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The University of Southern Mississippi

MONTICELLO RISING

by

Charles Edward Campbell

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2010

ABSTRACT

MONTICELLO RISING

by Charles Edward Campbell

August 2010

Monticello Rising is a compilation of fiction accompanied by a critical preface.

The pieces within were all composed during my studies at the University of Southern Mississippi's Center for Writers between the years of 2008-2010. The collection is about aspects of growth, initiation, and loss in human relationships.

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2010

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Charles Edward Campbell

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved:

Steven Barthelme
Director

Frederick Barthelme

Dr. Ken Watson

Dr. Charles Sumner

Dr. Monika Gehlawat

Dr. Susan Siltanen
Dean of the Graduate School

August 2010

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A FEW POSSIBILITIES AT A TIME:

CREATIVITY AND CONTRADICTION IN MONTICELLO RISING

About four years before writing this collection of short stories, I wrote another titled *Parallax*. Based on the narrative structure of Akira Kurosawa's film, *Rashomon*, each short story in the collection, while including similar characters and events, remained different, so that some stories would work on, pivot, or even contradict others in the collection leaving the reader to determine the true nature of the events as they were revealed from story to story. *Parallax* marked the first time that I had ever tried to write a short story. My life up to that point had not been a very bookish existence, and the content of the previous collection, in hindsight, was tied specifically to other events and perspectives that had otherwise influenced the way I understood the world of literary fiction and how I went about creating the fictional dream for my reader. I have since moved away from the suppositions about the craft that brought those stories to life, and as an artist, I feel I am now working in a more exciting space for making art.

For me, this is a richer, more enjoyable locale, a kind of between space, where I am constantly left to reconcile the kind of writing I've done with the kind of writing I would like to do, and what is more is that for the first time in my writing life I feel I've begun to discover the elements of story that affirm why I write in the first place and why I think that writing in the creative genre is important. Perhaps it is this point of contact, this analytical strand, one I've been working backward to see and re-see that takes the lead for our purposes here. In a sense, then, I suppose I'm also attempting to reverse engineer the process of how I got to this place, and more than anything, align what's written in this current collection of short stories with some kind of literary rationale, one

that resists the urge to restrictively frame or enclose the expansive possibilities of what could be embedded in this collection of short stories, what is said or isn't said, and learn something in that course of action to continue my growth as a writer.

Additionally, to discuss what is written here it will be necessary to talk about my work in terms of process over product, and state that this collection is still being written and rewritten. After all, the writing of *Monticello Rising* was at its heart a learning experience founded on questions that had piled up in my mind through the years of applying my knowledge the best way I knew how post-*Parallax*. In normal protocol it was necessary then to file through both respectable and nefarious claims of all kinds in order to investigate what it meant to write literature, how I wanted to position myself in this literary community, and what it was that I wanted to say. What mainly materialized out of the workshops and literature courses, the independent studies and presentations at conferences, the grants that required I invest myself in the writing of others and books on the craft itself, as well as the after-class conferences with those who know and care deeply for the writing of fiction was this question: what is it exactly that gives the world of fiction its credibility and the stories we read their immense power?

Through the process of writing and reading and reading some more, I have arrived at several different ways of maybe not answering this question, but dealing with it. I will begin with a remark from Leonard Bernstein in *The Infinite Variety of Music* on the subject of meaning, artistic merit, and the purpose of creativity where he states that “a work of art does not answer questions, it provokes them; and its essential meaning is the tension between the contrary answers” (203). What I find important about Bernstein's response is twofold: first the assertion that a work of art does not provide *answers*, but

provokes questions, and second the concept of the *contrary*, or contradiction, and how that relates to the creative process.

Working on the first of these propositions one might conclude that the role of art is not to answer the big philosophical questions of our existence. Thus, the following denies a role for art in providing answers or dealing in excessive philosophical treatment. What we have here then is an old argument, one that has to do with the relationship between philosophy and literature. There is a history, a literary lineage of philosophical literature if you will, one that runs the gamut all the way from Socrates appearing as a protagonist in Plato's *Republic* to Ayn Rand's characterization of John Galt in *Atlas Shrugged*, from Milan Kundera's opening philosophical rants on Nietzsche in the beginning of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, to Jean Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea*, or Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, both attempting to write the tenets of existentialism into fiction. It extends further from the reference-dropping James Joyce in *Ulysses* which one needs a concordance to decipher to Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, Leo Tolstoy's *Hadji Murad*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and gets as diverse as Tom Robbins' *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, or Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, working its way too through Umberto Eco's semiotic fume, *The Name of the Rose*, Jorge Luis Borges' *Labyrinths*, John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, and it continues to breed: Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*; Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*; Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961); Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*; Raymond Federman's *Take It or Leave It*, and many more titles.

The list is long and the books themselves when read and digested begin to forward a kind of suggestive take on how the writing of literature works: that one finds a good idea and then builds a particular world around that idea as to give it flesh and the characters then exemplify a grandiose, schematic picture of how the world operates and man's purpose in it. Moreover, the resonance of these texts is bolstered by their selective inclusion in literary canons, their use in college classrooms across disciplines ranging from philosophy to pre-law. I mention this in light of my own experience, as much of my early reading was focused on texts that were couched in the theoretical and philosophical debates of their time. In turn, without anyone to tell me different, I was left to decide for myself what literature was and how to write it. And thus, I wrote *Parallax* and a number of other short stories that were heavily ideological and concerned mostly with ideas and concepts and political agendas. The people around me in my previous program found the work interesting and they encouraged me, and so I wrote more. Teachers let me borrow books like Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Thomas Pynchon's *V*, and when I published the first story in the collection they gave me awards.

But during all of this I began noticing other far more interesting works that I had no previous experience with. Since I was trying to write short fiction I read short fiction, moving away from the various novels that were being shoved my way. I read Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O." and James Purdy's "Don't Call Me by My Right Name" and James Baldwin's "Sonny Blues." I read Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and John Cheever's "The Swimmer" and Hisaye Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables." I immersed myself in the worlds found in Saul Bellow's "Looking for Mr. Green" and Donald Barthelme's "Views of My Father Weeping," and my heart

sped up reading Joyce Carol Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" and went hard and cold when I read John Updike's "Separating." I read Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," Ann Beattie's "Janus," Raymond Carver's "Cathedral," Richard Ford's "Rock Springs," Robert Olen Butler's "Relic," Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried," and Amy Hempel's "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried."

During all of this reading I started to get the feeling I was being left out of something special. Here was all of this interesting literature that no one had told me about, that walked these fine lines of ambiguity, that trapped me in their beautiful lies, and conveyed to me that the job of the writer was not to "say something," so to speak, but to do as John Gardner says in his *The Art of Fiction*, to "convince the reader that the events he recounts really happened, or to persuade the reader that they might have happened (given small changes in the laws of the universe), or else to engage the reader's interest in the patent absurdity of the lie" (22). This is far different than pontificating about answers to philosophical concepts; rather, it has to do with building entire worlds around characters, working not from narratological plot schemes, but from the sentence and letting the story develop around it. He notes that "the value of great fiction, we begin to suspect, is not just that it entertains us or distracts us from our troubles, not just that it broadens our knowledge of people and places, but also that it helps us to know what we believe, reinforces those qualities that are noblest in us, and leads us to feel uneasy about faults and limitations" (31). With this statement Gardner positions literature and the answers it might provide into a gray area, conveying its strength to be in its relationships, not only in the ideas it might possess. It enriches life by working on its complexity and recognizing its beauty, complicating the cliché and overly simplified. This is early

signaling to a later concept in *The Art of Fiction*, where maintaining the fictional dream of the reader becomes paramount, working ultimately to invest readers in the possibility of the alternative universe fiction creates and constructs.

In fact, the first story that comes after this critical preface, “Bedlam,” is an example of the very shift I am attempting to describe. For this reason, I’ve placed “Bedlam” before the others stories in the collection of *Monticello Rising*. At first my instincts were not to include the work at all. They were to disregard it. To pretend it didn’t happen and move on. But if the work in this creative dissertation bears any likeness to what I have learned, like it or not, it begins with this short story, and becomes more complicated from there. To that end, the inclusion of the story and its importance to the depiction of the growth I describe, are not only key to understanding what kind of work I’m doing now, but also how that work got to the level it’s currently on, and perhaps where it might have the potential to go in the future. Consequently, it may mark some progression of learning, or at least, a change or shift in my writerly aesthetic over time, making it irreplaceable in conveying how the process of writing and rewriting and reading and rereading and discussing literature with those around me in the program has complicated how I see and write literary fiction.

Notably, upon first writing “Bedlam,” the story began pretentiously with an epigraph from William Blake’s “Milton,” it rambled on openly about Franz Kafka’s “Metamorphosis,” it contained an actual diagram of Aristotle’s Wheel, and after the first scene there was the logical assertion of “Sentence A says Sentence B is true,” only to be refuted later, before the last scene, where the logic was introduced to its counter, “Sentence B says Sentence A is false.” Between these missteps were more missteps and

with “Bedlam” I think what becomes evident is that there is a writer behind all of this that is more interested in these ideas than the characters that exist in the story, which is unredeemably problematic for many reasons. For instance, to once again consider Gardner’s take on the interruption of the reader’s dream when applied to a story like “Bedlam,” the text forwards the advice that stories such as the one in question, reveal that the reader’s dream is suspended from the get-go. In fact, Gardner suggests that “in this kind of fiction, needless to say, the law of the ‘vivid and continuous dream’ is no longer operative; on the contrary the breaks in the dream are as important as the dream” (87).

This attempt at a meta-fictional text, if it is to be successful, should otherwise rewrite the world in so vivid or convincing a way that the reader experiences another, where even if they are aware that they are complicit in something false, that this false thing rings so true that it has the potential to pull at their heartstrings, similarly, one might say, but not completely the same as, when the audience forgets Howard the Duck is a duck, or where they may feel a stitch of pain for Simba in *The Lion King*, though they went into watching *The Lion King* knowing it was an animated feature. These are cartoons, not meta-fictions, but still, a certain line of thinking holds. In Gardner’s view, although these fictions still “delight” and “charm,” and give us what “all good fiction” gives us, a kind of “moment by moment fascination,” for unconventional fiction “mystery is its soul,” and thus without “two gifts, one extraordinarily childlike, the other highly sophisticated and mature,” the charm falls a bit flat and its performance doesn’t satisfy (Gardner 94). There are few writers who succeed at the task of pulling this kind of tightrope act off, as Gardner notes, and commonly when beginning writers first go to exercise their creativity they often unknowingly participate in this kind of work thinking

that it is innovative, staggeringly original and inventive in ways that literature had not before conceived of. They are surprised to find that the reception of their work is met with disappointment, that their readers want to fall in love with their characters and not their ideas, and that their dreams of becoming a writer who does not deal with character, plot, setting, and themes in a traditional sense are met unequivocally with comments that reinstate just how unoriginal their work might be, provoking questions and comments such as these: “this really reminds me of ‘Lost in the Funhouse,’” or “have you ever read Thomas Pynchon?”

To avoid falling back into this kind of unconventional conventionality, then, there’s work to be done, steps to be taken, steps I had to push toward, working my way into constructing the kind of fictional dream that didn’t immediately show its scaffolding, where readers became invested not in the abstractions and self-reflexivity of the text, but rather enthralled and encapsulated by the story’s action and emotional force, an experience that is possible not by recognizing the language that constructs the narrative, but by forgetting the language was ever there in the first place and actually seeing the story in the mind’s eye. At first, I found myself a mess, to say the least, and at times almost paralyzed in divergent thought. I would write a sentence and delete it. Write another and delete it. I tried writing in notebooks with pens and not composing on the computer. I changed the time when I wrote to early in the mornings, instead of late into the night. I invested in fictional worlds, scanning a multiplicity of anticipated directions a story may take, and in a tight-fisted battle with the self, I resisted becoming the only character in my work by remembering “that the serious fiction writer always writes about the whole world, no matter how limited his particular scene. For him, the bomb that was

dropped in Hiroshima affects life on the Oconee River, and there's not anything he can do about it" (O'Connor 77).

The struggle to provide such sensual detail in order to construct a whole world, or at least a slip of experience that the story and the reader share, then, is marked by divergence. And this is where it becomes necessary to revisit Bernstein's comment on art and work backward in order to clarify its importance to the development of my writing in this collection. Bernstein asserts that "a work of art does not answer questions, but provokes them," and he goes on to clarify his statement that "its essential meaning is the tension between the contrary answers" (203). What he likely intends to do is steer the artist away from ways of creating that make art didactic or stale, purely philosophical, historical, ideological or instructive. Secondly, he seems to suggest that art exists on a plane to be negotiated amongst these various ways of seeing the world; yet, I would like to follow up on this suggestion by proposing that stories seem to more definitively stand in a liminal space, concerned more with experience than ways of summing up or framing that experience. Robert Hass has said something very similar to this contending that the greatest works of art are those that "come very close to saying the opposite of what they mean" (Hass).

This is accomplished likely by focusing on the vividness of the story at hand, by finding beauty in the ambiguity, in the description and detail, a strange smell, a funny-shaped rock, and well, working from there, letting the scent take us somewhere unanticipated, somewhere we mess things up and create problems and conflict and tension that aid the reader to feel the experience of this fictional reality. The funny-shaped rock is not just a rock anymore. It is a rock that two teenage lovers once decided

looked like a broken heart as they overlooked Saint Louis, sitting atop a small mountain of trash on a garbage boat traveling down the Mississippi. For this narrative to grow what is necessary is uncertainty, contradiction, ambivalence. Without uncertainty, the imagination simply does not come into play. As Donald Barthelme has said, “Not-knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention” (12). And according to Gaston Bachelard, there would also be no discovery of new or larger truths: “Not-knowing is not a form of ignorance,” he says, “but a difficult transcendence of knowledge” (xxxii). As Bachelard’s words suggest, not-knowing is far from being a passive state; resisting the mind’s tendency to converge on a comfortable certainty requires arduous, active effort. Those who resist the tendency possess what Keats called “Negative Capability,” the ability to remain “in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (193). And that ability, the ability to be certain about the need for uncertainty changed the way I thought about writing fiction.

Instead of depending on big ideas and philosophical cant, instead of plotting my stories out like a “to do list,” my work began at the sentence level, and with each revisitation it became more and more complex. For instance, while writing the story “The Summer of Krista Mendez,” I began not with a big idea or philosophical end in mind, but instead I worked from sentence to sentence. In one sentence two children were crossing their eyes at a camera. In the process of writing I encounter a number of possibilities. Maybe the picture doesn’t take. Maybe the children take the picture and uncross their eyes. But these possibilities are rather dull in their delivery. The reader expects the

picture to either take or not to take – that’s what has to happen – or for these children to uncross their eyes after the picture, and thus, the excitement of either is rather unfruitful in its prospect. So, the thinking through process is one of finding a way to select what possibility will enrich the composition by writing the situation into the next sentence.

Let’s say the children don’t uncross their eyes after the picture is taken. Then what is the reader left with? Perhaps the same thing that the writer is struggling with in the writing of the text: more possibilities to consider. Consequently, in “The Summer of Krista Mendez,” of the two children that take the picture, only one has the unfortunate outcome of Strabismus, an imbalance of the muscles in the eye. His right eye straightens and his left eye wedges against the bridge of his nose. My thought here was to work against the expectation of the reader. By at first considering the expectation that the eyes of the children will likely uncross after the picture, and working against or diverging from this expectation by writing it in at the sentence level, the plot then becomes something intrinsic to the act of writing out the story, not something exterior or formulaic in the process of charting what is to happen before one writes.

Consequently, in this kind of approach, I’ve found that characters do things I did not expect them to, and events happen in creating the fictional world that shock me in the process of writing them down. It’s as Flannery O’Connor once said about her short story “Good Country People”: “I wouldn’t want you to think that in that story I sat down and said ‘I am now going to write a story about a Ph.D. with a wooden leg, using the wooden leg as a symbol for another kind of affliction.’ I doubt myself if many writers know what they are going to do when they start out” (100). O’Connor goes on to explain that as she found herself writing her story it began to develop along the way, and before she knew it

she had two women, one of them with a wooden leg. As the story progressed, next she introduced a bible salesman, a character she initially had no idea what she was going to do with, but knew that he was going to be important to the story.

In much the same way, when writing the second story in my collection, “Mountain Lion in Appleton,” I wrote most of it without a mountain lion at all. The story began as a kind of observation into the incident of domestic abuse, having the woman as the abuser and the man as the abused. The daughter of this troubled couple was my focus, but her character felt overly determined by her social environment. I struggled with the story for longer than I’d like to admit and one day I decided that I was going to give it one more try. I went back into the story this time with a different attitude, composing it playfully, almost with a kind of improvisational randomness, much the way a group of musicians would play their instruments together just to jam, to see what sounds good. Out of this playing around emerged a much stranger narrative, one in which I threw in a mountain lion. To put it lightly, one cannot just throw in a mountain whenever they see fit, so at first, I knew that I would have to work around it. Thus, in much the way O’Connor’s explains writing in the wooden leg into “Good Country People,” I too was forced to negotiate how the mountain lion would come to fit into the story considering a number of possibilities: how others might react to the mountain lion and so forth.

The same goes for yet another short story in *Monticello Rising*, in fact, the title story, where I found myself writing about a grown man whose father was recently paralyzed in an elevator accident. The father wants to kayak the waters of nearby Lake Berryessa. When the story began I was forced to imagine who my narrator’s father would come in contact with, and so I created the character of James Cartwright, the father’s

physical therapist who had agreed to accept the invitation to join the father and son on their trip to the lake. Because I had imagined Cartwright in opposition to my narrator, when I initially began writing the end of the story, I began writing it in the mode of drowning him in a kayaking accident, but as I got to that point in story, something else happened, something unexpected – Cartwright didn't drown. As I kept writing, in the process aiding his father in trying to save Cartwright's life and succeeding, the narrator had somehow forgotten about his father, who had begun to drown.

In writing these events the drowning of the father surprised me. And to once again revisit what O'Connor says about her short story, "Good Country People," the story "produces a shock for the reader, and I think one reason is that it produced a shock for the writer" (100). Because I didn't see these things coming, they weren't foreshadowed loosely in the text that came before. And my story was the better for it. Because my characters did things that surprised me, the story carried on with a spontaneity that my previous stories hadn't had. When I found a place where I might have contradicted myself in the story, it was no longer indicative of failure or error, but an opportunity to make the story richer; in letting the story explain itself new plot lines developed, and working to integrate elements that didn't belong gave my narratives unexpected turns.

As Graham Priest once put it, some contradictions are not only "rationally possible," but "rationally obligatory" (23). In this view, Priest joins the likes of Heraclitus, Plotinus, Hume, Engels and Hegel in the rational obligation to accept contradiction: in this line of thinking, behind the dialectic method, the assumption is that something can be true on one level, its opposite true on another, and when they are synthesized, both can be true on higher levels, equally. Jean Cocteau seconds this belief:

“All creation,” he has said, “is the spirit of contradiction in its highest form,” and in its highest form, “contradiction transcends the either/or mentality of simple negation” (63).

Taking all of this in consideration, I realized something else, too: that writing literary fiction is not just a formulaic layout of conventional tools, narratives that are told and retold in different ways as to renew their varying plot devices; it is a way of thinking, but it is not just that, moreover, it is a way of seeing and experiencing the world. The line of thinking usually follows that it begins with story; narrative is the rhetoric of duration. It deals with the finite, the transient, and the contingent; that is to say that it has to do with infinite possibility, a few possibilities at a time. Along with the story is voice. Voice or voices are said to constitute the story. Thus, voices call worlds into being, worlds with listeners and readers to participate in the event of story-telling or story-making. Only then is the story real, made real through the inter-subjective exchange, more commonly known as reading. Narrative is the way the mind both creates and makes sense out of reality, the way it negotiates life. Because of this, stories have authority; they make claims upon our attention, they give us pleasure, they give us news, they give us the language to comprehend our lives.

Reading Robert Coles’ book, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* a few years ago, I remember being impressed by Coles’ story of his psychiatric internship and how he learned to see patients as “storytellers” and not as subjects with “problems” to analyze and diagnose with proper psychoanalytic terminology. For Coles, doctor and patient best meet one another in the give and take of storytelling, an enterprise that honors and respects the particularity of individual lives. Analogously, Coles argues that as readers we best meet stories when we let them engage

us deeply and penetrate our moral imaginations, not so much in providing solutions or resolutions, but in the struggle of the mental and physical strain of being human. The best stories then draw us to the deepest levels of our lives. It is my hope that the stories in this collection will one day provoke this same kind of engagement in readers.

I choose to pursue writing in the creative genre because I feel it illuminates the social process of learning, acts as a preservation of culture, supports the educational initiative to instill knowledge, and shifts thought in and out of fixed perspectives. It is virtuous in its separation from other forms of writing; the artist is forced to work with relationships, and not just blunt analysis: stories soften our natures by allowing us to stand in grey areas, connect our sympathies to a larger consciousness, and thus, make us more aware of our own existence, our being.

For this reason, I feel that – more than ever – the need for creativity is vital to the preservation of our discipline. And I would like to continue my future work as a means of giving back to the world of literature what it has given to me: purpose and community, the very essence of that which makes us human. In this regard I am also reminded of how Russell Banks ends his novel, *Continental Drift*. He claims that stories “deprive the world as it is of some of the greed it needs to continue to be itself” (430). He then sends the book outward as an agent of “sabotage and subversion” to “help destroy the world as it is,” which seems to me, also a profound act of creation (430). And so in that same line of thinking I also send this collection of short stories out into the world, having to do with the finite, the transient, and the contingent, which is say they have to do with infinite possibility, a few possibilities at a time.

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Bedlam

Dudley didn't *feel* confused; in fact, he felt more lucid, more rational, and more articulate than ever. There was a sense of clarity, a clairvoyance that he hadn't experienced for some time. He knew that if there were an exception to every rule, that every rule must have at least one exception; that is, pending this rule was not that exception. And despite the fact that he was sweating heavily, and his glasses refused to balance on the bridge of his nose, he felt confident in the letter he had written. He awaited the arrival of Dr. Lisa Congelton, head of isolation management, transitional care, and crisis stabilization. She would be joined of course by Christina Eliot, Dudley's witness, Jerry Jacobson, secondary security and correctional staff, and Dr. Paul Hannah, head of mental health evaluation and treatment. But as everyone began to file into the room and take their seats, something else became very clear: *spies do not look like spies*.

The letter in his hands was an apology. And although he didn't want to apologize, he did know that under state rule 33-404.205 of the department of corrections mental health services handbook, it must be read aloud to all correctional staff, witnesses, psychological specialists, and senior psychiatrists involved with the inmate at the time of violation. Moreover, all letters that receive a failing mark under rule 33-404.206 would require that the inmate be held under further administrative confinement, and undergo auxiliary mental health screening as necessary. Dudley handed Dr. Congelton a roll of toilet paper. She began to read aloud:

“On October 31st, at approximately 7:30 pm, I did in fact drop three Klonopin and a handful of Zoloft into a Dixie cup. Shortly after, I was assaulted, attacked by three men in white uniforms, flogged and beaten by one – the defendant – then dragged up the stairs

to my quarters. I was reluctant to retaliate. Because my code of conduct is one of passive resistance I'm afraid that responding violently would prove on more human grounds counter-productive."

"You have to be kidding me!" Jerry Jacobson interrupted, gaveling his crutch to the floor.

"Guard Jacobson, you are aware that all letters must be considered in their entirety! I expect that you will act in accordance with these rules," Dr. Congelton replied.

Guard Jacobson propped his mammoth foot, now in a plaster cast, on the conference table. And Dr. Congelton continued reading:

"I have heard the caws and rants of guards that claim these specific violations to be false. I do not wish to dispute over matters as petty. From my injuries, it should be obvious to all in this room that I was severely beaten by the guards of this institution. I only wish to reasonably make my case that any man forced to masticate the toe of another, in order to escape the violence that has been thrust upon him, has been pushed too far."

Dr. Congelton paused briefly, met eyes with Dr. Paul Hannah. Then she returned to the letter: "I would like to announce that in my seclusion, while drafting my letter of apology, I have also composed a *map*. The *map* is a movement of peace, not violence. This is why it pains me to admit my crime, openly, biting the foot of one Guard Jerry, a most petty act for one to commit."

Jerry Jacobson removed his foot from the table.

"All of us know Guard Jerry as a very self-made man; in fact, so utterly self-made and committed to self that he can blame no one but himself for his shortcomings. The

biting, I believe, probably had a lot to do with what they tell me is my *projection*. What my psychiatrist, Dr. Paul Hannah calls the psychological mechanism of blaming others for one's own problems. I consider it a blessing, then, that I suffer the pains of a misdirected projection, and not Guard Jerry, for we would all but lie at similar fates. I am _”

“Crazy!” Jerry Jacobson interrupted, extending his pointer finger toward Dudley.

“That’s what you are, crazy!”

“Farce!” Dudley screamed back, his glasses scooting over his crooked nose, holding two fingers to his temple.

“Dudley, that’s enough,” Dr. Congelton said, “and Jerry...” Dr. Congelton rose from her seat squeezing half of the apology in her hand. “Dudley, this is unacceptable. I am afraid I am forced to deny your request.” She walked slowly toward the window with the other half trailing off the back of her shoe.

“Bedlam! Bedlam!” Dudley insisted, his arms flailing backwards; his eyes shells of disbelief.

Looking over her shoulder, Dr. Congelton whispered to Jerry, “Take him away.”

“Farce! I am –”

“Crazy!” Jerry Jacobson interrupted, only to be silenced by a sharp stare from Dr. Congelton. Christina Elliot, on her hands and knees, crawled closer to Dr. Hannah, gripping the window sill and pulling herself up, looking blankly out into the distance. Dr. Congelton met eyes with Dr. Hannah, and then directed her attention to Dudley; Dudley slouched down and pushed his glasses firmly back on the perch of his nose.

“We are trying to help you, Dudley,” Dr. Congelton pleaded. “If you feel that

you cannot cooperate then –”

“Bedlam!” Dudley shouted. “Bedlam! Again and Again.”

Dudley was dragged out of the room and put back into his cell.

Before being hospitalized Dudley Freeman had graduated at the head of his class. His father bought him a Porsche on his sixteenth birthday. By his seventeenth he was already attending Harvard and finished before he was old enough to drink. Dudley Freeman was a force to be reckoned with. He was a superman.

To the literate world he would have been Willy Shakespeare.

To the Trojans he would have been Achilles.

He was once young, smart, and well-liked. So, when Dudley took a job as a Design Consultant at Aquent Marketing and Creative Services, he became head of his department – Creative Editing and Effects – and was promoted even more quickly to the head of Creative Control. From there he continued to draft work that was said to be on the “cutting edge” of creative design.

He coined slogans for laundry detergents:

Pristine: Refining the Fabric of Life.

Or mineral water:

Delight Mineral Water: Find Delight in Nature’s Purity.

But if Dudley were Prince Hamlet, Clyde Jacobson was Laertes. The two were natural foils, and whenever possible Dudley conveyed to Jacobson what he naturally conveyed to nearly all entry-level applicants that attended the annual company Christmas parties. He would simply wink at them as he sipped his Lemon Drop Martini, and walk

about pinching a toothpick with an olive on the end of it, using it as his pointer, signifying to others he recognized their existence only because of his own. Jacobson had hated Dudley. Dudley had felt about Jacobson the way the deaf most likely feel about sound. They are aware it is all around them, but recognize that it will likely never be of any use to them.

It was love at first sight. On hands and knees, Christina Elliot crawled over the dull hardwood floors, the disassociation and depression cluttering up her brain, all the borderline personalities and trauma talking to one another.

Dudley knew he was heavily medicated, but for some reason, he couldn't help but stare at Christina Elliot's ass. There was a science to it, he thought. How the cotton draped over her body, moving with its rhythm. It was like she was never on the ground, like she was constantly and consistently in flight.

To Dudley, this flight felt like falling; but, it was a falling that took him higher and higher, gripped by a gravity that was light as light, buoyant and free, everything connected with everything else. He wanted to fly with her. He wanted something to break open inside her like it had for him – break open in her chest and snap back like rubber cords. He wanted it to hatch deep within her and rupture, until she felt as alive as he did when he saw her.

But there was a problem. Well, besides the fact that Christina Elliot was crazy, she had not spoken to anyone for several years. Even her therapy sessions with Dr. Paul Hannah were rumored to be riddled with awkward silence. The only connection Dudley had with Christina were those uncomfortably gauche stare-downs that he gave her. Those

looks of discomfited hunger, like a 35 pound jackal, rib cage bursting, working its way through skin, saliva dripping like dishwater from its jaws, gawking insanely at a piece of tender meat.

“Are you gonna eat that?”

“What?” inquired Dr. Paul Hannah.

“That apple. It really is a marvelous apple, a fantastic piece of fruit. Are you going to eat it?” asked Dudley. Dr. Hannah looked back. His face appeared shrunken and confused, and a sort of glaze came over his moony eyes as he routinely reached for the apple at the edge of his desk. Once his hand found the apple, he felt another hand meet his, sliding gently over the top.

“Only if you weren’t going to eat it,” Dudley said.

“Of course, Dudley,” Dr. Hannah acceded as the two of them met eyes, and at the same time, glanced away. “So, Mr. Freeman, what is it that has you still in treatment?” Dr. Hannah breathed heavily through a pause. The file on the desk was stamped two years with good behavior. Dudley had tucked under his arm a copy of Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. “Why is it Dr. Congelton feels your condition has worsened and you have become too violent to re-enter population?”

Dudley took a large chomp out of the apple, holding it so as to expose the shiny red sheath around a white interior, shoving the large portions into his jaw and raising two fingers to his temple. “Bedlam,” he answered.

“And, what exactly is confusing about this situation, Mr. Freeman?”

“They are trying to kill me,” Dudley said as the apple crackled and echoed to the

tall ceilings of Dr. Hannah's office.

"Who is trying to kill you?" Dr. Hannah asked.

"They're all crazy!" Dudley blurted out, the white shards of apple tumbling from his lower lip and shooting over Dr. Hannah's desk. "Bedlam, again and again!"

"Everyone in here is crazy, Dudley!"

The comment, followed by a short pause, echoed within Paul Hannah, contemplating in detail whether he had said the right thing. Dudley also was silent. He knew that Dr. Hannah had stated a cold-hard fact. He knew this was so because any person that had ever been to an asylum for the criminally insane knew this was so. Dudley Freeman was aware that insane people are always sure they are fine – it is only the sane people who are willing to admit they are crazy. Dr. Hannah had stated that everyone was crazy and Dudley had found that there was something peculiarly and temporarily sane about this remark.

"One thing before I die," Dudley mumbled through the slight space still in his mouth not filled by chunks of apple.

"And what is that, Mr. Freeman?"

"Well, this has to do with a bit of everything and nothing, really." He looked off, lost into the high ceilings of the office. "Well, I keep having these dreams, where I'm dreaming -- someone's in my room -- and, I wake up in the dream..."

"Yes, yes, go on," Dr. Hannah insisted.

"...and I find myself changed in my bed into monstrous vermin."

When Jerry Jacobson woke up one morning from unsettling dreams he discovered

he had changed. He was undergoing a transformation that was not entirely foreign to him. After all, for some time now, he had felt little by little, life was erasing him. Every morning he would wake up, put on his correctional officer's uniform, look in the mirror, and, usually, every morning it was the same. There was something he had lost or couldn't recognize.

His keys. His memory.

His wallet. His penis?

All of which neglected warning of departure and all of which motioned to disappear or wither beyond recognition in no particular order whatsoever. Jerry Jacobson, notably, was the son of the late Clyde Jacobson – a man, who after acquiring the rights as part-owner of Aquent Marketing and Creative Services (in a card game, of all things...), was murdered in a fit of Manson-like rage in a Las Vegas Hotel. He was said to have been killed by a cheater who had stacked the deck – someone at the end of their poor, pitiful, pathetic rope, who had been swindling the company owners out of their money for years.

Black Jack. Texas Hold'em. Spades.

52 Card Pick up. Chase the Ace.

Solitaire?

Jerry was very young when his father died and remembered very little about who killed him, except that the person had been sentenced to the Athen's Asylum for the Criminally Insane.

After the trial, twelve employees collaborated to create a board, and the members of this select committee worked to smooth business relations, seeing it fit to pass on half of

Aquent Marketing to the Jacobson family; that is, if the one surviving owner, who now held the legal rights, agreed to sign a release statement. Shortly after Clyde Jacobson's murder, however, information concerning the trial became *classified* by court order, being that it could possibly endanger the lives of others. Many were put into witness protection programs and the rightful owner had fallen into obscurity. So, what had become myth surrounding the disappearance of the unknown owner had become the history of the Jacobson family name.

Jerry Jacobson looked at himself in the mirror. The vivacious man who once looked back at him in his twenties had become middle aged. His lips were like rubber and had fallen away. His flesh, no longer tight, was now but a swathe over his bones. His cheeks imploded; his eyes sunken in. His skeleton, working its way through, eating its way to the surface. Jerry looked to his right, where a photograph of his father sat on the dresser. And, suddenly, he realized what it was that was different, but not necessarily foreign, about his transformation. Erasing him. From history, from family, from life.

The game was Texas Hold'em.

Dudley started off slow – losing a hand and winning a hand, losing and winning, winning and then losing – until he knew that he could easily take the rest of the asylum guards at the table for their money. Holding an ink pen between two fingers, touching it to his lips, and removing it as if he was puffing on a cigar, Dudley began his winning streak. With each win Dudley massaged his temple with two fingers.

Christina Elliot scooted over the floor, next to a window and pulled herself up to look out. Now and again, she seemed to glance back over her shoulder, observing the

outcome from game to game. Dudley imagined her as his beautiful trophy woman standing in the distance. As the games went longer, they became more intense. The winner collected the likes of candy bars and sodas then upped the bet. When the stakes would rise, candy and soda became better winnings – more time for recreational activity and/or visiting hours. When visitation and recreation became the standard, the stakes would rise to TV time and more material assets. And, although it wasn't actually thousands and thousands of dollars turning into millions, something about this raising of the stakes made Dudley become solid. Not necessarily in his bearing, but more like, something in his eyes. It wasn't that jackal-like stare, or the empty glassy gaze that one most normally associated with him, but a look of concentration – focus.

It was as if he had been in games where the stakes were higher, games where houses came and went, cars were given away, wives were won and lost for nights at a time. Dudley upped the stakes. He gambled for medication, population time, his own television. By the time the stakes were this high, Jerry was out of the game and only a spectator. His pockets had been emptied games ago, but his inattentive mind had become somehow fascinated by how Dudley had managed to gamble nearly all the guards into an inescapable debt. In this particular game, however, Dudley looked as if he might have met his match. The three middle cards in the flop were a six of spades, a seven of diamonds, and an eight of spades. His demeanor seemed not so confident.

“What's wrong, Freeman? Working up a sweat?” one of the fellow guards asked. Dudley *was* sweating profusely. As the dealer approached the turn, the nine of diamonds emerged. Dudley shook his head, puffed on his pen and raised his bet.

“I don't know, Freeman. Looks like that TV stays in the community room tonight,

buddy.” The guard looked around the table and the other guards laughed. All, but Jerry Jacobson.

As the dealer dealt the river, all five cards lay on the table, adding a king of hearts. Dudley once again raised his bet. The guard met the bet with a smile and two candy bars. “Why, brother, you read me like a periodical. Call?” Dudley said, looking around the table. The guard coughed up a deep laugh, almost a growl. He flipped over his two cards. He had a six of diamonds and a five of clubs. As Dudley pushed the frame of his glasses on the bridge of his knotted, crooked nose, the glassy look in his eyes returned. Dudley flipped over his cards and revealed a Jack of diamonds and a ten of spades.

“In all my three years working here, Dudley.”

“Sir, a man fighting against the highest form of injustice – ”

“I guess so. Next week?”

Dudley nodded and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Rising from his seat, he collected his winnings, piling them into a pillow case. Unplugging the television, he pushed the rollable cart at a manageable distance. Just before he exited, he winked at Christina, crawling closely along the wall, her cotton robe snaking behind her. Spotting the wink from across the room, a trickle of disgust slid down Jerry’s spine; that gesture, there was something familiar, yet still, entirely foreign about it. And, with the cart’s wheels clack, clack, clacking, and his pillow case dragging the ground, Dudley was on his way, until, another guard at the table posed a question.

“How long you been in here beating us at poker anyway, Freeman?”

“Brothers, they say with good behavior, I should be out in two.”

“He’s been in here for 10 years?!”

“Jerry, I don’t see why it’s any of your concern. Dudley is a very special case,”

Dr. Congelton said, dumping her lunch into a garbage bin and setting her tray on the top.

Jerry followed her out of the swinging doors of the cafeteria and through some more swinging doors into a bright hallway. As Jerry followed, he breathed in the familiar scent of alcohol, sharp and filling the corridor.

“He’s never gonna get out of here, Doc. The man is –”

“*Crazy?* Dudley is not *crazy*. Mr. Jacobson – ”

“You’re right,” Jerry said, holding both arms up, bent at the elbows, palms facing Dr. Congelton. “*Dudley-not-crazy*. So what exactly is wrong with Dudley Freeman?”

Jerry Jacobson asked, hobbling unevenly down the hall.

“Dr. Hannah is in the process of properly diagnosing him. Bi-polar disorder and manic depression were the initial guess. It doesn’t seem to fit.”

“But, the man’s not crazy!” Jerry said with his mouth shut, squeezing the syllables of every word through the spaces of his teeth. “You said it yourself. Why is he here?”

Dr. Congelton entered her office and walked to her desk. She grabbed a long, flowing sash of wrinkled toilet paper and held it in the air. “Because he claims abuse, then demands compensation for wrongful actions. He writes letters of apology on toilet tissue when we give him paper. He bites off pinky toes like tiny Vienna sausages. Mr. Jacobson – any more questions?”

Answers?

In the Greek work *Mechanica*, there is an interesting problem concerning the motion of a wheel turning about on its axis – entitled *ROTA Aristotelica*, or Aristotle’s Wheel. So it goes, there are two wheels. One wheel is bigger than the other. And the other, smaller wheel, is inside the bigger wheel (imagine something like the design of a car tire – the larger wheel, on the outside – and, the rim inside – the smaller one – each the shape of two circles, but with different diameters). As the problem goes, the two wheels, one inside the other, roll one full revolution, tracing two lines equal in length. To demonstrate the motion of the wheel, Aristotle designed a diagram, one side with a picture of the two wheels before they moved one full revolution, and on the other side, after. The following seems to indicate that both wheels have traveled one full revolution, and the lines, being equal in length, indicate that both wheels have traveled the same distance. In mechanics, however, when a circle makes a revolution on its center, moving forward along a plane, it traces a line equal to its circumference.

As Aristotle pointed out, this makes for what is an interesting contradiction. The smaller wheel obviously has a smaller circumference than the larger one. It should not only trace a shorter line, but obviously, not travel the same distance. Where as one almost always assumes that both wheels indeed trace out their circumference, in reality, it is impossible for both wheels to do so, or even for both wheels to perform such a motion. Physically, if two joined concentric wheels with different radii were rolled along parallel lines, at least one would slip; and, notably, if a cog system were used, it would jam. In much the same way, Jerry had planned a similar correspondence between two bodies in motion, for what he observed should travel along the same linear path: one night, after

hours, Jerry planned a trip to Dudley's cell on the third floor:

"Dudley Freeman. Dudley, you fucking putz. Wake up!" The voice emerged from nowhere. Then grabbing Dudley by his shoulders, a shadow, seemingly not even a solid figure, began shaking him against the bed. It spoke from out of the darkness. It said, "Wake up, you crazy fuck. You might be the only sane son-of-a-bitch in this place."

Dudley's eyes peeled back and revealed nothing but white, the pupils absent, floating somewhere in the soup of his head. Slowly the rounds of his pupils dropped down and met the crazy eyes of Jerry Jacobson.

"Bedlam?"

"Wake up, Dudley Freeman. Or, I'll...or I'll fucking kill you!"

Dudley's eyes sprung open. "I knew it! Jacobson. You're going to kill me!" Dudley cried through the creases of Jerry's fingers covering his mouth. He attempted to move. Jerry had him pinned.

"Quiet, you crazy bastard. All I need is your signature."

"Anything you want. Just don't kill...don't kill me, you ugly red-headed..."

Dudley's voice drifted into Jerry's hand in desperate plea for his life and soon faded away.

"Look, I can't get your signature until you are classified as sane. You understand? So, you have to be on your best behavior. Or, I'm going to come up here one night while you're asleep and slit your throat."

"Farce."

"I mean it, you crazy fuck! I'll slit your throat from ear to ear like you did my father. All I want is the company. That's it. And I'm going to have it whether I have to

kill your ass or convince these crazy bastards that you're sane."

Dudley nodded and hummed into the palm of Jerry's hand. Jerry removed his hand from Dudley's mouth and placed it around his neck.

"The company?"

"From ear to ear, you crazy retard."

Jerry let loose of Dudley and disappeared into blackness. The door shut behind him; the only sound heard was the echoing footsteps of Jerry Jacobson, clapping in a decrepit limp on the dull hardwood of the hallway floor.

The Athen's Asylum for the Criminally Insane was a beautiful place. Its very architecture, based on the Bethlem Royal Hospital of London, boasted the finest in asylum credibility. Inside: corridor after corridor of high ceilings and foyers, planked wooden floors, long and never-ending hallways and staircases. Outside: fountains, recreational areas, barbed-wire fences that ran perpendicular to very efficient community housing farms, dairy barns, and greenhouses. It was a place where patients took part in tasks both indoors and outdoors, and in accordance, recreational activity was recommended. Dudley hated the outdoors. He almost hated the outdoors to the extent that Clyde Jacobson had hated him. He would prefer to sit somewhere cool and comfortable, where he could explain to Christina the accounts of his love. Instead, when outside, he was separated from the group and forced to watch from a distance with Dr. Hannah.

"Mr. Freeman, are you enjoying the warm weather today?" Dudley's glasses were fogged; he was sweating profusely. He had his eyes on Jerry, who, at least a hundred yards away, was teaching Christina how to play Croquet. Dudley watched as Jerry would

wrap his arms around her waist and help her hit the ball through the wickets. A blank stare would come over her face, and then a wide smile would emerge.

“That bastard,” Dudley whispered to himself.

Dr. Hannah glanced back, confused.

“Mr. Freeman, why it looks like you haven’t slept for weeks.”

“Ear to ear, Hannah! He’s going to cut me from ear to ear, I tell you.” Dudley sat under a tall oak tree. His eyes were paper slits, the flaps of skin beneath them purple and yellow.

“Nonsense, Mr. Freeman, the security here is great. They have keys to every cell of the building and can enter any room they need to.” The look on Dudley’s face became even more horrified. “You want my apple? It might make you feel better.” Dudley looked over to Dr. Hannah like he could see right through him, his eyes like two marbles pushed into a ball of silly putty, the flaps of purple and yellow nearly drooping over his cheeks.

“Damn it, Hannah. What *company*? Ear to ear. Hannah, you’ll see. Ear to ear.”

“Now, Mr. Freeman...” Dr. Hannah placed his hand on Dudley’s shoulder.

“Bedlam!”

“Confused, Mr. Freeman?”

“They’re trying to kill me!”

Dr. Hannah shook his head, possibly as if to question what kind of delusional case he could be dealing with. “What can I do? Let me help you, Dudley.” Dudley looked at Dr. Hannah, squeezing whatever energy he had into this sentence: “Dr. Paul Hannah, have you ever read *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka?”

Dr. Paul Hannah had not read *The Metamorphosis*. But, he had read the aforementioned work, *Mechanica*, attributed to Aristotle. In fact, Dr. Hannah's favorite part of the *Mechanica* was *ROTA Aristotelica*, or Aristotle's wheel. He had found that the difficulty with the small wheel and the big wheel begin when we presume that a one to one, point to point correspondence in motion indicates that two curves must have the same length. In reality, the points on the big wheel make longer leaps in revolution than the points on the small wheel, and therefore, are not in correspondence at all as they move upon the line. For several years, Dr. Paul Hannah had made the wheel a faithful metaphor for his studies involving synchronicity, thought about how it might benefit his work at the asylum, and forwarded his interpretation to others in his field, especially Dr. Lisa Congelton, head of isolation management, transitional care, and crisis stabilization. To most everyone, but especially for Dr. Paul Hannah, there was something about Dr. Lisa Congelton – something – lurking beneath the surface, waiting to be uncovered, ravished and taken like a hungry beast.

Dr. Paul Hannah wanted to be that beast. He wanted to prove to Dr. Lisa Congelton that he was a superior psychiatrist, a noteworthy doctor, and a man to whom she was capable of giving herself fully. He wanted to exist in correspondence with Dr. Congelton. And, it was obvious he planned on doing so by curing the most problematic patient in the Athen's Asylum for the Criminally Insane: Dudley Freeman. But Paul Hannah had absolutely no idea what was wrong with Dudley Freeman. From what he could tell, he only found Dudley a bit strange, but he wasn't entirely sure he was *crazy* at all. However, he had noticed that Dr. Congelton paid especially close attention to

Dudley.

Ergo, if he wanted to be in her presence, it was in his best interest to counsel Dudley; and the longer he was around Dudley, the more he saw of Dr. Congelton; the more he saw of Dr. Congelton, the better chance he had to have his love reciprocated. A good way to understand this might be to realize that no matter whether a physical body in motion spins, wobbles, or produces any form of displacement, it is always the center of gravity that determines both positions in relation to the center of gravity. In other words, in motion there is no such thing as a correspondence of points, only points that make their own necessary leaps to retain their relative positions.

As Dudley Freeman awoke one night from unsettling dreams, sweating profusely, he found himself in his bed expecting to have been changed into monstrous vermin. Instead, he noticed something in his room, moving about, but not of his making, and, in the moonlight, Dudley spotted a shadowy silhouette in the doorway. He thought: *This crazy fucker has actually owned up to his word. He has come to kill me, come to slit my throat from ear to ear and leave me dead in this godforsaken, solitary cell on the third floor.*

Immediately, Dudley tensed up. The shadowy figure seemed to float over the surface of the room, without sound. It came closer to Dudley's bed and sat down, softly. The room no longer took on the odor of lead-based paint and oak furniture. There was a sharp scent of alcohol, a splash of vanilla perfume.

Dudley ran his hand over the surface of his bed-stand, searching for a blunt object, finding nothing, but a damp apple core, and a copy of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

The book was better than nothing, he thought, but once his hand found the spine, he felt another hand meet his, sliding gently over the top. The hand seemed to emerge from out of nothingness, holding his lightly, lifting it, and placing it on something different, but not entirely foreign to him -- something warm and moist.

“I’ve seen the way you look at her,” a voice whispered in his ear.

“Farce?”

“That’s right, Dudley Freeman. I’ve noticed you, too.” Dudley clinched his hands. Balled them into fists. Rubbed over his eyes. Re-opened them.

Before him was Dr. Lisa Congelton. “Fuck me like a crazy man, Dudley. Bedlam, again and again!”

That night Jerry Jacobson crept up the steps of the Athen’s Asylum for the Criminally Insane, quietly, as not to disturb a soul. When he made it to the third floor, a crooked rectangle of light cast itself against the worn planks of the hardwood, and he walked toward it, with full intent to enter and stab Dudley Freeman. But when he entered, Dudley wasn’t there.

Instead, he walked in on Dr. Lisa Congelton, strangely wandering from corner to corner.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Jerry asked.

“Oh, well. What are you doing here, Mr. Jacobson?”

“Mandatory check procedure, Dr. Congelton.”

“Good, Jacobson. It’s pleasant to see someone doing their....”

An alarm sounded. It was loud and sharp, sound moving at the speed of light,

hinged in the ears of all around, pin wheeling through the hollow hallways filled with white and pink neon light.

“Is that?”

“The fire alarm. The first and second floor. Out. They’re all unlocked!”

Jacobson and Dr. Congelton ran out of the room together, stepping down the wooden stairs in unison. In full stride, Jacobson turned a corner and ran into what perceivably could have been a brick wall. This wall, however, turned out to be Dr. Paul Hannah, rushing up the stairs. The impact of the hit had knocked both men flat; things scattered everywhere.

A box of candy. A bouquet of flowers. A note.

A stack of papers. A briefcase.

A switchblade?

Before anyone seemed to notice, Jacobson grabbed the knife and cupped it in his palm. Dr. Congelton looked oddly at Dr. Hannah, then she extended her arm to Jacobson and he returned to his feet, sliding the knife in his pocket. Paul Hannah got up by himself.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Dr. Congelton asked.

“I saw your car, I thought...maybe...” Dr. Hannah mumbled back, trying to find the words.

“Who gives a shit?” Jacobson said, cutting inbetween and leading Dr. Congelton and Dr. Hannah down the stairwell and out the ground-level door.

When they arrived in the cold night the smell of rain was heavy in the air; nearly all the patients were running mad. Mr. Bonneville had pissed himself and was chasing a fireman with his shoe. Mrs. Gladstone was bathing in the fountain. Mr. Roberts was with

her. It was complete and utter confusion, bleeding-bloody-anarchy, lunacy giving way to folly in its purest form – it was *bedlam*.

Dr. Hannah, Dr. Congelton, and Jerry Jacobson looked upon the open field with horror and wonder. Dr. Congelton walked out into the mess and spotted Dudley. Beside Dudley was Christina Elliot. A slow drizzle had begun to slant in the wind and Dr. Congelton took Jerry by the arm.

“Guard Jacobson, do your job and restrain that animal.” Jacobson approached Dudley, accompanied by Dr. Hannah. Dudley sat back and watched in astonishment the spectacle before him: fire trucks, police officers, grown men and women streaking through courtyards, bathing in fountains, a beautiful chaotic madness – *a map*.

As Jacobson got closer, Dudley cried out, “Bedlam!” holding two fingers to his temple. Jacobson, observing Dudley’s disposition and remembering what he had left of a pinky toe, paused.

“Confusion, Mr. Freeman?” Dr. Hannah questioned.

“Jacobson! What are you waiting for?” Dr. Congelton lashed out.

“He’s not confused. Dudley is perfectly sane. In fact, I’m willing to bet Dudley had nothing to do with this madness. I suspect the girl if anything, Doc,” Jacobson interjected, putting an arm over Dudley’s shoulder and applying pressure to Dudley’s neck. Dudley’s eyeballs bulging, he struggled to free himself.

“Ear to ear, Hannah. Ear to ear!”

A strange, but curious look came over Dr. Hannah, and he moved between Dudley and Jerry Jacobson. He extended both arms full-length, placing his hands on the chest of each man. “I don’t know what’s going on, but Jacobson, I don’t want you

putting your hands on Mr. Freeman.” Jacobson dropped his arms and slouched over.

“Yeah, well, you keep that crazy bastard away from me,” Jerry replied.

Dr. Hannah looked at Dr. Congelton, and then at Dudley.

“What exactly is going on here?”

“You’re all fucking nuts!” Jerry screamed, the warm words releasing into the cold air, hanging in a cloud. Dr. Congelton opened her mouth to object, but, just as the words began to form on her tongue, Jerry removed the switchblade from his pocket, and with a sharp, violent twist of his wrist, the blade slid out. Christina Elliot grabbed Dudley and pulled herself to her feet, standing in front of him.

“Deaf and dumb can stand?” Jacobson said, pushing Dr. Hannah aside.

“Jacobson, if you go any closer to Mr. Freeman you will be terminated from your employment!” Dr. Congelton called out. Jacobson turned to Dr. Congelton, holding the switchblade firmly in front of him. The noise and lights and chaos seemed motionless, tranquil – even quiet. The patter of rain drops beat lightly in the distance. And, for the first time in years, Christina Elliot spoke:

“Kafka once said that ‘during the change the Master may chance to walk along the corridor, contemplate the prisoner, and say: You must not lock up this one again He is to come to me.’” Suddenly, attention shifted. “I saw Guard Jacobson assault Mr. Freeman.”

Blood ran into Jerry’s face. He could feel *the blood* behind his eyes, rocking back and forth, a warm yoke shifting in a thin shell – like sour milk lumped and muddy inside his head. Sound went under, far away and spread out, like water had filled his ears.

Jacobson changed the position of the blade in his hand. He looked in Dudley’s

direction and said, “It was you, wasn’t it, Freeman?”

All color went out of the world. Gray hues flowed over things. Jerry Jacobson gave a cathartic cry to the sky. All that was left were five people standing in a circle – exchanging glances. It began to rain, hard. It came in frozen ropes. It came and no one wanted to move, to breathe. Jacobson charged in the direction of Christina. And the rain fell, harder. But, just as Jacobson got close enough to jab the knife into her insides, something obstructed the path. Jacobson felt the weight brush by him and the blade sink into the tender flesh, slicing through. The rain fell, so hard. Until it filled their shoes. Until it filled their hearts.

Dudley fell to the ground. Everything was stationary. The old men streaking no longer ran. All police officers came to a halt. The firemen there for the false alarm watched in amazement. Jerry Jacobson became still. Dr. Lisa Congelton was still. Dr. Paul Hannah was still. Christina Elliot was still. And for one moment, it wasn’t everyone moving at once that caused the confusion, and time stood still – in bedlam.

Monticello Rising

Moon Woman

We got drunk and lay beneath the stars on an old trampoline in her backyard. When she kissed me my lungs shrank up like a closed fist. There was fire behind my eyelids. The summer surrounded everything and made it warm. That was the night she told me that the moon was our magnet. She told me that touching is to feeling as looking is to watching. What does it mean to stare, I asked her. I was really pondering what it meant to see.

As I got older I imagined the moon differently. I imagined it as a bright white eye that watched her every move, or an egg waiting to crack open and plunge its oily yolk upon the sky.

Have you ever listened closely to an egg crack? The cracking is to fracture as hearing is to listening. The cracking is generous, intimate and gentle. Perhaps this egg will hatch, incubated balmy in the sun's rays, a tiny god climbing out, the ooze puddled and shifty in its thin shell. It's a lonely god staring down at us all, able to feel what we feel but denied its right to touch.

I turned thirty-five a couple of years ago. I got married to a woman named Ingrid. She was not my moon woman, but she was a morning person. We moved into a house with two kids and a dog and went to sleep early every night before the moon appeared faintly translucent in the sky. On her birthday I took her and the kids to play miniature golf and between holes I caught myself staring at my golf ball, the tiny craters on its white surface.

Ingrid pecked her pink golf ball into the mouth of a plaster clown and watched it wind around and come out the other side. I penciled in her score on a tiny pink card.

Meanwhile the kids would draw their golf clubs on one another like medieval swords. I wrapped my arm around my wife's waist from behind and kissed her light on her lower cheek.

Later that night I couldn't sleep. The moon shined bright and wet through the blinds in our bedroom. I wanted to resist it. I wanted to ignore the splashing light dividing the darkness. But I couldn't and I got up from bed and went to the bathroom. I didn't turn on the lights. I closed the bathroom door and opened the faucet so that the water would run loud into the sink.

When I peeked through the blinds the moon peered back at me huge and white and glowing. It was my moon woman's featureless face, no eyes or nose just a hungry kiss-mouth on the white moonscape, a tiny fissure beginning to form a crooked line that meanders sharp and angular along the contour of its smooth yellowed shell. And I made myself look away. I turned off the faucet and walked tired and rigid back into the bedroom. I crawled in bed and pulled myself to my wife. Her legs scissored beneath the thin sheets. I kissed the back of her neck. She turned and we made love, the moon's light burning into the indentions of our muscles.

Mountain Lion Spotted In Appleton

Brown fronds tumble after cars and rasp on the blacktop and curl in the parched ditches and I wonder whatever happened to September. She was heavy set and she played softball and she could beat Ricky Carrington, the fastest guy in the neighborhood, in a foot race. I could never tell if September was joking or serious. She walked around with a brown canvas rucksack on her shoulder. Once she greeted me at the bus stop with a punch to the belly. It was common knowledge that September grew up in a household where her mother beat her father, regularly. And sometimes she would talk at the bus stop, until the bus came, about how she just wanted her father to ball his skinny fists, one time, until his knuckles got white and sharp, and knock some sense into her mother so she would shut the hell up. September once said she hated her father because he wouldn't hit her mother back. And at community functions, during the big cookouts in the summer, somehow I would always end up behind this woman at the buffet. She was big and obese and she picked at the food with her bare fingers, tasting everything.

The summer September disappeared I spent a lot of nights lying in bed, wide awake, listening to the angry voices make their way into the street. Sometimes I would sit trying not to listen and watch my ceiling fan turn and turn. Other times I would sit at my bedroom window, both watching and listening. After a good thirty minutes of the fighting, the yelling, typically, September's father would walk out the door with a beer in his hand. He would jump in his wife's car, an old Ford Taurus with one winking headlight, and pull out of the driveway.

Most of the time that's how it ended. I say most of the time, because one of these nights, just as the yelling had calmed and I was on the verge of sleep, there came a

random knock at the door. It was September's mother, bloody and beaten. She was pale, panting, telling a story of a mountain lion, a big golden cat, she called it; she claimed it attacked her, chased her out of her front yard and onto our porch. I remember my father looking at the curved, scimitar-like scratches on her face and then the older bruises on the back of her arm. He sat at our kitchen table with her, cleaned the scratches with a warm wet cloth. He told her she could stay the night, told her to get away from the man who did this to her. And then he walked her back to her door.

Because of the mountain lion other parents had decided to keep their children in the house. The local paper ran a headline that read *Mountain Lion Spotted in Appleton*; above was a picture of September's mother without any explanatory caption below it. The article went on to say that the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife in Maine had three reports before this one, putting the cougars somewhere in the proximal area of Lexington Flats and east Kingfield, a box of land that sat at the edge of Appleton Estates, our neighborhood. My father scoffed at the paper as soon as he opened it. He was convinced this was a hoax, that this was but cover-up for a dysfunctional household. But at night, when I would shut my own eyes to sleep, I remember having trouble not imagining the mountain lion's wet black nose – its growl vibrating deep in its own throat – its breath hot – its whiskers stiff – its marble eyes soft, dark, and deep.

All of the houses with large summer sundecks saw red-brown sun-kissed mothers and daughters crowd into tanning beds. Gardens grew thick and green and then brown, the vines climbing up and over the boulder walls then dying there in the sun. Luxurious backyards were abandoned, pink algae lining beautiful white fountains and swimming pools. Appleton Estates was forsaken and empty. Of course, my father dismissed the

rumors, told me to go out and play, and so did September's parents, who after the incident never mentioned it. Most everyone else took the newspaper article as a warning. They stayed inside. And that summer I walked through their yards like they were my own, hopped their fences, made my own cut-throughs, imagined how I would escape the big golden cat if it were chasing me. I did this until one day, out of the corner of eye, in a downhill stretch of steep ridges that ran along the back of the neighborhood, where the nice wooden fences on my neighbors' land were replaced with the barbed-wired ones that marked the property line, I spotted what I thought to be a tawny animal with a golden coat and long club-like tail, a cougar-gait; from a plunging incline it leapt over old man Seeber's wooden fence.

Instead of running away from the creature, I followed. I saw a paw disappear into the tree line, like it was sucked into the forest behind the Carringtons' house. I lengthened my stride. What began as a jog became a run and that run was broken up by sharp turns and quick leaps over fences small enough to hurdle. It was the first time all summer I had the chance to really break loose, to run, to see how fast my body would move. I felt a sweat break and it felt good and the scenery blurred past all in one streak – the vinyl siding and brick walls and high porches and white stone columns. When I entered the tree line light squeezed through the trees in a weird way; the leaves became the sky and the light parting through looked star-like. There was a hiss and then a snap and I felt something like a burn, then a sting, and I went from an all out sprint to a one leg bounce, landing in a patch of spade shaped weeds. There was something in my shin. It was small and round and it was just under the skin.

"You were in the way." I did a half turn and I saw nothing. September came out from behind a tree, her rucksack thrown over one shoulder. She was wearing camouflage skateboard shorts and a white rag tied around her head. The rag had *KILL THE COUGAR* written in black magic marker on it. She was carrying a BB gun, and not just a regular BB gun, a CO2 powered automatic one that appeared to be a knock off of an AK-47.

"You shot me?" I asked. She came close to me, bent low and put her hand on my hip. A droplet of sweat hung on the end of her nose. "You fucking shot me!" I said.

"Why are you here?" she asked. She ran her index finger over the tiny lump in my shin.

I sucked a lot of air in and she patted me on the head. She turned around, began walking out into the woods.

"Hey, where are you going?" I asked.

"I was almost sure there were two of them." She stopped, facing out into the forest.

"Two of them?" I asked.

"I was almost sure there were two of them..." and this was when she turned around, "and then, after I pulled the trigger to get the second I realized I had shot you."

"Did you see which way it went?" I asked.

"C'mon. We need to go this way," she said.

I used a tree for leverage and got back on my feet. I went limping through the forest, following September, watching her climb over logs and navigate the wooded area. She surprised me at the way she moved, like she knew exactly where everything was. We crossed a shallow creek bed. Suddenly my toes were cold; water had seeped through a

hole in the toe of my shoe. September stopped with a foot still in the water, bent low so that she could put her hand in. A cloud formed in the creek. At the bottom of the bed she had found a print, or so she claimed. After a while she took her hand out of the water and looked up at me.

"I saw your Dad walk my mother home," she said.

"You know what you're doing?" I asked. "I mean you're shooting at a mountain lion with a BB gun."

"Am I?" she asked, looking back over her shoulder. "She deserved it, you know." It was the first time she had ever made complete eye contact with me.

"Deserved what?" I asked. "He just walked her home."

She pointed out into a round opening in the trees. "I think she went that way," she said. She walked slowly, cautiously, like the cat might be close. When we came to the other side, there was no mountain lion, no cougar. The forest opened up into a round wide hollow. On the other side of the hollow was Ricky Carrington's older cousin. He was sitting by a bullseye. He was alone and he looked sad and he was petting a golden retriever. I shuddered at the idea of September shooting his dog. September walked out to the middle of the hollow. She punched the ground with the butt of the gun. The dog beside the kid seemed to slump down when she did it. The kid smoothed the hair on the dog's back, whispered something in its ear.

"Already went off into the woods," she said, squinting in the sun and looking off into the trees. She put her hand to her forehead to block the sun. "We need to keep going if we want to find it."

"I think we did find it," I said. I looked at the dog, nodded at the kid.

"Whatever," she said, marching off, the dry grass crunching under her feet. I was inclined to follow, but something kept me there. I looked at the kid and his dog once more and then watched September disappear into the woods. After that I found my way back over the creek, crossing a small white bridge this time, and when I arrived on solid asphalt, the neighborhood felt safer for some reason. I wasn't sure whether it was because there were likely no cougars in Appleton, or whether September had marched off in the opposite direction. People were out and about in the neighborhood. I passed the Mendez house and saw some kids jumping on a trampoline; a house over, there was another group taking turns throwing flat miniature basketballs at one another. I cut through old man Seeber's yard to find him drinking Scotch on his patio, talking to himself. I had never seen a golden retriever jump a fence as tall as Mr. Seeber's. And I was having a hard time trying to reconcile what September had said – her mother deserved it – with her hunt for the mountain lion.

I arrived home just as the sun was going down and everything was blue-orange. It was going to be a cool summer night. I could tell. There was a breeze. It smelled faintly like rain but the clouds had passed and everything was open and exposed; dew formed on the grass. I walked in the house, dirty. My father asked where I'd been. I told him hunting for mountain lions. He laughed and changed the channel on the television.

I sat in my room for a long time, trying to squeeze the BB out of my leg. I walked to my bedroom window and opened it. The air was thick and cool. The whole neighborhood looked light blue. When I closed my eyes I could still picture the mountain lion, the wet nose, the whiskers, everything. And that's when I heard arguing from across the street. The voices bounced between houses. Then I heard September's name. I looked

out the window, but I didn't see her. I saw September's father running around his front yard, barefoot and shirtless, his bare chest white in the darkness. He knocked on his own door. He shook his fist at the windows of his house from his driveway. Apparently he had gone outside, and his wife had locked him out, left him there to watch every light in the house go dark.

He began lurching around the front yard, strangely, slumped low to the ground, mouthing words to himself. It wasn't long until he found what he was looking for. He held a rock in his hand, stared at it for a while, examining it, looking at the top and bottom, brushing off excess dirt. Seconds later it busted through the windshield of his wife's Ford Taurus. The alarm sounded. The thick glass caved, spider-webbed to the outer edges from a deep hole in its center. Tiny light blue crystals pebbled in the driveway. A light came on in one of the bedrooms and then another at the window for the stairs and then another in the living room. And when September's fat mother came hauling out the front door with no bra, dressed in nothing but a t-shirt, September's father was already back-pedaling.

He kept the car between them. When she moved left, he moved right. When she moved right, he moved left. He ducked and she lost sight of him and he crawled to the other side of the car. She bent over, looked for his feet to see which direction he was moving in. Eventually she got impatient and picked a side and he was forced to outrun her. Circling the car and tailing out into the yard, his naked heel escaped her diving swipe by a couple of feet. After that she was done. She rolled over from her chest to her back, lay there – and began to cry. September's bony father walked over and sat in the wet grass with his wife; he took her hand and held it and they sat there for a long time, their

fingers braided together. He helped her up and they walked inside. Later the car chirped and the lights in the house went out one by one, again – the living room, then the stairway, then the bedroom on the left – but just as the last light went out, one came on, the bedroom on the right, September's bedroom.

I watched as the window opened and a square of light cast itself on the house beside it. A brown rucksack came flying out the window and fell in the grass. Leaping down from almost two stories was September, dressed in her camouflage shorts and her white bandana. Her marble eyes shimmered in the purple night, soft, dark and deep. She walked slowly through the darkness like a cat, softly, as if the pads of her feet weren't even on the ground.

Continue On

Krista takes her mother's camera from the shelf in the spare bedroom and spends days walking around the city. She's looking for things to photograph, experimenting with different lenses and shutter speeds. She stops to take a picture of one dirty shoe left on the sidewalk. The strings are double knotted and still tied tight. On her walk she comes upon a porcelain lamp on the sidewalk, without a light bulb – a bicycle chained to a bike rack, with two flat tires – a man holding a guitar, with no strings – a window at a local coffee shop, that opens to a brick wall. It begins to rain and she watches a man in the crosswalk brave the downpour with plastic bags on his feet, a newspaper shielding his head.

The city swims under the rumble and stutter of jackhammers – it breathes steam from manholes – its tram lines rise up with fume and chemical – and she snaps pictures. Later the same streets look back at her in the red light of her mother's basement, a developing studio of steel pans and smelly fluids. Familiar faces grow alien and marvelous; objects slowly flare white into image, rubbing against a city reduced to instants. The streets she had walked everyday for years appear unusual – changed. She worries about the unforgiving appointment – the threat of death, hurry, or capture – the escape from place, person, or moment – the possibilities of the before, after, and in-between when someone left their shoe on the sidewalk and continued on.

Out into the Wind and the Rain and the Gray

I guess I'm about eight years old when he starts walking off. It's done in such a way that makes you think there's some other place he's supposed to be. One second grandpa's right in front of you, nodding back and forth, those shifting blue eyes lost in the void, then you take your eyes off of him. And he's gone. I see more of the zoo that day than ever before. Security is worried mom's going to sue them if grandpa ends up somewhere he could be injured or hurt. They let us in a fenced in area with real-live Siberian tiger cubs. One of the ladies even lets me touch a ruffed lemur, a red one. People stare at us from the outside and I feel like I'm one of the animals. Mom is sweating through her shirt and she doesn't even look at the lemurs or the monkeys, or the jaguar as we pass it – but the llama gets her attention – when it spits at her.

We get to the bird exhibit and there are blue-necked peacocks walking around, pretty white cockatoos, and red and green and yellow parrots. Mom isn't impressed with any of these birds, that is, until my little sister's baby finger points up at a fake rock wall, a ledge where a waterfall pours into a clear pool filled with silver-finned fish. She points and says, "Pretty birds." "Yes," mom says without having a look for herself, "look at all the pretty birds." That's when one of the security women lets out a scoff of some sort, like a dry cough. That's when mom looks up at the plastic rock wall, and there's grandpa, completely naked except for that white cowboy hat on his head, birds of all different colors and kinds perched on his shoulders, his arms. He waves down at us, his legs dangling over the waterfall, and a tiny white-bellied cuckoo with dark black eyes lands on his hand, stays there.

This is only one of many incidents. It drives mom insane. Grandpa's right beside

her in the supermarket one minute, mom scanning the canned soup for vegetable beef, then she turns around and the old bastard vanishes. I remember her time and time again stomping off furiously, pushing a grocery cart a hundred miles an hour, one bum wheel clinking and clacking though the packed aisles, my little legs just trying to move fast enough to keep up, and her finding him, in the frozen food section, rubbing a pound of ground beef against his cheek. For years this goes on, her chasing him around supermarkets and theme parks and hospitals and movie theaters, and sometimes you get the feeling that the old man might just be fucking with her, that he knows more than he lets on, that he's entertaining himself.

But after mom bails him out of jail, for the incident at the Portland Zoo, grandpa is never the same. I think it has something to do with the way the security guards had to corner him on that waterfall. When they finally surround him – no way out, I remember him taking that old white cowboy hat and tossing it in the air like a Frisbee. The hat sails quite a ways, lands right at mom's feet. She picks it up, dusts it off, and doesn't seem to know what to do with it. So she shoves it on my head. He comes home from jail and he's not the same. He won't go to the grocery with mom. He stops rocking back and forth. He doesn't even walk off places anymore. He just sits on the porch and stares off into the woods. He sits out there all day – doesn't move, doesn't talk. Mom forgets about him a time or two. I know it had to be two or three times, at least. She wouldn't even realize it until the next morning when she walks out to get the mail.

Grandpa on the porch. Hadn't moved all night. His blue eyes don't seem so shifty anymore and it's like whatever he's doing on that porch, he's sure of it, like whatever he's looking at in those woods, he's focused on it. There's only one instance when I find

him away from the porch and I have to follow him into the woods. He crosses a patchy field and a creek of clear flowing water and over the creek there opens a round, wide hollow. The sun shines between the trees and the open space of this place makes it feel like a stage, some kind of strange island you're on. I yell into the forest as grandpa walks out into the patchy grass. He keeps walking like he can't hear me, so I yell again. He doesn't turn around. Instead he stops at the center of the hollow, raises both arms, his palms up, open and inviting and birds from nearly every neighboring tree take flight from their respective branches and come to land on the crest of his head, his shoulders, his arms. His blue eyes are shifty and glazed over. I can't tell whether he wants to smile or cry.

In August of that year a tropical depression forms east of the Bahamas. This storm moves slowly toward the northwest and intensifies. By the end of the next day it's a hurricane named Bob and it's moving northeast and accelerating. It cuts a path across northeastern Massachusetts. It follows the path into the Gulf of Maine. People are barricading their windows and doors. Stocking up food and water. Mom is filling a bucket with sand, she says in case there is a fire, so we won't have to waste the water. She's taking care of my sister so she sends me outside to get grandpa, tells me to bring him in off the porch before the weather blows him away.

The storm is picking up and the rain is slanting hard and the wind is lifting everything that's not tied down into the air: garbage cans and lawn furniture and a pink plastic flamingo with a propeller spinning crazy go lifted into the gray, appear then disappear into the suck of the storm. And that's when I see grandpa. Walking out into the middle of it all. I want to chase after him, but I pause; there's something strange about

him being there. He looks like he's a part of it all, like a rock or a tree or a piece of the whole thing, like he belongs to it. I finally get the nerve to chase after him, but when I do, he's moving forward, strongly fighting the wind. The rain starts to calm and so does the wind and I barely catch a glimpse of grandpa and he's like a shadow crossing the creek and into the hollow, and the rain, it goes soft.

I run into the hollow following the depressions in the mud shaped like grandpa's tennis shoes. They're filling up with water and every dimple in the soft earth looks like every other dimple and eventually I'm making my way toward the center and all of sudden, there are no more dimples, no more tracks in the mud. They seem to all come to an end in the center of the hollow and I'm doing 360s, turning and turning in the same spot, looking out into the wind and the rain and the gray and I don't see him – grandpa isn't there. I walk out to the tree line and yell for him, walk back to the center where the tracks stop and look around. I look everywhere and I find nothing, except for that old white cowboy hat. The storm picks back up. The wind gets worse and the rain gets hard again and eventually I have to run back.

Hurricane Bob only took three lives. It injured two. It was a category three hurricane with one hundred-plus mile per hour winds. The search parties found the three dead and informed the families and the funerals were planned; the two injured were discovered and brought to the hospital; but no search party, no police officer, nor mom, nor myself, nor anyone ever found grandpa. The last thing I can remember is him crossing that creek, slipping between two trees into that hollow. Poor grandpa; he loved that hat. He hardly ever took it off. There's pictures and pictures and pictures with him wearing that hat. The wide brim swung low over his eyes. And if he ever walks off from

wherever he is when he returns he'll have it again, to fit low over his eyes as he raises his hands to the sky so all the pretty birds can open their wings wide on the wind.

A Few Close Calls

When John Seeber signed up for the National Guard he had a few close calls at boot camp with snakes, spiders, and ticks, some lousy food. He did lots of pushups and jumping jacks and ran more than he ever had in his life. The Drill Instructors yelled and cursed a lot; one of them liked to repeat a bible verse from Psalms 18:34: He teaches my hands to make war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze. There was a fellow recruit of John's named Decker.

Jon emptied his shaving cream into Decker's shave kit. Decker emptied toothpaste into Jon's. Jon filled Decker's pillowcase with baby powder. Decker tied Jon to his bunk in his sleep, taped his sheets closed. Jon froze Decker's socks and hung them back on his rack before he woke up. Decker froze Jon's towel. Jon thawed his towel inside Decker's bed sheets. Decker glued Jon's shower shoes to his footlocker. Jon cut the shoelaces on Decker's boots. The bad economy's good for military recruiting, Jon heard a recruiter say. Joining the military is often a quicker way of attaining citizenship, Decker told Jon. Jon called Decker a liar. Decker had a round get lodged in the barrel of the weapon he was firing, once. It could have killed him. Before Decker could fire it again Jon stopped him and took it to the armorer.

The war was something that was happening in another country to other people. Chris "Decker" Jameson would die the first the week he was in Iraq when an IED took out his Humvee. Jon Seeber is halfway through his first parachute drop behind enemy lines before he begins to wonder what it's all about.

Blink

After his wife Florence died, Edward Seeber would never sleep more than a single hour. In that single hour, he would never dream, and when he awoke, he would not feel tired. In fact, the one hour seemed to serve the purpose of a full night's rest, where he would fall asleep to the rising of the sun and awake to the burning flames of morning, alert and refreshed. But, because he could not dream while sleeping, he had come to notice a change in his waking life: his dreams had found a way to the surface. He would blink, find the letters in his alphabet soup swimming toward one another to spell the word *recession*. He would blink again, realize he wasn't eating soup, put the spoon away and read the rest of the Wall Street Journal. These moments came and went throughout the day, pieces of dreams riding currents, thoughts like burning ashes in the wind, scurrying along and catching themselves wherever they liked.

He was eighty-one years old. In a fair world, a cancerous cell would have left him a hollow shell, as it had Florence, and even now, he troubled himself with the thought that there was no redemptive quality to this world, one where he lived and his wife was gone. Making himself a drink, Edward stared at an old picture of his son in his living room. In the picture, Jonathan was dressed in his little league uniform, deep red-brown streaks on his white pants, the screen-printed numbers peeling off his worn, cotton shirt, a bat over his shoulder. For some time now, Edward had wished to fix the problems between him and his son. He thought about picking up the phone and inviting Jonathan over, watching a game or two on the television, having a couple of drinks, sorting through their problems. But every time he set out to do so, there seemed to be something in the way. He would pick up the phone, dial the numbers and after the

second ring, hang up. Edward found it difficult to express how he really felt in words; he found it even harder to apologize, or to thank his son. It had been Jonathan who had sat with his wife in the hospital, who when the chemotherapy made her skin dry and yellow, left the hair on her head in the palms of her hands, stayed late hours to comfort her in her final days. And it had been Jonathan, who had knocked on his door that morning, wanting to talk. So, Edward Seeber sat down with his son at the kitchen table.

“Do you really think you should drink Scotch at nine in the morning?” Jonathan asked.

“It helps me sleep,” Edward said. He got up and opened a box of cinnamon pop tarts, reached in and pulled out a shiny foil package.

“Scotch and a cinnamon pop tart?” Jonathan asked.

“Don’t knock it until you try it, boy,” Edward said. He tore open the package, pulled out a pop tart. He looked down at his glass of Scotch. He went to stir it with his index finger.

“You must be trying to kill yourself,” Jonathan said.

“I don’t trust you,” Edward said. “You look just like your mother.”

“So what are you saying?”

He told Jonathan not about the dreaming, but about the one hour – the way he didn’t feel tired, and the way it began promptly after Florence had passed. He finished his pop tart, all but the crumbs on the table. The breaded specks grew legs and walked away.

What Edward had meant was that when Florence was alive she had noticed that even though Jonathan was athletic and outgoing, women wouldn’t approach him, that he

had a hard time getting a girlfriend. She had expressed her concern to Edward, to make her son a man, for she knew her son was handsome, *too handsome*. Jonathan was almost a perfect mirror of his mother: his face smooth, his features sharp, yet soft and suave – a perfect circle with angles, a square without corners.

“And that’s why you’re fifty-two years old and alone,” Edward said.

“Yeah?” Jonathan asked, tapping his fingers on the table. “I’m fifty-one, actually.”

“If it were raining pussies, son...you’d get hit in the head with a dick.” Edward started to laugh, but instead he coughed. He got up holding his back with his left hand, raised his drink with his right, and walked out of the kitchen. Jonathan followed him through the house. It was true: the perfect symmetry of his face had broken a promise that smut magazines and popular culture had made to him, that beautiful women would orgasm effortlessly beneath him and furiously above him as they looked down on the refined angles of his face.

“Maybe I just believe different than you, pop,” Jonathan said, following his father.

“How is that?” Edward asked.

“The only relationship, I think...that can make both people happy is one where no person can make any claim on the life and freedom of the other,” Jonathan said. Edward stepped out of his back door and onto the patio. It was a bright day with a nice breeze; the sky was a glacier filled with a tiny pulsating sun in its center, blue-white and open, transparent, yet somehow false, held up by invisible wire.

“I wish that baseball had hit you right between the eyes, son,” Edward said, taking

a seat on the patio. “Would’ve knocked some sense into you.” He was referring to a backyard game of baseball when Jonathan was twelve or thirteen. The pitcher on the opposite team had thrown out his arm, and now the teams were uneven. But instead of quitting the kids had decided to ask Edward to pitch. *Just the last three outs*, the opposite team pleaded. *We’re up by three* they said. Edward set down his Scotch that Sunday afternoon, and joined the game.

He could still feel the fluid movement, the keen muscle memory that moved through his body when he threw the first pitch that afternoon. It whizzed by the first batter in a line of pure energy extending from his hand to the catcher’s glove. He retired two batters; he could hear the children in the infield idolizing him, blocking their faces with their gloves and whispering loudly that Jonathan’s dad is pretty damn good. It was about that time that his arm became loose and rubbery, the muscle without true substance, gelatin. He walked the next three batters and the kids laughed, thinking he was obviously doing it on purpose. By then, it was Jonathan’s turn to bat. The first two pitches Edward threw hard, stiff fastballs inside, but instead of coming out of the box to avoid the pitches, Jonathan opened up his stance, brought his lead foot to the third baseline and fouled the pitches off. The kids in the field gasped and moaned, knowing Jonathan had made contact with the ball at the very end of his bat, and the ball had sent a vibration from the end of the bat, to the handle, into his hands, and from there, all the way through his body. Still he showed no pain.

It was then that Edward had thought about what his wife had said: *make her son a man*. The catcher threw the ball back and Edward caught it, looked it over for effect. He stood on the mound and eyed Jonathan with the concentration and focus of an angry

drunk. He wound up, threw a white, streaking bullet at Jonathan's head. The boy fell flat to the ground, dried sand floated light and free through the air like sawdust, formed a cloud that moved over him. The pitch missed him. Jonathan got up to wipe himself off. Edward got the ball back. Jonathan stepped back into the batter's box. The next pitch, Edward planned on doing the same thing, but as he released it, he felt his fingers slip from the ball's seams, and instead of being high and inside, the pitch wobbled on delivery, came right down the middle.

"Don't tell me you're still mad," Jonathan said.

"Of course, I'm not mad," Edward said. He finished the rest of his drink in one big gulp.

"Yeah...you're still pissed," Jonathan said.

"No one could have fielded that ball," Edward said.

"What'dyamean...the ball came right at you?"

"No, that ball went way over my head. Out of play," Edward said.

"I'm getting a glass," Jonathan said.

"I'll get you a glass. Stay here, I'll be out in a minute." Edward got up from his patio chair and walked back in the house. Jonathan followed him inside. He stopped to look at the wooden cabinets. "You've really done some good work on these cabinets. Mom would be proud." Edward swung open a door, grabbed a glass.

"I let you get that hit," Edward said, handing Jonathan the glass.

"On second thought, pop," Jonathan said, raising his glass, "I really shouldn't."

"I told you to stay outside. I'll be out in a minute," Edward said.

"If you're more than a minute, I'm leaving," Jonathan said, leaving the kitchen

and walking out on the porch. Edward came out a minute or so later, carrying a bat with a glove slid over the barrel, a baseball tucked firmly in the glove. In his other hand was a half-empty bottle of Scotch. He set the bottle on the table.

“If I were you, son...I wouldn’t bat a lash. I wouldn’t so much as blink when I give you the heat...not this time around,” Edward said.

“No, pop. I don’t play baseball anymore,” Jonathan said, laughing.

“You don’t play baseball? What are you, some kind of pussy? Get out here and hit the ball. C’mon,” Edward said. He removed the glove from the handle of the bat, slid it over his hand, leaned the bat against the house. He could tell calling his son a pussy had gotten to him.

“Why can’t we just sit here like father and son, have a drink?” Jonathan asked.

“At nine in the morning? Who gets drunk at nine in the morning?” Edward asked.

“Who plays one on one backyard baseball at...” he checked his watch, “nine thirty five in the morning?” Jonathan asked, grabbing the handle of the bat and walking out into the backyard.

A large smile came over Edward Seeber and his eighty-one year old legs hurried to the small hump of grass that used to be a homemade mound. He took the baseball and threw short pitches to himself back in the glove, spit a string of saliva through the thin space in his front teeth. Jonathan stood in the batter’s box, a fifty-one year old boy, his bat wagging over his shoulder.

“Don’t throw too hard, pop. You don’t want to hurt yourself,” Jonathan said.

“Don’t you worry, boy. Just remember, don’t you blink.”

Edward Seeber reared back into a strong wind up, feeling the same fluid

movement, the keen muscle memory that moved through his body when he threw the first pitch in his backyard those many, many years ago. He shifted his weight and kicked high and hard to get force on the pitch, so hard that he closed his eyes in deep concentration. When he reopened them, all his momentum came toward a dead spot of grass that was once used for home plate; the ball buzzed as it came off his fingers, moving forward with power and speed. With nothing to stop it, the baseball continued freely in the air, knocking the bottle of Scotch to the concrete patio, shattering it. He pulled the glove from his hand. The old man looked around him, the two glasses appearing empty and strange without the bottle beside them. He walked inside to call his son.

Levity

Amelia eats the crayons. Her teeth are chunked and smeared with color: electric lime, pacific blue, and shocking pink. I pick up the empty crayon box and find a little sharpener on the back, shake a blue shaving on my index finger, taste it.

“As good as you expected?” Sasha asks.

“Like retro wax candies,” I say, pausing – “like the big red lips from back in the day, with no taste to them.”

She takes the child in her arms and tilts her head, uses her acrylic nails to scrape away the wax from tooth. An assortment of crayons lie scattered everywhere, hacked and broken and half-eaten. The paper once wrapped around each colored log is unwound and torn in curled ribbons, spread over the carpet.

“Crayons aren’t harmful if swallowed are they?” I ask. Sasha’s face softens. “I mean, they’re just colored wax, right?”

She takes her hand out of the child’s mouth. Her nail is dark purple. I think of the periodontal precision of an acrylic nail. I check the back of the crayon box for a warning label.

“There’s nothing on the box,” I say.

“Let’s hope not – for your sake,” she says, rolling a half-chewed pink crayon in my direction. “Have another, on me.”

She looks up and for a moment I imagine what it’s like to see Amelia’s mouth through Sasha’s big round eyes. I imagine a kaleidoscope of color packed into molars, incisors smudged in pink-blue-green, a blue-black tongue falling back into the dark tunnel of Amelia’s throat.

This is likely the way Sasha would normally spend her day, walking from kitchen to living room in those old cheerleading shorts and a tank top, moving back and forth between attending to Amelia and watching Maury Povich in her apartment. At night she makes money by working as an operator for a 1-900 sex/psychic hotline, the kind that are advertised alongside the other thirty minute paid advertisements about spray-on hair and food dehydrators. And still, amongst it all, there's a little voice in my head that reminds me that Sasha wasn't always like this, that there was a time when she was vibrant and glowing. This too was before I knew that I was an experiment of hers, that she only mostly dated white rappers and body builders.

“So, are you still with what's her name?”

“Krista is out in the car,” I say. “We were thinking that we could take Amelia off your hands for the day.”

Sasha walks out of the room and takes Amelia with her. They disappear into the kitchen and my cell phone vibrates. It's Krista. She's promised she would stay in the car, but the message is a lone question mark. I send the same thing back.

“It's not your day to have her, you know that,” Sasha says, standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. She has Amelia on her hip. “I don't like you thinking you can come over here anytime you want.”

The truth is that when Amelia was born Sasha and I weren't on very good terms. Although I now know I'm Amelia's father, I didn't always know, and although being a good father is something that is important to me, still, this is also something relatively new to me. After all, the extent of this relationship was never meant to be this serious.

It began with Sasha hopping from bar to bar in her own self-described

unpredictable ways and my meeting her in the whirlwind of it all. Although I was aware she had a boyfriend, Bryson, she and I began hooking up anyway. After having sex we usually didn't talk for a couple of days, which turned into a kind of broken communication, where she would get drunk on the weekends and send me hateful text messages, that is, until the end of the night, when she would call to have me pick her and her friends up from some party in some obscure location.

More than once I found myself sucked into the pull of everything, crashing with her on a couch in one of her friends' apartments. Some nights I lay there in the dark with her after everyone had passed out, smelling the alcohol still sweet on her breath. Other nights when she didn't pass out we would fuck loudly on whatever couch we happened to find ourselves on.

"Well, aren't you going to say anything?" she asks.

I realize I've been sitting in silence, thinking about fucking Sasha on the couch. I should say something.

"What do you want me to say? I want to see my daughter. I don't want to start an argument."

"I just want you to know that you can't just waltz over and make everything better," she says.

Amelia slips down slightly, scissoring her legs, and Sasha bounces Amelia back up on her hip and leans in the doorway.

I find a picture of Amelia on the coffee table. I pick it up and look at it and then finally move from sitting in the floor amongst the scattered fragments of color, to the couch.

“I’m around,” I say, looking at the picture.

The picture is one of the only ones with all of us together. Amelia is a year old in it. Now, she’s three years old and big for her age. We’re all sitting on a trampoline in my neighbor’s backyard. The sun is going down in the background.

“Child support isn’t everything, you asshole. You know – I’m kind of glad you left us.” Sasha’s voice breaks a little when she says this and she almost begins to cry.

“See, right now, you can’t even look me in the eye.” And she’s right. I can’t.

“Do you have to say that in front of her?” I ask. “Do you want her to hate her own father?” By the time I look up Sasha’s already walking across the living room with Amelia.

I’m not sure what to expect so I put down the picture frame on the couch. Sasha bends over with Amelia in her arms and picks it up. “It’s good,” I say. “Who took this picture?”

My phone vibrates again. Another text.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, I like it,” I say. “Maybe I could have it?”

“Are you crazy?” Sasha points at me with the corner of the picture frame. And I begin to think that this isn’t necessarily a good discussion for us to be having at the moment.

“Keep the picture then,” I say, my hands in the air like it’s a stick up. “Just saying, you’re not the only one – ”

“You are fucking crazy,” she says. I look at her and she wipes her eyes with her forearm, picture frame still in hand. She walks away from the end table and places the

frame on the bookcase, moving it farther away from me.

It seems I'm in quite the predicament now. In all actuality, the goal of my visit, as discussed previously with Krista, was to ask Sasha not just for a picture of my daughter, but something more, *my daughter*, not just for the day, but for custody, and so far, not getting a photograph isn't the best sign.

She repositions Amelia and they go down the hallway to the bathroom where I can hear the faucet come on, running water in the sink. Sasha talks faintly to Amelia about brushing her teeth, about the glittery toothpaste she likes.

I look around the apartment and dust has formed on most of the flat surfaces. The place is generally a shit hole. It's your typical two bedroom apartment on the first floor with a small living room, a walk-thru kitchen, two small bedrooms and a bath. There are two bookshelves with mediocre textbooks and board games, a Ouija board. Most of the furniture is old and passed down and covered with gray afghans. The only redeemable quality is the sliding glass doors that lead to a patio, which is really just a ten foot block of concrete Sasha's decorated with plastic chairs and an ashtray that appears to be stone, until someone bumps into it. Then you realize it's plastic, when it wobbles and your attempt to catch it only results in ashes getting on you instead of the concrete.

Amelia's bedroom is rather different, though. On her bed are hand-sewn, patchwork quilts, flower-sprinkled, pink-laced pillows, stacked in mounds. The room smells of a mix between hand soap, lemon oil, and deodar cedar. It's the room of a little girl, stereotypically boarded with hearts and faeries and unicorns. In her closet are claw-footed chairs, tubs of toys, talking, walking figurines, beautiful, wood-carved mini-houses, tea cups and saucers. I picture Amelia walking in and out of the closet talking

back to her toys, dancing with figurines, wishing she had someone there to dance with her.

I start to wonder what it might have been like if I'd decided to stay with Sasha, when I first found out Amelia was mine. I mean, I never even knew my own father. What do I know about being one? I know even less about women, what makes them work, what makes them tick. Just look at how Sasha and I worked out. I can't even see my own offspring but every two weeks or so, and on the weekends. I can't even come over and see my own daughter without getting in an argument.

And just as all of this is working its way through my head, through the brushing and running water and what ifs, there comes a knock at the door. I rush to answer it, thinking it might be Krista. I make sure to get to the door promptly and take a deep breath, open it with a smile. And, of course, Bryson, Sasha's former boyfriend, Cro-Magnon man with 20 inch biceps, tree trunk thighs, and relentless uni-brow, the guy who Sasha was cheating on with me, now stands staring back at me.

I reach in my pocket and read the text message from earlier. It says, *Bryson is here*, via Krista. Through the open door I wave to Krista over Bryson's massive neck muscles. She looks back at me from the street, parked and still sitting in the driver's seat. She blows the horn, gives me this gesture, a shrug, like, uh, what the hell is going on, and I return with a wave, something like, it really isn't a good time to explain.

"Come on in," I say. "Sasha's in the bathroom with Amelia. She should be right out."

Bryson walks by me before I can sufficiently clear the path and I find myself in a very small space with my shoulder against the door. It leads me to assume he has the kind

of prehistoric brain power that would stare at an approaching comet entering earth's atmosphere. He makes his way to the couch but doesn't sit down. He throws a brown UPS box on one of the cushions and looks at me. I signal to Krista in the doorway with one finger and shut the door.

"Sorry for the mess," I say. "I bought Amelia some coloring books and crayons as a gift and she kind of ate the crayons and forgot about coloring the pictures."

Bryson squats low to the floor and stares at one of the nubby crayons. He picks up the pink one that Sasha pushed my way earlier and rubs his thumb against the teeth marks. I've never spoken to Bryson, but Krista knows him from college. She's told me enough about him for me to get the idea that it might not be wise to stick around and talk everything out.

I begin to think about promises, what I promised Krista so that Krista would promise not to get involved in all of this. In some ways I guess she's already involved.

When Sasha sees Bryson from the hallway she places Amelia on the floor. "That's my girl," Bryson says. Amelia runs wobbling through the hallway and latches onto Bryson's leg.

My phone vibrates again. I turn off my phone.

He picks Amelia up in a swift sweep and she goes from the floor to his shoulder in one grand motion. I picture my daughter like a dumbbell. He tilts his head upward at her.

"Guess what Bryson has for you," he says.

Bryson and Amelia make their way to the couch, Amelia sitting on his shoulders. I don't take my eyes off of Sasha. She returns my stare of disapproval and her lips curl

into a tight space. Amelia's mouth is still slightly stained in crayon at the corners, one side purplish, the other more red.

Bryson sets Amelia on the couch, gives her the brown package he walked in with, tells her to open it. She struggles with opening the package so Bryson helps. When they finally get the package open it's a doll. Amelia grabs it instantly and seems fascinated. And that's when it hits me. The doll is dressed just like Amelia, in blue jean overalls and with a pink butterfly on the front pocket. There's something to this.

Bryson unbuttons one of the overalls on the doll and I watch him take his hand and pinch a tiny black square, slide a switch to the left. Suddenly the doll's eyes glow bright and hot – it comes to life. Bryson tells Amelia that if she presses her hand to the doll's chest that she can feel its heartbeat.

“Thanks, babe,” Sasha says, moving closer to Bryson, “look how much she likes it.”

I begin to think about how different Amelia's room looks from the rest of the house. I begin to think about how much blood pressure it takes to make that big vein in Bryson's neck bulge fat and full the way it looks right now.

“You know I like to get her nice things, Sash,” he says.

Amelia moves in the middle of the floor and carpet is still covered in crayons – she sits down with the doll.

“We need to talk, Sasha,” I say. She nods and then I look at Bryson. “Alone.”

I can tell he doesn't like this request by the way he looks at me. He doesn't say anything but he stands up.

“Anything you can say to me, you can say in front of Bryson,” she says.

“That’s not the point. I just need a couple of minutes where you can hear me out. Some of these things are personal and I’m closer with you than I am with Bryson, that’s all.”

Sasha looks at Bryson and he turns his neck in small circles, making cracking sounds. Amelia begins dancing in the floor with her doll. She’s doing some strange salsa-like prance.

“I don’t like this shit, Sasha. You know that,” he says.

I exhale more loudly than normal. They both look at me like they’re offended. Then Sasha’s cell phone rings.

“That’s my shift,” she says. “I need to take this.”

“No,” I say – “just five minutes.”

Sasha begins to plug in her ear piece to her phone.

“I have to take this. You know that.”

“Look, brother,” Bryson says, turning to me. “Sasha has to work and she can talk to you another time.”

Amelia begins dancing faster, making strange noises. I watch her take the doll by the right leg and begin swinging it.

“With all due respect, this is pretty important,” I say. I’m pretty sure I can see the vein in Bryson’s neck begin to throb. Sasha’s phone continues to ring. Her eyes goes from Bryson, then back to me, to me and then back to Bryson. That’s when I look to the sliding glass doors. Peeking in the window, forehead to the glass is Krista.

She sees me and moves her face. There’s a small wet pattern in the shape of her nose. Sasha looks to Bryson and I wave Krista away, but she doesn’t leave.

“Five minutes,” I say again, and right when I say it, Sasha answers her phone. She rolls her eyes at me. “Whatever,” I say.

Then, Amelia, with her hand gripping the doll’s ankle, eyes filled with heat, tosses the doll in the air. There’s a moment when her eyes go blank, a pin ball machine gone tilt. The doll soars in the direction of the bookcase and hits the picture frame. Bryson and I both hunch down at the same time.

The frame tumbles from shelf to shelf. The glass shatters and falls on the carpet.

“Amelia!” Sasha screams. She hands the phone to Bryson and walks toward the picture frame. The headset for the phone falls to the floor. Outside on the patio I hear something like a hollow thud, like plastic, like dropping a wiffle ball bat on the asphalt. There’s ash all over the patio.

A tiny voice calls out from the cell phone: *hello?*

“What I am supposed to do with this?” Bryson asks.

“Talk!” Sasha says. “Fucking talk to them.”

“No, Sash – ” Bryson goes to object.

“I said talk Goddammit! I’m doing something,” she yells. I look outside and see black ashes all over the patio. The nose print is gone from the sliding glass doors. Bryson puts on the headset plugged into Sasha’s cell phone.

“Five minutes, Sasha, please,” I say.

Sasha grabs the doll and looks at it as if she expected a thread to come loose and the black-buttons to well up, squeezing out tears, for a seam to split open spilling real blood, real organs – all over the floor.

“What are you wearing?” Bryson asks in a female voice.

Unbuttoning the doll's overalls, and peeling them down, Sasha feels around a flat area near the lower back of the doll. With her index finger and thumb, she pinches a tiny black square, and slides the switch to the right. Amelia begins to yell and then cry. The light behind the doll's eyes goes dead.

"No, Amelia," Sasha yells. Amelia watches her mother sidestep the glass and the crayons making her way to the other side of the room. "I'm going to set this doll back on the couch and I don't want you to touch it, understand?"

Amelia cries harder.

"I want Amelia," I say. "Sasha, I want my baby girl."

"What?" she asks. "What did you just say?"

"I'm not going to suck it yet," Bryson says.

We both pause for a moment and look at Bryson.

"That's ridiculous," Sasha says. "She barely knows you and you've hardly been in her life. I let you watch her for ten minutes today and when I come back in the room, she's almost eaten a whole box of crayons."

"I have a house. It's better than living in this shit hole."

"Can you speak up a little bit, honey," Bryson says, "I can barely hear you."

"She wouldn't be living here if you would've treated me halfway decent. If you would've at least tried to make it work between us," Sasha says.

Out of the corner of my eye I watch Amelia pick up the doll again and begin dancing. There's too much going on though. Sasha doesn't notice.

"Yeah, baby," Bryson says, "ooh, my panties are getting a little wet." He's not even disguising his voice anymore.

“Look if you wanted a family you should have at least said something, not lie to some poor guy and tell him it’s his kid. Then you hide the fact that Amelia was mine! And for what?!”

“I’m on my hands and knees. What do you want me to do?” Bryson says, his voice more breathy this time.

“I have my own reasons for telling you what I told you about Amelia. I didn’t have to tell you at all!”

Amelia takes the doll by the ankle again.

“My mouth is soo close to your balls.”

Amelia begins making the same strange noises.

She begins swinging the doll faster.

“Not tell me at all? Not tell me at all! What? Did you want her to grow up without her real father?”

“Can you feel it? Do you want me to lick your balls first?”

“Bryson,” Sasha pauses for a moment. “What are you doing?” Bryson takes an ear plug out of his ear.

“Talking,” he says.

“There’s never a good reason to hide something like that,” I say. “I cared a lot about you. We could’ve made it work.”

Amelia lets go of the doll again and it goes flying across the room. It lands on the bookcase but with no picture to knock over. Sasha’s big round eyes get bigger.

“Get the fuck out!” she yells. Amelia freezes in place. Bryson and I look at each other. I wonder if Amelia even understands anything that’s going on.

“Bryson, get the fuck out,” she repeats.

Bryson shakes his head and lays the phone and head set on the end table. He walks by her with the same nudge he gave me walking in the door. Sasha stumbles off balance then catches herself. He walks out of the door and shuts it softly behind him.

I’m not sure what to say. I begin to leave the same as Bryson. I don’t know what else to do.

“No, sit down,” Sasha says. She takes the phone and hangs up on the man on the other end. She grabs my hand and says it again: “Sit down.”

A part of me wants to believe that Bryson was predicting someone’s future not talking to someone on the sex hotline.

“You going to give me my five minutes?” I ask.

“Yeah, I’ll give you five minutes,” she says. “Just let me clean some of this up.”

I get down on my hands and knees on the floor and begin picking up crayons. Sasha goes over beside the bookcases and begins picking up the glass. When I’m done with crayons I begin dusting. For almost fifteen minutes or so Amelia doesn’t move. She sits and watches us clean the living room, propped against the arm of the couch. On my way to the kitchen for garbage bags I look out the window.

Krista is gone. So is the car.

I pick up the picture frame and look at how beautiful Sasha was in that picture of all three of us. She looked younger. She looked happy. When I go to set it back on the shelf there’s something else I notice as well. It’s a Ouija board. And I think about the time she convinced me to play with her. When she convinced me it didn’t have to be creepy. It could be sexy.

It began simple enough – our hands on the planchette, going from one letter to the next, guessing what word the other was trying to spell, usually a piece of clothing to take off, or a sexual position. I remember getting nervous when Sasha asked the board who I really loved, and the heart-shaped planchette, with its dial in the middle, and our hands on opposite sides, passed up the K and went to the A and then to the M and then to the E, and by the time it was moving toward another letter, I had already stopped asking if Sasha was moving it or not – I didn't want to play anymore.

I turn away from the Ouija board. And then from the bookshelf. And for a moment I feel like I did before Amelia was born, when Sasha and I were something exciting and thrilling, when there was a certain playfulness, a levity to what we had. When we were sleeping on three different couches a weekend. When I could feel her breath against my cheek, smell the sweetness of the alcohol. I look at Sasha and our eyes meet in a way they haven't for a long time and I see that she has Amelia beside her on the couch. She unbuttons Amelia's overalls, and peeling them down, Sasha feels around a flat area near the lower back. With her index finger and thumb, she pinches a tiny black square and slides the switch to the right.

The Summer of Krista Mendez

Her skin is creamy, sun-browned and sprinkled with distinctly shaped moles, one of which is right above her upper lip. She is dark-haired and dark-eyed, except for the wisps of baby hair at her temples. This summer is the summer of Krista Mendez doing cartwheels and back handsprings in the grass. I'm fourteen at my uncle's summer home in Maine posing with my cousin, Jason, crossing my eyes at the camera. "Don't do that," my Uncle Doug says, "or your face will stay that way." I cross my eyes harder. Jason, two years younger than me, leans in and does the same. Uncle Doug takes the picture. There's a soft snap and my eyes go back to normal. But, Jason's – don't. His right eye straightens; his left eye wedges against the bridge of his nose. A couple of days pass and after watching my cousin try to straighten his eye in the mirror, my Aunt and Uncle decide to take him to an optometrist. Strabismus – an imbalance of the muscles in the eye. We all wait in a building of flesh-colored walls and freckled marble floors for hours to hear from the guy in the lab coat that the eye will fix itself, that the muscles will grow straight, that the eye will strengthen, but by mid-summer, I watch Jason struggle to straighten his left eye enough to know it's probably stuck that way.

The summers I spend at Uncle Doug and Aunt Carol's feel backward; I'm used to streets lined with banyans and scarecrow palms. I'm from South Florida and it feels odd, going North for the summer. There's not much to do. You have to have an imagination. You have to make shit up. We string a garden hose between two trees; it's a volleyball net. We find four or five flat miniature basketballs in the garage; we play dodge ball.

Behind Uncle Doug and Aunt Carol's house is a patchy field of woods and vein-like creeks that if you traverse the stony bottom and white trickle of the creek bed, the

other side opens to a round, wide hollow. The sun shines on the hollow, illuminates the open space between trees, makes it feel like a platform you're standing on, like an island of sunshine in the midst of a forest of darkness. Jason spends a lot of time back there after the eye thing – no one knows why.

Really, no one is concerned. Kitty-corner to our house is Krista Mendez's house and I spend most of my time pretending to do things in the front yard so that I can watch her dark, satiny hair flip and flop around in a pony tail as she plants her hands in the fresh cut grass and gracefully lands handspring after handspring on uneven ground. Sometimes she catches me looking at her. And when she turns around, in that moment right before I lose sight of her face, her eyebrows raise and she smiles.

In August everyone comes to Uncle Doug and Aunt Carol's end-of-the-summer neighborhood cookout. It's a big deal. The whole neighborhood is invited. Uncle Doug builds an arched bridge across the creek so people can enter the hollow without getting their shoes wet. He also sets up an archery target at the tree line of the hollow, one with a big black bull's-eye. Aunt Carol spends hours and hours in the kitchen, talking on the phone and organizing recipes for casseroles and finger sandwiches. People assemble in the yard. They sit on the porch and play guitar. They share stories in the buffet line, laugh and exchange smiles, but they are strange about taking pictures.

Jason and Aunt Carol get in a fight that morning. Jason refuses to wear the glasses the optometrist prescribes for him; he insists on wearing an eye patch. The optometrist gives him eye patches, yes – to cover his good eye in order to force him to use the other. He has exercises he must perform every night: before bed he puts the patch on, takes a bar of soap and marks three X's on the mirror, rolls his eye in the socket, goes from X to

X. I walk by the bathroom one night, and without thinking, I glance in. I see the eye in rolling around. It stops, like he's holding it there, but not of his own will.

All day at the cookout Jason struggles with the smallest of tasks. At the buffet, he holds his paper plate out, misses it, scoops chicken salad in the grass. After three scoops pile white and wet at his feet, Aunt Carol tries to help him, but he refuses her help. He drops the oversized spoon in the chicken salad and smacks her on the wrist. Aunt Carol pulls me by the arm and drags me inside. Five minutes later I'm standing in the backyard again, wearing an eye patch. She walks me over to Jason, drags me by the elbow, makes a scene.

“Now, young man, you have nothing to be embarrassed of,” Aunt Carol says. Almost everyone witnesses this, even Krista, and they all turn to look at Jason. He must feel them looking at him because he turns around, tilts his head to the side and eyes them back, the one eye round and big as if to disapprove, if not with a penetrating stare, with something else, a look of contempt, perhaps, directed toward each person who had turned to look at him. It seems almost out of embarrassment, one by one, the adults walk away, migrate to the open hollow across the creek where Uncle Doug and his neighbor, Edward Seeber, are drinking Jack Daniels and shooting a bow and arrow. The crowd winces and moans when Edward Seeber shoots an apple off the head of Uncle Doug. I'm standing by Jason when this happens; Jason's eye gets big and open. There's a strange look on his face.

Later, as the party moves inside, I hear Aunt Carol and Uncle Doug arguing about how the arrow could have killed him, or at least claimed an eye. The voices move through the wall. Jason sits at the kitchen table, stares into a bowl of apples. I have my

face pressed to the window. It's Krista Mendez jumping on her trampoline. When I take my face from the window, a wet pattern appears then dries on the pane. I pause for a moment and turn around to look at Jason. He snatches an apple from the bowl and races into the backyard, leaves the screen door clapping against the door facing. I follow wondering what he might be up to, wondering if Jason is actually going to talk to her, going to say something to Krista.

The evening begins to change colors; it's not dark yet, but the sun is falling on the horizon. Everything is light blue, everything. Plastic wrappers and beer bottles and paper plates lay scattered in the yard. I feel something squoosh under my right foot and I look down at a hummock of chicken salad, soft around my shoe. I remove my foot and drag it across the grass, looking ridiculous I'm sure as I cross the yard. At this point, Jason is circling Krista's trampoline. I hear Krista laugh. I walk a little faster to hear what's happening.

"You can't," Krista says.

"Can so!" Jason says, running circles around the trampoline.

"Cannot!" she says again, "You have never even shot a bow and arrow!" He's still wearing the patch on his eye. He moves the patch to his forehead.

"Yes, huh. Dad showed me."

Krista stops jumping on the trampoline and hops off barefoot into the grass. "Oh, yeah," she says, snatching the apple out of Jason's hand, "Well, shoot this apple off my head, then."

Jason's shorter arms reach and reach for the apple, but Krista won't let him have it.

“Okay, I will,” Jason says. “I’ll get Dad’s bow out of the garage.”

“What makes you think I’m going to let you shoot an apple off my head?!” Krista says. You can’t even shoot a bow and arrow!” She looks at Jason and then at me; it’s an expression of pain and bewilderment, like she just bit into a lemon. “Why don’t you shoot it,” she says holding the apple close to her cheek... “off his head.” Krista looks at me and I look at Jason.

“Yeah!” Jason says. “Why don’t I shoot it off your head?”

I stand there in the dark for a moment. The crickets get loud and no one talks. This is a stupid idea. I’ve watched Krista do back handsprings in the front yard all summer. I went to sleep most nights imagining her green hands under the clear running water of her bathroom faucet.

“If you don’t...she’ll think you’re scared!” Jason says, crossing his arms. Krista’s white teeth put off a brilliant smile.

“Okay, whatever. Get the bow.”

Jason leaves and I just stand there, silent. Krista looks bored. After a full minute or so of silence, Krista gets up and starts jumping on the trampoline again.

“Are you scared?” she asks. I look off in the distance like I didn’t hear her say anything.

“He can’t reach the bow,” I say. “Uncle Doug puts it high on the top shelf. When he comes back, I’m going to take a big bite out of that apple right in front of him.”

Krista doesn’t look impressed. And it’s about that time that Jason comes running around the corner of the house. He has a bow and a satchel of arrows looped over his shoulder. Krista stops jumping again and comes to sit on the edge of the trampoline. She

says, “Man, that isn’t even his good eye.”

She’s right – he’s moved the patch from his forehead, down over his eye again, over his good eye, like when he does the exercises in the mirror. It’s hard for me to say anything, to stop this before it goes too far. Jason signals us to follow him and goes marching into the light blue afternoon.

Krista seems excited, sidesteps to walk in front of me. All I can think of is a sharp arrow moving clean through the socket of my eye, dead-ending at the back of my skull, the apple wobbling off afterward. We walk the miniature arched bridge over the creek. We walk into the patched grass and into the hollow. It’s getting darker, and everyone but Jason seems to be a bit apprehensive about where to step. Somehow we all end up in front of the big black target.

“Take twenty paces,” Krista says. Jason goes counting his steps, the dry grass crunching under his feet, and she puts her hands on my shoulders, moves me in front of the target. It’s the first time I’ve been this close to her. Her hands are soft, warm. She smells like sunscreen.

“Just make sure you stay still,” she says. Her eyes are green-hazel and deep. I look into them for too long and she puts a finger on my nose.

“Yeah,” Jason chimes in walking off in the distance, “while I shoot this apple right off the top of your big head.” He’s still counting aloud, heel to toe, to a spot in the grass. She puts the apple on my head, balances it.

“Ridiculous,” I say, the word still in my head from stepping in the chicken salad. “Just ridiculous!”

Jason picks the bow up from the grass. He takes an arrow out of the satchel and

fumbles it. When he starts to line everything up, the arrow keeps slipping off. When he finally manages to hold it pretty steady, his arm begins to shake as he draws back on the string.

“Okay,” I say, my hands open in front of me like a mime in an invisible box.

“Okay, you win!” I take the apple off my head. “There’s no way I’m letting you shoot that arrow” and I make sure to point... “at my head.”

Krista looks disappointed. I put the apple in her hand.

“I knew he wouldn’t do it,” Jason says.

“Me, too,” Krista says. She puckers her lips, moves them to side of her face. She smiles at me and walks to the target, squares her shoulders. She places the apple on her head and says, “You ready?”

Before I can get a word out, Jason locks his elbow against the limb of the bow, pulls violently back on the string, an arrow pinched in his knuckles, a patch covering his good eye.

“No!” I say.

I want to move. I want to push Krista out of the way. I want to stop Jason. I can’t move.

Jason pauses for a moment, holds everything for a couple of seconds to take aim – and the eye – even in the blueness of the afternoon it’s big and white and it can’t stay still, the center of it black and round and shivering like it wants to wander off.. And there’s a moment where the trembling stops, like the eye takes control and something holds it steady and Jason lets go.

To this day I imagine closing my eyes, opening one to a world of straight lines,

and the other to its shadow twin – pulling two worlds together, or splitting them apart. I imagine the constant pressure, the weight between, when everything intersects, when your eyes cross and your vision blurs, waking up that way, day after day. I look at that picture of me and Jason, think what might have happened if it were never taken, if that picture were never snapped. I think to whether anyone would ever know a crooked line, if they had never seen a straight one. I think about this nearly twenty years later in the summer time, at Uncle Doug and Aunt Carol's summer home, eating chicken salad across from my cousin, Jason, and his wife, Krista, at the annual neighborhood cookout. The eye never completely straightens out but when Jason wears his glasses you can hardly tell the difference. I pass by the bathroom mirror as I walk the hallway and I'm hesitant to look in. I enter the kitchen and Krista is washing dishes, and just as I wonder if she knows I'm in the room, she makes a half turn with her hands still in dishwater, and she smiles.

By the time I make it outside again, the party is moving inside. I stay in the backyard, watch the sun go down. When everything turns light blue, I start to walk. I walk up the trail and over the white arched bridge. I cross the creek, walk out into the blue hollow, all the way up to where the target was. I run my fingers over a hole, a notch in the wood. And I take twenty paces into the patchy grass. At twenty I turn around and cross my eyes and watch the world blur and split apart and then come together. I go through the motions with an invisible bow. And this is what I see in my mind's eye: I shoot an arrow and watch it pierce through the white center of an apple without touching a hair on the head of Krista Mendez. It all feels surreal. The apple splits into juicy white shards. The arrow sticks upright in the wood. The air smells like fresh cut grass.

Hover

I thought about you as I strolled amongst Atlas-like timbers to the ocean. I take a moment to step back and look at it all. I listen to the slap and the surf of water and rock. The moon and the sun hang together in the sky. The wind is the moon's imagination, you'd say. And I'd picture it wandering, through the tight spaces. Now, I just want to get through the day. There are times I stop to cry for no reason at all. There's other times when I can't make myself feel anything. Who knows what any of this means? I don't know what it means. Maybe it's not supposed to mean anything. I remember your hands on my back. I remember being on my stomach, confined by the wrists, half undressed. You are my mother's former boyfriend. When she's out of town you call me over. This is paying rent for the duplex you let me and my friends live in for free.

I've gained a certain ability to confront the fear of you, to recognize it, but I haven't learned how to voice it. So, I'm quiet as you lean in. I feel your hands on my back. There's no eye-contact, nothing ever spoken. But there is the noise the bed makes as you reposition yourself; the din of traffic; the low hum of the ceiling fan; the small shifts in the door that sound like someone might walk in. I think of nature, of bright green trees and blue birds, an open field under a dark purple sky. The whole world is sideways on a pillow. The neighbors have a pool and the reflection of the water, it stretches and bends light into waves, patterns on the wall.

My focus becomes a dot of water on the window pane, a tree just outside. White birds have gathered on the branches. These birds have deep, black eyes. The birds themselves, they seem to look at me, then fly away, silent. A ray of sunlight slants in through the tree's branches; it begins to rain – lightly sprinkling in the sunshine. It all

unfolds much the same way: abrupt and unannounced. To suspend above the violence, the thrusts, I hover and watch what happens, when every moment became the same one; I remember it as I look off into the ocean and feel small and scared like the tide might come in and swallow me. The rhythm of the waves washing up and receding on the bank. I'm barefoot and my toes sink into the sand. I recognize it: the rhythm and the fear and the cold as the water moves against and over my ankles, feels like it may suck me away. There's no voice, nothing left in me. I'm seventeen again, my face sideways on a pillow. Outside the window children are being carried away by white birds with dark black eyes.

The Woman with the Tattooed Hands

On a warm summer night I'm sit out on the slope of my father's rooftop staring up at the moon. I can see images of animals and people's faces in the gray craters, and the stars, if I look close enough, are filled with all the colors of the spectrum. About a hundred yards away from my house and just into the woods behind it, the slow, shallow trickle of a creek flows south toward the hollow where we used to play as kids. The creek once sparkling and clean now carries aluminum soda cans and candy wrappers, old faded pages of dirty magazines. Everything seems coated with the smell from the pickle factory that sits just behind this wooded area, and if I press my palms against the rooftop, the grains in the shingles stick to my hands. This leaves no place to steady my bottle of beer except between my legs, and in the distance, I can hear the train gathering momentum on the tracks just past Appleton, close to Monty's Grille and Pub and the old baseball fields where I lost my virginity to Carley Stanton on the concrete floor of a dugout. I'm out here looking for signs of life, and I don't see many, but the smell of the pickle factory is telling me something. I take the last swig of my beer and climb back in through the window. This is the first time I've been home since dad died. He passed only three weeks after mom.

The story goes that my father was in his old red pickup when he stalled his engine out on the train tracks waiting for the stoplight to change. He got out of his truck and banged on the starter with a hammer and then tried to start the motor again. Behind him, people watched and waited in their cars as the light turned green to yellow to red and back to green. No one honked their horn until the headlight of the *Bar Harbor Express* appeared from around the bend, about a quarter mile up the tracks. Some other guys

jumped out of their cars and tried to push the truck off the tracks. They couldn't budge it. And when the train was almost upon them, some brave lady in a black Jeep, behind the truck, pushed her accelerator to the floor and rammed the truck out of the way. But the back of her Jeep didn't clear the tracks and the train grabbed hold of the fender and pulled the Jeep and the lady under its wheels and then skipped off the line.

The boxcars that derailed went tumbling into the cars parked in front of the tracks and the locomotive slammed into a local pub that sat across the street. There were explosions and people screaming and the train had disconnected in several pieces, boxcars sprung open strewing bushels of yellow bananas across the grass and mud. Police surrounded the scene and the whole night strobed blue and red while shadows grew large on the sides of buildings and in alleyways. The brave woman whose Jeep pushed my father's red pickup out of the way died on impact. And once he learned of her death he walked for miles down High Street toward the center of the city, winding past the junior college, the baseball stadium, and the courthouse, where the black gargoyles lean over the roof with long black wings stretching out against the skyline of office buildings. He took the tourist stairwell to the top where the bell tower stays unlocked for those who want to get a good view of the town. And he jumped in open-armed free fall several hundred feet to his death, where no one would disturb his body until a twelve year old girl with pigtails riding a pink bike would finally draw attention to him the following morning.

Much like my father I've come to find myself in a walking mood tonight. Stepping away from the front door the only thing I want to be sure about is the beer in my hand and that I'm going to make a left and follow the road. I have to get out of the house. More than anything this has to do with everything inside. Things are still piled up and

lying around. Furniture collects dust. Old hospital bills yellow and curl by the window with dates past due for mom's chemotherapy. And there's a strange scent of old that surrounds everything. Leaving the yard I notice that only half of the grass has been mowed and the push mower is turned over in front of the driveway. The place is depressing and I've had enough of that for the past month, so I want to escape, to go. I say I don't where I'm going, but I do. I walk out of Appleton Estates and trudge on through Lexington Flats and on farther through East Kingfield and by the time I've walked out of one rural subdivision and into town I'm making my way over some train tracks that I can't bring myself to cross without bending down to feel how warm the rails are; there's a browned banana peel near the track where Carley and I used to lay quarters on the rail and wait for the train to come. Those quarters would expand and flatten just bigger than a silver dollar. Carley's favorite was the quarter that almost split in half, but held together by a sliver of alloy. She thought it looked like a broken heart, but I told her she was reading too much into things.

Instead of taking High Street and walking farther toward town something about this exhausts me, so I look across the street to Monty's Grille and Pub. It's been at least forty-five minutes since my last beer and I could really use one. When I walk through the doors there's already a picture of the "great train wreck" framed near the bar, complete with smashed in cars and the bananas scattered in the streets. Up on the corkboard fliers advertise for bands made up of college dropouts. I take my seat at the bar beside a lady with a large scar above her right eye.

"What's new?" she asks. I notice she's got two tattoos on the tops sides of both of her hands. She's drinking a black and tan. This is an unusual selection, I feel like. When I

don't answer she gives a short glance over to a couple of guys playing pool in the corner of the room. They don't return her look, but there's something decisive about it.

"C'mon," she says, "there must be something."

"Nothing," I say. "It's all the same here. That's all."

"Well," she says with an awkward laugh, "I guess we have something in common."

"We do?"

"Let me tell you a story..." she pauses, waiting for my name. I don't give it to her. "In my freshman year of college, two semesters before I flunked out, I sat behind a poor looking asshole who looked something like you. In biology class I used to tickle his neck just to see if he'd turn around."

"Did he?"

"Never did. So, one day I went to drawing pictures on the back of his neck."

"What did you draw?" I asked.

"Cartoon characters," she says, taking a drink. "I drew cartoon characters... Yosemite Sam... Mighty Mouse... Bugs Bunny."

"Bugs Bunny," I say to myself shaking my head. "You couldn't do any better than that?"

I used to get in conversations like this on a daily basis. There was a time once where I worked at almost every restaurant in this city. I've bartended and waited tables and I've cleaned dishes and sautéed vegetables. At one time I knew everyone in this town from ages twenty-five to thirty-five and we used to drink beer at each other's apartments and date the same people and get caught up in the same stupid drama more times than I'd

like to recall.

“I don’t know,” she says, concerned about her answer. “Just letting everything sink in.” She takes a cigarette from the pack on the bar and lights it, takes a big draw. She holds in the smoke for a long time and blows it all out at once. “You look like you need a drink,” she says. I’m waving the smoke out of my face, trying not to cough. Her eyes get big and she puts her hand flat on my chest. “I’ll buy your first one.”

She waves down the bartender and he returns with a green bottle for her and a glass for me. The glass is filled with too much ice, watered down brown liquor – Scotch, like my father used to drink. When I take hold of the glass there’s already condensation wet and cool on the sides.

“To my father,” I say.

“To your father,” she says, raising her bottle.

I clink my glass against the bottle and take a big drink that burns on the way down.

“Thank you,” I say – “I needed that.”

“I could tell,” she says. “You look familiar. You sure you don’t want to tell me where you’re from?”

“No,” I say. I reposition myself on the stool. It’s wobbly and of the four legs it has one leg seems longer than the other three.

“I’m up here every two or three weeks.” She takes a draw from her cigarette and ashes in one of the empty bottles at the bar, tells me her name is Sasha. I wonder how much younger she is than me: late twenties, maybe early thirties?

Sasha goes to telling me another story. I enjoyed the first so I decide to listen.

There is a water skiing accident. It happens on some lake out in California. It's her and a bunch of friends out on the lake. Everyone's in the sun all day, drinking beer, partying. And this guy, I think she's says his name is Jay, decides that everyone has to water ski or get off his boat. And before she's really aware she's doing it, she's strapping on a life jacket. She's so nervous that she puts it on upside down.

"Had you ever skied before?" I ask. She gives me a blank look and then winks at me.

"It was my first time." She laughs and I laugh with her. There's something charming about her. She's good at this. "I've never told anyone that."

"Two more," I yell out over the bar.

The bartender gives me a solid look and turns to Sasha.

"Yeah," she says and holds up two fingers. He goes to making the drinks.

One of the skis isn't strapping on right, but Jay tells Sasha it's going to be okay. She describes falling in the water several times and not being able to stand up as the boat takes off. Then around the seventh or eighth time, she's moving down the lake gliding on the water smoothly, skiing, moving from one side to the next. The momentum pulls her. There's passing boats that wave. But she's afraid to wave back, to take her hand off of the bar. Eventually, though, she tries it. It's not that hard. Her ears are full of wind and water and her friends look impressed; they're waving from the back of the boat and taking pictures.

The boat swings around. She hangs on until it straightens out. Everything seems to be fine. But then as the boat pulls back into the middle of the lake the waves get choppy and hard. Sasha says she feels a jerk, like a punch to the stomach when she rides

over a high one, and when she lands, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep her balance. Her hope is that the waves will die down and smooth out, but they don't. They get higher and higher and just before she rides the last one, she blacks out.

“What happened,” I ask.

“I'll tell you when I get back from the little ladies room,” she says.

While she's gone I get to thinking that she's going to tell me that this is how she got that scar on her eye. I decide to pull a menu from the bar and look it over. Now the menus are filled with dishes served with chipotle and adobo sauces instead of the local catch out of the St. Francis or St. John's rivers. I'm not sure how I feel about this. The best of my jobs in the food industry was undoubtedly that of bartender. If you work in the right place, on Friday and Saturday nights, the same people sit at the bar, waiting for tables to clear for the dining room. Stories like Sasha's aren't new or uncommon. You hear them all the time.

For instance, when I worked at this restaurant and bar, Madison Gardens, out closer to Lexington Flats, it was located beside a Laundromat. Carley used to do her laundry there all the time, before she moved away. Sometimes I would schedule my breaks where I could walk next door and sit with her while she washed her clothes. This was the opposite of what most people did. Most walked across the street to the bar while their clothes were being washed. Every now and again, someone would spend all of their money on drinks and not have enough money to dry their clothes.

All I remember is empty bottles of detergent scattered on tables, dryer sheets littered in the floor. The place was a dive. But all of the college kids did their laundry there and after a couple of beers, I'm sure they didn't feel like cleaning up. The craziest

thing that ever happened was when some guy walked in the front door one day with a kitten in the pocket of his hooded sweatshirt. He took the kitten out of his pocket and placed it in the drier and pushed the “on” button. The kitten went round and round and broke its neck. When the people in the bar found out what happened they chased the guy down the street and caught him in the alleyway, when he lost his shoe and hesitated to run back for it. They beat him pretty badly and cracked open his skull. It was in most of the newspapers at the time.

“So enough about me,” she says. “Why the hell are you in Maine?” Sasha comes back from the bathroom with more questions. I’m wondering what happened to her telling the story about the skiing accident.

“It’s complicated,” I say. I sit up straight on my wobbly stool and really look at her for the first time. Once you get used to the scar you really don’t notice it. She has hazel eyes and dark skin and a pretty smile.

“When was the first time you came to visit him?” she asks. “You toasted to your father. I assume you’re here to visit him.”

“Kind of...” I say trailing off a little and raising my empty glass to the bartender. “I’m kind of here to say goodbye.”

“Oh, it’s one of those things,” she says. “I understand.”

I look away from her eyes and go right to her hands. Both of the tattoos look the same and I begin to wonder why. On the left hand, inked into her skin is a naked woman in a seductive pose, one arm covering her breasts, the other at her side. The naked woman’s legs give the impression of motion, as if they were captured in a moment where the thighs were about to scissor. On the right hand, as far as I can tell, is the same

woman.

“They look the same but they’re not,” she says.

“They look the same to me,” I say. “What’s the difference?”

“The one on the left hand is God,” she replies, taking a drink of her beer, “and the one on the right is the devil.” She extends her hands flat in the air as if they were spread on an invisible surface. My mother used to do something similar to this when she came back from getting her nails done and my father always found the posture a little unsettling. He always turned away, as if he couldn’t or didn’t want to see her hands.

“But they are the same tattoo,” I say.

“No, they’re different,” she says.

Sasha gives another quick look to the guys playing pool in the corner of the room.

“You want to play?” I ask. “I’m pretty good at pool.”

“No,” she says, “come with me.” We get up from the bar and I follow her through a narrow hallway. The walls are wooden and framed with pictures of old automobiles and boxers from the 30s. Eventually we come to a screen door and it leads to a patio. I follow her out and we sit at a fiberglass table. She throws down her pack of cigarettes and puts her drink on the table. Although it’s summer, there are Christmas lights strung around the wooden rails, and rather than being tacky, they actually feel like a nice touch tonight.

They give warmth to Sasha’s face. Her dimples are more pronounced, her face smoother.

“So you told me about your father, what about your mother?” Sasha takes a drink of beer and goes to light another cigarette. “Where’s your mother?” she asks, the cigarette bouncing up and down between her lips.

“She died on cancer,” I say. She doesn’t say anything for a while so I try to change the subject. “Most of my girlfriends have painted or written poetry,” I say. Sasha nods and smiles. I pause of a moment and lean in closer, start again: “All of my girlfriends for the past three years have names that begin with A. No joke. There’s Angela, Annie, Alicia, Audrey, and Alysse. But the only woman I think I ever loved, her name began with a C. Go figure.”

“That’s shit,” she says, and she says it like she’s holding her breath. She exhales smoke and waves at me with the cigarette. “Don’t stop! Go on.”

“All of these women are attractive and young. But they seem unsure about themselves, about the wisdom of their plans, so they to think that no one will date them because they’re leaving in less than six months.”

“Why are they leaving?”

“Usually, it’s college or the Peace Corps or some shit like that. They work in restaurants, sometimes two restaurants, to save money for their trip, and when I meet them at parties –”

“Or Monty’s Grille and Bar,” Sasha says with a wink.

“They tell me their plans and I say something like, wow, that’s really ambitious, what you’re doing, I mean. Not many people are as brave as that.”

“Men are full of bullshit. I’m allergic to bullshit.”

“But I really loved this C girl. She was my first love, I think.”

“And where did that get you?”

I watch as she rubs the cigarette out on the bottom of the table.

“Well, sometimes exactly where I needed to be.”

“Other times, places you didn’t want to end up?”

I take down the rest of my Scotch.

“It’s getting late and the bar’s about to close.”

“I think I’m going to head down High Street,” she says. “Can you give me a lift?”

“I walked,” I say, a little embarrassed. “But we could walk together if you want.”

“I say we grab a shot at the bar on our way out and start walking,” she says.

Before Carley left for the last time I remember having moments like this. I remember the fourth of July as we down High Street, holding hands. The intersection was packed with people and you could still feel the heat rising from the asphalt. Everyone stared blank into the sky at the fireworks exploding pink and green and yellow, falling bright and burning out into the night like stars. The artillery rounds fired off and sounded like deep thunderclaps. It wasn’t a completely clear night and I remember it beginning to rain soft on our heads about mid-show. And when the fireworks were done the sky turned from blue-pink to black.

Making our way to the bar, Sasha and I grab a couple of shots of Jack Daniels. I’m impressed with how she handles it. I think I grimace more than she does trying to get it down, and on our way out, the summer surrounds us. I think about my father as we walk quietly down the road. It feels like we’re the only people in the world. There’s hardly anyone out. For the most part Sasha is quiet, but she does grab my hand as we cross the railroad tracks, and although it’s clammy and sweaty, I like the way it feels.

We walk for miles down High Street, toward the center of the city, winding past the junior college, the baseball stadium, and the courthouse. I think of wiping sand off of Carley’s back after we made love in the dugout. We come upon some benches and

instead of sitting down we walk on by. In the night sky black gargoyles lean over the roof with long black wings stretching against the skyline of office buildings. And I lead her through an iron gate, a stairwell for tourists, which takes us to the top of the bell tower where my father made his final leap. The gate, as I thought it would be, was still unlocked. The view of the town is a sublime experience from this high up. Sasha's clammy hand in my own. The air rotten and stagnant, but somehow sweet. The pickle factory, perhaps. I look up in the sky and the moon seems to hold the faces of the people I've known. In constellations there are kittens tumbling.

Monticello Rising

After watching my father rehab for five months at Sutter Medical Center in Sacramento I want to believe. I watch as his physical therapist pushes him through exercises, as he becomes committed to a circuit training regimen: bicep curls, butterfly presses, arm raises. He does what is called “chair yoga,” breathing and meditation drills. The doctors tell me it's important that I be supportive. I'm there more than I should be. I often fall asleep on the foam mats to the rhythm of him in the gym, to the jerk and pull and clack of weights smacking together. And I'm awake at night beside his hospital bed listening to his grunts and cries, wondering what it's like to have your spine crushed by a steel beam, to be conscious the whole time, to hear from a stranger in a bright white room that you may never walk again.

Now all dad talks about is James Cartwright, his physical therapist. Cartwright tells dad about all the things people can still do as paraplegics – bungee jumping, mountain climbing, dog sledding – and I begin to wonder exactly what limits dad sees for himself. There's a piece of me that likes seeing my father involved in these activities. There's another side of me that thinks a lot of what this physical therapist tells dad is full of empty promises. I've made a promise myself.

I take the rest of my vacation days from work and load up the van, pick up dad from the hospital.

He wants to rent kayaks and go out on Lake Berryessa. On the drive he's quiet for a long time, but when he finally speaks he tells me he wants to kayak the still waters of the lake, climb out and swim, feel the water surround him.

“These waters are going to heal me,” he says. “They are going to seep into my

legs and make them work again.” A warm smile comes over him. He unfolds one of the brochures for the lake. It opens big and wide like a road map and takes up almost all the room in the cab.

Growing up it was dad who would drive, me with my head stuck in a brochure. I can still remember scanning the glossy pamphlets with historical summaries, the ones explaining that the lake is not a lake at all. It’s a reservoir. The land was previously owned by the Patwin Indians who fished the salmon from the streams and picked the blackberries that grew alongside. Of course that was before Mexican and European settlers slowly forced the Patwin out and secured the area with a Mexican land grant, Rancho Las Putas, later ceding it to the United States in The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Under the treaty, the people of the valley would build ranches and cultivate farms, and eventually, found the town of Monticello. But even Monticello could only stand for a short time. The town was evacuated, the roads peppered with gravel and sand, then flooded, filling the valley with water to create a man-made lake.

This is Lake Berryessa swollen and full atop the abandoned houses and empty streets that exist below. In the dry season people say you can still see Monticello: the rooftops, the rusty skeleton of an old bridge that used to lead into town, remnants of the past breaking the lake surface. When I was young I would try to picture it, the water filling the valley, the people of Monticello unwilling to leave their homes, the churches and schools on the lake bottom.

“I want to hike the conservation trails this time,” he says, laying a hand on my shoulder. I lift my arm to adjust the rear-view mirror. “Those trails, that’s a spiritual journey, a real renewal.”

“Those are rough trails,” I say. I know these trails. I know the terrain. I know he can’t do this in a wheelchair. And a part of me begins to wonder if he really thinks that after he floats around in those coves that the water is going to heal him – that it’s going to help him to walk again.

“Why didn’t James ride with us?” dad asks. He turns down the volume on the radio.

“James said he would meet us. He wanted to drive separate,” I say.

A couple of weeks back dad asked me if it was okay if James Cartwright came with us to Lake Berryessa. Although the trip was supposed to be just us, I told him to go ahead and ask, thinking the man is obviously too busy to be taking personal vacations for every patient he works with. It turns out I’m wrong. James Cartwright has a very flexible schedule. One would assume that this wasn’t so, seeing as James works with more people in the rehabilitation clinic than any other physical therapist. He’s an ex-NFL football player. He’s a six-foot four inch, two hundred and fifty pound source of positive energy. And he’s popular not necessarily *just* for his celebrity. James recovered from what was supposed to be a career-ending spinal injury after finishing his own rehab program at Sutter Medical Center. When James agreed to the trip he gripped my forearm and shook my hand. I smiled at the same time my knuckles cracked, watched my father as he leaned back in his wheelchair and did something like a half-wheelie, leaving a shriveled black tread on the marble tile. James gave dad a high five. And when I followed up to do the same, I almost missed; I got his pinky and part of his palm.

After an hour and half of driving we arrive at the southern-most tip of the lake, Pleasure Cove, a nice camping area with an RV park, gas dock, and tee-pee village. In

case we decide to stay the night there are hot showers and electrical hook ups, cabin and boat and kayak rentals for the afternoon. Pleasure Cove is an area of prime real-estate: bright painted houses, white wooden docks that jut out into the water. The picnic areas are equipped with barbeque grills and fire pits, and just down the road is another cove, the Spanish Flats, where there's a beach for swimming and a full-service marina and bar, a grouping of award-winning wineries.

Directly across from the Spanish Flats sits a small cove. This side of the lake is actually a restricted area, the conservation trails, where locals and hikers trudge old dirt paths. The trails are known for their scenic views. Hikers are said to disappear between the tall oaks that cover the rocky dry land and return with stories of being one with nature.

It isn't long after we arrive that James Cartwright pulls up in a tan Range Rover, the wheels rolling over the gravel in a chitinous crunch. He has a particular confidence as he steps away from the vehicle. His clothes are perfect; rugged khaki pants and a brown tee shirt, *Aviator Rayban* sunglasses, a water bottle attached to the side of his *Columbia* outdoor backpack.

"How are you, brother?" dad asks from across the parking lot. He seems impatient with me as I have to help him out of the van and into his wheelchair.

"The energy's high today, Mr. Carrington," he says, rubbing his chest and sniffing the air. He takes off his backpack and places it on the ground, makes his way over to dad. They exchange some strange handshake that combine all known handshakes, a blend of actual handshakes, fist bumps, and pointing at one another; they look at each other with their eyebrows raised, an equivocal look, then laugh.

Every summer since I was sixteen, I've tried to get to know my father better, but we're different people. It proves to be harder than simply showing up. My mother and father were never married and I never heard from dad much until I was older. We definitely don't have secret handshakes. I would come to visit dad in the summer, split my time working and spending the weekends on the water. Dad had gotten me a job at a shipment company loading boxes in the back of trucks. As long as you work, he said, you don't have to pay rent. The job was in a huge warehouse mapped with caution signs and painted steel bars, conveyor belts pushing boxes from one side of the building to the other. It was dusty and it didn't pay enough and I worked too many hours. Everyone I worked with was older and they hated their jobs. I remember coming in late at night and leaving early in the morning. There was no one to casually run into, to make friends with. I spent my time alone, driving around in dad's old white Chevy for hours because I didn't want to sleep in the guest room. It felt strange to lie in a stiff unused bed, my father's sports trophies gleaming in the moonlight.

“You guys rented the kayaks, yet?” James asks. “I actually brought a fee waiver. A buddy of mine gave it to me.”

James tells us that last time a friend of his came out to Lake Berryessa he had to return a canoe. It was damaged on the bottom. The owner had apologized and given him a fee waiver.

“What was wrong with it?” I ask. James looks up at me and shakes his head, kicks some gravel to the side with his shoe.

“Couldn't have been serious,” James says. “No one got hurt.”

“Well, you two can sit here all day and talk about canoes, but I say we go down

here and get out on this water,” dad says. The wheels on dad’s wheelchair find traction in the gravel and it leans to one side as he climbs the lip of the sidewalk and pushes off. James shrugs and follows. I’m not far behind. The walk leads us to a small place called the Kayak Shack, a wooden building that sells and rents used-kayaks by the dock.

As we walk I’ve already convinced myself that I might’ve been a bit harsh on James, being so suspicious of him and all. I mean, the guy works with my paraplegic father, day in and day out, and I haven’t heard him complain once. They seem to have a genuine relationship, him and dad. James could be at the hospital now, helping others, but he took time off so he could be here. He could be out with his own family and friends, but instead he chose to honor my father’s invitation; he’s here, with us, and he’s come in good spirits. I think of the doctors who tell me to be supportive and follow James into the small wooden shack.

Inside the shack it’s all worn hardwood floors and different colored kayaks hanging on the walls. I watch as James looks at the kayaks, stopping to inspect the different colors and types hung on the wooden walls with metal hooks. He looks close at each one, rubs his hand over the fiberglass in light smooth motions.

“So, James, have you ever been kayaking?” I ask.

“Just between us,” he says, “this will be my first time.”

When I look over at dad he has rolled his way to the other side of the store. He’s looking up at a blue and yellow sport model, reaching to rub the bottom, the way James was doing.

“You know what, though,” James says to me, placing his hand on my shoulder “that doesn’t intimidate me. That’s how you have to approach an adventure like this, with

your heart and your mind open.”To avoid looking James in the eye I scan the room for dad. He’s in the corner by the blue and yellow sport kayaks.

“This one right here,” dad says, pointing up.

James reaches into his pocket and pulls out a yellow slip of paper: it’s the fee waiver. I walk toward the cashier as James goes to pull dad’s kayak off the wall. The woman accepts the waiver and when I walk outside James is already helping dad in the kayak, talking to him about how to maneuver and what to avoid. There are pictures of a little blue man doing what’s called an Eskimo roll.

- (1) Blue man is capsized beneath the water, upside down.
- (2) Blue man uses paddle to break the surface of the water.
- (3) Blue man ensures paddle is level above waterline.
- (4) Blue man begins sweeping motion away from boat bow.
- (5) Blue man safe with paddle raised above head.

James points out the safety signs by the dock. He tells dad to make sure his head is the last thing out of the water, because if he comes up head first, he’ll go straight back under. Then handing dad his life jacket, James begins to joke around.

“These jackets are for children and weak swimmers,” James says, laughing. He helps dad squeeze into the tight space of the kayak. “Good thing we got one for you, old man!”

Dad wobbles slightly atop the water, his hand holding onto the dock. “I used to swim this whole lake from one shore to the other, Cartwright,” he says, pausing, looking out on the lake. “I could probably still do it now.”

I’m hearing all this as I walk out the door, carrying my own kayak. I notice the

girl working at the shack. She can't help but laugh. The girl's laughing, but dad's right. When he used to take me up here, maybe ten or so years back, he was one hell of a swimmer. All those swimming trophies. All those stories about him swimming the length of the lake, shore to shore.

"I believe you," James says with a wink. He throws a light punch at the life jacket, wipes his nose with his knuckle and bobs his head like a boxer.

"You do?" dad asks. He looks surprised that James believes him. I've heard several people argue with dad over this for hours, and most every time he almost ends up in the water, threatening to swim the whole damn lake just to make his point.

"Of course I do," James says. He looks over at the girl working the shack. He knows he has an audience. "Mark Ingis: forty-seven years old, double amputee." He looks off at the other side of the lake. "He scales Mount Everest with two prosthetic limbs after losing them in an earlier attempt." James bends down and tightens my father's life jacket, puts his hands in the avenue between his neck and shoulders, massages lightly. I watch dad remove his hand from the dock. The waves of water sway him. "Anyone who's determined enough and sets his mind to his challenge can do anything." James stands back up and looks the girl in the eyes. "When we think of limits, we create them."

I take my eyes off of dad for a moment. James and this girl, *their eyes* are locked together. For some reason I get the feeling James is going to step toward her, but then there's a splash, and all I see is a paddle laying on top of the water, then dad's kayak completely flipped bottom-up, rocking, forth and back. This scares me, until, in one grand motion, the whole kayak flips back atop the water, and dad emerges wet and

breathing heavily. James takes his paddle and reaches out so dad can have something to hold onto, to balance himself.

“You okay, buddy?!” James asks. Dad has to take a moment to get his breath. I don’t know what to say. I can tell the girl doesn’t either. “Well, at least we know you know how to roll yourself.”

Dad looks embarrassed, but he has a smile on his face. He grabs onto the dock again with one hand, coughs for a spell. Then he and James begin to laugh.

“Yeah, I think I got that down pat,” he says, looking up and rubbing over his face with his off hand. He pinches the end of his nose. The girl and I laugh too.

Five minutes later and we’re all legs-locked-in-kayak with our paddles pushing out into the lake. I slide over the water and push out to dad’s paddle, bring it back to him. The girl at the kayak shack smiles at James as we drift off. I’m still arguing with him in my head, with what he said at the dock: when we think of limits, we create them. Did dad think of being a cripple? Did he create the situation he likely has to live with for the rest of his life? the situation that limits him to a chair? I know the point that James is trying to make. But dad doesn’t live in that world anymore. He lives in a much more real world, where legs are crushed, entire lives along with them.

It makes me think of the day it happened. I left dad four or five voicemails on his cell phone. I was coming to town and needed a place to stay. I waited in front of his house for hours thinking that he had forgotten. It was an hour later that a lady contacted me. She let me know that while inspecting an elevator shaft a steel beam had collapsed two or three stories above him. The beam would fall and leave him trapped beneath it. And he would lay there in darkness for hours while his co-workers took an early lunch.

When the ambulance came, and the medics had finally gotten to him, he was still conscious. The company my dad had worked for offered to pay all doctor bills, provide him with compensation for time missed. And for the first couple of nights at the hospital some of his co-workers stayed bed-side with me. People sent flowers and cards with *get well* messages in the fold. But after about a week went by, and another, and another, co-workers and friends came less frequently. It felt so strange to sit with him the first night when the doctors told him that he would likely never walk again. And to still be there, three weeks later when they cut off the first cast. After seven months, he got his release from rehabilitation, and that same feeling, somehow it lingers. It's still there. It was the most time I'd ever spent with dad. It was the first time I had ever saw him vulnerable. It was the closest I'd ever been to him; the farthest away I'd ever felt.

It all runs its course as I'm pushing my paddle deep into the water, making my way behind James and my father. There's a bank to my left, a forest bluff offset by a billboard, a sord of ducks in flight. James and dad are about fifteen feet ahead of me. I can still hear them in conversation. They talk about Michael Vick, whether the NFL should have let him come back to professional football. They talk about the difference between the war in Afghanistan and Vietnam. Sooner or later, though, the topics begin to change.

I hear something about water and healing. There's mention of Emperor Augustus and Roman baths. And I start to wonder where this specific exchange might be heading. I hear James tell this story about a fourteen year old boy named Jesse from Key West. Jesse is paralyzed from birth with spina bifida, a birth defect where there is an incomplete fusion of the spinal cord. The doctors tell Jesse he will never walk, and the boy abandons

his will to live. But Jesse's mother won't give in; she does extensive research on spinal injuries, on people who defied the odds and bounced back. It all frustrates and depresses her at first, but then she finds this article on hydrotherapy. She begins to take her son to the beach. She scoops Jesse up in her arms and walks into the water with him day after day. She talks to the boy and encourages him. Soon the boy begins to swim and exercise, to develop his upper body in the ocean.

"The waters of the gulf are spiritual waters," James says, "they are complicated; they are gentle, warm, and healing; they are also rough and filled with the heat and turbulence necessary for miracles." He tells dad that Jesse begins to make progress, and to the surprise of the doctors in the hospital, as James insists, Jesse overcomes his handicap and now walks upright.

"It's easy to forget how powerful we really are," James says.

"I like that." dad responds, squinting in the sun. He removes his paddle from the water.

"I think we've lost the ability to believe in things," James says. "And when we lose that, we also lose the ability to overcome adversity."

Listening to the conversation I must have lost track of how hard I've been paddling because all of our kayaks line up for the first time. James puts his paddle in deep, lifts his chin, glides across the water and moves ahead of us slightly.

"Dad, you don't really believe that shit do you?" I ask.

I watch dad take the paddle off of his kayak and lay it back in the water in silence. For the first time I start to notice how big and strong his arms look. He doesn't even look at me. He paddles ahead with James. It's long before they pick up the pace are quite a

ways in front of me, again, and I relax and let my kayak just float for a while. I'm not sure I want to catch up. I'm late as they turn the corner around a small strip of land. Eventually I make it around and everything opens up.

The Spanish Flats are in sight. People are running free and barefoot over the white sandy beach, umbrellas standing in the sand. I can see the marina and the bar on the hill. There's a couple riding a two-seat bike on the blacktop above the dock; a smaller boat sits bright and shiny ready to be put in the water. Close by is a miniature cove and the restricted land that lies across, the conservation trails. Everything calm and even, a-shake and a-shimmer, glints and gleams and sparkles in the rustle and swirl and bubble of the broad and red-brown water of the lake.

And that's when I hear a shuddering pop, like splintering wood, a pronounced click, like snapping plastic. It blips a tiny echo through the cove. I see dad turning. He doubles back. He's coming my direction. "James!" dad yells out, pointing in front of him. But he's not pointing at James; he's pointing at me. James' kayak is bottom up, wedged against a sharp black object breaking the surface of the lake. It can't turn the other way; it can only push off against the object and float to where there is less leverage. The round belly of the boat looks like an animal, like the hump of a whale. It rocks in one direction and a paddle comes out, shooting up and then floating off on the surface of the water. For a moment I'm lost. I almost turn away to the banks that run along the farmland and pasture and forest bluffs, turn my attention back to the waterline stained on the rock, rose and brown. What am I doing? I can hear my father yelling, and when I turn toward him he's pointing more frantically, this time with his paddle. He removes his life jacket and pushes out of the kayak, flops in the water.

I begin to paddle faster. I'm still pretty far away. I yell for dad to put his life jacket back on, but he doesn't. He's taken it off to swim underwater. I think of James, the water filling him up. I think of blue man capsized beneath. I watch as dad goes under. I lose sight of him. I can see him trying to push the kayak from underneath. And, I think, how hard does this have to be without your legs to kick? with only an arm to tread water? The kayak almost flips, but before it does, it rolls back. Dad emerges from the other side. I'm getting closer now. I can help. Dad goes under again and the black object doesn't look like a black object anymore. It's a grey-green brick wall.

I watch the boat rock with more momentum, but it still doesn't turn, and I'm practically there, maybe ten feet, when I realize dad's kayak has all but floated away. His life jacket and paddle are scattered over the red-brown lake. James probably swallows a lot water; it's probably burning his lungs. Just thinking about it I catch myself holding my own breath. I unbuckle the life jacket and push myself from the kayak and into the lake. The cold of everything surrounds me. The water rolls into my face, gets sucked in by my nose. I cough.

Dad looks at me and says, "Damn it, Son, I need your help!" I swim closer and he says "help put weight on the other side."

We both dive under this time. I can see James underwater. He's hazy in the red-brown; there are big bubbles floating upward from his nose and mouth. His arms are limp and hanging down so far that they cut off in the darkness. On previous attempts, I watched the kayak almost turn twice. Once, it had come up, completely, but James' head surfaced first, and the kayak capsized again. On the next attempt, the left side just didn't have enough leverage, and it kept the kayak from turning over. This time I swim to the

left side and pull down with all I have, with everything in me. I feel everything begin to roll in one motion and I feel a push from the other side. The kayak flips and James turns over with it. When I come up he's breathing, but he looks terrified. His green eyes are bulbed and big. He's taking large grating breaths.

"Are you okay?" I ask. He can't speak to me, or he won't, and his whole face looks locked in a cramp, like trying to smile while crying. He takes big chest-choke breaths, grips the wood and fiberglass of the kayak. I pat him on the back and tell him relax, to breathe. He sucks in hard and looks at me, spreads his fingers on his hand and palms his chest. But that's when I realize he's trying to say something. That's when I realize I still haven't seen dad.

I turn in the water. I turn and turn in circles. He's nowhere.

I can feel the lake pushing against me. I yell out. And there's no answer. I yell again and again. And there's no answer. The water slaps against my cheek. I raise my chin to keep it from washing in my mouth. I take a deep breath and go under. I dive down and use the wall to help me pull farther. I keep my eyes open and feel around with my hands. There's a slick muck growing between the indentions of the brick. I swim back up. I have to get my breath. I look over at James. He's pale. He looks disoriented. I take in as much air as I can and I dive down again. I feel the brick. I push my fingers in the indentions, the slime there. But, again I have to resurface.

I come up and the sun is bright; purple shapes form in my vision. The waves rock black and white across the water. James has drifted farther off. He's hunched over now. I dive back down. And this time I keep pulling myself down. I keep my eyes wide and open. There's nothing but brown water, nothing but brown water. The farther down

nothing but brown water. I swim down and my lungs hurt and I can feel the pressure. My heart beats harder. I can swim deeper. I pull myself to the wall and my ears pop. I'm alone and surrounded. The water plugs my ears. A city rises up from the bottom of the lake. The people of Monticello come out of their homes and churches and school buildings. They stand by the road and sit on their porches, with their families, and the Patwin emerge from behind those same houses and buildings, walking barefoot on the gravel with black hands, blackberry stains in their palms. And when dad drowns in Lake Berryessa the Napa County Sheriff's Office will send a whole diving team to recover the body. They will scrape the bottom of the lake with chain nets and come up with bicycle tires and transistor radios and miscellaneous appliances. The things they pull up will have a slimy new skin: small psychedelic-colored arthropods, soft mosses and lichens. I'll imagine my father's body lying on the bottom of it all, resting amongst an alien world of three-eyed fish, moon-rock gravel, and green and yellow sponges. I'll picture divers like astronauts with air masks and oxygen tanks hovering around him, pulling chains over him.

I will stare at the declining line where the lake is drying up. The water will roll over and tuck itself under in current, filled with heat and turbulence, frothy with boil and backwash, with history, with everything I expected to find. The Patwin Indians must have thought they would tend the oak groves and fish the salmon forever: it was fruitful land, they were good people; it should have fed them forever. The people of Monticello must have thought they would farm Monticello forever: it was some of the best farmland, with good water; it should have been farmed forever. Although he was barely around my father was plain and frank and kind. Who knows what would've happened? The wounds

our time together might have healed? That part of him that lived inside me should've lived forever, but when he died a piece of me died with him – nothing is forever.

Eventually the diving crew and police officers will load up and pull away. James will go with them, hours before, in an ambulance. The people who gather to watch it all will walk back up the hills and stone pathways toward their nice gardens and patios and barbeque pits. I will stand here for at least an hour after everyone else is gone. And as the sun begins to set and the ripples run white and pink over the purple water, I will walk hands-in-pocket over the swollen planks of the dock, pass the small boats covered in canvas, and the house boats farther down, and the bait and tackle shop on the corner, and come to a white gravel line that separates the marina area from shore, and when I get there, I will realize, I'm not as alone as I think. I will see foam white splashes made far in the distance, someone swimming far out on the other side of the lake. This person will come to where the water is shallow and trudge through the water and onto the bank. I will watch a man walk upright out into a restricted area, an area locals and hikers refer to as the conservation trails, and disappear between the tall oaks that cover the rocky dry land.