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cottonwood

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Fall 2002

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1989
oil on canvas
34″ × 40″
Courtesy the artist
From the exhibition Spiritual Journeys: The Art of Robert Sudlow
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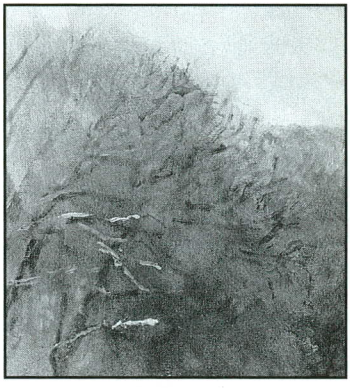

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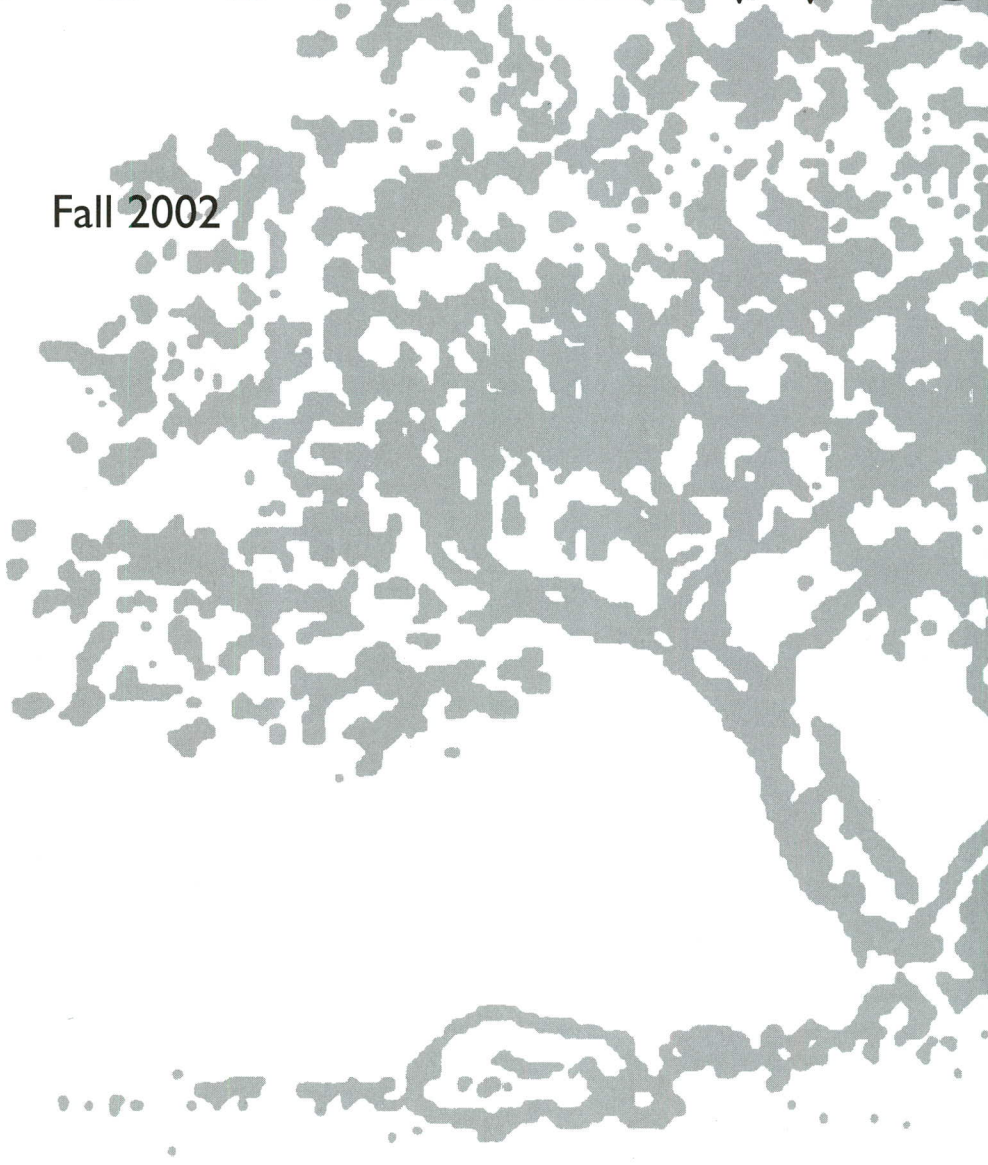

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Contents

Jeffrey Voccola	Life On The Sun	1
Neil Nakadate	Time and Place: 11/11/01	17
Joanne Lowery	Execution in Minsk, 1941	18
Cecile Corona	The Hurricane Party	19
Andrew Kozma	After the Storm	33
David Garrison	California	34
Kim Chinquee	The Edge	35
Robert Sudlow	Portfolio: Spiritual Journeys	44
Alison Townsend	Going for Apples, Oak Glen, California	50
Tom Hansen	Arrested in Minnesota: Three Lakes	53
Jennifer Johnson	The Lottery: March 1970	55
Tom Larsen	9/12	56
Jessica Rosenfeld	Shooting the Square	64
Virgil Suárez	To the Crow Picking Mud Snails in a Rice Paddy	66
Peter Myers	Seated Bather	67
Deborah H. Doolittle	The Scarecrow	81
Jesse Lee Kercheval	Fence	82
Jerry Gabriel	Weather	83
	Contributors	99

Life On The Sun

In the year before I entered high school, I watched my father and Adam, my brother, slowly pull apart. Their arguments, for the most part, revolved around my father's expectations of Adam and his grades at the community college he had been attending for the past few semesters, which were never good. My father, who had worked twenty-two years in the moving business, had come to believe in the great advantage of an education. He had expressed since we were small the importance of college, a belief that would eventually find its place in me. But even at the time, I knew their arguments were fragments of something larger, something that had more to do with my father than Adam.

I was in that stretch of life where larger evils were just off in the distance. I would listen from my bedroom as my brother came home late at night, coughing the nicotine from his lungs, and I was sure life was more exciting outside the boundaries I had always known. But with my father and Adam constantly toe to toe, I wasn't in a rush to get any older. Things were heating up and I figured we had enough changes coming.

So when my brother announced at dinner that he had decided to quit school, the initial reaction from all of us, my mother, my father, and me, was silence. None of us moved so much as a hand to mouth. Adam was slumped in his chair and I watched him finger the rim of his glass.

"Okay," my mother said, twisting her hands in a napkin. She positioned herself between my father and brother and glanced in my direction. "Okay."

My father sat at the end of the table with the newspaper draped across his empty plate and did not look up, but I could see he wasn't reading. His focus ended at a much farther distance, as though he were looking through the paper. Then, very slowly, he turned the page. "The hell you are," he said.

"It's not for me," Adam said. "I'm going to get work somewhere. In a shop or something."

My father leaned back in his chair. "A shop?" he said. "Well, I've got to hear this one. A shop." He crossed his legs as if he

were getting comfortable. "Why the hell would you want to do something like that?"

"I'm not happy at school." Adam took in a breath and looked at my father for the first time. "It's all a lot of bullshit that I don't need. At least if I'm working, we can start saving some money."

I saw the muscles along my father's jaw tighten. "We?" He nodded. "I see."

My father realized what we all did at that moment—that Adam was speaking of his girlfriend, Melissa. Melissa spoke loud and fast and had almost no lips at all, but I could see, at times, what my brother found attractive in her. The way she touched his hand for no reason, her long stares while he spoke. Sometimes, when I watched them, I found myself hoping that, one day, a girl would care for me as much.

When Adam mentioned Melissa, my father seemed stopped in his tracks. Maybe he sensed that he had lost his leverage, that he no longer had any influence over Adam. Whatever the reason, he waved his hand in a dismissive sort of way and began to leave the room.

"I've heard enough," he said.

Adam stood and faced my father, and though his eyes were glazed, he seemed confident to me. "I've already decided," he said. "It's no big deal."

"Hold on," my mother said. She patted the air with both hands. "Can we sit down for a moment? Let's just sit down."

My father stood about an inch or two shorter than Adam, with hard, suntanned arms. He clamped onto Adam's shoulder and the veins bulged from beneath his skin. "I'm through," he said. "This is the same thing over and over. I'm trying to keep you from breaking your back all your life." He spoke close to Adam's face. "If you want to do things the hard way, you go right ahead. But you do it without me. I want no part of it."

Adam turned his eyes to the floor. "I'm sure," he said under his breath and he jerked his shoulder from my father's grip.

My father took a step to keep his balance and had a look of surprise like I had never seen on him. His face was drawn taut. He pulled back as quickly as if it had been a reflex and swiped my brother, open palmed, on the side of the head.

Adam stumbled backwards. He lost his footing and tipped

back over his chair, thudding to the floor. He didn't look up at my father, who stood over him with that same paralyzed expression.

"Charlie," my mother said. She grabbed onto my father's arm.

"It's a waste," my father said. "A goddamn waste." He pulled away from her and headed upstairs.

My mother knelt beside Adam and I rose from my chair. It was the first time I had ever seen my father raise a hand to either of us. With a single gesture, he had exposed a volatile side of our family, one that gave way to unsettling possibilities. Adam scrambled to his feet and rushed out the front door, and suddenly the room was silent. My mother fought to catch her breath, and I had goose bumps up my arms as if the room had turned cold.

That night I turned in bed, trying to make sense of the two of them. Adam's was a life that I hadn't the experience to understand. I traced the corners of my bedroom ceiling, trying to see his reasons for quitting school, his need to make life difficult, more conflicting. Once, when he was thirteen, Adam was grounded for two weeks because he refused to apologize for throwing ladyfingers at our neighbors' dog. My parents made him stay in his room, hoping he would give in, but he never did. This was how Adam operated. He would take a lifetime of complication to have his way.

I don't know how long I had been lying there before he walked into the room. He turned on the light and closed the door behind him. His eyes were red and puffy, and his hair was pasted against his forehead with sweat. He sat on the floor with his back to my dresser.

"Give it up," he said. "I know you ain't sleeping."

I squinted at the light. "Daddy still pissed?" I said, and he nodded at a Yankee pennant on my wall.

"I'd stay out of his way," he said.

He grabbed a tennis ball off the floor and bounced it a few times. "Yanks don't have it this year, Chump," he said. "Baltimore has them beat, player for player."

The cuffs of his jeans were soaked to the calves and his sneakers were crusted with mud. I thought he might have been running through the woods.

"You really going to quit school, Ad?" I said.

The ball took a bad hop and shot under the bed. Adam rested back his head. "It's gonna happen to you, Dale," he said. "He'll find something to ride you on. He'll be even worse by then."

I noticed his hands trembling. Adam was almost six years older than I, and just then, I realized I had never once seen him cry. The idea never even seemed possible to me. He sat crouched in the corner of my room, trying to mask it, but I saw the light glimmer around his eyes.

He pushed himself off the floor and switched off the light. "Good luck," he said.

The next day he was gone.

I wish I could say that I felt something other than relief the next morning, when I woke to find his room stripped of his things, but the fact was Adam's disappearance did little to change our relationship. It wasn't that we disliked one another, but we were at such different places in life that it was difficult for us to make any real connection. In fact, at the time, I was almost relieved. I figured his leaving might make things easier on all of us.

In the wake of my brother's departure, my father took on an uncharacteristic silence, barely uttering a word to either my mother or me. He started working fewer moving jobs and spent much of his time hanging around the house. He'd mounted some new shelves in the garage, and more than once I saw him resting against our Buick, gazing at them with his arms crossed. I didn't think he was a bad man, or that he'd handled Adam with anything but good intentions, but the loss he carried around drew sympathy from me, maybe even pity, so that summer I made it a point to wake early and head out for the day, to avoid him almost altogether.

I spent most of my time with my best friend, Frank, who lived about half a mile down the road on a wide, sloping plot of land. Frank's yard had scattered patches of dead grass and was strewn with rocks, and every morning I guided myself up the steep driveway to his house. I did this so routinely throughout the summer that I didn't have to knock on the screen door for Frank to come outside. The sound of my footsteps on his back porch was usually enough to let him know I was there. On this particular morning, I expected to see the minibike that we'd bought from

his cousin, Stan. When I opened the back gate, Frank was hunched over it with a wrench in his hand.

"She running?" I said.

Frank looked over his shoulder, his hair hanging in sweaty strings. The rain from the past few days had left a thick, lingering humidity and made everything you touched feel as though it were perspiring. "I had her going for a little over two minutes last night," he said.

The bike had been sitting in Stan's garage for years. He'd found it abandoned in the woods near his house and eventually rebuilt the entire engine, though I had yet to see it run. The frame had flaking patches of rust along the joints and some folded towels tied down for a seat, but Stan had told us it was ours for fifty bucks and Frank walked it all the way across town to his backyard.

Frank dropped the wrench and stared at the bike with his hands on his hips. "Wait here a second." He ran up the porch steps and into his house.

I felt the ground with my palm and sat. In the six years I had known Frank, I had probably been inside his house no more than two or three times. He had two older brothers. Ty was supposed to be a senior in high school and went to Westfield for three years until he was transferred to the SAFE program—a place they sent kids who didn't want to go to school. He didn't have a driver's license, and during the summer evenings he would walk by my house on his way home. He knew me through Frank, and if I saw him during the day he might give me a quick nod, say what's up, and those moments made me feel older, more significant. But at night, Ty's eyes were small and distant, and even if I called his name he would move past me with indifference, his boots padding along the pavement. Once, I saw blood running down his arm.

Frank's oldest brother, Gill, was almost thirty but lived at home as well. He didn't have a job and spent all of his time in the house, which was the main reason, I assumed, Frank had never asked me inside. Rumors circulated the neighborhood about Gill. Some said that he had messed himself up on drugs when he was young, fried his brain. Others thought he had some kind of illness. What was certain was that at one time (a time before I knew him), Gillie was a normal kid and something happened to change that. And though I was curious, I never asked

Frank about him. I had seen Gillie more than once, though, through the screen door or during the winter mornings that I stood in their kitchen, waiting on Frank before school. Gillie had tired eyes and a heavy slouch and wore a thin white helmet that looked like it was made of Styrofoam. Each of those few times I saw him I felt genuinely surprised, as if he'd always been something I imagined.

Frank stepped from the house carrying a metal toolbox. He set it beside the bike and popped the clips. "With a small engine, the problem's either fuel or spark," he said. "It really doesn't get more complicated than that."

I sat there while Frank worked on the bike, and though I knew nothing about engines and wasn't sure if Frank knew what he was talking about, I felt that we were working toward something. We took turns pulling the starter cord, trying to get the thing to turn over, but the engine only shuddered a few times and choked itself out. Finally, as the sun slipped behind the trees that lined Frank's yard, the engine caught, releasing a heavy cloud of brown smoke. It hummed for a moment and sputtered to a stop. Frank gave three more strong pulls and let the cord snap away from his hand.

"Piece of shit."

"She'll run," I said. "We almost had it that time."

Just as I grabbed the cord and secured my foot against the frame, Frank's neighbor, Joely, stepped through the bushes that divided their yards.

"I wouldn't pull that thing again," she said.

I had known Joely only from a distance, saw her step from the car to her house from time to time. She wore a pair of cut-off jeans and a necklace of wooden beads that swayed above her breasts as she walked. I watched her ease her bare feet over the rocks in Frank's yard.

"You two are driving my mother crazy," she said.

Frank wiped his eyes with the back of his wrist. "Tell your mother she'd better get used to it. Once we get this thing going, she's going to be hearing it all the time."

"Like hell," Joely said. "She'll have the cops here every hour if she has to."

"That's okay. I know where you live. If Bernice wants a war, I'm ready."

Joely smiled. Frank's confidence amazed me. Joely was a few

years older than us, and while I stood there, scanning a list of things to say, he spoke as easily as if he were talking to me.

"We were just about to call it a day," I threw out, and Joely looked at me for the first time.

"You're Adam Reiner's little brother," she said.

Hearing Adam's name made my shoulders tighten. "Yeah," I said.

She studied my face, looking as if something had come to mind. "I remember him from school."

"I'm surprised," Frank said. "You hardly ever go."

She slapped Frank on the shoulder and he grabbed her hands, lacing his fingers in hers. The two began to push against one another and Joely let out a playful scream. I watched the muscles in her legs tighten as she struggled to keep her balance. Her hair dropped in front of her eyes.

"We'll be at Westfield this year," I said and both of them stopped and turned to me.

Frank released her hands. "Yeah, girl. Why don't you give us a ride so we don't have to walk every morning."

Joely wiped a pebble from her heel and backed away from us. "Please," she said, and slipped through the bushes without another word.

We stood there a moment, staring in the direction of her house, and Frank put a hand against his chest. Without looking at me, he met his palms as if he were praying and said, "We'll be attending Westfield this year."

I crouched down and charged him, running my shoulder into his gut, and Frank held me off by the shoulders. He sprayed a laugh.

"Come on, Dale," he said. "Let's see you take me down. This time I'm pullin' for you."

Frank was entirely too strong for his age. He had very little mass to him, a person you could categorize as trim, but both his brothers had grown to be large young men and you could see promise of that in his arms alone. He'd already earned himself a reputation as someone you didn't mess with, and I was happy to have that going for us.

I managed to hook my leg behind his and throw all my weight against his chest. Frank fell on his back and I covered him, trying to pin him to the ground. He tried to push me off, but he was laughing too hard and it made him weak. I struggled

to keep the upper hand with everything I had. Frank took in a breath and held it, and I felt his arms tighten around my neck, the strength in his legs as he tried to roll me on to my back. Even though I knew it wasn't real, wrestling with him was frightening. There were times when I was afraid I might have used too much of my own strength and caused an irreversible reaction from him, where the fight could turn serious. But Frank always seemed to know the limits of what I could take.

I held him down by the shoulders and Frank's eyes suddenly widened. I felt someone grab me by the arms and throw me aside. When I looked up, Ty had Frank in a headlock. He gave Frank three sharp jabs to the face that I could tell were held back a little, yet still seemed to hurt like hell. He mumbled something and Frank said no.

Ty got up and walked toward the house without even looking in my direction, and I knew that whatever happened had nothing to do with me. He snatched his denim jacket off the ground and headed inside. Frank pulled up his shirt and dabbed a spot of blood from his lip.

"What the hell was that?" I said.

He forced a smile, but I could tell he was rattled. "I called him a pussy yesterday," he said. "But my mother kept him from killing me. Guess I had that coming." He held out his hand and I pulled him up by the wrist.

We locked the bike in his shed, and I headed back to my house to clean the grease from under my nails. I had already lathered up to my elbows with dishwashing detergent when my mother entered the kitchen. There were faint crescents under her eyes. She leaned against the counter, a coffee mug cupped in her hands.

"Aren't you a mess," she said.

"We were working on a bike," I said. "It's still not running, though."

"Oh," she said, though she didn't seem to be listening. Then she said, "Have you heard from your brother at all?"

"No," I said. "How would I hear from him?"

"I don't know. I just thought maybe he called while your father and I were out. You would tell me if he did, wouldn't you, Dale?"

I nodded and that was the truth. Adam had been gone for nearly two months, and I don't think I would have kept something like that from her, even if he asked me to.

"It's been too long," she said.

"I'm sure he's okay, Mom. He'll call soon."

She clicked her fingernail against the cup and flashed a weak smile.

Just then, my father entered the kitchen with circles of sweat under his arms. He pulled a glass from the cupboard and I moved aside so he could fill it from the tap. "I need you to work for me tomorrow morning," he said. "We've got to make a delivery."

I watched the water spiral into the drain. Helping my father on these runs was Adam's job. I had only been along a few times as an extra hand. "Okay," I said.

My father rubbed the back of his neck and leaned against the refrigerator. "Good man," he said, grabbing my arm. "We'll get some muscle on those bones of yours."

My mother emptied her cup into the sink and walked out of the kitchen, and I could see my father watching her.

"And clean up that sink when you're done," he said.

That night, Frank and I sat amidst the trees in his backyard, tugging on the beers we had stolen from my basement. Frank sat on a cinderblock with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He had dug a hole with his boot heel and was trying to start a fire. The night sky was overcast, so dark it took on a purplish hue, and a lighter band of clouds stretched out across the horizon. Frank lit some paper and held it under a few pieces of kindling. They released long, wavering ribbons of smoke.

"Catch, damnit."

"It's too wet," I said. "It'll never burn."

He passed me his cigarette and took a long pull from his beer. "I'll get it," he said. "These were buried in the brush. They're not as damp as the others."

I took a drag from the cigarette and felt myself slip into the first traces of a comfortable buzz. I watched the fire wrap around the kindling. The wood popped and hissed as the flames lapped against the bark.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed the kitchen light from Frank's house. When I turned to look, someone was standing in the doorway, staring out at the yard. I knew, from the silhouette, it was Gillie noticing the fire. He stood there a moment, slope-shouldered and completely still, not even turning his head. Then he disappeared.

I wondered how Gill stayed in that house day after day, how he could stand to watch the world from a distance, from behind a pane of glass, never taking part. I pictured him sitting in front of the television, gazing vacantly as the blue light reflected in his eyes.

"What's wrong with Gillie?" I said. The words slipped out as easily as exhaling.

Frank poked at the kindling with a stick, and for a moment I wondered if he'd heard me. I blew smoke over the fire and tried to think of a way to take the words back.

"What'd you hear?" he said.

I shook my head.

Frank readjusted on his seat, folding one leg beneath him. "He had tumors on his brain," he said. "They were benign, but he's had a bunch of operations. Every time he gets a little worse."

It was odd hearing Frank use the word benign, as if he were reading from a book he didn't understand.

"The medication is what makes him the worst, though. Fucks with his chemicals, and all." He leaned toward me and in a softer voice said, "He even shits himself sometimes."

He dropped the stick into the fire and wiped one hand with the other. "The thing is," he said, "those operations didn't do a damn thing to help him. They made him worse, really. He still has seizures. Bad ones, sometimes. Now he isn't much use to anyone." He was talking with his hands as if to reinforce this point, but I felt it wasn't me he was trying to convince.

"That's rough," I said.

"I wasn't even in kindergarten when it started. I can barely remember Gillie when he was normal. It messed with Ty, though. They were kind of close. My mom says that's why Ty's always getting into trouble. And I'll tell you, I believe it. I can't remember the last time he looked Gillie in the eye." He threw a small piece of wood onto the fire. "This thing's going now."

Behind me, there were footsteps in the leaves. Frank moved the two remaining beers behind a rock and I stamped out my cigarette. As the person stepped closer, I saw that it was Joely.

"You can smell that smoke all the way to my house," she said.

"I'm surprised your mother hasn't called the goddamn fire department," Frank said.

Joely stared at the fire with heavy eyes. "To hell with her."

Frank nodded to get my attention. He pinched his thumb and index finger and held them to his lips like a roach. "Why don't you sit down before you fall down," he said.

Joely sat beside me. She crossed her arms just below her breasts and drew in her knees. I tipped the ash off my cigarette with all the conviction I could gather.

"It's cool out here," she said. "I hope it clears tomorrow." She had light indentations below her eyes that showed up as gray smudges in the firelight. She let out a yawn.

"Want a beer?" Frank said. He handed her the one he'd been drinking. Joely took two long pulls and handed it back to him.

Frank dumped a handful of leaves onto the fire, and a wide cloud of smoke spread out around us. He held an imaginary guitar and said, "Ladies and gentlemen. Are you ready to rock?" He moved his fingers up and down the neck, his mouth drawn open in a kind of mock concentration.

I threw a clump of dirt at his head and he ducked around it. Joely didn't laugh. She picked at her thumbnail and turned to me with a sober look. "I heard about your brother," she said. "How he took off."

I wasn't surprised. For all I knew, Frank could have told her. Ours wasn't a neighborhood where words were held back, not for the sake of anything. "Yeah," I said.

"Where is he living?"

"Got me," I said. "We haven't talked to him since."

"He's probably partying his ass off," Frank said. "Now that your old man can't ride him anymore. I bet he's celebrating."

Joely poked at the ground with the toe of her clog. "I saw him, you know."

"You *saw* him?" I said.

"He was getting gas on Bridgeport Ave. With that girl."

"Melissa," I said.

"Yeah."

I looked down the hill where the road trailed into town. I had never pictured Adam so close. My mind had him driving as far from us as possible, settling into places I had never even seen on television. I said, "I thought they would have left town, at least."

The fire had nearly burned itself out, and Joely turned her body to me, her eyes more alert now. "You ever close your eyes and look right at the sun?" she said. "I mean stare straight at it through your eyelids? If you do it long enough, it almost feels

like you're right there, in the middle of all that light. That's all you need. You can feel your heart slow, right then. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah," I said, vaguely. It seemed that Joely had been thinking about this for some time, and I wondered if she had been fighting with her mother.

Frank looked at us as if we were crazy. "I don't know what the hell you guys are talking about," he said. "Alls I know is I gotta piss." He stood and raised his eyebrows at me, then gestured towards Joely. As he moved away from us, the rain started. It came down slow at first, with heavy drops that snapped against the leaves.

"Do you think she's pretty?" she said.

"Who?" I said, but I knew what she meant.

"Your brother's girl. Do you think she's prettier than me?"

But before I could answer, Joely inched closer. She took my hand and held it against her breast.

For a moment we stared at one another, then I moved my hand and kissed her. I thought this was what she wanted, but there was a tightness in her lips, forced movements in her mouth that left us out of sync. There would come a time, much later in my life, when I decided I had missed her intentions, that she'd only taken my hand so I could feel the beat of her heart, but these days I think, no, that's not right. These days I think maybe Joely was trying to distance herself from whatever was troubling her, hoping to feel some of the light she was talking about, or, perhaps, that all she wanted at that particular moment was to be close to someone, and this was the only way she knew how.

But in my inexperience this was an opportunity for sex or passion, or, for all I knew, love. I pulled her close and she ran a hand up my back, settling her chin on my shoulder. She shivered once and I breathed her in as the rain spattered on the dying embers.

The next day, I woke even earlier than usual to help my father. Every month or so, he took his customers' unwanted junk to the dump, but if the load had even the slightest value, he and Adam delivered it to Apa, an Indian man who owned a used appliance shop down in Longshore. Apa had an ongoing contract with my father where he paid a hundred dollars for a truck full of used household items, no matter their condition or worth.

The deal benefitted my father in a number of ways. He avoided the dump fee, which the company reimbursed him for, was paid by Apa, and only had to part with twenty dollars for Adam's time.

My father drove with the radio off, and I listened to the junk shift from one side of the bed to the other as we took the corners. He pulled something from his pocket and tapped it against my knee.

"Here," he said. "You're going to need this to open some of those boxes."

I took the pocketknife from his hand and slid out one of the blades.

"You can keep that," he said. "Just be careful with it."

"I will."

He patted me on the stomach. "You eat something before we left?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm okay."

"Good man," my father said.

When we arrived, Apa was waiting for us in the parking lot. He pegged open the side door as my father backed the pickup toward him.

I hopped out of the truck and when I turned around, my father's boss, Tom Hallard, was standing beside Apa with his arms folded. If my father was surprised by this he didn't show it. He moved past me and said, "Start unloading," though he was looking at Tom Hallard. I said hello to Apa, who just nodded, and the three of them headed inside.

I dropped the gate and started to empty the truck. It was a small load, and I figured I could have the truck emptied in a matter of twenty minutes or so.

When I carried the first box into Apa's backroom, I could hear my father and Tom Hallard. I stood beside the doorway, listening with my back to the wall. They were arguing about something I had missed, and Tom kept saying *never again*. My father repeated that he had always done his job. When I went back to the truck for the next box, my father stormed out behind me. He waved his arms at nothing in particular and was muttering to himself.

"Come on, Dale," he said. "We're leaving."

I had a box of dishes in my arms and they clattered as I tried for a better grip. "I'm not done," I said. "There's a lot left."

"Forget it." He slammed the gate of his pickup. "Let's go."

I stood with the box in my hands, unsure of what to do. His face was red and he yanked the door open. "I said let's go."

I set the box on the curb and got in the truck.

My father floored the accelerator just as I shut the door and drove like a man in pain. He took corners at high speeds and nailed the gas pedal at the first glimpse of a green light. The truck bounced at the slightest dip of the road.

"Work like this makes for a hell of a life," he finally said over the engine. He stabbed at the dashboard with his index finger. "This is what I'm trying to keep you from. This is what your brother could never understand."

There seemed to be a whole conversation going on inside his head, one that I didn't feel I should interrupt, so I only watched the road. He said, "You know, I never pushed him away. It wasn't what I wanted. It was his choice."

"I know," I said.

He took in a long breath and released the air through his nose. Then he looked at me and in a single violent motion swung the truck to the curbside. We jerked to a stop. "You and your friend have been stealing my beer, haven't you?"

I didn't move. Frank and I had been careful to take only one or two at a time, certain it was going unnoticed.

My father shook his head. He reached across my lap and popped the door handle. "Get out," he said.

I sat there, unsure of what he was saying, and he nodded at me.

"Go on," he said. "I know you think I'm being hard, but it's what I believe is right. You're gonna learn, son. I'm trying to do what's best for you."

I stepped out of the truck, and when I closed the door he spun the tires in the gravel and left me to walk home. In some ways I was relieved to be away from him. I could keep out of sight until he cooled down. What bothered me was that he knew I had taken the beer, probably for days, yet he saved his anger for the right moment, a time when he could take his frustrations out on me. And this little game he had constructed trivialized my life. I could live with us being at odds, but my father had made this battle on his own terms. I didn't stand a chance.

I walked home with all of this turning in my head, and when I got to Frank's house I headed up the driveway. As I walked through the back gate he was moving the minibike to the shed.

"We've got to get rid of this," he said. "My mother's on my case. Damn thing ain't running anyway. I don't know what the hell Stan did to it."

I walked beside him as he straddled the bike into the shed. He shoved it toward the corner. It rolled a few feet and tipped over, crashing into the wall.

"I bet he won't give us our money back, either," he said.

He moved around the yard, picking up tools and flinging them into the shed. They sailed through the air and crashed into a clutter of old bicycles. I didn't help him clean up; I didn't even say a word. I only stood there with my hands in my pockets, listening to the tools bang against the aluminum walls. And watching him, I thought about how Frank had called Gill useless and how it had felt wrong. Frank still had two brothers in his life and he didn't give a damn about either one. It bothered me to think maybe I was no different.

As Frank tossed a wrench into the shed, I noticed a purplish bruise at the base of his neck, a kind of bite mark. And although I never allowed myself enough time to question him, or even consider a different possibility, Frank, I was certain, had been with Joely. In fact, it occurred to me that it was not the first time, and I felt like a fool for not realizing that.

Oddly enough, I can't remember thinking about Joely at all. I don't even know if what I felt was jealousy, but I reeled back and hit Frank in the jaw.

Frank dropped to one knee and looked at me as if he were waiting for an explanation. I swung at him again and he grabbed my arms and forced me to the ground.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" he said.

I stared at him while I caught my breath. I could see him trying to make sense of this, searching for what he'd done wrong, and, for whatever reason, he let me go and started to walk away.

When his back was turned I scrambled to my feet and threw my arm around his neck. Frank broke free and swiped me across the face and I fell to the ground. He dropped his hands. "Are you crazy?" he said.

I wiped my mouth but there was nothing there, then I got to my feet and ran. I heard Frank calling me back, but I ran as hard as I could up the street. About halfway between Frank's house and my own, I realized that I had nowhere left to go. I leaned against a telephone pole to catch my breath while my mind

flashed with everything around me. Thoughts moved through me so quickly I had trouble holding on to them, and at this point it's probably easier to say what I didn't know: I didn't know that in the years to come, my father and I would struggle for control, but that in no way would it match the problems between him and my brother. I didn't know that, in time, Adam would return to our family, years later, after he and Melissa had married, and although there would be much difficulty, he and my father would eventually settle on what you could call civil. I didn't know that Adam would never set foot in a classroom again or that I would receive a master's in engineering. I didn't know that Frank and I would pretend our fight had never taken place only to drift apart in high school, or that now, over twenty years later, Adam and I would never find that connection to one another. And I didn't know that this would be the first of many pauses in my life, a long stagnant spell between one phase and the next.

My whole life was traced out in front of me, and it's hard to believe I couldn't see it at the time. I only stood there gasping for air, watching the treetops for the next breeze. My heart was racing as if it were trying to get away from me. It'd be some time before I would catch up.

Time and Place: 11/11/01

At almost 88 my father finds the times
confusing. Not the wake up, show up on time
times, though he sometimes loses track of lunch
because my mother is no longer here
to make sandwiches and soup, but the times
he's going through now. It was confusing this fall,
a whole week without baseball, commercial
television without commercials, and
real-time coverage of stuff you'd rather not see,
beginning with those planes and buildings. Time was
when he knew exactly what was up and how to act
and he's got the hardware to prove it, a Silver Star
and enough German shrapnel deep inside
to set off an airport warning,
in these nervously calibrated days.

Newspaper maps sit neatly folded on his desk,
a good sign my brother says, that Dad's not disengaged
from everyday life. But they are only cartographies
of confusion for a world that has changed too much.
Names have been altered and the old boundaries
are hard to find, and some countries aren't even
there. "I can't find Taliban," he says,
"on any of these maps."

Joanne Lowery

Execution in Minsk, 1941

She needs to comb her hair
after the Germans are done with her
as their first public warning

after her family sneaks out at night
to cut her down, a secretary
perhaps by the look of her sweater

partially unbuttoned, the crooked hem
of her plain skirt. But her shoulders

stay straight and her arms
don't hurt behind her back

and the neck doing all the work
looks strong, her eyes alert

and her mouth full of one
last thing to say.

Do you think she taught dance
on Saturdays, so perfectly

her toes balance high above
the pavement? Down the street

like her, a row of new flags.

The Hurricane Party

I stood in the middle of Grand Central Station watching people run around me like the world was coming to an end, the way my world felt ending, like I had all these people in suits with briefcases and cell phones racing inside my head, and none of them knew if they would get where they wanted to go. They knew where they wanted to go. I had gotten on and off my train three times already.

Dillon? I can't meet you later. They're telling commuters to leave the city. They're telling everyone to go."

"Don't go."

"I might get stuck," I said.

"So what? Stuck? What's stuck? I'll meet you. We've been stuck before."

"I'll call you from home."

"No. You're not going. You're not going to go if they're telling you to."

"Why not?"

"I can meet you for coffee. We can meet for a drink. I'm broke, you're buying. I'm so broke, Katey. It'll only take me fifteen minutes to get there. I've been waiting all day for you to call. I didn't even go out for cigarettes. I don't know how long I'm staying in New York; I might end up going to New Jersey next weekend. I haven't seen you in what?—three years? It's been three fucking years. I'm sitting here out of cigarettes."

I said, "Sorry, I've got to make the next train," and he said to call back if I changed my mind. I told him I didn't think I would.

I got on the train, a window seat facing backwards, the way most other people don't like to go. Dillon was right; I was always doing things like that. The things other people didn't like. And if somebody told me not to do it, I likely would. It was a teenager thing I'd never stopped doing. I guess I'd always done that, way before I was a teenager, and way after now, too. My feet started jiggling. The man in the brown suit next to me gave

me a look. He was sitting back in his seat, smoothing out a wrapper, picking up a ham sandwich. All ready, all relaxed, going just where he wanted.

Dillon? It's me. I guess I'm not going right now. I . . . I missed the train."

"It was going too fast," he said. "A lot of trains go too fast. You can't get on them."

"This isn't funny. I might really get stuck here."

"Do you feel stuck now?"

"No. But before I felt trapped."

"When?"

"On the train. I jumped up from my seat, and the guy sitting beside me almost lost his sandwich on the floor. He gave me a mean look."

"I get mean looks all the time," he said.

"I'm sure you do."

"What kind of sandwich did this guy have? Maybe you could jump up from another seat on another train, another sandwich—this time I'll grab it. I'm fucking hungry, Katey."

"You know, I think I'm wrong. I think this train I'm looking for didn't leave the station yet."

"Come on, Katey. What's going on? You ran out of your train, didn't you? I bet everybody was looking at you like you were nuts. You *are* nuts. What's going on with you? You have to tell me. You told me you want to move back to the city. Does your husband want to move back to the city? Does your kid? I don't understand. Is this some kind of crisis? I'd like to hear about your crisis. Are you having a crisis?"

"I wasn't."

"I'll be there in fifteen."

"Fifteen minutes, from Queens?"

"No, twenty. Make it twenty."

Dillon-time made that forty. I took a walk out of the station. It was just drizzling then. Some people didn't even put up their umbrellas. It was like a different world out here, quiet, calm, a world where people walked slow, right through puddles, right through the middle of empty streets. Nobody outside was worried about going somewhere. They weren't going anywhere. They had nowhere to go. The rain fell soft on my face. I walked

through a puddle that covered my feet. I was wearing sandals. Earlier at the college my student had questioned me about that; how could I wear sandals on a day when a hurricane was predicted? What was I thinking? I was thinking it was warm, they'd dry, it made sense. If that were the case, he said, you should have worn your bathing suit. He made me laugh. Really laugh. And I wasn't sure I should have. I was getting too casual with him. He would stand up close against me, his face nearly touching mine, and point out sentences in his essays, something I'd only notice once he walked away. I was afraid that lately I was only noticing things once they'd walked away.

Now even the drizzle had stopped. Eight years ago when I was living in the city everybody said we should tape up all our windows. A hurricane was going to hit. For once I decided I should do what I was told. So I made huge masking tape X's on the two windows I had in my studio apartment and waited. I actually waited for the hurricane, with all the lights up bright in my room. Nothing ever happened. I couldn't even hear the rain that night, and I'd kept my music off just so I could. Later on I would find out that the hurricane passed us by, took a path away from the city. Instead of watching my windows, I could have been outside, walking the empty streets like this, with everybody else inside, watching the tape on their windows. Still, remembering that didn't make me feel easier. The dark sky hung over me. Maybe this one time what everybody said would turn out true.

When I turned the corner, the street was empty except for one man who was hawking umbrellas. He looked away from me, up the block, and then back, his eyes fixed above my head. "Umbrella, three dolla, umbrella, three dolla," he called out, as if he were calling through a crowd. I could have told him: What good's an umbrella in a hurricane? Instead I took out some money and he handed me one wrapped in cellophane. Everyone I was telling was telling me: I should think things through. I couldn't just walk away the way I was wishing I could. I knew enough to know that. And still, here I was, walking, and there I was, holding the new umbrella, peeling cellophane off in strips. I opened it. The man grinned. It worked. See? He nodded at me before calling down the empty street again.

When the time was up, I headed back to Grand Central. The information booth was swamped with people asking about

trains, what trains were leaving when, if a train anytime was leaving. Sometimes the track would change ten minutes before the departure, and the crowd would surge out of one gate toward another. There were four people, almost a perfect circle around me, pulling out their cell phones. None of them looked like Dillon.

He told me that he'd let his hair grow real long, that he looked like a mountain man. I asked him, "How do mountain men look?" He told me that they have long, wild hair, and that they don't go to dentists so their teeth rot. He told me he hadn't been to a dentist in four or five years. He couldn't afford one.

"Sorry I'm late." He came striding up and kept going, so I would start striding too, following him up the stairs to the main doorway. He had that same nervous energy, that same way of looking quickly about as if everything in the room had something to say about him.

He cocked back his head and looked over at me. "God, I can't believe I recognized you. You look so different."

"I was ill for awhile. I lost a lot of weight. Then I started working out. It's not much of a story."

We stopped before stepping into the street. Dillon shrugged. "At least you have a story."

The rain had started up again. When I pushed my folding umbrella, the handle snapped in my hand.

I could feel Dillon staring at my face. When I looked, he turned to the rain. He said, "You look about twelve. You look like a little kid."

"You look like a mountain man," I told him.

He said, "I look like shit."

I didn't think he looked good either. "You look all right," I said.

"Let's get a beer."

I pushed up the umbrella and held it by the stubby pole at the top. Dillon stuck his head underneath. We started walking. He kept his head straight, but from the corner of his eyes I'd catch him staring at me.

"You look seventeen, Katey. Twenty-two. You could be twenty-two. You look like that actress. You know that actress?"

"Sure."

"The one in that movie."

"I know what movie you mean."

He laughed. "Shit, that's all right. Looking young's a good thing. You look good. I look like an old man."

"No you don't."

"I am old. An old, fat guy with rotten teeth."

The nearest bar we found was loud and crowded, but we found a table empty in the back.

"It feels like a party in here." I said, "I feel like we're at a party."

Dillon was giving the room his nervous look. "Good," he said, "I haven't been at a party with you in years."

"We didn't go to parties," I told him. "It's like trains are coming and going but we're all pretending they're not. You know, just so we can hang out here and drink beer—away from home."

"What is this?" Dillon steadied his eyes on me. "You're not happy at home anymore, Katey?"

I shook my head. I said, "A hurricane party. That's what this is."

Dillon shook his. "Yeah."

"Yeah," I said, "one last drink before the flood begins."

We ordered ours. Then I went to the toilet. When I came back Dillon introduced me to Claire, the waiter who had brought the beers.

"I told her all about us," he said. "How you were my girlfriend before you got married and had a kid."

"Oh?" I looked at Claire and she grinned back. Then she put her tray underneath her arm and stood, grinning at Dillon.

I took my seat. He said, "I told her how it broke my heart when I heard about you getting married. And having a kid. And a house and all that shit. All that shit I never thought you wanted. Christ, I don't think that's what you thought you wanted. Was that what you wanted? It broke my heart. But then you broke my heart way before then, too. That was a long time ago. We don't talk about a long time ago any more."

Claire shook her head. Only she stood where she was, like she didn't believe him. I didn't believe him either.

I said, "That's right. We don't talk about those things."

"Tell me, Claire," Dillon said. "What do you plan to do when the flood comes?"

"The flood? Oh, you mean this—well. Not much I can do." Claire leaned her ear to her shoulder and smiled down at him. "I'll probably just stay where I am, serving drinks."

"Then I'll stay where I am, too, and drink anything you're serving."

Claire's face got brighter when she laughed with him. She liked Dillon. Most women liked Dillon, no matter how bad his teeth got. I was trying to figure out what it was they liked so much when he pulled out a small tobacco tin. I watched Dillon roll a cigarette. He licked it and sealed the paper and lit the end. Claire watched, too.

"Nope," Dillon said, striking the match. "We just don't talk about past things."

I said, "We don't talk about most things."

Dillon opened his eyes wide, waving the smoke from my face. '"But that's exactly what I want! I want to know what you're doing." He grabbed my hand. "Katey, I never get to see you. What's going on with you?"

Somebody called for a waiter. "Excuse me," Claire said. I told her it was all right to leave us, but Claire sighed when she turned away like it wasn't all right with her.

I leaned across the table. "What's all this stuff about 'breaking your heart'? You make it sound so—"

"Yeah, I know," he said. "But it was—"

"No, it wasn't." I pulled my hand from Dillon's. "I'd like to know what's going on with you," I said. "I thought you were living in New Orleans."

"Yeah, yeah, New Orleans is great. I was playing great music in New Orleans. But in the summer it gets too hot." He turned his head and blew smoke toward a couple at the next table.

"Now it's not summer," I said. "You used to say New York got too cold."

"It does. It will. And I don't have a fucking coat. Remember that great leather jacket I had? I hocked it to get here."

"Well." I shook my head; I was remembering all the things in my apartment that used to disappear, then later how I'd find the tickets from the pawnbroker in Dillon's pockets. I said, "You won't get too hot, anyway."

Dillon was staring over my head toward the front of the room; smoke curled up from the hand he kept on the table. When his eyes met mine again, he said, "I meet women all the time. You know, I'm always with somebody different. But I was seeing this one woman in New Orleans for a few months."

"Months? That's serious."

"From Lithuania."

"I never met anybody from Lithuania."

"Well, yeah, she was beautiful, too. A beautiful woman from Lithuania." He looked at me and held his breath a moment like he saw the beauty right between us. Then he laughed. "With American money—that's an important part."

I said, "The parts sound perfect."

"Yeah, yeah." He took a long drag; I watched the cigarette paper burn. Then he threw back his head and blew the smoke over me. He said, "That was one of our problems."

"Whose problem?"

"You and me. Money. But I know, we're not talking about past things." I looked at the couple sitting next to us; they were sitting there silently drinking their drinks. He said, "She was great only she didn't get anything I said. She didn't understand me."

"You're not Lithuanian."

"She had no sense of humor."

"Humor's a hard thing to get. Maybe you'd think *she* was really funny if you were Lithuanian." Dillon didn't even grin.

He said, "I would joke with her and she would give me this blank stare: 'I do not get what it is you are saying.' She'd say, 'What are you meaning? Is this funny also?' She made me laugh. I mean, she sounded like Natasha. Do you remember that old cartoon *Rocky and Bullwinkle*? There was this Russian spy called Natasha. This woman sounded just like her, and it made me crack up. I'd crack up, and she'd stand there giving me that same grim look." Dillon opened his mouth wide like he was about to crack up then, but he caught me frowning at him. His lips tightened to a smirk.

I said, "You *laughed* at her?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't help it."

Some people were laughing at the front of the bar and we both turned toward them.

I said, "Well. At least she made you happy."

"Yeah. Make me happy. Women like to make me happy." He was looking hard at my face, then he shook himself.

Dillon looked up. Claire was standing there looking down with her empty tray. He gave her one of his boyish grins.

"Yeah . . . that's it. That's why women like you," I told him. "It's your big-boy charm." Then he gave me one of those grins, too.

"You should see those guys at that table," Claire said, looking toward them over her shoulder. "Charm is something they could use."

"Well, you just stay with us then, Claire," Dillon said, patting an empty seat at our table. "We'll pretend we can't see them. They'll go away."

"I wish they would," she said, frowning at one of the guys, who stood up and waved an empty beer mug her way.

"Tell me, Claire. Don't you think Katey looks twenty-two?"

I slapped the table: "Dillon!"

"Sure," Claire was saying. "She looks that."

"See that?" he said to me.

"Can I get you guys some more beers?" Claire was smiling; Dillon was smiling, too.

"That would be great," he said. "And, Claire, do you know if there's any food knocking around? You know, like bar food that goes along free with the drinks?"

Claire winked down at him, then looked over at the guys with no charm, who kept their hands raised in the air to get her attention. She nodded at them.

Dillon shook his head when she left. He said, "I guess the hurricane party isn't too much fun for Claire."

"Yeah. Well, I'm not too sure it's all that much fun for me."

"Come on, Katey. We haven't seen each other in what?"

"Three years."

"A long time," he said. "And now you're having a crisis."

I said, "I wish you'd—"

"Yeah, I know." He said, "Do you remember that time we took a drive-away car to California?"

I said, "Wait. You're bringing up the past. This, right here, is a past thing."

"Well, fuck past things. Everything's a past thing anyway." Dillon looked at the people around us like their present wasn't going to last much longer either. "I met you at Grand Central. That's a past thing, too."

"I don't want to talk about Grand Central."

Dillon sighed. He said, "Come on, Katey."

I shrugged. "All right. What about that trip?"

"We'd never been somewhere together. We were always in the same place, just on campus, our rooms. I still think about this a lot. And I was looking forward to it. I thought that's just what

we needed. I mean, more than forward. A drive-away car. It was the only way we could get a free trip. We just had to take that goddamn car through the states. They gave us—what?"

"What?"

He said, "Five days. We had to get there in five days. But we didn't make it in five days."

"We didn't make it at all," I said.

"Yeah, we left the car in Chicago. It took us three fucking days just to get through Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania isn't a trip."

"No. Nobody'd call Pennsylvania a trip."

"We kept pulling off, stopping on the side of the road." I felt Dillon slide his leg between mine under the table. "You remember, you remember why we kept stopping."

"Yes, I remember that," I said, pushing my chair back.

"Then we'd get back in the car and start arguing again."

I said, "You kept telling me I was going to kill us on the road. I was going to smash up the car, I was going to run the car right into the side of a truck. You'd shake my arm on the wheel." I stood up and shook Dillon's. "'My god!' you'd scream just when a tractor-trailer would be zooming by. 'You're going to kill us!'" Falling back into my seat I said, "I started to think I really would."

He said, "It was crazy."

"I know the trip was crazy."

"We were crazy, too. We were really crazy together. I knew the first time I saw you. I don't know why we tried to get away. We might as well have stayed right in our rooms."

Dillon slouched back in his seat and stared there silent at me. After awhile he said, "Let's not talk about this anymore. Let's talk about now. Look at you now."

"What?"

He said, shrugging, "Just look."

He stared at me, then we both looked at the other people around us. There were people talking, people smoking cigarettes, people holding drinks, people leaning on the bar to get drinks so they could hold them. Behind the bar the TV was on, and the jukebox, too, playing the usual jukebox tunes, a steady beat behind the talking. When I looked back, Dillon had closed his eyes and was fiddling with his tobacco tin.

Then he said at once, his eyes opening, "I want to get married. Really. I want to get married, myself."

"Are you being serious?"

"What do you mean?" He leaned forward. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I just—I don't see you—"

"I know. Nobody takes me seriously about this. That's a problem. I don't want to have kids; I just want to marry. You know, you know what that's like."

"Yeah, I know that."

"I want that, too. And I want it to be somebody my own age. Only I never can meet anybody my own age, and if I do, they're either married or neurotic." He fixed a look on me. "Or both."

I put my eyes on the front of the room. I said, "I wonder if the rain's getting worse." Dillon sat grinning at me. I got up and pushed through the crowd of people who were standing about the bar, holding drinks. I could hear the rain when I got to the front, even before the door opened. When I looked out I saw huge drops pelting the street, streams running down the gutters. Two guys pushed past me to get inside, their wet hair plastered on their foreheads. I asked them if they knew if any of the trains were running. They said none of them were right now.

"It's gotten worse," I told Dillon back at the table.

"Where were you?"

"Just watching it come down. I've made a big mistake. I don't think I'll get home tonight."

He said, "Don't worry. You can stay with me."

"Right."

I could feel the couple beside us staring at me. When I looked, Dillon said, "This is Bonnie and Jeff. They've come to the party all the way from Chappaqua." Bonnie laughed. Jeff nodded at me.

Bonnie said, "Yeah, your husband told us about your hurricane party idea. I like that. A hurricane party's fine with me. I don't mind getting washed out if I get a break from the kids." Bonnie laughed again. "They're over at Jeff's mom's house."

I said, "That's good." Bonnie agreed.

"Dillon was telling us you're thinking of leaving the suburbs."

"Was he?"

"It can be tricky if you have to find new schools, but I wouldn't exactly call it a crisis."

"No? What else was my husband telling you?" I said.

"Well, I was telling him first. I used to live in the city, too. I

was saying: What I really miss? Take-out food. I don't know about your area, but there's nothing around our way."

I said, "Oh?" I was squinting at her. The more I squinted, the blurrier her table got. Then I tried squinting at Dillon; he stayed just as clear as he was, a few feet away.

Bonnie said, "Well, maybe that's just our town. It wouldn't surprise me."

"No, it wouldn't surprise me either," I said. I opened my eyes all the way and let Bonnie's table back. She was trying grinning at me, but the grinning dropped, like she didn't think it was working.

Claire went by, putting new drinks down on our table. Dillon watched me sip my beer.

He leaned over the table and said, "I'm serious about staying with me tonight, Katey. Why not? I'm sleeping in this huge apartment. I won't bother you. You can have the couch. I mean, why can't we do that? I don't sleep with married women anyway."

I smiled at him. Then I sat back and drank my beer while Dillon checked everyone out, the new faces in the room, the ones that were getting pushed back from the bar to the table area. A number of people had entered since the heavy rain started.

I said, loud enough for him to hear, "That's nice of you."

He leaned over. "What? What is?"

"Not sleeping with married women. I'm sure all married women in the world thank you."

Dillon dropped the cigarette he was rolling. "All right. All right, so I'm full of shit." He brushed the tobacco into his hand and put it back in his tin. "All right, go ahead, laugh at me."

I did. I closed my eyes, laughing. When I looked, Claire was putting a plate of food down in front of Dillon.

"They're kind of pasty things with tomato sauce," Claire said. 'I mean, the chef's Irish so I can't say his Italian cooking's good. But I don't have to charge you for it."

"Then they're delicious." Claire laughed along with Dillon. "You're wonderful. Really wonderful, Claire. Isn't she, Katey?"

Dillon was biting a piece of one of the pasty lumps. I looked away.

"I was just telling Katey that I don't sleep with married women," Dillon told her.

Claire said, "What's that?"

"I said I told her I don't sleep with married women." He shook his head and Claire shook hers. "Absolutely not."

"Oh. I hope not," Claire said, blushing. She backed up, saying she had to take an order across the room.

"This isn't bad at all," Dillon said, shaking some cheese on his plate.

I watched him eat half of the pasty lumps. Then I turned and pulled my chair up to Bonnie's table. I said, "Excuse me." Bonnie put her wine glass down and met my eye before looking away, to her husband. "Did my husband tell you I'm divorcing him?"

Shaking her head, she said, "Look—"

"I am," I said quietly in her ear. "Really. We're getting a divorce. We've left our kids at home, we're talking about our divorce now. We leave our kids all the time."

She sighed. "Really—"

"And do you know why? Do you know why I'm divorcing him?" I could feel it opening, the sky opening, my words coming out: "TAKE. OUT. FOOD. Because of the fucking take-out!"

Dillon dragged me away in my chair back to my side of our table. He tucked my chair in and sat back down himself. He apologized for me, said I'd been under a lot of stress. Everybody's under a lot of stress in hurricane weather.

"God, Katey, you're so crazy!" He slapped a hand over his mouth to keep in the laughter. "I always forget that you're as crazy as me. Shit! You act like a fucking normal person. Then—Wham! You're gone, completely. I always forget that. You got to be careful, though. They'll take you away, and I won't get to see you the rest of the night."

"Look, I'm going back to wait at the station." I pushed away my beer.

"No, you're not in any shape—"

"Oh, I'm in shape. And I won't be if I stay here with you."

He shook his head. "Anyway, there aren't any trains running. You said so yourself."

I said, "I'm not seventeen."

"Uh. . . what?"

"I'm not seventeen, Dillon."

Dillon clenched his teeth and looked from one side of the room to the other, looked like he was trying to get somebody, anybody, to look back at him. "Uh, yeah, yeah right. Okay, Katey. You're not seventeen," he said, not to me but to every-

body in the room. But nobody else listened. Then quieter, straight at me: "Right. Right, Katey, all right. You're not seventeen. What the hell."

"I'm not even twenty-two."

"Ah . . . okay. You're not that either. And you're not twenty-three. There's a whole lot of numbers you aren't." Dillon laughed.

I said, "It's like with that woman."

"What woman?"

"The one from Lithuania."

"What about her?"

"It's not funny to me."

"So what? Don't find it funny then. Who the fuck cares if you're finding this funny?"

"I do."

I moved back my chair but I sat where I was, watching Dillon.

He said, "You're fucking crazy."

I shook my head. I stood up from the table.

"Katey, please." Dillon grabbed my wrist, pulling me to my seat again. "I won't."

"But you will. So will I."

"Yeah, probably." Dillon dropped my wrist and leaned back in his chair. The room got louder but I felt us falling into a quiet place, like the eye of a storm passing. His dark eyes had a sad look then, sadder than sad, like all the sadness he'd ever felt was passing over us just that moment.

When I turned I caught Bonnie's eye, but her eyes slipped away, to someone else's table. I pulled out my wallet and put down money, a good amount of money, enough for the bill and a few meals for Dillon the next day, even though food wasn't where he would spend it.

"Are you guys leaving?" Claire stood at our table, giving Dillon an anxious look. "It's really bad out now. You'll get drenched."

"Katey doesn't mind," Dillon said. "She's wearing her sandals."

"Oh! Look at that," Claire laughed. "Sandals."

I was out of my seat, out of the door. Dillon might have been behind me. I put up my broken umbrella and ran through the street, through the wind and hard rain, through the ankle-deep water. Two blocks. My pants, my shirt were soaked by the time I reached Grand Central.

I could feel the stillness before I looked. The only movement was the guard, rocking on his heels by the central staircase. There were a few people with their eyes closed, slumped on the floor by the gate entrances, heads resting on backpacks. The information booth was dark. At times someone somewhere was coughing. And above the ticket windows, those huge timetable boards were dark. I had never seen them dark. They were always posting names of destinations, white lettering against black, all the towns all along the Hudson. Now the letters were gone, the places blacked out.

"Nothing's running." I hadn't heard the guard approach me. He was standing beside me when I looked, staring up along with me at the black time board.

"I see," I said. "I didn't think anything was."

"No, they haven't been running for awhile." He kept his eyes on the board and pointed at it. "Tracks are flooded."

I said, "Everything's flooded."

"So I've heard." He turned to me and looked, a soft look. "I'm afraid you're going to have to wait until the morning trains start up."

"That's all right." My voice echoed in the empty station. "It's all right, I don't mind waiting. Really."

Andrew Kozma

After the Storm

Berryman Improvisation #2

Shh! on a twine hung from disastered trees
a spider spins still, its line bleeding water
from the branches to bulge
the spider's body as though caught
in the slow grow of amber.
This quiet. I am silent,
stitched in fallen branches, afraid
for the birds I have not heard.

David Garrison California

It happens
that the heart dries
sometimes
like a black leaf. It
happens too that these open hymnals,
the October air, the dove's voice, the blue
hour, your hands, fingers, our tools, these marks,
end always in a going away.

So close.
I whistle straight through the owl's chest,
his feathers like gray scales, silent. A wind
and a hissing loss. These may be
occasional payments made against
what's due for this body, what's finally
collected.

One old
friend goes gaunt, a thin stick.
And one, Haw Creek Elementary,
1959, wrote his name in chalk. My
children's arms entangle everywhere
in the trees of love. Their lovers' memories
make shadows against the far wall.

Beyond,
the lemon trees
assemble like packages. The roadways
make fists. The ocean I remember offers
only the least comfort, settles nothing.
These dark rounds, one and one and one.

Kim Chinquee

The Edge

On the way to the airport, I glanced in my rearview. Tony was sleeping in the back, all twisted up, his forehead up against the metal ashtray. O'Hare was a two-hour drive—Tony was flying to Virginia to stay with my ex, his father David, for the summer. David always took Tony to Disney, Sea World, those dumb amusement parks. One time, they went to Hooters.

It thundered, rain pounded, and moisture clouded up the windows. The wipers ticked as fast as they would go.

At the airport, all the parking ramps were full, so I circled the terminal, hoping a spot would open up. The rain turned into slow lethargic drops. Everything was wet. We parked in overflow.

After we checked in, we had an hour to kill, so we sat on green hard chairs. Tony played Tetris on his Game Boy, and I sat with warm coffee in my hand, looking at the men in suits go by. After I hit a dry spell, I looked at Tony's face, his dark eyes squinting in concentration, his eyebrows moving upward then inward as he pressed the black knob with his overanxious thumbs. His expressions reminded me of his father, whom I hadn't seen in years, when he and Tony shared the same spiked hair. Now Tony's was a bowl cut, and he was picky with his hair, styling it with mousse and gel, using a thick brush. He wanted to grow his hair long to cover his big ears.

We sifted through the airport. Airline crewmembers dashed in crisp blue pants and skirts, rolling their totes like golf carts. A dark-haired man in a trench coat shuffled by, carrying a briefcase. I inhaled his musky scent until a young couple ran past, breaking my concentration, the woman's dark hair flying, her glasses escalating down her oily pointed nose, the man's bag flapping at his pudgy side. It reminded me of Tony's trip last year—he missed his flight because I'd overslept.

At the bookstore, Tony looked through the latest Harry Potter book, and I moved to the magazines, next to a tall attractive man with reddish hair who was reading *Esquire*. His long fingers turned the pages, then he darted his blue eyes at me, blink-

ing his golden lashes. He smiled and I figured if I got one inch of him, I'd want him all, so I turned the other way, telling Tony maybe we should get a bite. He reminded me I'd buy him something, and he picked a Chicago T-shirt for his father, saying that's what he really, really wanted. As I paid the cashier twenty dollars, the red *Esquire* man stood behind me, buying a pack of Juicy Fruit. I smelled him, feeling magnetized, and after he checked out, he offered me a stick, holding out the pack like you see on those dumb commercials. I tried to set a good example, said no thanks (though kind of teasingly), I didn't take from strangers. After the man folded his piece, he leisurely placed it in his mouth, and although I didn't like Juicy Fruit, I suddenly wanted a piece myself and my mouth began to water. He chewed, looking at me like he had something I could never have, like the pale-faced dwarf in second grade who beat me at a spelling contest. Then the man walked away.

"He's flirting with you, Mom," Tony whispered.

At the gates, I hugged Tony, and told him not to eat too much, since he liked airplane food better than my cooking. I turned him over to the stewardess, making sure he wore the tag around his neck, like somebody's puppy. I told him that I loved him. "Yeah, whatever, Mom," he said, then walked down the tunnel to the plane, conversing with the attendant as if he'd known her all his life.

I watched the aircraft scoot down the runway, its enormous body teetering over its tiny wheels, and after it took off and became a mosquito in the sky, I walked through the busy airport. I felt a little free, my stomach skipping, yet something left me nauseous. I wasn't crying like a mother should be when she knows her child is leaving. I stopped at the bookstore on the way back to my car, looking for the *Esquire* man, but I didn't see him, so I bought a pack of Big Red and sailed out to the lot.

As soon as I got home, I took a bath and got ready to go out. I was overanxious, but I took my time—I wanted to look good. I went to this bar called The Edge, where the lights were neon and the music was sweet and low. I sat at the bar next to a guy who was watching TV and sucking on a Heineken. He resembled my father with his dark eyes and graying beard. He said his name was Adam, holding out his hand. I said mine was Eve, and did a little curtsy.

"No, really," he said.

"*Really*," I said, making big eyes at him. He didn't need to know otherwise.

"You come here a lot?"

"No. Maybe once," I said. I was there a couple of times a week, if I wasn't getting lucky somewhere else.

He told me I was gorgeous. I thanked him and sipped my wine. "Nice lips," he said. He kept staring and I figured he was in for the evening. He was okay, but I was hoping for something better.

The bar was getting packed, people crowding all over. Smoke from some big-haired woman flew right in my face. Adam moved his barstool closer to mine and waved the smoke away. "Don't worry, I'm married," he said, holding up an empty ring finger. "After I quit smoking I gained weight, and now the ring doesn't fit. Things change. The wife's in California for the summer."

I eyed him over the lip of my glass, then said, "Well, I've been divorced eight years, and my last boyfriend was a year ago. Is that okay?"

He nodded slowly, and took another hit off his beer. Took him a while to get this, I guessed.

"Any kids?" he said.

"No. Never had a thing for them," I said. It wasn't his business.

We were talking and Adam kept telling me how beautiful I was. I tried to hide what it felt like to hear that even though I heard it all the time. The wine was getting to me. I looked around, saw few attractive men, all of them busy, so I turned back to Adam. He wasn't all that bad. A little old, but I liked my guys that way.

"A year, huh?" he said.

"Yeah," I said. "But I get by."

Then he talked about law school. I listened. He showed me the half moon tattooed across his forearm. "Party," he said, dropping his sleeve. "You got any?"

He got me another glass of wine, and I showed him the Japanese lettering on my lower back, lifting my shirt so he could have a peek above my belt. He traced the lettering with his finger. I slid my hand up his leg. He moved closer, smiled, put his hip against mine. Just smelling him was enough to make me want him.

At the apartment Adam started apologizing. "Excuse the mess. Julia usually cleans."

"Does she," I said, dropping my purse on some papers on the coffee table. I reached up and started on his shirt, but he pulled

away and asked me to sit down. I slid his dirty clothes over so I could use the sofa.

"Wine?"

He poured in the kitchen, saying he'd bought it in Spain for his wife. Her pictures were everywhere, a Spanish woman with a thin young face and glowing eyes. "She's pretty," I said, thinking she seemed kind of dark.

Adam looked at the picture I admired and handed me the wine. "Yeah, but so are you."

We went back to the living room, where her pictures were spread across the walls, some in frames, some taped up. I wondered what was so great about this woman. We got on the sofa and I kissed him, unzipped his pants. Again he pulled away. "This could be nice, you know."

"If somebody weren't so jumpy," I said.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," he said, and stood up.

"Me neither," I said, pulling his hand to my face. I sucked his fingers, one at a time, then moved up his wrist. He tasted like dish soap.

"You're sexy," he said, like an accusation.

"You think?" I said, giving him his hand back.

"I love my wife, you know. If she ever found out, I'd never admit you were here."

"I'm not sure I want a boyfriend," I said. "I don't find guys I want to marry in places like The Edge." I reached into his boxers and he grabbed my hand, pulling me into his bedroom, where everything was clean and smelled like his cologne. Julia was splattered across the bedroom walls. I stopped what I was doing for a second. I was getting sick of her.

"You got enough pictures of your wife?" I said, sliding off my sandals, then pulling back the comforter.

"You don't want to fall for me."

"Don't worry about that." I took off my shirt and unhooked my bra, glancing at the open blinds. I did his clothes next and pulled him to the bed. I was on auto pilot. I told him what I liked, then motioned his head between my thighs. He kissed my stomach and moved downward, kissing everywhere except where he was supposed to.

"You need some help?" I said.

He put my hand between my legs, said he liked watching, so I did it all myself. I came, but knew it wouldn't last long, so I moved on top of him, but he couldn't get it up.

"It's not you," he said. He got a leopard-print negligee from the dresser drawer and tossed it to me. "This might work," he said.

I slid it on. It was too big, but did its job. Adam got on top and worked around it, then I flipped him over. It didn't take long for him to finish, but I wasn't being picky.

We stared at the ceiling and lightning flickered in as it began to storm. He apologized.

"You weren't all bad," I said, sitting up. I lay back again and moved a hand under the pillow, feeling something hard and sharp. A knife. I grabbed it and held it up. "What the hell is this?" I said.

"I always sleep with that. Watch out, it's sharp," he said.

"No kidding." I sat up and waved it around. "This get you excited?" I held it up against his chest.

"It's for protection."

I kissed him, touched the blade to his face. He jumped back. After I teased him a bit, he started getting frisky.

"I guess it's worth a try," he said.

I got on top, and we had sex again, with the knife. Things came close a couple of times. It was decent sex. We ran out of breath.

"How was that?" he said.

"You're getting better." I laughed a little, lay back, and listened to the thunder.

While he went to the bathroom, I roamed his apartment with the knife. I wiped the handle with a dish towel from the kitchen counter, never knowing what could happen. I dropped the knife into the sink, soaking it in Dawn.

Back in the bedroom, where Adam hid under the covers, I did my usual strip tease. I hung the teddy over one of his wife's pictures.

"You're so crazy," he said.

"I'm doing you a favor," I said.

"Come here." He held back the covers, like an invitation.

I crawled under, smelling the fresh sheets. Things outside got quiet. He moved next to me, and I turned my back toward him.

"You needed the attention, I could tell," he said, and kissed the top of my head.

I thought what a stupid thing that was to say, and fell asleep.

Tony visited his father every summer. Before he could fly alone, I'd take him there myself. The last time, when he was four, I missed my returning flight and had to stay a night at

David's. I slept on his sofa, and woke to him fondling my breasts, so I had sex with him. He fucked almost anything. I left the next day, kissing little Tony on the forehead. He could learn things from his father that I could never teach him.

I got back home and started having sex with anything that moved. Sometimes after Tony fell asleep, I'd sneak out and find a man. It didn't matter who it was. I knew what I wanted and said, *so what*? I was good at it. I could tease or I could fuck him—I could make him do exactly what I wanted. I could be Kitten or Bunny or Pumpkin or Candy—or someone named Sharon or Linda. It was my game with my rules and I always was the winner. Now I just can't get enough.

The morning sun was bright, but everything was cold. "You're so pretty," Adam said, moving my hair from my face. "It feels good to be with someone again. I mean, wake up next to someone, to you."

He buried his head in my neck and sucked on it. His lips were dry. He ran his fingers through my hair.

"I'd like to get to know you."

"You don't have to say that." I shook my head. "Usually I get forgotten in the morning."

"I bet you were a good wife."

"Yeah, that's why I'm divorced," I said. I couldn't believe his nerve. David fucked anything that would stay still long enough while I stayed home and waited. "I never was faithful."

"Still, this thing with us could be kind of nice, don't you think?"

Adam was more than I'd found lately, but I couldn't see him as my boyfriend or my part-time lover. I was selective with the guys I dated.

"My wife isn't very sexual," he said. "But we're really good friends."

Adam showered, looking excited. Then, as he got dressed for work, I made the bed, finding dried blood from his cuts.

"She really is a good wife, you know," he said.

"I'm sure she is," I said.

I went to the bathroom to make myself look decent, using his wife's stuff. I found a stack of pictures in the drawer. I filtered through the close-ups and stared at her. I noticed her flawless smile, her dark lips, and white straight teeth. She had a clear

complexion. Then I saw the naked snapshots—her dark hands cupped her tiny breasts. Her body was petite, sort of dainty, round and curvy. Her sharp chin tilted downward, sort of shy. She was striking and sincere. She was everywhere.

I rearranged the photographs, putting her upside down, making her look awkward. I ripped her up and threw her in the trash, covering her with balled-up toilet paper. On my way back to the bedroom, I grabbed my purse and got my mints, handing Adam an Altoid as he fixed his tie. He chewed the candy right away.

"Have you ever been with a married man?" he said.

"I'm not sure," I said.

"I've never cheated on my wife."

"Good for you."

"You needed the attention," he said, skimming his finger under my chin.

I gave him a smirk. "You know, that's a really stupid, pathetic, patronizing thing to say. You're not really that dumb, are you?"

"I just like messing with your head." He turned away and sprayed on his cologne. "Meet me tonight at eleven at The Edge."

"We'll see." I got dressed and fixed my rumpled hair while Adam watched me in the mirror.

"Wear a short black skirt and bring a couple of condoms," he said. "I used my last one."

I ignored him, grabbed the brush from the dresser. My blond got mixed with Julia's dark.

"Looks like you had sex all night," he said.

In the living room, he flipped on the TV and checked the British Open while I strapped on my sandals. He half-watched me, half golf.

He walked me to the door and kissed me. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, I looked at the wall behind him at a picture of Julia's face, her eyes looking right at mine. Suddenly, she was just another sad-looking woman without a clue about her husband.

"I'll see you tonight," he said, sliding his hand up under my skirt, along my inner thigh. I backed away, grabbed his hand, and squeezed it.

"You're such a tease," he said.

"Your knife's in the kitchen if you're looking."

At home, I turned down the TV. It was on Disney, the channel my son lived for. I went through the channels—Discov-

ery, Learning, History, Home and Garden, Animal. I caught an eyeful of coffee-table-sized turtles crawling across stretches of dirty blowing sand.

I checked my answering machine, then email. Nothing. I had nobody to talk to, nobody to call. I dropped my clothes in the hamper, took a hot shower. Then I dried off and looked at myself in the mirror, thinking Adam got a bargain. Naked, I crawled into bed, stared at the ceiling, and started thinking about the knife and him going down on me, not getting anything right. I figured it was no wonder Adam's wife was in California, and if she had any sense she'd stay there. I thought about my ex. Some men are so pathetic. I started masturbating, but I couldn't get interested enough, so I put on my robe and sat on my big white sofa. Finally I turned off the stupid TV.

Then I was just *there* in this strange way, like everybody else on the planet was dead, and if they weren't, they weren't coming over to my house for happy hour either. Nobody ever came inside the place except me and little Tony, and it was like time was standing still and I wasn't really anything. Like some parked car in a day lot. Not in use. Waiting for someone to come along and start me up—I'd fuck him in his car, or in a dressing room, or a bar. It was fun, it was exciting. So I just kept on.

I went into Tony's room, almost stepping on a little plastic guy with hair and lots of muscles. I picked him up, looking at the face. It was stern and hard. Dead. Mean, almost. I set the guy on Tony's dresser and crawled into his bed, under the comforter that was dotted with action figures whose names I couldn't remember. Drawings were posted on the walls—men with fight, bright colors and dark hair, serious and confident, so much life in them. Yet everything was quiet.

Tony's sheets gave off a soft fresh fragrance, feminine almost. I rested my head on his big pillow and scanned the rows of toys, the Rollerblades and skateboard, the green football helmet and beat-up basketball. The closet doors hung open, too-small shoes scattered on the floor, hangers tipped with outgrown clothes, the Sunday church suit that he'd never worn.

For the rest of the day, I sat around thinking about last night, wondering what was important, if anything really mattered, if I'd always want and how long it would go on. After a while, I went back to Tony's room for the atmosphere, and I lay down, trying to take it in. I fell asleep, and when I woke up it was dark,

and I wondered what time it was, if it was too late to meet Adam at The Edge. But I was too tired to think about it much, so I stayed where I was, staring at Tony's drawings on the wall, at all the characters he'd made. The streetlights shone in, highlighting the curves and angles of the many distinct faces. I noticed their intensity, their arresting definition. Their eyes glowed in the flickering light, looking back at me.

Spiritual Journeys: The Art of Robert Sudlow

Robert Sudlow has long been considered one of the most important painters to emerge from the Midwest.

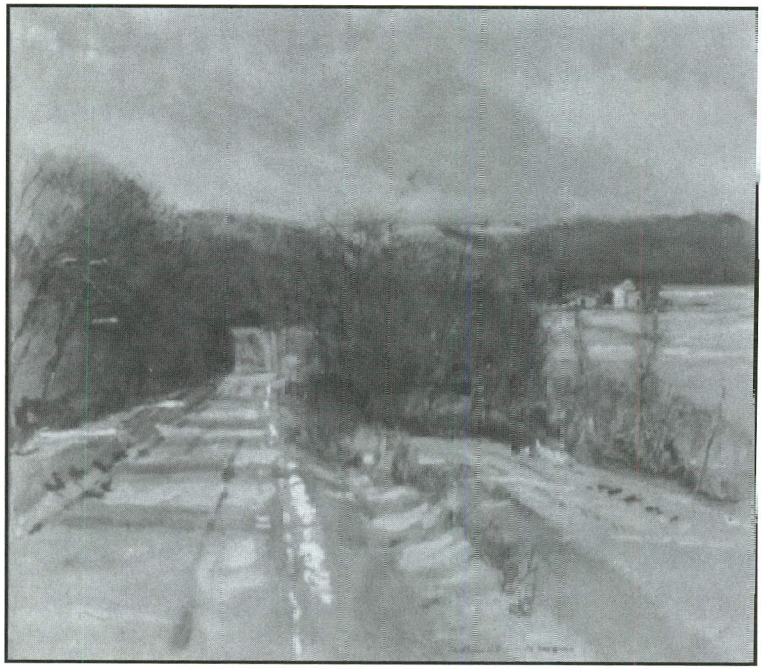
Sudlow received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Kansas, where he worked with Albert Bloch, a member of Der Blaue Reiter, a group of German Expressionists in Munich, Germany. In 1946 Sudlow joined the faculty at the University of Kansas in the Art and Design department. He served as Professor of painting until his retirement in June 1988. Sudlow has the distinct honor of being named the first artist in the history of Kansas as the "Governor's Artist" for the state in 1974. He was also named Kansan of the Year in 1997. Although he has had opportunities to work and live elsewhere, he has always been drawn back to his native Kansas. It is a spiritual migration that results from a compelling need to depict the essence of this familiar landscape. Baker University's Dr. Preston Fambrough, who contributed an essay to the recently published *Spiritual Journeys: The Art of Robert Sudlow,* writes, "Sudlow's career . . . turns on the . . . discovery that we can never respond as deeply or completely to any other surroundings as to those in which we were born . . . If childhood is, as Wordsworth, Dickens, and George Eliot felt, a privileged time of our most vivid and perfect impressions of nature, then no exotic landscape, no matter how spectacular, can ever affect us as profoundly as scenes familiar to us from our earliest years." He suggests that if Sudlow's "regionalism" is properly understood, it "no longer seems a limitation or restriction but an access to the artist's deepest and fullest responses to the natural world."

The book, *Spiritual Journeys: The Art of Robert Sudlow,* in addition to Fambrough's piece, features a comprehensive essay by Dr. David Cateforis, Associate Professor, Department of Art History, University of Kansas, and an introduction by Wes Jackson of the Land Institute, Salina, Kansas.

Rick Mitchell, Arts Editor

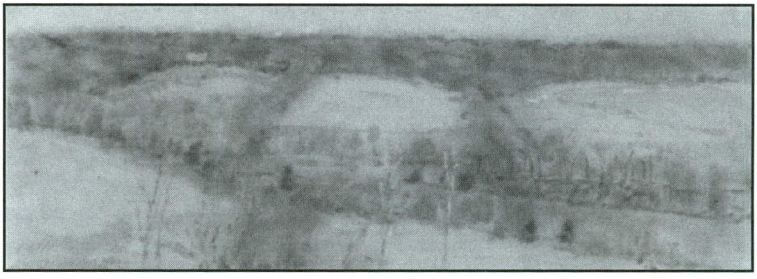
Cold Front. 1990.

Foggy Headlands. 1982–1988



Snow Road. 1989.

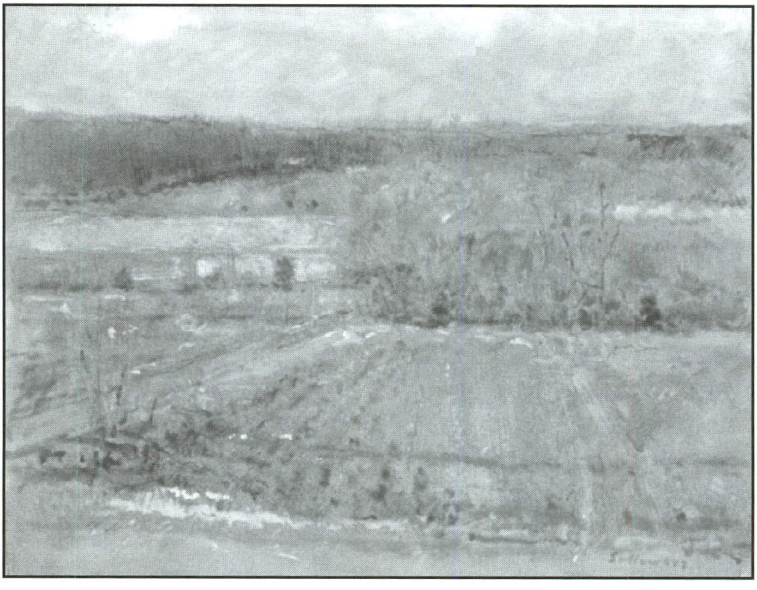
Darkening Creek. 2002.



View from Aust. 1995.

Deer. 1955.

Henry's Garden. 2001.



First Spring. 2002.

Snow Road Study. 2001.

Snow Hill. 1987.

Alison Townsend

Going for Apples, Oak Glen, California

The apples are the excuse,
but it's the season that pulls us.
Flu and all, with our sweaters
and pale cheeks, an hour east
on the freeway, then upward,
to where orchards
dot the hills
at the edge of the mountains,
each tree erupting
in a burst of sudden gold.

This isn't the East, I say primly.
These aren't real autumn colors.
But at Oak Glen the leaves do flame,
each one igniting like a match
struck upon memory or dream.

I burn at the edges.
All afternoon we eat apples
and visit orchards, adrift
in the odor of ripe fruit
and cider so tangy it sparkles,
honey biting the unsuspecting tongue.
We muse, comparing the virtues
of Rome Beauties,
Pippins, Red Delicious,
Grannies, and Standard MacIntosh.
They are all perfect,
and each with its purpose,
the white on the inside of apples
crisp and sweet as the first snowfall
of winter—the one we called "sugar"
because it came and went so fast.

Finally, settled under an oak
in the late autumn sun,
we eat hot apple fritters
and grow heady on ripeness.
The warmth penetrates our chests
like an old-fashioned compress,
while the half bare branches
sift gold over our shoulders,
and the occasional apple falls,
rolling to its resting place
among hillocks of long dry grass.

You read.
I lie in these bright leaves
and scribble, trying to remember all
that I know or have known about apples
from the stars which shine out
of each half when sliced crosswise;
to the smooth brown seeds
I thought lucky
and collected as a child;
to the way deer looked
at first light, on a November morning,
creeping up to eat windfalls
before disappearing,
the small hoofprints
across fresh snow
the only sign
they'd come.

Half asleep,
I dream of cooking with apples,
the world contained in a circle
of tart peel, sweet crescents,
and a mixture of allspice.
The possibilities are as varied
as the flavors of apples,
each one polished,
spinning like a globe
that blurs life
into what I taste

when you kiss me awake,
the scent of apples simmering,
moving within me like late light,
or the promise your mouth makes,
welcoming me home.

Tom Hansen

Arrested In Minnesota: Three Lakes

1. Sitka Lake: Moose And Puffball

No moose. Or hoofprints of moose.
Only a pumped-up puffball, a branch,
and that small congregation: a few dozen
out-of-round granular nuggets.

When moose is done dining on salad greens,
he leaves as payment this pile
of moose berries, bullwinkles, excrescent globules
to nurture the next growth of green,

which will bud into leaf and be eaten by moose
and make that metamorphic journey
down through the dim, alimentary canal,
to be born, again, on the far side of death,

back into the world—gently squeezing out
from the business end of the moose
while the other end continues to munch,
lunching on fresh forest greens.

2. South Cone Lake: Lilies

A family of lily pads dreams in the sun,
sending tendrils into the dark
past of their previous lives, born of water
and earth below water.

But what we see—what is—is something
other than water and earth below.
We see no lake. We see lilies
hover in sun-rinsed air.

3. Lynx Lake: Bracken

Take, for instance, this wild profusion
of bracken branching and overlapping,
this fragile architecture of flesh,
its green geometry unfolding. . . .

Wade through it. Sink into it.
Lie as still as you can below it,
holding your breath while you count
from one down to nothing.

O sweet Jesus, sometimes, I swear,
we are all of us queens and kings:
drinking this wine, staggering home
knee-deep through pools of bracken.

The Lottery: March 1970

Vietnam? If you were male and draft age,
you never stopped *thinking about it.*
—My father

After the earth has gone soft, dark with snowmelt,
and the grey hard weight of winter lifts from the old hills,

he drives with the windows down along Deep Creek Road,
sting of wind in his eyes as it sings through his '59 Ford.

The radio static crackles in valleys, breaks with voices—
they might as well be transmissions from the moon

in this spare corner of the plains. At Pillsbury Crossing
he parks the hard-top and wades barefoot across

natural flat rock, through a thin sheen of water, slight
two inches deep where the creek courses over

limestone. He takes off his shirt, tosses it to dry land,
sits heavy and cross-legged in the cold water, watches

his denim cutoffs darken, stain of a temporary blood.
He shivers and the water washes, relentless, around him.

The day after the Trade Center came down, while the world was riding out the shock waves, I was driving Rob to yet another veteran's facility. Admission had been scheduled a few weeks earlier, and in light of events could have easily been postponed, but he was ready and I was anxious to get it over with. For the next six months he would wrestle with his demons in the foothills of the Adirondacks. The Bath program offers intensive therapy and occupational training and is the showpiece of the New York system, according to the literature. How my brother came to be placed there is fairly miraculous. With no health insurance and a history of intransigence it would seem to be his last and best chance.

I had reserved a rental car two days earlier, but within hours of the attack there were none to be had. My own car didn't look up to the trip and my wife had need of hers, so I did the only thing I could do. I borrowed my mom's Escort. I arrived at Rob's house at five a.m. to find the lights on and the doors open. From the kitchen I could hear a television and a radio blaring upstairs. The usual images flashed through my head as I climbed the stairs: Rob hanging from the rafters or slumped over in a pool of blood. Scenes so familiar they seem predestined. When I reached his bedroom I could see him sprawled on his back, his face frozen in the pale TV light. I looked for the rise and fall of his chest, then stepped inside. The TV showed the towers imploding for the millionth time. I watched the dust cloud rising, the floors caving in on themselves, then a montage of people running from a dozen different angles, great rolling clouds squeezing free of the buildings behind them. From the other side of Rob's bed, the radio played at the exact same volume, the words swirling around each other, making no sense. With the creak of a floorboard he jackknifed into a sitting position and fixed me with those floodlight eyes.

"Sorry," I shrugged.

"Is it time?" he croaked.

"It's time."

He rolled out of bed and into the bathroom without a word. While he showered I sat in the kitchen scanning a newspaper open on the table, the same paper that was there on my last stop around a week earlier. A time so distant and inviolate I couldn't bring myself to turn the page. Rob shuffled down and sat across from me, lighting the day's first cigarette.

"You okay?" I asked, lighting my third.

He fixed me with the dazed look of the heavily medicated. "Never better."

"You know how to get there?"

He handed me a two-page computer printout map with curb-to-curb directions, alternate routes, estimated times, and mileage down to the second decimal. How to get there, all right. We finished our smokes, gathered his things, and left by the kitchen door.

"Aren't you gonna lock up?"

"What for? The kids might need to get in."

"You'll be gone for six months."

"The front door doesn't lock. Besides, these people are scared to death of me."

As well they might be. More than one tranquil evening was shattered by sirens and flashing lights. Still, Rob tends to overestimate his presence, and I made a note to buy some padlocks. While he loaded his bag in the trunk, I checked the night sky, making out the Dippers, the North Star, and what looked to be the logo for Mercedes Benz. The trees appeared silver in the dim street light, with lighter patches where the leaves had turned. It would be February when he returned.

"You've got everything you need?"

"I've done this before, remember?

"Right, okay then."

We sat in the car for a minute listening to reports of Muslim bashing in Texas. The dashboard clock read 5:15 as we pulled away, and I couldn't help feeling we were being watched. I know I'd be watching. We approached our first intersection.

"Which way?"

"Left," he nodded without consulting the map. Checking right I eased out, nearly clipping an old man and his old dog—the last person we'd see for thirty miles, shaking his fist in indignation. Me and my brother on the road. We passed through unfamiliar towns with familiar names, countless flags, and messages of consolation. The gray dawn of a different world.

"What road is this?"

"This is route 313, and this," he gestured to a row of brick duplexes, "is Quakertown."

"*The* Quakertown?"

"The very one. Weird little burg. Full of Germans."

I tried to imagine life in a town filled with Germans but nothing came to mind. It's the sort of little-known and unverifiable observation Rob is always making. We stopped for smokes at the only place open, a convenience store at the edge of town. The clerk was Russian.

"How long have you been in this country?" I asked him.

"Three months."

"Any problem with the Germans?"

He looked at me like I had two heads. On the way out of town we passed a dozen "God Bless Americas" and one "Nuke Afghanistan" with Afghanistan spelled wrong. We hit the extension northbound and were halfway to the Poconos by sunrise.

"So tell me, how is this VA hospital different from the others?"

"It's farther away."

"From where?"

"From everywhere. Plus there's bears."

"Six months rehab free of charge. A wonderful thing, the VA."

Rob said nothing to this.

"It is free, right?"

"It is when you don't pay the bill."

"How did you get in?"

"I told them I was suicidal, but salvageable."

Working the system, as my wife would put it. A veteran psych nurse, she can play this game with the best, the ward being the last refuge of junkies and crackheads. If it isn't suicide, it's hearing voices. Or both, just to hedge your bets. They say I should kill myself and shit. My wife calls it the voice of reason.

"It's no scam," Rob said, almost to himself.

"Hey, what do I know? You do what you have to do to get help. I'm just thinking, thank God for health insurance. If I was you I'd be fucked."

"Check your policy. You're probably fucked anyway."

He was drafted in the summer of 1969. A few months earlier we'd both been summoned to North Philly for physicals, and by Christmas he was in Seaside, California, bound for Vietnam. He was lucky, though. His unit bounced around stateside, ending

up in Newark, Delaware, two hours from home. My own luck was even better. My induction notice never came.

The sun was just clearing the mountains when we stopped at McDonald's. We sat outside at a picnic bench, swilling coffee and smoking cigarettes and watching the jagged shadow line move across the valley. A day as perfect as the day before. Whatever comes next still to come.

"Look at it." Rob studied the Escort parked alone in the lot. "The prototype mom car."

"I'm trying to remember the last time we were in a mom car together."

"Might have been when dad died."

"You think?"

"After that you were never around."

Possible, but unlikely. Our dad died in 1962. It's a subject we tend to avoid, but out by the Escort we were thinking about it. My brother recalls a death-bed vigil, but it never happened. The old man was gone by the time we got there. What he would make of all this is easy to imagine. You get out of life what you put into it, boys. Can't means won't. How a grown man could believe such shit is still beyond me. He might have changed in later years but not without a battle. The old man died when Kennedy was president. Reducing things to sophomoric terms was endemic with that bunch.

"A 1962 Oldsmobile 88. Ragtop." Rob closed his eyes.

"White with cranberry interior."

"A goddamn pimpmobile, for crying out loud!"

"Definitely not a mom car."

My father bought it for her thirty-fifth birthday, and to mom's credit she drove it like a chanteuse. Five little kids squealing in back. A year later he was gone, and a year after that the Olds was stolen from the parking lot of a corrugated box factory. My first employer. The same factory where my father had worked as regional sales manager. The thieves poked all over the seats, then tried to set it on fire. My mother never drove it after that.

"A 1966 Chevrolet Corvair."

That one I ran into the garage wall.

North of the border we picked up the Adirondacks. Bluer than the Poconos, set farther off the highway. We passed

stone farmhouses, fields of crops, hillsides mottled in cloud shadows. East Coast mountains in distant layers. How is it I'd never been here before? I've traveled twice as far to places half as nice for my vacation! Rob seemed oblivious, lost in thoughts of extended confinement. Once they closed the door you may as well be in Coatesville. I felt I should cheer him up, but I didn't want him to think I was enjoying myself. I was doing him a favor, after all. Any other Wednesday I'd be in a graffiti-scarred printshop in North Philly.

"Do the numbers 493-2005 mean anything to you?" he asked suddenly.

I thought for a minute. "Donald Tessien, calling for a pick-up game."

"So it's not just me."

"I guess not."

"The thing is, kids don't play baseball anymore."

"A damn shame."

"It was like, six phone calls and you had a ballgame going."

"And you knew those numbers by heart."

"It wasn't just the cool kids either. Everybody played. The jerk-offs, the fart smellers, the fat kids. It was democratic, man."

"Of course, off the field you didn't know them."

"No, of course not."

I tried to picture Tessien today but could get no farther than an egg-shaped head. I'd heard he lives in Cincinnati.

"You know what else you don't see anymore?" Rob scratched at his beard. "The vertical hold knob. Nobody makes them."

"It has been a while," I had to agree.

"I used to love watching the picture roll up and down, then down and up."

"I seem to remember."

"It did me good. I don't know."

"What about the horizontal hold?"

"Horizontal hold did nothing for me. I was strictly vertical. Twenty up, twenty down. I had a system."

"For what?"

"The even keel. Life in the balance. I guess I was nuts even then."

"You're not nuts."

We drove a mile in silence.

"The thing about the vertical, it was continuous like a line. A never-ending parade. The horizontal was like a wheel. Maybe only three pictures going around."

That I could see what he was saying was no consolation.

"Although now that I think about it, horizontal has its appeal."

Outside Binghamton the highway narrowed to one lane. We followed spewing dump trucks between concrete barriers, a steady dribble of gravel pinging off my mother's windshield. To our left the city shimmered in the late morning mist. Home to Blue Cross, American Ladder, and my wife's former boyfriend, Ed. Her suggestion that I look Ed up on my way home met with hoots of derision. I'd rather beat myself with a hammer.

"So when does it get ugly?" I wondered aloud.

"It doesn't. The VA has a certain aesthetic. Plus people out here work for cheap."

"How come?"

He gave me a look. "It's the economy, stupid."

"Oh, right."

"Everybody has four jobs and nobody's making it. Fucking Dogpatch, man."

"Like Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh on one end, Philly on the other, and in between it's Alabama."

His smile exposed glaring gaps. "Ordinary fucking people. God, I hate 'em."

I smiled back. "Harry Dean Stanton, *Repo Man*."

Rob laughed for the one time that day. "So it isn't just me."

"Yeah, it is."

We listened to jazz on the tape deck, previously unused. Rob refrained from smoking, in deference to his mom. For this I was grateful. When he smokes I can see his hands shake. My guess is that cigarettes will kill us both if we live that long. We picked up the habit from our parents, who eventually quit, mom for her fiftieth birthday, dad for the obvious reason. We are the last of the breed. Lurking in the shadows outside office buildings and restaurants. Hacking our way into deep middle age. Were either of us alone we'd be smoking our brains out.

"Guess you won't be getting the games."

"Not unless they bomb the WWF and NASCAR."

"Too bad. The Phillies are making a move."

"Turk Wendell is making a move? Get fucking serious."

"I like having a guy named Turk on my team."

"Just the kind of management decision that got us where we are today."

"Especially considering the name we're getting rid of."

"Gomes? Biggest goddamn lips in the major leagues."

We can do this for hours. The history of baseball, circa 1959 to the present, is our own history. The only true bearings we have. A thousand ballgames at our fingertips. Stats and pennant races by the decade. Every play recalling a similar play or one not so similar but funnier. It's the history and the numbers, the incalculable range of possibilities, the almost spooky geometry we've come to crave. The seasons piling up, the rising and the falling, those old names popping up in the obits. The sons of the sons just hitting their stride. Above all, the minutia. Entire phone calls over nothing else. A sort of telepathy that is the strongest tie between us. He may be the only other guy on the planet who remembers Bobby Del Greco, for Christ's sake. Someone like me needs someone like that.

"Fuck the Phillies," Rob said, reaching for a smoke.

"Yeah, right. Fuck 'em."

When we get there you can just drop me off," Rob said when we reached the exit. "I don't want to hang you up."

"You got it." I jumped at the chance. I had a fat joint and a fistful of Brahm's tapes for the ride back, and if all went well, I'd be home before dark.

In Bath all roads led to the VA medical center. We drove through wrought-iron gates and up a tree-lined entrance to the hospital, a sprawling brick complex that, from the outside, could pass for a resort hotel. We grabbed his things from the trunk and milled about the sunlit lot like a couple of freshman. I, for one, could never do this. Not at fifty. I realized suddenly why Rob wanted me to take him. In case he chickened out.

"Any chance you might know somebody?" I asked him.

"A good chance. It's your basic revolving door."

"That would make it easier, no?"

"Not really. No buds here. Turn your back they steal your Walkman."

"Jesus, I hate to just drive off," I lied.

"Hey, I made the bed. Go watch your Eagles."

"You got any money?"

"There's nothing to buy. I'll be fine." He started off across the blacktop.

"Okay. See you."

I watched him through the windshield, listing slightly as he headed up the hill to the front entrance. Duffel bag under one arm, trailing a suitcase on wheels. I thought for a minute he would turn and wave but he didn't. And then he was gone. The hillside behind the hospital towered in a wall of evergreens. The brick facade sparkled in the midday sun. Normal-looking people went about their business.

Could be he'd get well there, but I had my doubts. He'd been down this road once too often. The resilience that marked his early comebacks was no longer evident. Drugs and the pressure had taken a toll. I thought back to those days after high school, my brother and his friends on a farm near Princeton. College kids with their new cars and old dogs. My own friends seemed shabby in comparison. Dropouts and dopers with prior convictions. Thirty years later we're still going strong while the best and brightest flamed out to a man.

I circled the driveway and drove out the exit with a smart salute to the grunt in the gatehouse. Little fucker looked right through me.

Jessica Rosenfeld

Shooting the Square

We drove round the night streets
in your parents' Ford Grenada

waiting to be seen.
We pretended it was otherwise.

It's hard to even wish for
what you know you don't deserve.

The world was too big for us,
we nailed it down to 4 corners.

We wanted to be seen as other people,
not how we saw ourselves.

The streets were ours to name:
23rd, Massachusetts, 6th and Iowa.

Tonight we would give our hearts
wholly to anyone.

That's what John Cougar was
telling us and we needed to believe.

We'd do the cheap cologne version
of love. It was all we could afford.

Say we were the brothers Grimm
collecting stories from the dark

to tell ourselves later,
about how we were wanted.

3 boys from Oskaloosa.
The blue Blazer. Your first kiss.

Then all the long nights
of nothing but each other

reading the backs of Harlequins
at Safeway at midnight.

Say we were 2 lonely Edens
formed side by side,

2 creation myths turned toward
opposite windows in search

of another. The cassette player
thumping between our thighs.

Calling it a night was just like
a little suicide.

You had never been kissed by anyone
not even your mother.

I had never been kissed by anyone
who meant it.

Was it a Bronco or a Blazer?
If only we could give our hearts wholly.

Just for the act of giving
and being received.

Virgil Suárez

To the Crow Picking Mud Snails in a Rice Paddy

after Bashō

Like lead-darkened words,
one by one, this plucking
of snails drowned in last

night's deluge. A memory
of rivers is carried through
by ravenous water surges.

Each snail is itself a stone,
a marker the crow tries
to learn and remember

the way to fly backward
toward a bruised sky,
this promise of more rain

on its iridescent feathers.

Peter Myers

Seated Bather

One quick, spontaneous impression: a white dog running against a green field speckled with yellow sunshine, shadows, and light blurred by motion. That's how I remember it, with the colors of a lovely spring day, like in a Seurat or Monet perhaps, but instead of Parisians enjoying a sunny afternoon at the park, or lily pads floating atop a cool garden pond with an arched bridge connecting two opposing banks, there was the white German shepherd running in long loping strides.

I saw the beauty of a thing I feared.

And my father, seeing the dog, too, viewed it not as something beautiful but as an unwanted bridge between our family and the Devores. He saw it like numbers on a spreadsheet, an error to be erased. There was no distraction of beauty, merely a problem to be solved.

Another of our chickens lay dead outside the coop, the third one in as many weeks. I heard Dad's hard-heeled boots turn heavily on the wooden porch as he went into the house and reemerged with his deer rifle. Mom yelled at me to go with him.

I don't think he even knew I was with him for a while. He took our old blue Chevy pickup and hit the gas before I had even closed the door. I remember how the truck had bounced hard against the deep ruts in the dirt road, and how I wondered it was a miracle something in the truck's undercarriage wasn't damaged, and how I was afraid to talk to him because of the way the muscles twitched in the side of his jaw like they always did when he was angry. And I remember as we came past the last thick, low-drooping limbs of live oaks how the Devores' house came into view, with Mr. Devore and his wife and son all sitting at a wooden picnic table along one side of the yard beneath a tall pecan tree, and how off to the left, on the other side of the yard, just emerging from the trees at the foot of the hill, was the dog, breaking again into a graceful lope as he ran toward the Devores, and how Dad, aware he had to shoot quickly before the dog ran all the way across the yard and reached the family, slammed the brake pedal to the floor so that the wheels

tore into the earth and a plume of dust swirled around us as the truck rocked to a stop.

I remember Mr. Devore standing then as he saw our pickup skid to a halt. And I watched the white dog still moving in that playful, steady gait as he crossed the yard toward the family, and Mr. Devore realizing something was wrong as he began to run toward the dog. And I looked back at Dad as he opened the door of the pickup, grabbed his deer rifle, and then braced his arm against the pickup door and sighted for the shot, his right eye squinting so that the crow's feet lines deepened below his temple as he waited for the last cloud of dust from the pickup to filter past.

Then he squeezed the trigger.

Even though I knew what was about to happen, each gunshot was always more startling than expected. Though I'd heard it many times during hunting season when we'd go after dove or quail, or in the cold dark hours of winter when we'd finally get a good shot at a buck, each shot always came with the same strident ferocity, crashing through the plane of silence like a rock through the mirrored surface of water, the report coming back at you again and again in a series of eerie, distant echoes like waves that rippled back to seal a wound in the silence.

On a newly mown lawn lay the white dog, seeming to run against a field of green. He lay on his side next to the Devores' exotic garden of flowers, running, not with his forelegs though, just the hind legs twitching vainly against the air, and behind his shoulder blood welling up through the white fur with Mr. Devore kneeling beside him, and perhaps ten feet beyond, the picnic table beneath the dark shade of the pecan, and behind the table, standing, their son Greg, his hand covering his mouth as he stared at the dog, and beside him Mrs. Devore, not looking at the dog or her husband or at me but at Dad.

II

Three weeks earlier I'd come home from college to spend the first part of the summer with my parents. Even that first morning I could already sense the tension.

"Aren't you going to finish your eggs?"

My father stared into space.

"Jim," said Mom. "Are you going to finish those?" She

pointed at the scrambled eggs on his plate as my father seemed to finally take notice.

"I'm not really that hungry," he said. 'I think I'll just finish my coffee out on the porch."

"Jim." My mother's voice was imploring. I stood on the other side of the bar that separated the kitchen from the den. They hadn't noticed I was there. "You don't need to worry about it, okay?"

He didn't say anything.

"I'm sure it's just the stress," she continued. "You just need to relax. I'm sure it'll pass." She touched his wrist, and I could see them looking at each other. "Besides, I like it when we just hold each other."

My father had stood up suddenly then and, without looking at her, taken his coffee to the porch.

I got myself a cup of coffee and moved out to the porch to join him. It was a cloudy Saturday morning. My father sat in the porch swing and stared at the yard and at the foggy green hills across the dirt road that ran past our property. He put a cigarette in his mouth, then fumbled with a book of matches to light it. A flame leapt at the end of the match, then faded in the wind. He struck three more before a flame finally stood erect long enough for him to light the cigarette.

"What happened to your lighter?" I asked. He looked startled. As he turned, his black hair blew down across his forehead and hung there just above one eye like in a picture of Elvis Presley. My father was one of those men age has little effect on. At forty-five, time had drawn few lines on his face. His hair was full and so black that people who didn't know him well often asked if he were part Indian. In bright sunlight, it sometimes seemed to shimmer blue like the wings of a grackle. His gold wedding ring caught the glow of the cigarette as he smoked.

He turned toward me, the cigarette hanging limply from his lips. "I don't know what happened to the lighter, son," he said. "I left it somewhere, I guess."

"Oh no," I said.

He shook his head and smiled guiltily. "Yeah, I know," he said. "How old were you when you gave that to me?"

"Six, I think."

"Fifteen years I had that with me," he said, taking a drag from the cigarette. "Fifteen years and then suddenly it's gone

like that." He snapped his fingers in the air and gazed off at the green hills as though thinking of something else. "I really am sorry," he said.

He looked at me, and this time he wasn't smiling. "I really am sorry, Tom."

The lighter had seemed to me one of the few things we had in common. *Like father, like son*, the old saying goes. But it never seemed to apply to us. My father was a big man, well over six feet five, while I was just shy of six feet. He was a man of action, decisive and resolute, an accountant who worked in Austin and loved to hunt. And me, I was exactly the opposite: I lived life like a rat in a maze, in utter confusion, most of the time unable to make up my mind. God help us if the topic were ever politics. I saw the arguments of both sides but couldn't take a stand. And as for numbers and math, leave those for the teachers, scientists, bankers, or accountants. My big thing was art.

I'd been off at college in San Antonio studying art history and painting. And though my father didn't completely understand why I loved art so much, he never pressured me about what I'd do later in life. He'd look at a painting I'd done, put a cigarette in his mouth, flick open the Zippo I'd given him so long ago, light the cigarette, run his fingers through his hair with the gold wedding ring showing sharply against his raven black hair, and politely tell me he didn't understand my painting but it was "damned interesting," which I took to mean he hoped to God I'd improve by the time of graduation. He'd tell me then that if things didn't go exactly as I wanted with my artwork, maybe I could "run a gallery or something, or maybe work at a museum." Then he'd flick the lid down on the Zippo, and I'd see those engraved initials "J. G." disappearing back into his pocket and think for just a moment how proud I'd been to give him the lighter. Mom had provided the money, of course, and even suggested I get it engraved with his initials. I remembered the way he'd smiled, taken me in his big arms, set me on his lap, and sworn he'd always think of me whenever he used it. And he had had it with him ever since, right up until a few days before I'd gotten home.

That was about the time we'd first seen the white German shepherd that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere and killed our rooster. The dog belonged to the Devores, a family living on the other side of the hill that bordered the northeast side

of our property. Though the family had lived there for the past year, Dad had only recently had a problem with the dog killing my mom's chickens. And though this might have been merely an annoyance for some, for me it bordered on terror.

When I was six years old—just a few weeks after I'd given my father the lighter—I was attacked by a rottweiler, the first I'd ever seen, black and orange and full of tight muscles, with a wide mouth and powerful jaws. The dog had mangled my left arm, ripping open flesh like ragged red blooms along my wrist and bicep. Fortunately, my arm was the only place I'd sustained significant injury, but the scars would stay for the rest of my life, jagged, jigsaw-like scars from my wrist to my shoulder. But there were other scars as well, and maybe that was one other thing my father and I had in common.

He understood my fear. The attack had left me with an almost insurmountable fear of large dogs. I fought it as hard as I could, and a psychiatrist had worked with me in recent years, but the fear was always there. While friends sometimes teased me about my shyness even around friendly dogs, my father never said a word, and I always remember how the day after the attack he'd told the sheriff that if the dog were not destroyed, he would do what the county had not.

III

The house was built of brick that was orange and black with a bit of off-white mixed in, and the wooden trim was painted a dull brown, colors I thought more suited to a calico cat than someone's house. And the Devores had made some additions to the property, hauling in railroad ties and laying them at jagged angles to mark off a series of gravel walkways and gardens. The garden flowers flamed with myriad colors: brilliant reds, yellows, purples, blues, and whites, everything oddly enticing and yet strangely dissonant to the surrounding hills. A cloud of black butterflies with yellow and gold markings fluttered above the garden, and atop the end of a railroad tie sat a mantis, its brown body barely visible against the weathered grain of the wood. It held a black insect between its pinchers and looked at me with empty, bulbous eyes, its head swiveling with smooth, mechanical precision.

It was about midmorning, but one of those days you'd never

know it because of the way the clouds played with the light. High, gray cirrus softened what little light got through, and some of the lower clouds lay like long feathery bars across the hills. The clouds in the west were already that dark blue that indicates rain, and as Dad and Mr. Devore talked, I heard the low rumble of thunder.

"What do you think about what we've done to the house?" Mr. Devore asked. Mr. Devore was a tall man, just an inch or two shorter than my father. His brown hair was combed straight back and receded along the sides. And though several years younger than Dad, his thin hair was streaked with gray, and his eyes were so deep set I couldn't help but imagine the shape of the skull behind the wrinkled forehead.

I took off my cap and laid it on a wooden bench alongside the cinder walkway by the gardens. I wiped the sweat from my forehead, and Dad lit a cigarette as he looked at the gardens and the rest of the house. "You've really changed things around here," he said. "Looks like a lot of work."

Mr. Devore laughed. "My wife, Angela," he began. "She's the one who loves flowers. I told her I'd do anything for her and suggested we put in plants indigenous to the area, you know, vegetation that looks like it belongs here. But not Angela. She's got to make a splash everywhere we live. She wants all the color she can get." He ran his fingers through his thinning hair and smiled. "Always blurring the lines of decorum, that's Angela."

"There's nothing wrong with a little flair, I suppose," said Dad. Lightning flickered from the other side of the hills, and for a brief second the dark leaves of the live oaks flashed a rich green, and the gardens blazed with color.

Greg, Mr. Devore's twelve-year-old son, brought the dog around to where we were speaking. The dog's name was Bo, and Mr. Devore asked Greg if there were any way the dog could have gotten out. According to Greg, the gate to the dog-run was locked, no boards were loose that Bo could have gotten through, and he was sure the dog couldn't jump over the fence.

"Nevertheless," said my father, "this is the second chicken it's killed."

Greg looked at my father very seriously. "I promise he won't get out again, Mr. Green," he said.

"Yes, it better not happen again," said Mr. Devore firmly to

his son. Then he looked back at Dad. "I'd be happy to pay you for the trouble he's caused." He reached into his pocket, but before he could offer any money, Dad stopped him short.

"I don't want your money, Mr. Devore. I want you to keep your damn dog off our property!"

"Well, again I'm very sorry, Jim," said Mr. Devore. His eyes narrowed as he looked sharply back at my father. Lightning flashed again, throwing an eerie white light across the garden and the house, and something at one of the long vertical windows caught my eye. I couldn't tell what it was, though. The drapes were open. The room was dark.

"Next time I'll call the authorities," Dad said.

My gaze drifted back to the window, where I caught the slightest hint of movement; something small and white seemed to drift in the darkness of the room.

"Look," said Mr. Devore. "I'm sure that won't be necessary. I can understand how Tom might be a little scared because of—"

"Tom's got nothing to do with it," said Dad. "It's your animal and your responsibility. If it comes over and harms my property, goddamnit, I'll do something about it!"

My father was losing his head. I'd never seen him so angry.

"There's no reason for language like that, Mr. Green," said Mr. Devore. It thundered again, this time the kind that seems to come at you from far away in soft, deep undertones that build to an awful pounding rumble you can feel in your chest. I looked at Dad, at Mr. Devore, then again at the window. A jagged flash tore the air, everything surreal and white.

A white coffee cup. That's what I'd seen at the window. Mrs. Devore's. The white light had revealed all—the cup she raised to her lips, the wisping curls of her hair, the soft shadows suggesting the smooth slope of each breast, and the naked curves of her hips.

Mr. Devore whirled quickly and glared at the window. Then he turned and squinted back at me, but said nothing. He looked at my father. Dad threw his cigarette to the ground at Mr. Devore's feet, and the wind blew orange sparks that flickered on the gray cinders of the path. Mr. Devore crushed out the butt with his heel and stared accusingly at Dad. "I think you'd better go now," he said.

IV

Even the first time I met her, I imagined her naked. It hadn't been difficult to do. She had worn a mauve silk robe covered with bright patterns of blue and yellow flowers. She pulled and tugged at the belt of the robe, knotting it across her waist so that the fabric clung tightly to the flare of her hips, and her breasts swelled beneath the patterns of the flowers.

"Oh, how beautiful," she had said, and I had thought, *Yes, how beautiful*, before slowly realizing the words referred not to Mrs. Devore but to the dead rooster her husband held in one hand. "Just look at those colors." Her long, delicate fingers stroked one of the bird's wings as though caressing something of great value. Almost affectionately, she drew her fingers again and again along the rooster's limp wing, and the black feathers shimmered blue in the sun.

This was the first time I'd gone to the Devores', a Saturday morning. It was the first time we'd had trouble with the dog. It was the first time I'd met Mrs. Devore.

"I'm so sorry it's dead," she said. She looked at me with her brown eyes, brushed a wayward curl of brown hair from her forehead, and held out her hand. "I'm Angela," she said. "And I'm so sorry our dog killed such a lovely animal."

I'd never thought of our rooster as seeming "lovely," but something about her tone of voice made me willing to consider it—the soothing confidence of someone you're almost tempted to let take control.

I took her hand, and as she leaned forward, the V the robe formed across her chest opened slightly so that her breasts bobbed gently beneath the thin silk of the robe and the nipples stood erect.

I looked away. To me, she was as exotic as the garden.

Several weeks later, the day after Dad had given Mr. Devore the ultimatum about the dog, she had appeared in the doorway dressed the same way. It was a warm Sunday afternoon, and since the weather was nice, I had walked over to the Devores' to retrieve the cap I'd left on the bench by the garden. I had worried a little about running into Bo but figured he'd be penned up after what my father had said to Mr. Devore. I also worried about how Mr. Devore might react when he saw me, but when I

got there Mrs. Devore told me he had taken their son to Austin for the day.

"Goodness, you must think I never get dressed," she said, laughing. "I was just about to go for my afternoon swim. Would you like to come in?"

I told her I had come for my cap, but it wasn't on the bench where I'd left it. Perhaps her husband or son had taken it into the house, she suggested.

While she looked for my cap, I waited in the entryway. In front of me hung an impressionistic painting with an African theme—tall Masai warriors clad in bright red robes—and to the left of that a long spear hanging diagonally across the wall beside a large wooden African mask with long narrow slits for eyes. And on a small table to my right sat what looked like a statue of a Tibetan monk in meditation, and behind him a white oriental vase covered in lovely blue flowers. And on the wall above the vase was another interesting painting. This one might have been Mrs. Devore herself, an impressionistic portrait of a woman with long curls of brown hair.

After a few minutes, Mrs. Devore returned and told me she'd been unable to locate my cap. I thanked her for looking, and as I turned to leave, she insisted on getting me something to drink. Then she surprised me by reaching out her hand and pushing back the hair on my forehead. My face and hair were wet with perspiration, and the cool air of the house felt good on my forehead. "Besides," she said, "you look like you could use something cold to drink." She was smiling.

"I *am* a little thirsty," I told her.

"Good," she said. "Come on in and I'll see what we have."

She closed the front door and turned the lock. Then she led me to the kitchen and brought out a pitcher of iced tea from the refrigerator and poured me a glass. "I hope you like it sweet," she said. "I've already sweetened it."

"That's fine," I said.

"Good," she said, handing me the tea. "Let's go in here." She guided me into the living room, and I sat on the couch. Mrs. Devore sat next to me. I sipped the tea and noticed a large book open on the coffee table.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's a book of art I was looking at when you knocked."

I turned the book to a better angle so I could see what she'd been looking at. It was a picture of a Picasso. *Seated Bather* read the caption.

"Oh yeah, I've seen this before," I said. "It's Picasso, isn't it?" The painting was of the distorted figure of a nude woman, a blue sea behind her.

"Do you like Picasso?" asked Mrs. Devore.

"I think so, but I'm not sure I really understand him though."

Mrs. Devore smiled and sipped her tea.

"I mean, I can see the figure of the woman, here. She's reading a book."

"Reading a book? How do you see that, Tom?"

"Look," I said. "If you lean back away from the painting a little and squint, you can see it. Here, you can see her holding her arms out in front of her with the open book." I touched the picture and traced the outlines of the woman's arms and the book.

Mrs. Devore set her drink on the table, then leaned back a little and squinted at the picture.

"You're right," she said. "How'd you know that?"

"One of my art books I have from school," I told her.

"Well, you seem to understand a lot about Picasso, Tom."

I smiled. "No, not really. Most people that look at this the first time say it looks like a praying mantis. But the funny thing is, I can never see that. For some reason, I can never see the mantis." I shook my head and laughed. "I showed my father this painting once, and he couldn't see it either."

She touched my arm and looked at me knowingly, as though we shared a secret. "He doesn't understand art like you do, does he?" she said. "But look, the mantis is what I see immediately. Don't you see it here?" She drew her finger along the outlines of where the mantis was supposed to be. "Here, you can see the head of the mantis, and here you can see the pinchers. You don't see that?"

"No," I said. I shook my head again and smiled.

She laughed and touched my arm again. "You're so charming, Tom," she said, smiling.

I looked down at my glass of tea. Mrs. Devore laid her hand across the back of my palm. As I turned toward her, her face was close to mine and she looked into my eyes. "I'm sorry, Tom," she said seriously. Her voice was calm and soothing. "I

make you uncomfortable saying that, don't I?" She patted the back of my hand. "I just hope Gregory appreciates things like this some day. It's refreshing to see a young man like you who cares about art." She paused, took one last sip from her glass, then stood up and took me by the hand. "Here, come with me. I want to show you something."

I stood and let her lead me through the house and into a large room with a high ceiling. Tall windows formed the length of the wall on the north side, and soft, indirect sunlight flooded the room. Paintings lined the other bricked walls, and in the middle of the room stood several easels.

"This is my little studio," she said.

I walked around the room, studying the paintings. Most were landscapes depicting scenes from our area. I recognized the flowers of the Devores' garden, the big pecan tree of the front yard, the hills of the next valley to the east.

"You painted these?" I asked.

She nodded but said nothing.

"They're beautiful," I said. "Impressionistic. They have a soft impressionistic quality about them."

Mrs. Devore smiled. "I love the impressionists," she said. "I like what the impressionists did and what they stood for, how they sought to capture the transience of a scene. And the way they challenged the established standards of the time."

"You mean like what Manet did with *Le Dejeurner sur l'herbe*?"

Mrs. Devore laughed. Excitedly, she clasped her hands beneath her chin like a small child in prayer, and as she spoke became even more animated. "Yes, Tom. You know that painting? It's one of my favorites. And you know, when Manet painted it he told the Salon of Paris his main interest was the temporality of the light, not the subject matter. And yet Manet challenged the boundaries of subject matter, too. There you have the two men having a picnic somewhere in the country, and seated with them is a naked woman as if it's the most natural thing in the world. Up until that time, nudes were painted mainly by the old masters, or sometimes used as allegories. But here was Manet challenging all of that. It was scandalous!" She paused, laughing to herself, and the light of the studio gave her eyes a greater sense of depth and color, and as she talked her eyes were flecked with gold. "When I think of the impressionists, I think of how

those painters broke away from the Salon of Paris for self-definition. They knew how the constraints of convention mask our true desires, our true impressions. They knew that our true expressions and our true selves can't be contained by rigid lines of definition."

I wasn't sure what to say. I crossed the room to one painting that stood out from the rest, a larger painting of a woman defined softly by subtle shades of light and shadow. She had long smooth black hair that fell across her shoulders. Her back was to the viewer, and she was nude, reclining slightly on one arm.

"I love this one," I said.

"Oh, that one caused quite a row," said Mrs. Devore. She spoke softly with a hint of regret in her voice. I felt her touch my arm, and she spoke almost in a whisper. "This is my favorite, too."

"It's lovely. Who is it?"

"Marta," said Mrs. Devore. "She was the daughter of a man my husband worked with in Mexico. She was a lovely girl. She used to visit us at our house, and I'd always been struck by her beauty. And after several attempts I finally convinced her to pose."

"Did she like the painting?"

"Oh yes. She loved it. It was her father who objected. He couldn't stand the thought that I had painted her in the nude." Mrs. Devore looked at the painting, and you could see the feeling in her eyes, almost the way one looks at a lover. "He just couldn't stand the idea of others seeing the painting." Mrs. Devore sighed.

She reached out her hands and touched the shoulders of the figure. And for a moment, her outstretched arms reminded me of the arms of the woman in the Picasso.

"There was a lovely innocence about her," she said. "So shy. Maybe that was a part of her charm. And she was so beautiful." She drew her finger along the curve of Marta's spine and looked at me. "You would have liked her, Tom." She reached up and brushed the hair from my forehead. "The two of you seem much alike." She moved the tips of her fingers lightly across my cheek. I looked away, but I could still feel her gaze. And when I glanced back at her, she looked straight into my eyes, and I felt she didn't just see my face but something else I didn't want her to.

Then she smiled. She tilted her head to one side, and there was a playfulness in her eyes I'd seen when she'd talked of

Manet. "It's time for my swim now," she said. "Come on, Tom. I'll show you our pool." I thought I should leave, but before I could say anything, she took my hand and led me from the studio into a tiled sunlit room with tropical palms and large windows that looked onto the swimming pool in the backyard. She opened the door to the backyard and led me outside.

As with the front of the house, the backyard was an effusion of color: tall trees shading the yard and an arbor covered by purple blooms of wisteria; patches of sunlight speckling the grass beneath the trees; gardens of orange, red, and yellow flowers that seemed to flash with the sunlight; and before it all the languorous blue of a kidney-shaped pool. The scent of the flowers filled the air and reminded me of the scent of Mrs. Devore's hair as she had led me through the house. I tried to imagine the house's previous owner, an elderly widower, at home in such a place, but it was impossible. This was Mrs. Devore's home, a place that heightened the senses, and I felt I'd traveled far away. I thought of jungle paintings by Henri Rousseau, of rich greens and raging tigers, snake charmers and native drums, and as I turned to tell Mrs. Devore how beautiful it was, she stood in front of me and took off her robe.

I looked away.

She wore a black one-piece swimsuit, and I was afraid to look at her. I thought of how I'd seen her the day before.

"I should be going," I said. I tried to smile naturally, but everything seemed forced.

Mrs. Devore came close and stood in front of me, holding the robe in one hand. Sunlight shimmered across the blue water behind her. She reached out and touched my face again. "All right, Tom," she said in a whisper. "All right. But you don't have to."

She reached into a pocket of her robe, brought out a pack of Marlboros, shook out a cigarette and put it to her lips, then flicked open a silver lighter and held it to the cigarette.

"Like father, like son," she said, closing the lighter.

"I beg your pardon."

She drew hard on the cigarette, and the paper at the end curled orange and receded into ash. "You have your father's eyes," she said.

My heart pounded.

"I do?" I strained to see the lighter she held in her hand, but I could see no initials.

She dragged again on the cigarette and let the smoke curl thickly from between her lips. "Yes," she said. "Not so rigidly defined though, I think." Her head tilted playfully to one side and she smiled teasingly. "What do they hide, Tom?"

I didn't answer.

She walked with me back to the front door, and I thanked her again for the tea and looking for my hat. She stood in front of me, still without her robe, and again I tried not to look at her too long. And as I turned to go, I passed again the Tibetan monk and the flowery vase, the Masai warriors, the mask and spear, then the painting of the woman with long wispy hair, the outlines of her face soft and nebulous, an essence contained by no clear line.

When I reached home thirty minutes later, my father sat in the front porch swing, smoking. The sun was bright on his face, and his eyes looked tired and sunken, and the lines ran deeper across his forehead. He dragged on the cigarette, and his eyes narrowed like slits in a mask as he gazed at our green lawn and the wild hills beyond, gazed, I thought, in a contemplative way, perhaps even cynical, like the gaze of a man caught between wonder and regret, or a man beguiled by the beauty of a thing he fears.

Deborah H. Doolittle

The Scarecrow

Always, it is the same scene:
the fields, cultivated or
fallow, the trees signaling

in the background; the wind
that brings the raucous blackbirds
in. It requires a hobo's

attitude towards insurance,
finer things like clothing
and how to fill those blank hours

of counting different ways
to view those birds: ebony
beak; amber eye—that

obsidian streak across the sky.
Ignore the call of distant
cars, the dry rattle of corn,

and the nauseous heaves of wheat,
and even the grackles seem
impressed. Forget this constant

squabble for seeds and how
the highway beckons. One hitch
of a thumb and halfway down

the road, the fields will become
the vague outline of an idea
already half-forgotten.

Jesse Lee Kercheval

Fence

In this picture
you are leaning against one,
smiling at me,
not the camera.
Your editor's assistant,
looking at this photograph,
will say, Paul Newman.
You look that handsome.

She doesn't know
you are three weeks
into radiation,
about to lose your hair,
can hardly see,
or that your whole right side,
toe to tongue, is numb.
No one could guess
from just this photograph,

which is either
a snapshot of the last time
I saw you alive,
or just a picture of you
smiling at me
from a single moment
in our lives
which both go on from here.

Jerry Gabriel Weather

It was going to be my birthday in a few days and I decided enough was enough. Let's say I didn't feel exactly present. I told Sarah on the way back to her parents' house that I wanted to break it off. I'll be the first to admit that it must have seemed somewhat capricious.

Sure enough, Sarah was a little dumbfounded at first, sitting slackjawed over in the passenger seat. But then something appeared to sink in, and by the time we'd snaked our way back to her town, she told me that she thought it had been inevitable, which was a way of thinking about it I hadn't bothered to reach. I generally did not see the world so absolutely as evitable and inevitable, possible and impossible.

"Are you still going to spend the night?" she asked me in her driveway. The truth, of course, was that I wanted to be out of there, but I was tired and it was a two-hour drive back to Columbus, and it was already nearly two in the morning. I could have slept some at a roadside rest, I thought, and then gone on, but I figured why not just sleep here, and get up early, be gone before anyone rises.

"Is that all right?" I asked.

She nodded sadly but was otherwise quiet, not too awfully different from her usual manner.

I slept soundly on her older sister's bed in the basement, where I had slept the other nights I'd stayed at her parent's house, and I woke early, well rested despite the brief sleep and the events of the previous night.

I found a note under the door with my name on it as I was dressing, and I picked it up and put it in my pocket without unfolding it. When I opened the door, Sarah was there, too, curled up asleep, one of those four-color pens and some cream-colored stationary next to her limp hand.

I crept past her—she didn't stir, whether because she was asleep or embarrassed I didn't know or care—and I carefully made my way upstairs. The kitchen was brightly lit and quiet. I stole a bagel and banana from the counter.

I thought I was away and was already mentally going through

the music selections I had in my car when I saw that her dad was in the driveway, washing his Cutlass Sierra. It wasn't even seven yet.

"Did a real number in there," he said.

"Is that what you call it?"

"Well," he said, pausing dramatically. "What's your next conquest?"

He was a bit of a pill—a bitter man. Kind of an asshole, actually. An English teacher at Sarah's high school here in Horace, Ohio. A Dodger fan, no less. Would sit there in front of the TV ad nauseam cheering on those hapless fools.

"You prefer that I marry her and live unhappily for forty years?" I asked him.

This seemed to cut to the quick.

"Look, Casanova. You can play by your rules if you want. Just keep in mind that every dog has its day."

He used an awful lot of clichés for an English teacher. "That must mean something," I told him, though I knew very well what it meant.

He answered me anyway. "You'll get bit by your own medicine someday," he said. Needless to say, I found Mr. Montgomery not to be the sharpest guy on the block.

"Look," I said. "I'm sorry I've hurt your daughter. She'll be okay, I think. It's not like I've left her at the altar."

"True," he admitted, but then, as if his inner struggle with all of this were right on the surface, he said, "Just for the record, I never liked you."

"You really find it necessary to tell me that?" I asked.

He shrugged.

What a wiener.

"Fortunately for me, Mr. Montgomery, your opinion doesn't hold much sway outside that house."

He was getting really mad.

"Get out of here," he said. "And leave that banana and bagel. Those are mine. Go earn your own food."

"Sure," I said, and I threw them on the dewy lawn. I got into my car, the sturdy Renault Alliance. *Car and Driver* "Car of the Year," 1986. "Also for the record," I said out my window, "I never liked you, either." I could see that it no longer mattered how far either of us took it; things between us were, so to speak, shot.

"I don't give a good goddamn what you think," he yelled, aiming the hose nozzle in my direction, only the water didn't quite reach me. I turned on my windshield wipers just for fun.

"You don't need to bother coming back," he said. He put his thumb over the nozzle so he could get a real taut stream of water, but I was just ahead of him and had my window up by the time he got it straightened out toward my head. It splashed against the window. I goggle-eyed him as I drove off.

I was nearly to the highway running between Columbus and Cincinnati when my car gradually lost power and, after a little sputtering, stalled. I tried it six or seven times, but it was done for—wouldn't even turn over.

I got out and walked back to town, which took the better part of half an hour. It was already getting hot. I found a service station in Horace called Ray's Shell. I loitered by the front door for twenty minutes until Ray showed up, and I explained my situation to him. He nodded then he put on coffee, smoked a cigarette, opened the cash register and counted the money. Eventually, two more guys appeared, and Ray called one of them over.

"Earl," he said. "This gentleman broke down out toward the reservoir. You take him out there in the tow and get his car—at least see if you can figure out what the deal is."

"Yep," Earl said, sleepy-eyed.

"Follow him," Ray instructed.

I did. The wrecker we took was vintage 1964. It merely had a chain and a lift bar—none of the bells and whistles of the contemporary models; none of those handy lift ramps.

"Probably gonna be blistering today," Earl observed.

I sat quietly.

"You live around here?" he asked.

"No," I told him. "Up to Columbus. I have a girlfriend down here."

"Who's that?" he asked.

I rattled off the first girl's name I could think of. "Her name's Celia."

"Celia. . . ?"

"Holcomb," I said, only afterward realizing that I had conflated the names of two previous girlfriends: Celia Watkins and Mindy Holcomb. Weird.

"Don't know her," he said.

"She's not lived here long," I told him.

He nodded.

It didn't take us long to reach the car. He got in and tried it, then took a quick look under the hood.

"Alternator's probably dead," he said. "Killed the battery."

We towed it back to town and he talked to Ray for a while. Ray disappeared into the garage where my car was for nearly half an hour. Eventually, he came back outside and smoked a cigarette. I was sitting on the ground, leaning against the glass window of the office.

"It's your alternator," he said. "I can get one in from Columbus this afternoon, but we ain't got nothing around here for it. Not even rebuilt." Like some war pilot lamenting the wiliness of an enemy, he took a hard drag on his cigarette and, simultaneously exhaling and speaking, he said, "No good Frenchies."

"How much?" I asked him.

"Hundred and sixty-five or so with labor."

"Shit," I said, shaking my head. I didn't have a lot of spare change for new alternators.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd not swear," he told me.

"Sorry," I said, feeling a little foolish.

"Well, what do you wanna do?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm going to be needing the car."

"Roger," he said, as in aye aye, and turned and walked back inside.

I walked down the block to a diner and ate some bacon and eggs. I stayed for a long time and read all of the morning paper, drank a lot of coffee. Nothing of note had happened in the world. There was a big drug-trafficking bust in Florida, and there was a picture of some Feds standing in front of a yacht-looking thing full of what were apparently clear bags of cocaine. There had been flooding in Bangladesh, and there were awful pictures of that, too. And here in the U.S. the governor's convention was going on in Missouri, and there were a bunch of these guys mouthing platitudes. Also the Dodgers lost to the Padres in ten innings, which gave me a silly sense of satisfaction.

When I came back to the station, I positioned myself in a shady spot in the grass away from the noise of the auto-bay. I covered my head with the paper like characters are always doing in old Laurel and Hardy movies, and I fell asleep.

Later, I woke up when the sun fell on me; it was one of those hazy Midwestern days in which the horizon and the clouds sort of mesh, gradually dispelling the belief that there's anything separating them.

I lay there and stared up into the sky for a long time, just spacing. Then I started to think about what I was going to do when I got back to my apartment. I couldn't think of one thing,

actually, and imagined I would be doing something very similar to what I was doing here, and thus came to the conclusion that this wasn't all that inconvenient for me, except for the money of course. While I was lying there, Ray appeared over me.

"You awake," he said.

"Yep."

"Listen," he said. "I'm sending Earl over to Vansickle County to pick up a wrecked bug. If you're interested, I'd pay you eight dollars an hour to go with him and help him when he needs it. Might not be anything to do, but it would save me having to send one of my mechanics. You wouldn't be more than a couple hours, and by then we'll probably have that French-mobile of yours up and running."

I had to think for a few seconds to understand that when he said *bug* he meant a Volkswagen and not an insect. Of course it makes no sense, an insect *wrecking*, but that is the way my mind tried to translate it.

"Sounds like a fine deal," I told him.

"He'll be leaving here just after lunch. You plan on eatin' anything?"

"I'll just grab a sandwich," I said. "Take me five minutes."

I had a sandwich made at the diner I'd eaten at, and while they made it, I called my boss on my calling card and told her that I'd had car trouble and wouldn't be able to make it on time this afternoon.

"I want to see documentation of this engine work," she told me.

"Of course," I said. "I'll have it notarized." I was kidding of course. I assumed she was, too, but who knows.

Earl liked to talk about baseball. One of his sons played in a youth league and so I heard all about that. He was upset about the game dying and was convinced it was happening fast, that kids today cared more about clothes than playing ball, which was the first I'd heard that particular slant on the argument. And then there was soccer, which was a whole other subject. It was a communist sport, Earl said. Once they brought soccer in wholesale, he was saying, we'd have our very own politburo soon enough. I kept my mouth shut on these topics. I thought Earl was a smart enough guy who, with a captive audience, took things just a step farther than he should have.

"What do you do up to Columbus?" he asked me.

"Go to school," I said.

"State, is it?"

"Yeah."

We were quiet. The radio fizzed and occasionally I could make out some distant Motown.

"How do you like it?"

"School?"

"Yeah."

"It's all right," I said. "I don't love it."

"You studying to be a doctor, or what?"

Even Earl seemed to see that this was a strange assumption. He added, "I don't know. Business or something?"

"Teacher," I said. "High school history teacher, probably. Maybe an engineer. I'm not quite sure."

He nodded. I waited for him to say something jokey about train engineers, which he didn't, and then I waited for him to say how long he'd been at this job and all that, but he didn't say anything else.

We entered Vansickle County. It was way down there, tucked away in a corner of the state I'd not really seen before, and I took note of the place and stacked it against the rest of the state and country that I knew, cataloging it. Earl lit a cigarette and offered me one, which I turned down.

After a number of turns onto unmarked roads, I asked Earl how he was navigating exactly.

"Like a bird, captain," he said, enigmatically. I didn't press the issue. I guess if you live your life in one place, you eventually learn your way around.

Soon we came onto the wreck scene. There was a semi and a VW bug involved, and a deputy sheriff was there by himself directing traffic. The road was one of these minor state routes that had maybe been a prominent thoroughfare before World War II, but had gradually become less important as the interstate system went in, connecting cities.

The bug was blocking part of the road, and what little traffic there was eased by on the wrong side, guided by the deputy; the semi was lying on its side in the first few rows of some soybeans as if asleep. It had taken out a hefty-looking fence in getting there.

We pulled up next to the deputy.

"Anyone dead?" Earl asked.

"Naw," the deputy said. "Couple broken bones probably. How you gonna do this?"

Earl surveyed the situation, noting the disfigurement of the

car's front end. "I'll pull it from the back to get it out of there, and then I'll set her down and switch it around for the drive home," he said.

The deputy nodded and we positioned ourselves.

We rigged up the axle to the lift, and then Earl slowly levitated the car with the hydraulic controls on the side of the truck. He had me get in the truck then and pull it forward and to the side of the road, to where we could get an angle on the car, and then he set it down like he'd said and got back into the truck and maneuvered around to the other side of it and picked it up again. It was pretty torn up and hard to situate in a way that would keep it from pulling to the right, but we got it to where Earl was satisfied, more or less.

The deputy was brooming off the road then.

"You all have an awful lot of these sorts of mishaps down this way," Earl said.

"I know it," the deputy said. "Had a godawful storm couple hours back. I reckon one or the other of 'em lost their way in the rain."

"Shit happens, eh?" Earl observed.

"Sure does," said the deputy.

"How's come we get called and not a wrecker from Carthage?" Earl asked the deputy. We were sitting there in the middle of the road, and Earl was absently pulling out a cigarette with his two hands resting on top of the steering wheel while he talked to the man.

"Only wrecker in Carthage got his license suspended for DUI."

"And whose mess is this to clean up?" Earl asked, thumbing toward the eighteen-wheeler.

"Mack is sending some people down from Columbus to take care of it."

"I see," Earl said, lighting his cigarette with the truck lighter. "Well, you keep 'em straight round here."

"Will do, boys," he said, and Earl put the truck in gear and pulled away in the direction of Horace County.

We were talking about cars and he wondered how I could possibly drive a Renault. "Nobody makes junkier cars than the French," he said. I explained that my particular model—produced, if he insisted on pushing things, in Canada, not France—was "Car of the Year" according to *Car and Driver*. He was not impressed by Canadian manufacturing and suggested that the

French either owned the magazine in question or had bribed the right people or, he said, done some other stuff, if I knew what he meant.

"What's your girlfriend do down here?" he asked.

"She works at a Ponderosa Steak House somewhere around here."

"Good food, Ponderosa," he said.

"But she goes to school up to Columbus. That's how I know her. She's just down here for the summer."

"You two planning on getting married, then?"

"Probably not," I said.

The sky above was starting to darken, and Earl observed that we were probably going to be getting some weather. He turned on the radio—said he wanted to see what sort of news on the situation could be scared up.

"You married?" I asked.

"Seventeen years," he said.

"You don't look old enough really for all that."

"Just barely," he told me.

"What's your wife's name?"

"Collette."

"How many kids?"

"We got three, all told. The oldest one's a junior at Horace High."

We rattled along, and every seven or eight miles or so Earl pulled over and we checked on one of the straps that held the car in place because it had dry rot and was threatening to break.

"Ray's been saying for ages he was going to replace this," he explained to me. "But he never does and it just keeps getting worse."

"Things get in the way sometimes," I observed.

"I reckon they do," he said, "but he's going to have bigger bills to pay than a new strap if he don't take care of this soon."

The storm moved in swiftly and overtook us before we'd taken too much notice of it. The radio eventually told us of tornadoes touching down in three of the five neighboring counties. Not five minutes after this announcement, we saw our very own tornado. It was to the south of us, and it was unclear in what direction it was moving or how big it was or if it was touching down. But it was a damn ominous sight, sort of evil almost, if some naturally occurring phenomenon could be called evil.

"*This* is a damn mess," Earl said. "I can abide all sorts of things, but I do not care for tornadoes."

"Should we pull off?"

"Well, hell yes we should pull off," he said. "But you've got to find someplace safe first. You let me handle things here."

I said nothing. It made sense. I didn't know anything about tornadoes. Where I came from in the southeast of the state, we rarely had tornadoes; whether that was because of the hilly nature of the region or some other more complicated meteorological phenomenon I'm not sure.

We turned off the county road we were on and drove for half a mile on gravel before coming to a bridge. The rain was making it hard to see anything by then, and the thunder and wind had ratcheted things up considerably. We stopped just short of the bridge, pretty much right in the middle of the road; there were steep banks on either side, but no where else to put the truck and the bug.

"Let's wait it out," he told me.

Everything I'd heard about tornadoes seemed to be true. They are loud like trains, and it is this noise that is the terrifying business. Also—and I don't know the science of it—there is something that changes about the very color of the sky; it turns a sort of spooky jaundiced hue, something much different than your average thunderstorm.

There was a moment there when I was convinced the tornado was going to take us and the bug and the wrecker and probably the bridge, too, and send us all back over to Horace County or beyond. Earl seemed to comprehend this, and he grabbed my shirt with one hand and the bag containing my sandwich with the other, shut the door with his elbow, and then guided me toward the bank. We slid down the incline and waded through some dense weeds—a regular snake pit it would have been in other conditions.

Below the bridge there was more noise—trees cracking and falling and branches being thrashed around in the swollen creek, but all in all it was more hospitable than above after you got used to the darkness and the gurgling of the water.

We found a dry spot on the creek bank where there was plenty of space. It looked like this had been a hangout for some local kids, equipped with a fire pit and sitting stones and graffitied walls.

"Well," said Earl. "This is going to put us behind some." He was doing an admirable job of shrugging the whole business off if he in fact could not truly abide tornadoes.

I found a concrete block and sat on it, and Earl handed me

my sandwich and told me to eat it, and not altogether kindly. I wasn't much up for eating the sandwich, but I did as he said. He crouched nearby and lit a cigarette. Rainwater was blowing in some.

"So what went wrong with you and your little girl?" he asked. He had to talk loudly to be heard.

It was an obvious ploy to get us off the tornado, but I didn't mind. Normally I would have played dumb, but I knew it didn't matter what Earl knew. It really didn't matter what anyone knew. I didn't have any answers to questions about my girlfriend Sarah or a number of other topics that related directly to my existence.

"Usual," I said. I bit into the sandwich. I'd gotten a BLT.

"The usual," Earl repeated. "Which is?"

"Which is I've not got a clue," I told him.

He seemed to me the very bastion of calm.

He laughed. "You'll get used to not having a clue," he told me.

"I'd rather not," I told him.

"You don't got to," he said. "But if you want to, you get used to it."

I didn't say anything to that.

"Course you can just chuck the whole thing, I guess," he said, "but then where are you?"

"That's sort of the plan at the moment," I said.

He thought on that for a while.

"Yeah," he said. "I can see your way of thinking on it."

We watched the wind snap off a twenty-foot branch upstream a ways. The water pulled a discarded clothes dryer along as if it were made of airtight plastic.

We were quiet for a long time, and the noise of the storm subsided slowly, and over time I got over my fright. We waited there for nearly half an hour until it seemed to have passed completely and the sky had lightened some.

"I suppose we should mosey back to town," he said, putting out his fifth cigarette.

"All right."

Back up top there were tree limbs strewn about like leaves might be in the fall. The truck and bug had been untouched, though, and from where we were—this being summer and the trees densely foliaged—we couldn't see too much in the way of real damage and couldn't discern if the tornado had passed close by or not.

"This CB used to work, but it don't anymore," Earl said,

seemingly by way of apology. "Else I'd call in and tell Ray the situation."

We headed up the road some and found a spot to turn around, which was tricky with the bug on back in such a narrow road. Several times we had to stop while I cleared fallen tree limbs out of the way. When we eventually got back to the main road, I remembered that I'd left a bag of things on the floor of Sarah's sister's room. I closed my eyes: how could I have forgotten my bag at that house? I might have done without it and all its contents, but inside there was a watch that had belonged to my father, who had died a few years back. I wore it even though it was junky and about forty years old because I didn't have much to remember him by. It did a poor job of telling time and did so with little sliding digits like most watches use for only the date.

When we got back to Horace, I asked Earl to drop me four blocks from Sarah's and told him I'd be at the shop in less than an hour to pick up my car.

I made my way to the back side of the house through a wooded path Sarah had taken me on that ran adjacent to the high school where her dad taught and where she herself had graduated two years earlier.

The whole Montgomery clan was supposed to be down to Cincinnati today at Sarah's little brother's cello debut, which was happening at some arts institute. The next Yo-Yo Ma, I thought, and laughed to myself.

One arm of the path led straight to the Montgomery's backyard, and I paused there and looked around. The woods were soaked with moisture, like some Philippine place, and the heat had come back with a force equivalent to the storm itself and just seemed to overwhelm things. It was downright stultifying, and I sweated through my clothes in no time.

There was an old rusted swing set in the Montgomery's yard. The yards on either side of them also had swing sets, and the yards on either side of them did too. I couldn't believe it. It was possible, I guess, that this was some sort of skewed sample—that there was a swing set manufacturer in Horace that tested its products on the local population. Barring that, however, it was as if every yard in America had one of these things. They were something, apparently, that could not be done without nor shared.

Everyone had one, and now everyone's kids were the age of Sarah and here the swing sets were, rusting from weather and

disuse. Left here long enough, they would eventually get swallowed up by the earth, seeping into the ground, reverting back to their constituent elements. Their rust would seep into the water and contaminate it. We were all of us being contaminated by the gradual entropy of the world that existed before ours. It never ended, this cycle.

I'd never broken into a house. I knew that the Montgomerys didn't lock their back door, though, so it wouldn't be messy, and I would be in and out in no time, and on my way home.

Inside it was quiet. I stood animal-like for a moment, waiting to hear movement. I heard none. In and out, I repeated to myself quietly. No lingering. No bananas. None of those little star crunches her mom was always feeding me, though now that it came to mind, I was a little hungry. I saw on the cuckoo clock that it was just before three o'clock and reminded myself not to jump when the clock performed its hourly ritual.

Sarah's sister had been in band, like Sarah and their little brother Phillip, and there were trophies and photos all around of those halcyon days. Camille—the sister—hugging two other girls in front of—what was it? —the Jefferson Memorial? Camille holding her clarinet to her mouth and looking toward the camera. I knew her sister some; she was also going to school at State. She was older than us by a few years and reserved and always seemed to be thinking the worst of you when you spoke with her. I didn't like her much and had told Sarah this one night. Strangely, Sarah hadn't minded. She said she didn't care about her sister, either, and didn't care if I hated her. Some family, I remember thinking, though every family has its little sticking points and resentments, and I'm sure that Sarah cared about her sister in some way that wasn't altogether explicable to me.

I found my bag where I'd left it, and I snatched it up, robber-like, and bolted upstairs toward the back door. But then I remembered Sarah curled up outside my door that morning, and I decided to look to make sure everything was in order. I rummaged around in the bag and noticed nothing out of the ordinary at first. Then my pulse raced.

The watch, I thought. The watch itself was missing—the very thing I was worried about. It was a worst-case scenario. What had she done with my dad's watch?

I dumped the bag out on the kitchen floor and spread out all the contents. No watch. Maybe I had left it somewhere. I reconstructed the night before. Pizza Hut. The Harrison Ford movie. The party with her high school friends. The drive along the

reservoir home. There was no place it could be but either on my wrist or in my bag, and at last I remembered putting it there, carefully, while I was lying in bed, a copy of Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* resting on my chest (I'd found the *Reader's Digest* condensed version on Camille's shelf).

I went back downstairs and looked around the room again. No watch. Back upstairs. I peered around the den, Sarah's bedroom. There was a picture of the two of us in a frame there. She worked quickly; we had only been dating for a few months. I searched the rest of the house—the bathroom, the cupboards, the vegetable drawer in the fridge. Why are you looking in the vegetable drawer, I thought vacantly. Nobody even puts vegetables there. Except the Montgomerys; their vegetable drawer was chock-a-block with iceberg lettuce and old celery and carrots. Not surprisingly, there was no watch.

I looked around. Afternoon light shone in from the front room. The sitting room, these things were called. Nobody ever sat there. There were mints in a dish on a coffee table, and I ate two of those. There were more *Reader's Digest* novels here. And some sort of compendium called *Foxfire* that my mom had in her sitting room; even after looking at that book a number of times, I still didn't know quite what it was or what it was meant for. No watch.

I peered cautiously out the front window, drawing the curtains very carefully, not sure what I was looking for. It just seemed like that's the thing the burglar does from time to time—glances out the window to make sure the coast is clear.

There was no one out; it was too hot. Plus, there had been tornadoes in just about every county within a hundred miles, and for all I knew there were entire sections of Horace leveled. Hell, the Montgomerys themselves could have been killed driving in their Cutlass Sierra toward metropolitan Cincinnati. I saw them lifted up to about 300 feet, their car comically spinning around like one of those little maple-seed propellers that fall in late summer. Weirdly, it was Sarah's dad's face that I saw, not Sarah's. He didn't seem able to scream so he just sat there, seatbelted in, waiting for the end. It was unsettling to see him like that, and I made myself think of the Padres beating the Dodgers last night out in California, poor old Steve Sax striking out with two on in the bottom of the tenth.

I peered around the neighborhood and caught a quick flash of light from the driveway. I squinted. There was something glistening brightly there on the concrete driveway.

Ah hell, I said.

I opened the door and went out. There I was for all to see. I walked right over to the driveway. It was my watch—my father's watch—crushed. I picked up the pieces and held them in my hand. I considered their weight. Probably he'd bought it at a PX in Brownsville one afternoon all of those years ago, before a big night out. He'd probably shown it all around that night, and several other guys had held up their wrists to show theirs—the same watch. Everyone would have had a big laugh, and then there would have been more beers brought to the table and some grousing about this or that commanding officer. There would have been girls involved somehow, local girls, the grown children of majors and sergeants from the base, girls whose futures were uncertain but most likely involved marrying an airman first class and eventually moving with him to his hometown.

And now my father was gone, and probably some of those other guys were gone, and the girls, too, some of them were gone. Brownsville probably wasn't the same—or if it wasn't Brownsville, then Roswell or Colorado Springs; it didn't matter; they were all different places now, I could only assume. People and things were always changing, disappearing, going away, dying, drifting off, slipping back into the ground. It was the only truth of being alive, it seemed to me while I stood there. I put the watch in my pocket.

On the concrete, written in a pastel chalk—an orange the color of those ice-cream push-ups—it said, "We're not quite even, but I feel a little better."

I didn't know Sarah's writing well enough to know empirically if this was hers or not, but I knew it was not; insofar as she had a style, this was not it. It was her dad's. What a loon, I thought. It was spooky imagining him doing this in the hopes that I would come back and see it. How could he have known that I would?

The neighborhood was perfectly still. I thought for a moment about what I might do to retaliate. I can't lie; I considered several heinous acts, the most devious of which was pissing in his favorite Dodger-watching chair.

In the end, I didn't do any of those things, and the reason was because Mr. Montgomery was a man who knew what he wanted in the world. A guy like me, I realized, would always lose in a battle against a guy like him. He knew exactly what he was after and he was going to get it; he was going to persist and

fight against everything, and eventually he was going to prevail somehow. And that, above all else, was probably the most important distinction between the two of us in the end.

That old watch, I knew, didn't represent my dad any more than his gravestone, or the photos of him in Myrtle Beach, or his old letters, or even the stories I told about him. This was merely an old crushed watch that he had once owned. I decided to leave the watch for Sarah's dad and reached into my pocket to retrieve it and accidentally pulled out with it the piece of paper I'd forgotten about—the note from Sarah. Why not go ahead and get all this over with at once, I thought. I threw the watch down and opened the note. It was damp from the rain and sweat, but legible. God knows how many drafts it took her, but the note contained merely one line—four words, all told. I wish you well, it said. That was it. Love, Sarah. It touched me that she would eventually decide to tell me just this one thing, and for a moment I felt pretty small and wished that I could touch her hand and show her that I was human, that I felt, that I wished her well, too. I did wish her well. I wished everybody well.

I turned and started on my way back to Ray's Shell then, and the heat came down and blanketed me. I had a lot on my mind, I suppose, but soon the heat took it all away, which I can say was a little piece of heaven; it was one of those rare little gifts you get from the world that comes along at precisely the right moment.

I just walked, and for that forty-five minutes there was nothing but certainty. I took off my shirt and wrapped it around my head, turban-style. No one was out. It was a Tuesday in the middle of July. It was hot—98 degrees, according to the Farmers and Merchants Bank on Wood Street. These were truths. This was the town of Horace, Ohio.

What people called The Heartland. I had survived my first tornado today. Who knew what else I was to survive.

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