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Better than Adequate: An Investigation in Contemporary Short Fiction

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BETTER THAN ADEQUATE: AN INVESTIGATION IN CONTEMPORARY SHORT
FICTION

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Stephen Michael Hundley
May 2018

Accepted by:
Nic Brown, Committee Chair
Keith Lee Morris
Dr. Austin Gorman

ABSTRACT

This thesis is comprised of two components—one critical and one creative—sharing one, convergent goal of achieving a better understanding of, and ability to produce, quality fiction.

The critical component addresses craft elements in contemporary fiction. Specifically, these elements include: premise, place, and decoder statements. By analyzing these techniques in the work of active, or otherwise remarkable, authors, the thesis explores the ways in which the pieces are successful and attempts to isolate and come to an understanding of the specific elements employed.

The creative component, made up of six works of short fiction, hopes to employ the techniques discussed in the critical component (alongside others), demonstrating growth and competency in the form.

DEDICATION

To my mother, my first reader and editor, who has supported my writing since it covered the back of her Lumina's seats.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to my committee chair, Nic Brown. Thank you for your candor, critique, and faith in my writing. I would also like to thank Keith Lee Morris for advising me in this project and others, for his leadership at *The South Carolina Review*, and for inviting me to attend AWP.

I am immensely grateful to Dan Leach, who has read the pieces featured here (and a good many others) ad nauseam, and who has been an inspiration, critic, mentor, and friend over the past year. Thank you and Hannah for opening your home to me.

Thank you to Dr. Austin Gorman for your love of Tom Waits, as well as your acceptance and accessibility. The attitude of support and progress you demonstrate in the Writing Center has influenced the way I view fiction and critical work, both mine and my students.

Without the eyes, ears, guts, and generosity of these writers, and the dozens of writers they have introduced me to, this thesis and the growth I have enjoyed at Clemson would not have been possible.

Finally, I would like to thank my family—Mom, Dad, and Melissa—who have always made a point to support me, not just in a general sense, but specifically in regards to my writing. Through their actions, they are a constant reminder of the work ethic, humor, and compassion that I hope to bring to my writing and my life.

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INTRODUCTION

I was listening to an interview with Barry Hannah, Larry Brown, and Brad Watson. Truthfully, it was more of a candid recording. The film crew set the authors up on a porch with drinks in Oxford, Mississippi and left them to muse about drinking and writing, what their biggest challenges have been, the state of the field, and such. At one point, Barry Hannah remarked that there are “too many writers” (Hannah). He went on to warn that “reading can be harmful,” and distract or discourage a young author from developing their own voice—and confidence in that voice (Hannah). Despite these opinions, new writers crop up every day. Literary magazines publish some of them. Others put out novels. Hannah acknowledges this and responded by noting that some books “need to be written,” and, I suppose, celebrated, while others do not (Hannah). In the same interview, Hannah remarked that most new fiction (he said this in 1997) is “adequate” and “merely literate” (Hannah).

Hannah’s statements are of interest to me because of his monolithic stature in a group of authors that I wish to enter into conversation with, or authors that I see myself as loosely derivative of—the Larry Browns and Brad Watsons and Richard Fords. Hannah once served as the director of the Masters in Fine Arts program that I’ll attend in the fall. While I feel an equal homage to other writers outside of this white, male, Mississippi cohort—Aimee Bender, Junot Diaz, Wells Tower, George Saunders, Ron Rash, Breece Pancake, and Raymond Carver to name a few—I feel a connection to Barry Hannah and the writers the surround him in, what seems to be, the modern pantheon of Southern

Literature, and I feel compelled to answer Hannah's complaint: that there are too many writers.

I don't believe it is healthy to doubt an artistic call or desire, much less your right to create fiction because Barry Hannah was underwhelmed with the novels of the 1990's, but I do think it is a useful jab—one that might spur an investigation and an argument. What are contemporary authors doing to be more than, or even merely, adequate?

In my study of contemporary writers, I've focused on a few areas of interest. These being: premise, how do authors set up a story that is, from the onset, engaging; place, how the fabric of the setting can elevate a narrative—and what dangers may attach themselves to strong place writing; and “decoder statements,” places where the author breaches or manifests more strongly in the narrative voice to make epiphanies more clear or control a reader's pace.

Good writing resists quantification. The magic tricks—or techniques and strategies—of one author may not work for another. Still, good writing does avail itself to study. Deconstruction, analysis, and emulation is an excellent place for emerging writers to start. I've conducted a study of contemporary literature that interests me and informs my fiction in hopes of improving my craft. In a landscape as saturated as writing and publishing, one would do well to, as Hannah said, “[die] of competency.” Through study, I dare to exceed it.

PREMISE: “THE ONE WITH...”

FOCUS ON: GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ, AIMEE BENDER

A writer friend of mine, and a great consumer of stories, rattles off story premises like titles: “The One with The Man in the Cage.” “The One with the Car Sex.” “The One with the Old Man and the Meth Heads.” To praise a story of mine, he’ll christen it with one of these titles: “The One with the Dog,” or something, and he’ll glorify the title. “This will be the one they call: ‘The One with the Dog’ when they talk about it.”

Some stories seem to make an impact by way of premise more than anything else—when the situation applied interests me more than the characters or form of the story. This can be referred to as “premise writing.” Columbian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez is a favorite exemplar for premise mastery.

One facet of Marquez’s appeal is his willingness to “look” directly at a scene—and I believe this to be vital in fantastical premises. This is demonstrated in his short story, “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings.” After spring-boarding on deep-set interests (angels, mythology, divinity, death, the afterlife, etc.) in his premise, Marquez fulfills the promise of the title and gives readers what they are excited to see—an angel, or, rather, an old man with enormous wings. The characters acknowledge the premise themselves, charging admission to see the old man—freak show style (Marquez). Marquez isn’t coy. Premises involving fantastic creatures remind me of monster movies, where the suspense and power of the horror/fantasy are amplified by how much the monster is *not* shown, but Marquez zooms the camera in on his old man, such that we know very well the scant plumage of his wings and the parasites that fester on them.

Marquez allows the premise to perform its hook, satisfying readers looking to immerse in the fantasy of an angel come to Earth, and then transitions the piece to a conversation hovering around realism, as if saying, “Yes, we’re all interested in angels, but what would this *really* be like? What would this reveal?”

Premise, the way a story introduces itself to readers, would seem to be peripheral of takeaway, what a story leaves readers with. Marquez’s story is fascinated with the workings of the village, the way its denizens process the arrival and irrefutable nature of the angel. Students of writing might imagine the premise as an act of misdirection, then, and a vehicle for story. Marquez strikes a deal with the reader—packaging commentary in a sugary coat of premise, which, after consuming, the reader is more likely to suspend their disbelief, engage with characters, and take part in the cynicism that Marquez projects over his village—the unexceptional, finite, frail nature of human and angel alike.

Aimee Bender’s collection *Willful Creatures* has contributed to Bender being publicly listed under “speculative fiction,” “fantasy,” and “magic realism” (goodreads). Bender’s stories, like Marquez’s, have a tendency to startle readers with their memorable, unapologetic premises. There’s no tip-toeing around a boy born with keys for fingers. Of course, not all premises need be fantastical, though the premises I’m drawn to most often are.

Fantastical premises lend a certain freshness to fiction, especially realistic fiction, that allows for a liberty of ideas—by that I mean, if a writer finds themselves wanting to write about childhood, or their own childhood, or, more specifically, a loss of innocence they experienced in their own childhood, problems associated with the well-worn path of

that narrative will likely ensue. By employing a fantastical premise, whether biblical, incidentally dangerous, or paranormal, a writer might begin from, figuratively speaking, the side of what they initially set off to write about and, in finding their way back to their original idea, lead their readers through some terrain of interest.

In realistic stories, this coupling of the fantastical premise and grounded, often bitter, commentary is common. Many of the premises in Aimee Bender's *Willful Creatures* continue this tradition. "End of the Line" offers in premise one man owning another, miniature man and housing him in a cage (Bender). As with Marquez's story, the idea hooks and Bender's characters handle the rest. Such that the premises of both writers might be considered hypotheticals: "What if an angel fell to Earth?" "What if a man could own another man like a bird?" Or possibly these questions began someplace more akin to "What happens when you give one person control over another?" It is not easy or necessary to prove that these stories were intentionally crafted from the premise up, but in reading and digesting the work of Marquez and Bender, we may identify the imaginative premises as strengths to be emulated. This posing of hypotheticals is a good tactic for brainstorming—certainly as valuable as starting from character, setting, or scene.

PLACE: BEYOND REGIONALISM

FOCUS ON: BREECE D’J PANCAKE, GEORGE SAUNDERS

Many of the authors I enjoy most are frequently described by regional modifiers. Southern writers, like Barry Hannah and George Singleton. Appalachian writers, like Breece Pancake and Ron Rash. I’ve seen Cormac McCarthy grouped a handful of different ways. It seems likely that arguments could be made for grouping authors based on their actual origins, or current addresses, or the settings most common in their fiction. These groupings are slippery, and, while they may encourage readerships in the areas they champion, I see writers avoiding regional art identities more than broadcasting them—possibly because of the regionally charged political climate we find ourselves in, but more specifically, I think, because these distinctions can be limiting. Because place writing is a priority in my own work, most of which takes place in the South, questions surrounding regional writing and forging an identity as a “Southern [white, male] writer” are of interest to me. Nevertheless, good “regional writing” is often just good writing—important for establishing setting and suspending disbelief, useful for forming believable characters who populate the worlds authors create or borrow, but, ultimately, malleable.

Author Kevin Barry, who is Irish, sets a good many stories in West Ireland, and is often called an “Irish writer,” once joked at a reading in Clemson, South Carolina that when he sits down to work, he never attempts, consciously, to “do some Irish writing.” It must be a testament to the prowess of the authors in rendering settings and scenes that depict regions with a fidelity that makes connections between the place and the author inevitable.

West Virginian author, Breece D’J Pancake, provides an example of place writing in his posthumous collection *The Stories of Breece D’J Pancake*. Most of the “extraordinary praise” for the collection references strength of place (Pancake). Bolton Davis of *San Francisco Review of Books* lauds Pancake’s “attention to atmosphere,” and “powerful sense of place” (Pancake). *Prairie Schooner*’s Gregory Morris makes note of the “geographical despair” (Pancake). Perhaps more helpful to our investigation of Pancake is Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times*, who complimented Pancake’s “writerly eye for detail,” which the author uses to “build a picture, layer by layer... of his native West Virginia” (Pancake).

The stories in Pancake’s collection are not linked, but the sense of place in the stories seems to expand and solidify throughout the book. This begins in “Trilobites,” where Colly, the main character, drives a tractor “to the knob at the end of [his family’s] land” (24). “Far off, somebody chops wood, and the ax-bites echo back to me. The hillsides are baked here and have heat ghosts” (25). As Kakutani recognized, Pancake’s place is made of details. Not just the landscape, but occupations, tools, vehicles, businesses, foods—the sounds of the tools. The geologic history of the place.

Pancake does well to both show and tell readers about the place he has created—a place that demands and thrives on the senses of Colly, as well as historical narration. The former (the biting of the ax off camera) provides the life of a world inhabited by more players than those the story deals with directly, and the latter (Colly/Pancake’s claim that the hills are “baked” and haunted) attaches a feeling of a world that has been in existence a long time—a world that is old, attached to the important events of the story, and,

alongside the story, needs to come to some sort of resolution. Pancake's valley feels haunted, doomed, tired, and angry—just like Colly. When there is unity between setting and character—a unity of mood and texture—“place” is created, which, it seems to me, is different than setting in that a “sense of place” would seem to imply reader investment and complete character integration.

To contrast the weathered despair of Pancake, I'd like to discuss George Saunder's *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, where, in place of a valley made mausoleum for trilobites and farmers, readers are treated to what I will call historio-industrial magical realism. Many of the collection's characters might be vocationally identified, which is to say that their workplace directs the story more than their regional placement. Certainly this is true in the title story, where the main character works as a “Verisimilitude Inspector” at a historical theme park—CivilWarLand. The park operates as much in setting as it does in premise and the wild fantasy of a historical theme park is stretched and simultaneously tethered by an ever growing roster of proper nouns: “The Great Forest,” “Teen Groups,” and an “Old Tyme Skills Seminar” from “Mr. Alsuga” all at home in the park. I found a reckless feel to Saunders's world, a feeling of: “What's next?” I believe Joshua Ferris is referring to this feeling when he discusses the collection's “highly imagined premise... limitless in its outrageous gothic possibilities” (Saunders xiii). Ferris praises Saunders's ability to “tether” this possibility and “make of it something deeply affecting” (xiii). Without a tether, reading “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline” might be described as a voyage into the absurd—and, to an extent, it is. The tether Ferris describes is Saunders working at transmutation: taking the raw, spontaneous

feel of absurdist writing and transforming it into a realistic story grounded in a place that feels real—where the conflict and characters are believable and compelling.

Saunders's transmutation is performed by no supernatural means, but by techniques very similar to those employed by Pancake; namely, an eye for detail. Through specifics that add history of place and pin-point details, Saunders makes quick work of populating his world with a great many peripheral characters, occupations for those characters, and places. This is demonstrated in the opening paragraph of "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline":

Whenever a potential big investor comes for the tour the first thing I do is take him out to the transplanted Erie Canal Lock. We've got a good ninety feet of actual Canal out there and a well-researched dioramic of a coolie campsite... We've got no budget to correct, so every fifteen minutes or so a device in the bunkhouse gives off the approximate aroma of an Oriental meal. (Saunders 3)

The piece begins in-scene and establishes CivilWarLand as a place of fantasy, where canals can be built, extravagant historical dioramas built—including smell replicating technology. However the whimsical feel of the scene, readers are grounded by way of the investor tour. Whereas Pancake leveraged the history of the landscape, the floods and animals that covered the land millions of years ago, what plants grow there now, what sorts of people and occupations dwell in the valley, Saunders establishes his setting as a place of malleability, where anything can be made—employing whatever ridiculous, often humorous, often tragic, historio-techno-babble the author finds necessary to impress upon his readers that, yes, anything can happen here.

With a keen eye for detail and an assurance of language—language that doesn't pause to explain that a "coolie" is a derogatory term that describes (in this case) Asian manual laborers, and that, alternatively, explains precisely what one might do at a "Burn'n'Learn"—Saunders establishes his theme park as a place of infinite imagination, but not removed from the baggage of the history it is replicating, satirizing, and drawing on. This mixture of fantasy and historical context lends itself to an enthralling and, quickly, believable sense of place—it's a place that you want to believe exists and, maybe, almost could.

While Saunders's collection maintains an overtone of Southern centralization, the characters and setting derive more "place" from their vocations, something that Pancake makes use of as well, though the argument may be made that the vocations depicted in "Trilobites," and other stories in Pancake's collection are rendered in intentionally regional terms—specifically his miner characters in "Hollow," where much work is done to draw ties between people, work, and place. Despite creating a Civil War land, Saunders escapes an overtly Southern connection because of his story's nebulous setting and his simultaneous creation of a sense of place amongst the working environment of the main characters by leveraging vocational focused scene/character building—wherein the region-less rigmarole of corporate dealings and middle-management struggles supersedes regional associations.

DECODER STATEMENTS: SPEAKING DIRECTLY TO READERS

FOCUS ON: PHILIP LARKIN, ZZ PACKER

A good deal of realistic fiction is iceberg fiction, wherein a scene is shown, generally something minimalistic, and the implications, emotions, or otherwise significant extensions of that scene or action is left unsaid. Possibly the most common piece of advice young writers receive is to “show” and “not tell.” And yet, there are times when telling, in a moment of brief transparency between author or narrator and reader, can be extremely powerful.

In the past, I have called these moments “mini-epiphanies,” and attempted to employ them in advancing my characters’ consciousness from point-A to point-B. In labeling these moments “decoder statements,” as I have come to do, emphasis is placed on the relationship between author, character, and reader, wherein the author uses a clear statement of truth or fact to reach out to the reader directly and overtly. This is similar to what might be described as a “natural,” or less plainly signaled epiphany planted by an author, in that a decoder statement makes a point to distinguish itself overtly. In the plainest language, this move might be thought of as spoon-feeding a reader, or saying something to the effect of “the moral of the story is...” Of course, skilled authors will work to make more of the technique than this, and contemporary fiction often resists “morals.” Rather, the technique is often used as a place where the author encourages the reader to stop and consider something made plain.

My favorite example of a decoder statement is actually from a poem: Philip Larkin’s “The Mower.”

Next morning I got up and it did not.
The first day after a death, the new absence
Is always the same; we should be careful

Of each other, we should be kind
While there is still time. (Larkin 118)

The plain-faced candor in the clause after the semicolon has always struck me—even before I studied literature at a university. It is as if Larkin is stepping outside of the poem, which has a rather clean, narrative line, and leaving readers with a thought, hand-picked and set apart by a semicolon and a line break.

Whether employed in verse or prose, decoder statements serve a dual function in giving readers a natural stopping point in a piece and giving authors an opportunity to introduce variety of tone. In fiction, we might observe this in the work of ZZ Packer. Packer’s story “Brownies,” which follows a child narrator through a girl scout camping trip, the author makes frequent use of perspective, voice, and descriptions that leave readers with much to consider, but not much is said overtly. Much of “Brownies” is written in scene.

Details like the clothing of the individual girl scouts, interactions between the girls and their parents, pieces of information about their home-lives: these things grant readers insights that are generative in so far as they push readers to an understanding of racial, economic, social, and even sexual frustrations, but Packer seems to tiptoe around

making direct statements throughout the piece—letting the story do the heavy lifting in the work of leading readers.

That said, near the end of the story, as the girl scouts are leaving for home, and the narrator is explaining why her father had a group of Mennonites paint his porch, Packer writes:

I now understood what he meant, and why he did it, though I didn't like it. When you've been made to feel bad for so long, you jump at the chance to do it to others. (Packer 31)

Packer goes on to link this epiphany to several other events witnessed by the narrator, but more important for our study is the tonal shift, wherein the narrator speaks outside of a dialogue exchange—set apart from the heavy dialogue in the pages before—and provides a common link between the episodes of alternating humility and cruelty demonstrated in the story, which “decodes” the story somewhat—if only in such a way that may lead readers towards a place desirable to the author.

Using a decoder statement near the end of a story seems fairly common, which seems intuitive, given that such a technique relies on the weight of the story that comes before it to be effective—there needs to be a story to decode. I have come to expect seeing such statements from most authors near 4/5ths of the way through a story or later. I have seen this in T.C. Boyle's story, “Caviar,” as well as Packer's “Drinking Coffee Elsewhere.”

It is important to note that the term “decoder statement” is a general one and not bound to the specific conditions I've included in this essay. Decoder statements certainly

do not need to be in first person, or even address the reader. A decoder statement in “Drinking Coffee Elsewhere” comes from a psychiatrist and is directed at the narrator—it even seems to be a little tongue-in-cheek, given its source. Packer writes:

‘Who knows?’ he asked with a glib, psychiatric smile I’d never seen before.

‘Maybe it’s your survival mechanism. Black living in a white world.’ (Packer 144)

The essential nature of a decoder statement is not in its specific form, but conceptual. Especially when writing in the tradition of American Realism, Minimalism, or (and possibly especially) Magical Realism, it is important to provide readers with clues, however overt. It is not to say that every piece of poetry or prose must need a defined “artistic mission” that may be a success or failure, or that a reader may arrive at the “correct” conclusions—certainly the project of writing and relaying experiences and ideas is not often so cut and dried as that.

As an author, I hope to nudge readers towards considering certain questions illustrated in my stories. Wealth disparity and socio-economic factors, the feelings between men and women, relationships between humans and animals, the relationships between people and the land; decoder statements are useful for me in that they allow for stopping points—to both take a break from iceberging and scene writing and provide a space for speculation. I believe decoder statements have served Philip Larkin and ZZ Packer in similar ways.

APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

While counsel and critique are powerful tools, the most generative exercise for my writing has been reading contemporary fiction—and I believe this to be an experience that is common for many writers. It seems that every conversation I have with a more established author ends with me scribbling down the names of collections or stories or novels of authors new to me—authors that have influenced the writers influencing me—my professors and friends. I take comfort in this chain of influence, the joy of storytelling, and the empathy that drives it.

I have focused on just a few authors in this short essay and only three techniques. Of course to produce a short story of worth, something able to entertain and incite readers, it takes a balancing act of premise, place, and leading readers through decoders statements—it takes more than that too. In truth, just performing these techniques and others like them—tools for crafting stories that are relatable, powerful, and clear—is a recipe for crafting merely adequate stories. Competent stories. The kinds of stories that Barry Hannah was lamenting to his friends about on that porch in Oxford, Mississippi.

In studying the works of established writers, the techniques included in this essay (and others), I am sure that I have not equipped myself to produce fiction that exceeds “competent”—not fully anyway. I believe it takes something more, likely something intangible, to achieve that. A certain awareness that is harder won than from simple study. The stories I want to write relate my thoughts and emotions, entertain, and hopefully challenge readers—these are basic things. I also aspire to remind readers of people and places in their lives and allow them to then, possibly, see these people and

places in a new light or with more sympathy, to encourage readers to, as Larkin put it so memorably, “be kind // While there is still time” (Larkin 118). These are the sorts of stories that I believe Hannah would want to see more of, stories that “need” to be written. Certainly this is presumptuous (who knows what Barry Hannah thinks is “needed”), idealistic, and possibly vain, but, after meditating on what pieces of fiction I have “needed,” I am left believing that living an observant and thoughtful life will lead me to what readers need, and the tools that I have learned to use from the writers I idolize will allow me to do the rest.

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Replica

Rob leaned on the counter at the post office, his Springfield rifle propped by the door and a Confederate uniform on his back. He had come for a stamp. The woman working wore a nametag that read “Janice.” She might have been fifty.

“You born crazy?” she asked him. “Or just dropped?”

“Married into it. Then dropped,” he said. In another life, Rob had been a lawyer who collected Mustang convertibles. As a Confederate soldier without a car, he was less popular. “I give tours for the museum.”

“Mhm.” She put a stamp on Rob’s letter and laid it in a stack. “Your little missus march around like that too?”

“Oh, no ma’am,” Rob said. “She’s working on the railroad.” Janice let out a snort. That was good. It didn’t sound all that bad when you told it like a joke. Rob’s brother, Peter, had been a master joker. This had all been Peter’s thing—all this Civil War stuff. The museum tours and funny clothes and reenactments. Peter, who had lived in a few sections of a remodeled train out in the woods with no electricity and wouldn’t tell anyone how he’d gotten all ten tons of it out there. “History’s mysteries,” he’d say and laugh.

Then Peter died of a snake bite out behind his train and left a wife and a boy, and now it was Rob who loved the wife and raised the boy. Rob, who wore the funny clothes and swapped sass with Janice at the post office.

“Crazy loves crazy,” Janice said, and that was true. It took love to make crazy work. Sarah was in love with the past, because that was where Peter lived. The boy, Johnsey, was eleven and loved caring for the animals—four chickens and a dairy goat. Rob only considered himself half-crazed, but even he was, strangely, in love.

At the funeral, none of the family stood with Sarah. There was a rumor she had treated Peter’s bite at home with honey and prayers. She wore her period clothing, black bonnet and all. Aunts and uncles skirted her like a leper, and you could see she didn’t give a damn. Johnsey wore a rough little suit and held his mother’s hand through the service. Rob began coming to the train with books and salted meat.

Sarah had been receptive to the marriage. She and Rob kissed once at a party, and again in a car while Peter bought beer. They were young and love came easy. When Peter died, consolation turned to covenant, though Sarah didn’t suffer cars any longer and her hair had greyed. And there was the money that Rob had from practicing law. Money that paid off the land and restocked the train and let Sarah continue on in the world she and Peter had entered into some years back.

On the ten-acres Peter bought beside I-16, certain things had to be forgotten. The lunar landings. Internal combustion. Air conditioning, God bless it. The rules of the fantasy were obscure, and Sarah was their keeper.

Rob spent twenty years as an Atlanta bachelor, swearing up and down that a ’67 Stang would be his baby forever-and-ever-amen. And yet, here he was: wifed up and raising Peter’s boy. And it was worth it. *The boy* was worth it. He was worth wearing

Peter's uniform, and if Rob had to cut his hair Lee's-army short and spill fake blood once a year in a grey coat, hell, he was worth that too.

So Rob moved into the train and took Peter's job at the museum and sold his Mustangs to a series of old men and a sixteen-year-old with tissues in her bra.

Janice had a school photo on her side of the counter, pocket-sized and framed in steel. The boy in the picture had a gap-tooth grin.

"Does he go to school in town?"

"He's grown," she said. "But he did." And then, after some time: "Played the trombone."

Rob paid for the stamp, and the bell on the door rang high when he pushed it open. He moved across town in the heat of the day with the Springfield slung across his back, honks splashing like gutter-water from cars on the road.

From afar, he saw Sarah hanging the wash. Johnsey and Duchess, the goat, sat in Rob's old black Mustang—the one he couldn't bear to sell. The car was parked in the woods some ways from the train, hidden behind a small hill and covered by a brown tarp so Sarah could pretend it didn't exist. To speak of it was taboo.

"Get that goat out of my car," Rob said.

Johnsey pushed Duchess out of the open door. He had the tarp rolled back so that the long nose of the Mustang was showing. He had the roof down too, and the sight of the boy behind the wheel of the old black car brought Rob joy in the hot of the afternoon.

Rob held the goat by the snout and tugged its head around. The goat licked at his hand like a dog. He brushed some mud off the Mustang's passenger seat and sat down.

The boy had his hands on the steering wheel and was tracing the lightening path of a crack in the windshield with his eyes.

Rob passed Johnsey a Moonpie from his pocket and began unwrapping one of his own. They ate in silence. Rob swept some of the dust from the leather dash with the side of his hand and frowned.

"She's mad today," Johnsey said.

"What for?"

Johnsey was working his tongue around his mouth, chasing marshmallow out from behind his teeth. "She found your watch."

Rob passed the boy his water canteen, a replica steel thing. "Your watch," he said. It had been Peter's watch. Rob had given it to Johnsey a week ago. "Did you wear it out?"

"Only to church, and on my ankle. There was a sock over it. She saw the lump."

"She has it?"

"Yes, sir."

Rob looked back towards the train. He could see smoke rising from the cook fire, thin and grey. "Best get back then. I'll talk to her tonight."

Johnsey clicked his tongue for the dairy goat and Duchess came around to his side of the car. He dangled his hand out and pulled the goat's horns. The goat nipped at his

fingers and let out a little bleat. The boy bullied the goat and sat in the car. “Can we see them?” he asked.

Rob looked to the smoke again and heard no one coming. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the glovebox before passing Johnsey a picture of Peter and a dog. There were about fifty pictures in all, and Rob had been showing them to the boy one at a time to kindle the mystery—to draw out a life.

“What’d he name that dog?” He said it “dawg.”

“Wasn’t his dog to name. Was our neighbor’s dog. Sue.”

“Sue.”

Peter was thirteen in the picture and sat in an old rocker with Sue between his legs. She was a silver-haired Golden with no teeth left. She’d gum your hands till you cried.

“Johnsey!” Sarah called from the train.

Rob whistled and Johnsey passed the picture back in a hurry. Rob locked it up. The two of them covered the Mustang and walked up the little rise to the train.

Sarah had a stew going over the fire and was poking at it when she saw them coming.

Rob pecked her cheek and sat next to the fire on a cut log stool.

“Chickens,” Sarah said, and Johnsey walked out to where the coop was kept. “We had some trouble this morning,” she said when the boy was out of sight.

“I heard. The watch.”

“I told you about giving him things like that. It confuses him.”

“It was Peter’s.”

“I know that,” she said, still stirring at the stew. Chunks of tomato and meat roiled in the pot. There was sweat on her brow and splatters of red broth on the apron she wore over her day-dress, and she stirred on without meeting Rob’s eye.

Rob stared at the fire.

“And what’s that on your breath? That sweet.”

“Rock candy.”

“Lie.”

Rob pulled a blue stick of rock candy from his pocket. “This one’s for my boy.” He stood and brushed the hair out of Sarah’s face. A pink stick appeared from behind her ear. “And this one’s for my wife.” He gave her little kisses until she relaxed her angry, pursed lips, and then he kissed her good.

“Did you send the letter?” she asked. There would be a reenactment in a week at Kennesaw Mountain. It was the only time Sarah would stand to ride in a car, and she penned a note to Marcy Dean every year asking for a ride in her “coach”—an extended cab Ford.

Rob had fought and died twice now. You had to lie down in the grass when you died. Lie down and bake in the sun. The first year he fell to musket fire. A grey-haired veteran had patted him on the shoulder, saying, “You’re down, son.” Last year, a Union cavalry officer slid a blunted saber across his chest.

“I did,” he said.

She sighed and took the stewpot off the fire, her hands wrapped in heavy cloth.

Rob held the door to the train, and Sarah stepped inside. When Johnsey poked his head around the end of the train, Rob raised a thumb.

When dinner was through, Sarah laid in the passenger car to read. The library was groomed with zeal. Tonight she cradled *Moby Dick*—published in 1851.

Rob and Johnsey went out to walk. To “check the snares,” Rob said.

“Do you still want to go tonight?”

“I do.”

Rob carried a lantern and walked with the boy into the woods. Duchess followed, and they shooed her back twice before Johnsey tied her to a tree.

“I’m sorry about the watch,” the boy said when they were some ways from the train.

Rob saw the purple lines of the switch behind his knees. “She beat you some?”

“Only some.”

A lump formed in Rob’s throat. Those whelps were his doing, and Sarah was not one for “some.” She was an all or nothing kind of girl.

“Probably deserved it.” He poked the back of the boy’s head and watched him stumble over a root. “I’ll get it back. We’ll keep it somewhere.”

A light flickered ahead through the wood and brush, and the man and boy made their way towards it.

“You loved my pa a lot?” Johnsey asked.

“He was my little brother,” Rob said.

“Do you love ma too?”

“Yes.” Rob dimmed the lantern to a flicker and stowed it behind an azalea hedge. “Hush now, and watch if you want to.” They hid themselves in a stand of pines. Ahead, a television set flashed inside their neighbor’s trailer. The old couple that lived there were watching cartoons. *Pinky and the Brain*. It was their Sunday ritual. Sarah had brought the couple a yellow cake once, years ago, and said they were dull. Well, look at them now. Holding hands and drinking clear liquor and yucking it up like little children. A bit of Rob panged for Sarah to see.

Too far away to hear, Rob and Johnsey did the voices themselves.

“What are we going to do tonight, Brain?” Rob asked in his best Pinky.

“The same thing we do every night, Pinky. Try to take over the world,” Johnsey answered in Brain’s dry voice. They laughed.

They made a new story each Saturday night, speaking for the mice. Tonight Pinky and the Brain were discussing the ethics of eating squirrel—what with it being in the rodent family. This lined up nicely with the science chapter Johnsey was working through. He was homeschooled—for “quality and accuracy alike,” Sarah said.

When the show ended, the old couple switched off their TV set. The man left the room, and the woman lit a cigarette.

Rob and Johnsey walked back in a weaving path, their night vision ruined by the flashing of the television. Johnsey held Rob’s hand.

“Do you want to go to school?” Rob asked.

“I am.”

“With other kids. The public school in town.”

“Ma don’t want me to.”

“She *doesn’t* want you to, and I’ll talk to her.”

Johnsey was silent. He walked ahead of Rob and held the lantern with both hands, waist high.

“You could play sports. Soccer or football. You could play in the band.”

“She doesn’t want me to. Don’t say nothing. Don’t say anything at all. I like doing school here.”

Before they were in sight of the train, they heard Duchess bleating. She came plodding up to them through the dark, the chewed-through rope dangling from her neck.

Rob kissed Johnsey on the head and sent him to bed the goat down for the night. Then, he washed his face in the cedar-wood bucket outside of the train, enjoying the smell of the water and the woody sweetness of what dribbled through his lips.

Inside, Sarah was asleep.

The master bedroom was built in the shell of the train’s caboose. Lace curtains hung for privacy’s sake. Rob slipped beneath the sheets. He would have to be careful, he thought. They’d talked about the school before. That was old beef. And there was the watch to get back. So he would be careful—put a little sugar on the spoon. He laid a kiss in the nest of her hair, down for the night and unbound.

“Hm.” She smiled, eyes closed. “Traps?”

“Bare, but set. What do you think about Johnsey going to public school?”

Too much.

“Not yet,” she said, and then, “I read something about the goat in my almanac.”

She turned to face him in the dark. She had been stewing on this. Stirring it around.

“Not yet, but when? I think it’s time, Momma.” He kissed her cheek.

“Not yet. I’m worried about the goat.”

“Yeah? She seems fine. Do you have the boy’s watch, dear? I’ll keep it for him.

Keep it out of the way.”

“The goat’s wrong.”

“What do you mean?” They were whispering back and forth.

“She’s the wrong breed. I told that snotty Jaffords woman that I needed an Angora goat, but this thing, she’s getting huge.”

“What do you mean? Pregnant?”

“She’s French Alpine. They milk better. Get bigger. Flat haired. Angora’s are curlier. I’ve been waiting for her hair to curl up, but she just keeps getting bigger.”

“So?”

“So it’s wrong. French Alpine didn’t come until 1900. Dead wrong. Damn Jaffords. I’ll have to sell it at the reenactment. Or trade.”

“The boy loves that goat.”

“I know it,” she said—mournful and everything. Mournful and resigned and cold as stone, like a sad statue.

“You can’t sell it.”

“It’s wrong. Like the watch.”

Rob sat up in bed. “You didn’t sell the watch.”

“No.”

“Where is it?”

“Gone.”

“Gone?”

“Gone. Don’t nobody need that watch. A soldier couldn’t buy that with a year’s pay.”

“Well, I’m not a soldier again until next week. Where did you put it?” Rob stood from the bed. She had taken things before and made them “gone.” He walked from the room, naked save his underclothes.

“Come back to bed.”

He stepped outside and dug in the ashes of the cook fire with a stick until he found it, the leather burnt away and the face blackened. The glass was all busted. The fire wouldn’t have done that, but Sarah could have. Sarah and a stick.

She slid open their bedroom window. “Come back to bed. We’ll talk.”

Rob threw the watch against the train car, and she slid the window shut.

“Christ.”

He walked back into the train and sat in the passenger car. He pulled a tin of whisky from beneath a seat. At the end of the room, behind a pane of glass, was a manikin dressed in Peter’s infantryman uniform—the one only worn at ceremonies and reenactments. Rob pulled from the tin and glared at the doll-soldier in his brother’s clothes.

Peter had collected the pieces. The coat and trousers were high quality replicas, costing several hundred dollars. The belt buckle was genuine. Peter found that with a metal detector. He'd soaked and scrubbed it until the brass shown like a gold tooth. The hat, though, was the real treasure. An original, it sat atop the manikin, cocked to the side as if the cloth man had just thrown it on as he jogged to muster—perhaps fastening the brass buttons of his coat as he went.

Rob raised the tin to drink.

Johnsey came padding in from the next car.

“Back to bed,” Rob said, and the boy went as quiet as he came.

Rob looked down at the mud on his feet. The ash on his hands. He raised the tin again. “Some life, Pete,” he muttered. The uniform stood sentinel behind the glass and said nothing. “Some wife.”

Rob got up with the whiskey and stepped to the glass. He opened the display door and took out the hat. He smelled the wooly stink of it. A loose hair stuck from the fabric and he held it up to the lantern burning nearby. Blonde. Peter's. He put the hair in his pocket and the hat on his head.

He went outside to drink with the goat.

“And wasn't Johnsey right?” he said in the hay-shed. ““Don't say nothing.””

There hadn't even been a chance to fight about it. Too busy bailing out crazy.

Duchess chewed at his shoe lace and he pulled his foot away.

Rob looked the goat over. She was getting big. As big as a big dog. He got a whiff of her breath when she tried to climb into his lap. Rob pushed her back from where he sat. “She’s gonna sell you back to the Jaffords.”

The goat looked at him when he spoke, its alien pupils wide and dumb.

Rob finished the tin. He was a nervous drunk. “I’d sooner eat you.” He let the empty tin dribble onto his fingers, and Duchess licked them clean. “Kid needs to go to school.”

He walked out to the Mustang and groped behind a tire for the key. The galloping horse cut into the head of the spare was worn smooth as the face on a silver dollar, and when he slid the key into the ignition, the old girl fired right up. Rob laid his head on the wheel. The leather was cool. The purr and rustle of the engine worked its way through his skull. He let it run for ten minutes before he staggered back to the train.

“Kid needs to go to school,” he slurred from the foot of the bed, the lantern held high.

“What were you doing running that car?” Sarah asked.

“Kid’s going to school. I’ll drive him there in that car. He loves that car.”

“You’re drunk.”

“We’ll take the goat. She can ride shotgun. Kid loves that goat.”

“Are you wearing the infantry cap?” She stood from the bed and crossed to face him. She stood very close. She began in a whisper: “Peter would never—”

“Peter’s dead!” he shouted. He stepped back from her. “Peter’s dead, and the kid needs school. He needs to be around kids. His best friend’s a goat. Shit, Sarah. How

selfish can you be?” She stared at him, so he said it again, softer. “Shit, Sarah.” And then, “It’s too much now.”

She reached up to his face. Carefully. Slowly. She took the hat from his head.

“Sleep somewhere else tonight.”

Rob gave her a weary look. He stepped back out to the passenger car and laid down on the bench-seat. Then he stomped out to the hay-shed. He laid down in the prick of the straw and closed his eyes, the breathing of the goat raspy and even in the dark.

He woke to Johnsey shoving at him in the hay-shed. The sun was terrible through the slat-wood walls. Rob turned his face into the hay, and the musk of it turned something in his guts. The boy shoved at him again, and Rob heaved into the straw.

“She killed her!” Johnsey cried. There were tears running openly down his face.

“What? Who?”

“Ma killed Duchess. She’s killing the car too.”

Rob stood and fell. “What?” He rose again on rubber legs. The door to the shed was closed. He pulled at it and found it locked.

“No, Ma!” Johnsey had his face pressed between the slats.

Outside, Sarah was dousing the Mustang with kerosene, the canister upended in her arms and belching out long runs of amber fuel. The leather interior shown wet. Something white was slumped over in the passenger seat.

“Goddamnit!” Rob pulled the boy back and kicked at the slats. “Goddamnit!” He missed a kick and fell.

Sarah struck a match and flames leapt about the cab. The smoke was immediate, oily and black. She walked back to the train, clutching Peter's hat with both hands, and for a flash Rob saw that resolve in her face again. That indifferent resolve she wore when Peter was being lowered down into the Earth and there was a six-foot gap between her and Johnsey and any love at all. Rob could see she didn't give a damn. He sagged against the slats, saying her name and watching her pass him by. The sight of it burned out the middle of him.

Rob sat down with the boy and laid an arm across his shoulders.

"Easy, son."

The train door slammed over the crackle of the Mustang, and Rob imagined Sarah replacing the hat on the manikin's head. She would set it just as it had been, cocked just-so to the side. She would polish the gleaming buttons and smooth the trousers. She would pass her hands over the fabric and, in her own way, mourn the goat—maybe even the car. She would look around their empty home, thinking of Peter and the perfect way he married the old world to the new, and perhaps she would lament, then, that she had taken Rob for a lover. Rob, who was not Peter. Perhaps she would lament Johnsey just the same. They were, the both of them, imperfect replicas.

Rob gave Johnsey's shoulder a squeeze. "Your pa loved that dog. Sue," he said. "He buried her."

Johnsey dug his hands into the straw. "It was the neighbor's."

"They were away. I was home from college, and your pa was watching her for a little money."

“How did she die?”

“We thought it was her gums—the way she was crying—but she was just old. Your pa laid on the laundry room floor with her. We had an old wire brush that she liked, and Peter ran it through her fur so she wouldn’t cry. He must have brushed her all night long; he had that silver hair stuck all over him. It was all he could do. She passed in her sleep, and Peter wouldn’t let anyone touch her. He was just a little older than you.”

“What did he do then?”

“He made her a little grave in the woods. He slept. I took him bowling. You know your pa couldn’t bowl for beans.” Rob pulled the boy’s hands out of the straw and studied them. “You’ve got his thumbs,” he said. “You’re doomed.”

Johnsey laughed.

Dog

Byron found the dog's carcass laid out on the black mud of the salt marsh, just behind a row of palms and within sight of the community dock. It wasn't a neighborhood dog. The breed was wrong. Something strange. Off color.

The body was short with square, well-muscled shoulders. The stomach was white with spots, each one distended now like tattoos on a pregnant belly. The fur ran from yellow to brown. Beer cans, crab trap floats and Styrofoam cooler pieces formed a line where the water left them. Ten yards below the high water mark, the dog lay alone on the dried and cracked mud.

It didn't come in on the tide, Byron thought. It was brought here. There were no footprints, but the mud was hard and washed by the sea.

The dog's eyes were open, the lids and ball of one socket pecked and pulled away. There was a hole ripped into the lower abdomen. Buzzards. Something must have scared them away, or maybe the tide had come in and covered the body. He poked at the dog with a length of palm frond. The hair was stiff with salt, and the flesh beneath did not give easily. The whole of it rocked when he pushed harder with the stick.

Byron examined the tan pads of the dog's feet, which were clean. He pulled the pads apart and felt the soft place between them, like he did with his dogs at home. His parents would not have approved. There was a gallon-sized Purell on his kitchen table, and the family wiped to their elbows at meals or in passing.

The smell of the carcass was enough to wrinkle Byron's nose. Some of the dog smell, dusty and warm, still clung to the hide, though decay rose from the wounds. It might have been a good dog, he decided. The ears were kind—drooping and soft. The teeth were sharp and clean. He guessed it was young.

Byron would be sixteen in two weeks. For his birthday, he had asked for a nylon dragon kite and a Casio calculator watch. The kite, he wanted to fly in the open lot beside his house. The watch, he wanted to impress his neighbor Mary, who wore hers every day. Mary had not been at school today, but the pollen streaked Lexus in her driveway hinted that she was home, and she knew Byron would be here.

He was left alone in the evenings, his parents working late. After the bus dropped him off, he would often walk the dry-muds of the marsh—his book bag hung on the jagged bark of a palm tree, and a palm frond sword in his hand to poke and prod at whatever the water left. Mary often came with him; though, it had been three days since Byron had seen her last. Three days since her father had been arrested. He had killed a man.

The dead man was a lover. There had been no struggle and no chase. After it was done, Mary's father, Phillip, sat in the garage and waited for the police to arrive, while Mary's mother, Beth, sobbed into the kitchen phone to the 9-1-1 dispatcher then fled to a neighbor's house—the Mitchel's. Phillip sat in the garage and smoked. It was said that five cruisers came—flashing and parked front-to-back like railcars on a model train that bent around Mary's U-shaped driveway. It was just after school, and not many in the neighborhood were home.

When the deputy sheriff arrived, Paul Mitchel, who played tennis with Byron's father, said that Phillip "walked right out to the deputy with his hands up. With his hands up and a cigarette still in his mouth."

"Did they find the gun?" Byron's father asked, his fist wrapped in Lucy's leash. Byron held Tomcat at a good heel, while his mother held Rory, the Bichon, in her arms. The whole family walked together.

"Hell no. And I heard from the Deputy that Phil hasn't said nothin but 'lawyer' since they brought him in."

Mary was not at school the next day, or yesterday, or today. Byron was not surprised by Mary's absence, but he was curious about where she had been during the killing. It had been a Tuesday. Mary and Byron had ridden home together on the bus and walked the marsh. They had found, among other things that day, two pieces of good, green sea-glass, smooth and glossy, and then they had gone home.

She must have been in the house when it happened, Byron thought, noticing now that the dog's toenails were neatly trimmed.

The lover had been a man called Babe. Whatever his real name was, no one used it. For over a year now, his truck had been appearing outside Mary's house—sometimes for days at a time. At the neighborhood oyster roast, everyone gossiped about what he did for work. Someone heard he built dog boxes and shipped them all over the country. Another heard he welded submarines at King's Bay; "a scuba welder," Mrs. Stanley confirmed with a nod. "Very skilled. I've seen the tanks." Phillip's truck was a rarity. He

came some weekends to take Mary to lunch, or maybe a show. On those days, Babe was on the job.

“He was a real nice guy,” Paul Mitchel told Byron’s father. “A nice guy who never hurt anybody. Helped me put up my Christmas lights this year. On a ladder.”

Once, Babe took Beth out on a kayak. Byron and Mary had watched the adults from the community dock as the boat wound its way through the marsh and out to a dry-land patch. The kayak laid there beached until dark.

“They’re fucking,” Mary had said.

Byron stayed for dinner at Mary’s that night. Babe boiled pasta and toasted garlic bread and sang Tim McGraw, while Mary’s mother chopped vegetables and hummed along. Mary looked baby blue daggers at everyone in the room—chew, chew, scowl. Byron was hooked.

“Byron?” Mary’s voice called from the palm brush-forest. A second later, she broke through the wood line and began walking towards Byron and the dog. Her stringy blond hair was down today and hung all the way to her waist, fine as silk and flying all about her face. Her watch, he saw, was gone.

Mary was a year younger than Byron. Only fourteen. She was a pretty girl, he thought—had always thought. Even if her skin was so white you could see the blue of her veins, especially around the tops of her hips, she was a pretty girl.

Byron had kissed her once two years ago. She had asked him not to do it again.

“Gross, huh?” Mary said, crouching next to Byron and the dog.

“Are you okay?” Byron asked. “I heard.”

“I’m fine. Dad’s in jail.”

“Is your mom okay?”

“Yeah. I was in the house when it happened. At the top of the stairs.”

Byron threw his palm frond sword into the mud flat; the blade sang whiffle notes in the air.

“Gosh,” he said after some time.

“I’m glad he’s dead,” Mary said.

“Why?”

“He was gross. Always kissing on Mom. Feeling her legs when I was around.”

“Yeah.”

“Dad shot him here,” Mary pointed to a place an inch above her right eye. “The bullet went through and into the wall. The cops pulled it out.”

“What happened to the gun?”

Mary smiled. Her teeth were white as soap, and thin. Byron could almost see through her two front ones. He could see the grooves in the enamel, and the serrations on their flat, razor edges.

“I don’t know.”

Byron’s father believed that Phillip had thrown the gun into the river. His mother believed he had hidden it in the house. “He was a carpenter,” Byron’s mother said. “That whole house has secret drawers and hidden closets.” If there were secret closets in Mary’s house, Byron hadn’t seen them.

He began to draw a line in the mud with the toe of his sneaker, circling the dog. He wished he had not thrown the stick.

“I took the gun. When Dad left, and Mom ran away.”

“Why?”

“I still have it,” she said.

Mary walked back to the wood line, and Byron followed, feeling like he was walking on the moon, his knees rubbery and loose.

“He kept trying to get her on his side. He kept trying to be all sweet, and Mom bought it. It was so annoying,” Mary said absently, digging in the growth of an azalea until she pulled out the gun.

It was a small, black revolver with a wooden handle. The kind a detective might carry, or an old city cop. Byron’s grandfather had been a police officer in Detroit. His service gun was framed in Bryon’s father’s office. It was almost the same.

“Why did you take it?”

“Because I needed it. I’ll bury it. No one will know.”

“Yeah.”

Mary walked back to the dog. “But Babe was trying to get sweet and brought this dog to our house. Adopted it. Made Mom name it,” she said and kicked at the dead dog’s spotted belly.

“She called it Ox. Like the story.”

“What?”

“*Babe and the Blue Ox*. Like it was some kind of joke.”

“Oh.” Byron’s hands were sweating and sticking together. He rubbed them on his jeans.

“So when they were all gone, I took the gun and the dog out here.” Mary poked at the dog’s empty eye socket with the barrel of the gun. “Bang.”

“Why?”

“Don’t be mad at me.”

Mary took a couple of crow hops on the mud flat, like she was going to throw the gun, but then she stopped. She walked back to Byron and the dog.

“I should bury it, right? The mud will eat it up. The salt too.”

“Maybe.”

“Dad will be in jail for just ten years, I think. It was in hot blood.”

“I don’t know.”

“He was really mad. I called him about the dog.”

“Yeah.” Byron’s head felt light. He wished he cared where Mary’s watch was. He wished, more than anything, that the gun and Mary and the dog were not real. That they were sea trash and dead gulls, laid up on the tide line and rotting.

“Do you want to shoot it? There’s still bullets. I only used two.” Mary held the gun out to Byron.

“I don’t want to.”

“If you don’t, it’s because you’ll tell,” she said. Like it was a fact, and she had known all along what his answer was going to be.

“I won’t tell.”

“You might.”

“I won’t.”

“Have you ever shot anything before?” She aimed the gun at Byron’s foot, and watched him step back.

“Stop that. And no.”

“You’re pretty afraid, huh?” She smiled that too-thin-tooth smile at him again, and pulled the hammer of the revolver back, pulled it with her whole left hand, until it clicked and held fast.

“No. It’s just not safe. Someone will hear it.”

“Shoot the dog.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You can kiss me again.”

“That’s okay.”

Mary dug in her pocket.

Byron watched the gun in her other hand, the barrel swinging all over, and wondered who this girl was that had found him on the marsh. There was something different about her—something old broken or something new grown. The way she stood close to him. The way she hovered around the dog, and needed to hurt it—to mangle it. Mary had always been strong willed, but she also cried for roadkill. In the summers, she and Byron pulled turtles from swimming pools. They watched birds. For an entire day, they followed a cat that came off a boat in the marina, trying to feed it. To pet it. Through

boat yards and up trees and under trailers, they followed that cat, and Mary had never asked Byron to kiss her.

Mary's hand came out of her pocket with a piece of gum. She popped it into her mouth.

“One kiss. One shot.” She held out the gun to Byron again, the barrel pointing at his stomach.

Byron stepped close to her and took the gun. He aimed it at the dog, at the ugly hole Mary had already shot into its face. Just one, he thought. Then I can go home. Throw the gun in the river and go home.

“First,” Mary said and reached her arm around Byron's waist. She grabbed at his skinny buttocks and pulled him close until his hips touched her own, their foreheads bumping gently. Mary matched her lips to Byron's, and, even as he felt the weight of the gun in his hand, he felt the touch of her tongue on his, the hard muscle of it knocking around the inside of his mouth. Her eyes were open and shocking blue. It was his second kiss, and it was good, he thought. Even with the dog and the teeth and the gun, it was good.

Sweat rolled into Byron's eye and burned until he squeezed it shut. His hands felt miles away, and he wondered if there was a rock buried in the mud that might send the shot into his own face instead of the dog's. He pulled the trigger, and the gun kicked in his hand. The report drove a black bird from an oak. An egret glared from across the marsh.

“You missed,” Mary said.

Byron opened his eyes. There was a clean hole in the mud just below the dog's head. It might have been a fiddler crab's home—one of millions. Relief and nausea rolled through him, his shoulders sagged, and still Mary held him close with her fingers hooked through the belt loops of his jeans.

"Yeah," he said. Blood rang in his temples. He tried to pull away from Mary, but she held him close.

"One more," she said, her breath brushing Byron's cheek. She had a light, sweet smell. "Just one."

"I don't want to."

"I was waiting for you to come out here," she said softly, still holding on to his pants and pulling him now, just a little, so that he had to step with her towards the dog. Like a dance. "I heard the bus and waited for you."

"Mary."

She kissed him again, sucking at his lower lip.

"Shoot it this time. With your eyes open," she said. She reached for the pistol in his hand. She cocked it roughly. She wrapped her hand around his and the handle of the gun.

She smelled like honey. Honey and that gum.

"Wait," he said.

"How do you feel?" she asked. She bent at the knees, pulling Byron by the hand until the pistol pressed against the dog's bloated side. The smell of the dog interlaced with the smell of Mary; it was sugary-sick.

“Wait,” Byron said. He tried to pull away again and could not.

Mary leaned in to kiss him once more. Her finger snaked over his to the trigger.

“Shh,” she breathed.

“No,” Byron said and shoved her away. He leveled the gun at the horizon and fired. He saw there was a boat behind the sights, miles away and cutting its way across the sound. He worked the pistol’s action and fired two more times before he dropped the pistol on the mud next to the dog.

“You didn’t have to waste them all,” Mary said.

“Shut up.”

She watched him closely.

Byron looked back at the dog and imagined Mary leading it out, her spindly hand wrapped beneath its collar, to the mud to be shot and left. Somehow, the leaving seemed worse. He stooped and dug his arms under carcass until he had the thing secure against his body. He lifted the dog.

“What are you doing?” Mary asked.

“Take the gun.”

Mary picked up the gun and followed Byron across the marsh to the community dock. At the dock, she threw the pistol into the water.

Byron turned with the dog and saw that he and Mary were alone. Palms leaned out over the water from the mud bank behind them, as if straining to get a closer look, their root-ball feet clinging to the shore. Dead trees lay snaking and grey just under the surface, all reaching out to the dock where Mary and Byron stood. Soon, they would

break away and float out with the tide, or else sink to the bottom and rot. Some of them were shade trees and some of them beanpoles and all of them were doomed from their first sprout to drown in the Lincoln River. A hard wind blew in off the sound and tore a few fronds from the palm trees, picking them up like dandelion spores and dropping them where it pleased.

Byron held the dog over the water. "Say something nice about it," he told Mary.

"What?" She said from behind him.

"The dog."

Mary was silent.

"Was it friendly?" he asked.

"Yeah."

A man shouted from somewhere on the land above the dock. Someone coming to investigate the shots.

"Byron," Mary said.

"And it was named Ox?" Byron continued.

"We don't have time." Mary grasped at Byron's sleeve.

"Was it a good dog?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Good." Byron let the dog fall into the river. From behind him, he heard the ringing of Mary's shoes on the steel ramp of the community dock. The dog bobbed for a while and then sunk away. Byron heard the shouting of men on the land above him, and then he heard nothing at all.

Eloshn

In a barn marked “Sit-A-While,” a man walks to where I left the Eloshn boy. It’s an old man. He picks the boy up from the table of blankets—turning him like an apple in the light that’s spilling in through the barn doors. He wipes the child’s mouth with one of the blankets before re-swaddling him in my bathroom towel. He rocks the boy and murmurs something and looks around the room until his eyes find mine.

“Is this your boy?” He’s looking at me closer now, memorizing my face. His hair is cut like an old soldier’s, sharp and grey.

“No,” I say.

“Was someone here?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” He crosses the barn floor with the boy.

I am digging and turning my hands in a plastic bin of mated socks, reaching deeper and feeling out the corners for the pair that will convince the old man to walk the other way. He gets close. He leans in to speak.

“Hold him,” the old man says, and presses the Eloshn boy against my chest. He is already releasing his hold on the child before I can speak. “I’ll have to call this in,” he says, and produces a push-to-talk radio that I hadn’t noticed before, the sort with a long antenna that can call out to space.

He starts to chatter, “Waters.Malthus.Waters.Malthus.” He coughs and spits. A response comes and the old man, Waters, is shooting back and forth with whoever is on the other end, telling them all about the boy he found, while the boy himself sleeps on my chest, wetting my shirt with drool and beginning to stir.

This morning, I took the Elsohn boy to the stores in Malthus and left him. It’s Sunday, the day country people come to these kinds of places to shop and pass talk. The Malthus stores are all built in the shells of old barns. They stand in a line and look out over fallow fields, their paint cooked off by the sun and their boards warping out of place. The silos are covered in climbing vines. It is fall, and behind the barns, the Berkshires have the shape of a woman under a mottled quilt, their peaks soft as hips and rolling down to nothing before rising again.

I left the boy in the barn where they sell rocking chairs and those rough blankets patterned in Southwestern motifs. I set him on a stack of those blankets like he was a shirt or something that I’d picked up in the store, carried for a time, and put down. Except, of course, this is different. This is a child, just a few months old.

Even after leaving him, I couldn’t help but watch the way the boy sleeps. Like a man moving in waist high water, he is wading through whatever dreams come to an infant boy, pushing through them with his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth twisting up and smoothing out in the wake of what’s flickering behind those tissue paper lids. Probably just shapes and smells and half-things: half-trucks and half-flies and half-cooked notions of hands and blankets and me.

His probably-mother is long gone, run off and likely living with her uncle or paw-paw or some other man in some place. I don't know. She left, and I took up with Sari, and this morning Elsohn, the boy, showed up in the front seat of my truck with the door open and wispy dragonfly nymphs circling his face, which was all a-sheen with snot and that clear baby spittle. Sari called him Elsohn for the road I live on. Elsohn Drive. "The Elsohn boy," she calls him, so we don't have to give him a proper name.

"A boy," Sari said, peeking into the folds of his ratty blanket when we found him. She was dressed for work, her white coat on and her medicine bag in hand. She'd shown pity and wiped his face. She'd felt his head for fever. She told me to call the sheriff, unless it was mine. Then she got in her jeep and drove off to work. That was her way of saying it: there'd be no happy foundling family of three.

Sari is the kind of woman that every man loves, and a few have tried to marry. I'm holding on to her as best I can, but she'll never stand for this. It's not in the plan. She's always saying how she wants to leave for the desert. Arizona. Southern Colorado. New Mexico. Just some desert. I think she'll go too, as soon as her mother passes.

But the mother is a tough old bird. I pray for her nightly.

In the barn, Waters is making his report into the radio, and the Elsohn boy is crying in my arms. I'm looking at his angry red mouth and trying to ignore how his brow meets his nose like a girl I used to know, or how my father's bent ears droop on his head. I'm trying to imagine a future where I flee to the desert with Sari Segal.

We'll have a wedding on the dunes and a cake the shape and color of a cactus rose. We'll make a flat-bottom sailboat that only rides on sand and sail away with strings of cans sliding around behind us and the lizards skittering after, attracted by the glare of sun on tin.

Waters locks eyes on me. "Stay here," he says, and walks out.

And there I am again with the Elsohn boy in the Sit-A-While, and I have a choice. The same choice I had an hour ago, but now it's different with Waters and his radio. There will be questions. Witnesses might appear from thin air. I think of a woman I made eye contact with earlier in the day. She'd been smoking between the barns. How much had she seen?

I leave the barn with the Elsohn boy, his tiny heart humming against the inside of my arm. I think of the newborn chickens I saw as a boy, how their hearts would beat so frantically, visible beneath the skin.

My truck is parked in the shadow of a willow. It's not far from the barns, and I wonder if I shouldn't have parked down the road and walked in. Through my windshield, I look for Waters and see, instead, the grey face of a storm coming over the mountains. The trailing hands of the willow brush across my windshield in a harbinger breeze. The skies begin to darken as the sun is swallowed up. In October, it seems the rains come every day.

The Sit-A-While stands like a jack-o-lantern in its field, with a barn door mouth and hayloft window eyes flung wide. A worker inside the barn closes one of the windows, then the other. The face of the barn is passive; it does not care if I leave the

child or not. It does not care about anything, or even remember when it housed horses or hoppers or whatever it was that they did on this farm. The barn doesn't care, and the willow doesn't care, and the mountains beneath their quilt of trees don't much care either. The smoking woman agrees: the Elsohn boy could be anywhere or with anyone, but he doesn't have to be here or with me and Sari. He might as well be the Earth's child, and the Earth here is fallow and asleep.

But I take the boy. I can't leave him, and now it's become dangerous to leave him. I take the boy and drive.

The roads around Malthus are winding with thin shoulders and narrow, grassy dips that stand for ditches. We drive along the floor of the valley for a time. The Elsohn boy is asleep in the crease of my passenger seat. His hands are clinching and reaching and covering his eyes and from somewhere in the back of my mind I am reminded that he may scratch himself. I reach over to feel if his finger nails are sharp like a puppy's teeth, but the tips of the boy's fingers are soft and wet.

The body of a deer appears, white in the headlights. I lift my foot from the pedal, too late, and the deer is crushed. The cab rushes in, and when I wake the radiator is hissing vitriol, busted to hell with the front of the truck.

The animal is on the hood, a doe. One of her forelegs is sticking through the spider-webbed and bloody windshield, and I wonder how long I have been unconscious, imagining the deer's hoof slashing around the inside of the truck's cab while I was slack in the seat. I've heard of that—of struck deer cutting men's throats, their hooves slicing faces and eyes.

Across the wreckage of the cab, the Elsohn boy's seat is bare. I sit upright, feeling hungover and syrupy. Feeling kicked around. The truck's blinker is click-clinking, locked down in a forever-left.

On the floorboard, an infant coughs. Glass lays around the Elsohn boy, and, as disconnected from me as actors on a screen, my hands reach out and pick the shards away. I lift the child from the floor. Globes of red bloom across his forehead, and my breath catches before I realize it is my own and wipe it from the child's face with the tail of his swaddle-cloth towel.

I set the Elsohn boy back in his seat and cut the engine. Outside, the front left tire is bent in, and I know the truck is done. I wrap a shirt from the truck's bed around my head. The pain has me in a fog, though the valley air is clear and smells pregnant with rain. Crickets blare and beyond a bridge some yards away, I see the reaching, yellow light of a house and the familiar shapes of barn and silo hulking nearby.

It will take some time to reach the house, but there will be a phone. I'm not sure who I will call. No wrecker. No police, not after running with the boy. Not Sari, who will be coming back from Millerton about now—she is a large animal veterinarian and performs regular check-ups on horses all around the area. Surgeries too. Without words, she told me to leave this boy. To leave him in a basket somewhere. To kill him even, I don't know. To take him somewhere or get used to the idea of raising him alone. With her eyes cut to slits, she told me before she climbed into her jeep without doors and tore down my drive. "Deal with it."

I'll call Sari. I feel the October chill reach my bones, and it occurs to me that, child or no child, there is no one else to call.

Walking with the Elsohn boy pressed against my chest, I pass a mailbox leading up to the little farmhouse and see that it is in the shape of a dolphin. Oyster and conch shells lay in a heap around its base. Apple trees stretch away from the house in rows. Their trunks are twisted and parched. As we walk between the rows, I wonder absently what the farmer might keep in his silo. Or is this one just for show?

The screen door of the house whines open, and a woman steps out. As I get closer, she raises her hand to wave. "Was that you that crashed?" The woman is not very old, though her hair is silver. "Is that a baby?"

"It is. Can I use your phone?" We are in the light of the house now.

"Of course," she says. "I just called the sheriff."

I turn to look back at the truck and can just see the outline of it in the twilight. The line of the road runs along the bottom of the valley for miles. The sky has gone mauve, low clouds fit to burst. I sit down at the dolphin woman's kitchen table. The wallpaper is all shells over yellow sand.

The dolphin woman points me to a blue phone hanging on the wall. "Phone's there. Can I see him? Are you sure he's fine?"

I pass the child to her and dial Sari's mobile phone number—she is the only person I know with a mobile phone. The dolphin woman checks around the boy's head. She looks into his eyes. She holds him up beneath the light in the kitchen, and the Elsohn

boy giggles. I should know her, I think. My house is ten miles away. I should at least know *of* her. But I don't.

Sari answers the phone. "Yes?" she says through static.

"I hit a deer. Can you pick me up? I'm down County 7 from the fairgrounds. Towards home."

"God knows," she says for a curse. And then, "Do you still have the Elsohn boy?"

The dolphin woman lays the child on the kitchen table, and points to my brow, where I've bound the cut. "Can I see that?" she whispers. "I was a nurse."

I nod and feel the cool rush of blood as she unties the shirt. She pulls a medical kit from above a cabinet and begins to clean the wound.

"I have him," I say into the phone. "Come pick me up and we'll talk about it." The line pops and cracks. "Sari?"

"Did you call the police about the truck?" she asks.

"They'll be here soon. I'll talk to them. I'll work it out. Look for my truck on the road."

"Just tell them it's not your kid. Tell the police," Sari says.

"We'll talk. When you're here," I say. The dolphin woman's ear is close to the receiver. She has to hear.

"Okay," Sari says and hangs up. She always does that, always ends the conversation without "goodbye." She says it is a boring tradition, the hemming and hawing back and forth. The little dance people do at the end of a phone call. "Alright..."

Well... Okay," she said in a nasally voice when she explained herself. All of that social posturing annoys her.

I sit back down in my chair.

"How long have you lived here?" I ask the dolphin woman, and wonder how long it will be before Waters arrives and asks me, again, if the boy is my son. And if I lie and say he isn't, what then? Will they test? Take some of my blood and some of his?

"A year," the dolphin woman says and pours a cup of coffee. "My husband and I moved from Mississippi last summer." She raises a spoon to me and I nod. I'm thinking of how far away the mountains are from here. Too far to run.

The dolphin woman passes me my mug. *All weather*, the mug reads in letters made of umbrellas and shells, *is beach weather*. "Cream," she says and rests a pale hand on one covered bowl. "Sugar," she says with her hand on another.

I wonder if she might take the boy. Could I just hand him over? Just like that?

"You two are lucky," she says. "I could hear that crash from here." She shakes the Elsohn boy's hand, the hoop bracelets she wears jangling. The boy is lying in the middle of the dolphin woman's kitchen table—exactly where the turkey would go, or the ham.

"Do you have something we could put him in?" I ask. "Anything will do." Beneath his towel wrap, he is wearing the same black t-shirt that I put him in this morning. It fits him like a judge's gown. Fresh blood shines on the sleeve.

As soon as the dolphin woman leaves the room, I snatch up the phone and dial Sari.

“Come get me,” I say as soon as she answers. “Come get me and let’s get out of here. Go to the desert.” She is quiet for a while. I say: “Hurry up.”

It’s not right, she says, to put this on her. She has her practice. She has her mother.

And it isn’t right. It’s against our rules. This is not easy, peripheral talk before bed. It is not platitudes and placations. We’d been floating along together, here where not much happens and the hard decisions are made for you, and then come along the Elsohn boy and demanded an answer, and we’re not made for that kind of answer giving—hard and clear. Raise the boy or leave him. Right or wrong. That’s why things have broken down now, and Sari, I know, won’t come.

“I’ll come get you,” Sari says. “Be outside.” The line clicks dead.

The dolphin woman comes back a little later with a pair of faded blue boxers and a proper blanket and changes the Elsohn boy. I step out on the porch to smoke. It feels odd to be separated from the child, like when you walk away from your wallet or some other thing you’ve set in your mind as important, but it’s not love and I know that. It’s just that leaving him is wrong.

My father was caught stealing a few cars when he was a young man. Our town is a small one. No charges were pressed, but my father was thought of as a thief for the rest of his life. We were once turned out of a restaurant. He had trouble finding work. He was shamed, I know. He carried it in his walk when we were in public; he sort of slinked around. I asked him once why he didn’t leave town, and he said we had land here.

“I’d be damned if I stayed,” I said.

“It is what it is,” he said.

I’d be damned.

“Won’t you hold him?” the dolphin woman says from the kitchen behind me. She has the boy in her arms and she looks, I can say with certainty, beautiful in the soft light of her beach-themed home. Outside, it has begun to rain. I smash out my cigarette in half of a clamshell that she has on her little porch. There are already twenty or so butts in it. I reach out for the boy and she passes him to me. The storm peppers the tin roof above.

I imagine laying the boy down in a porch chair and sprinting for Sari’s jeep. I picture us speeding away, down and out of the valley, and it’s as real to me as a cactus rose.

The close-set headlights of Sari’s jeep emerge down the highway and begin to crawl towards us. From the other direction, the blue lights of the sheriff appear. The two cars barrel down on each other like knights in a joust, except Sari just drives on past the dolphin mailbox, and the sheriff slows to check the wreck.

“Is he your son?” the dolphin woman asks.

“Yes,” I say. It feels good to tell the truth.

The smell of wet earth rolls in from the fields. The rain is falling in sheets, combing the apple orchard, blowing into the porch to mist us where we stand.

The boy’s eyelashes are long and curled. They snatch water from the air. They are heavy with tiny drops of it, glistening like pearls.

“I’m Karen,” the dolphin woman says over the shower.

“Avi,” I say. I sit down in one of Karen’s white wicker chairs with the boy in my lap, and she settles into another. “This is Elsohn.”

Buddy

They began with frogs. Jim would catch them. That was his specialty. He knew just where to go, and that was his secret. Buddy would do the rest—the cutting and gutting and the stretching, while Jim squatted and watched. They'd been at it for weeks since Sgt. Miller, the biology teacher at Crydale Military Academy, showed them how.

“Smells like booze and hospital beds,” Jim had objected over the body.

“Nah,” Buddy had replied. “Frog's a frog.”

And they had cut up at least twelve since then. Cut them up on the concrete floor of the bathroom in the boys bunk house while the rest of the seventh graders slept.

This morning, Jim found a toad. “A real fat boy,” he said after he pulled it, dazed and stone-like, from his pocket behind the cafeteria. He stashed it in his footlocker until they could find the time to operate. That's what Buddy called it: operating.

When the day's classes and drills were over, dinner eaten and prayers said, the commandant switched off the lights. It wasn't long before most of the boys were asleep. The days were grueling. Buddy waited until he could hear Tom Belechant snoring before he kicked the bottom of Jim's bunk.

Jim's small face appeared in the dark.

Buddy made his hand into a pair of scissors and cut the air.

Jim nodded and slipped down to the floor with practiced silence. He lifted the lid of his footlocker, felt around for the sock that he'd put the toad in, and carried it to the bathroom.

Buddy counted to fifty before he eased himself out of bed and followed.

It was cold inside the bathroom. Jim had the toad out of the sock, and it sat, oblivious, in the middle of room. Jim hunched shirtless on the commode. His collar bones and ribs poked under his skin like poles in a tent.

“Damn, but he’s big,” Buddy said.

“Ayuh,” Jim said. “Biggest I’ve seen.”

Buddy took a pack of cigarettes and a bar of chocolate from the pocket of his pajama bottoms. The boys smoked and shared the chocolate, while the toad hopped into the corner of the room and stared at the wall.

Jim took a drag of his cigarette and coughed.

Buddy cut him a look.

“Sorry,” Jim whispered. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and held it like a piece of chalk.

Buddy’s cigarette flared and hissed as he sucked at it. He took it from his lips with two fingers. “Hold it like this,” he said.

Jim corrected his grip.

“Well,” Buddy clinched the cigarette in his teeth and produced a pocket knife from his pants. “Let’s fetch him up.” He opened the blade and examined it while Jim retrieved the patient.

The toad was laid on its back, its legs kicking. Seemed to Buddy they kicked in slow motion. The frogs didn’t fight much after they spent a day or two in Jim’s sock.

Something about the long dark of the footlocker and the sudden light of the bathroom. Or the cold. The floor was frigid on the boy's bare feet.

Buddy cut into the frog, and opened him up. The single, hanging bulb that lit the room made the grey and purple innards shine like ribbon. The toad croaked for a while before it hushed for good.

With the tip of the knife, Buddy lifted the pink lob of the liver and pierced the tiny heart beneath. Blood filled the chest cavity and ran down to the filmy white tissue that made the bladder. Smoke rose from Buddy's mouth, and he sucked it back in through his nose.

"Rinse," Buddy said aloud.

Jim turned on the sink, made his hands into a cup, and poured water into the frog. Rose colored juice welled out of the torso and snaked its way to the drain.

Buddy made two cuts and flipped the frog's pale stomach out onto the concrete. The liver and heart followed. Then the lungs. Finally, the intestines and spleen. The organs were laid out on the concrete and examined.

Jim rolled his finger over the stomach and examined what squeezed out: grey phlegm and a small fish. This was cause for some talk.

There was a knock on the door.

Jim looked at Buddy.

Buddy shook his head.

The knock came again. Harder this time. "Come on. I know it's you. Hurry up."

It was Peters. Pissing Peters. Woe be the man that wets the bed in military school.

“Shitting,” Buddy said.

“Screw you!” the voice whined back.

“Want to smell?”

Peters’s feet slapped the concrete as he walked away.

When the organs had all been measured and recorded, felt and held, the boys dumped them into the toilet and flushed them. The knife was cleaned. The floor was rinsed. Jim and Buddy washed their hands, crowding the sink and scrubbing at the same time. It was during Jim’s second wash and rinse that Buddy stopped him with a hand to the wrist. He pulled Jim’s hand out of the sink.

“What?” Jim asked.

Buddy was studying the surface of Jim’s hand. He poked at a hard bulge that rose between the bones of Jim’s fingers, like a pinball under the skin. A vein ran along next to the bulge, and when Jim flexed his hand it squirmed and jumped to the other side of the growth.

“Where’d that come from?” Buddy asked.

“Don’t know. Guess it’s always been there.” Jim tried to pull his hand back, but Buddy held fast. He was a head taller than Jim and a deal heavier.

“Let go,” Jim said.

Buddy turned him loose, but his eyes stayed on the growth. “Tumor,” he said.

“Probably cancerous.”

“Shut up.”

“That’s bad news, Jimmy.”

“It’s fine. Let’s go to bed.” But it was, Jim already knew, too late. The frog operations were getting mundane. Too easy. He had hoped that the size of this frog would have made a difference to Buddy, but it was cut up, examined, and flushed away like the dozen that came before it. Last week Buddy had suggested they move on to mammals and he had gone as far as laying out lunch meat soaked in bleach for stray dogs. The stuff had reeked, but Jim threw it away all the same. He liked the secrecy and the thrill of the surgeries, but that was too much.

Buddy took the little blue notepad that he recorded all the frog measurements in off the cistern of the commode and opened it to a fresh page. “Let’s just sketch it,” he said. “We can use that to research it later. Maybe even ask the sergeant.”

Jim allowed himself to be sat down in the center of the bathroom, where the harsh light of the bare, hanging bulb was strongest.

Buddy laid Jim’s hand on the paper and began by tracing around its edges. The graphite left a long smudge against the skin as Buddy slid it around the outline of Jim’s hand, pressing it hard against the hand to get a good shape. It was only a few years ago, Jim remembered, that they’d done this in art class. Making turkeys.

The pencil tip skipped on a burr in the concrete floor and made a slice in the meat of Jimmy’s thumb.

“Ah!”

“Shut it!” Buddy said. The little blood that ran out of the cut soaked easily into the pulpy paper. “You’re fine.” He ripped a paper towel from the dispenser and pressed it against the cut.

“Shit hurts,” Jim said.

“Don’t be a baby.” Buddy was free-handing the bones of Jim’s hand over the tracing, sketching them out in long, quick strokes. The grey pencil lines were doubled in places by the blood left on the graphite. Soon, a fairly good sketch of Jim’s hand lay stretched out on the floor.

It was impressive, Jim thought, as he pressed the paper towel against his thumb, waiting for the bleeding to stop.

There was another knock at the door. “You freaks diddling each other in there?”

It was French this time. He came around most nights. Jim didn’t think he slept.

Buddy went to the door, turned the lock, and stuck his head out.

“You buying?” French asked, but it wasn’t a question. Miles French was the commandant’s kid and knew how to throw his weight around.

French dealt in vice. Cigarettes mostly, though he had once sold a hipflask of whiskey. He got his supply from his mother’s purse—two packs at a time. “And she can’t say boo to my dad because she’s supposed to be quitting,” he told Buddy once. French would sell you a cigarette for a dollar or a pack of twenty for fifteen bucks.

The deal was, you bought a cigarette or one turned up in your footlocker for the commandant’s morning inspection. Contraband like that could mean a couple hundred up-downs in the yard, latrine duty, a letter home; it could mean whatever the commandant wanted, really.

“I’ll take three,” Buddy said, and pulled a piece of folded paper from the pocket of his shorts.

“Money,” French said.

“This should do,” Buddy flashed a very passable sketch of a pair of breasts. In the picture, they were being pushed together by a woman’s hands, cut off at the wrist. Buddy had sketched it from a magazine they’d found over a year ago. The magazine had quickly become legend. It was passed, snatched, and sold from boy to boy, bunkhouse to bunkhouse; a secret the boys of Crydale Military Academy kept for three glorious months, until Randy Snider got caught in the lavatory with it. Jim was sure no one had spoken to Snider since, except to curse him.

So the magazine was gone, but Buddy, a genius as far as Jim was concerned, remained. Buddy and his sketches. They were good as gold at Crydale, and French was Buddy’s best customer.

“I’ve already got that one,” French complained.

Buddy returned the breasts to his back pocket and came back with another piece of paper, this one still folded. When French reached for it, Buddy pulled it back.

“This is special,” he said.

French looked around nervously. There were, occasionally, bunk checks performed by the commandant’s staff, and even Miles French wasn’t invincible. “Let me see it.”

“This is worth more than three of your dirty Camels. This is worth,” Buddy glanced back at Jim and grinned. “A pack.”

“Shut your ass,” French said.

“Remember page 17?” Buddy asked.

French hadn't punched him yet, Jim thought. That was something. And page 17, that was something too. Page 17 had been a full spread, ambitious for even Buddy.

"Let me see it," French repeated.

"Ten first. Ten after," Buddy haggled.

French passed over a fistful of cigarettes, and Buddy passed the paper through the crack in the door. A few seconds passed before French shoved another wad of cigarettes into Buddy's hand and slipped away.

"Pretty slick, Rick," Jim said when the door was locked again, but Buddy had already shifted back to sketching the hand and seemed deaf to anything else. He tore the bloody paper from the notepad and started sketching again on a clean sheet.

"We should get to bed," Jim said.

"Do you remember CJ Waits?" Buddy asked, his eyes flitting from the old picture of the hand to the new while his hands worked over the notepad.

CJ Waits had been a bully. A bad one. Before he'd been expelled, CJ had terrorized near every boy in the school, and he'd been particularly hard on Jim: calling him names, kicking him in the back when he stood at the urinal, bloodying his nose when he felt the urge, always with threats to do worse if Jim snitched.

"Yeah," Jim said. "I remember."

"Remember that thing he used to do at lunch? How he'd sit behind you and wait, wait, for you to start eating, then slap the back of your head. Just slap it a little. A little pop, every time you tried to eat?"

"Yeah."

“And every time it got funnier to him. Every slap. He’d laugh so hard he’d shit.”

Every meal, it seemed, CJ found a way to sit behind Jim, and every meal he played “slaps.” Meals at Crydale were 20 minutes even—never 21, and CJ never took a break. Jim had taken to hiding food in his underwear and eating it, sweaty and crushed, in a locked bathroom stall, where CJ would often find him alone. All part of the plan.

This went on for some weeks until Buddy stuck a fork into CJ’s leg. Jim had been Buddy’s shadow ever since, even after CJ was expelled—for what, Jim never found out. Not that he cared why. He still had trouble swallowing in the mess hall.

“Yeah, I remember. Shut up about it, will you?”

“Just saying. I helped you out there.”

“Yeah,” Jim said.

“And now I think you can help me out.” Buddy set down his pencil. On the paper was the finished hand, and it was one of Buddy’s best. The veins stood out from the frail bones of the fingers. There was a spray of freckles across the back of the palm, and the bulge was depicted flawlessly. It seemed bigger on Buddy’s page, more pronounced. More malignant. Like a wild thing that would continue to grow until it covered the entire hand, unless, Jim thought, it slipped down inside his hand and snaked up his arm, searching for his heart where it would lodge itself like a jawbreaker sucked down a windpipe and kill him dead.

“You want to cut into my hand?”

“No,” Buddy said. “I want to help you. Just like I helped you with CJ. That thing’s no good. Look at it. Come here.” He waved for Jim to come sit down next to him where the sketch was.

“See this vein?” he said. “We’ll stay away from that. It’s getting pushed up by the bulge. I’m worried that soon it’ll restrict the blood. Stop it up. That’s bad news.”

Jim made a fist and watched the vein swim over the bulge. He felt his throat grow reedy. His palms pricked with sweat.

“But we can fix it,” Buddy said. “We’ll make a little half circle cut like this,” Buddy drew a crescent around one side of the bulge, so that the pocket of the “C” held the growth. “Then we’ll just peel back the skin a little and let the pressure off. The thing will probably pop right out by itself.”

“No way!” Jim said a little too loud.

“Shut it!” Buddy said. “Idiot.”

“You’re not cutting me with the frog knife.” Jim said quietly.

Buddy chuckled. “Of course not. We’re not doing it tonight. And we’ll clean the knife up good. We’ll get a new one. This is huge. It’ll take time. Materials. Planning.” The bright light of the bathroom made Buddy’s pupils shrink to sunken dots in his mossy green eyes, but they were dancing now—sparkling and huge—darting around the room as he planned out the operation.

“Why don’t I just go to the infirmary with it?”

“You could,” Buddy said, “but it would cost. Not you, but your parents.”

“And the doctors, they’ll want to study it too. They’ll take you away, keep you in a hospital room plugged up to machines for weeks.”

“They’ll use needles to numb you first. Before they cut it out. They’ll probably go up through your palm to get at the roots of it. You won’t be able to throw a baseball for beans after that.” Buddy held up his own hand, palm down, in the air. He pushed up on his palm, beneath where the bulge was on Jim’s hand. They flesh between Buddy’s finger bones rose a little each time he pressed from the other side. “They’ll cut right through. It’d be easy.”

Jim considered all of this. Buddy knew that Jim’s parents didn’t have much and that he was sensitive about it. Jim was at Crydale because of an aunt who worked in the office. But the rest made sense. Jim hated hospitals. His tonsils had been removed in fifth grade and the memory of his night in the Starr County Hospital was still fresh. The smell of bleach on the sheets and the cold kept him awake all night. A surgery like this would likely keep him overnight, especially if they cut all the way through his hand. He imagined the long needle they would use to put him to sleep. The cold liquid from the syringe pouring into his veins. And then he would just have to lie there all dead and wait on them to cut him up. That would be the worst part.

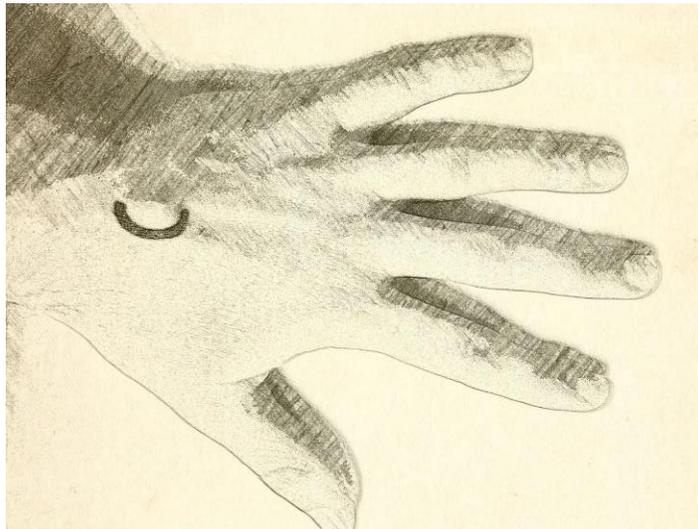
“You wouldn’t have to use a needle?” Jim asked.

“No way. I know something that’ll make it so you don’t feel a thing. And we’re just cutting the skin. Easy stuff.”

“Yeah.”

In the dark of the bunk house, Jim studied his hand.

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A week later, Buddy jerked his head for Jim to come over during recreation period. He was under the pull-up bar, the tall one that nobody could reach. “Look at this,” he said, and pulled the edge of a squeeze-tube from his pocket. “The real deal: ‘Numbing Gel.’”

“Where’d you get it?”

Buddy smiled and tapped the metal tracks of his braces. He’d just gotten back from an emergency appointment.

It had been a good week for Jim. There’d been no late nights with Buddy, and, truth be told, Buddy had been quiet all week. “Preparing,” he had said seriously. There were notes about what the bulge was likely filled with all around the edges of the sketch Buddy had made of Jim’s hand. Buddy had even made a couple sketches of what he thought the growth would look like once it was out of Jim’s hand. Most looked like used chewing gum or blurry grapes.

Billy also filled a folder with other sketches, things he had copied from the library's anatomy textbooks: the tiny parts of the throat, the musculature of the hand, the winding path the intestines made from the belly. But even with Buddy occupied, he and Jim had spent a lot of time together.

After this week's lesson on pond ecology, Sgt. Miller asked Jim to stay after class. "I just need Jim," he said, though Buddy remained to skulk near the jars of fetal pigs and deer.

"Everything OK?" Miller asked.

"Yeah," Jim said. Ever since CJ Waits, the sergeant had been keeping tabs: buying him sodas, asking if Jim was happy here.

Miller was a young man and handsome. Jim hoped he wasn't screwing his aunt.

"What'd he want?" Buddy asked when the boys were in the hall.

"Just asked if I wanted to redo the quiz essays," Jim lied.

Under the pull up bar, Jim slipped a Garter Snake from his pocket. It was a baby, no more than four inches long. A curiosity, Jim hoped. "What do you think about this boy?" he asked, grinning.

But Buddy seemed to not even notice the snake. "Let that thing go before it bites you," he said. "We're past reptiles."

Jim lowered the snake to the ground and watched it make delicate "S" cuts in the sand, dashing for some high grass nearby. "I've been thinking about the operation," he said. "I think I want to keep the bump."

Buddy smiled. "I know you're scared. It's okay. You won't feel a thing. Look." Buddy turned away from where the commandant sat talking to a group of boys holding jump ropes. He pulled the tube of gel from his pocket and squeezed some onto his hand. "Look at this," he said.

Jim leaned in to see, and Buddy wiped the gel across his cheek. "Damn it!" Jim said, smearing the gel with the back of his hand.

"Rub it in," Buddy said.

Feeling stupid, Jim complied. Soon the entire side of his face felt cold. The passage of the wind caught him by surprise. When he touched his cheek it felt doughy and alien under his fingers. His hand too, felt strange where it had touched the gel.

After a while Buddy pulled Jim behind a tree and pinched his cheek. Jim felt nothing. "Do it again," he said, amazed.

Buddy pinched him again, then slapped him.

Jim couldn't feel a thing.

They met that night in the bathroom. Buddy brought the frog knife, which, he assured Jim, had been sterilized. He also brought a white uniform undershirt, the one he had worn that day, along with a fresh, rolled pair of socks and his leather belt, the shiny black one that the cadets wore with their dress uniforms.

"Sit," Buddy said and motioned to the commode.

Jim sat. His stomach was in knots and threatening to empty itself. He wanted to go back to bed. He had to pee.

“Hand,” Buddy commanded.

Jim put his hand out, and watched as Buddy emptied half the tube of gel onto the top of it.

“Rub it in,” Buddy said, and Jim began to massage the gel into his skin, making sure to cover the bulge, while Buddy marched around setting up his operating room. The undershirt was spread under the sink, next to the drainpipe. This would be the operating table. The belt and socks were laid on top of the shirt. The blue notepad was opened to a clean page, and a pencil, freshly sharpened, was laid on top.

Buddy washed his hands and smoked a cigarette, dropping the ash into the dripping sink. He was finishing his third, and the room was foggy with French’s Camels before he called Jim over. After a little fussing over the best way to position things, Buddy settled on having Jim sit under the sink in a half-crouch.

“Let’s not do it,” Jim said as Buddy was adjusting the belt, deciding where it should be lashed and how tight. “I don’t want to do it.”

Buddy sighed. Sweat sat in heavy beads on his brow and ran openly down his chest where dark hair was just beginning to sprout. “We don’t have to do it if you don’t want to,” he said, still working at the belt that bound Jim’s arm to the drainpipe.

“Ok,” Jim said. He felt he guts uncoil. He shoulders relaxed; he hadn’t even known they were tight.

“Is it numb?” Buddy asked and flicked at Jim’s hand where it dangled, the arm securely fixed in place.

“It’s way numb,” Jim laughed. He flapped his hand in the air and felt the bizarre sensation of his flesh jiggling, as if detached, on his bones.

“Put this in your mouth,” Buddy said, holding the rolled socks.

“What?”

“Put it in your mouth. If it hurts, you might yell.”

Jim’s pulled at the belt and it held fast. He reached to unfasten it, but Buddy pulled his hand away.

“What are you doing?”

Buddy reached to cover Jim’s mouth.

Jim ducked away. “Stop!” he said. He tried to push Buddy back, but his good hand was lashed to the pipe, and, anyway, he was hunched awkwardly under the sink, unable to stand. He kicked out at Buddy, but the bigger boy was already too close.

Buddy overpowered Jim easily, holding him by the throat to stifle the scream. Pinching the nose until the mouth dropped open and then shoving the socks into the mouth.

“Quiet in there,” French said through the bathroom door.

But Buddy barely heard him. His left hand clamped the Jim’s nostrils closed, while the right fended off blows. He watched Jim’s face turn from red to blue, watched the whites of his eyes wash over in spider webs of blood and the pants darken with urine. It was alarming. It was scary. But after a while, after some time, after the initial struggle was done, the patient would tire, would sleep. Then Buddy could work. Then he could finally work.

Big Stars

Marlin had been stalking through the high, clinging fennels for the better part of the morning, dragging the exhausted hound-pup behind him and cursing fiercely every time it gave a whimper or yip.

The dog pulled weakly, straining for a pine stump piled with scat.

Marlin yanked at the leash, a pink floral thing—his wife, Amanda, had picked it out. She picked the dog and collar both. Even after Marlin warned her: “Hounds are howlers,” and she ignored him: “I know, but still.”

The hound was, for its part, born of the finest Redbone bitch Marlin had ever known. A Redbone with a coat like silk and honey-brown eyes. It would bring a dove back to your hand still breathing—at peace, even, with its black eye half shut and its blue lid showing plain, as if the dog’s mouth had lulled it to sleep. What sire had mixed with the Redbone to make this litter, no one could say, nor would Freeman acknowledge. Marlin guessed a stray had gotten wind of the hound and slipped the fence. A Shiba or Chow Chow.

A Redbone’s fine, blush coat was a thing to behold, the way it hung on a hound, bristling on the ridge of the back where the muscles bunched the skin. Amanda was seduced by it—all that red fur, almost gleaming on the mother in the low light of Freeman, the breeder’s, garage, where it gave suck to the litter.

But within weeks, Amanda's dog had handfuls of extra skin. Great rosy rolls of the stuff formed fluffy jowls beneath its muzzle, around its head, down its chest. It looked like an emaciated, red lion on a good day, but after a few hours in the fennels, following the bends of the river and the two sets of shoeprints that meandered alongside it, the dog resembled something emptied from a lawnmower catch. The paws were caked over with mud and spring growth, the muzzle bled from a patch of thorns, and the proud, if otherworldly, Chow Chow mane was heavy with sand-spurs and seed pods, like a wreath with Christmas baubles.

Marlin stopped to smoke, and the hound lay down to wheeze.

From half a mile off, Marlin could hear the logging trucks on the highway. Hauling wood from Dargin to Hoover. It was loud, satisfying work, the cutting and stripping and loading. This land was Billy McClur's, and cut last year. Billy's plot backed up to the main road, and above that, on a sunny hill, was Marlin's house. Each morning, taking his coffee on the porch, Marlin would look out at the sprawl of Billy's pine-land stretching to the horizon. It was his pleasure to cut it all down.

The river whispered from its shallow bed beneath the fennels. The water, trickling over the rocks and stumps overturned by the timber crews. The crews would leave what stumps they could, those from the ten-year pines and the stray hardwoods that didn't pose much issue for the truck axels, but some they would tear out—by request or by accident—those, they would throw down in the sand-bottom river. Some went easier than others.

On a job cutting roads in Alabaster, Marlin had seen the roots of an oak, possibly a hundred years old, snap the arm of a tractor when the driver pushed it too hard. Oil sprayed. The great metal arm dropped. After lunch, the driver of the rig was fired, and the dirt road laid around the stump.

Ahead in the fennels, a woman squealed. It was, Marlin thought, a pretty sound. A sound it had been some time since he had heard. Another squeal and now a man's voice, velvet smooth. A young man.

Amanda's dog's ears perked up, and it rose from the dirt to pad into the brush towards the noise where it whimpered and tugged against the leash.

Marlin pulled the animal back to him and ran his hand across its ribs, making a shushing sound as he did. The dog licked his hand. There had been a time when that sort of thing softened him, the simple kindness of a dog. The callouses on his hands scraped across the dog's fur and left hair hanging from the tips of his fingers, and the cruelty of the day sickened him some. Marlin pulled at the dog's ears. He let the thing gnaw his wooden fingers. It was a puppy and quick to forgive. But Marlin's anger remained.

Amanda had broken the news to him in the bathroom of Drawlings Elementary. She dragged him in from the hall, the summer smell of her perfume strong in the confined space. The muscles in his neck pricked with anticipation. In the past, this had been a place for love.

"I'm pregnant," she said.

"Hey, now." He reached for her, finding a hip under the cool cotton of her dress.

"No." She parried his hand. "It's not yours. And I'm leaving tonight."

The bell rang. The locked was turned. There was nothing to do but go back to work. Amanda said she was sorry, but this was love.

“Love doesn’t ask permission,” she said.

In the freezer room, behind the kitchen, Marlin shared the story with Greg, the chef. They hung their hairnets from a rack of milks and traded pulls from a ketchup bottle. It was filled with something Greg had made at home.

“I guess I should have told you,” Greg said.

“What?”

“I didn’t know nothing, of course. But there were rumors. Ms. Hawkins saw her drinking with Sparks Holloway one night.”

Marlin sucked from the bottle. “The hell does she know about it?”

Greg reached out for his turn, but Marlin wasn’t done.

“Nothin,” Marlin said.

It was a Friday, and the kids were jumpy as is, pushing in the lunch line. Pechuchi was getting it bad from a group of boys. Whatever his first name was, Marlin didn’t know. The school uniforms only had the last name stitched.

One boy, he’d tap Pechuchi on the shoulder, and Pechuchi, knowing the drill, would look the other way, thinking to catch the boy. But no matter which way he looked, another boy in line would slap him in the nuts. Pechuchi would flap his arms and say something shrill, the line would shuffle forward, and the tapping and slapping would start again.

The main slapper had Frost stitched on his shirt, and this one Marlin recognized. He was Scotty Frost—the assistant principal’s boy and recent star of Drawlings Elementary’s production of *Into the Woods*. Scotty had played the prince. He had a voice like a champagne flute, owing to his prepubescence. *The Chronicle* ran the story with Scotty on the front page, faux-velvet tunic open to his naval and chest hairs drawn on with an oil pen.

The big deal with the play was its director, Sparks Holloway, who had acted in a few B-list films in recent years and was from the area. He was a few years younger than Marlin, but there had been some overlap at Drawlings High. Sparks had braces, Marlin remembered, which was no small thing. Braces meant money.

Amanda had painted the backdrops for the play and made the costumes, working late into the night for weeks.

Marlin guessed that’s how she and Sparks got along, and looking at Scotty Frost’s hair, prematurely styled in the Hollywood vogue, the ridiculous silver chain around his neck, and, yes, the thick braces lining his malicious smile—he was sure of it. It had happened in the auditorium. Sometime after smearing oil in tight little squiggles of hair on Scotty Frost’s baby-smooth chest and filling ten yard canvases with fairy-tale forests, and possibly after some wine, his wife was stuffed with Sparks Holloway’s child.

A boy with a snot run dried on his face tapped Pechuchi on the shoulder.

Pechuchi extended his plate to Marlin for a serving of Jello and, to his credit, didn’t keel over when Scotty Frost kicked him, full force, between the legs.

How Marlin managed to get from behind his steel cooler carts and Plexiglas sneeze-guards so quickly, he couldn't say, but, even months later, after the firing and the lawsuits and the costly settlement that kept him out of jail, he remembered the satisfying thwack of the Jello spoon against Scotty Frost's jaw.

There had been a brief and ugly divorce. Their daughter Elly, driving for a year now, appeared briefly at meals and evaporated again—a ghost at sixteen. Amanda moved in to Sparks Holloway's motel room. Marlin found work with the lumber crew.

Amanda never returned his calls, but a month later she showed up at his door. Sparks had left town early one morning, neglecting to pay his motel fee. Amanda was showing by then and the feelings dredged up by seeing her in that state and needing him again turned something over. They patched things up. The baby was born. They bought Amanda's hound-pup soon after.

Marlin crept forward through the fennels, leading the dog by the collar.

Soft-stalk plants, fennels and dandelions and thorns and weeds of all natures, shoot up within days when the timber is taken out of a place. Inside of six months, they can be six feet tall. Marlin had no trouble staying beneath the cover of pale green growth. The fennels tore from side to side like a woman's hair in the wind that howled down from Marlin's hill, and Marlin crept on.

Through a part in the weeds, he saw what he hoped he might: a black Mustang. Sparks Holloway's Mustang. In high school, Sparks had driven his father's red '67, and last year he had driven a blue car of the same year, but Hollywood money meant

changing colors at will. This one was a '92 and hideous. Like a VCR on wheels. The hubcaps were sooty with brake dust. The windshield had a crack. The car was parked under a poplar tree that had survived the timber crew's culling by its proximity to the stream, which it leaned over with dignity.

The high school was putting on a new production this year. One of original design that would be played in venues all over the county. Word had spread that Sparks would be directing the show.

Amanda had been without remark when they'd read it together over dinner a week past—a ritual of theirs. The dog had been in her lap, nosing, every now and then, up to the ledge of the tabletop and trying to lick at the edge of Amanda's plate.

Amanda read the article silently, her finger to the page, and Marlin read along, following the point of her cherry nail.

"Ought to shoot him," Marlin said.

"And they'll haul you off to jail," Amanda said.

"It'll be a crime of passion," Marlin said, his mouth full. "I think I love him."

"Stop."

"No, really. I feel it. I love him to death."

Amanda cleared her plate from the table and ran the sink, the hound-pup at her heels.

"Love doesn't ask permission," Marlin said.

Amanda slung her plate into the sink. A piece of ham landed on the floor, where the hound fell upon it.

“Get that meat,” Marlin said. “Don’t need her learning to eat people food.”

“Screw off,” Amanda said.

The table slid a foot when Marlin stood and dumped his plate into the dog’s bowl, still mostly full. “Fuck it. Fine.”

“Animal,” Amanda said.

“Yeah, we’re fucking dogs.” Marlin took her by the neck and forced her down—first to the table, then to the dog’s bowl, into the gravy and the oily stink of the kibble. When she stopped clawing at his hands and trying to stand, resigned to cry in the mess of the bowl, Marlin stroked the back of her head. He drove to a small bar in town. When he returned, Amanda was gone.

The hound remained, the bowl licked clean.

Beneath the poplar, on a blanket, Marlin saw the blonde head of Sparks Holloway bobbing and nodding, the pale hands flashing in the air as they maneuvered through some great joke. Amanda’s red hair was splayed out over the roots of the tree.

Marlin slipped his pistol from his waist band and pulled the hound close. Through the high weeds, he emptied a magazine into the side of Sparks Holloway’s ugly car.

The driver’s window shattered. The frame heaved as a tire blew.

The lovers crawled behind the Poplar tree, while Marlin shot clean silver holes into the door of the Mustang. He marveled at how they seemed to appear in an instant—as if willed there. The air stank of powder.

Marlin dropped one magazine for another and shot out the headlights before he stepped from the fennels, lifting the hound by the loose skin of its neck.

The dog squirmed and kicked. It twisted to bite.

“Damn you! Whore!” Marlin screamed.

But Amanda wasn't there. Elly peeked from behind the Poplar tree, barefoot in a dress—white in the face. Behind her, a blonde boy, maybe sixteen, was tearing through the uneven stumps of the cut field, making for the fennels and the highway beyond that. Marlin had seen him at the house once before, through the narrowing doorway of Elly's room—a door where, when he pressed his ear to the wood, he could hear Elly hissing into the phone: “Come get me from this place.”

Marlin stood at the foot of the poplar and felt the hot blood and adrenaline pumped from his muscles and replaced with something cool and heavy. Big stars blossomed behind his eyes, and his knees felt weak. Elly's mouth was opening and closing, but she wasn't saying anything that he could hear. Marlin put the gun to the hound's head, and waited for the sun to explode. For something to stop him dead.

Settled

After it's finished, and I am cradling the back of her head, lost in the easy rhythm of her breathing, the gentle spasms beneath her skin, I am reminded of finding her face-down and floating, of pulling her from the water, of pounding her chest until, heaving and sputtering, she came back.

"Sarah," I say, but she's already rolling to her feet, collecting her Levis from beneath the window frame, and pulling the legs right-side-out.

"Clear out," she says.

I pass her socks from beneath the covers. "Come with me. Just for now."

"No time for that."

Bill, her husband, will be an hour yet—gone for supplies. Even after his affair with Daisy-Come-Again, Sarah will stay. Maybe because of the affair, she will stay. She picks at her hair, correcting yellow strays, tucking them behind her ear. She applies her makeup with a hard, pecking hand.

I retrieve my shirt from between the pillows, my hat from the floor.

Bill's mother glares from her portrait on the dresser, gold-rimmed glasses high on her nose, wide as a snorkeling mask.

"Help me make the bed," Sarah says. "Then clear out."

I duck into the woods and listen to the helicopters sweep the house. Then I'm threading through the wild pines crowding the little slope running down to the highway. My truck is hidden in the thick of them. There's gritty bird shit on the windshield and needles piled on the hood.

On the long straight of Luther Street, I can see Bill's truck coming a mile off, and I know he sees mine. We roll on, arms hung out the window like knights in a tilt, fingers flexing in the wind or else tight in a fist. Bill's truck stops level with mine.

"You got a bathing suit?" Bill asks.

"Hm?"

"A bathing suit," he says again.

"What?"

I leave him with that.

Bill's a dentist for money and a carpenter for fun. He's added a 200-square-foot sunroom to his house. The walls are plate glass under crown molding and pine. Sarah's filled the place with Peace Lilies and indoor palms.

If not for Sarah, I'd welcome the flood that's coming to tear through Issock and bury it under a hundred tons of silt. The glass walls of Bill's house will shatter. The plants will drown. Fish will hang in clouds beneath the cathedral ceiling and drift to the kitchen. Freshwater clams will nestle in the foyer. Maybe an eel will sleep in the bed.

Though, to hear Bill tell it, none of that will happen, and his house, the pride of Baddock County, will float.

Bill Selmy is well-connected. He's done a root canal for the mayor, dug a cellar for the chief of police. When the judge's wife knocked out all her teeth ice-skating, Bill screwed in a set of porcelain veneers. He built the town a gazebo in the park with the names of every war veteran posted around the roof in hammered brass, six Selmy men among them. And because Bill says the pontoons he's installed beneath the foundations of his house will float the whole towering mess of it above the flood, people believe him.

The media ran with it. News crews drove out to hear Bill explain how the wedge-nosed pontoons—"like the prow of a ship!"—will part the waters of soon-to-be Lake Issock and lift his house high above their heads. Experts were dispatched. Measurements were taken. And when the right heads had nodded and the right papers were signed, Bill was granted his floating castle along with limited rights to the lake, should his house survive.

Three hours before the flood, I'm lying on my back across a table in the 1-2-Diner and chewing one plastic straw after another until they're nothing but flattened shreds. The town is all but empty, and the tornado sirens are going off every ten minutes for the holdouts to flee. The only cars on the road are the deputy sheriffs', but the diner is dead and I'm parked out back, so they don't bother me. I smell meat patties rotting. The sun cuts through the split blinds and warms my eyelids. I've settled to die.

The door jingles, and Roe Freeman, the sheriff proper, comes to hover over my table. His gut blots out the light of day.

"Diner's closed," he says.

"Curl up and die."

“I’ve got some chicken,” he says, and sits down with a box. “Set them wife-y woes aside and share some chicken with your brother.”

It was his ease and appetite that made him my mother’s favorite.

“Time was, she’d have left with me,” I say.

“Time was never.”

“If I had asked last year. After the affair,” I say. I fish in the box of bones. The breasts, thighs, and legs have been picked clean. I take a wing.

“But you didn’t ask her.”

I shake my head. “Just didn’t ask right.”

When Roe was in diapers, Sarah and I were fogging up my mother’s Malibu. There’s something special in those initial fumbblings that he can’t understand. A sacred trust, like love for the self—something. Roe’s great love was a horse named Betty’s Thigh that won him a Pick-6. Sarah and I married the week after the race and divorced before the winnings were spent.

After Sarah found Bill in his office, the patient chair reclined and Daisy-Come-Again white-knuckling the headrest, she stayed with me for a month or so. She left when I proposed again. That was my mistake.

“Camera on one of those hello-copters saw you leaving the house,” Roe says. He makes a buttermilk biscuit disappear in two bites.

“I can’t say goodbye?”

“That what you were saying?”

I turn my hand into a bird, and outside the flood sirens wail.

“Yeah.” Roe wipes his hands on the drapes. Then he puts three rounds from his .38 into the back of the cash register.

I roll onto the floor and listen to Roe belly laughing. He passes me his baton and, because I know he means well, I let into the cake display first and the framed poster of the “So Sweet Apple Pie” after that. We trash the stools and the countertop, and for a minute all memory recedes, but then Roe starts ripping off the tops of the tables and it comes back: Sarah serving coffee and pie to the out-of-towners, while I turned sausage at all hours of the night. Some nights there’d be no one but us. We’d pass maraschino cherries mouth-to-mouth over the counter.

Roe gets his hands on a broomstick and chants for a pitcher.

I line up across the floor and start whizzing mugs into the tile wall while Roe heaves the broom. High. High. Low. I lob one underhand and he connects, bellowing like an ape.

Roe sits down. His tan sheriff’s shirt is soaked through. “Better?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

In the parking lot, my truck is nowhere to be seen.

“You’ll find it at Showman,” Roe says, and waits for me to walk to his squad car. “You drive,” he says, and when I climb into the cab he handcuffs me to the wheel. It’s his party trick.

The Crown Vic lumbers up to speed while the AM radio garbles about Bill’s house and history in the making. The birds, I see, are flitting from tree to tree and calling

out. I've read that before floods, hurricanes, even tornados, stampedes of wild animals can predict disaster. I imagine the unnatural surge of the water pulling birds from the air and consider that the ground will fill first and how great the unending bulk of the new lake will feel above the centipedes and moles—the crushing weight of it driving them deeper then snuffing them out.

Between the low, brick buildings of town, what cars weren't worth the move line the streets. Clunkers mostly, of which there are a herd in Issock—hand-me-down Civics with crushed-in bumpers and trucks sitting on two or more donuts with their tailgates broken off.

I'm surprised to see Spaceman Howl's Buick parked outside the boarded-up drug store. His Shepherd bitch, Molly, sits in the passenger seat. In his youth, Spaceman was a pilot of jets. Because he was said to have shot down several enemy planes, he became briefly famous. It came out eventually that Spaceman had actually spent his years in the service coiling hose on an aircraft carrier, but not before he capitalized on his fame by way of a fairly lucrative pool digging service—a venture I joined him in. It was shit work and long days driving a Bobcat, shoving around the dirt that Spaceman would scoop out of folk's backyards, but I had a family, and it got me out of the diner.

The first pool I dug for Spaceman was my own, which seemed like a big idea at the time. It had a shallow end that stretched for ten yards and faded down to nothing, so the water met your toes like waves on a beach. I cut a deep end fifteen feet down and set a spring board overtop; in school, Sarah was a diver.

We were proud. I had one of Roe's deputies make me an oil drum smoker that would cook five chickens end-to-end. We had people over for drinking and tooling around. Everybody'd bring their kids and dogs. Our boy, Harlan, was easy to spot. Only three, but a head of strawberry curls to shame Shirley Temple.

Things got comfortable. We had a pile of friends. The drinking got a little out of hand, for Sarah and me. I woke in the middle of the night once, Sarah and I were stretched out in a lawn chair made for one, covered in morning dew. Friends of ours, the Beesons, had taken Harlan for the night. We had a good laugh about it the next day. A week later, Sarah and I came to under similar circumstances, but the Beesons were out of town. We ran crazy for a few hours after that, looking for the boy. I was going door-to-door with Roe when Sarah found his body behind the pool ladder.

Spaceman stumbles out from the pharmacy holding a few plastic bags and shades his eyes to see who's rolling down the street.

I've got the window down, so it's no trouble to spit.

The deputy sheriffs are reporting "all clear" through the radio in Roe's cruiser. They're pulling back to Showman's Hill, a swell of granite like the top of a bald man's head. Its grey rise peeks above the clay and pines and provides a vista. People abandon unwanted animals there, to the extent that other people leave food. Over time, a good sized pack has formed, its members ranging from Tom Ellison's unwanted litter of Doberman's to my own aunt's aging Maltese. Elsewise, it's a decent place to take a girl.

The deputies are excited and chattering about the flood. They've set up a viewing party at Showman's with picnic tables of sweet tea and chicken. Two deputies are already there, fending off the circling pack.

Deputy Watson asks Deputy McCain if he's brought cans or a keg. Deputy Clarke has found paper plates at the Save-A-Lot. No one, it is discovered, remembered ice.

A watermelon rolls at Roe's feet on the passenger's side, and behind the steel cage that bisects the cab, I see gallon jugs of tea jiggling alongside Stouffer's mac and cheese. The smell is intoxicating.

We pass Bill's house and I can see him outside. Sarah is on the porch in a fringe coat. She'll be wearing Western boots underneath.

I suck my teeth.

"Deal with it," Roe says. "Her choice."

"That's nice," I say.

A group of strays crowds in the road ahead, chasing and nipping and otherwise grabbing ass. Some are spotted and a few are black.

We get closer and the features of the dogs begin to sharpen. A Jack Russel has a limp. A black mutt chomps a ball. Most are deer dogs with tagless orange collars—the kind that sometime get lost on big hunts. The county leaves boxes for them on the side of the road. I wonder if there are any locked up in the boxes now, padding around in circles and waiting to drown.

Bill's lab, Frank, emerges from the pack and steps into the road, barking and wagging his tail.

I hit the brakes, and a gallon of tea kicks the back of my seat.

Frank shows a toothy grin. "School's out for summer."

"Pull around him," Roe says.

I putt around to the left, but Frank steps in the way again.

"Hell," Roe says. He reaches over and honks the horn. Nothing happens, and he honks again.

Franks stands to lay his paws on the hood of the car and barks some more. He's looking through the glass. "School's out forever."

"Ho!" A man calls from behind us.

I look into the rearview. It's Bill, jogging up to the cruiser waving his arms over his head like he's signaling a rescue plane.

"Appreciate it," he says, holding Frank by the collar. "Roe. Johnny."

Everyone in town calls me J-Hook except Sarah and, unfortunately, Bill. I've always suspected he did it for spite.

"You got all the animals loaded up in that house, Bill?" Roe asks. "Two by two?"

Bill laughs well. That's his best feature, Sarah says: his laugh. His jolly, fucking laugh. He leans in to rest his hands on the windowsill of the cruiser so that he's about a foot from my face. "Just the ones I like," he says.

"What are you still doing down here, Johnny?" Bill asks.

"Dog catching," I say and regret it because it makes Bill laugh again.

"We've got room in the back yet," Roe says. "Get you and Sarah and the dog in here."

“No, no,” Bill says. “This is the real deal.”

“Mhm,” I say.

In order to smile wider, Bill has to actually open his mouth. “Ah,” he says.

Frank’s ears perk up, and he takes off running, ripping, to my delight, his collar from Bill’s hairy fist.

We all turn to see Sarah walking out of the pines and into the road, pushing Frank down when he jumps.

“Bill,” she calls.

“Ayuh,” Bill says and taps the roof of the cruiser. “You boys get out safe.”

It occurs to me, as I watch Sarah standing by the roadside, that she is not afraid. She is impatient—ready to be off. She is not spinning her ring the way she used to. She is not pulling at her collarbones the way she did when she was in a stew, or waiting for a phone call. She is not that ashen woman who I knew to sit kneading her scalp in the bathtub before a trip to the grocery store.

She looks fine. She is practically glowing, waving at Roe’s cruiser while she waits for Bill, and now walking away with her hand stuck in the butt pocket of Bill’s jeans. She won’t know I’m in the car if I don’t say something. She’ll walk back to Bill’s house to have a screw or pet her dog or, otherwise, wait to die.

“You got any ice?” I call out the window to Bill.

“The hell?” Roe asks.

But obliging Bill is already waving us on to where his driveway opens into the main road, and Sarah, I see, has removed her hand from Bill’s back pocket and made it

into a slender pink hook, like Monkeys in a Barrel, and she's hanging it on the ledge of her collarbone. And she is, I know, troubled by the thought that she need not resign herself to this—that I might not allow it, that I am in Roe's cruiser, and that *I* am still here.

“You gonna stop this flood?” Sarah asks from the across her kitchen counter.

Roe and Bill are in the garage filling a cooler with ice.

“Where were you?” my mother asked Sarah at Harlan's wake. She never asked me, then or in the bitter years that came after. Not even when it was Sarah floating.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask.

“It's going to be a whole new place, after the water comes,” she says.

Sarah stretches her arms out atop the granite. The pink of her veins, the branching paths they make through her pearl flesh, matches the stone.

“Just gonna be clean, flat water. Not even gonna be any fish in the place for a few years. That's where I want to live.”

“We can leave here just fine,” I say. “Don't need a flood for that.”

“I want it, Johnny,” she said. “To see it buried.”

When Bill is away and Sarah calls me—I know it's to go back to the old times, to travel with her eyes squeezed shut and her hands against my back. She wants adolescent fingers on her skin. She wants to be folded in my mother's backseat. She wants the skinny fry cook inside of the diner waitress and the pool digger inside of the woman

sunning in her front yard. She wants anything besides the poor, sad mother and father with the dead little boy. She'd drown to forget it, to wash it all away. She'll drown again.

"You ever thought of what'll happen to Harlan?" I ask. "When the water comes."

"That's a rotten thing to say."

"I've been thinking about it."

"Can't see what good that does," she says as she wipes the counter clean of lunch crumbs.

A helicopter flies low over the house, and the silverware chatters in its drawer.

I see a mouse running along the wall behind Sarah's back. It's got a big wad of something stuffed in its mouth, and it's standing up to paw at the glass walls and doors—looking for a way out.

"Well, I've been thinking about it, and Roe and I moved him."

"Jesus, Johnny."

"I didn't open the box, but—"

"Jesus."

"He'll be up behind Showman's, where he won't get washed out. Should stay above the water."

"You shouldn't have done that," Sarah says. "Shouldn't move a body."

"It's a good place."

The sirens kick on again and it's their swan song, high and sharp.

"Let me show you where."

"Not a church?"

“It’s better than a church,” I say. “There’s a row of azaleas. There’s a great big poplar. All those friendly strays stay up there and watch over the place.”

There’s a part of me that hates to bring Harlan into this, to even say his name. He was here for just a little time, when Spaceman and I were selling pools as fast as we could dig them, and the money was rushing in. I had Sarah quit the diner as soon as we knew there’d be a kid, and she grew distant, obsessed with making ready, with buying this and that, with rearranging and baby proofing the house.

When the boy came, I took as many jobs from Spaceman as I could. I packed lunch and dinner. I worked under electric lights and came home well into the night. And when the boy died, for me, it was like he was never there. There was always a place where he might have been; a hole. But it was Sarah I missed. It was my wife.

“Let me show you,” I say.

Bill and Roe come into the kitchen.

“Let’s go,” Roe says.

“I’m asking Sarah if she’ll come pay her respects,” I say.

“Respects to who?” Bill asks.

Roe hooks my arm and pulls me towards the door where the mouse is, still, looking for a way out.

“To Harlan. He’s been reburied. Thought she should see where.” I say it to everyone, but I’m looking at Sarah.

She finds something to pick at in the sink.

“Flood’s in an hour or less,” Bill says.

“I’ll take her back in a boat. Or a submarine.”

“No,” Sarah says and leaves the room.

Bill isn’t laughing now. “I think you’d better go,” he says. “There’ll be time for that later. If she wants.”

It occurs to me that I’ve never really looked at Bill in the face. He looks old. He’s well-muscled and taller than me by a head. The skin around his eyes is raccoon-tanned from his sun glasses. He could be mayor. He could have a different Daisy-Come-Again every week. What makes a man like that want to drown on national TV? What makes a man like that want my wife?

Bill puts his paw of a hand on my shoulder and leads me, with Roe’s help, to the big glass door of his house.

Outside, Frank is barking and snarling at the helicopter over the house. The air is humming with the noise of sirens and engines and wind. The trees are bending where they stand.

“You’ll kill her,” I say.

“No,” Bill says. “I won’t.”

Roe pulls me down the driveway. Beneath Bill’s house, the pontoons stand in long lines, their steel noses upturned. There are dozens of them, and they look tiny. Miniscule. They cover the house’s belly like the legs of a millipede.

I imagine the waves, great white waves, atomic bomb waves, rolling down the cleared and waiting street. I see them blowing Bill’s truck away, throwing it like a toy. The skinny pines are fodder. I see the trees and the truck and the water colliding with the

pontoons, swallowing the house whole. The floats break and race away. Their silver backs breach the surface. From Showman's, the deputy sheriffs point like whale watchers on a pleasure cruise.

Sarah looks down on me from her bedroom window. The blood in her face has drained away. Her eyes are red. She looks like the girl I married, and she looks like a ghoul.

A voice comes from the helicopter, deafening and robotic. "Clear the area."

I wave off the pilot and slip into the cruiser. Before Roe can get to his side, I've got the old girl in gear and whining, back, back, down the driveway, and now on, on towards Bill's house. The pedal is hard against the floor, and Roe is beside the road, waving like a madman for me to "Stop! STOP!" But the cruiser is hungry for the pontoons. She wants to taste their silver flesh. She wants to plow into them and tear through their papery tin skin, one after the next, all the way down the line. She wants to be my voice when I say, one more time, "Please. Don't wash away."

Background Reading

Short Fiction:

Alexie, Sherman—*The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

Bender, Aimee—*Willful Creatures: Stories*

Boyle, T.C.—“Caviar,” “Chicxulub”

Brockmeier, Kevin—“The Ceiling”

Carver, Raymond—*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, What We Talk About When We
Talk About Love, Cathedral*

Diaz, Junot—*Drown*

Ford, Richard—*Rock Springs*

Franklin, Tom—*Poachers*

Hannah, Barry—*Airships*

Johnson, Denis—*Jesus’ Son, The Largess of the Sea Maiden*

Lahiri, Jhumpa—*Interpreter of Maladies*

Leach, Dan—*Floods and Fires*

Márquez, Gabriel García—“A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”

Moore, Lorrie—*Birds of America*

Packer, ZZ—*Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*

Pancake, Breece DJ—*The Stories of Breece DJ Pancake*

Rash, Ron—*The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth, Burning Bright*

Saunders, George—*CivilWarLand in Bad Decline: Stories and a Novella*

Singleton, George—*The Half-Mammals of Dixie*

Tower, Wells—*Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*

Watson, Brad—*Last Days of the Dog-Men*

Wolff, Tobias—*In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*

Novels:

Camus, Albert—*The Stranger*

Faulkner, William—*The Unvanquished, As I Lay Dying, Absalom, Absalom*

Gardner, Leonard—*Fat City*

Morris, Keith Lee—*The Dart League King*

Poetry:

David Bottoms—*Armored Hearts*

Larkin, Philip—“The Mower”