold air settled into me while I thought about it. "Shit," I muttered, and went to his door and knocked.

He answered with bloodshot eyes. He still had not shaved. "Everything okay, Mr. Lawrence?"

"We're going for a hike. I want to show you something."

"Well—"

"No. It'll be good for you."

"Okay. Hang on."

He shut the door and I waited and then he came back out, wearing his down vest and boots. "You sure you want me to go with you?"

"Yeah. Come on." I started off and he followed me into the trees.

The crisp air preserved the scent of evergreens. I inhaled, my lungs burning. The trail, a thin scratch of soil and rock, led down into the ravine and then turned up one of the slopes, running sidelong against the mountain over ledges made by fists of rock. Soon we passed out of the shadow and could consider the view. We watched the conflagration of earth and sunlight and the glimmer of structures I knew to be Ft. Collins. I found the thin line of the river, and I traced it with my eyes into the blazing east until I couldn't follow it anymore.

Billy sighed and said, "Wow."

The trail curved with the mountain, and we moved through a cleft in the range. A short

ways further we passed into a high bowl hewn out among the mountaintops, a secret place, rimmed with the uttermost ridges of the mountains. We descended among tall thin pines, and the small lake in the bowl's center lay foreshortened and bright. Another week and the lake would freeze.

“Wow,” Billy said again.

The water was still and clear over round stones. A buck on the far bank bent to drink. Then it raised its head and great rack of antlers and stared at us. The white fur of its chest gleamed before it turned and disappeared into the trees, hooves sharp and staccato on the stones.

I stooped and picked up a stone and cupped it in my hands. I brought it to my lips, as if breathing on it might accomplish something. I reared back sidearm and hurled it, watching it skip across the water three, four, five times. I had not done this in a long while, but still, the stone sunk just as it always had. I smiled and looked at Billy. “I used to bring my boy up here to skip stones.”

Billy grinned, but I was somewhere else, and Anne had finally asked me outright. My eyes gave it away before a word left my lips—I didn't even leave myself the opportunity to lie. All I could think of were the quick and silent fucks with the lone female attorney at my firm. They'd seemed thrilling at first. No, they *were* thrilling. But when they lost that I loathed myself and was likewise powerless to stop. It all ended, both with my wife and the woman at work, soon after Anne discovered what I'd done. I spent years analyzing why I did it. I theorized, but as time mounted the reasons why started to seem unimportant. This is what I mean: in the present, I live in a cabin in the woods by myself, and I am here, here and nowhere else. There are only the choices I have made and the consequences. Nothing else.

Then, I was staring at Billy's hands again as he pulled and twisted at his wedding band.

“Are you okay, Mr. Lawrence?”

“Are you a good liar, Billy?”

He backed away. “What?”

“Nothing,” I answered. “Nothing.”

He looked out at the lake again. After a while, he said, “You were right. This clears your head.” Then he bent and picked up a stone. He glanced at me, as though to make sure he wasn’t committing some sort of transgression. I nodded, and then he threw the stone. We watched it skip.

We returned along the trail with the sun passing through a cloudless sky. After we’d stepped onto the gravel of the lot Billy said, “That was nice, Mr. Lawrence. Thanks.”

“I’m going to have a beer on the porch,” I said. “Care for one?”

“Sure.”

Inside, I told him to go on out back and have a seat while I grabbed the bottles. When I was alone, I placed my hands on the counter, closed my eyes, and breathed. I felt, for the first time in a very long time, that I had mended something.

I went out the backdoor with a beer in each hand. Billy stood there, and as I glanced at the little table and saw my coffee mug from the morning, I realized Billy was holding the crinkled stack of Travis’s letters in his hands. He had been reading them, but now, as it all dawned on him, he jerked his eyes up, full of fear.

I lurched forward, dropping the beers to the porch. I tore the letters from his hands and shoved him away, and the letters were crumpled and crushed and I stared at them in my hands, breathing hard and not speaking. I already loathed myself. Unthinking, reactionary. I’ve never learned to master this impulse; I’ve never learned how to apologize.

“I’m sorry,” Billy finally said. Then he left through the door.

I sat down in my chair. I was shaking all over. One of the beer bottles had rolled up against a railing post and the other had shattered and the beer ran over the stained boards of the porch and slipped through the cracks. I saw an image of Travis then, poking at a keyboard somewhere in that faraway desert, and I started to cry. The tears, I am certain, came from the same place they’d come when I received notice of what happened to him over there. The tears were all part of the same reserve, my only reserve. I cried and I heard Billy’s car start and I heard him drive off.

In one of his last letters, Travis tells me, Dad, writing you helps. I never talked to you enough before, but talking to you now helps me out.

As I read those words, something new forced itself out of the silence around me, something heavy that latched onto my back and has never fallen away. I doubt it ever will.

Travis says this: Writing you helps me.

The dark came on. My breath clouded in the air around me, and I thought about all the things I could not know.

Somebody knocked on the front door of my cabin. I sat for a moment, not wishing to move, and the person knocked again, harder. I got up and smoothed the letters and folded them and put them in my pocket.

When I opened the door a police officer stood there, khaki uniform and coat. His car idled quietly behind him, Ft. Collins Sheriff stenciled along its side. I cleared my throat and said, “Can I help you?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, sir,” he replied. “There’s supposed to be some heavy snowfall tonight, and I had to get up here before then.”

“Is everything okay?”

He took something out of his pocket, a folded piece of paper. It was a printed photograph, and I knew it would be Billy before I even saw it. Then, there he was, smiling and shaven, sitting on a couch and wearing a T-shirt and shorts. He seemed a different man than the one I met.

“Apparently,” the officer continued, “this man has an awfully worried family. His credit card popped up at a hotel in town a couple days ago, and we thought he might be heading through the pass.”

I took a breath and arched my neck, and right then the first snow tumbled out of the sky. Big flakes. Snow that would stick and build and cover everything until it melted and the world came out again, altered only in slight ways if altered at all. I thought of Anne and looked at the police officer with eyes that betrayed me once again. I hoped, at the very least, I’d done something to help Billy. I hoped he was going home.

It was almost as if Travis *knew*. I think of that sometimes, but I can’t know anything about it. He says he’s sorry in the very last letter. He’s done things and seen things over there that have made him understand his life more clearly.

He says: I know you’ll blame yourself, but I made my choices, too, and I should have done a better job. Sooner or later, we’ve got to figure out the role we’ve played along the road that’s brought us to where we are. There’s more I should have done with you, Dad.

I know, inside my heart, that my son was right about some of that. But I can see further back along that road.

Travis and that boy had joked about what might have happened in the State Championship game, and Travis had liked that. What might have happened is nothing, but I can't help thinking about it, too. I read my son's letters, and I can see that he was smart—smart enough to do better than he did in school, good enough at least to get into college. To have the option. And while his size precluded any sort of athletic scholarship, I think of him on the football field and the reckless, almost self-destructive savagery he played with. The sheer violence of it. I wonder if that would have been inside him at all. I wonder if he would have joined the marines, if he still would have felt the need to do something affirming, something to vindicate his own existence. And I do not believe he would have felt that desire had I not robbed him of something else—something secret and impossible for me to name—when he was only thirteen years old. I do not believe he would have. Among all the rest I cannot know, I think I can know this much.

I came back out to the porch after the officer left. Whorls of snow in the darkness. Now, I hear the snuffling. The snap of a low hanging branch. The bears have come. I can't see them. They will hibernate soon. I just sit here and listen. I watch the falling snow, and I wish for lines of fire to scorch quietly through it all. I wish—if this is the way it all must have happened—that I might have been over there with him.

Sometimes the Mother, Sometimes the Wolf

The record scratches to life. I ease back in the swivel chair and stare at the lights of the soundboard. I still can't make sense out of the lights. I imagine the rock and roll tunes zipping through the desert waste. They bounce off the range, ping off the antenna of a lonely semi, and shoot straight into the dark. They break up and dissipate before they even make it out of the county, let alone to my home, more than a thousand miles away. I have friends there. A girlfriend, taking summer courses. I used to want to be a D.J. But now I know the weakness of my voice should I lean into the microphone and try to speak to somebody out there. Summer—and this internship—is almost over.

I remove the headphones and scratch my face. The record switches tracks. It's late, nothing to report. The weather hasn't changed in the month and a half I've been here. It's hard to believe that Muleshoe ever existed before the drought. People talk about an aquifer that's all dried up. I'm beginning to feel like that. A husk.

More coffee. I rise to get it. The chair spins and squeaks with each rotation. The phone in the booth rings. Shrill and startling. Aside from pranks, this hardly ever happens. Not during my shift.

“Hello?”

More than twelve hours ago, Hector and I rode out from the slat-ribbed herd to find the lost cow. Mr. Thad, the wealthy old dude who owns the radio, put me on at his ranch so I can make a little

money while I'm here. I am qualified to do this because last fall break I visited my girlfriend at her family's cattle farm out east, and they let me help, mostly for comedic value. I still don't know much, but I can ride a horse. I'm very proud of this.

Hector and I crested a rise, and the morning broke red against the mountain slopes. My horse stamped the dry earth. The sky was empty as ever. I scanned for the cow. Mr. Thad's land spread about us in low hills of red clay and scorched grasses. In the distance the clustered buildings of downtown Muleshoe glinted. I could just make out the highway cutting through the town's heart. Out a ways, the radio shed existed as a speck, the tower next to it a gray needle. In another direction I saw Mr. Thad's big home and the adjacent barns. "I don't see this fucking cow anywhere," I said. "You?"

Hector stared skyward, hand arched over his brow. He wore a bandana, streaked with salt. "No."

"You're really trying hard there, dude."

"I look already. I don't see it."

I clucked and set my horse forward. Hector followed. He might be younger than me, I don't know. I've been to his trailer before. It's full of books. Even the little TV with its rabbit ears rested on a stack of old books. That's how he learned his English. Plus, he told me, he liked to read. Clearly.

At the top of the next rise I saw the dark heap on the flat below us. We rode down. The air stank of guts and hummed with flies. The drought-cracked earth had blackened around the cow, what was left of it. The thing had been disemboweled and fed upon. My horse whinnied. I dismounted. The cow's neck bent at an impossible angle, and its tongue, dry and swollen, lolled stiffly from its mouth to rest in the dust. I was watching the flies roil above the cow's open eye

when I realized Hector was speaking.

“I have read something,” Hector said, still mounted. He gestured at the carcass. “When the lamb is lost in the wilderness, you don’t know what come looking. *A veces la madre, a veces el lobo.*”

“You think a wolf did this?”

Hector made a face. Of course, I knew. There were no wolves anymore. Hector said, “Is just an expression.” Sometimes I think Hector is smarter than I am.

“Maybe one of us should go get Mr. Thad.”

Hector turned his horse and booted it into a trot.

“This is a shame,” I called after him. “Huh?”

Hector shrugged before he disappeared over the rise. As if to say these things happened.

The woman on the phone speaks fast, frantic Spanish. I cannot understand her. Something about a hospital and a virgin. It sounds urgent, whatever it is. I don’t want to be rude, but she doesn’t listen to me when I tell her she has the wrong number. “Nine-one-one. Try that.” I hang up.

I go to the kitchen—which is also the shitter—through the door at the end of the short hallway outside the booth. A toilet and a sink, lit by a lone yellow bulb. The coffeemaker rests on the edge of the sink. I take a piss first. My tired self stares back from the cracked mirror above the toilet. The bulb overhead flickers and goes out, and in the dark I wish to be beside my girlfriend. She has a tendency to shove me away from her after she’s asleep, and this is somehow endearing. I wake when this happens, and watch the moonlight across her skin and the dark, butterfly tattoo on her shoulder. The light bulb flickers back to life, and I am there in the mirror, solitary and exhausted. Dead air buzzes in the booth monitors, and I curse and run down the

hallway, spilling my coffee. The phone begins to ring again but stops by the time I get a new song playing.

I take a crushed pack of cigarettes out. A habit I've picked up from Hector. I light a smoke, turn down the monitors, and ease back. I am driving that lone semi, high beams on, headed out of this place.

The phone rings, jolting me awake.

I stood upwind from the dead cow, smoking a cigarette, and Mr. Thad's red truck came out of the swale. It stopped with a light squeak of brakes, and both he and Hector got out.

Mr. Thad is tall and thin everywhere except for the gut bulging beneath the buttons of his shirt. His mustache and eyebrows are versions of the same bushy, white caterpillar, but the center of his mustache is stained tobacco brown. Red broken vessels spider in his cheeks. He came over and removed his hat and passed a hand over his slicked white hair. A stream of tobacco juice squirted from between his front teeth. "Yep," he said, nodding at the carcass. "That's a dead animal."

A moment passed. Finally I said something. "What do you think, Mr. Thad?"

He looked skyward with a jolly expression. He suddenly seemed tipsy. "I think it's gonna rain today, by gawd."

Hector scoffed once before catching himself.

Thad turned. "Don't think so?"

Hector shrugged and pretended to be interested in something far away.

"What say you, boy?"

I peeked at the blue sky. "I respectfully disagree, but that's not what I meant—"

“Was down Portales way yesterday,” Mr. Thad continued. “All them Mexican Indians say rain. Praying to their holy santos and likewise with the rain dances. Doubling up that shit can’t hurt. I’m inclined to believe ‘em. Hector, you got any of them santos?”

Hector nodded once. I’ve seen them, colorful handmade figurines on the windowsill. St. Anthony is his favorite, he told me.

“You pray to them, too, then.” Mr. Thad began toward the truck, listing.

“Mr. Thad,” I said.

He stopped. “What? Go get the goddamn backhoe and pick that thing up before my dogs find it. Dead cow, ain’t it?” Then he clambered into the pickup and drove off.

“Shit,” I muttered, flicking the cigarette away.

We walked back, Hector and me. I led my horse. When we got to the big gray barn we played rock-paper-scissors to determine who would do the grisly job of picking up the cow and dumping it into the gulch. Hector beat me, paper over rock, and chuckled.

“I know your head, my friend.”

“Is that right?”

He smiled and tapped my temple. “Your head is hard like a rock.”

The shrill ring of the phone bores into my skull before I answer.

“*La virgen!*” the woman on the line shouts. It is a different woman than before.

“Ma’am,” I say, “calm down, please.”

“*No no. Aquí a la hospital. Dígales la gente, por favor! Dígales—*”

“Look. You have the wrong number. I hope everything is okay, but please, call an ambulance if something is wrong.” I hang up.

Soon, the phone begins ringing constantly. If I don't answer, the rings give out then start again a few seconds later. I can think of no explanation except for the kids who prank call while getting high out at the abandoned drive-in. This, though, doesn't seem like their style.

I'm getting a headache. I pick up the phone and shout into the receiver, but I stop with the male voice on the other end.

"Mary," he says. "The mother of God."

"Hector?"

"*Escuchame*. Listen to me. It is the mother of God. She is appeared at the hospital."

My headache swells. "Hector."

"The mother of God is appeared at the hospital," he repeats. "*Ahora*. You must spread the word on the radio. Is a sign. Mr. Thad was right."

I start to laugh.

"Please, my friend." Hector's voice grows more anxious. "This is true. Tell everyone."

The line goes silent.

I replace the receiver on the cradle. When it starts to ring again I decide to have a smoke outside.

I'd driven the backhoe out to the carcass and there were three buzzards picking at it. They looked at me with impassive eyes. My machine's engine didn't scare them. I had to get out of the backhoe and shoo them away because, for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to dig out the dead cow with the hideous birds still sitting on it. They merely waddled a few feet away and watched. I lifted the carcass into the front-end loader and drove the short distance to the gulch at the border of the property. The birds hopped along behind me. I tipped the cow out over the

edge, backed away, and drove off, and in the rearview the birds remained on the ground, as if they didn't understand what had happened to their meal.

The afternoon wore on. When we finished repairing a segment of fence, I finally asked Hector whether he would pray to his holy santos.

Hector grunted and gathered up the wire spool, and we started toward the barn.

“Well?” I pressed.

“Is private.”

“I never knew you were so religious.”

“I never knew you so religious,” he mimed. It was funny with his accent.

“My mom prayed a lot,” I said, thinking of childhood Sundays. She would wake me up and make me dress nice, and we'd walk down the street to St. Adalbert's, a big old church that smelled like bad perfume inside. In the summers it was hot, and I always felt light-headed. My dad preferred to drink at home on Sundays. “The praying never worked, far as I could tell.”

Hector stopped. He disintegrated a clump of baked dirt with the toe of a boot. He raised an arm and gestured at the arid plains and then let his arm slap back to his side. He shrugged. I waited for him to say something. He didn't. I stopped going to church myself some time ago. But still, it seems I can't escape it. My girlfriend and I walked around the campus of our Catholic university one evening during the end of the semester. It was a cool night, quiet and dark. I'd begun to sense something changing between us. She said, Let's go in here, and led me through the large oak doors of the basilica, and we sat in one of the pews. The cathedral was dimly lit. In view of the big golden tabernacle and under the watchful eyes of the angels in the ceiling mural, I didn't feel like I could talk, so we sat quietly in that huge space contemplating the impenetrable mystery of it, and somehow this was easier than talking. There hadn't been a whole lot of

communication this summer either.

Walking again, Hector and I passed Mr. Thad, who sat on the bottom step of the big house, staring at the clay between his boots. He lifted his head and waved. “Come over here. Lookit this.” An empty bottle of wine sat on the step next to him. He pointed to the ground and the black squirming mass there. “Here.”

I leaned in and saw the ants, a chaos of them. Closer still, and I saw the snake beneath the turbulent swarm. It had been small and now was dead and dried out—a husk—and the ants picked it apart and carried off the pieces. I stood up.

He smiled at us, dark flecks of chew in his teeth. “That’s one dead serpent,” he said, bursting into laughter. He spit a stream of juice into the ants before squinting into the clear sky and crying out, “Gonna pour, thunderstorm, by gawd!” He laughed until he coughed and hacked out his chew which landed in a wet lump on the clay. Then he stared at the ground a while. “Go on,” he said. “Get out of here. I got nothing else for you to do today.”

Hector drove us away in his truck. I wanted to go home and sleep before my shift. He talked me into a few cold ones instead. It felt necessary.

I lean against the corrugated wall of the radio shed and smoke. The lone streetlamp reveals an island of chalky gravel, and everything outside that is black. The cigarette burns down to the filter, and I can still hear the phone inside ringing. Hector. He isn’t stupid. I grit my teeth, flick the cigarette butt away, and start walking. I don’t worry about the dead air I’ll leave behind. Maybe the whole of Muleshoe will be out at the hospital, which is nothing more than a two-story, cinderblock clinic.

Outside the streetlamp’s sphere, the sky fills with stars. The apex of the radio tower

blinks slow and red. I follow the dirt trail toward the distant buildings, eventually crossing onto pavement. I pause when I hear a soft rumble. I turn and a flash of lightning draws a white-hot cord between sky and hardpan far out on the plain. I'll be damned.

I pass the Greyhound station on the outskirts. Buses leave from there and drive to places on the far side of the border, fabled places. But to Hector, I imagine, they are nothing more than ordinary. Now that he lives here I suppose there is much less in his life that seems mythic. I pass the Den, where Hector and I drink. A man crouches in the shadow next to the building, vomits. My temples throb.

The lights of the clinic's parking lot come into view. I can see the crowd packing the pavement. The murmur grows, but no fiery apparition hovers in the sky. I near, imagining how this must have come about. Earlier in the summer Mr. Thad's cattle stampeded only because of one spooked animal.

I see nothing save for the crowd, the parking lot, and the clinic. There are whole Mexican families, ranch hands, and bean farmers whose irrigation ditches have run dry. Truck drivers, nurses, people I recognize. Some stand in clusters and hold hands. Some bow their heads and mutter prayers. As I watch, though, the crowd begins to disperse, people leaving one at a time or a few at a time and walking off into the night. Lightning flashes, thunder rumbles. Close by.

Someone grabs my arm. Hector. His eyes are damp.

"Hector, I don't see anything."

He points to a payphone at the edge of the lot. "We call to tell you it is a sign."

"Yeah," I say, searching all around, searching for anything.

"You tell everyone?"

"Tell what? I don't see anything."

“*La virgen.*” He points at a second floor window. “She was there.”

“Oh, you mean somebody *in* the window.”

“*Si, pero no.* Outside the window. In the air. She was there.” He rubs the back of his hand across his eyes and then looks to me, sincere.

I turn to the darkened window frame. I speak over my shoulder. “There’s nothing there.”

“She is left.” Hector is quiet.

I turn, and he is walking away.

A cool wind gusts. The storm clouds slide overhead. Lightning flashes and thunder bellows. Those who remain in the lot scatter. I can feel the empty window frame on my shoulders. All of these people flee, and the wind gusts. Hector stops at the edge of the lot and faces me. He beckons to me with his hand, and the storm clouds fall open, hard and cold and strong. Hector becomes a ghost, obscured nearly altogether. I stand alone and all is water and all is noise. The lightning flashes again and ignites the slanting ropes of rain. The world is only light—just for an instant—and out of the darkening and quaking repose I draw a first breath. I don’t know anything.

I'm Talking About You

Cold. That's all there is when the wind blows like this. I was raised just a little north of here, but I've been away, and somehow I forgot how goddamn brutal winter gets. I say this much to Sarah. She snaps her cell phone shut and looks up at me. She smiles and brushes her auburn hair out of her face. Her breath clouds behind her words.

“What'd you say?”

“Nothing.”

A first date. A blind date. A mutual friend thought we'd have fun together. Me, new in town, and her, as our friend put it, *a good time*. Dinner consisted of few words, gulfs of silence. I'm not much older than she is—Sarah graduated two years ago from the university I've just been hired by—but we don't seem to have much to talk about. Half joking, I asked during dinner how she felt about her Catholic university hiring an agnostic and a pseudo-nihilist to teach its students, but she only looked at me for a moment before saying she always struggled with philosophy. I'm starting to worry that, come the end of Christmas break, my first batch of students won't be as bright as I had hoped.

After dinner, I asked if she'd like to do anything else—just to say something—and she suggested a drink. I agreed. I don't know why. No. I do know why. It's her hair. Even on this sidewalk, in this line outside the bar, her hair smolders with some kind of warmth the rest of us don't have out here in the cold. I'd like to reach out, right now, and run my frozen fingers through it. I imagine her hair fanned, spread over my pillow, a halo of fire. Fat chance. Still, a

man can't help but dream. *I* can't help but dream. I know that about myself. And this is one of the few truths I find troubling to my beliefs. This deep and desperate need, rearing itself only now and again.

"I can't believe you haven't been here yet," Sarah says.

I look the building over. It seems to sag into itself. Crumpled siding. Bass beats through the walls like a manic heartbeat. The shining sign above brands the night: *The Linebacker*. College football rules this town.

I shrug. "What can I say?"

"You better get used to this place," Sarah says. "It's popular. We used to come here *every* Thursday. So fun."

We reach the door, and the air rolls, swampy and hot, from the opening. I can already see that the place is packed, bodies in the dim light. The bouncer, a beefy fellow with a tribal tattoo around his bicep, leans forward when he recognizes Sarah. She kisses him on the cheek. He asks to see my identification.

"What do you think?" she shouts to me over the music as we work our way in.

I don't know what to say. It's like a million other places. Wall to wall humanity. Hot and airless. A floor like flypaper. Sarah stops in the center of the room and turns to face me. She smiles, and her smile really is nice. I look at her dark eyeliner, and I watch the way her hair glows in the warm light of beer signs on the walls, and I can see it. She fits in this place. I imagine her in here two or three years before, getting sloppy with her girls, maybe falling onto the filthy floor and laughing while her friends help her up. But she would have been beautiful throughout, and I think I might have loved it in an inexplicable way. I imagine this place summons that same deep and desperate need within her, and I look at her hair. Maybe I do have

a chance tonight.

Sarah says something, but I can't hear her. She rises to her toes and puts her mouth to my ear. Her breath on my earlobe sends a feeling through me, and I'm bold enough to place my hand on the small of her back.

"I said I used to come here all the time," she shouts.

I nod like it's the first time she's said it.

We stand for a while, the music and the bodies surging all around us, and I dig for something to say, just so I can lean in close to her. "Crazy in here tonight."

Hand on my shoulder, she shouts again into my ear. "We won our bowl game today." She casts her hand over the room. I notice now. All the people wear blue or gold or green. Shirts with shamrocks on them. Cartoon drawings of leprechauns.

A new song begins, almost too loud to be heard or distinguished. The beat pumps, and Sarah raises her eyebrows and smiles like she knows the song. She starts dancing, scooting up to me, but something seizes inside my stomach like it always does, like it always has. Quickly, I ask her what she'd like to drink.

I squirm through the people toward the bar, cringe as I pass beneath raised arms and sodden armpits. I order a gin and tonic for Sarah, whiskey and water for myself. The drinks come in opalescent plastic cups, and they are extremely cheap. I hold the cups above my head and work back through the crowd.

I find Sarah talking to a tall, slender man with somehow bulky biceps, tight shirtsleeves. His sideburns and goatee have been landscaped with apparent diligence, and I can't tell how old he is. Twenty-one. Maybe older. He holds a beer, and he shakes slightly to the beat. Sarah, too, shakes, and I can tell they are both itching to just full out dance with each other. This guy. I

wrote about swinging dicks like him in my dissertation. All I have to do is look around the room to confirm it. A fucking drone.

I walk up to them and hand Sarah her drink. She takes it and immediately begins stirring its straw. “Thanks,” she says.

The guy says nothing for a moment. Finally, he tells Sarah it was nice to meet her and walks away.

After a measure of the song passes, Sarah brightens. She’s figured out something to say to me. “What’d you write your dissertation on?”

The music’s so loud. I wish she had asked me this during dinner. I shorten the title for her. “The Human Imagination.”

She cocks her eyebrows and opens her mouth, but the room goes wild and distracts her. Me. Televisions hanging on the walls roll highlights of the day’s game, clearly played in some warmer climate. A chant rises and is cast back and forth from one side of the room to the other. Sarah raises a fist and joins in. I watch all these people, and for an instant I wish to join, and be a part of all this.

A sudden swell of bodies threatens to knock us over as a space clears on the floor. I stay on my feet and manage to catch Sarah around the waist. I see in the space that the floor is tile, checkered and streaked with filth, and a man stands there and strips until he’s stark naked. He begins dancing to a rhythm all his own, eyes closed, and he lifts a beer bottle above his head and pours the beer out. The liquid runs through his cropped hair and over his body to glisten in the beer sign light. The room laughs, cheers him on. The flashes of digital cameras catch in the wet sheen of his body, and I stare into the liquid-crystal panel of a camera held by a girl in front of me as the man’s slender frame and hairless chest and swaying, half-erect dick become forever

trapped there. The man spins, something like firelight upon him. He wears no shoes, and his feet are dirty. Suddenly, he stops dancing and opens his eyes. His shallow chest heaves. He looks at the girl with the camera, and he steps forward and grabs her and kisses her hard. I can see his fingers, wet and thin, threaded into her hair and clutching the back of her head. People scream with laughter. The girl breaks away and turns her face and she's smiling. Not angry at all. The man stands there, and his smile fades as if some clarity has claimed him in this instant, and he pushes through the crowd, running by us and out the door. The empty space remains for a few breaths, and bodies fill it up again.

Sarah's laughing. She looks at me, and I laugh back because I feel I must. She keeps laughing, and I realize she's laughing more than she would be if I had something to say, if I had something to offer.

A new song, and Sarah starts shaking to the music. I drain my drink and, despite my desire, yell into her ear that I'm going to the bathroom. I think to myself as I work toward the far side of the room that with a few more drinks I might dance. I might.

The copper plate on the bathroom door, greasy and worn by legions of palms, makes me squeamish, but finally, I push the door open and go through. Inside, the music becomes a steady throb.

The restroom is tiny. It stinks. One urinal, one stall, and a sink with a cracked mirror above it. A man sits on the tile with his back against the wall across from the sink and urinal. His legs lie flat extended away from him, and his jeans are fashionably torn. The crook of one of his elbows hangs on the rim of the trashcan next to him, and his forearm disappears into it. Vomit, still slick, spreads over his shirtfront, over the cartoon leprechaun there. He looks at me, his eyes roll, and he smiles wide. His eyeballs jiggle in their sockets until they fix on me.

“Hello,” he says.

“Hi,” I return. I don’t make a move toward the urinal.

“Are you having a good time tonight?” The man speaks as if his mouth is full of water.

I’m considering the probability of actually squeezing out my piss while he sits there. He doesn’t wait for me to answer.

He chuckles. “Itsa crazy night, man. You know?”

“Sure,” I say. I make a decision and turn to leave.

“Hey wait. Wait. I gotta tell you something.”

I stop. I don’t know why. No. I do know why. This guy, drunk as he is, sounds sincere. And in here, apart from the room where people dance, here is a man that sounds as if he wants to tell the truth. As if he wants to bear something for me to witness. So I stop. I turn to him.

“You know Ashley,” the man says.

“Uh. No. I don’t.”

The man laughs. “Yes. Yes you do. You know what?”

“What?”

“Fuck that bitch, man.” He laughs again, but now his smile and crinkled eyes warp into a solemn expression. He stares at me, almost begging. “You know, right?”

“Sure,” I say again.

“Man, it’s so messed up. So messed up. Why do you think?”

I shouldn’t have stopped to listen to this. I should say something about the nature of things. How everything gets messed up if you only wait long enough. Say something like that and walk out of the room, but he asks me again what I think, and I don’t want to answer like that anymore.

“Look, buddy,” I say. “I’m just gonna—”

“No, no, like why do you think things are like this?” The man’s eyes seem to clear for a moment, blue and cold and aching.

I take a deep breath. “Like what?”

“Like how come these bad things happen? Like, I mean, why can I say something’s bad?”

I shrug. Sigh. “The way it is, brother. What can I say?”

“Look.” The man’s features droop in a gruesome attempt to appear serious. “This what I’m saying. Somehow we can see if something is bad or good. Something that happens. Bad or good. When did we learn that?”

I don’t respond. The throb of the bass grows.

He holds up the hand not in the trashcan and bends his thumb back and forth. “Look. Sometime we got thumbs like this. See? Sometime we learned how to talk. So sometime we learned to see what’s bad and good that happens to us. Right?”

I try making light of what he’s just said because I want to leave. “Look, pal, this conversation’s a little too academic for me. I’m gonna—”

“No, man, *look*.” He sounds a little perturbed now. “I learned about this in class, so I *know*, man. This place is mean and harsh and you survive cause you’re lucky. Harsh means, man, and you survive cause of, of natural fucking selection, man.” He points. A fat fly bouncing and buzzing against the mirror. “See? That fly don’t know what’s bad. What’s not fair. The fly only has to care about surviving and that’s it. And surviving’s hard enough without all this other stuff. See?” He points at the fly again, and the fly crashes into the mirror, into itself. “That’s what I’m saying. What good does it do me to see what stuff is bad? Gotta mean something.

What's it mean?"

I open my mouth. Close it. I want to tell him that I know how he feels. I want to tell him that all I ever do is try to make sense of that very feeling. I open my mouth again, but all that comes out is a whisper. "I know, man." He doesn't hear me.

"About us," he offers. "What's it mean about us?"

I don't have any words. The throbbing beat of the music pounds against me. Inside me. My head. My ribcage.

The man lurches suddenly, violently, as if he'd like to get up and come after me. But he doesn't rise. He only screams, his voice garbled, the cords in his neck standing out. "I'm talking about you man!"

He hangs his head now and begins to cry. I watch him. I feel strange. Like I've receded far back into my own head, cringed against the back of my skull, and watched through distant eyes. I hear the man speak, barely above a whisper. "I wish I was something else."

The fly whines against my ear, vanishes. The man coughs and looks up at me with fearful eyes. He pulls at the trashcan and tips it and all sorts of foul shit spills from it as the man slides and falls in his drunkenness and begins retching and spewing across the stained tile and crying while he does it all.

I turn, knock open the bathroom door, and leave the room.

I push through the crowd. Sarah's there. I can tell by the color of her drink that it is new and not a gin and tonic. The tall man with the sideburns and goatee looms over her, and she laughs and paws at his arm. She turns and begins rubbing her backside against his crotch to the tempo of the music. He moves in a rhythm with her, and I watch. I look around the room and everything is like this and it is all okay with everyone. I walk past Sarah and the man and go out

the door into the cold night. It has begun to snow, and the fat, white flakes drift against the deep sky.

Everywhere, cars crouch quiet and dark. I stop. The naked dancing guy sits on the curb. He's found a pair of boxers. He hugs his knees to his chest. His hair looks wet. The snowflakes land and melt on his back. Thin steam rises from his flesh.

Another man comes out of the bar and passes me to go stand in front of the naked guy. The man holds out a dirty sneaker by a lace. It hangs, rotating slowly.

"I couldn't find the other one."

A whining hum, what's left of the bar music, fills my ears. I pass the naked guy and his friend. I'm walking, and I feel as if there is something out there, stalking me. Something that slides between the bars full of desperate men and desperate women and dispatches those it happens upon with indifference. And here is my car. I open the door and sit down in the quiet and in the dark. I put my head against the headrest and close my eyes. It is quiet and dark in here. Cold. And that is all there is.

This Game Do That to You

The baseball shine under the lights, and this run through your head as the pitch on its way: full count but you don't want no walk. A walk don't get you out of A ball. You swing, but the pitch disappear. Just gone. The catcher block it in the dirt, leap to his feet, tag you out. Game over. This the only night with a crowd—dollar-beer night—and they howling at you walking off the field. The fuck they at the rest of the week?

Already the guys got the music playing in the clubhouse. Wish for something good just one time. Maybe a dude from your own Chicago hood, like Common. He got something to say at least. Swear to God, Single-A make it hard to remember you even like baseball at all. Had fifty stolen out your locker the first week of summer. You can't find out who took it. The Latinos don't know English. The white dudes think you crazy. Like one day Ronnie look over from his locker and point at the five-point star inked on your forearm and ask what it is, so you tell him it's Vice Lords. And he ask what that is, "Like a gang or something?" How to tell him Greg made you get the tattoo when you was thirteen just so you could walk home from school? Greg is Vice Lords. Not you. But your brother always looking out. How to tell Ronnie that? You can't.

Tonight you get on the bus to drive all the way to Grand Rapids for a day game tomorrow, so you sit and untie your spikes and start packing. Ronnie lean over from his locker and smile. He think he all smart because he played in college and he been here a few years since. "Jones," he say, "you ever seen a slider like that before?"

"Fuck no," you say.

“Don’t throw no bitch sliders like that in high school, do they?”

“Already said no.”

“Dude’s gonna be a big-leaguer before long. Nasty shit.”

Maybe so. But you know all that mean—better be able to hit that shit if you want to be a big-leaguer. You eighteen already, and no dummy. The clubhouse empty out and you sit thinking. Seem like you can’t get a goddamn hit anymore. Leroy the clubbie drag his vacuum into the room. Leroy got a gray beard and red face. Always a chew in his cheek.

“Not your fault tonight, big fella,” Leroy say. “Blame the fucking scout that signed you.” Then he start up his vacuum.

The bus rumble out in the lot. Skip sit up front reading over the box score. Don’t need to look to know it say Jones, 0 for 4. Skip got to be thinking about the new center fielder. The club signed him now the college season ended. Short white dude, but the motherfucker can run. You better hit or they’ll call up his ass before they do you.

Only seat left on the bus is near the back, next to Mordecai. Been everywhere, they say. Played for everybody. Now all the way back down in Single-fucking-A and he don’t hang up his spikes. Mordecai look like an old teacher or something, wearing his glasses and reading a book.

He nod at you. “Come sit down beside me and hear my sad story. I’m shot in the breast and I know I must die.”

You heard crazy shit like that before out his mouth. “Whatever you say, teacher man.”

He crack a smile at that one. “Just something I was reading.” He wave the book and the cover say something about a drum.

Close your eyes after a while. Greg’s waiting here like he do sometimes, pulling you out on

the porch at the start of summer, before you leave home to join the club. He point at the ink on your arm and then he lift up his shirt, point at his own five-point star. "Don't fuck this up," he say. "Remember what's back here for you. What ain't. Don't fuck this up. You remember."

Mordecai wake you, tapping your leg. Ask him, "We there?"

He nod at the window. "I didn't want you to miss this."

The black trees going by, the sky going orange. "Miss what?"

"Have you ever seen the sun come up before?"

"You woke me up for this?" Mordecai just smile.

Hot as hell today. Mosquitoes. Nobody going to be in the crowd for a midweek day game either. Check the lineup after batting practice. Sure enough, Skip got the other center fielder, Morgan, in there. Swallow down what you feel. Know you'll get another chance.

You jog to the outfield to do some running, and all the pitchers out there cluster around something on the warning track. You go check it out. Ronnie stand in the middle of them, using a fungo bat to draw in the gravel. He trace a big circle, four feet around it, a tail, and a head with a smiley face. All the pitchers laugh.

"Fuck's that?" you say.

Ronnie shrug. "Rain turtle."

"Huh?"

He spread his arms and look up. "Rain turtle makes it rain."

You shake your head, smile. A rainout might be nice but the sky blue as ever.

"You got a lot to learn, Jones," Ronnie say, laughing.

Do your sprints in the grass and get your legs warm. When you finish, all the pitchers gone

back to the dugout or into the bullpen, but Mordecai come from somewhere and stand looking at the rain turtle like it something to think about. Then he use his spikes to sweep through the gravel and erase it. He do it until the whole rain turtle gone. Now he look at the sky like he nervous. Still no clouds. Yell at him, “What you doing, teacher man?” But Mordecai just go to the bullpen. He don’t even turn around.

Into the seventh inning, still no score. Zero, zero. Skip yell for you from the end of the dugout. He cough out a dark clump of sunflower seed and point at Morgan in the on-deck circle. “Get your bat,” Skip say. “They bring in a lefty, you’re gonna hit.”

You wait with your stick and helmet and watch their pitcher. Breathing hard, wiping his forehead between pitches. He fall behind three and one but get a pop- up on the next pitch. Two out. All the same their manager come out to the mound and bring in the lefty. Skip call Morgan back, and you stroll to the on-deck circle. The umpire shout when the lefty make his last warm-up.

Kick at the chalk and dig in. Remember. Don’t fuck this up.

The lefty surprise you by coming inside with the first pitch. Turn away and the ball hit you in the back. Don’t hurt bad—sting a bit—but the catcher jump up like you about to charge the mound. Just jog to first.

“That a kid,” the base coach say, coming over close to talk quiet. “Two out. Get in scoring position.”

Take your lead. Expect the throw over. Dive back to the base and the first baseman slap you hard as he can on the helmet with the tag. Get up, don’t worry over no bush-league motherfucker like him. Take your lead again and break soon as the pitcher lift his foot. Your

spikes pounding in the clay—you can always do this. Glance, see the catcher climbing out his stance. Slide hard feetfirst, the clay burn through your pants, and you pop up and stand as the throw get here.

On the next pitch, your hitter poke one through the right side of the infield. This is automatic. Got to score. Going around third, your favorite feeling in the world. Like running downhill. Like you never run this fast ever. Like you and Greg is kids again and you running just because. A Stony Island sidewalk and the Chicago sun. Home plate come into view and you don't think about pro ball or getting called up or nothing.

You know the right fielder going to come up throwing by the way the catcher block the plate. He raise his glove and tense and you feel the throw out there on its way. Dive around the catcher and slap home plate just before he tag you on the feet. No crowd to boo. No sound but your breath. Get up and stand in the clay under the sun, safe at home.

When you jog to center for the bottom half of the inning, Mordecai come out the bullpen and wink as he pass. Scoreboard say 1-0. Ain't going to last, you think. Mordecai got two pitches. Slow and slower.

He go full count on the lead-off man and the dude foul off pitch after pitch. When Mordecai let go the ball you lean to right field, anticipate. But the bottom just fall out the pitch like Mordecai yank on a string tied to the baseball, and the batter whiff, strike out. Mordecai do the next hitter the same way and the third batter roll over the first pitch he see and dribble it in front of the plate. Mordecai field it himself and throw him out. Just like that. End of the seventh and you still up.

Mordecai sit at the end of the bench in the dugout. Already sweating, a towel around his shoulders. Got his elbows on his knees and he stare out at the grass. He just smile, maybe happy

there wasn't no rainout.

Team go down one-two-three in the top of the eighth. Back out to center.

Their lead-off man launch Mordecai's first pitch about a thousand miles. It just hang in the air forever till you can't see it no more. You don't even move and the game all tied up. The next batter yank a pitch down the right-field line for a triple. Mordecai fall behind the third hitter three and one. Lean with the next pitch and now break for the gap in right center almost before you hear the crack of the bat. Glance once at the ball—so high up there—to figure where it might land, put your head down, run. The wind whistle. You push, running and running and feeling the ball up there. You and it. Don't fuck this up, Greg say. Don't fuck this up. Stop on the warning track and turn and block the sun with your glove and the baseball almost right on top of you and you catch it. Like that.

Take the baseball from your glove and raise your arm. The runner tagged and just walk home. The go-ahead run. Too far away to do anything about it. Everything so far. You feel like you do in the clubhouse after games. All by yourself.

The next hitter crush the first pitch he see from Mordecai. Gone. Make you hold your breath till it land. Mordecai just stand on the mound, hands on his hips, hanging his head. Simple, man. This game do that to you.

The dugout keep silent in the top half of the ninth. Go down one-two-three again. No fight. Game over. The dugout about empty but Mordecai still sitting at the end of the bench, elbows on his knees, staring at the cement under his spikes.

Got the music playing again. Even on the road they do. But Skip stick his head in and yell to turn that shit down. Somebody does, and now when it go quiet Skip call Mordecai over to the office.

You don't watch Mordecai cross the floor. Least you try. Maybe everyone try. Get up and go to the shower and take your time. The water beating on you. You want to tell Mordecai something. Maybe say thanks for the sunrise. Shake your head. Stupid.

When you come out the shower a book waits for you on your seat. Look around the room. Mordecai already gone. Ronnie just shrug, sitting at his locker. He laugh a bit and say, "At least the old dude don't have to come back tomorrow for another day game."

Don't answer. Just sit down. You wonder if Ronnie ever liked this game. Maybe when he was a boy he did. Somebody creep over to the music now and turn it back up. Same shit. Maybe Ronnie just been here too long. Decide, right now, you don't ever want to draw no rain turtles. Flip through the pages of Mordecai's book. Put it to your ear and listen to them whir. Start to finish. Like that. Put it in your bag. You picture how Mordecai erased the rain turtle earlier and you know he had something different to say from everybody else. But what of that? The game got no room for him. What can he do now? You don't know. Maybe go be a teacher. Coach high school someplace.

You take up your spikes. Black leather with the metal cleats. See the orange clay in the creases. Like they all just one thing, the clay and the leather. Tomorrow, you get to wear the shoes again. You can remember that.

Contrails

Jake watched the afterburners, orange-blue over the black line of the Rockies. He can hear the distant, rolling clap of the fighters' engines. The pair of jets passed beyond the red constellation of NORAD antennas and climbed. Jake imagined sitting cramped among gauges, dials, and lights—one hand resting on the joystick, the other on the throttle, all of it trembling beneath his fingers. Mach 2 with the flick of his wrist. Jake desired only a few things in life: to grow up, to be a fighter pilot, and to have sex with lots of women.

“I can't wait till I'm eighteen,” Freddie said next to Jake.

The two boys stood on the pavement of their cul-de-sac amid a rare swarm of fireflies. They held croquet mallets. A firefly flared. Jake swung and missed. “What's so good about eighteen?”

“That's when it's okay to have sex.” Freddie ran a hand over his buzz cut. “Cause you're an adult, you know?”

“Who says?”

“Ben and Nate.” Freddie whiffed at a firefly. “They were talking about it.”

Ben and Nate were sophomores at the high school, four years older than the boys. Jake scoffed anyway. “They don't know crap.”

“Ben was talking about how he almost got in a girl's pants one night.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You know.”

Jake didn't, but another insect flared. He swung, and the firefly exploded noiselessly against the head of the mallet.

"Nice!" Freddie cried.

The bug had splattered on the wood, and its guts glowed neon green like something radioactive. Or toxic. Or like the alien's blood from the movie they'd secretly watched on Freddie's cable. Jake held the mallet out to Freddie and said so.

"Yeah," Freddie replied, eyes widening. "Just like the Predator's blood."

Jake watched as the glow of the guts faded. All that remained was a dead bug. "Let's do something else, Freddie."

Freddie swung out, connecting. "Gotcha, fucker!"

Ben had called someone a fucker a few days earlier, and Freddie had constantly used the word since. It didn't bother Jake that it was a cuss. It just sounded worse than some of the others, weird out of their mouths. He said again, "Let's do something else."

"Okay." Freddie peered at the mallet. "Lookit this. Sick."

They tossed the croquet mallets in the grass and raced to the lot behind their houses, where they'd been waging a war against summer's end by staying up late and camping out. Jake lost the footrace. He wasn't fast. Sometimes he had dreams that he was being chased by an awful, terrifying thing—a thing that fed on children and would never stop chasing him. His legs wouldn't work right, despite the screaming of his mind. He couldn't outrun the monster, and just as it closed on him, the thought would come that he'd never be fast enough. Then he'd wake up.

They sat on their sleeping bags in the green canvas tent, shining flashlights into each other's eyes. They talked about the end of *Predator* when Dutch had to make his own weapons and put mud all over his body and how cool it was. They talked, briefly, about their fathers who

had left to fly jets over Desert Storm. They didn't mention the possibilities. They talked about the fear some of the kids on the base shared—the ragheads might bomb Cheyenne Mountain because of all the NORAD stuff there, for example—and they talked about the other day, when Jake's mom put a towel around her head and ran up to Freddie's kitchen window and scared Freddie's mom. They talked about a girl from school they'd seen in a bathing suit down at the lake. She had boobs now. They talked about boners. They talked about the new major league baseball team Denver was supposed to get, and they speculated as to what the team would be called. Jake wanted them to be called the Falcons. Freddie, for no reason he could explain, wanted them to be called the Green Machine. They talked about the impending start of seventh grade.

A jet passed overhead. The ground trembled.

“An F-15,” Freddie said.

“Bull. That was a 16.”

“You hear how loud that was? Two engines.”

“15's don't fly that low,” Jake said.

“Whatever.” Freddie whipped his flashlight beam across Jake's eyes.

Something exploded outside the tent, so loud it hurt his eardrums. Shapes grew in the tent walls, something prodding the canvas. Jake screamed. Mountain lions, coyotes, invading ragheads. Another explosion. Then there was laughter, high howls.

Ben ducked into the tent, stooping because he was tall. Freckles shadowed his face. He grinned. Large, white teeth. Ben used to be cool, letting the boys hang out in his carport while he listened to Pearl Jam and talked to them about stuff. But things changed. A couple uniforms showed up on his doorstep with bad news. Ben's father had also been a pilot. “What's up,

fuckers?”

Nate followed him in. Nate wore his hair like Kurt Cobain, letting it hang all around his face. He was not a base kid at all, but a friend of Ben’s from school. He only started coming around recently. He held a small, red cherry bomb by the wick, swinging it back and forth as if he’d hypnotize them. He bared his own crooked teeth. “Got you pussies good.”

Freddie snorted. “We knew it was you.”

“Bullshit,” Ben said, punching Freddie on the arm. “Had you pissing yourselves.”

As Freddie rubbed his arm, Jake looked at the older boys’ ripped jeans and unbuttoned flannels, and he marveled at their language. Effortless. But he wanted the older boys to go. They made him feel like he had to pretend. They made him not want to grow older. The haircuts and the clothes and the words. It all seemed tough.

The flashlights glinted against Ben’s canines. “What you children doing tomorrow?”

Freddie didn’t answer, but neither did Jake. He never knew anymore what the correct answer was when it came to Ben.

Nate broke the silence. “I’ll tell you what you fuckers aren’t doing. Stay the fuck away from the creek. Just stay away. We’re doing shit down there that’ll scare a couple pussies like you to death.”

Ben leveled a finger. “I better not see either of you down there tomorrow.”

And then they went out through the gap in the tent flaps. The hiss of the cherry bomb. The bomb exploded, and the older boys’ laughter faded away.

Jake sat up in terror, hot breath on his neck. No. He was awake. The tent was dark, and he could hear Freddie breathing. Jake closed his eyes and did what he did when afraid, and he felt the

deep reverberations of the engines, the wheels rolling over the tarmac. His heart thumped as he slammed the throttle forward, igniting the afterburners. He jerked the stick back and lifted from the ground. Everything, in an instant, became magical. The earth fell away. He clawed through the ocean sky and rolled on swells of cloud.

Whispers outside the tent. He held his breath. Soft steps in the grass, the impressions of flashlights through the canvas. Slowly, Jake crawled to the tent opening and worked a finger into the zippered gap, parting it enough for his eye. He saw two uniformed men, fatigues the same color as the night, searching for something with flashlights. Jake knew—they'd heard the cherry bombs in the valley. Jake's father always snuck illegal fireworks onto the base for the Fourth of July, and after setting them off, he and Jake would walk into the field and collect the rocket shells. But there had been no fireworks this summer, of course, and these unknown men searching in the dark did nothing to make Jake feel better. He returned to his spot and put his head on his pillow, and he stared for a long time at the vague shadow of the tent's apex.

After a quick breakfast of cereal and orange juice, they went to shoot hoops in the driveway. They argued over who got to be Michael Jordan until Jake gave in. They counted down the final seconds of a hundred games and let their jump shots fly.

As the ball clanked off the rim and bounced along the driveway, a jet screamed overhead. Jake craned his neck. The single engine of the F-16 flared, and the sound vibrated within Jake. The engine of another fighter crackled, far up there, and the planes met and flew in formation toward the Rockies.

“Badass,” Freddie said, jogging after the basketball. Then he returned and asked, “What do you think they're doing down at the creek?”

As if in reply, the sharp concussion of a cherry bomb echoed in the valley.

They left the basketball in the grass of Freddie's lawn and hurried past the houses of their cul-de-sac and across the field toward the creek. They pretended they were spies, scurrying from the cover of a lone evergreen to an aspen to another evergreen. They paused. Jake watched the forest at the far end of the field. A beige cliff face rose out of the trees. Jake knew that the creek, obscured from here, ran along the base of the cliff. They played there often, sometimes walking the trail alongside the creek down to the lake. Another cherry bomb exploded within the trees. Laughter.

The boys moved slowly into the foliage and went to all fours, crawling until they could peer around the base of an oak. The creek was there, thin and shallow this time of year, burbling through the valley away from the mountains. Jake knew there were rainbow trout in the creek, flashes of red and green and silver. Once, he had waded into the creek and faced the current, the water cold around his knees, and he tried to catch the trout with his bare hands as the fish bolted past. Soft fins brushed his fingers only once, the closest he ever came.

Ben and Nate stood on the far bank amid a haze of acrid smoke. Ben held a large, jagged rock in his arms, and Nate held a cherry bomb and the lighter. Nate lit the bomb, hunched and dropped it into a hole in the ground. Then the older boys stepped hastily away from the hole. The dark soil rose and fell in a fine shower, like a little geyser.

Freddie whispered. "What're they doing?"

Jake shrugged, watching as Nate dropped another cherry bomb into another hole.

It exploded, and Nate cried out. "There!"

Jake saw it, too, something long and dark, slithering along the ground, dashing for the water. Ben moved fast. He leapt at the snake, raising the big rock over his head with both arms

and then slamming it down. The rock rolled off the snake. The snake did not move any closer to the water, writhing, thrashing its body in the dirt.

“Fuck yeah!” Nate shouted.

As Jake watched, a jet roared low overhead and he thought of his father, and the snake’s violent and soundless thrashings sent a feeling through him, and he stood up and began running for home.

Jake heard the shouts. He broke into the field and ran as hard as he could, but his legs wouldn’t work well enough. He knew he was screaming but he couldn’t hear himself and he wanted his legs to move faster, but they wouldn’t. They just wouldn’t. The monster gained on him. He felt it. Then it hit him in the back, and he met the earth face first, and the dirt was in his eyes and in his nose. He retched, all his breath gone.

Nate pulled Jake to his feet and sneered. “Pussy.”

Tears welled in Jake’s eyes as the bigger kid pulled him by the arm, back into the trees and toward the creek. Ben had Freddie by the arm now, too, and they stood on the far bank, next to the snake.

“Bring him over here,” Ben said.

Nate tripped Jake and dragged him through the creek so that he sucked in water and came out sputtering and cold. Nate made him stand next to Freddie. The snake smacked its body against the ground. It had black scales, yellow striations.

Ben cradled the big rock against his hip and faced the boys. “We told you not to come down here today.”

“But,” Nate said, brushing the hair out of his face and sliding around behind the boys, “that’s the beauty of knowing two pussies like you. So fucking predictable.”

Ben held the rock out. “Now you’re going to finish this.”

Nate shoved Freddie in his back. “You first.”

Ben pushed the rock into Freddie’s arms, and Freddie took it and stood over the snake.

Ben shouted into his ear. “Do it!”

Freddie hefted the rock over his head with both arms. He buckled slightly with the weight before grunting and slamming the sharp rock down. The snake jerked, elevating its body into the air even as the rock rolled off of it.

“Nice one,” Nate whispered, his grin audible.

Ben picked the rock up and hopped away from the snake. He turned to Jake and thrust the rock into his arms. It was so heavy.

Jake didn’t move.

“Go.” Nate shoved him forward.

The snake was in its throes.

“Do it,” Ben said.

Jake closed his eyes. The engine rumbled. He soared against the blue—

“Do it, Jake,” Ben said.

Jake clenched his eyes shut. He felt his arms moving, lifting the heavy rock. He pushed the throttle forward, jerked the stick over and rolled—

“Do it.”

He held his breath, heard the dying snake. Everything seemed to swell into a deafening hum and he pulled back on the stick and climbed for the sun—

“Do it now, fucker!”

Jake slammed the rock down.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the rock roll from the snake's head. The snake was almost still. Twitching, now and again. Jake's ribcage expanded, contracted. Ben slapped him on the back and stepped forward. The older boy took a pocketknife out of his jeans. The handle was deer antler. The blade clicked open. Ben crouched and pinned the body of the snake with one hand. He placed the blade against the snake's neck. Then he began to saw. Jake turned away.

They followed Ben and Nate through the trees and out into the field. Toward their homes. Jet engines crackled, high up, but all Jake could find were the contrails, crossing the sky like white scars.

The body of the snake swung from one of Ben's fists. With his other he clutched the thing's head. Trophies, but of what Jake didn't know. The thing appeared smaller than it had seemed in life. An inch of bloody muscle protruded from where the scales of its neck ended.

They walked in silence until Freddie hit Jake's arm. Freddie grinned, artificial beneath red, puffy eyes. His tone did not match his words. "Pretty cool, huh?"

Jake didn't answer immediately. He felt as though he'd left something in those trees next to that creek, something that would lie there through the fall and the winter until the creek bloated with the melting snows of spring and carried it away forever.

He turned to Freddie. "Yeah. Pretty cool."

The bigger kids halted. Ahead, a green truck had parked on the pavement of their cul-de-sac. Two uniformed men got out. They must have heard the cherry bombs, echoing throughout the valley. Jake tensed, and he felt the moment of flight coming. Then the boys bolted, each of them alone and none of them running together. Jake felt himself running faster than he ever had, fast enough to outrun those men, and so he glanced over his shoulder and beheld the uniforms

turn—not toward him, but toward his house—and the fighter jets overhead swooped and thundered.

Outside the Wire

I was with Abby the first night of the new war.

We quit studying, pushed our books aside. Abby sat across from me on the floor beneath the window, wearing only her underwear. She'd drawn her hair into one long braid so that it hung over her shoulder and draped between her breasts. The window, slightly open, allowed cold air into the room, and Abby raised the joint to her lips, lit it, and inhaled. She smiled, holding the smoke then blew it toward the window. Her green eyes held steady in the haze. She passed the joint to me. Soon she opened her arms, and I crossed the space between us.

I left her dormitory and walked into the frozen night. Quiet, clear, sharp. The March air was cold enough to make my skin hurt. The sidewalks carved the snowdrifts of the quad into gleaming geometrical patches, the color of the moon. Through the bare tree limbs the golden dome of the administration building shone. At night, they aim lights onto it. They do the same with the basilica next-door and the golden cross at its steeple. My yellow-brick dorm is situated next to the basilica. The year of its construction is carved into the keystone over the heavy oak doors—1888.

A blast of furnace heat and a common room full of people. Silent faces turned toward the television. The TV was on a cable news station, a grainy image, the camera rotating around some structure, a bunker. Then the bunker exploded. A flash of light filled the monochrome frame and gave way to a thick column of smoke. I left the common room as chat, a few cheers even, escalated.

My bed rested high up on a pinewood loft. My desk and a recycled futon filled the meager space beneath. The small light on my room phone blinked, alerting me to a voicemail. My mother had phoned long distance from our home in New Orleans every day for the previous seven days. I sat at my desk and listened to the message.

She exhaled, and I could tell she'd been drinking. Crying, too. "Hey, Jackie," she said. She paused, I imagined, to drag off her cigarette, and then she went on in her hoarse voice. "I'm sorry, Jack, I really am. But I don't know what to do with him anymore. I need you, honey. He's getting worse. I'm afraid he's gonna hurt me. Please, Jack. He—" She paused again. "He pushed me down today. I need you to come talk to him. I'm sorry, honey. I'm sorry." She told me she loved me and hung up. My eyes strayed to the pictures tacked to the corkboard above my desk. Blood thrummed in my temples.

The phone began ringing again. I thought about it before answering. It was Abby.

"Did you see?" Her voice sounded dreamy. She was part of the peaceful minority on campus, writing letters to *The Observer* and scrawling huge anti-war slogans on the quad with sidewalk chalk. I never had the heart to tell her what I really believed, that all that shit didn't accomplish anything.

"I saw."

She whispered. "Pretty fucked up."

I looked at one picture above my desk in particular, at my eight-year-old self. Kyle, my brother, was nineteen, his arm around my shoulders. We stand, hair ruffled, in front of a tent. His blond hair and light eyes contrast with my own darker features. He smiles, I do not. It was our final morning camping out.

"Yes," I say to Abby. "It probably is."

* * *

The picture had been taken sometime in the two weeks before Kyle shipped to Kuwait. He took me camping for three days. During the last night, he spoke to me in the tent. Shadow and voice against the moonlit canvas. It was my job to take care of Mom for a little while, he said—*Can you do that for me?* I nodded. *I knew I could count on you.* He waved me over and hugged me. He said this: *Sometimes there are just things we have to do, Jackie. You know what we say in my squad if we gotta go outside the wire? We say, it's not a glamorous life, but it's what we do.*

The wind howled out of the gray sky, tearing down the quad and stinging my eyes. I scanned the directory board in the entranceway to the faculty building because I had no idea where Crowley's office was located.

His door was ajar, and I could hear the clacking of a keyboard. I knocked on the jamb and he said to come in. Crowley swiveled away from the computer. His eyes were clear through rimless glasses. He wore a sweater over a button-down. He was one of those young professors, always making you call him doctor.

"Jack, my fine fellow." He grinned in a way I didn't like. "What a pleasant surprise. On exam day no less." He glanced at his watch. "An exam starting in about twenty-three minutes, I might add." He gestured at the chair next to his desk, and I sat down.

"Dr. Crowley," I said, "I know I haven't been the best when it comes to your class. I mean, I know I've had my problems in there. But I was hoping I might be able to reschedule, you know, take the exam another time. Something's come up."

Crowley smiled. Then he laughed. Really laughed. He shook his head, coming down out of his mirth. "What on earth makes you think I'd do something like that for you?"

Outside the window, snow began to fall.

“Do you know how many classes you’ve missed this semester?”

“I know, sir, but—”

Crowley held up fingers. “Four,” he said. “And it’s only March. Not to mention your dreadful performance on the first exam, your half-assedness of the essays. Rescheduling is out of the question. Despite the evidence to the contrary, I believe you know better than this.”

My eyes burned. “I know all that stuff is true, Dr. Crowley. But please, hear me out. I’ve got an older brother back at home who is in a lot of trouble. He’s real messed up and he drinks and he gets bad with our mom. She’s been calling me, begging me to come down and work it out. I gotta get over to Chicago right now just so I can take the train to New Orleans today, or I have to wait another day. I can take the test Monday. Please.”

Crowley removed his glasses and folded them and placed them on his desk. He folded his hands in his lap and regarded me. “This isn’t my first rodeo, my man. Class starts in seventeen minutes. I’ll see you there, or you fail the course outright.”

Kyle used to drop me off at the grade school in the mornings before driving his old Jeep out to the high school, but in the afternoons I’d walk home because he always had practice. Kids walked home in packs. We all knew each other. One afternoon a kid yelled out to me, calling me a name and telling me that my mother was fat. His friends all laughed. Despite the truth that my mother was fat, I was rendered helpless against the urge to go after the kid, and I hit him, but only once. A right hand to the nose. He fell, nose blossoming. An old woman came out onto her porch and started yelling at us and we all ran. I was sitting on our front steps when Kyle pulled up and parked at the broken curb. I didn’t want to go inside to let our mother see me so upset.

He sat down with me and I told him what happened. He said that he was proud of me. He

said I did what I should've done. I told Kyle that wasn't it, and showed him my hand and my swollen thumb. At that point in my life, it was the worst pain I'd ever felt. *Show me how you make a fist.* I showed him. *No,* he said, *like this,* and he unfolded my fingers from around my thumb, formed my hand into a fist, and then pushed my thumb down along the outside of my knuckles. *It won't hurt as much like this.* He told me again that he was proud. *Always stick up for the things you care about.* And in truth, I had many more fights on the way home from school.

But matters eventually cease to be so simple. For instance, my brother took to sleepwalking when I was in eighth grade. I didn't go on my class trip to Washington D.C. because my mother had to work two doubles in a row, and somebody had to be home to stop Kyle from sleepwalking into the street, as he had already once. Three years later, I didn't go to prom. On my way out the door, Kyle beckoned me to the couch where he sat, knees to chest and eyes watering while he watched a movie. He grabbed my hand and didn't let go. So I sat down. I didn't tell him where I was supposed to be, and he didn't ask, and still, my girlfriend at the time broke up with me. And, when this university accepted me, a good university far from home, Kyle dragged me outside to those same steps where he'd shown me how to make a fist. By then, Kyle was on some medicine that allowed him extended periods of clarity—the government had finally agreed to send disability pay to him and some of the others—and he told me he'd hate it if I went to a shittier college just to stay close. So I told him I'd go. I told him I wouldn't disappoint him.

So I found myself caught again, unwilling to say fuck the test, fuck Crowley, but then also incapable of concentrating during the damn thing. I told Abby afterward what had happened. We spent the evening together.

"I'll tell Crowley you weren't lying," she said.

"Thanks, but it won't matter."

“I’ll drive you to Chicago in the morning, okay?”

I kissed her. “Thanks.”

She took my face in her hands and made me look into her green eyes. “Show them how much you love them.”

I told her I’d try. She said she was serious. “I’ll try,” I said.

The only thing Kyle ever told me about it, the only actual detail, was that all the smoke made his spit turn black. That was all. Black spit. The explosion on the television in my dorm’s common room reminded me of all the images we saw during Kyle’s time over there. Burning oil wells. All that smoke, blacking the sky. When I was old enough to develop a moderate understanding of what was happening to my brother, I read up on other stuff—anthrax vaccines, chemical agents—but eventually I stopped all that. Eventually I tried to just be there, just be home with him.

The train arrived in the middle of the night. The last time I’d been home was for Christmas, when there’d been a brief, wet cold snap. But by now, in March, the humid Louisiana heat had set in. I took a cab out to Lakeview and our house.

My mom still had the artificial Christmas tree up. Its tacky lights looked pitiful in the front window. I unlocked the door and went inside. The living room was like any other: old beige couch, armchair, coffee table, small television, and VCR, still. The smell of my mother’s cigarettes lingered, but there was another underlying funk, one similar to my dormitory. I gathered a few of the crushed beer cans and empty glasses up off the coffee table and took them to the kitchen. I emptied the ashtray. Then I unplugged the Christmas tree, went to the couch, and slept.

My mother shook me awake in the morning. She wore a nightgown and her thick glasses. I got up and hugged her. She was a short, round woman. She regarded me then hugged me again. “Do you want some coffee?” she rasped.

“Thanks,” I said.

She went into the kitchen and made the coffee and poured out a couple cups. I watched as she took a black-labeled bottle from those atop the fridge and poured a splash into her mug. She glanced at me. I cleared my throat.

“Ma, why’s the tree still up?”

“Oh,” she said. She came over and handed me my coffee and then bent and plugged it back in. This little bit of effort set her to breathing heavy. She shrugged. “Your brother likes it. I don’t know.”

We sat down and she asked about Abby and school. I gave quick answers. In the silence that followed, the ticking of the clock mounted. I glanced at my wristwatch and then went over to the clock and moved the minute hand ahead by ten minutes. Then I saw Kyle, standing in the mouth of the hallway, looking at me. He wore flannel pajama pants and a T-shirt. He scratched at one of his arms and grinned. “Hey, Jack.”

I went and embraced him. It still startled me to be eye-to-eye with my brother. He smelled hung over.

“Are you home for awhile?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “We’ll see.”

He scratched again at his arm. He must’ve been getting that rash. “It’s good to see you,” he said.

* * *

We lounged around during the day, watching TV and talking. Kyle told me he'd been working some in the lumberyard at Home Depot. "We could go out there," he said, grinning. "I'll let you drive the forklift." I chuckled and told him we might. He got up to make a rum and coke only once, and by the time the ice melted he'd left the drink unfinished on the coffee table while we talked.

I wanted to make dinner that evening. I told Kyle to go shower and come to the grocery store with me. After he cleaned up, he came out wearing jeans and a shirt and a baseball cap. He'd even shaved. "How do I look?" he said.

"Great," I told him.

"Hang on," my mother said, scurrying to the kitchen and opening a drawer. She returned and pressed some cash into my palm. "Pick me up a six-pack, Jackie."

I tried not to glance at Kyle. "Ma—"

"Just get it for me, honey."

I drove her car to the store, quiet the whole ride. For the thousandth time, I wondered how much Kyle's disability pay had to do with my mother keeping him around. The cash she handed me certainly came out of it. It was a difficult thought to wrestle with. I loved my mother. And I knew she loved Kyle. But matters, again, stop being simple. Once, over the telephone, I said something about her own drinking. I told her it should be obvious that having so much alcohol around the house just made Kyle's problem worse, too. She laughed and said, *Honey, how would I deal with it at all if I couldn't have a drink?*

I pushed the grocery cart while Kyle walked alongside, grabbing the items I pointed out and putting them in the cart.

"Get a thing of olive oil over there," I said. But Kyle had fallen behind.

I turned to find him frozen in the center of the aisle, chin to his chest. Urine darkened the front of his jeans. He raised his face and looked at me and I wanted to cry. He said, "It's the new medicine does this to me." Then he began to look around, embarrassed.

"It's okay," I said. "Come on." I left the cart there and put my arm around him and we walked to the front of the store. I walked just ahead of him to block the view of the teenage cashiers, worried about what Kyle might do should one of them point and laugh.

"I'm sorry," he kept saying.

We got in the car. I told him it was okay, it was fine, but he shook his head. I knew that I was losing him. He punched the glove box door, a quick jab. He punched it again. His breath came in quick puffs and then he began to cry, keeping his sobs silent and covering his eyes. He punched the dash one more time.

Our mother sat on the couch when we returned, her feet propped on the coffee table. She looked at us as we came inside. "Where's the food?" she asked. Then, "Did you wet yourself?"

I made a mistake. I glanced at Kyle. I saw it in his features. He took my glance for blame. I put my hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged me off and crossed the living room. He bent and ripped the artificial tree's power cord out of the wall. The lights blinked out.

"Kyle," our mother said, sitting up.

Kyle reached through the synthetic needles and grabbed the trunk, lifted the tree, and hurled it across the coffee table. Our mother rolled out of the way and got up, shouting, "Kyle! Knock it off!" She started toward him.

I felt bogged down, helpless, caught.

She reached to grab him. "What's the matter with you!"

Kyle threw her aside. She fell to the ground, and I felt the impact in the floor. I was

moving now, looking at my big brother, moisture in his angry eyes, and I had to bring him back, so I made a fist—my thumb along the outside of my fingers—and I hit him.

I felt the lancing burn as my knuckles struck his top row of teeth. He fell next to our mother, and she scooted away from him with her nightgown up around her vein-ridden knees. Utter silence filled the house. Kyle rolled onto his side and then pushed himself up to sit, hand over his mouth. He took his hand away from his face. A single tooth rested in the center of his bloody palm. Our eyes met. Then I turned and fled the silent house. I wanted to puke my guts out. I wished a truck had passed right then. I would've thrown myself in front of it. I spent the night in the station and got on the train in the morning.

The train chugged northward. Snowfall drifted past the windows. The hills looked hard. Dead, dead trees. My knuckles ached, radiating through my wrist. The cuts on my first two fingers crusted over. As the dark came on so did the flat expanse of Midwestern tundra. I dreamt my hair was falling out and woke to recall a moment from the previous summer. Kyle and I sat in the back yard as the sun fell and a formation of pelicans glided through the gloaming. *Isn't this nice?* I said. Kyle didn't answer. He was staring at his hand in his lap. Then he showed me the clump of hair. *See?* he said. *It just falls out.*

I took the South Shore Line to South Bend and stepped into the painful night. The snowfall had ceased, but the cars in the lot were nothing more than mounds of snow. A snowplow sighed past, yellow lights blinking.

I got into a cab that smelled like cigarettes and cologne. The heater roared. The driver took it slow down the streets, and then I could see the Golden Dome. The luster of it did nothing to warm me as I walked to my dorm.

I had a voicemail from Abby: “I hope it all went okay. I told Crowley you didn’t make it all up, but I don’t think he believed me. I tried. Call whenever you get back. I don’t care what time it is. Love you.”

She answered her phone after three rings, sleep in her voice.

“Hi,” I whispered. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right. Come over.”

The dark began to drain from the sky. The snow crunched underfoot. I could hear and see my breath. Abby, wrapped in a quilt, waited for me inside the side entrance of her dorm; at this time and on this campus we were breaking the rules. She let me in and wrapped her arms around me, taking me inside the quilt. She whispered, “You’re cold.” Then she led me up the stairs and down the silent hallway to her room.

We climbed into her loft. She folded herself into me, and I buried my face in her hair. I hung onto her warmth as if it were a mooring. She trailed her fingertips over my swollen knuckles and the cuts. She hushed me. “Tell me in the morning.” She kissed my hand softly and drew herself closer and slept.

I watched gray light fill the curtain. When Abby finally stirred, she kissed me on the throat and waited. I remained quiet for a long while, thinking of her abhorrence for violence. But then I spoke.

When I told her all she looked at me and said, “I’m sorry.” She kissed me. “I’m so sorry.” She didn’t try to tell me I was wrong, she didn’t try to tell me I shouldn’t feel so shitty, and she didn’t try to tell me anything grand or philosophical. I felt certain that this was why I loved her so much.

We ate breakfast at the dining hall. Abby laughed when I fumbled the spoon with my busted fingers and spilled cornflakes across the table.

We crossed campus to class and sat around the seminar table. Crowley hadn't arrived yet. My heart rate accelerated. Abby must have noticed how tense I was because she placed a reassuring hand on my knee beneath the table.

"Good morning all," Crowley said as he entered the small classroom. As he came around the edge of the long table and began to set his things down, he said, "Not missing any class, eh, Jack? You're brother must've made a miraculous recovery." He raised his face and grinned, impressed with his own wit.

It took me a moment to really hear it. Then I did. I felt as I had when that kid called my mother fat. But I didn't flip out or scream or anything like that. It was like my rage amassed too quickly, swelling so that it choked me and left me stupefied. I finally stood, exerting along every cord, and knocked the chair out from beneath me. There was a pain in my throat, aborted words. I ran out of the silent classroom and went down the stairwell, the rage gnashing in my ears. I ran out into the cold. The water on my cheeks began to freeze. I didn't know where to go.

I ended up at the side door to the basilica, waiting for a tour group to pass. The small ironbound door has an ornate entranceway built around it. The names of university students who perished in the First World War are emblazoned upon copper panels, greened with age, to either side of the door. Statues of Joan of Arc and Michael the Archangel weather the ledge over the door, and words are chiseled: *Our Gallant Dead, in Glory Everlasting*.

I went inside to get out of the cold. Dusty light filtered in through stained glass, and the air was heavy with incense. A legion of angels and men with biblical beards watched from their positions in the ceiling mural. Cloud thrones set in an ocean of stars. I walked between the gold-

filigreed columns to sit in a pew. A few others—tourists, priests—moved about in the quiet cathedral. I thought about being caught between things, and I thought about those gallant dead. I didn't feel sorry for any of them.

I was back in my room, dicking around on the Internet, when Abby finally knocked on my door. I let her in and returned to my desk chair.

“Wanna talk?”

I shook my head.

“Just look at me for a second.”

I did. She went and sat on the futon and waved me over. We just sat for awhile.

Another knock at the door. I got up and crossed the room to the door and looked out through the peephole. It was Crowley. I held my breath, didn't open the door. He stood in an overcoat and scarf with downcast eyes. He looked like an old man waiting for a bus. He raised his fist and knocked again.

“Jack?” he said through the door. “It's Dr. Crowley. Can I speak with you?”

Abby made a noise behind me. I didn't say anything. Crowley waited. Then he squatted and slid a sheaf of papers beneath the door, stood, and walked away.

I picked up the papers. It was my exam from the week before. The pages were bloodied with red ink. But the grade on the final page had been scribbled out, and next to it Crowley wrote these words: *I'm sorry*.

I crushed the papers and flung them into the corner. Then I returned to my desk and clicked over to another website.

“I think you should have talked to him,” Abby said.

I snorted. A few wordless moments passed. I felt her standing somewhere in the space behind me. I turned around.

She went and got the papers and smoothed them out and looked through them. She set them on my futon. “Do you want to be alone for a little while?” she asked.

“Sure.”

“Okay. Call me, or, anything.”

Crowley came to my door seven consecutive days. I never answered. He pleaded through the door. *Please. I need to talk to you, Jack. I need to.* I refused to vocalize a reply. I continued to attend my other classes, but I decided I wouldn't return to his. Late one night I was awake, reading in the quiet, and my phone rang. I looked at the receiver and then answered. Nobody said anything. I heard the person inhale, exhale. The rattle of breath in lung. I thought it was Crowley, but then I thought it could be my mother, and finally I thought it could be Kyle, too. “Who is this?” I demanded. It could have been any one of them. Something surged inside of me, the wild desire to apologize. But I shoved it back down my throat and hung up the phone. I waited. The phone didn't ring again.

Abby called me in the morning, asking me to go for a walk. The sun glinted in the dome, and though the air was cold, the snow would soon melt.

“How are your fingers?” Abby asked me.

I shrugged. We sat on a bench, looking out over one of the campus lakes. Patches of ice still floated.

She took my hand in hers and touched the cuts on my knuckles. “Dr. Crowley asked me about you yesterday.”

“So?”

She frowned and lowered her eyes to our hands. “He wanted me to tell you how sorry he is.”

I took my hand from hers.

“I think you should talk to him,” Abby said. “He didn’t know.”

“I told him, Abby.” My eyes began to burn. “I told him.”

“I know. I know.” She exhaled. “But I think you should talk to him, forgive him.”

“I don’t need to do anything. All that matters are the things I have to do, and dealing with Crowley isn’t one of them.”

“Jack.” Abby shook her head. Her eyes were red and glistening and she swallowed.

“Look,” I said. “Life’s not a glamorous thing. It’s hard. That’s the truth.”

“I know that,” Abby said. “But so what? There’s nothing special about just knowing it. You don’t have to deal with everything like this.”

A wind blew through the bare limbs overhead. I shook my head.

Abby closed her eyes and opened them and wiped them with the back of her hand. Her voice sounded clotted. “I need you to be the kind of person who forgives other people,” she said.

I took that in. I saw that she needed it. Now, I can see that I needed it as well. But I couldn’t yet be that kind of person, not with my fist still aching. I couldn’t. I tried to hold everything down, but I got up off the bench when I realized I wouldn’t be able to. I walked away, knowing what the choice meant. Abby didn’t call after me. I was only ever caught between things. Somewhere else in the world bombs fell, so as the snow melted away, I allowed myself to harden up inside, held my fist to my face, and accepted the cuts made against my brother’s teeth.

A Strange, Old Thing

She is right, and I want to get drunk.

“I *am* sorry,” she says. “The human heart is a strange thing.”

“I heard you the first time.”

I can hear her breathing. “I have to go.” Her voice hangs in the cell’s earpiece.

“Okay.” A roach shoots out from beneath my futon, skitters through bars of moonlight and disappears beneath the fridge. Thought I was rid of the fuckers. The line clicks and dies.

I leave my Mid-City apartment and go to the stop and wait for the headlamp of a streetcar. It whirs into view, wheels faintly shrieking. It would be comical if someone tried to kill himself by throwing his body in front of it, like they do with the subways in New York. But I doubt the streetcars move fast enough to kill you. Maybe. I take it to the final stop and then wander into the Quarter, which is a place where one can easily forget things. I cross the street and step onto the sidewalk over the matted yellow grass that’s washed into the cobbled gutter, residue of mule shit from those dead-eyed things that pull the buggies.

The bar I enter is a corner bar on a busy street with an open door and live music. The band plays some kind of Latin swing. The space is far too big. There are only three patrons, and two of them dance. This big empty space with the buoyant music clashes with something inside of me, and I think about turning right around until I see the open doorway on the far side of the room with the neon sign above it: *back room bar*.

The back room bar is narrow and empty. The light from the lone television flits in the

luster of the bar top. The woman behind the bar greets me with a smile, calls me “honey.” An enduring drama. Me, looking for a place to sit and drink during the night, and she, looking to make someone happy to be where he is. I sit down at the bar. A nature show plays muted on the television, and the music from the main room filters in.

“What can I getcha?”

I order a bourbon. She’s striking, beautiful. My eyes are drawn to the gyre of blossoms inked into the pale skin of her arm, ascending red and blue and purple around her elbow and bicep to disappear beyond the curve of her shoulder. She wears her hair long, straight and dark, and makeup accents both the corners of her eyes and her cheekbones. Her smile is wide, practiced. Her teeth are white, and she has a piercing, a silver ring encircling the center of her bottom lip. She turns to pour the drink, moving with a rigid grace, one reserved by people who are accustomed to being observed. This impression seems bolstered by the economy of her skirt, the tone of her legs, and the precariousness of her heels. She hands me the drink, smile still across her face.

I introduce myself, and she says, “I’m Miyuki.” As if she feels she should explain, she adds, “I’m half Japanese.”

“It’s quiet back here.”

“It picks up later.”

“No,” I say, “I mean I like it like this.”

Her eyes move when she speaks, darting between me and the nature show. She holds onto her smile, keeps her head still, and crosses her arms. All of this relegates our conversation to a certain level. A comfortable level. One where there is neither prospect nor threat of real connection. I want the illusion of not being alone. I want to converse with this porcelain mask of

Miyuki's—something which is a reflection of her self, sure, but a construction all the same. Easy for her to slip into.

“Do you live in New Orleans?” she asks.

“I just moved here.”

“Why?”

“I'm trying to be a writer.”

The smile on her face changes, and she uncrosses her arms and places her hands on the bar. She has long, pretty fingers. “I like to read,” she says with a warmer inflection altogether.

“That's good,” I say, swallowing a sip of bourbon and nearly laughing at the same time.

“I moved here to act.”

“I've heard this is the place to be for that.”

She nods. “I've been here three years.”

“Where'd you come from?”

“I was in Baton Rouge. College. It just wasn't for me, you know?” She produces a rag from beneath the bar and swipes at a spot on the bar top that doesn't look like it needs cleaning.

“It's not for everybody.”

“I didn't even tell anyone I was leaving.” She raises her eyes, as if to ascertain whether or not I've reacted to this. “I've lived lots of places, though. Baton Rouge was just the one before this.”

Something feels true about this. I glance at the television. In the wide-angle shot a solitary wolf lopes across a white and frozen landscape. “So how's it going? I mean, have you been in any films?”

“Oh, yes.” She nods with vigor. She rattles off titles of movies that have to be B-list

horror films, and now she laughs. “I scream and then get killed,” she says. “In all of them.”

“I’d like to see some of those movies.” It immediately feels like the wrong thing to say.

“I’m also a model,” she says.

There is movement through the entrance. Two guys come in. I can see Miyuki’s mask return.

They sit at the bar. The one immediately next to me wears a tie-dyed shirt and a flat-billed backwards hat. He has a thin, chinstrap beard and glazed eyes. “This is Phoenix.” Miyuki reaches beneath the bar and brings up two beers. He shakes my hand but doesn’t ask my name. “He lives upstairs.” The other guy wears glasses with hip frames and an eyebrow ring. If she knows him she doesn’t introduce me. She sets the beers on the bar, and Phoenix and his friend turn to watch the nature show.

Miyuki remains behind the bar but doesn’t seem willing to continue our conversation. She watches the television out of the corner of her eye and plays with the silver ring in her lip. After a bit she takes out a cigarette.

“So,” I say to Phoenix, continuing the theme of the evening, “why are you in New Orleans?”

“Film,” he replies, over his shoulder. I press him for specificity, and he says, “I’m going to be a producer.”

I don’t know what this means. On the television the wolf pauses on a ledge and looks out at the ocean heaving beneath a steel-colored sky. A whale breaches through the water and splashes.

“The other day,” Phoenix says, “I watched this show about how whales evolved from dogs.”

His friend turns on his stool. “Dogs?”

“Yeah, like these prehistoric dogs. They found some bones in a desert and figured it all out. Crazy, man.”

“A whale dog,” his friend says. “What kind of big ass dog was that?”

Phoenix shrugs and chortles.

“If I had that dog,” his friend says, “ain’t nobody be fuckin with me. I’d be riding that dog like He-Man on Battlecat.”

Phoenix puts his fist over his mouth and goes, “Ohh!” He rolls his head to look at me, and his eyes are red and watering but gleeful, and I am staggered by the truth that we can know such an ancient secret as the evolution of whales, but we cannot come to understand the secrets of our own hearts.

“Another beer?” Miyuki says.

“No.” Phoenix gets down from his stool. He slaps his friend on the back. “Come on. We’re going upstairs. Be back.”

“Okay,” Miyuki says. Phoenix and his friend leave the bar. Miyuki aims a remote control and changes the television to a station of music videos. They are much easier to ignore. “Another drink?”

“Okay. You want one?”

She pours a bourbon over ice before pouring each of us a shot. The liquor burns behind my orbital bones. “Thanks,” she says.

A man comes in and heads straight behind the bar. He’s older, with long hair and a beard dark enough to have been dyed. He wears a heavy black coat with a tight V-neck underneath. He stops and sways, slightly drunk. His lids are heavy. Miyuki gives him a different look altogether,

narrowing her eyes and puckering her lips. He holds up an empty glass and jiggles it.

“Sure, honey,” she says. She bends to get something from a fridge beneath the chorus of bottles, and the man watches her ass. He bites his bottom lip. When she straightens, the man smirks at me. I look to the contents of my glass. His drink must be complicated. It takes a very long time to make. For the duration of its mixing he stands and looks up and down Miyuki’s backside. I can almost feel him going erect.

She stirs the glass and hands it to the man. “Here you go, baby.”

A deep noise emanates from the man’s throat that might be a thank you. He takes a sip and winks at her. He throws me a dark look and then goes back toward the main room.

Miyuki rolls her eyes. “He owns the place.”

“I figured something like that.” The noise from the main room seems to have grown. Things are picking up.

People wander in from time to time, well-dressed tourists or dread-locked gutterpunks. Sometimes they perceive the calm room and turn around, sometimes they order a drink and take it with them.

“How many nights a week do you work here?” I ask Miyuki.

“Just this one. I also dance.” She averts her eyes.

I understand both that she is embarrassed and that we have suddenly skimmed a deeper level. I begin to think too much. It doesn’t bother me that she strips, nor do I think there is anything wrong with it, but because she seems uneasy by revealing this detail of her life I do not want her to think anything of me if I respond wrongly. “Okay” is all I say.

Her eyes are big and clear. “It pays the bills, you know? Sometimes I have lots of auditions but that doesn’t mean anything happens.”

“I get it.”

A rolling crash resounds through the ceiling, demanding my attention. Now another. The crashes keep coming.

Miyuki sighs. “Who knows?”

“If he’s not working, how does he afford an apartment *here*?”

“Oh, Phoenix doesn’t pay rent.”

“Well. What does he do?”

She shrugs. I can tell she knows exactly what Phoenix does. She brightens: “I used to write a lot.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. I really liked it.”

“That’s great,” I say. “Why do you say ‘liked?’”

She hums sadly. When she speaks, though, the sadness drains away and her voice is only truthful and I feel that she’s not wearing a mask of any kind. “A while ago I was living in California and I did a lot of drugs.” She taps her temple with a finger and then lets her hand fall to her side. “I don’t think my mind’s been the same since.”

I don’t say anything, hoping for my face to show my sorrow. I wish I could offer something, say something about how I cannot understand how the individual experience and acknowledgment of it must feel. But though this may be true, I would want to impart that I can appreciate the loss and the regret and the acceptance, because these are things I do know, even if for my own reasons. But I can’t say anything. My thoughts are too difficult to form words around, yet not so profound as to risk the blundering should I try—to risk the shattering of what suddenly feels to be a fragile and uncommon connection.

Phoenix enters the room and stops, staring at us with a red face and bright eyes. He holds a scuffed up skateboard by the wheel. He doesn't speak, just holds the pose. He's alone. Maybe his friend has passed out upstairs.

I say, "Are you okay?"

"Could you hear me up there?" He is breathless.

"That's why I asked if you are okay."

"No, dude." Phoenix laughs. "That's why I came down here."

I glance at Miyuki. She's covering her mouth, smiling. Now, she says, "What are you doing?"

"I'm ollie-ing over my glass coffee table!"

"Did you break it?"

"No, man." He shakes his head, nearly crying in his mirth. "That's why I moved it."

"What?" I say.

Miyuki reaches and pats the top of my hand where it rests on the bar top, as if to make me feel okay. Phoenix turns to go. Miyuki calls after him. "Be careful."

He stops again, waves the skateboard through the air for emphasis. "If I break it, me and my boy are gonna roll a joint, get some superglue, and put that shit back together. That's the only way to make something better, man. Break it, get fucked up, and put it back together."

The bar owner re-enters, slightly listing, and Phoenix pauses again. Words pass between them that I cannot hear, and the older man takes a step toward Phoenix. The man is much taller. Phoenix sets the skateboard down and gestures defensively. He reaches into his pocket and takes out a folded stack of bills and hands it to the older man. Then he picks up the skateboard and walks out. The bar owner thumbs through the stack, then slips it inside his coat and walks behind

the bar.

Miyuki has her face on. He raises a single finger, and she bends to making his drink again. He stares at her ass. “You know,” he begins. His voice is gruff. He slurs his words, but he also has a heavy accent. “I would love to fuck you from behind.”

Miyuki stands and flashes him a detached smile. The man notices me looking at him now. He squares himself up to face me. I sip my bourbon and try to look as smug as possible. The alcohol sings in my veins. The man opens his mouth. “Are you okay, my friend?”

“Just fine.” He doesn’t look away. “Where are you from?”

“Austria,” he answers. He takes his new drink from Miyuki’s hand. “You know Austria?”

“Yeah.”

“Is not your one with the fucking kangaroos.”

“I know.”

He flips his hand through the air. “Is not your one with your fucking shrimps on the barbie and your fucking outback steakhouses.”

“I know, man. I know where Austria is.”

“Yeah, yeah. You fucking know Austria.” He glares at Miyuki and then walks out.

Miyuki makes a face at me, mostly humored.

“That guy has bad intentions.”

“I know,” she says. She spreads her hands. “I know he does but I need the job. I think he knows I won’t touch him. And he hasn’t *exactly* crossed the line yet.”

I have a hard time believing this. But I think of the porcelain-like mask she slips into with such ease, and I know. “You know what you’re doing,” I say.

“Yes,” she says. “I do.” After a moment: “He bitches about the shitty business back here.

But he always comes back here acting like he doesn't like anybody talking to me."

I drain my drink. "I don't like him."

"I know." She pours me another without me asking. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

I clear my throat and sip my new drink. It isn't watered down. "Not really," I say. "At least, I—No. No, I don't."

She narrows her eyes. I can see her thinking. "Okay" is all she says.

"You have a boyfriend?"

"Yeah," she says, exhaling. I can sense what comes next. "But sometimes he's not very nice." She watches me and waits, but I don't speak. She throws her hands up. "What can I say? I love him."

I let the bourbon pool in my mouth and now swallow. The world feels simple and awful and unknowable. I take one more sip. I say, "The human heart is a strange thing."

"Yep." She grins, sadly. "It is."

People come in and out and she tends to them and I finish my drink. I leave cash on the bar top and get up to leave.

Miyuki calls me by name and walks over. "Come back and see me sometime."

I think maybe she's just a good bartender. "Do you mean that?"

She looks hurt, and I feel like a jerk. "I like talking with you," she says.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I like talking with you, too. I'll be back." I mean it, and I hope I will.

"Okay. Bye." Miyuki smiles. I turn and go.

The main bar has filled out. A new band plays swing music. People dance. Cigarette smoke convulses beneath the dim lamps. I don't see the Austrian anywhere.

I walk out into the night and cross the teeming street and go to the streetcar stop. It is

separated from the Quarter by a tall cement wall. I'm the only one here and the streetcar is nowhere in sight. I cross the tracks, kicking the gravel aside with my soles, and stand on the concrete quay to watch the wide river slide by, deceitfully calm. In one direction, there is darkness. In the other, there are tall buildings and lights, a docked cruise ship, and the span of the massive bridge. Tonight's intimacy resides here, between it all. I feel the laboring of my heart and imagine it as some kind of living fossil, its cords and veins and sinews stretching back to a time when deserts had been oceans, a time harboring its own secrets not yet or never to be divined. Something, a garbage bag maybe, breaches the river water.

Shark Skin

They eat in the quiet dark of the camp. Jeff sips his coffee. The place is the same furniture. The wallpaper has bubbled along its seams. The guns lie in their racks. The fishing poles lean in the corner. The camp is his father's home.

“Ready?” the old man says, and they gather the poles.

They walk to the dock, his father leading the way, a big though not soft man. His gait is still the same. It makes Jeff feel little. The dock is not what he remembers. The wood of this dock looks fresh, but it will age and be washed away like the others before it and rebuilt. It seems to be a necessary and elementary pattern.

Jeff brushes away the mosquitoes felt but not seen and says, “This is yours?”

It is not the gray flat-bottomed thing of his youth, but a sleek little boat with an outboard V-8 and a fiberglass hull and captain's bench and stands for the poles. They get into the boat, and he can feel his father's grin in the dark as he stands barefoot at the helm and steers the boat slow out into the water with the outboard chugging nearly soundless. On other docks early fishermen move aboard their anchored vessels, cigarettes flickering. It is all so quiet. They pass a shrimp boat, identifiable by its smell and its raised wings of mesh and cable. His father says there's still oil washing into parts of the marsh, but the shrimpers return. Jeff marvels at the miracle.

His father taps him on the knee. In a hush: “Look at those stars.”

This is a sky he never sees so clearly in the city. A single star slashes from its place.

“See that?”

Jeff considers his father, this old man who feels he should whisper in the company of the sky. “This was a good idea, Dad. I’m glad I called.”

“It always helped me get my mind off things.” His father nods solemnly. He gestures at the nebulous dark off the port side. “Show you something on the way in. Too dark yet.”

“Okay.”

His father begins to ease the throttle forward. “Hold on now.”

The prow rises out of the water, and the wind obliterates everything with its roaring wash. The ride is not like that of the old flatboat, the spine-jarring *chock-chock-chock* it made in the chop. This is all sound and silence and wind and sky—the moonless dark of their bedroom where he lay next to her while she breathed slowly, awake, and he propped himself on an elbow and watched. Defenseless against his hope that he might yet divert their course, he wished for the figments of other destinations. He raised a hand and placed it on her side, between ribcage and hip, feeling her beneath the cotton shirt. She didn’t respond. Sliding his hand to her back, he traced with fingertips the letters of words he was unable to say, and she held still. He waited and took his hand away and fell onto his back and stared at the ceiling while next to him she sighed and spoke, saying, If you want to do something, Jeff, just fucking do it. The ceiling spread like some great starless mess. Her breathing changed, and he knew the sound of her sleeping. That was all.

His father throttles back and drops anchor at a place indeterminate in the water, his fringe of hair wild.

Jeff stands and stretches, watching the sky redden like an ocean of its own. The world takes gentle shape. They float near a small outcrop of pipes rising from the water. Seagulls perched atop it ruffle themselves awake.

“What’s that?”

“Gauges and such. For the pipeline.”

In the distance an oilrig squats like a spider caught against the sunrise. “We’re in the gulf?”

His father shrugs. “Brackish waters.”

Jeff pivots. No land in sight. “It’s so calm.”

“No wind yet.” His father grins. He pulls a rod from its stand alongside the helm. “Come over here. Take hold of this.”

Jeff stares at the hook, its barbed end. “You’re going to have to help me. I haven’t done this since I was a boy.”

“I know it.” His father opens a hatch behind the captain’s bench to a compartment of yellowish water, and he dips a net and withdraws a mass of small, live shrimp and dumps them into a watered bucket. He reaches into the bucket and removes a single shrimp, pinching it. “Watch now,” he says. He takes Jeff’s hook in his other hand and impales the shrimp behind its head.

After his father lets the line go, the shrimp dangles and twitches. Jeff feels it in the line. There is something hideous about it.

His father shows him how to release the line and hold it and then cast. “Right out there,” he says, gesturing at the pipes.

His father turns to bait his own hook, and Jeff rears back, suddenly conscious of the hook dangling over everything on the boat. When he throws, the line lands squiggled atop the water, the lime green bobber not ten feet from the hull. Jeff looks to see if his father has seen, but the old man’s back is turned. Jeff reels quickly. The shrimp rises, twitching and wet.

“Heard that,” his father says. “All in the wrist. Nice and easy.”

Jeff tries again, but the bait doesn’t go much further.

His father catches the first fish, setting the hook and reeling without a word. He lifts a large speckled trout into the boat, and it flops on the deck.

“Look at that thing,” Jeff says.

His father takes up the fish and drops it into a cooler. “Better reel. Your bobber’s gone under.”

Jeff turns and jerks the rod. The spool buzzes, the rod bends. Something tugs hard. The rod snaps straight. The line goes slack.

“Come on, now,” his father says. “Here to catch the fish, not feed them.”

Jeff doesn’t realize his father is joking until he sees the man’s smile. The old man comes over and baits the hook for him and then takes the rod. “Here. Watch.” He rears back and casts out to the pipes. “Come on, fish,” he says, swishing the rod and making the bait dance. Then, to Jeff, “Gotta talk to them fish. Come on, fish. Breakfast time. Come on, fish. See?”

The rod bends, and his father says, “Hah!” He pulls and reels and soon lifts another large speckled into the boat and takes the hook from its mouth. The fish grunts until it goes into the cooler with the other. He baits the hook and hands the rod back to Jeff. “Gotta talk to them.”

Jeff casts, a little better now. He flicks the rod like his father demonstrated, and there is something familiar in it.

“Go on now. Talk to them.”

“Hey, fish. Come on, fish.”

His father chuckles.

The rod flexes.

“See now?” his father cries.

The line yanks back. Hard. Jeff nearly slips. He resists the urge to say it feels like a big one. He reels and reels.

“Get it over here now and pull it up to me,” his father says.

When it rises from the water and hangs thrashing above the side, his father reaches, balks.

“That’s a shark,” Jeff says.

It is tan and white and maybe a foot and a half long. Blood streams from the corner of its mouth, down its side, over its gills. His father times the thrashings and grabs it behind the head. He produces a stick with a curved piece of wire at the end and uses it to pry the hook from the shark’s jaws. It has a lot of teeth despite its size.

“Baby sand shark.” His father holds it horizontally in front of him. “Come over here. Feel this.”

The shark thrashes in his father’s hands. Jeff thinks he hears it breathing. He runs his fingers from fin to tail. The skin is smooth and slick, almost pleasurable to the touch.

“Feel the other way now.”

Jeff starts from tail to fin and jerks his scraped fingers away. What must it feel like for a shark to brush against you as you swim? The shark is gorgeous and frightening, like another kind of beauty he’s been acquainted with but is no longer. The shark snaps its tail, flicking its blood, and his father tosses the shark back into the water. Blood flecks across Jeff’s shirtfront and down his forearm.

After a while, his father pulls in another trout, and Jeff reels in a shrimpless hook. The old man grins and reaches for the hook, but Jeff stops him, saying, “I’ll try this one.”

In the bucket the shrimp wriggle around his fingers before he closes on one, its flailing

legs. He holds it between his fingers and presses the hook against its shell, and as he thrusts the hook, the shrimp twitches and slips from his fingers, and Jeff stabs the center of his thumb with the hook. The fishing rod clatters to the deck.

“Let me help you,” his father says. He picks up the hook and baits it and hands the rod back to him. “Get it out there now.”

Jeff casts and flicks the rod. He reels in and casts again.

“Talk to them,” his father says.

Jeff looks at him and then at the bobber. “Come on, little fish.”

He flicks the rod. Nothing. He reels in and tries another time. Nothing.

He casts once more and waits. “Please,” he says quietly. “Please, little fish.”

The bobber dips and he feels something in the grip. He jerks back and the rod bends.

“Reel now. Don’t stop.”

Jeff does reel, and the fish pulls against him but nears.

“Over here,” his father says, leaning out over the water. “Get it over here.”

His father reaches for the line. Jeff feels it in the rod as the line gives. It dangles loose in the water. The rod straightens. His father retracts his arm and leans on the railing, staring into the water. A moment passes before the old man turns and smiles.

Morning evaporates into midday, and a wind picks up, the boat beginning to rock. His father points to the clouds massing on the horizon and says, “About time to head in.”

Jeff doesn’t catch a fish. His father catches another and drops it into the cooler. “Some specks,” he says. “No reds, but still not bad.”

Jeff puts their rods in their stands and sits alongside his father on the captain’s bench. He doesn’t feel the need to speak. Jeff spares the oilrig one more glance, a tragic reminder amid all

the glory. His father throttles up, and the boat leaps. The land comes into view, a thin green line. They enter the channel and encounter a shrimp boat dragging its mesh wings in the water. The marshland flows past, and an eagle circles out over the marsh.

They slow as they near the bayou and the camp, but his father turns away from home, toward the far side of the channel. “Got to show you this,” his father says.

They enter a less uniform waterway. There are no homes, no camps, and where the water meets land a yard of sediment appears, and through the new growth there is dirt but also broken asphalt. His father steers the boat slow around the tail-end of a pickup, jutting crooked and filthy from the water, like something that has been there for a long while.

“Oh man,” Jeff says and looks at his father, who nods and casts his hand out over everything as if to suggest that it is his. Or perhaps to suggest the necessity of residing in this place. Jeff looks at the deck and says, “I’m sorry, Dad.” He thinks not of the truck or the broken road or the old dock washed away, but of the years. Those wordless years contain the truck and the road and the dock and all the rest. A flood of crude oil and the storms before that.

His father grips his shoulder.

“I never understand things until it’s too late. You and Mom—” Jeff pauses, thinking of his parents as well as his own crumbled marriage and quiet bedroom. “I’m sorry.”

His father pats his shoulder. “Me too.”

The waterway opens up into a fresh expanse. His father says, “Okay. There.”

Jeff stands to look at the structure built on the point of land. The thing is big and square, with stone ramparts and slot windows. “That’s a castle.”

His father chuckles. “A fort.”

“How old?” It’s like nothing he’s ever seen outside of a book or a television screen.

“I don’t know. A Spanish fort. Then a British one, I think. Then American. This used to be the only way inland,” his father says. “All the way to the Mississippi. New Orleans. I guess this was the guardhouse. They say the only one knew another way was Jean Lafitte. The pirate got all the way to Lake Pontchartrain. No one knew how. Except maybe the Indians.”

“What happened? I mean, why’d they stop using the fort?”

His father shrugs. “Things changed. Found other ways.”

Jeff looks at the fort. Everything is quiet. He looks all around. There is the broken road and there is the sunken pickup and there is the fort, still there, and after how long? His father brings the boat around and throttles up. Jeff sits and watches the fort disappear. As they cross the channel, heavy clouds sail overhead, bringing a cool wind.

“I’m going to come here again,” Jeff says.

“I hope,” his father replies.

Jeff can tell the old man would like to say something more, but it remains unsaid, and a rain begins to fall, light and cool, and the shark’s blood runs down Jeff’s forearm, past his wrist, off his fingers.

The Tools of Ignorance

I have seen them all.

The pretty boys with all the talent and not an ounce of sack.

The Latinos so flashy they trick you into thinking they're good.

The fake hustlers who got everybody convinced they're playing hard because they run to the fence on a ball way foul.

The fellas dumber than the bats they use, a long existence ahead if this ball gig doesn't work out.

The college boys who get burnt out because this ain't a team, least not the kind of team they're used to. Here guys steal out your locker.

Seen the guys who can't hit.

The guys who can't throw.

The guys who can't catch.

The guys who could throw but then got the yips.

Seen the bonus babies come and go.

And I've seen the few who are big leaguers. You know them almost straight away.

I don't get to know the guys much past what they talk about and what they throw off the mound. But usually that's all it takes to know somebody well enough.

I've seen the goofs. Lord knows there are plenty here in the bullpen.

I remember two relievers, now long gone. Mike Dickey and Ronnie Smith. Both lefties.

They thought it was a great idea to bring a water balloon slingshot down here one day in the middle of summer when everything drags and the days are endless. They were trying to hit the press box. I noticed the wind blowing out but wasn't about to say anything. This is usually when you know a pitcher won't make it—when he doesn't think about the wind.

They launched that sucker, a red balloon, and the wind caught it. Didn't even make it halfway. It hit the third base umpire in the back. Both got fined. Dickey was released sometime later because he couldn't pitch. Smith got called up to Double A and lingered awhile before he was traded. I heard he just got released, too.

I've seen the high draft picks come in, talent I can't fathom. And I've seen those same guys never get outta A-ball. Dwindle here six, seven years till the organization cuts them loose. It's saddest when they come in only eighteen and their career's over at twenty-five. It can be such a cruel game.

Not many speak to me other than the pitchers, and most of them only when they have to. I don't mind. I just catch the pitches they need to throw and do my job. My knees trouble me some.

I don't need this. I got a degree. JUCO for two years and I graduated from a university after that. Playing ball let me do it. Wasn't half as good as most here, but I did all right. I got a fine job and a wife now, and I only do this in the summer. The extra money's nice.

Most of the time I think this team exists so the one or two prospects on the roster have a place to play, and I'm probably not that far off. Most of the guys are assholes, and I don't speak the same language as a lot of them. But the game is always the same.

One of the guys that did talk to me a bit was a pitcher named Tom Thorpe. Thorpe said to me once, "You know, sometimes I don't like this game anymore. Most times actually. Especially

now. Every second is a competition. With your own teammates even. But sometimes when I'm on the bench over there, I'll notice you watching something. And I'll look where you're lookin and I'll see the small white ball rolling through the green grass. And after the outfielder picks it up and throws it back in I look at you, and your eyes are closed and you still got that small smile. And then I like it all again."

Thorpe never made it outta A-ball. But he was a college boy, a senior-sign, and now he's got a job in a big city somewhere selling stocks.

Sometimes, my aching knees seem like such a small price.

Vita

Nicholas Mainieri was born in Miami and has lived all over the country. He studied literature and played baseball at the University of Notre Dame, and he holds an MFA from the University of New Orleans, where he also taught freshman composition, served as the editor of *Ellipsis*, and won the Mockbee Award in nonfiction. His work has appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Hobart*, and *Fwriction:Review*, among other publications. He now calls New Orleans home and hopes to have that privilege for the rest of his days.