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Fall 2009

Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press
Lawrence, Kansas
Cottonwood 67

ISSN 0147-149X

Cottonwood is a review of the literary arts published once yearly.

Two-issue subscriptions to *Cottonwood* are available for $15. Four-issue subscriptions are $28. If you wish to subscribe to *Cottonwood*, or to become a donor, patron, or benefactor, please write to: Cottonwood, Dept. of English, 1445 Jayhawk Blvd., University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 66045, 785-864-2516.

Cottonwood welcomes submissions of fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. Please limit poetry submissions to five, prose submissions to one story or essay. Submissions will not be returned unless they are accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Simultaneous submissions are accepted, and submissions are read year-round. Please send submissions care of the appropriate editor to: *Cottonwood;* Room 400 Kansas Union; 1301 Jayhawk Blvd.; University of Kansas; Lawrence, KS, 66045.

Cottonwood receives support from the Department of English of the University of Kansas. Production is facilitated by the Word Processing Center of the University of Kansas and Blue Heron Typesetters, Inc.

Cottonwood is indexed by the *American Humanities Index*, *Poem Finder*, and the *Index of American Periodical Verse.*

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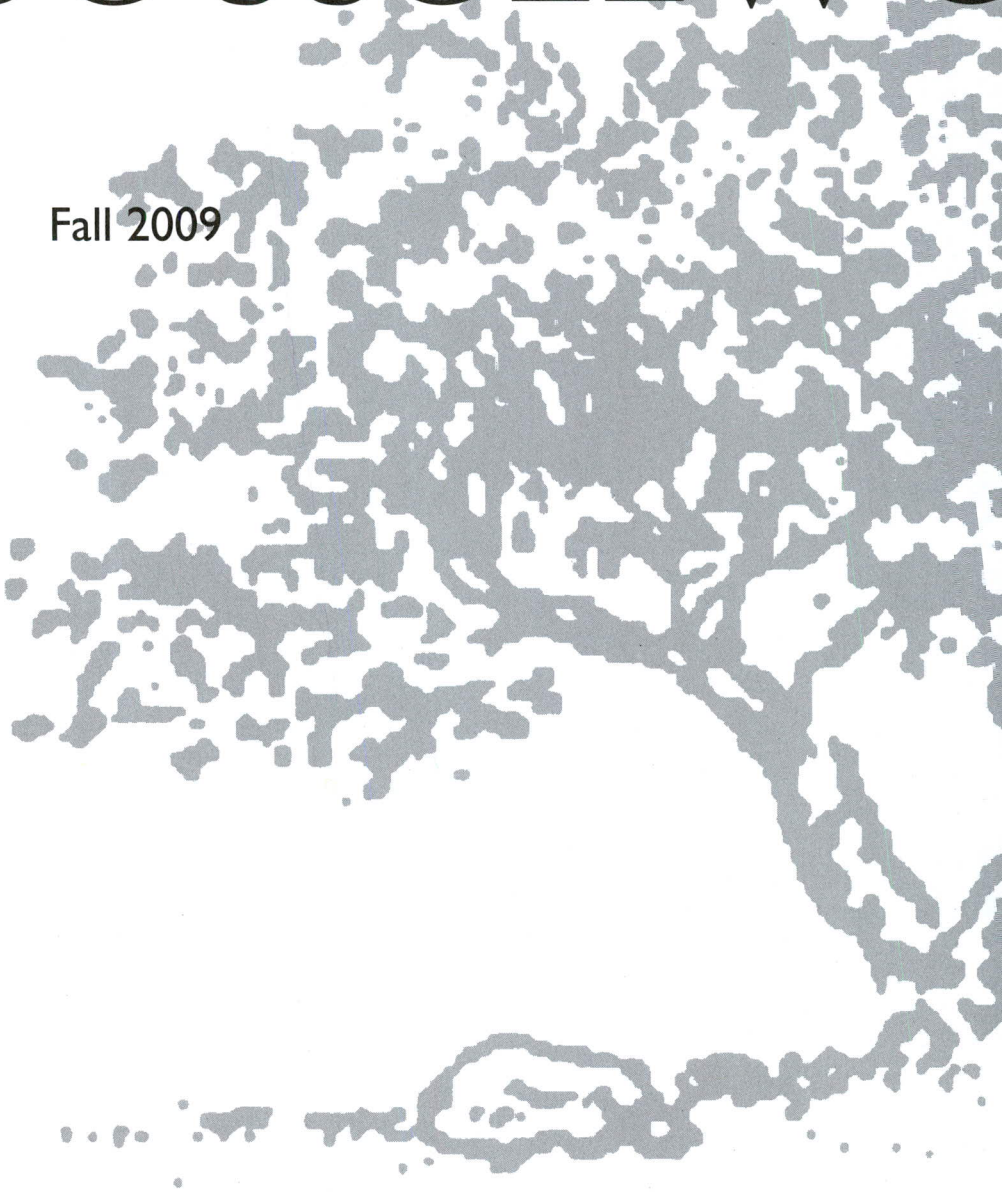

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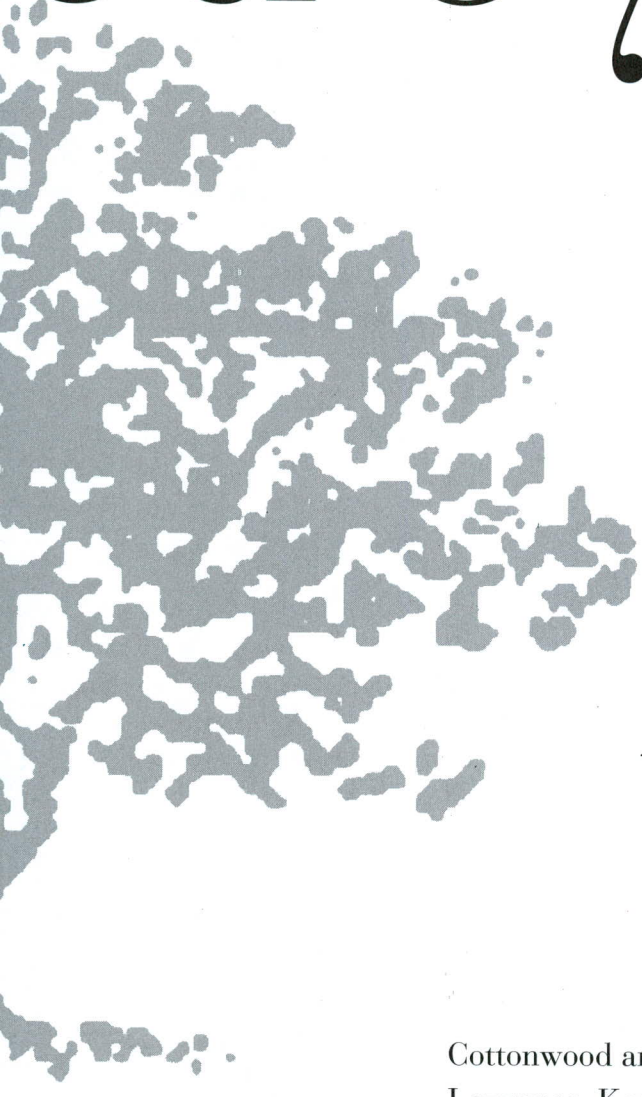

Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press
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Andrew Plattner A Year Gone

A queer cry, then silence, like a swimmer yanked into the deep . . . George sprang from his bed in a half-dream, to the one window in his room . . . outside there was his mother standing on the lawn in the washy moonlight, his father's hands around her neck. Her knees were bent, her hands slammed at his arms . . . down the street a car door shut and there were voices, quick footsteps . . . his father let go and she fell to the ground with a gentle swing of her arm and a surprising soft thud, like an actress might . . . his father ran into the darkness . . . by the time George was out in the yard, his mother was already on her knees, waving at the encroaching neighbors like a near counted-out prizefighter. "I'm all right," she said, gasping. "You," she said when she spotted George. "Back in . . ." She caught the grass with her hands, took labored breaths.

"Leave him alone," she said. Nobody was moving, but a couple of neighbors were yelling to one another about George's father, which direction he'd gone in . . .

Thereafter, George and his mother continued living in their small brick house on Fulmer Street in Cold Springs, West Virginia. George's mother wore turtlenecks to her job at the hardware store. She did have bad dreams, she would scream in the middle of the night and George would throw open the door to her bedroom and the silhouette of her would be sitting up, and there would be that gasping sound.

"I couldn't breathe," she'd say.

"It's all right, Mom."

"No," she'd say. "It's not."

After his father had been gone for a month, George began to answer the phone to hang-ups. He answered the phone one Sunday afternoon to another silence. He waited for the hang-up. "George!" his father said. "How's school?"

George swallowed and said, "It's almost summer."

"Summer . . . right."

"Where are you?"

"Where am I? Where's your mother?"

"Are you in prison?"

"No."

"Do they let you have phones in there?"

There was a pause from his end. "Will you tell her I called?"

"No," George said. He hung up.

In the fall, his mother began to take the Oldsmobile out on Saturday afternoons. She insisted George stay put, not have friends over, and he followed these rules, except when his friends would stop by. They would sit inside the house with him, watch Penn State grind their way up and down the field on TV. His buddies would leave and George would wander into his bedroom, look out the window, watch the empty yard. He knew that his father would return at some point, that was just the nature of things. His father liked to gamble and usually worked at a golf course or a racetrack, though he never stayed at one particular job for very long. When his mother arrived home from her Saturday drive, she'd usually have dinner for George, a cardboard box with chicken or a Styrofoam shell with spaghetti. When she drove him to school, he'd see a folded-up program from the Wheeling Dogs sitting on the backseat.

His father would resurface a year later when George's grandfather, his mother's father, was dying of pancreatic cancer in a hospital in Pittsburgh. His grandfather was a crazy, mean, cheap old man, and George's mother and her brother Harry took turns going up there. George went along with her just once. His grandfather was sick and gray and his eyes were yellow and he said he was glad to see George. But as George and his mother walked out of the hospital room, his grandfather said, "Don't bring him back, Louisa . . ." George and his mother stopped at a Wendy's on the way home, and as his mother peeled open the wrapping of her hamburger, she began to cry. She continued unwrapping it, brought the sandwich to her mouth with the tears still on her face.

It was not long after this, just a few days in fact, when she returned from one of her Pittsburgh visits with George's father in tow. As usual, George was spending his homework time watching reruns, and she smiled in a hectic way as his father stepped into the small living room, just behind her. "Here's your dad," she said, like this was something George had ordered. It didn't seem like his father was going to step around her, so she moved away. His father looked older than a year gone; he was thin and

he appeared exhausted. George's first idea was that he was sick as well.

"Hey sport," his father said in a pretty plain voice.

"Hey," George said.

"Dad's gonna be staying with us while grandpa isn't well," she said.

"Oh?" George said. He felt like asking if his grandfather was going to get better because she had made it sound that way. But then he thought of her crying at Wendy's and had nothing else to say.

His grandfather, in fact, died a week later. At the funeral, Uncle Harry, who everyone said was a dead ringer for the guy, ran out in the middle of the church service, just sprinted down the aisle in his street shoes and cried out as he shoved open the glass doors.

George's father stayed around for the reading of the will, though no one really knew what to expect there. George's grandfather had worked for Weirton Steel his entire adult life, had gone from hot saw to crane operator to union rep. You could hear him coming because he only carried coins in his pockets, that was one of the jokes about him. But when George's parents returned from the lawyer's office, it was as if George's father's old energy was back. He rubbed George's hair and then ran out to get dinners from the Mountaineer Cafe. Harry stopped by later that night. George could hear them talking about the inheritance, even though the door to his room was closed. Harry and George's mother had each been left $100,000. They talked about how proud they were of his grandfather, agreed that it was too late to do anything even if the rumors were true—that his grandfather had skimmed plenty from the union's pension fund.

At one point, Harry apologized for running out of the church like he had, and George's parents were quick to forgive him.

"Forget it," his father said. "I felt like running, too."

"That's right," his mother said.

"I'm scared shitless," Harry said, at another point.

"Put the money away," George's mother said.

"That's not what I'm talking about, sis," he said. "That's the last thing I'm worried about."

Uncle Harry, whose full name was Harold Brighton, had, many years before, tried to get a degree from a community col-

lege. He tried two colleges actually, bolted from each, then decided he wanted to be a paramedic. His actual jobs had been mail carrier, bread truck driver, beer salesman, bartender. These days, he worked as fork lift operator. He was pretty famous in Cold Springs as a drinker, a fast-talker, a big-thinker. People seemed to like him, they knew he was just the opposite of his father. He never hung on to anything for very long.

So, George knew that something spectacular would happen now.

The next morning at breakfast, it was easy to see his parents had all these different things on their minds. His father held the salt shaker over his pancakes at one point. "Can you believe this? Look at me," he said. It seemed nice though. George's mother just smiled and shook her head. George felt nervous too now, though he couldn't say exactly why. It seemed like his father might be hanging around. They had this future to think about now, one that held a lot of money. One of his father's first ideas was that they all should move to Miami Beach. For a while, the world could just feel like a paradise.

Money usually made George's father both happy and restless. He'd usually bet part of his weekly wages on greyhounds, horses, or golf matches. He was like Harry in that he did not want any part of mill life, and sometimes when George's father went to the track, Harry had gone with him. Harry was not married so he did not have a wife who worked and brought in extra money. But then again, he didn't have to fight with anyone about it either. The night George's father had strangled his mother, the two of them had been arguing loudly beforehand. Money was in the mix.

George wondered now if their problems would be over. After the inheritance had been announced, the inheritance was all his father talked about. Even when he said he wasn't going to talk about it any more—his father would say, "Okay, new subject now, let's talk about what Louisa did today . . ."—he would just wind up talking about it again. He'd taken a leave from his job at the dog track and George had no idea when his father would be going back to that.

One night, his mother arrived home later than usual from work, brought a boxed pizza with her, and set it on the table. After the three of them were situated at the table, she said, "Ask me what I did today."

"What did you do?" George said after he noticed his father was just watching her.

"I gave notice," she said, then her face beamed into a big smile. She wore two gold-plated barrettes that had her auburn hair pulled back at the temples. It highlighted where her gray hairs were coming in.

"Cool," George said, because his father seemed utterly speechless. "Right?"

"Very cool," she said, keeping her eyes on his father the whole time.

"Just like that?" George's father said.

"I've been working at that store for sixteen years, Ronny," she said. "I'm going to invest this money, maybe make eight or ten percent a year. It'll be just like minimum wage. Once we settle Dad's house, I'll use that to pay off this house. I might want to build an addition here, a little library. I might want to start a garden."

His father said, "I mean, it's easy now for you, isn't it?" He set down his fork, rubbed his hands back and forth over his thighs.

George's mother kept a steady expression. "Money will not ruin my life, do you hear me? My father worked like a slave his whole life. That's why he stole from the union, they couldn't help him. He was a brute. The day before he died, he begged me to forgive him for how he treated us. I did, too. He said, 'Whatever you do, don't wind up like me, darling.' Do you remember that? You were standing right next to me when he did."

"We should spend it while we can," George's father said. "You are going to wind up exactly like him, don't you see that?"

"No, I'm not," she said. "No. I don't have to."

After a moment, his father said, "I knew this would happen. This won't be living, not at all. Nothing is going to change. Nothing is ever going to change, Lou. Can't you see that?"

She hated being called 'Lou' but this time she didn't bite. Her eyebrows went up and she said, "You can get your job back at the dog track any time."

"Riiiight," he said, really dragging the word.

There was no real argument that night, but the next morning George's father moved out of the house again. He took a room at the only motel in Cold Springs, the Claremont, and while he was there George's mother would call every day to see what his

father was up to. His parents would talk on the phone, and usually the subject had to do with his father going back to Wheeling. It seemed to be a threat, though she didn't take it that way. The weather was turning warmer, she suggested that he ought to work outside. His father then talked about moving to Pittsburgh, where he could try to get on as the pro at a public course.

On a spring-like afternoon in early March, George's mother picked him up from school. She drove the Olds and was parked along the curb, smiling in his direction as he walked out. "Come on, slick!" she yelled in his direction. "I'm buying!"

"How's the Dairy Bar sound?" she said, once he was in the car with her.

"Sure," George said. While she had been working, George had caught the school bus home and for a couple of hours would have the place to himself. This was good because George masturbated, and he usually saw something at school—the senior girls playing volleyball, the waistband of Becky Hillsdale's neon pink underpants, the canned hams under Jeannette Sims' body tight U2 t-shirts—that would make him want to do so. Today at least, he would get a double-decker and a milk shake, plus onion rings.

George and his mother shared a picnic bench and he knew the Dairy Bar was a bribe, so he was uneasy and excited. And there was news, of sorts. She scratched at somebody's name already carved into the table and said, "I think Dad's going to leave soon, George." He didn't say anything, just took a big bite of sandwich. "I don't know where. He might go to Wheeling . . . he might even go back to Youngstown. I just don't know. I wanted to tell you, though. I don't want you to have to keep wondering about things. I know you are confused."

"No, I'm not."

She eyed him. "Yes, you are. Don't argue with me."

George felt blood rushing to his cheeks. He shrugged. "Okay," he said. "Jesus."

"Jesus has nothing to do with this," she said. She wanted to look tough, like she was ready. But more than anything, she looked forlorn to him.

"I don't want him to hurt you, Mom," George said. That caught her by surprise, he could tell.

Finally, her eyes focused on him. "I grew up with a man fifty times meaner than your father . . . that's why I liked your father,

because he wasn't that way. He's not, and you need to know that. Those days when I took those drives? You know, I was going to see your dad. Talk it out. He was scared that he might've hurt me. He was very very scared. He is always . . . I had to convince him that he hadn't. And then, when I needed him to come home for a little while, to be with me while Papa was getting near the end, he was there for me. It was . . . it was good, you know. He redeemed himself. Then, Papa had to give us the money . . . that just kills your dad, you know." She shrugged. "I wonder what Papa was doing . . . he knew about Harry, too." She watched George, looked at him in a hopeful way.

"Maybe it's all he could do, Mom."

She closed her eyes halfway. "Papa, he had an imagination," she said. "He just never got to use it." She shook her head, ran her fingertip over the letters in the table again.

"If you give Dad some money, maybe he'll stay."

"No," she said. "If I give him some money, it'll never end. We have to have a life without money, don't you see?" George really did not understand, and it must have looked this way to her as well. "Let me put it to you this way," she said. "Who would you rather be in charge of the money?" George didn't say anything to this.

"Maybe I can change the future," she said.

It was the middle of March when Harry stopped by the house to announce that he had just bought a minor league baseball team down in South Carolina, the Camden Fighting Grays. He had just returned from a visit there. Harry was tall, just like George's mother, and he waved his arms about as he described the stadium where the team played. He must have known about the situation with George's father—who had indeed moved back to Wheeling—because Harry did not ask about him at all. George's mother sat at the kitchen table and seemed overwhelmed by the news of the baseball team. Harry kept talking, and at the end of his speech he placed his hands together and said, "Well, I just thought you'd want to know . . . I'm off to South Carolina again the day after tomorrow. I guess I'll stiff McPhee on the rent. Old bastard."

"Papa hasn't been dead two months," George's mother said.

"You put yours away, I'm glad for you, sis. I can't do that. I can't live like that."

"You sound like Ronny," she said.

"Don't say that, okay?" he said. "I'm not Ron."

The look on her face did not change, however.

"Hey, I will keep you apprised of everything," he said. "Maybe you can come down sometime."

"Sure," she said, her voice tiny.

And then, he was gone again.

"A baseball team," she said, after he left. "A goddamn baseball team?"

Somehow, George's father found out about this. He appeared from nowhere a couple of days later. George had caught a ride home after track and field practice, and when he opened the front door, there was his father and mother, sitting across from one another at the kitchen table. George wore his running shorts, had his cleats tied together at the laces, the knot right on the tip of his shoulder. His father already looked agitated, so George had an idea at least . . . his father stared at George for a few seconds, then looked directly at his mother. "When did he start running track?" his father said.

"Last year," she said. "He is already running for the varsity. He is very very fast," she said.

His father considered George for another moment. "God damn it," his father said. "Everything is just so out of whack. What is going on now? Harry buys a baseball team, George is a track star." He pounded his fist on the tabletop. "Everything is happening without me. I object. I object to all of it."

"Calm down, Ron," George's mother said. "George, you go back there and get a shower, right now. We'll be out here . ." George did as his mother asked, but after he'd showered, combed his hair, and put on jeans and a clean t-shirt, he walked out to discover his father was gone again. His mother had her hands folded on the table. Without looking up, she said, "I don't spend it, he is upset. Harry spends it all, he is upset."

"What's wrong with him, Mom?"

"Been poor too long," she said, after a silence.

"Dad's poor?"

She turned at this point, her eyes going upward to him. "Everyone's poor, son," she said, her eyes suddenly sparkling. "It's never going to change." She watched him a moment longer. "It's all right," she said. She took his hand, guided him to the

seat where his father had been sitting. "I'll make you some dinner," she said.

From Camden, Harry would write and call frequently. He told George and his mother about everything, that how once the season began the roster of baseball players changed. Players would either be moved up or they were released, and each of them had to be replaced. Harry arrived to greet the new ones himself, at the town's bus station. Harry came up with promotional ideas, made sales calls on all the local businesses. He wanted every person in the town to feel as if he were part of the team. The manager of the Fighting Grays was a former major league backup catcher, Lee Michaels Corales. Harry sent George a signed baseball card of Corales and his batting career had pretty light statistics, so when George sent a thank-you note, which his mother suggested, George also asked Corales if he ever had done something unique, like hit into a triple play. Corales did not write back.

To George, it sounded as if Harry was at summer camp. Harry would explain his activities, and it was as if he was continually trying to convince someone of something. Even when the Grays went on a big losing streak in May, Harry spun the whole thing around. We have good players, he told George over the phone. That's why they keep getting called up. We have a good product here, Harry said. Things will improve.

In late June, Harry invited George and his mother down to Camden for a three- game set with the Biloxi Tigers. Harry said this particular series was going to be a big deal because Cody Sawchuk, a one time all-star major league relief pitcher, would be with the Biloxi team. Sawchuk was almost forty and on a rehabilitation assignment, trying to work his way back to the bigs after breaking his arm slipping on a patch of black ice outside his home in Winnipeg. George's mother went to the public library and printed out a few articles from google.com, and George guessed about the most interesting thing about Sawchuck was that he was originally from a town called Moosekabear, Manitoba. Sawchuk's father had been a promising hockey player until he got hit with a puck that broke his eye socket and messed up his vision forever.

George's mother decided they would surprise his father, and they drove down to Wheeling with two packed suitcases in the

backseat of the Olds. George had never been to where his father lived in Wheeling, which, it turned out, was on the outskirts of town in the public housing complex. He examined the profile of his mother as the car crept past one silent four-story brick building, then another. She said, "He has a problem, George. You know that." He didn't say anything to her and turned forward again, set his eyes on the full clotheslines strung between poles in a stretch of brown grass between buildings. Finally, she pulled into a parking space and they faced the last building on the street. "Here we go," she said, watching it. Then, she glanced at George. She said, "He won't want you to see his place."

"I want to see it," he said.

A second later, she said, "All right. Maybe it'll help."

George's father lived on the third floor, at the far end of a hallway that featured a carpet the color of wet ashes. It actually smelled that way, too. His father's door was made of pine and painted steel gray, just like the others on this floor. When George's father opened it, he did not seem completely surprised to see George's mother, but his father's eyes sharpened when he saw George standing behind her. "We're going to South Carolina to see Harry's baseball team," she said in a chirpy voice. "We want you to come with us."

"I don't want him up here, goddamn you," his father said. His father was dressed in brown slacks, a white shirt, and a brown vest. George couldn't tell if his father was about to head out for his job or had just arrived home. His mother knew, he thought.

"Harry's invited us. He practically begged us. We want you to ride along," she said again.

"Well, Harry wants something," he said. "You know that."

"Probably," she said.

The three of them stood in silence for what seemed like an entire minute. "Probably be our last chance," she said. His mother reached over, shook the button line of the vest. "Come on, honey," she said. "It's baseball."

"How many days?"

She shrugged. "You like the road, come on."

His father stepped back and seemed to be looking around the room. But the door was open just so George could see a sliver of him and not much else. "You got the Olds?" his father said, after another moment passed.

"We'll be downstairs, waiting for you," she said.

They drove under blue skies. George's father drove and his mother rode in the passenger seat, while George sat in back, suitcases at his sides, his head poked forward between the seats. At first there didn't seem to be anything to talk about, but then his mother decided to try and get them in the spirit of things. She said, "Your father grew up pulling for the Big Red Machine. When he was in his teens, his father took him to a playoff game in Cincinnati . . . versus, who was it, hon?"

"New York Mets," his father said. "Tom Seaver pitched for the Mets. Pete Rose hit a homer in the eighth and Johnny Bench hit one in the ninth, so the Reds won. My old man said he'd never forget it. But he did. 'Really?' he said last time I mentioned it. I barely remember it now."

"When I was growing up, my favorite was Roberto Clemente," she said.

"He was killed in a plane crash," George said right away, because he did want to contribute something. He just didn't know anything else about the guy.

"That's right," she said, a moment later. "After that, it was Manny Sanguillen." Her mood dipped then, George could tell. She said, "Are you excited about meeting Cody Sawchuk? Are you going to get his autograph?"

"I'm going to ask who hit the longest home run off him," George said. His mother's face got a look on it then and she turned to his father. And then they both looked the same way, like they wanted to laugh at exactly the same time.

His father said, "I think I'll ask him if he drinks on the job."

His mother gave his father something of a bug-eyed look. "I'll ask him if he swaps wives with the other players." They were both nodding their heads.

"Maybe he cheats on his taxes," his father said.

"Pops pills," she said.

"Minor league," his father said, giving a soft laugh. She didn't, though. His eyes went to the rearview to see what George was doing, which was nothing. It was pretty strange to see them both in a mood like this.

They had to go through a bit of West Virginia, then Virginia and North Carolina. George's parents took turns driving, and the one not driving would doze and George would doze and

once, when his eyes opened, he could see his father in the passenger seat, just awakened, too, and his father was watching his mother. George could just see one side of his father's face and the side was in sunlight and his hair was sticking up and it made George think of a baby bird. He couldn't tell if his mother knew that his father was watching her. The back of her head was above George, and she usually drove with both hands on the wheel and rarely took her eyes from the road. They were heading south and the sun was on the far side of her profile.

George didn't get to ask Cody Sawchuk any questions because, as things turned out, Sawchuk got called up to the majors. The night George and his parents arrived in Camden, Sawchuk pitched an inning in a game against a minor league team in Knoxville and just gave up a couple of singles. Apparently, this was proof enough that the old magic was close by, at least that's the way Harry put it. Harry told George and his parents the story while they all were standing out on the field prior to the start of the Biloxi-Camden game. The players for both teams were going through warm-ups. The local high schools and taverns have been emptied out, that's what George thought as he watched the players on the field. No chance, he thought. The words formed in his mind just that way.

Harry was bright and tired-looking all at once. He wore a maroon baseball cap and a bullpen jacket with a maroon body and cement-colored sleeves over his civilian shirt, and George's mother was wearing a bullpen jacket, too. Harry had presented her with it earlier that morning. The jacket had 'Louisa' stitched over the heart and everything.

Harry and his father had been pleasant enough when they greeted one another. Each said the other's name, and as they shook hands they nodded in a way that suggested they knew all they cared to about one other. George and his father were the only ones on the field who weren't wearing any type of baseball gear, and his mother must've been aware of that, too. Without a word of warning, she decided to walk across the first base line, and she went right up to this chunky black player and began chatting with him. In a moment, the man was looking at Harry and then Harry just turned up his palms and shrugged. The chunky guy pulled off his baseball glove and handed it to George's mother. George thought his mother was going to put the glove on but she just trotted back toward them, and when

she was a few strides away, she flipped the thing in the direction of his father. Right at the last instant his father raised his hands and caught it, and then his mother turned and waved out to the player the chunky guy had been tossing with. "Burn one in!" she said, putting her hands to both sides of her mouth. The guy who had the ball was young, and he didn't seem to think about it at all. You could hear the ball, that's how fast he buzzed it, but George's father put up the glove and caught it, no problem. You could hear the pop from the ball hitting the palm and George imagined it had to hurt, but his father took the ball and made an easy straight toss out to the kid who'd thrown it. Then the kid smoked in another one. George's father stepped forward and put more juice into his next throw. His mother's eyes never left his father as he tossed the ball in his shirtsleeves. The early afternoon sun brought a glow to his face.

Harry couldn't stand still then, he would walk back and forth from dugout to dugout seeing about god knew what. He walked fast, brought a cellphone to his ear every so often. George and his mother drifted together, and her hand went around his shoulder while she watched his father playing toss. His father did have a gracefulness to him, and this was especially evident when he was doing something athletic. He certainly was a very nice golfer, he had a wonderful, easy swing that was easy to admire. He could've done more than be an assistant at some ratty public course in Weirton, West Virginia, which was the last golf job he'd had, but the truth about him was sometimes he'd play bad on purpose in order to set somebody up. If he was good all the time, he'd never get a lick of action, that's for sure.

After a couple of dozen tosses, his father waved his throwing hand at the kid he was tossing with, and then he removed the glove and trotted out to the chunky man George's mother had borrowed it from. He jogged back to George and his mother with his head down, like somebody who'd just hit the ball a long way only to see it caught right at the fence. Once he crossed the first base line he slowed to a walk, and when he looked to them he said, "How'd it look?"

"You're a natural," George's mother said holding one hand near her mouth, like he was a lot farther away than he was.

During the game, Harry, George's parents, and George sat in the press box, which actually was a six-by-nine room with threadbare carpet and two vending machines and no air condi-

tioner. There were two name cards on the windowsill for guys at local newspapers, but it didn't seem like they were going to show, not without Sawchuk being there. Harry opened the windows and wanted George's mother to sit alongside him in the reporter's seats, but she wanted George to, so his parents wound up sitting together at the back of the room, on fold-out chairs. She had shed her bullpen jacket but Harry kept his ball cap and his jacket on, despite the warmth.

Everybody acted polite enough in the press box. George's parents kept dabbing at their foreheads while Harry told them all about the car dealers and supermarket owners who were going to buy billboard spaces on the home run fence, and George's parents were just nodding then, saying good, fine, good for you . . . and then Harry swiveled in his chair and said to George, "What do you think of all this? This is pretty much the top of the world, isn't it?"

Harry was dressed like he was trapped: half-man, half-ballplayer. And this made George nervous. George wound up saying, "When the reporters don't show up, do you just call in the score of the game to the paper? Have you ever wanted to just make it up? Say one player on your team hit like ten homers in a row? Or tell the paper the umpires were on the take?"

Harry gave George's parents a look, and his mother just let her arms hang loose over her knees and shook her head.

"I do call in the scores on occasion," Harry said after considering George again. Then Harry blinked a couple of times. He kept his eyes on George and he said, "I do feel like making things up. All the time, actually." He just looked at his hands then, that were folded at his belt buckle. "If you really want to know the truth." George really didn't, that was the point. Harry's voice had faded somewhat and he did appear relaxed for the first time. He smiled right before he said, "I'd like to tell the newspaper a lot of things about the team. What they're like. What's really going to happen to these guys, each and every one of them." He glanced in George's mother's direction at this point. "I just wanted to stay out of the mill," Harry said. George's father gave Harry a single nod, and then Harry's eyes went to the floor again. He said, "Well, hell, Louisa, come on back to the office. Let's do this part of it." Harry got up and walked for the doorway without looking at any of them and finally George's mother followed.

George's father stayed quiet after they left, and in a minute he took Harry's seat and he and George were both looking out at the field. His father didn't stand for the national anthem and so George didn't either. After the first inning, his father dug around for some change and they split a pack of pork rinds (they'd agreed on popcorn but George pushed the wrong numbers) and a can of iced tea. The stands were almost empty, and George guessed everyone had heard the news about Sawchuk. One time, George clearly heard a Camden batter say, "Fuck me!" after striking out on three pitches.

"Harry wants to tell her this is a great chance," his father said. A bead of sweat escaped his sideburn, rolled along his jawline. "What would you think about being owner of a baseball team?" his father said. His eyes went out to the field, the empty stands. "I guess it's exciting. Maybe you would feel like a king of your own country." He stopped, licked his lips, probably because of the rinds he'd eaten. "It just doesn't last, though . . . I mean, look, I have an imagination, all right? I can see this and I can see what anyone would see in it, okay? I guess I really would like to be caught up in it, too . . . I'd like to let myself go like that . . .

"The baseball team is just an elaborate, incredible trap. I wish Harry would have asked me about it . . . He's trying to have a job that isn't a job. He's trying to be something . . ." His voice drifted at this. "We shouldn't have visited their father in the hospital. God damn it, I knew that was a mistake. He scared them." He stopped again and bowed his head a bit, like somebody at church.

"God damn," he said. Then, "It really is every man for himself. I keep hoping for something else. I keep hoping the wildest, most impossible of luck will come to us. We are all doing that."

His voice sounded dry by then and he did not look George's way for a while after he spoke, and George guessed that this was on purpose. His father seemed to be catching his breath. He took in long breaths through his nose, and George could see his father's chest rise and fall because of the way the shirt clung to him. At one point, a Biloxi player rifled a shot into the left field corner and the stands were silent as he tore around the bases and wound up standing on third. It looked odd, him running hard like that. It seemed like he was out there by himself, on his own frequency. Overall, from up here, the game seemed listless

and dumb, not at all like when you were down there on the field yourself. Only a couple of hours had passed but that already seemed like a dream to George, that he'd been down there on the grass with his mother's hand on his shoulder, the two of them just watching his father play ball.

Around the seventh inning, she and Harry returned to the press box. They seemed to be in friendly enough moods, and right before he took a seat on one of the metal chairs Harry looked at George's father and he said, "Too smart for me, Ron." It looked like Harry expected his father to chime in, say something agreeable, but his father didn't do that. He just looked out to the field again.

"Who's winning?" George's mother said, after a time.

"Bilxoi," George said when no one else said a thing. He probably didn't need to speak at all. The scoreboard above the outfield wall was as clear as anything.

When George and his parents were packed into the Olds again, his father started the engine then held his hand over the gearshift. He said, "Well?"

"We're staying at the Quality Inn," she said. "Harry says it's right down the street."

George's father turned and gave her a steady look.

"Oh . . . he'll need forty thousand for another season," she said. "I'd be half-owner."

"What did you tell him?"

"What do you think I told him?" George's mother said.

He said, "Did you even want to talk with me about it? Maybe I wanted something here. Maybe I thought a baseball team was a good idea." He shook his head. "You already made up your mind, why the hell did you ask me to come along?"

"Maybe I haven't made up my mind," she said. "You ever think of that?"

He turned again. "You bitch. You've made up your mind about everything. You're just acting superior to the rest of us now, you and your eight percent."

"Say it," she said. "Say you want me to spend all of it so we can move down here. We'll spend every nickel on this team." Her voice weakened right at the end when she said, "Make my heart race."

"So you'll give forty grand for his foolishness, but me nothing? You have no right saving that money. None."

George's mother was astounded by this, that was the look on her face. "Just drive, all right?" she said.

"Fine, right," he said. "But this time I'm gonna make up your mind for good."

His mother closed her eyes and she held them like that for a couple of seconds. She was waiting on him to do something. George was terrified. He was glad neither of them cared to check on him.

When she opened her eyes again, she said, "Chicken shit." She was looking straight ahead, at what George couldn't tell.

George's father decided to sleep in the car that night, and George and his mother had to wake him up in the morning by knocking repeatedly on the windows. For a moment it seemed like his father wasn't going to get up. He seemed frozen, his mouth open in a silent yell, his body twisted. A pint bottle fell from him as he turned, then awakened.

George's mother called Harry from the interstate as they were heading north. She told him that she was sorry, but they had to get back to West Virginia. Something had come up. George guessed that Harry didn't ask what that something was because she said, "All right, see you," a second later and hung up. What could have come up with us? George thought. His father wasn't a heart surgeon. He wore a brown vest to work.

His parents hadn't said anything about this beforehand, so after she clicked her phone closed she turned to George and said, "You don't mind, do you? I mean, Sawchuk's not here." George shrugged. She said, "He's a bum anyway, right?"

"Maybe he'll make it," he said.

His mother watched him for a second longer, probably could tell that George was uncomfortable, and then she just nodded.

George's mother dropped his father off at the public housing complex on the outskirts of Wheeling. His father ran up the steps to his building and he did not look back. He might as well have been a hitchhiker. The next day he was gone from there, too. He had moved back to Youngstown, that's what his mother said. To light some old fires. George pictured a bonfire, a bunch of people standing around it, but he couldn't see his father

among them. He tried to imagine his father living someplace farther away, like a Camden or a Miami Beach. His father would be wearing a windbreaker and he would be walking along a boulevard by himself. He would have the exact appearance of someone to whom money meant everything. George supposed his father would look suspicious to strangers in this way, so they wouldn't give him a chance at all. So, in this way, his father might always be better off around some people who knew him. After all, he was born in Youngstown.

George's mother then decided to go back to her job at the hardware store, even though she did not have to. She was restless. She said she would save the garden and the library for next year, maybe they could start to think big again then. She encouraged George to find some summer work, even laid out some money for him to buy a new Toro push mower.

Harry did sell the team the following spring, right before the season started. During his only baseball season he'd lost quite a bit of money, which came as a surprise to no one. George's mother and Harry had talked frequently on the phone about what his next move might be. "There's just no point in it now," she'd say. "You tried. You did the best you could . . . Sell right before next season starts. That's when the price will be the best."

Harry moved back to Cold Springs that April, into his father's old house until he could think of something better, and George's mother wanted to throw a little cocktail party welcoming him home. She wanted a modest party with a handful of people from the neighborhood. She bought the stuff to make gin martinis, as well as a cheese and cracker tray from the Food Lion deli. But then, right as she was setting things up, Harry called and said he didn't feel well. He apologized, said he was just going to watch the Pirates on TV.

"Okay," she said in a quiet way. "I understand."

She'd already invited people and decided to go through with the party. She laughed and told everyone the theme had changed, they would be celebrating her birthday early this year. George stayed down the hall in his room, just lying there on his bed in his jeans and his t-shirt. He smelled like cut grass and gasoline and he'd gotten sunburned too, so he was trying not to move at all. He could hear the voices, and even though the party was supposed to be about something else, his mother started

talking about Harry and the baseball team. "The spring is exactly the time to sell a baseball team." George heard her say that quite clearly. "I mean, am I right?" she said. Her voice raised. "Am I not?"

The room went quiet for a moment. "You are, Louisa," someone said. "It's all right."

"You're just a fool if you wait any longer," his mother said a moment later. "That's one thing I can tell you for sure. One fucking thing for sure."

Someone decided to put on some music. But the party did not last long anyway, and when the people left, they seemed to go all at once. His mother must have gotten right to the clean up because when George walked out there later you couldn't tell there had been a party at all. There were no glasses sitting out and the kitchen counter was wiped clean. George found the barely used cheese and cracker tray in the refrigerator, so he took it back to his room, closed the door, and tried to stay quiet. He could have listened to the radio but he looked out the window, which had a view of their yard, their street. In a while, everything would turn to shadows and dark shapes. The crickets would begin to chirp, as if they were the things that had just awakened.

Robert J. Oberg Unspoken

If I were to beg flowerlight
for that sweet stickiness of tongue,

if I were to peel open a sleeve
of grass and climb in,

chart the lunar craters
of my orbiting skull,

would it come to this —
your hand unspoken in between.

It has been enough, though often
I have lived as if it were

not. Time has slipped from us.
Who knew...that happiness

was a stiff-backed porch chair,
or knowledge everything once

denied. The sun's soft unfogs
the bay, masts clang for sails.

It would not be any different
if I were smarter or less afraid.

You are heating water in the kitchen.
Your empty seat-curve

begins to pray, *Mother*
forgive him, he doesn't know.

My hand warms around morning tea.
I am thankful for your sound

footsteps, for the screen door
thwacking back the jamb.

Sit a while.
It's all over us.

Kevin Rabas

Lightning's Bite

Watch out. The lightning might come down
and bite you, my son says, and we look
to the gray, weighted clouds above us
that look like they are carrying heavy sacks
of hail or rain. Or snow, but it is too early for that.
So, we hold out our hands, and look for the droplets
that should come, and there are none.
So, we look to the trees that wave and bend
and to the branches full of big green leaves,
branches that look like the necks of great dragons
twisting and fighting, when all this really is
is wind, and we go home, go inside, and watch
as the lights go out, and the storm rumbles above us.
It is like standing under a bridge as a train goes over.
But this train keeps coming, and rumbling, and my son
puts his hands over his ears. I take him in my arms,
and we do not tremble, but instead we laugh.

Doug Ramspeck

The Owl that Carries Us Away

The boy is washing the possum skull with his mother's hose on the stone steps. He found it in the mud beside the river. It was half-buried and stubborn, even when he poked it with a stick, even when he tried to pry it free with his fingers. Now he cleans the dirt out of the sockets with the spray of the hose. Pours the water through the teeth. Watches the water sliding across the pale bone. Hears the water splashing against the steps. The light snow that is falling is bone-colored too, as though the great skeleton of sky has broken into shards and is coming down, falling out of the fat and low-slung clouds, and the boy carries the skull through the kitchen door, hiding it behind his back. Something is frying on the stove, lifting smoke, sizzling a complaint, but his mother isn't there to tend to it. The room has been left by itself, the glasses and plates abandoned on the kitchen table. The boy hurries through the kitchen and up the narrow stairs with the skull. The stairway in the ancient house—built shortly after the Civil War—reminds him in its narrowness of the dark passage of a cave. He enters his bedroom and closes the door behind him. He lies on his bed and holds the skull on his chest. Strokes his hand across the hard, smooth bone. Feels for ridges and bumps and openings and crevices. Thinks of a cat purring beneath the rhythm of a palm. He pets the skull until he hears his mother calling out, and then he pushes it as far under the bed as he can reach, far back in the darkness.

"Wait here," he says.

At dinner, the boy sneaks looks at his father while he is eating. His father's hair is starting to grow back, but the boy can still see strange patterns and odd lines beneath the thin strands. The scars are puckered and pinkish on the white skin. Sometimes they seem to trail off like snakes. Other times they look like railroad tracks. When the bandages first came off, the boy was reminded of a swollen pumpkin, of something that only vaguely resembled the father he had known. His father stabs at his meat with his fork and cuts off a small piece with his knife.

The pork chop looks slippery on his plate. He gets a small piece loose and lifts it to his mouth. Chews. The exertion of the chewing leaves him breathless. The scars shift from pink to a deeper red. He puts down his knife and fork and leans back in his chair, leaving most of the food untouched on his plate. He leans back in his chair and says something, but his voice is garbled. The words sound like they are spoken through rocks. The boy takes a sip of his milk and looks out the window at the snow coming down.

"Look at that, you two," his mother says. "It's snowing."

The boy is imagining the possum waddling at some point down by the river. Its bald long tail. Its moon-white face. The possum dying by the river then shedding its body until all that was left in the mud was its skull.

There is a limestone house on the bus ride to school, a house with a chain-link fence around the front yard. There is an American flag on a white pole. There is a small German shepherd that runs back and forth along the line of the fence as soon as it sees the bus. The dog barks and runs, runs and barks. The boy sees Biggs waiting just outside the fence, his hands in his pockets. He isn't wearing a hat, and his hair is being blown this way and that in the wind. The flag is being blown this way and that, too. The dog is still running along the fence line. The bus brakes squeak. The barking of the dog sounds louder when the bus doors whoosh open and Biggs climbs on board and walks down the aisle. The smell of the refinery from the next road over enters the bus with Biggs, follows him. Biggs sits down next to the boy and punches him hard on the arm near the shoulder.

"Asshole," he says.

The next hit lands in almost exactly the same spot, and the next one after that does as well.

"Look at how stupid skinny you are," Biggs says. "I bet I weigh twice what you do."

The fist comes down hard again on the shoulder. The side of his hard shoe kicks the boy in the leg. He moves closer and presses him against the side of the bus by the window, holding him pinned. It's like the weight of the bus itself pressing against him.

The boy looks out the window. They are stopping before a house that backs up to the Johnson River. The muddy waters of

the river are flowing except near the shore, where there are small patches of ice shimmering bright in the morning sunlight. The ice looks like strange tumbled jewels. This is the same river that goes past the boy's own back yard, out in the woods. In the summers he sees muskrats swimming in its shallows. He throws rocks at them. Sometimes he goes swimming in the river. There are supposed to be leeches that will clutch to your skin and won't come off unless you burn them. They suck your blood and grow fat as a finger on your body.

"I hear your dad talks like a retard," Biggs says.

The boy doesn't answer.

"Walks like he's drunk," Biggs says. "Like he's a spaz." Biggs hits him once more while pressing his body hard against him. Biggs smells like something dying at the deep back of a dark cave. He says, "I hear he couldn't even do the job right. How can you miss from that close up? You touch your head and pull the trigger."

"Shut up," the boy says.

The brakes squeal again as the bus comes to a stop in the school parking lot. Everybody stands. Everybody starts walking toward the door, filing out into the cold air. The boy can see his breath escaping from his mouth like a cloud or a spirit. Biggs keeps bumping against him, sticking out a foot to try to trip him, pressing his knuckles into the small of his back, whispering names against his neck. The boy is free of the bus and hurries toward the door. They aren't allowed to run, but he walks as fast as he can, weaving in and out of the other students. He steps inside the building and hears his shoes clapping loudly on the shiny floor. The old janitor is standing on a ladder, changing a light bulb. The old janitor looks at him and seems unsteady on the ladder, like he might at any moment fall. The light bulb is sputtering. It sounds like a voice. The boy hurries toward the safety of the classroom.

In the boy's dream an owl is flying out of the gray-orange sky. At first the owl appears to be part of an upper limb of a hickory tree, made of bark and wood, but then it comes to life. It flies above the river and holds in its talons a possum skull. Then it is holding in its talons a living possum. The possum squirms but can't loosen the owl's grip. On the ground the boy runs through the woods and tries to keep the owl in sight. He crosses

the river, swimming, and then he runs into an open field he's never seen before. The field is tall with corn in the dead of winter, and the boy runs through the tall stalks that are frozen like icicles. The owl moves slowly by flapping its great wings and the boy is powerless to keep up, but still he runs until he reaches the railroad tracks. There are turkey vultures on the tracks, which confuses the boy, for he was certain he saw the owl land there and begin feeding on the possum. The vultures are eating the dead flesh, and then the boy feels the talons of the owl lift him by his own flesh, the flesh of his back, and he is being carried away from the ground, away from any life as he has known it. Higher and higher he moves into the air, until the house where he lives with his father and his mother is a small speck on the ground, and the school where he spends his days is a small speck, and he knows his back should be hurting from the talons but it's not, and he wonders if he's become a skull as he's being carried, if that is all anyone would see from the ground.

He comes awake and climbs from bed. He carries the skull with him back beneath the covers. He places the skull on his chest, aiming it forward, and he strokes the smooth bone with his palm. Most nights he falls asleep like that. And he knows that when his mother comes into his room in the morning, he will quickly hide the skull beneath the blankets. When his mother is gone, he will touch his lips to the skull. The bone will feel cool against his lips. The empty eyes will look up at him. He will rock the skull in his arms like an infant. He will think about the skull while he's at school. He will imagine it hiding all day beneath the bed, its eyes glowing the way you see raccoon eyes glowing green in the woods in the summer. He will imagine the skull waiting for him to return. Imagine the skull feeling lonely beneath the bed and listening for his footsteps on the stairs, holding its breath, waiting for the bedroom door to come open and to admit him.

It is Saturday. The boy is holding his mother's gardening trowel in his hand. The boy is digging. Digging in the mud by the river. The ground is cold and hard. The boy is wearing gloves, but still his fingers are numb. Each time he lifts more earth, each time he wedges more dirt loose and throws it in a small pile by the river, he looks through the pile for bones. He imagines the

bones will be in the dirt like worms, waiting in the dirt. He imagines finding the rest of the possum, bone by bone. He figures that a possum, even a dead one, can't have a head without a body. The body is waiting in the ground, if only he can find it. He imagines placing that body in a box beneath his bed, placing the skull atop the box.

When it is lunch time and his mother calls out from the back of the house, he gives up digging. His mother has made grilled cheese sandwiches. Some of cheese has dripped over the sides and has burned into the bread. There are potato chips and carrot sticks. The sticks make a crunching sound as he chews them. He closes his eyes for a moment and imagines he is crunching down on bones. His mother stands over the table while he is eating. She says, "Your friend's mother called?"

"What?"

"She said you're his only friend. It's sad, really."

"What are you talking about?"

"The mother's name is Dorothy. She sounded very nice on the phone. He's coming over."

"Over here? Who?"

"Your friend from school. The mother called to set up the play date."

"Who are you talking about?"

When Biggs arrives, they go out in the woods together. The mothers remain behind, talking in the driveway. Biggs is wearing a baseball cap and winter boots. He makes large footprints in the snow. The boy shows Biggs the river, which is frozen with a thin skin of ice you can break through if you stamp on it or throw a heavy enough log or rock. For a time they have races with dead leaves in the open patches of water they've created. They have stick throwing contests, seeing who can hit certain trees on the far side of the river. Biggs throws hard but not straight. Later they throw rocks at squirrels, but the squirrels are high up in the trees. The boy has a BB gun his mother locked in the blue trunk in the garage. This was the same time she got rid of his father's guns. Gave them to the police to get rid of. The blue trunk has a padlock, but the boy knows the key is in the coffee can in the shelf by the toolbox. They carry the BB gun into the woods and take turns shooting. Biggs shoots at the squirrels but doesn't hit any. The boy shoots at a bluejay. The

bird flies off. Finally Biggs hits a junco that looks puffed up and frozen on an oak limb in the cold. The junco falls to the ground but is still squirming. Biggs shoots it from close range. The gray wings are still flapping. Biggs gives the gun to the boy to take a shot. He touches the barrel almost to the white belly and pulls the trigger. There is blood in the snow. They take turns shooting until the junco is lying still and its dark eyes are blank. They lift the bird by the feathers and throw it in the muddy river. It floats and they take turns shooting while the current carries it downstream. They watch the bird snag where the ice starts up again, and they shoot it seven or eight more times.

When they get back to the house, they take off their muddy shoes before going inside. The boy's mother, who called out to the woods earlier to tell them she was going to the drug store, has left some cookies on the kitchen table. They are Oreos. They eat the Oreos and pour themselves some apple juice. They get the package of Oreos out of the kitchen cabinet and pour more cookies onto the table in a pile.

Biggs says, "Let me see him."

"See who?"

"Your father."

"Why?"

"What's the big deal? Let me see him."

They walk together down the hallway to the Florida Room. The boy doesn't know why it's called that. As far as he knows, no one in his family has ever been to Florida. The room uses a space heater for warmth. It glows, especially in the dark. In the dark it looks like something inside it is on fire. But it isn't dark now. There's a big stuffed dead fish over the couch. In the past, the boy has climbed on the couch and run his hands over the fish. He has put his fingers in the mouth of the fish to feel where its teeth should be. He has run his fingers over the hardened fins and tail. His father is lying on the couch with his eyes closed. Music is playing from the radio. It is music without words. You can wait for the words but they don't ever come. The boy takes Biggs to the entrance of the room and lets him peek in. His father has a blanket up to his armpits, and open pages of the newspaper are lying on the floor by the couch. Some of them are crumpled. There's an empty plate on the TV tray beside the couch, and on that plate are the remains of a grilled cheese sandwich. The boy leans in the doorway and lets Biggs stare at his fa-

ther. His father's hair hasn't grown back yet, and the scars are visible through the winter light falling through the tall windows. His father is snoring a little, or maybe breathing loudly, but it's hard to hear over the sound of the music without words. There are violins or something, and they are very loud. Biggs stands there for a long time, but then he turns and walks out. They go up the stairs to the boy's room and sit on his bed.

Biggs lies back on the bed and puts his hands behind his head. "It must have hurt," he says. "Can you imagine that? It must have hurt like hell."

The boy rises from the bed and walks over the window. He wishes it would snow again. He likes to watch the snowflakes falling out of the sky, falling down from the clouds on their long journey, falling like strange moths.

"Why did he do it?" Biggs asks.

The boy says, "I'll show you something if you promise not to tell anyone."

"What?"

The boy gets down on his knees and reaches under the bed. He pulls out the skull and holds it on display in his two palms. Biggs reaches out and takes it from the boy. He turns it in his hands. He runs his fingers over the sharp rows of teeth. He sticks his fingers in the eye sockets.

"What is it?" Biggs asks.

"Possum."

"Can I take it with me?"

"No."

"I'll just borrow it."

"My mother will see it. She'll take it from us."

"We'll hide it in something."

"No. You can't have it."

When Biggs leaves to go home with his mother, he is carrying a plastic bag. The boy watches the bag as Biggs carries it toward the green car. He watches the green car drive off with the bag and with Biggs. He sees Biggs sitting in the front seat. He sees the car round the corner at Wallace Street. Then he can't see the car at all.

The boy's father is bleeding. He is bleeding in his head. That's what they say. The doctors. They don't know why. The boy's mother is crying a lot. She is crying right now in the wait-

ing room. The father is back in the hospital. The hospital smells. They are cutting into his head with a knife to make the bleeding stop. It doesn't make sense. The boy wants to ask his mother how a knife can stop bleeding, but his mother doesn't seem to want to talk. They have been sitting in the waiting room for a long time. It is boring. There is another family in the waiting room, including a baby dressed in a yellow one-piece, and the baby keeps crying and then spitting out its pacifier. The mother puts the pacifier back in, but then the baby starts to cry again and it falls out on the carpet. The carpet is blue-green. The boy's uncle shows up, and the boy hears him talking to his mother, and he hears his mother saying how bad things are. Everything is taking a very long time. When the boy has to go the bathroom, his uncle walks him down the hallway. Later the boy sees his father briefly. His eyes are closed, and there are bandages on his head like the ones he had last time, bandages where the knife probably went in to make the bleeding stop.

By the next evening, the boy is able to sit on the edge of the bed with his father, who can speak in a low, roughened voice that is impossible to understand, but mostly he wants to sleep. Outside the hospital window there is a parking lot and then a small outdoor ice-skating rink, and the boy stands at the window and watches the people skating. He sees a little girl with a pink stocking cap fall down. There are bright lights that make it easy to watch. The boy watches the same girl to see if she'll fall down again. He wants her to fall down—and she does.

A few days later his father comes home, though he isn't as strong as he was and his hair is shaved off again. The boy sees that there are new scars, new stitches. He is supposed to be quiet in the house, though he keeps forgetting. His father can't stand up now without help.

This time when Biggs comes over it is snowing and they go sledding at the reservoir. Afterwards they drink hot cocoa with marshmallow. Biggs asks to shoot the BB gun again, and they do. Later he explains that he forgot to bring the skull. It was an honest mistake. He says he'll have his mother arrange to play at his house the next day after church.

So his mother drives the boy over on Sunday afternoon after lunch. It's the limestone house with the fence and the flag and the dog. The dog growls and the boy doesn't want to go through

the gate, but Biggs yells at the dog and it runs off, though not very far. It growls from the side of the house but doesn't come any closer. Biggs and the boy go out to the road, hide behind a hedge, throw rocks at passing cars and run. They throw rocks at the neighbor's shed. They lob rocks over the fence at the dog, which growls and runs when the rocks land. Later they go into Biggs' room, turn on the TV, and lie on the floor.

"Where is it?" the boy asks.

"What?"

"The skull."

"In my closet."

"Get it out."

"After the show."

The boy goes over to the closet and opens the accordion doors. It smells like cedar. The clothes are packed tightly on the hangers. There are dirty white socks in a pile. There is a baseball catcher's mitt. There is a cowboy belt with a large shiny buckle hanging from a hook.

"What are you doing?" Biggs says.

"Getting the skull."

Biggs grabs him by the arm and they wrestle. The boy throws a punch into Biggs' fat belly, but his hand gets lost in the folds and nothing comes of it. He tries to push Biggs away from the closet, but it is like trying to push a brick wall. Outside, the dog is barking at something, and there are sounds of gunfire on the television. Then there are sounds of cars chasing each other. By this time Biggs is sitting on top of him. The carpeting smells like dirty feet. The boy's face is pressed into the carpet. His arm is under him in a way that twists it and makes it hurt. A house has fallen on him. His ribs hurt and he can't breathe.

"You're not ever getting it back," Biggs says.

It is morning. They are on the bus. Biggs is punching him on the arm. The boy is ignoring it. Biggs hits him harder, but still the boy keeps looking out the window. Biggs is asking if he can come over after school, maybe get off the bus at his house, but the boy says no. Biggs is asking if he wants to spend the night over the weekend. He says he's cleared it with his mother. The boy says no.

"Why?" Biggs asks.

On Thursday Biggs tells him his father has some leftover fire-

works and if he comes over on Saturday they can set them off. Once again he brings up the idea about spending the night—maybe they can even go bowling. The boy is looking out the bus window. The boy imagines himself as still as stone, as still as a statue. Not one word comes out of his mouth.

On Saturday morning Biggs' mother phones the boy's mother, but he has already told her no, never. He goes out in the woods by himself, and he walks down to the river, which has melted a little and is flowing so quickly now you can hear it. It makes a sound like something garbled in a throat. The boy wants to see how cold the water feels, so he takes off his shoes and socks and walks into it. The water is so cold it feels like it's burning. When the boy comes out of the water, his feet and his ankles are pink. He puts his socks and shoes back on. Later Biggs phones him, but the boy hangs up the moment he recognizes the voice. He slams the phone down, and his father looks up from the kitchen table but doesn't say anything. The boy goes up to his room and finds some matches he has hidden with some playing cards. He takes the matches out to the river, lights them one by one, and throws them into the muddy water. He likes to hear the sound of them being extinguished. He likes the smell of the sulfur.

On Monday Biggs gets on the bus as usual, but this time he is carrying a plastic bag. He sits down next to the boy but doesn't speak. He is breathing heavily. He is wearing his baseball cap. He unzips his coat and stamps his boots on the floor of the bus to get the snow off. Slush falls from his boots and starts to melt on the black rubber padding on the bus floor. He holds the plastic bag in his lap as the bus doors whoosh closed and the bus starts down the road toward the school. The bus sways a little, especially when they go over the railroad tracks. Biggs and the boy bump against each other. Finally Biggs takes the plastic bag from his lap and hands it to the boy. The boy lets the bag sit there for a moment, untouched, but then he lifts it and looks inside. Even the teeth are broken into pieces. The skull has been smashed. It's a plastic bag full of bone dust, bone slivers, bone shards, bone chunks. Biggs must have taken a hammer to it. He must have taken a hammer for an hour to be that thorough. The boy reaches into the bag and feels the remains of the skull. Some of the bone bits are sharp and jab against his fingers. He hears those bone pieces bumping against each other as the bus jiggles. The boy closes the bag and starts to speak, but something unex-

pected happens. The boy can't believe it at first, can't accept it, even though there's no doubt that it is true. Everyone on the bus is turning to look at him. This is the most humiliating moment of the boy's life. He knows he will never hear the end of it, that he will be known forever as the boy who did this, but he can't stop. His chest is convulsing. His shoulders are convulsing. He is crying. Not just a little but weeping openly, the tears pouring from his eyes, the wails escaping in throttled moans from his strangled throat. Even his nose is running. The tears won't stop. And now he doesn't think they ever will.

Sarah Carey

The Will

Forget the time it took, day in
day out, to warm supper,
schedule the help, to quell doubts
you were who you said you were.

When you signed for her, I saw
how time steals legibility,
how she lost the will or hid it
once she could no longer believe

saw sun specks on her wrists
the purple flecked topography of veins
in slim legs you inherited
and I did not. How transparent I've become

in my desire to stay young, see jellyfish
petechiae in the red folds of my knees.
I'm a grinder, says my dentist,
now it's clear to me
my jaw's clench skipped a generation.

You could say what needed to be said
and sleep at night. I dreamed of freeing
whatever was stuck on the roof,
tainting the palate, trapped
in the teeth's gnashing.

At the fountain where the girls went
in Mt. Gilead, back in the day
I imagine her black hair back,
white shoulders leaning to men
who drank in her shadows.

She was beautiful, alone. Then came you.
She shone. You always knew
the letting go would come
without fanfare, like on her birthday
when I ask if you think of her
and you say finally, *not with sadness, no.*

Karl Harshbarger

Gabriel

The husband and wife sat on a bench along the edge of the harbor, the husband shielding his eyes against the late afternoon sun and watching the ferry ease away from the wharf. Its engines made a deep, throbbing sound, and a boy on the bow pulled in the last of the rope and coiled it on the deck. At the bottom of a ramp next to the wharf, a donkey waited under a load of red roofing tiles. The donkey never moved, only occasionally batting its ears.

After a while the husband said, "I think it's time to go."

But he made no move to get up. He knew it didn't matter when they went to the center of the village. They could wait another half-hour, or an hour, or even after the sun went down. There hadn't been any other tourists on the ferry, after all, so it didn't make any difference. The rooms would be there now, or the rooms would be there later.

"John," the wife said.

"What?"

"That man."

The husband followed his wife's gaze and saw a single man, something of a string bean of a man, black pants, black sweater, and a black stocking hat, leaning against a rock at the end of the retaining wall next to the wharf. The man had his arms folded across his chest, smoking a cigarette and looking in their direction.

"What about him?" said the husband.

"He's watching us."

"Oh, I don't think so."

The man in black took a long drag from his cigarette. He pushed himself away from the rock, walked along the retaining wall in a kind of loping way, stopped, leaned against another rock, took a pull from his cigarette, crossed his arms across his chest, and looked in their direction.

"See?" said the wife.

The husband, who had traveled all over the world, explained it to her.

"He's a local. Maybe a bit strange. But absolutely harmless."

"Well, tell him to go away."

"I can't tell him to go away."

The man took a final draw from his cigarette, flicked the butt, reached under his sweater, brought out a pack, shook out another cigarette, and lit it. All this time he looked in their direction.

"You said it was time to go," said the wife getting up.

"Now?"

But because his wife had gotten up, he got up too. She was already bent over her pack. He went over, took hold of its straps, braced himself, swung the pack upwards and held it against himself as she worked herself under it. Then he eased the weight down on her.

"All right?" he asked.

"Yes, of course, all right."

He went over to his own pack, braced himself again, swung it up, thrust an arm through one of the shoulder straps as he leaned forward, got his other arm in, then slowly straightened up and tightened the truss belt letting the weight of the pack sink to his hips.

"So, I guess we should," he said to his wife.

But she wasn't there. He saw she had already walked some ways down the road toward the center of the village. He also saw the sun cast a long shadow in front of her.

He walked as quickly as he could under the weight of his pack until he came up beside her.

"Really! No need to hurry."

They kept walking. To one side of them the sea went out forever; to the other side white houses, bright in the sun, climbed up the slope of the hill.

"He's following us," his wife said.

"Who's following us?"

"That man."

"He's not following us."

"Well, look if you don't believe me."

The husband stopped, pretending to readjust his truss belt, and squinted back against the sun. The man in black was only fifty feet away and walking toward them.

The husband readied himself for a possible confrontation. But the man simply walked past them. The husband watched him continue down the street toward the center of the village.

"You see," said the husband.

"I'm going there," the wife said, turning toward a side alley that went up the hill away from the sea.

"There?"

But she was already into the shadows of the houses along the alley.

He called after her, "Jane . . . ."

But he couldn't see her anymore. So he had to follow her. Didn't he? At least that's what he told himself.

As soon as he entered the shadows, the alley started to climb. It went up steeply, twisting first one way and then the other, meeting other alleys that went off in other directions. The alley had a gutter with narrow steps running down the middle of it, and pots of flowers hung at the front of the tiny porches of the houses.

"Damn!" he said to himself He said this because it was a kind of craziness on her part to climb such a steep hill under the weight of their packs.

In fact, several times he was forced to stop to get his breath.

At last he saw her. She had also stopped and was leaning forward under her straps.

"Some hill you've chosen," he said when he got up beside her.

She didn't answer him because she was breathing even harder than he was.

After a little while he said, "So, I'll just have a look to see what's ahead."

He started out again, the pack now feeling even heavier and not at all sure his legs would really support him, when suddenly, just around the corner, thank God, the alley leveled out and opened onto a sunlit cobblestone square with houses, a water fountain, and a church at one end. A group of children played with a soccer ball, and several mothers stood out in front of their doors talking and watching the children.

He stood there breathing deeply. The church especially caught his attention. There seemed something familiar about it. Something the husband remembered. Or thought he remembered. Or maybe it was the way the low afternoon sun lit up the bell tower, making it brighter than the surrounding houses, or the way the sun cast the shadow of the tower across the cobblestones. In any case, whether he had seen it before or not, it was certainly a very old church.

His wife came up beside him and leaned forward under the weight of her pack.

"Just a moment," said the husband.

He undid his own truss belt, let the pack slide off his back, and swung it against the wall of the little pool beneath the fountain.

His wife kept standing there leaning forward.

"Stand up straight now," he said.

As she straightened herself he caught the back of the pack, lifted it away from her, and carried it over and leaned it next to his own pack.

"All right?" he said.

"Of course, all right."

She sat down on the wall surrounding the little pool at the fountain.

Only it wasn't really a fountain, the husband now saw. At least not a decorative fountain. It was actually one of those watering places. Every village had them. The women came here and put their buckets under the spigot and then carried the buckets back to where they lived. Just above the spigot an image of Christ on the cross was molded into the concrete.

The husband went over to the wall of the pool and sat down next to his wife.

"Not such a bad place," he said.

He looked out over the square at the mothers talking to each other, at the children kicking the ball, and he also looked at the church. Again, something about it seemed familiar, as if, maybe, he had seen it before. Although he hadn't. He was sure he hadn't. He was one of those people who had traveled all over the world, but he had never been to this island before.

Maybe he'd seen a picture of it, or a picture of some similar church. Probably that was it.

"You know," he said, "I wouldn't be surprised if that building doesn't date back a ways. Maybe to the 14th century."

"Oh?"

"I think I'll have a look in my guidebook."

He unzipped a side pocket of his pack, reached in, and got the guidebook. He sat down next to his wife again and started thumbing through the pages until he found the island they were on. And, yes, there it was: a picture of the church, the very one before them. And he had guessed correctly. Sections of the

church did date back to the 14th century. The book also said that there was a theory that the great artist Ambrogio Lorenzetti visited this island briefly, or at least his influence made its mark on the stained glass windows of this church. Some of the windows evidenced a technique quite advanced for the time, a variation of a type of painting known as *grisaille.*

"You know, we ought to have a look at the stained glass windows," said the husband. "We really ought to."

His wife said, "Over there."

The husband looked to the far side of the square, beyond where the children were playing, and saw the man in black, the same man they had seen at the harbor, the string bean of a man, leaning against the wall of a house, his arms crossed against his chest, smoking a cigarette and looking in their direction.

"Let's leave," said the wife.

The man pushed himself away from the wall of the house, flicked his cigarette onto the cobblestones, and started to walk toward them in that long, loping way. He didn't walk directly toward them but slightly off one way, and then slightly off another.

"Its time to leave," the wife said standing up.

The husband stood up, too.

The man stopped about ten feet from them, pulled off his stocking cap, and made a stiff bow. When he made the bow, the husband could see the man's head was bald except for a few strands of hair

"My very dear sir," said the man in heavily accented English.

He took several steps toward them and bowed again. Only this time he bowed deeper, first making a kind of flourish with the same hand that held his stocking cap.

"My very dear sir," the man repeated as he came up from his bow.

The husband was aware of two things: that his wife had her hand in the back of his belt and was tugging at him, and that, in response to the man's bow, he himself had made the tiniest of bows back.

The man took another step forward.

"My dear sir, my very dear sir, it is my wish that you will excuse me. For this, my taking the occasion."

Again the man made a bow, and again the husband found

himself making the tiniest bow back, and again he felt his wife tugging from behind.

"But I know, I know, my very dear sir," said the man stepping closer, "I know that my dear sir will not feel offended at my taking the occasion. Because it is clear to me—indeed, it is clear to anyone who sees you—that you are one of us, and not of any island but of this island. Is that not so? Tell me, my dear sir, is that not so?"

The man had managed to get quite close to the husband, so close, in fact, that the husband could smell a sour odor coming from his clothing.

"Is that not so, my dear sir?"

The husband decided the best way to deal with all this was to treat it as some kind of joke. Which, in a way, it probably was.

"Well, I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"But, my dear sir . . . ," said the man, and before the husband knew what had happened, the man had laid his hand lightly on his arm.

The husband looked down at the man's hand. It felt cold.

"Ah," said the man, "I'm touching you. You, sir."

The man inched even closer, all the time keeping his hand on the husband's arm.

"But you see, my very dear sir, in truth you have invited me. Out of all the world, out of all your wandering, sir, you have sought this island out. And therefore, as night follows day and day follows night, you have sought me out. Because, my dear sir, perhaps you have already guessed my name? Have you not guessed my name, sir?"

"No, not at all," said the husband.

"But, 'Gabriel,' my dear sir. 'Gabriel!' The archangel, the heavenly messenger, sent to the Virgin Mary. See Luke, my dear friend, or Daniel. Because, my dear, dear friend, even the word 'angel' comes from *angelos*, meaning 'messenger.'"

The man now closed his fingers on the husband's arm.

"John!" said the husband's wife.

The man, keeping his fingers closed on the husband's arm, looked at the wife.

"Madam! I trust you will forgive me for directing myself to your husband. But, madam, as I think you understand, I have no choice. I have not the slightest choice in this matter at all."

Out on the square the husband saw all the mothers at the door steps had stopped talking, and over to one side of the square the children had stopped playing ball.

It occurred to him that what was happening, that is, what was happening to him right now, was certainly no joke.

I must stop this, he said to himself.

And therefore he told himself to pull his arm away from the man. Do it! he said to himself.

And giving himself that command, he watched himself twist his arm away from the man's grip.

The man reached out to take his arm again, but the husband drew his arm further back.

"Let's get this straight," the husband heard himself saying to the man, "I am not your 'dearest friend.' I am not your 'dear sir.' I don't know you and I have never known you. And I don't want to know you."

"But you came to this island, sir."

The man reached out again.

"And you are not to touch me!"

Yet before the husband really knew how it had happened, the man had managed to grip his arm again. A shock of cold traveled up the husband's arm to his neck and down his back.

Then he saw, yes, there was no doubt about it, he was watching it happen, his wife had stepped in beside him and right now slapped the man across his face.

"Madam," the man said stepping backwards.

Then his wife was really pulling at the husband's belt and he was letting himself be pulled by her over to the water fountain—not the water fountain, the watering place. Every village had them. The women came here with their buckets every day and then they went home.

"Go away! Go away!"

That's what his wife was shouting at the man.

And what was this? The bells of the church were ringing, clanging against each other. The man was actually pulling on his black stocking cap, turning, and with that loping walk, starting off across the square. The husband saw him disappear beyond the last house.

As soon as he was gone, the bells of the church stopped ringing. Not right away, not all at once, not suddenly, but slowing, dimming in sound.

As the sound of the bells dimmed, the husband heard his wife crying. He saw she was now sitting on the wall of the little pool and had her face buried in her hands.

The husband went over and sat next to her.

"Please don't cry," he said.

When she didn't stop crying, he said, "It's all right. It's over. It's completely over. I'm sure."

"It's not over," she said.

"Yes, of course, it's over. He's gone."

"He's not gone."

"You can look yourself if you don't believe me."

Because it was true. It was really, really true. The man in black was nowhere to be seen. Nowhere. And, also, the mothers had begun to talk again and the children had gone back to playing ball. Everything had returned to normal.

But the wife kept crying.

"So," said the husband to the wife, "you know, I'll tell you what. I think it's about time. Now. We ought to get ourselves a room in the village."

Karen R. Porter

All Words

It is all words, words,
and I am drowning in sounds,
suffocating in nuances of meaning,
letters stitched to the inside of my flesh.
If I rub my arms,
I can read patterns to myself in Braille.
I am scarred by the persistence
of foreign tongues' convoluted wanderings,
the phrasing twisting my lips
and shuffling my tongue.
I have gotten lost
following sprawling sentences
while I hear each pause and breath
clicking tumblers into place.
Voices call out their definitions,
syllables, and grammatical conundrums
sound their challenges to
my aching brain. My head
rings with noise, is stuffed so full
that sometimes extra vowels
fall from my ears.

Michael Onofrey

How Did I Know This Was Coming?

I went out at the end of October to talk to my father. In the vicinity of Llano I turned right onto a graded dirt road, which led me south toward the San Gabriel Mountains. Of course it had been desert ever since I got on the Pearblossom Highway, but here, on the dirt road, it suddenly felt like desert—no roadside businesses, no billboards, no traffic. The Pearblossom Highway is a shortcut for people living in the San Fernando Valley on their way to Las Vegas, but a couple of hundred yards off that artery and it all stops—except for creosote, sage, Joshua tree, Mojave yucca, century plant, and brittlebush—and becomes a scrub desert. Jackrabbits and coyotes are common, and so are rattlesnakes.

Lesser dirt tracks branched off the graded road, mailboxes at those meager junctions. The route to my father's place began at such a spot. I turned left and stopped and checked the mailbox. There was nothing in it. I got back in my car and continued, foothills to my right, temperature in the mid-eighties, not a cloud in the sky. Fortunately, there was no wind. Often there is, and when it comes in October it's a Santa Ana, hot and dry, and infamous for brushfires that destroy homes in Southern California.

I came to a locked chain-link gate, fencing extending out from the gate, barbed wire stapled to wooden fence poles. Within the perimeter of this fencing, though, there were sections that were better fenced. My father kept Angora goats and that was the reason for more secure enclosures. After relocking the gate, I drove around a low knoll and continued on for about a hundred yards before I pulled up in front of a modest stucco house.

I had called ahead, so my father knew I was coming. I tried the front door but there was no answer. I walked around back and found my dad sitting in the shade of an awning that extended from the rear of the house. On the wooden table at his elbow there was a coffee mug.

"How are you, Dad?"

"Fair."

Near where he sat an aluminum cane stood, the floor-end of the cane a four-pronged claw. My father's eyes were blue, his voice scratchy, his hair thin and sandy and combed straight back over his scalp. He wore bifocals.

"It's a nice day," I said.

"It is," he replied.

From the patio there was a view of the desert, foothills in back, and in back of the foothills the craggy slopes of the San Gabriel Mountains.

I looked to the left and saw a few Angoras grazing in a fenced-in area. The goats had started out as a hobby, and they were still a hobby mainly, but in recent years they had turned a mild profit. Roughage was what they mostly ate: brush, woody plants, and shrubs. Cold rain after shearing could kill them, but that was hardly a problem in this area of the Mojave, shearing being an autumn and spring activity, cold rain a January or February occurrence. Their hair grows curly and thick, and quickly. Unlike sheep, Angoras are sheared twice a year. Their fleece becomes mohair.

"Get yourself a cup of coffee," my father said and gestured toward the house.

I nodded and went through the back door. The kitchen was spare, no clutter. I like milk and sugar in my coffee, but since I couldn't find any milk in the refrigerator, I was forced to settle for black coffee with sugar. My father drank his coffee black. I came out of the back door and sat down in a heavy wooden chair to my father's right. My father lived alone.

"How's your marriage?" he said.

I couldn't remember saying anything about that, but maybe I had, or maybe it showed. I brought my cup up and sipped the black coffee with sugar.

Angoras are not milking goats. They are fleece-producing goats. No milk, no cheese. Only soft, valuable hair.

"Down the drain," I said.

My father reached for his cup and brought it to his lips. His lips were thin and chapped. He was looking at the desert. He brought the cup away from his mouth and swallowed. There had never been much fat on him, and he was that way now, but now his skin was loose. On his forearms there were faded tattoos.

"Was it the drinkin'?" he said.

A hummingbird came buzzing into the patio. It hovered and

looked at us. Then it turned and went to a feeder that hung from a rafter at the patio's edge. It was a still day and everything was vivid.

"It was," I said, "but then the drinking stopped."

The hummingbird at the feeder had a red throat. My father, for as long as I could remember, had always talked without preamble.

"If the drinkin' stopped, why did the marriage stop?"

"How do you know the marriage stopped?"

"Did it, or didn't it?"

Each of the fenced areas for the Angoras had a structure that threw shade, and, if need be, to get under in the event of rain. My father rotated the goats from one fenced section to another.

"I moved into an apartment two weeks ago," I said.

He nodded and said, "And April's in the house with Lily?"

"Yes."

My father sipped his coffee. I sipped my coffee.

"That's how it happened with your mother and me—the drinkin'. She stopped, I didn't," he said.

Everything about my father was dry—his hair, his hands, his complexion, his voice. He set his cup down on the table but kept his hand around it.

"Well, I've stopped," I said.

He tapped at the side of the cup with his index finger. His fingernails were yellowed.

"If the drinkin' stopped, why did the marriage stop?" he asked again.

A rust-red Angora came into view, the animal heavy with fleece. Obviously my father's small herd hadn't been clipped yet. Angora nannies run eighty to a hundred pounds. A billy can get as big as a hundred and seventy-five pounds, but my father's males were only about a hundred and thirty pounds. He kept two bucks, one reddish, the other black. Naturally colored Angora fiber occupies a niche market.

"Because the bitching and complaining didn't stop," I said. "The bitching and complaining had become habit."

The hummingbird at the feeder lit out in a flash. On my father's arms, along with faded tattoos, there were bruises. He brought a hand up and adjusted his bifocals.

"You want to do me a favor?" he said.

"What's that?"

"Get me another cup of coffee."

I picked up his cup and went into the house. After I had poured the coffee, I looked out the kitchen window and saw him moving away from the table with the aid of his four-pronged cane. I watched as he made his way to the left side of the patio where the hummingbird feeder hung. When he got to the edge of the concrete, he unbuttoned his pants and started peeing. I waited until he was done. When I went out the back door he was settling into his chair. I set his cup down in front of him.

"I don't know how many times a day I got to piss," he said. "It just goes right through me. You say you stopped drinking?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Six months ago."

"Six months?"

"Yes."

"And you're living in that apartment alone?"

"Yes. It's on Vineland in the East Valley. Kids banging on the railings, jumping on the walkways, clomping up and down the stairs, going around in this patio area with their three-wheeled toys. There's a tree on that patio, but it's stripped naked. Maybe it's dead, or maybe the kids pulled all the leaves off it. All this is out my front door. I'm on the second floor."

A grin rose on my father's creased face.

An Angora will lose about ten pounds when it's sheared. This translates into a hundred to two hundred and forty dollars depending on the quality and cleanliness of the hair.

"And you're not drinking?"

"No, I'm not drinking "

"And you're living in that apartment alone, and you're not drinking?"

"That's what I said, isn't it?"

I looked at him.

"But I've thought about it," I said. "I've been going to AA meetings, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

I picked up my cup and sipped my coffee.

"How old is Lily now?" he asked.

"Sixteen."

"So there's going to be child support for a couple of years or so."

"I suppose."

"And that house ain't paid for, is it?"

"She can have the house."

He nodded and said, "Well, it might not be that simple. You might still have to pay for it, or some of it."

During breeding and kidding, Angoras need grain to boost their nutrition. Grain is also recommended to produce high quality fiber.

"Are you still driving, Dad?"

Another hummingbird, this one with a green throat, came to the feeder.

"The mailbox is no problem," he said. "I drive out there. After all, what am I going to do, run into sagebrush?"

The green-throated hummingbird was perched at the feeder. My father had rigged up a wire so that the birds could perch.

"Cisco and his new wife—well, she's not exactly his new wife anymore, but she's a lot younger than Cisco—they go to the store for me now and then," he said.

I sipped my coffee.

"I shouldn't be driving," my father said. "It scares me to go to town, even just over here to Pearblossom."

"What about the doctor?"

"Yeah, well, Cisco and his new wife, Fey, help me out with that too."

Hummingbirds are the only bird that can fly backwards.

"Cisco's a Jesus jumper now, you know. Did I tell you?"

"No."

"Yeah. He and his new wife go to this storefront church over in Victorville. They even sing there."

My father chuckled.

"Thing is—Cisco can't sing."

"How do you know he can't sing?" I asked.

"I had to go to that church with him and Fey once. You know, they help me out, so it was kind of an obligation."

I nodded.

"I don't like church. It bores me."

He wasn't chuckling anymore. He was looking at the desert.

"How do you move the goats?" I asked.

"I got this cane here, and I get a stick, and I move 'em real slow. They don't need to be moved that often, but of course there's other things. I need to give them that grain mixture sometimes."

Angoras should be sheared on a clean surface to keep the hair

clean. Years ago my father built a shed with a plywood floor that can be swept easily. Each goat's fleece is put into a separate burlap sack. The fleeces are not mixed.

"Thinking about drinking is part of the deal," my father said. "I got off the hooch about twenty years ago, and I've thought about a drink every day since—dreams, memories, mental snapshots. Washing dishes, seeing to the goats, sitting with a cup of coffee, waiting out in the brush for a coyote with my rifle, and an image will pop up. Sometimes, I can just about taste it."

The hummingbird at the feeder left, but then there came another, this one buzzing into the patio to stop and look at us before going to the feeder.

"Do you have a coyote problem?" I asked.

"Haven't had one in a long time. After I shot half a dozen of the damn things they got the message. I don't know, maybe they're going extinct." He grinned and then said, "But I don't think coyotes are capable of extinct, even if everything else is."

He stopped grinning, and then he reached into his pants pocket and brought out an asthma inhaler. He uncapped the device and brought it to his mouth and shot a burst of medicine in. He closed his mouth and inhaled. He held his breath while he recapped the inhaler. The inhaler went back into his pocket. He let his breath out.

"Does it bother you much?" I asked.

"You mean the asthma?"

"Yes."

"The medicine pretty much takes care of it."

I nodded.

"You know," he began, "I thought I had it beat. The army wouldn't have me because of the asthma. Sonny was coming out here in that pickup his father gave him. He had this two-by-four framing rigged up on back to throw a tarp over. Didn't drive with the tarp on, mind you. We just lashed it to the two-by-fours at night when we slept.

"We struck southern California and my asthma disappeared. They were throwing up tract homes out here then like confetti. We found work with a painting crew. We parked the truck in back of this bar—the Broken Yucca. The place closed at 2 AM and opened at 6 AM. We'd go in there at six in the morning, and brush our teeth in the restroom, and then sit at the bar and have a cup of coffee before going to work.

"Swinging a brush in the day, swinging a bottle at night—the good old days."

He chuckled, a wry sound. I looked at him. He was looking at the desert.

My father had been a housepainter, production work for a good many years, and then custom work. He did the custom work on his own. When I was in high school, I'd come out and help him—summertime, Christmastime, weekends. I thought the money was great. He tried to teach me what he knew.

"Up in Elko there'd be snow mixed in with the wind," he said. "And there was my mother and father with a Chesterfield day and night in that small house. I came out here and the asthma stopped, but then here it comes again. I turn sixty and it comes back like it remembered me. What was that—ten years ago?"

He brought his cup up and sipped.

"I got these credit card debts," I said. "April and I."

My father set his cup down. The table was made of two-by-fours, heavy, so the wind wouldn't blow it away. The chairs were the same, two-by-fours. Cushions were lashed to the chairs.

"Credit card debts?"

"Yeah."

As the sun progresses across the sky, the view from the patio changes. I stood up and walked to the edge of the patio with my coffee cup and looked out at the desert.

"They shut the warehouse down last week," I said. "I'm out of a job."

"Say what?"

It's four thousand feet high in this section of the Mojave. It's cold at night during the winter, and it can snow. Not a lot, and not often. Only once or twice a winter.

"The auto parts warehouse where I work, or worked, closed up shop, went out of business. They gave us our checks on Friday and told us that was it."

At night there are stars, and if there are scudding clouds and a moon, shadows move on the foothills like phantoms.

"There's something else too," I said.

"What's that?"

Now and then a roadrunner will appear on my father's property. It goes along the ground in quick bursts. It'll stop to gawk at the Angoras, and the Angoras will look at the roadrunner. I've seen a roadrunner snatch up a lizard. It'll stand with that reptile

squirming from either side of its beak and look around. Then it will swallow the lizard whole.

"I got health insurance now for me and April and Lily, but that's going to evaporate."

"Doesn't April have health insurance where she works?"

The most pressing weather condition in the desert is wind. If the wind isn't blowing, it's nice.

"Yeah, well, she can buy into. She pays some, and her employer pays some, which means that if she gets health insurance for herself and Lily, it's going to cut into her paycheck pretty bad. They don't pay much at that store she works at, you know."

"I know."

The wind in the desert at night, though—there's something to it, particularly in the winter when it's cold. It's a sound I carry everywhere, a sound that keeps coming back. It's me lying in bed and listening to the wind outside.

My father tapped at the side of his coffee cup with his fingernail. Then he stopped.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "You move into a crummy apartment two weeks ago and you lose your job the following week. You got a mortgage, and you got credit card debts, and you're getting divorced, and your wife and kid and you need health insurance. Is that about right?"

When there is no wind everything is quiet. I stood, listening to my heartbeat. How did I know this was coming?

"So you came out to talk to your old dad."

I raised my cup and sipped my coffee. As I lowered the cup I glanced at my forearm, where a tattoo was etched on the underside, fashioned after the flag of Mexico—an eagle with a suffering snake in its claws.

"What about unemployment?"

Roadrunners are very fast birds on the ground, seventeen miles per hour. Lizards aren't their only prey. They also go after insects, snakes, scorpions, small birds, and rodents.

"Yeah. I can collect that. I've already been to the office."

Rattlesnakes are on a roadrunner's menu.

"So you've been in that apartment for two weeks, and you've been unemployed for a week, and you're not drinking?"

"Yeah."

When there's no wind and no clouds during the day, the shadows from plants and rocks and animals throw queer patterns on

the earth because there is no blurring between light and dark. Lines are distinct. Neither my father nor I spoke for a long time. He was the one who finally broke the silence.

"Could you get me another cup of coffee?"

I turned and looked at him. He only sat, his face wrinkled and drawn.

I went to the table and picked up his cup, but as I started for the house he said, "And could you bring out that package of cookies? In the cupboard above the coffee pot."

I slowed to make sure I had heard it right. I said, "Sure." Hearing nothing more, I went into the house.

The cookies were Lorna Doone and the package hadn't been opened. I came out the back door and walked to the table and set the cookies and cups of coffee down on the table, and then sat down where I had been sitting before. My father opened the package and took a cookie out.

"Help yourself," he said.

"When did you start eating cookies?" I asked.

He put the cookie in his mouth and chewed.

"Oh, I don't know."

I took a cookie and put it in my mouth.

"Newhall, Valencia, Saugus, Canyon Country, Palmdale, Lancaster, Victorville, Apple Valley—we painted it up," he said.

Coyotes are a threat to roadrunners.

"The Broken Yucca," he mused. "They had shuffleboard in there. That's where I met Cisco. He was swinging a brush too. He had this Harley, and he carried a forty-five, and now he's going to church."

He brought his cup up and sipped.

"Got a call from this gal the other day," he said. "Two years of not painting, and I'm still getting calls. This one the other day is the daughter of a lady I painted for. Runs a beauty parlor over here in Little Rock. The daughter took it over from the mother. I must have painted that place three or four times, exterior, interior. The first time I painted it was just after I got into custom work. The lady's name was Elizabeth, the mother that is."

He put another cookie in his mouth and chewed.

"You always want to do good work when you're doing custom work," he said, "because it's word-of-mouth that makes or breaks you. Elizabeth took a handful of my cards and put them on the counter inside her shop. It was mostly older women that

went in there. Probably still is. A beauty parlor wouldn't be a beauty parlor without talk. A fresh coat of paint would serve up conversation for months. I kind of got lucky with that—the timing and all."

A roadrunner is about two feet long and about a foot high. It grabs a rattlesnake by the tail and whips the snake so that the snake's head strikes the ground. Bam, bam, bam, the snake's head smacking the ground, the bird whipping the viper repeatedly until it's dead. Then it swallows it, but of course it can't do it in one gulp. So it walks around with the snake down its throat and hanging from its mouth while digesting the snake.

"It was hard work that saved me—ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day. I'd come home and sit out here with a cup of coffee if the wind wasn't blowing, and if the wind was blowing I'd sit in the kitchen with my coffee. There were the goats of course. I'd tend the goat, I'd build fence, I'd repair fence, I'd repair sheds, I'd build sheds. There was always something to do. I made it so. I made it 'always something to do,' and it saved me."

He sipped his coffee.

"The pickup is sitting there with the camper shell on it just like always. The tools and the equipment are in the garage."

The gestation period for Angoras is five months. Their lifespan is nine to fifteen years.

"You need to do more than just painting to do a good job. You got to replace the cracked and warped fascia, you got to patch the stucco, you got to patch the cracks in the drywall, you got to build shelves when they want shelves built, you got to clear weeds when they want that done, you got to get down on your hands and knees and patch the cracks in the patio when they want that done—of course you get paid for it."

A roadrunner can snatch a hummingbird out of the air.

"Backbreaking work, the physical aspect of it—working the body, getting tired, feeling it in your bones and muscles and limbs, and falling into bed at night."

He reached for a cookie.

"Falling into bed at night and making those mortgage payments—it saved me."

He put the cookie in his mouth and chewed.

"The satisfaction of doing a good job, no shortcuts. Just good work. Sometimes you take it on the chin because you didn't know about the problems, you didn't figure them into the bid,

because you only discovered them after you got into the job. But unless you take care of those problems, the job is going to turn out shit. And that's the last thing you want, because aside from hard work the only other thing you got going is pride. This ain't investment banking or any of that bullshit."

He sat without speaking and so did I.

"You got a choice," he said. "Either you sink to a place that's worse than where you're at, or you roll up your shirt sleeves."

If the snow is windblown in the desert, the place looks like a dream. And if it's not windblown, every snowflake is absolutely vivid.

I nodded.

"Okay. Kathy and her daughter, Emily, are coming over the day after tomorrow to shear the goats. You can bag the fleeces and keep the floor clean while they work."

I nodded.

"Watch what they do, because they know just about everything there is to know about Angoras."

I nodded.

"You can go back to your apartment after the shearing is done and pack your things and forget about that apartment."

I nodded.

"Get yourself some health insurance and find out what your wife and daughter need and work that out with your wife."

"Soon-to-be ex-wife," I said.

"Right. Soon-to-be ex-wife."

He reached for a Lorna Doone.

"No drinkin'. If you start drinkin', the deal's off."

I nodded.

He was holding the cookie in his shriveled fingers and he was looking at me.

"I don't care if you bring women around, as long as there's no drinkin'."

I nodded.

"That about covers it," he said and sat for a moment before putting the cookie in his mouth. I picked up my cup and sipped and realized immediately that I had forgotten to put sugar in it when I was refilling my cup.

"Three more fenced areas," my father said, "and we can double the number of Angoras. The land's just sitting."

Black coffee. Elko is in northern Nevada. Prostitution is legal there.

"If you could do me a favor," he said.

I looked up from my coffee.

"There's a pad of yellow paper on the kitchen table, and there's a pencil there too. If you could bring them out, so I could write a shopping list. We need some things from the grocery store, and we need some special stuff for when Kathy and her daughter come over. I want to make a barbeque lunch so we can have that when the shearing's done."

After a rain creosote bushes become pungent. To walk in the desert under a roiling sky with damp ground underfoot is to stroll through a bittersweet bouquet.

I got to my feet and went into the house. The paper and pencil were on the table. I picked them up and started for the door, but then stopped and looked out the kitchen window. My father was making his way to the edge of the patio with his cane. I stood, watching and waiting, the desert welling up in my throat and in my eyes.

Karbacher on the Brain

dura mater: [L. 'tough mother'] the convoluted membrane covering the brain and spinal cord

It may be that within this lump of elements,
this dried plum,
this neural octopus,
this corrugated planetoid
are contained perceivabilities
of the theory and incidence of everything.

It may be.
But Aristotle thought the function of the brain
was to cool the blood.

hindbrain: the primitive basal area of the brain controlling equilibrium and involuntary systems such as circulatory, respiratory, and digestive

The fragility, the tenacity of these tissues,
the cerebellum, the pons,
are as daunting as their ambiguity,
their autonomy,

as their chaotic array,

the random expedience of their origins,

as the naivetes of Descartes.

forebrain: twin cerebral hemispheres regulating speech, as well as sensory and motor functions

About the supposed peripheries of the lobes,
the parietal, the occipital,
are weathers, are complexions —

postulates and dissents,
vanities and infections,

strictures and carnalities,
yearnings and inhibitions —

that Calvin only nearly conceived.

quale,-ia: [L. 'quality'] a detail of
a thing as perceived by a person

Everywhere among the chinks and crannies
auras of sensibility emanate,
of memory, of delectation,

filaments of anxiety,
arrival and flight,
of exotic calligraphy,
enigmas and rites,

of fervors by which Jung was enchanted.

Erin Lynn Cook

Thicket Wall

I studied the map of the park laid out on the picnic table. There were trail heads marked with red x's, like treasure, in between campsites. One was close to ours. I looked up the distance to Rocky Point and Agate Beach and figured the two-mile trek was doable for my four- and eight-year-old sons. The sun was unexpectedly warm and the air was still. Our campsite was cluttered with weeds, and it was difficult to make the area like a home. The boys' tent had to be on a lush mound of tall grass tamped down with a tarp. We jumped on it, the boys and I, until it was sufficiently level. I set up the older canvas tent closer to the fire pit. With the day so warm, it was hard to imagine how good a fire would feel that night, but as the sun shifted through the tight needle points of tall spruce, hemlock, pine, fir, and red alder trees, I felt a sense of potential cold.

"When will Dad be here?" asked Peter. He had been uneasy during the ten-hour drive from the San Joaquin Valley to Patrick's Point not having his father navigating the car. He had commented more than I'd have liked on my driving and questioned nearly every bypass I took. I had snapped at him once, telling him that I too knew how to read a map.

"Remember? He had to work a couple more days. He'll be along the day after tomorrow." I had reiterated the information so many times over the day that it was becoming like a script. I successfully pushed the emotionally-charged implications of *Mom can't handle this situation* away. Getting the tents situated was a helpful morale boost. I smoothed the park map out with my left hand and saw with some surprise that I wasn't wearing my wedding band. I had taken it off at the kitchen sink that morning to put it in the cleaning solution. Peter and Joshua climbed in and out of their tent, zipping and unzipping the front and side flaps, fool's protection against the harsh wilderness.

"Lay out your sleeping bags, guys. Peter, help Joshua with the ties. Make sure they are straight on your mats. You can get your pillows from the car."

The park guide had warned about not feeding the various types of wildlife. On the way into the campground, I'd stopped at the Visitor's Center and bought each boy a Patrick's Point t-shirt with a large bear on the front. I asked the attendant if there really were bears, and she nodded and answered, "But not as many as banana slugs. Just ask my tomato plants." I smiled and then scolded Josh for petting the preserved raccoon. "The fur might molt from the oils in your hand." Josh felt his fingertips.

Around the back of the Visitor's Center was the newly reconstructed Yurok Village of Sumêg. We looked at the sweathouse. It was constructed using earth as walls and indigenous redwood timber as a roof. The structure was for tribal leaders. I imagined the men, naked, fanning themselves with boughs, discussing prospects of kills for the tribe. I wondered at those men, so powerful in weaponry, so vulnerable underground filled with their secrets. Before I could stop them, the boys ran down inside it and I couldn't see them beneath the ground. I heard their laughter and peered through the rock vent trying to spy what they were doing. They ran out the other end toward the family houses made of stone and redwood. In the middle was a large dance pit. Signs clearly read to stay out of the ceremony area, but a little girl ran wild around the ashen fire pit while her parents leaned over and watched with a camera.

"Can't she read the signs?" Peter asked.

Our tent site was discreetly hidden from the road by a hedge of soft fern and huckleberry bramble. The berries were either just ending or just beginning, I couldn't tell which. I went to the cooler and felt through the ice for a beer. If David were here, he'd have already started on his second. It would feel strange to be alone in the tent the next couple of nights. I took a swig and felt the cool soothing burn down my throat. "It's not a problem," I had argued with him weeks ago. "I can go up early with the boys. It's our vacation and I want to make the most of it. I can handle it." We had decided that he'd ride up with another ice chest for the rest of the week to somewhat justify the second car. I wanted to take the boys further north into Ashland to see a couple of plays. It was our summer break, and since the boys were getting older I wanted to take advantage of my teaching job and make their summers my summers. There was an oppor-

tunity to be had, even if David had only a couple of weeks off a year. I hadn't told him of this idea.

"Done, Mom!" yelled Joshua. He held his hand outstretched toward the opening of their tent like his latest hero, Bello the circus performer, and gave a slight bow to invite me inside. That summer, after seeing Bello ascend a ten-story pole with his bare feet, Josh declared emphatically, "I want to be Bello," and pushed his hair up and up, repeatedly licking his hands to make it stand on end. I crouched down and peered inside their tent. It was like their bedroom at home, two twin beds side by side, Beaver-and-Wally style. It was warm and almost stifling.

"It looks great. Be careful about the flaps, the zippers can break easily, so don't play with them." They both knelt on top of their cartoon-character sleeping bags. I smiled at them and hoped that what they saw in me was comforting. "Should we go for a short hike? We'll start dinner when we get back." They scrambled to put on their shoes, which were waiting for them like puppies outside their tent door. Peter shoved his younger brother aside as he worked his heels into shoes he refused to untie.

Between our site and the next was a trail head. It was adjacent to the restrooms where for four quarters you could have the luxury of a hot shower for twelve minutes. The dirt was dark red. The path went down a brief eroded slope, and Peter slipped and fell. He quickly brushed himself off and declared he wasn't hurt. I followed more cautiously with Josh's hand. At the end of the decline, we butted up to the main rim trail. The Pacific blue below the canopy of green surrounding us was shocking to me at first. Though the ocean was in full view on the last leg of our drive to the campground, I had forgotten about it up above the ocean floor in the trees until seeing it again. It was clear we were on a steep ridge, and I held on to Josh's sweaty hand as he fought to get loose. Peter ran ahead and my heart pounded. What was I doing with two active boys camping alone? David's tone of uncertainty came back to my ears, and I heard myself yelling for Peter to slow down. By the third day I would not remember that fear.

Josh finally slipped his hand out of mine and found a breach in the tall ferns. It looked like a trail that might lead down the cliff to the water. I warned him to wait, and my voice caught the

attention of Peter, who ran back to see what his brother had found.

"Can we go? See, Mom, it's a trail. See? It's all cleared away." Peter had remembered my admonition to stay only on the trails. His feet quickly stepped forward without waiting for my approval. I pulled him back by his t-shirt collar and told him I'd check it out first. He turned his face into a dark scowl. Once again I wasn't giving him the freedom and control he felt confident he could handle. Sometimes his eight-year-old ways were identical to those of a seventeen-year-old. I feared what was to come.

"If you keep that look up, you won't be able to follow me." His expression magically softened into a smile.

The dirt-trodden path seemed to go beyond a dense patch of rhododendron bushes. They weren't in bloom, but just below them some thimbleberries peeked through, their vines intertwining with the deadly bush. A picture list of poisonous plants hung in the boys' pediatric office. I had memorized them all when Peter was an infant.

I pushed the bushes away with my shins and glanced behind me to make sure the boys were still up on the main path. They were, their faces anxious and excited at the prospect of moving forward. Just beyond the thicket wall I saw the trail end. It fell sharply away, leaving roots bare, reaching out like worms over the cliff. The erosion seemed sudden, exposing the jagged Mesozoic rock formations as they descended sharply to the thin sandy stretch a hundred feet below. I could see into the past and the division of the continents. I felt slightly dizzy at being thrust so close to the edge of the cliff and realigned my footing to feel more secure. I was close to danger.

I shook my head firmly as I walked back up to the boys. "It's not a trail. It goes right to the cliff."

"I want to see!" said Josh. I put my hand on his chest and pushed him up toward the safe wide rim trail.

"We'll find another fun trail." They resigned themselves rather quickly, but I could sense a continual undercurrent of curiosity.

We walked until Peter found his first banana slug and coerced it onto a stick. He named it Sam and we watched it drip slime all the way back to camp.

I struggled with the Coleman stove, but finally pumped it enough to get it lit. The fire pit had a few pieces of damp wood left over from the previous family. I had purchased some at the Visitor's Center and managed to get a fire going. I tried to recreate the memories of camping I'd had as a child. The boys skewered hot dogs on straightened wire clothes hangers and then we had beans and roasted franks. There was little light when we finished, and I trooped the boys over to the campfire circle. Just as it was when I was young, the ranger spoke of the animals in the park. He spoke of bears and how to respond if you came across one unexpectedly. Never turn your back on a bear, back away slowly, speak softly, whistle and make noise when hiking, bear-proof food areas—but nothing much on a predatory bear at night. The most deadly and frequent attacks came from a sow protecting her cubs. Adult males were also aggressive, especially during the summer mating season. One woman raised her hand and asked about pepper spray, did it work? While the ranger affirmed it as a successful deterrent I felt more inadequate as a mother.

As we walked back to our camp, dark because I'd forgotten the flashlight, I wanted the trees looming above to be those in our own back yard. Our own innocent, fluffily flowered crepe myrtle, our own towering deodar cedar that drops too many needles on our patio and roof, our own scarlet oak intended for shade, and as I listed them in my head I thought of them as ornamental, designed, not natural and uncontrollable like the cedars and pines dark against the night sky. Our back yard was like Ascension Island's Green Mountain, a desolate desert island devoid of much vegetation and supplanted by British with bamboo, ferns, and other non-native trees. A man-made jungle encrusted at the top with a cloud forest.

A family walked behind us. I could hear the laughter and deep voice of a father. A random flicker of light from their flashlights shone on the pavement in front of us. What was David doing? Was he asleep? On the computer? Listening to his music up loud on the stereo? Was he concerned for us?

"I miss Dad," Josh said as his sweaty fingers clasped my hand tighter.

At our campsite I was pleased that the fire was still active. I stoked it while the boys burned the wire hangers clean. We

roasted marshmallows and became sticky and happy for slumber. I had warmed up some water on the Coleman stove and we washed our faces and hands. It felt good. One last bathroom venture and the boys were in footed pajamas inside their sleeping bags.

I sat by the fire and listened to my boys' talk die down until I knew they were asleep. The dew settled into the air, thickening it to condensation. The hand towel wouldn't dry during the night, and the canvas on the big tent would be soggy come morning. The sound of the ocean amplified, and through the thicket wall I could hear talking on the Pacific rim trail. It started low and sounded like two men. The rise and fall of their pitch seemed natural. It was a few minutes before I thought it strange to still hear them. If they had been walking, their conversation would have trailed off like the tip of a tail. I stood and walked over to see if I could see over the overgrown ferns. Words drifted in through the leaves, "immoral" and "unnatural." I felt cold. A flashlight beam shocked my eyes and at first I thought I was seen, but then it bounced off a branch on the ocean side and then again. The voices were still low and concentrated. Then they went silent for what seemed like many minutes. I stood there trying to hear if they were still there.

"Excuse me?" I said finally, loud enough to be heard over the silence.

"Shit."

Footfalls faded and the flashlight beam hit high in a tree on the ocean side of the trail. For that brief moment there was a dark mass nestled between branches. I couldn't be sure, but it appeared to flinch at the beam.

The urgent need to urinate woke me about three in the morning. When I woke, my rear end was resting on the tent lining, the air mattress partially deflated. I thought of David and our own bed. It molded slightly to my body and had to be turned every few months to keep it even. He didn't like the subtle reflection of form, but I liked it. To me it felt like a warm stone worn down by a river. Once, while making love, he'd fallen into my spot and felt trapped. The dip in the air mattress held no warmth, and I felt trapped inside the moldy tent too big for one.

I pulled on my sweatpants without standing and quietly un-

zipped the tent flap. I felt the heavy dew against my cheeks. I put on my flip-flops and wrapped my arms about me. It was chilly. There was enough moonlight to see the ground clearly, and I decided to leave the campsite to use the restroom three sites down. I put my head near the boys' tent and could hear them grinding their teeth. The sound was like fingernails on a chalk board. When my oldest first started grinding his teeth in his sleep, it kept me awake. Now that they both did it, it was a comfort to know they were sound asleep.

Out on the black asphalt the night took shape. It had settled onto each site, causing quiet and in some cases solitude. I remembered the men's voices from earlier in the night, and I chose to not dwell there. I wanted it to cloud over and be concealed. The restroom entrance was illuminated by a dim light, but inside the only light came from windows high above the stalls. I looked up at the moon glow and hoped I wouldn't sit on a spider. A pair of women's slippers shuffled by and a stall door closed. I no longer felt alone.

Outside I could see again. The path toward the ocean was just across the way, and I decided to just walk down to where it met the rim trail. It was so still and quiet. I felt confident that the boys were safe for a few more minutes. The dark red soil was black at night and hid small rocks. My flip-flops were an immediate mistake when I neared the small slope, and I slid once. At the bottom where the path met the rim trail I stopped. If I walked to the left, I would come up behind our tent site where I had heard the earlier voices. If I walked to the right, I would be moving further away from my boys. My original intent was to turn around once I'd glimpsed the glow of waves below, but I remembered the dark shape in the tree. I turned to the left.

After a few paces I was behind our campsite. It was just on the other side of the dense underbrush of ferns and vines. The top of the big canvas tent peeked just above the vegetation. I realized I was looking for evidence of them. There was a large boulder big enough to stand on, and I wondered if they had stood here a few hours ago. What would they have seen? I stood up on the boulder and saw over the hedge to our campsite. The moonlight was brighter in a clearing through the trees. It illuminated the boys' tent clearly. There was a motion on the red and white checked tablecloth and I saw a terrier-sized shape moving across the top of the table. My mind flashed through the bear

warnings, and I recalled a story of a bear pulling a child from his tent, only to be found mauled the next day. My voice wanted to scream out, but I feared being too alarming. I tipped up higher on my toes to see, but the edge of one flip-flop caught the other and I fell forward, my hands running into the briar of berry vines. When I managed to pull myself out and stood again to see, the creature had been scared by the noise and run off. I came down from the boulder and ran back to the road, slipping once again on the steep incline. My knee hit hard and my hands felt sticky with dirt and blood.

The boys' tent was untouched and their teeth were still grinding. The water in the wash basin, once warm, was now so cold to my burning palms. The soap stung and my knee throbbed. I felt foolish and neglectful. Something I would not share with David.

Morning was bright. Birds, absent during the night, seemed to appear, singing. Several landed in the bushes, grubbing for the berries and slugs heavy with the night's moisture. Peter and Joshua came from their tent. Loudly they introduced themselves to the morning with voices that penetrated the thickness of other campers' sleep.

"You were too kicking me!" shouted Peter.

"Mom, Peter said I was kicking him."

"Joshua kicked me in the sleeping bag. He's a liar."

"I am not."

"You're just a baby." The last comment Peter said low, thinking that inside my tent, where I was still pulling myself together, I wouldn't hear.

"I heard that. You know the rule. Tell him you're sorry. And Joshua, quit kicking your brother. And use quiet voices." I put on fresh clothes to begin the full day I'd spend with the boys. The shirt smelled of home.

When I emerged they were hunting banana slugs. Broad leaves dripped, hanging low to the ground. The top of the canvas tent sagged where the dew had collected. Small puddles formed, yellowish around the edges—old waterproofing from when the tent was used by David's parents on their family camping trips. It was something we had in common, our love of outdoors. The day I met him he drove a 1972 Volkswagen bus that had seen its share of road trips and desert camping. That was

David's favorite kind—in the sandy barren lands of Joshua Tree and Anza-Borrego. Where the threat spiraled on the ground and rattled when approached. Where the shade came from the spikes of Joshua trees and the slant of rock to climb. Evenings were windy and blew in sand—unlike here, where the wind only blew at the ocean's edge and the shade from the thick tall trees was oppressive. His idea of camping stemmed from the open air at sea level, mine from altitudes and dense forest. Our landscapes often clashed.

The cellular phone had been left plugged into the car's adapter. I checked the range and battery charge. And I checked for missed calls. There were none.

Coffee brewed in a tin pot on the Coleman. I sat in a comfortable fold-out canvas chair and stoked the damp logs with newspaper. Joshua came over and sat on my lap. He reached up behind him and pulled gently at my hair. His rubber-soled shoes rested on the rim of the metal fire pit. The flames were low with no smoke. Peter came over and sat opposite us with a new banana slug friend on a stick. He was careful not to put it near the fire, but I could see a glimmer of curiosity in his expression and the angle with which he held the stick. His eyes kept looking from the slug to the flames.

"It would just be mean," I said.

"Oh, I know. I wouldn't do it, really. But what do you think would happen if I did? Would it boil? What about melt?"

"I think it would melt," Joshua said.

"I think it would be gross and disgusting," I said. Then I tickled Joshua and moved him aside so I could stand. The mist had burned off quickly, leaving the potential warmth of the day to settle in. I poured my first cup of coffee and noticed the dirt prints on the table covering. It had been a raccoon after all. There had been nothing to fear. The brightness of morning awakened me and I felt glad of where I was.

"We're going to hike to the beach today," I said more to myself than my boys.

Two men walked by on the road and waved good morning. I waved back before wondering.

The sky was rock candy blue. Vapor trails from jets floated like arrows. We went right at the Pacific rim trail, toward Agate Beach. There were several view points along the way—

Rocky Point, Patrick's Point, Wedding Rock—and I prepared our backpacks with water and heavy snacks. The trail was wide enough for two and occasionally three. Plenty of room for passing or walking side-by-side. Peter and Joshua were good hikers and stayed a few paces ahead of me, stopping every so often to notice the slugs or watch movement in the dense green foliage. I watched their heads as they would play a kind of hop-frog of follow the leader. Sometimes I'd see Peter's backpack, deep blue with fluorescent blue stripes, in the front, and sometimes it would be Joshua's deep auburn pack with bright red stripes. I was amazed at how young they still were and how old they were becoming.

I warmed up with the exercise and stopped for a moment to slip off my sweatshirt and tie it around my waist. The boys continued, but the path was in a straightaway so I could see them easily. Next to my foot was a similar movement to ones the boys had seen. I looked and saw black and white stripes disappearing into the brush.

"Peter and Joshua! Come quick" I yelled. They turned and ran back to me. "Look, there. Do you see? See the tail? It's slipping under that leaf." I pointed, eager for them to see the snake.

"I see it!"

"So do I. Oh, I think it's poisonous," said Peter. He had a book on snakes at home and had done a report on the King Cobra. He was confident, sometimes too much, in his snake authority.

"I think it's a garter snake. They're okay."

"Still, we should be careful," said Joshua. He poked his finger into his nose then looked at us and pulled it out.

"We'll keep our eyes out for more. Look over here, guys." I pointed to the Rocky Point marker. It was tipped over on the side of the hill. "We almost missed this trail. Let's go."

Around a quick bend in the side trail down to the point we came upon eroding wooden steps. They were dirt treads with railroad ties as aprons to keep the stairs together. The dirt was washed away so deep between the aprons that we had to hop from one railroad tie to the next. After the boys got used to the motion, they started ahead of me and quickly disappeared between the high shrubbery. I lost my footing a couple of times and almost twisted my ankle. I heard them up ahead and

shouted for them to stop until I caught up. The steep steps finally flattened out a bit and I could see over the top of the bushes.

We were out on a barren point, jagged with rocks, and the waves crashed on ancient rocks. I saw to my right and left that the natural hedge was nothing more than thick Douglas iris and fairy bells, with a salmonberry foundation. I stepped off the last riser and was on fine gravel that moved under each foot. It was difficult to keep my balance. I saw my boys sitting on a rock, and from my vantage point it appeared they were on a dangerous precipice. I slipped down to where they were and saw that it was much further from the edge. They were safe.

"Hear that?" I asked.

"What?"

"Seals. Look down there. They are all over that rock." I pointed down to a large rock jutting out of the breaking waves. It was filled with seals, barking and sunning themselves.

Peter stood and walked closer to the edge. His feet slipped under him and he caught his fall with the heel of his palm. I stood and held back from shouting at him to be careful; David always told me I was too protective. If he had been at Rocky Point, the three of them would be sitting with feet hanging over the lip of the rock. He could take them to the edge without fear of falling. I looked at Peter and saw his posture, just like his father's, a hand on his hip, knee bent, and looking off into depths I was too scared to see.

Barks and waves filled my hearing. The ocean spray was cool and smelled of fish. The noise reminded me of my classroom, consuming my ears but background enough to isolate one fear, that for my son.

"Let's go check out more of our hike, guys." I brushed sand off my pants. Joshua stretched his hand down and picked up a rock.

"Can I throw it in?"

"Be careful. Stand right by your brother."

He walked over to where Peter stood, and his arm swung wide over his head and down. I was still afraid for them, but waited as patiently as I could for them to make their way back over to the steps. I leaned down and smelled a lilac bush. We had survived another moment. There were now hours, not days, until David's arrival.

I tried to concentrate, but the noise of the environment interfered. I took out my cellular phone from my pocket and checked, no missed calls.

The last leg of our hike snaked us through a Sitka spruce forest. The path was newly formed. The trees were tall and elegant, like men in top hats. I had the boys stand next to a trunk and look up. Joshua reached up his hands, his fingers danced on the bark. Peter picked a cone up off the forest floor. It had sprouted tiny silvery green needles, like an egg ready to hatch.

We continued walking. The crushed granite path made a quick curve and I noticed giant roots higher than my head. As we completed the turn, I saw that the path curved where a tree had fallen. The giant spruce lay where trees had been. I looked around and it became clear what we had entered. It was a forest graveyard. Storms had come in from the ocean front and blown the giants down. The new path wove in and out, over and under, the fallen beasts. Everywhere I looked a tree was split in half by another that had fallen on it. Root beds almost two stories high were as common as upright trunks.

I pointed out each fallen tree to the boys. At first they seemed interested, but the twists and turns of the intertwining path drew their attention away. Where roots had pulled free from the earth, a pool of water had formed in its former bed. I reached out at every turn to feel the bark of the fallen trees, or run my fingers along the roots thick as biceps. The boys kept running ahead.

At the end of the Alice-like web, we found ourselves at the stairs to the beach. Unlike the dangerous steps to Rocky Point, these were constructed of neatly-molded cement. It was an easy descent to Agate Beach. The path was wide and filled with other visitors. Children's laughter floated up from the hundred-foot reach below. I let the boys run ahead, confident that where they ended up would be our destination.

At the bottom of the steps, Peter had already slipped off his shoes and Joshua was struggling with laces. The sand was not soft, like our central California coast, but it was fine enough to be comfortable digging toes into. I helped Joshua with his shoes and took mine off. We walked to the water and looked for shells.

Joshua found a small spiral shell that used to house a hermit

crab. The doorway was broken and the home was empty. The spirals turned like candy from red to pink to blue to white. It was beautifully damaged. The form and content melded to a single idea. Like an exclamation point, he poked it into the sand, filled it with the crushed agate, and turned its hourglass to drop tiny rocks back onto the beach. I picked up a piece of seaweed—translucent—and held it toward the light. A faint green glowed and I saw my two boys behind this lens. Their shapes moved and flowed like in a fun-house mirror. I pulled it away and suddenly lost sight of Joshua.

I looked around, trying not to be overly concerned and to remain as calm as David would. Peter was at the water, his pant legs rolled up to above his ankles. I eyed his position and circled around from that point. Then I saw Joshua. He was down the beach, walking away from me, holding onto a man's hand. I ran to Peter, grabbed his arm, and dragged him until his legs caught up with mine and he began to run on his own. I was yelling Joshua's name. The distance and vast Pacific blue sucked my voice from the air. I was feeling empty already. Empty of the ability to care for my sons, empty of David, empty from pride.

They weren't moving quickly and as I came closer I saw they were talking. Joshua was using his other hand to illustrate a point he was making and the man nodded. The man's head turned repeatedly from the left to the right and Joshua pointed ahead of him to a particular spot. Where were they going? What were they saying? My son was entering into a world of which I had no knowledge and no control. A world influenced by other people, other ideas, other places. He was not a part of me anymore.

Peter ran ahead of all of us, unaware of any potential threat. My hand came down on Joshua's upper arm and I gripped tightly, feeling his small muscle beneath my fingers. He turned quickly toward my grip.

"Is this her?" the man asked Joshua. In that moment I noticed the man's forestry patch and tan-colored shirt. I had been a foolish woman, fearing and not seeing the reality in front of me.

"Mom! Where were you?"

I shook and dropped to my knees, pulling Joshua with me. We both fell awkwardly onto each other and I bumped my chin on his knee, my tongue catching between my teeth.

"Mom, you're bleeding." He cupped his tiny hand under my chin and wiped a finger at the corner of my mouth. His finger was watery red.

"I'm okay, sweetie." I felt my own mouth gingerly, pushing my tongue around in the soft belly of my cheeks. "I'm sorry for falling. Are you okay?"

Joshua was looking off ahead of us and stood up. I had forgotten about Peter and followed Joshua's gaze. Peter was far enough away to look small against the waves. A gathering of people were huddled with him.

"That must be what I came down here for," the ranger said. "We've had report of a most unusual killing." He was the same ranger from the campfire. I remembered his warnings of bears, but not a word about the dangers of the sea. Or the dangers of protective mothers. I pushed myself up and dusted the agate from my knees. A bit of green seaweed stuck to my palm.

We began to walk and I felt comforted and more secure just having another's presence with me. The farther we walked toward Peter and his group, the larger the crushed agate became. Soon it was almost unbearable under my bare feet. I noticed the ranger had on boots and I envied his foresight. As we walked, he talked. He told me more about black bear history. About the good intentions of folks to relocate the bears that had become too human-dependent. They would sedate them and move them deep into the forest. When they came out of their drowsy drugged state, they were lost in a territory unfamiliar to them. Different landscapes, different foods, and other bears. It caused aggression and confusion. Eventually they would find their way back to their own territory and seem to take the aggression out on campers. Then he used the words that were so familiar to me. He said that the whole relocation efforts were "immoral and unnatural." In front of Peter and the circle of campers, I remembered the brown in the tree.

"So strange. They never come down here," said the ranger. He knelt down and people moved aside. Before I could keep him away, Joshua had sidled up to me and saw clearly the bloody mess. The ranger spoke, tilting his head up toward the Pacific edge. "Virtually unheard of. I've never seen it before in my life. He must have fallen from the edge."

I too looked back. I saw the stairs from which we had descended. I knew the trees lying down in death. My eyes followed

my memory back along the jagged edge of land in the direction from which we had come. My travel led me to a darkened tree.

We were all silent. It was clear by the markings that it was an unnatural meeting of territories. A beast from the sea and a beast from the forest.

Back along the ridge path heading toward camp Peter spoke of the lurid death. At one point I declared enough. This was respected for a length of the trail, then Joshua picked up where Peter left off. The black-brown soft fur spread out around the mangled body in chunks, torn by rows of triangular teeth. Under the remaining paws, so delicate in death, lay a gray mass that the ranger said was dorsal fin.

My cell phone vibrated at my side. We were steps from the back of our campsite. I stepped up on the boulder to peer over our thicket wall while the boys ran up the slope. David's feet were comfortably placed on the fire pit. He looked at home. I heard the boys scream "Dad" when they saw his car parked next to mine. David knelt down and braced for the boys' hugs. I stayed fixed as a spy. Maybe he'd experience a moment of fear. Two boys running wild without a mother.

Our tent in the mornings was damp. The broad vine leaves dripped with slug ooze. The campfire smoldered with dew. On the other side of the green thicket of ferns, vines, and flowers, the hundred-foot drop over oceanic basalt waited. The green of insects buzzed with life and lingered long after, touching me in my sleep like a familiar hand.

Harley Elliott

To Recognize Evil

It smells proper
and carries a speech
it has written for God.

Its praise
a decorated rope
and daily bread resentment
evil being evil

lets nothing show
just waits knowing
each has their own appointment.

When it does leap smiling
headlong from the mirror
who will deliver us?

Particle by particle
we make salvation
lined up with the
world all at once.

To know and call it
to account by name
we trust the voices
gathered in our bones.

Mark Bussmann Longitude

Katie waited. She waited in Wanda's Washworks for Evan. In a moment, his low forehead and slick black hair would enter through the swinging glass door. She sat straight in her chair, her hands with neatly trimmed nails touched with gloss folded in her lap. Though she had a washer and dryer in the basement of her apartment, she brought her clothes and a jug of blue detergent to Wanda's.

Overhead, a dizzying array of neon fixtures hanging from a weave of naked plumbing and beams dropped bright light, yet under her feet the just cleaned floor seemed dingy. One washer twirled, ownerless. It was early Tuesday night.

Katie sighed. Her hair, like falling leaves, brown and yellow, tumbled to her shoulders, lifting and settling. Should she start her load? No, Evan would be here soon. She clasped and unclasped her hands and looked around the Laundromat.

The Washworks hopped on weekends, she remembered. Tonight the bank of washers, sunk like a row of office safes in the mahogany paneled wall, were still. Behind her, where the dryers ended, a large-screen television whispered. In the middle of the room was an overstuffed couch and two plump easy chairs, unoccupied, around a squat coffee table covered with books and magazines. Ahead was a tidy, shiny counter where coffee drinks, juices, scones, bagels, muffins, and energy bars were dispensed. No one worked the bar now.

Before Katie could glance at the murmuring television or wander to the Washworks' library, Evan, clutching a red basket of laundry, entered backwards. When he turned, Katie took his basket. They kissed briefly and sat near the television.

"Are you okay?" she said, her hand rubbing his shoulder.

"Yes. How about you?"

"Fine." It was a word she spoke. She knew its meaning, but it held no significance except to be uttered as an offering of belief.

Katie was a St. Mary's parochial school girl. She graduated from Notre Dame High, and she'd left her husband Steve of six years and had lived in an apartment the past two months. It seemed all her life had led toward this evening.

"You'll go first?"

She nodded. She'd said she would. She'd tell Steve, and when she returned to Wanda's, Evan would tell Marni.

"It's nice outside," he said.

She nodded. Perhaps the stars, cottony dollops of light, were out. It was an evening when fall was soon becoming winter.

As she stood, Katie glanced at the television and thought for a moment the woman on the screen who waved her arms parodied her. Then she turned away.

"I'll be back soon."

Evan kissed Katie, let her go, and watched as she crossed the one-way street and was lost in the silken night.

A young woman in faded jeans and a clingy, white, short sleeved top pulled clothes from a washer, and with her back to Evan carried them in a lump to a dryer. She stuffed them in and bounced out the door.

Evan liked Wanda's Washworks. He liked the paneled walls, the smell of coffee—sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet, tonight none at all—and the sound of clothes like surf on a beach. He liked too the roar of televised sports and the drone of an announcer, and people milling and talking, and the light that drooped around his shoes, and the platinum music in this brick-faced urban Laundromat. He wished vaguely they had chosen another night, when the room rocked.

Evan thought of Katie in snapshots: the sway of her back and hips as she left tonight; her jaunt across St. James, a line of smoky glowing taillights in her wake; and now perhaps as she approached Steve. He clicked the camera off, fetched his clothes, and thrust them, with a cup of detergent, into a washer. He slipped his card in and out and set the machine in motion. As it gurgled, he surveyed Wanda's.

Where was Max who worked the coffee bar? He liked Max, wanted to say hello. What else could you do on a night like this? It was last April, an early spring evening, when he'd met Katie. The sun was splotchy bright, nearly lethal, a dazzling patch splashing along the glistening street after a day of rain. He squinted, saw Katie escape through the light, her head afire. He sat by her. They talked. That was seven months ago. He understood briefly what a friend had said at a bar last Saturday: time has no meaning. Seven months, passed. Yesterday. Tonight. Tomorrow.

Evan never sat in the easy chairs or couch that bracketed the reading area. He'd watched others who read, legs crossed, hands searching blindly for coffee, as if they were so engrossed they might never know when their wash was done. He wandered toward the books and magazines scattered on the low table and piled beneath as if he'd pass by. He settled instead on the couch and sorted the glossy periodicals (*Cosmopolitan*, *Woman's Day*, *Self*, *Money*, *Personal Computing*) and bright, richly colored paperbacks (many Danielle Steels, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, and *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*). He chose the Mars and Venus book and paged through it. His eyes wouldn't focus and he saw *Selected Poems of Adrienne Rich*. He thought once in college he'd read her.

Evan peered around the Laundromat, then scooped up the speckled gray book with maroon and black letters. It was slick and heavy, a collection of more than thirty years' work. Thirty years, he thought. Come February he'd be thirty.

He opened the book in the middle so it balanced in his hands, and read three, four poems. He read them randomly, the way he read manuals when he programmed the digital radio in his car or replaced the igniter in the gas oven, as he had last weekend with Marni over his shoulder. What strange words poets write, he thought, what strange thoughts. As if they must say a thing without saying it. What were stelae, anyway? Then he saw with his camera eye Katie and Steve, and they stood like bookends, a row of books between them.

The young blonde returned, examined her clothes, spun them again and left. As Evan looked at the Rich book he could no longer see words and just flipped page after page. He heard his washer quit and moved his clothes to a dryer. As they began to tumble, Katie walked through the door. She smiled, a wan smile in wan light.

"What did he say?"

She looked at him.

"Steve? Not much. He wasn't surprised." Evan thought he should move toward Katie, touch her, but he didn't. He looked away, as he looked away from accidents after glimpsing them. "We have some things to work out, but it went well."

Max strode in. He was taller than Evan, had scrub-brush hair and a paunch under his dusty charcoal T-shirt and jeans.

"Lo."

They nodded, speechless.

Max was accustomed to odd responses, no responses.

"Coffee? Anything?"

"No thanks."

He puttered about the counter, clinking carafes and mugs and spoons while the two dryers spun gray noise, and finally Katie and Evan clasped hands.

"I'll go now," he said.

"Good luck." She spoke as if it were important.

Katie watched him go out the door, felt the brief cool night invade, shivering and waking her, then gathered her laundry bag. She considered leaving, forgetting their pact—she had a washroom at home—but carried the clothes instead to the nearest machine, placed them in article by article, measured the detergent, and as the washer set about its agitating business she was free. She wandered to the couch where she'd seen Evan sit and sat opposite, in a padded chair.

The books and magazines were strewn on the table, and she moved her palm over the surface: what had Evan been reading? She chose *Vegetarian Times*, carrots in a bunch on the cover dripping as if they'd just been misted by the automatic sprays at the market.

Katie liked looking at recipes. As she read the ingredients of carrot-cinnamon soup, orange- and brown-speckled glop crisscrossed with greens, she felt her insides flush, a sickening emotion of dread passing from her throat and chest through her gut and loins, as if casually, without her consent, she were being probed. She dropped the magazine and closed her eyes.

She'd married Steve on a September Saturday afternoon. She'd squinted at the church entrance, remarked down the aisle to her father in non sequitur: *it will be fall soon.* He smiled, nodded, and in a rush, a spray of colors and then days, she and Steve were joined, rented an apartment, parlayed new jobs into a house, sent seasonal greeting cards, and went on Saturdays to other people's showers and weddings.

Steve. He hadn't argued. Not at all.

Katie searched the tabletop. A small book with circle cutouts caught her attention. She wanted to touch it, hold it. Something about longitude. A man in a white powdered wig and below, in his hand, a timepiece. A True Story, it said. Yes, a true story. She unfolded the book as a butterfly dries its wings, as if the whole

day awaited. She wafted through title, contents, acknowledgments, to chapter one. A little girl walked with her father, rode on his shoulders up Fifth Avenue while she carried in her hand a wire toy shaped like a tiny earth. It might have been Katie and her father.

She was drawn into the 18th century saga of John Harrison. Latitude could be determined by measuring the length of the day or the height of the sun at its peak, but determining longitude at sea was an enigma, and without the coordinates of both, one's place in the world couldn't be found. How had Columbus discovered America so many years before? Chance, she thought. So many great minds had failed—Newton, Halley, Thacker—all seeking celestial solutions, that the English Parliament in 1714 tendered a prize of 20,000 pounds to anyone who could solve the conundrum: how to measure longitude at sea.

Katie hardly thought of Evan. She breezed through pages while noticing a twanging music in Wanda's, a bass, then a piano cleaved in. She looked up and Max spoke huskily: "Duke and Mingus on 'Switch Blade', yeah." Katie smiled, noticed her washer had stopped and transplanted the load, shaking out each piece into the dryer. She returned to her still warm chair and resumed.

Harrison, a master carpenter who at age twenty had constructed a frictionless clock with wooden gears and axles, understood by knowing the exact time at two locations—at one's home port and any location at sea—longitude could be calculated. Yet no known clock could maintain time while enduring the rigors of sea: rampant motion, fluctuating temperatures, and damp, salty air.

At twenty-one Harrison set about his task, resolutely alone, seldom seen by anyone, a man possessed, obsessed, the solution a moment away, years and years away. His first attempt was only a few seconds off on a 24-hour-run to Lisbon. The second, commissioned by the Royal Society after the success of the first, was two years in the making and never left harbor. His third clock, radically altered because it transformed bar-shaped balances into circular balance wheels, was a stupendous twenty-year work of labor. A fourth version, further refined, emerged as his masterpiece at age sixty-six.

When Katie looked up she hardly knew the room. It seemed the white whir of dryers, The Talking Heads speaking of a beau-

tiful house and a beautiful wife, Max steaming frothy milk, even an announcer recounting scores, were one streaming voice. The descending, fading light, the traffic shades beyond the green blue window, the cloying scent of coffee and sweet laundry soap, and the viscous air were a black wrap and milky mass swirling about her. She wondered how a man could spend a lifetime dedicated to one task, its improbable success. She was saddened, awed, and then giddy.

Katie turned gracefully as Evan slipped for the second time that evening into Wanda's Washworks. She saw only what she felt, an enormous solace, even deliverance as he stood before her. But when she glimpsed his face, its sorrow, his eyes would not meet hers.

"Evan?"

"Yes."

She took his hand and they sat, sinking a little, on the sofa. "Tell me about it."

"Oh, Katie."

"Was she angry?"

"Yes. But."

The blonde skipped in, said hello to Max, retrieved her laundry, said good night to Max, and went out, her slim clinging top aglow, swallowing all light, radiating only luminous white.

"I told her about us—about you, Katie."

"Okay."

"No, it's not okay."

Still he couldn't look at her. A piano played purposefully in the background, keys struck one note after another as if they had a reason, a knowledge of terrain and destination: they were going, and soon would arrive.

She looked at Evan and he looked mournfully at her. At that moment she knew.

"You're not leaving Marni."

"No."

He continued and spoke sincerely, she supposed, but she didn't really hear, as she didn't hear a couple arguing across a room at a party or a mother disciplining her son in a department store.

Finally he said: "She knew what stelae are." He continued. "They're granite markers, stone tablets, like what the Ten Commandments were written on; they last forever, Katie."

She cried then, and he did too, Max stirring like the music behind them.

Evan took her hands.

"You'll be all right, Katie?"

"Yes."

"You could talk to Steve."

"I already have."

Evan stood, cradling his laundry basket.

"I can help you with your clothes."

"No, I'll be fine."

He wandered to the dryer, and as he piled laundry in his red basket she thought how they had talked so shyly that first time, the chance of her broken washer bringing her to this place, at that moment, how they had returned, one excuse or another, time and again, dismal spring blooming, becoming azure summer, finally distilled fall. *She* had asked him, after their third meeting, if they might fold each other's clothes. It had been a silly request, but somehow important to her.

She looked up as Evan paused before her, they exchanged a glance, and he went out the door, out of her life. She smiled, a little sadly, as his clothes slopped out his basket.

Katie looked toward Max, to see if he had followed their conversation, but his back was turned, juggling CDs. She opened her canvas bag and folded her clothes, sliding them inside. The night, rapturously dark, beckoned and frightened her. She loitered by the coffee table and finally picked up *Longitude*, wanting to read the story to the end, to know, after all those years, what had happened.

"Max, may I take this with me?"

"Sure. Bring back something new next time."

Next time?

"I will, Max."

Katie looked outside and saw her tumbling autumn mane reflected in the window, and beyond, apparitions of Wanda's: washers floating, a figure skating on the television screen, Max peering up into the light. Time for a heartbeat expanded, and for that elongated moment Katie felt improbably sane. Then clutching her book and laundry bag she left, Max behind her still gazing up into the hazy bleached light of Wanda's Washworks.

Stephen Lloyd Webber

The Bells Remind Me to Be Comfortable in Heidelberg

The bells remind me to be comfortable in Heidelberg.
The notes bend before decaying, wisp and smoke
could not allay fears and aren't trying;
I couldn't say they're bronzing the town
though buildings ring back;
someone's being hanged or wed,
webbed, handed something to be taken in.
Here here's a cigar and a cognac
to help you take it in. A seat all to yourself
at a table in the square, this will help
to bring you German dinner to take it all in
bicycling bird, human smell,
the dog wears no clothes, can play no instruments,
may be looking for employment. Enjoyment.

Michael Skau

The Curse

After she left me, I hung
bulbs of garlic on my door
and an *ojo de dios* from the bed-
room lintel and painted
a skull and crossbones
on the telephone and set
a crucifix in my mailbox.

But still I couldn't lose
her: an earring turned up
in the sofa, a hairpin
under the bathroom rug,
a kleenex on the floor of the car,
bloodstains on the mattress pad.

Kathryn Henion

The Cradle Moon

What I want to remember about America is the moon. The night before we crossed, it was shaped like your arms in the photo I carried in that white plastic bag all the way through the desert from Abuelita's house. I'm a baby in the photo and you are cradling me, one arm crossed over the other, hands cupping your elbows, and I'm looking up at you with a gummy smile. I want to believe that it's just like Abuelita said; that the only thing between you and me is earth and sky, and how, if we really think about it, that isn't very much at all. I want to remember me and Mijo and Peta. I don't want to think about the desert or the dirty vegetable truck or the grey walls and men wearing green. I want to remember how even though the moon was half full, a cradle holding stars, it lit the sky an inky blue. No matter how late it got, we could still see America, hills like black cutouts on the horizon, soft arms holding up the sky.

Tio Coyote said it's my fault, because the man wearing green could see how much I missed you. He could see it, Tio Coyote said, all the way from los Estados Unidos. I tried to be good. I followed Tio Coyote. Mijo and Peta and me, we followed him through the desert and on the dirty vegetable trucks. And I was quiet. Even at night when the coyotes howled and my tummy was so empty it hurt to breathe. But I couldn't help it, Mamma. Even when I closed my eyes real tight and tried to swallow you down deep, I couldn't get you past the back of my throat, where it ached and my tongue tasted like metal. And now we're caught at this place without windows in the desert, where the air sits and waits.

The man wearing green puts his hand on my shoulder. "We're not going to hurt you," he says. It stings where his fingers touch my sunburn. I won't let him look in my eyes and see the desert inside. I don't want to go back to the desert or to Abuelita's where I'll miss you even more. Instead I look straight ahead at his belt and the shiny black gun. I've never seen a gun this close before. It makes me think about cowboys on TV and

how they can pull guns from their belts in no time flat and shoot the bad guys dead. I want to hide like we did, Tio Coyote and Mijo and Peta and me, crouched down behind the yucca in the desert. But I try to be good like Abuelita said. I breathe in deep and step one foot in front of the other. Blisters sting between my toes.

Tio Coyote said America means the land of the free. But we're not free. We're caught with a gun. And it's not like los Estados Unidos in your letters. It's so hot still, like home. Except here my skin burns and I always want to sleep. But I have to keep moving if I'm going to see you again. I follow, because I don't know how to find you myself. I hold tight to the plastic bag Abuelita helped me pack, and I follow the man wearing green through a door in a wire fence into a courtyard of tall grey walls and questions, where there's no roof and no wind and the sun cooks everything inside. I follow him to an empty corner where there is a small rock next to a rusty old paint can almost full with cigarettes. He points to the rock and tells me to sit. I don't want to sit there. I can smell the cigarettes. I just stand and look at the pile of burned-out cigarettes in the can. "Go on," he says and pushes me on my back a little with his hand.

When he kneels in front of me, I can see over his shoulder that Mijo and Peta are sitting on a bench against a wall. They are holding hands and kicking up dust with their feet. They are smiling and don't seem scared at all. There is a bald man standing next to them and talking on a cell phone. He's wearing a suit and tie, and he dabs a white cloth against his forehead. Tio Coyote is arguing with another man next to a black door. I wonder if you're behind that door, Mamma, waiting for me on the other side. Waiting for me to pass their test.

The man in green points at Tio Coyote. "Do you know that man?"

"Uncle."

"Uncle what?"

I cough, and wonder if this kind of lying is good or bad.

"Jorgé."

He points his finger at Mijo and Peta.

"And those two?"

"Cousins," I say. My tongue feels dry and splintery, like wood.

"What're their names?"

I tell him and point. "Mijo. Peta." I know I've got it right.

"Where do they come from?"

I can't remember. I look down at my hands holding tight to my plastic bag and hope that it will make me remember the answer. But all I can think of is the photograph of you inside.

I missed you most at bed time. Abuelita would always stroke my hair with her hand and sometimes she'd take me to the window and tell me about the moon. She said how our Mexico meant navel of the moon, the memory of mother and child together, sharing blood. Abuelita said even though we were apart, even if I couldn't see you, just like the moon you'd always be with me.

Abuelita said you left for los Estados Unidos after Papa died. She said you wanted something you couldn't get in Mexico. I was too little then, the trip too dangerous. Hot sun. Hot desert. No place for a baby. You sent short letters on stationery from the hotel where you worked cleaning rooms, and Abuelita sometimes read them to me at night before bed. *Dear Rosa,* you wrote, *I'm sorry to be so far away. I will send for you soon, when I have money. Be a good girl, listen to Abuelita. I am thinking of you. Te amo. Your Mamma.*

I didn't want to go to America by myself. "Oh no," Abuelita said when I asked if she would come too. "I'm too old for all that." She said that's why you sent Tio Coyote, because he lived sometimes in America and he knew how to take me to you safely. And that was why I should follow him. No matter what. Abuelita sniffed then like she had a cold, and went into the bathroom.

Abuelita said I must dress right for where I was going. I thought she meant America. I didn't understand when she said it would be very hot and cold in the same day. She said jeans would protect me from prickly plants and sunburn, and she gave me a sweater for the night. She let me take the pink t-shirt with ruffled sleeves that you sent from America. I wanted you to see how much I like the gifts you sent. Abuelita emptied a white plastic market bag and put in some tortillas, a banana, and two bottles of water. She said I could also take some things from my room, but not too much or the bag would be too heavy. I put in some purple hair bands, a stuffed kitten I got for my fourth birthday, and a little book to fill with pictures. Abuelita said I could take the picture of you and me that I had in my room on

my mirror. In the picture you are wearing a yellow dress with small blue flowers. We are so happy.

Tio Coyote came to Abuelita's house in a rusty blue car with plastic bags for door windows. He chewed on a toothpick that rolled between his lips when he talked, and his face was dark and hard looking, like avocado skin. He had a long pink scar that cut across one of his eyebrows making two bushy pieces that reminded me of fuzzy caterpillars.

"This man is going to take you to your Mamma," Abuelita said. "You must do what he says."

"This all she has?" Tio Coyote pointed to the plastic bag in my hands. I nodded. "Bueno. Vamos."

"Be a good girl, Rosa." Abuelita hugged me hard. "Te amo."

"Te amo, Abuelita."

Of course I was scared to leave, but I didn't cry then. I couldn't wait to see you. On the back seat of Tio Coyote's car there was a boy and a girl. They looked a little older than me.

"Mijo and Peta," Tio Coyote said. He squeezed my arm then, hard enough that it made me look up at him. "Your cousins."

I didn't know I had cousins.

"And I'm your uncle. Uncle Jorgé. Can you remember that?"

I thought about that for a second, and then nodded.

"Bueno," he said, and then gave me a little push toward the car.

The girl, Peta, gave me her hand and helped me get up on the seat. "Tio Coyote's going to take us to America," she said.

"Coyote?" I didn't understand.

"Papa called him that," Mijo said. "But we're meant to call him Tio. So we can get into America."

"So we can see our parents again," Peta said.

Of course I wanted that.

"He said it isn't lying because at the end, once we cross the border, we'll be just like family."

Tio Coyote drove us to a gas station out in the middle of nowhere and told us to pick out something to eat. We each got a cherry popsicle and some banana chips while Tio Coyote talked to a woman in polka-dot pants and high heels he called Sally. He kissed her real sloppy on the lips and handed her the car keys and then she drove off in Tio Coyote's car. When we finished our popsicles, Tio Coyote made us give him the sticks

and said we might need them later. I had no idea what he meant by that. We followed him around back of the gas station, and then he turned and told us to stay together and to do what he said. And then we walked.

We walked and walked, and sometimes we'd ride. We'd ride in the back of trucks, behind boxes of fruits and vegetables. It was always squished and sour-smelling in those trucks, like sweat and gas. We couldn't eat any of the food, even though we were so hungry. "They look for that," Tio Coyote said slapping Mijo's hand. Sometimes we'd whisper to the other Coyotes and children traveling the long road to America, but mostly we sat quiet behind crates, watching the cracks of sunlight where the truck door rattled against its bed.

When we walked, Tio Coyote said we had to be invisible. We put heavy cloth over our shoes, tied with string around our ankles, so no one would see our feet on the ground. And we had to be quiet, like the desert. Especially at night when we slept in itchy coffee sacks next to cacti and rocks. I crawled deep inside my coffee sack and cried without making a noise. But there was no Abuelita to stroke my hair, and sometimes there was no moon in the sky. I worried about scorpions buried in the sand and hungry coyotes howling. In the morning my mouth was always dry and my hair was filled with sand.

I worried about my empty tummy and about how long I could go without letting it show. Peta cried a lot about her tummy until Tio Coyote got mad. "There's plenty to eat," he said, and Mijo and I looked around when he said that. Tio Coyote pulled a popsicle stick from his coat pocket and put it in his mouth. Then he dragged the wet stick on the ground until it was covered with bits of dirt and he held the stick out to Peta. She didn't move when he grabbed her and pried open her fingers and put the popsicle stick in her hand so that the part of the stick with the dirt on it stuck out. He told her to eat. Peta looked really scared then, but she knew she had to do it. The stick came out clean and Peta swallowed with her face all scrunched up, and then she looked at the ground. Tio Coyote walked away and told Mijo and me to follow. I wanted to help Peta like she helped me into the car, but I didn't want to make Tio Coyote mad. So I followed instead. Behind us, Peta coughed.

I got so tired, Mamma. But I kept walking. I thought about how the ground stretched out into the distance, like Abuelita

showed me on the map. I thought about how each step made a little ripple that traveled like a wave and connected me to you. No matter what buildings or walls or gates people put up, there was always a way underneath or over, or through. Abuelita said it was true because that's how my letters reached you.

But the man wearing green was looking for us. There was a cactus with a red flower and Tio Coyote said we were in America and Mijo and Peta hugged. I just stared at the ground, at my dusty sneakers next to the wire line cutting the ground in half, thinking America didn't look that much different from Mexico. The ground was covered with the same small stones of different colors and sizes and bugs wriggling in between. But it felt good to be where you are and so I set down my plastic bag and stretched my arms toward the blue sky. And there between my hands was the moon, see-throughy white, like a ghost. That's when it finally felt real, Mamma, that I might see you again, and I felt bigger. My tummy didn't ache so much and I breathed in deep and long. But the air was still, like a held breath. And that's when the man wearing green saw us.

The man wearing green smells sour like onions, and there's a fly crawling on his neck. "Look," he says, "there's no use lying. We've met your Uncle Jorgé before."

I know it's a trick. Tio Coyote told us so in the car on the way to the desert. He said America doesn't want us. Only Mexicans born in America are allowed to stay, because their mammas ate and drank American food and breathed American air. He said that's why we had to pretend we had America inside, because the men wearing green would try to trick us. So I stay quiet just like I did in the desert so the man wearing green won't see. He puts his hand on my shoulder again and squeezes and pulls me forward so my face is close to his. I won't look in his eyes. I look at his fat red earlobe instead.

"Your mother made a very bad decision."

I want to cry when he says your name.

"Lucky you got this far," he says. Then he says something I can't hear and waves to the man in the suit by Mijo and Peta. Except now their bench is empty. Maybe they passed their tests and went through the black door. Or maybe the man in green sent them back into the desert. I look up for the daytime moon, but all I can see is the sun so round and fat it takes up the entire sky.

The man in the suit comes over, dabbing his forehead with the white cloth. When the man wearing green walks away, his black leather boots kick up dust. It makes me cough. I feel dizzy, and my arms are heavy. I let my plastic bag slide down to the ground beside me. The man in the suit hands me a new white cloth like the one he dabbed on his forehead. I take it, Mamma, because I want to hide my eyes.

"I'll get you some water," he says and then walks away.

I put my face into the cloth and press it up against my eyes and my cheeks. It's the softest thing I've felt for so long, soft like in my bed at Abuelita's house. But when I pull the cloth away, I find something awful. On the white square there's a little American flag sewn into the corner, and in the middle is a smeared brown shape with lighter spots where eyes and mouth go, and some patches of red and speckles of black. It's me there on the cloth, and all those days and nights in the desert. Right there for the man in the suit to see. Before he can, I scrunch the cloth up in my hands and put it in my white plastic bag.

When the man in the suit hands me the small paper cup, I close my eyes and drink. It feels so good going down.

"All right," he says, "time to get you home."

I reach down beside me for my plastic bag, but it's gone. And then I see that the man in the suit has it, and I know he's tricked me. He took it when I was drinking his little cup of water. I know his home for me isn't in America with you and I know he's going to take me away from you. I can't breathe and my face feels hot. Then someone screams. The man in the suit jumps back.

It's you, Mamma. You rush out from the back of my throat and spill over my teeth into the courtyard. You splash up over the walls so that everyone in America can hear. You scream loud and high and long. Something inside makes me run toward the man in the suit. When I jump, I close my eyes and reach with my hands for my bag. But then I'm kicking air, and the man in green has me in his arms so tight I can barely move.

"Stop it!" he says, "No one's going to hurt you."

He says it again and again. But he *is* hurting me, Mamma. The prickly hairs on his chin scrape my forehead when I try to wriggle out, and his hands on my arms are like sandpaper. I bite down hard into the soft part under his arm. When I hit the ground, my elbow hurts a lot and there's grit and salt in my mouth.

Everything is fuzzy, but there are sounds. There are men's voices shouting, and then a blur running past me kicking up dust. More heavy feet follow. I cover my head with my hands because I think they're going to step on me. Boots on gravel, shouting and a loud clank of wire fencing, steps running away and then back toward me. I lift my head a little and see Tio Coyote running fast, away from the men wearing green. But he doesn't see me, Mamma, and he's going to run right over me, so I get up and I run too. I run as fast as I can, across the stones and the spindly grass patches toward the black door.

Except just as I'm about to reach the door, Tio Coyote knocks right into me. At the same time there's yelling—"Stop!"—and a loud sound like a hammer hitting rock. The gun, Mamma, the men wearing green trying to shoot me dead because I didn't pass their test. I feel the sharp pain in my side as I'm falling. From the ground I see Tio Coyote opening the black door fast and slamming it loud against the wall. I try to see if you are there behind that door, Mamma, inside, but there is only more darkness in the place where Tio Coyote disappears and some men wearing green follow. I want to follow too, but I am so tired and it's hard to move. I try to get up. My side hurts and it's getting hard to breathe. Dust and shadows in my eyes, the men wearing green moving around me, one of them is yelling for a doctor. There are hands all over, and a wet feeling beneath me. Something tears. It's my shirt, Mamma, the one you sent from America. They're tearing it off to see what's inside, Mexico or America. I shut my eyes to see what they might find. In the dark inside my head, I see the moon.

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Cottonwood
ISSN 0147-149X
$8.00