2006

Small People Want a Big World (collected stories)

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Small People Want a Big World (Collected Stories)

Matt VanderMeulen

Thesis submitted to the
Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

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Morgantown, West Virginia
2006

Keywords: Blue Collar, Fear, Gothic, Isolation, Dreams, Landscape, Escape, Sexual, Boundaries
ABSTRACT

Small People Want A Big World (Collected Stories)

Matt VanderMeulen

This collection explores the realms of fear in the real and gothic landscapes of the living. The characters, isolated by both social class and personal choice, find themselves defined by single events in which they must face their greatest fears. Some embrace it, some run from it. In pursuing their desires, they realize that desires exist merely because there is a void to fill, and it is this filling of the void which has been their driving force. These voids, however, are dark, empty places which occupy a subtle, outward presence in real life, but are, to many, best left unexplored.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


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Preface

Perhaps too focused on publishing, I’ve often found myself writing under the question: what makes a story? I’ve come to realize that I feel at my best when I’m writing for the pleasure of writing, as opposed to trying to produce a finished product for an audience. The reading lists throughout my three years at WVU have taught me much, mainly the difference between art and craft, the difference between writing and plot construction. While I’ve been told that I’m a poet in denial (both a compliment and criticism, and I must say I’ve never been told this by a poet), I do not wish to write poems. Rather, I wish to show moods evolve and change through a character’s day to day life, through his/her reactions to, and interpretations of, external events.

I feel my failures have been largely due to poor mood and emotional development within my characters. I often do not adequately qualify their changes, leaving readers wanting more definition, more
specific motives for character action. Though much of this can be accomplished through their actions and reactions to external events, I also attempt to better locate the single events which speak to the mood of their whole lives, and allow for an adequate interpretation thereof. My use of summary backstory has often been insufficient in accomplishing the character development I’m striving for, perhaps a reason for my anti-backstory stance in workshop. For what I seek to accomplish, backstory is rarely necessary, but rather should be inferred through the present situation. I’ve attempted this past year to write short shorts as a means of “finding the story” in what I write. This is not because, as I’ve feared, I’m trying to force mere language into the story form. It is because there are stories I wish to tell in which a character’s desire to fill the void supercedes any outward desire. While this may always be the case in “literary fiction,” my hope is to emphasize that it is always the case in real life. Outward “plot desires” are interchangeable. It does not matter if the character wants another person, a job, drugs, or a graham cracker. It is what’s missing around which the best stories revolve. My goal is to make this the outward desire, to bring it to the surface. It seems my characters often want things that do not exist.

Being overly craft conscious has been a detriment to my goals. I’ve spoken with my English 111 class about the difference between writing and crafting, and learned quite a bit in being forced to articulate what I mean to beginners. In attempting to do nothing more than construct a
plot, it is easy to lose sight of what’s important, of the inspiration that
began the story. Maybe nothing outwardly has to happen to flesh out a
change. This is not to say that elements of craft do not play an integral
role, quite the opposite, but which elements? I wonder if I often times
condense all elements of craft down to two things: plot development as
defined by the rising action-climax-resolution arc; and character
development in terms of providing the factual information necessary to
make sense of a character’s motives. Characters, however, may also
develop in how they interpret the imagery and people around them, in
how their actions develop mood and build their emotions, and it is this
mood development for which I most often need to hold my writing
accountable. Summary scenes can be largely inadequate.

I’ve gone back to the basic notion of audience. At the New York
Summer Writers Institute, Lee K. Abbott mentioned a certain writer (I
don’t remember his name) who wrote every story for “the woman on the
bus.” I’ve taken this to heart, this ordinary working woman with no time
or want for bullshit. If stories have no place with her, why write them?
And what exactly is it about any work of literature that speaks to her? It
is not character or plot development that merely provide information. It
is the filling of the void, not obtaining the object, to which she can relate.
Stories are worth her time because she knows the feeling, not the
lifestyle or events. “Where the Light Drops Out,” for instance, a story
which at one point exceeded 6,500 words (about 1,500 in its current
form), I had envisioned as a possible novella under the notion that the woman on the bus would understand the futility of a life’s worth of events and actions. This is precisely what inspired me to chisel it down. It is not the chronological listing of the actions to which she would relate. Instead, it is only that feeling of futility, interspersed with moments of hope and fear, from which she would take something. Only that was important to this piece. Even if she does not believe in complete futility, she would know the feeling.

I’ve been fascinated, as a writer, how changes occur within us in an instant. Pushed by the force of a lifetime’s experience, there are moments of change that appear to happen almost spontaneously. Shifts in attitude, outlook, and mood that alter our direction; perhaps “waking up on the right side of the bed.” These moments have texture, a body, which the reading lists these past three years have shed much light on. These writers (Ann Carson, Christine Schutt, Michael Ondaatje, Randall Kenan, etc.) seem to write for the love of the art, not the love of constructing a plot, though, inevitably, that happens.

I could not say with honesty that I have a love of fear; however, I do have an inclination that life might be driven by it. I think my characters operate under a fear of everything: of not filling voids, of not mattering, of isolation, of smallness, etc. Some embrace its pure power, some are overwhelmed by it. It is my hope that the narrators have captured this fear, in all its forms, through voice.
At the risk of sounding more artsy than I care to, my narrators seem to have an understanding of the characters that I do not. I have come to realize that it is voice that inspires me to write, and a large portion of my mental efforts are devoted to understanding why the narrators tell these stories the way they do, why the phrase sometimes seems more important than the action. Largely, the narrators seem to understand that these people tremble and scream, but do not provide much insight into what specifically may have caused it. It is never one specific event. There is a lifetime of experience driving every choice. They seem to feel that what drives the characters is not something, necessarily, to define, but something to be sensed through the way the story is told. In this way I guess I do not believe there are stories that need to be told; rather, there are voices that need to be heard. In “Marlo,” for instance, I feel I have a series of events that are leading somewhere; however, I have not found the voice to tell it, leaving the story, I believe, somewhat flat and lacking purpose.

My characters are, I believe, in fear of (or running from) their small worlds, their own bones of their own construction. Perhaps what I hope to accomplish is a panoramic view of fear in all (well, some) of its manifestations, or a circular scope of it with no beginning and no end.
Hassettville (The Beautiful Ones)

This is where we play our death games:

Twenty-one white stuccoes lined up along Highway 17, all chopped up into four apartments and surrounded by cornfields. Through the curtain threads it’s the third-shifters walking home in the sunrise, straddling the side of the highway dark as shadows. The cat-eyed boy, Eddie, and Aunt Donna the retard out front with their heads hung, twenty or thirty others grouped up behind them kicking up a low smoke of gravel dust. Them clowning, push somebody into the road when a truck comes then pull him back. Nicks of time.

Eddie keeps the sun beaten curtains closed because he likes to hide me. A silhouette daughter in nowhere. Behind them my brain playing an uneasy mix, the tinny shriek of train wheels and carousels,
children sweet screaming and laughing off barbed wire. Waiting. In my reflection off the butcher blade I’m lanky and fish scaled in freckles, natty orange hair to my waist and a twisted tooth, breasts too large for a fifteen-year-old falling off the edges.

Eddie gets home from the factory a pressure valve, veins like hot blue pipes in his neck. Kicks a loose square of linoleum across the kitchen floor so it smacks in the corner. I just glued it last night, didn’t take. He’s giant fat with fists like sheetrock and has crowds cheering in his head. Six-thirty in the morning and he doesn’t look at me mashing potatoes and chopping onions. He bends over the sink, his big frame wrapped in flab, and washes his face with his hands over and over, runs them over his bristly head and over-sized ears, his neckfolds. He’s got a red and white checkered shirt on him tight that makes it look like his back exploded. He hates Mom, would bust me open for going to see her.

“I’m goin to Mom’s before school,” I say.

“Shut the fuck up,” from under his breath.

He wipes off with the kitchen towel and slumps at the table like a sack of flour, staring out to our section of the front porch. Next door, Aunt Donna’s twin boys jump and scream, rattle the banisters. Upstairs, the cat-eyed boy has his Frampton on too loud. Eddie doesn’t move, chin on his fists.

I set dinner in front of him, a mound of mashed potatoes with sour cream, butter and onions, two salisbury steaks from the freezer and
sardines in hot sauce for dessert. He cuts the meat with his fork and dips it into the potatoes, flops it around with his tongue, swallows and repeats, staring at his plate. I could split him up the spine with one cold stroke before he knew what happened. I picture the bloodless blubber of a blue whale. Eddie used to be a football star.

When it’s ninety degrees outside it’s a hundred and ten in the factory and they open the doors so you can see the workers burning up in their denims and plaids, their arms up and down like levers. A recycling factory now that used to make Tupperware. They dump pop bottles into the chipper and melt them down through a plumbing of pipes. Mom drove a forklift before she got out. She didn’t take me or Eddie or Aunt Donna with her. She could’ve taken all of us.

Eddie wears fire-proof gloves and scrapes molten plastic off the filter screens with a putty knife. When the plastic hardens on his gloves he smashes them up on the floor with a hammer and peels off the plastic piece by piece. Every ten minutes or so, he cleans the screens again. He’s teaching the cat-eyed boy this. They let Aunt Donna drive the forklift. I almost never stop at the factory anymore.

“Gonna want any more?” He doesn’t answer. That means no. He stomps to the bathroom and pisses hard. When he turns the faucet on you can hear the slow strokes, hear him moan. I scrape the pans with the spatula and scrub the butcher blade shiny.
Eddie says Mom stepped too far out in the road one night and there was nobody to pull her back. An accident. Just out wandering, he says. Truck driver, whoever it was, never knew. Sheriff said she must’ve got caught in the undercarriage because they found pieces of her strung down the highway for a good ten miles. What was left fit in a lunch bag.

In my bedroom I shut the door and open the curtains to the cornfield. Aunt Donna’s twins crouch at the window with their red burned noses on the sill, trying to catch me changing clothes or talking in the mirror. Aunt Donna has no front teeth and her mouth pushed over to the left side of her face. She says Eddie “coulda gotta shootball shcoolarship ish shombody ever showed hish girl howta yoosh a diashragm right.” She likes her nipples to show through a sweaty tee shirt.

I turn on the classic rock station and lie down like I’ll sleep, hear the twins scurry into the cornfield. Janis Joplin’s on the radio. She speaks to me, the throaty rasp, the quiet shy girl with the heart of a rabid dog. It’s like I know her, like we’re friends. But it fizzles away in ash fall and sharp lights. I could break the window and slash myself open with the glass, or with the butcher blade right there in front of Eddie.

Some time between World War II and Korea when the fall harvest was over, Hassett’s father, carnival manager Hubert Hassett and his
midget General Stonewall Stump, both dressed like MacArthur down to
the pipe, showed up on the doorstep of farmer Dalton Banks and pitched
him their idea for a freak village. Said Banks could have twenty percent
of the profits and a key to the “city.”

“Like a Christmas village,” Hassett said. “Only different.”

Banks was old and lonely, looking to leave something behind him,
but he wasn’t so much a businessman as he was smart about soil—freak
shows traveled to the people, not vise versa. At the thought of a year-
round Christmas, he sold Hassett what he thought was only a chunk of
his farm for pennies. The first thing to get by him was that carnies were
swindlers. The second thing was that Hubert Hassett grew up on a farm
not a hundred miles south and knew his own share about soil. The
third thing was that freak shows were all but dead and Tupperware had
just been invented.

The bus comes at eight and the thought makes me shiver. Field
trip to the museum, pointing fingers, the bag lunch smell of tuna fish
and bananas. Chatter chatter chatter. A rosy cheeked counselor in
sundress and sandals telling me about co-op at the factory. “Job
training,” she says. “Never too early to start thinking.”

“I’m not a fuckin retard,” I say. I could take her with my bare
hands.
She wants to play psychologist, to know what it’s like to be one of them. But unlike Janis I don’t wear my heart on my sleeve. No tattoos. No patches on my clothes. My heart is mine and you can’t have it. You can’t even look at it.

The cat-eyed boy is colored strange like from an oil painting, dark hair spilling out down his head, his face and chest. When the air’s thick with water, he smears. He’s on his second round as a high school senior and training under Eddie at the factory. Nobody lives in the other apartment.

The cat-eyed boy, Eddie and Aunt Donna are going to the bar. From my bedroom window I can hear the slow crunch of gravel under their boots, see their figures teetering on the roadside. I slide the butcher blade into my jeans at the hip and hurry up into the cornfield. I’m going to Mom’s.

Eddie’s got a look on his face like the one in the picture. I dug it out of a box in his closet one day underneath his old football jersey and high school diploma. Eddie and Mom straight lipped and squinting in the lawn of the little paste church. It looks cold out, sky of gun-metal. Mom’s in her wedding dress with her orange hair tied up in back and a loose lock cutting her face. She’s got a lump nose and a long chin, her stomach blown out like a pumpkin, holding the bouquet on top of it, on top of me. Eddie’s shirt is unbuttoned at the top for his neck fat and his
tie's wind flapping, his hands in his pockets. They're leaning away from each other, make a sharp V.

Aunt Donna’s twins scurry behind me jumping between the rows. They whip rocks through the stalks and one hits me sharp between the shoulders. I pull out the butcher blade and run at them. Walking in the walls of corn you can see the flickers of ruby sun and clouds shaped like finger bones. You can hear the rocks crackle through like fire, stalks snapping, semis gushing by and away. Running, you have to duck your head and keep the blade up in front of you because the leaves hit heavy and sharp. If you fall you'll bust through the wall and they'll have you. The little ones are swifter at it, can jump between the stalks and hide so you have to follow their sound. When you pass them they get you from behind. That’s why you run at them. They’ll turn your back to cowhide, but they won’t face you up close.

When the farmhands complained, Banks went out and saw for himself the pinheads, fatheads, stick people and hairy dwarves wheezing around his land with two-by-fours and hammers. No Hassett in sight. When he found out from the construction foreman that Hubert Hassett had sold most of the land to a plastics company, he finally went into town and saw a lawyer who told him he’d sold away all his rights to the farm. Hassett had left his carnies for laborers and they had plans to ship in more from another factory and build them all housing to rent
from Hassett himself. It took three farmhands pinning Banks down on
his porch to keep him from taking his rifle to the whole construction
crew.

I climb out of the corn at the bar, a paint-peeled brick building
with a dented steel door and one white neon sign, **OPEN**. It’s between
The Little General’s Store and the Hassett Farm Seed Company, about a
hundred yards south of the huge gray factory and a hundred yards north
of our place. Past the factory’s the church and if you know your way
through the cornfield you can find the house Hubert Hassett left behind.
His son kept the slate roof, replaced the wood fence with brick when his
daughters were born. The younger sits on the balcony above the pear
tree and reads her prep school books, curling her raspberry hair through
her fingers. Her eyes drip and sparkle beads because her sister’s dead.
Hassett himself doesn’t come out anymore.

They don’t see me stretched in the warped window, framed in
chipped white wood. A rock skips up into my calf like a needle. Eddie
shovels peanuts into his mouth and stares at the bowl, his ass hanging
over the stool on both sides, cubes of light from the windows slashing
through. He doesn’t talk to anybody. Eddie the football star. Eddie the
high school graduate. *Ed-die! Ed-die!* It’s mostly pit-faced men playing
pool. Skynard’s on the juke box. The cat-eyed boy leans his head over
the bartop with his hands around a beer bottle. Eddie raises his head
lazy toward the window and I duck down with my nose on the sill. Aunt Donna shoves the whole neck of a bottle into her mouth without opening her lips and pulls it out, shows a black smile. The pit-faced men hoot and jump around at her. Eddie trumpets his nose into a napkin and shovels more peanuts. A rock hits the wall beside my head. I pick up a sharp one and wing it into the cornstalks hard as I can. The butcher blade shifts on my hip.

When Eddie, Mom and Aunt Donna were sixteen they were shipped out to the Benton schools every morning. For Eddie’s football uniform the coach had to have his wife cut the backs out of two jerseys and sew them together. Eddie was number 72 on the front, 73 on the back. His helmet only made it to the top of his ears and had to be strapped on under his chin with loops of medical tape. He couldn’t run for shit, but it took half the defense to pile on before he’d go down. The other coaches said the carnie freaks shouldn’t be allowed to play, that it was unfair like playing against real Bears.

The day after Eddie won the Single A state championship his senior year, Hassett Jr. brought his wife and two baby daughters out and grilled hot dogs and corn on the cob out front of the seed company. The workers got an extra hour for lunch. Aunt Donna says she ate twelve hot dogs and bit into a General’s star in one of them, but if you ask her what a General’s star is she runs away. The workers got drunk and started shooting their guns off like fireworks and wouldn’t go back to work.
Hassett locked himself and his family in the seed company. By the time the sheriff got there, the party’d moved out into the highway and caused a convoy of trucks to stall out. While everyone was scattering into the open field Mom found Eddie behind the church and climbed on top of him for the first time.

I make a new game walking the white line on the side of the highway like a tightrope. One foot leads another, traffic on one side drainage ditch the other. A semi blows by and makes my shirt flap. My head gets heavy in the heat and drags on the road, tires blasting dust into my eyes. I leave a red mark all the way down to the church, to the iron fence around the graveyard. The rocks landing behind me now. The twins can’t keep up.

Dalton Banks spent a year or so holed up in his house, which he now rented from Hubert Hassett, peeking from behind the shades. There was rape and incest by the shipped-in workers, carnies screaming, but what bothered Banks most was the graveyard, the makeshift plywood boxes for people who couldn’t even dress themselves much less do heavy labor. Not even tombstones. And the sheriff wouldn’t do anything about it so long as the holes were dug far enough beneath the frost line. One morning Banks snuck out into the cornstalks and for their own sake gunned down five of the remaining carnies and blew his own throat through the back of his neck. Hubert Hassett built a new house on the
property and moved his family in. Nobody knows what happened to General Stump.

I undress and lay myself out over the grass where Mom’s buried, fling my hair out in a giant fan fire. Ever lay naked on your mother’s grave? You can feel her pull, taste her in the grass blades. The sun makes my eyelids a red backdrop. Light sparkles. Rain falls. I grab the grass and let myself sink in, dent the earth in the shape of my body.

The twins scurry away when the cat-eyed boy shows up smelling like beer and old smoke, but they’ll be back. If we let them watch us they won’t tell. Eddie’d bust us both open if he found out, but we never mention that. We never mention anything. He leaves his boots at my feet and slips from his clothes. He likes to pace back and forth bare naked and get himself up till he drips from the tip.

The first time he was dry as sand and we kept our clothes on. After the harvest when the fields are stubble the sky goes flat gray and the workers button up their jean jackets and walk in huddles. I was outside my window at the edge of the field thinking of one of the Hassett daughters, but I don’t remember which one. He tried it from behind, had me around the shoulders and waist rubbing himself on me through our jeans and trying to wrestle me down. I nearly scratched his left eye out. He buckled over with his hands cupped on that one eye like he was trying to stop it from falling out and I knelt in front of him and punched
him once in the gut, watched him lay there trying to get his breath back. He dry gagged and I ran my hand down his chest into his jeans. He was still hard. Getting someone off when they can’t breathe turns them bright red and their muscles go tight as rope. He had my head squeezed in the crook of his arm and nearly bit my ear off.

He kneels between my stubbled thighs now, his hands caked in plastic scratching on my hips, putting himself in deep. His eyes make the high whine of August suns, the light fading in and out, in and out, the yellow heat into you. Our bodies are oil slick and we’re sucking at each other and we’re the beautiful ones.

His eyes fall, and he cums cums cums.

You can hear the combine getting closer and the factory grinding. Two years ago the cat-eyed boy’s father was in the field with the older Hassett daughter and tried to beat the combine. By the time he rolled off her all they got a chance to do was watch the header take them in eagle-spread. Hassett stopped when he felt the grinding and said he assumed something had got caught in the snap rolls, but when he got out to have a look and saw his daughter, it was him running in place and grabbing at his hair saying Oh shit Oh shit. It took the paramedics two hours to pull the bodies out. You could hear the bones tear.

The twins are walking the railing on the front porch when I get home and jump off when they see me. When I was little I was them,
would stalk behind the bigger kids to where they did their business. You throw rocks when they see you because they say they’re gonna kill you. After a while if you keep your mouth shut they stop saying they’ll kill you and pretend you’re not there because you probably saw them cheating or fucking some jailbait. If the combine’s closer than they think, you keep quiet. Some time after you saw them fucking they get married at the church and work at the factory, or the seed company. After the harvest, people shut their doors. Nobody’s ever at the graveyard.

Aunt Donna lives in heat and cum water, her pants dark like a piss stain an hour into the shift. She knows to point the forks down, to keep them two inches from the ground, to beep twice around corners. She raises them to eye level to straighten them out, can slide them into the pallets without touching wood, tilting the bins of white pellets back, sometimes they spill like snow. Some of the truck drivers know her and wave. She blushes and shakes her hair, lowering the pallets onto their truck beds, pushing them into each other, two rows of eight. In the parking lot a white moon rolls over and she can open it up for a stretch, smile at wind in her gums. She bounces hard over pebbles and slows at the bay, strokes the steering wheel like a horse’s mane. *Eeeeeeashy, girl.* The drivers come all night, in and out from some vague place of big voices and smiling orange lit faces. She doesn’t know their names, but in the beams of their headlights they show her pictures of green mountains and red walls of rock she doesn’t comprehend. One brings her salt water
taffy, another—jars of cherry jam in cloth and ribbons. She giggles and unties the ribbons, wipes the squares of cloth over her face. Then holding her wrist out for him to tie bracelets. “We’re married,” she says and opens the throttle up. Her chest out. The wind sings.

I glue the tile again and wash Eddie’s dishes, the cutting board worn and stained dark in the middle. I slide the blade from my hip and hold it under the water till it shines. Turn it back and forth to shoot reflections across the ceiling. I put the point to my forearm and drag it backward, making a white scratch up to my bicep and back down to the middle of my palm. I put it in my backpack and eat a can of sardines. Lick the hot sauce off my fingers and work my tongue into the corners of the can.

In front of the seed company the cat-eyed boy and me wait for the high school bus to come up the highway from the west, from McComb, Benton, and Spencer Sharples. Eddie doesn’t hear anything you say because he’s got the crowds cheering in his head. The cat-eyed boy used to walk in the open field when the sky went flat and sit cross-legged on top of Hassett’s brick fence, would stare at the younger daughter above the pear tree. She didn’t say anything for a long time, staring back and curling her raspberry hair, wiping at her cheek. He never set foot in their yard.

He sits next to me on the bus and turns his legs into the aisle, showing me his back. The counselor shouts roll over the matted-hair
kids. They don’t bother taking us all the way out to school for homeroom first, figure the less time to wake up the less trouble at the museum. I stare out the window, a forty-five minute ride where the clouds are higher than the sun and in the thin sheet of dust they turn purple. I press my fingers to the glass and touch my tongue to it. I hear the snickering and feel the eyes on me as I pull away, my lips imprinted in my breath on the window. The corn turns into woods and the woods into rusted homes of the outer city, the outer city to inner, punks with chafed pierced faces and warehouses with the windows knocked out.

We pass it, **State Mental Hospital**, a beige cement block building with chicken-wired windows and a chain link fence around the playground. The patients walk in circles in their white outfits grabbing their hands at the air with their heads cocked up, wrenched faces chewing fat tongues. The bus slows at a stoplight and I make eye contact with a mussed up silver-haired man standing still, his hands stuffed in his pockets pointing his forehead at me, a smile from his chest slicing me wide open. Monkeys in a cage.

The cat-eyed boy stares straight ahead darting his eyes like seeing things for the first time, the buildings turning from mortar to steel and mirrors, gold, dark suits and ties, women like peacocks. A couple weeks after his father and the older Hassett girl got shelled by the combine, the sheriff showed up at his place saying he needed to stop bothering the Hassettts at night. “Trespassing,” the sheriff said. “And they’re grieving.
They lost their daughter,” he said. The cat-eyed boy stood in the doorway with his shirt off. All you could see was his nose sticking out from his hair. The sheriff did all the talking. “She said she could see your eyes from the balcony. Said it had to be you.” Later that night he tried to get me from behind.

After the street party the plastics company and Hassett shipped out everybody who didn’t come back to work and shipped in new ones. Mom went to the factory and got to drive the forklift because she was pregnant. She taught Aunt Donna enough of it to get her certified. She told Aunt Donna she could never get Eddie off no matter how hard she tried, but Hassett she sure could, and there’s a right way and a wrong way to use a diaphragm.

We march around the museum single-file with headphones and tapes, the counselor in her sundress following us. A Van Gogh exhibit, that’s why we’re here. Flowers and stars. In the other rooms there’s stone statues with chunks bitten out of them, a mummy under glass, ancient weapons, swords with carved bone handles, metal-mesh armor, some stuffed shirt in my headphones explaining Vincent to me. I unfocus my eyes on one of the paintings, a wild swirling collage like water. The cat-eyed boy reaches out for one, wants his fingers in the paint grooves, to touch the murky, to go home. The counselor slaps his hand and motions us forward.

I grab him by the arm. “Let’s run.”
We’d be swallowed up among the millions in the open air. Hop some freight train, eat from garbage cans, sleep in alleys and under bridges, in youth hostels. I’m not afraid of those kids. I’m not afraid of crime, I’m not afraid of the police, I’m not afraid of being cold, I’m not afraid of being hungry, and I’m not afraid of you. If I tore open my skin and let you drink me, what would you expect to taste? The red sweet flavor of the little girl hidden inside? I’m the beautiful you didn’t know about. If you drank my blood you’d die.
Inhabiting Wastelands

Jacob at fifty, but older than that by insomnia, was all the way back by the wooded windbreak that marked the edge of their property when the heat rolled in, was breaking up the soil with a spade-fork, still planting the first round of three hundred trees he’d promised Marie he’d get done in a month, before she died away.

He’d heard of heat lightning, of summer storms, but not that would burn holes in him. It was like a sun rain. Couldn’t even look up from the dirt. Their barn in the distance looked to be in boiling water. In the periphery the flat landscape flapped like streamers. He thought of high school, of the orange ball of lava on the cover of his science book and something called a solar wind or solar flare. The photosphere. When the boy was learning manwords.

He dropped the spade-fork and went for the windbreak, his head down. The fifteen acres cracked in squares peeling up at the edges. He took it slow, watching his boots slap the packed dirt, the heat pouring down on him. When he broke the treeline he looked up to the green light
and combed his fingers through his hair, an old habit he was unaware of. The fields still wavered on either side past their fifteen acres, the yellow barn he could barely make out. There was no sound. He rubbed at his heart and took deep breaths. “Goddamn.”

He thought of Marie. Gone. Fizzled. He sniffed for fire and looked for smoke. Nothing. The magnolias and oaks and dogwoods baking in their burlap where the nursery’d dropped them off, the shiny black wheelbarrow, piles of ground cover mulch, peat moss and black topsoil dotting the landscape, his holes half dug. He rubbed his neck. “A goddamn meteorological event,” he said. “Amazing.”

He went for the barn with one arm crooked over his forehead and his eyes salting up. He took deliberate steps. A broken ankle would leave him to fry. It seemed the sky’d gone white, that his heart had ballooned. He kept his head down and stumbled into a pile of topsoil still cool in the center. He dug his hands in and rubbed the cool grains over his neck and face.

Inside smelled like rock dust. He locked the door behind him and dropped to his knees. “Marie? Marie?”

She made the sound of moth wings, was pale and airy and left a cold white wake as she passed. Her hair was white fuzz. The left side of her neck had purpled. She’d never bothered to paint on new eyebrows or
color her face. She didn’t speak or look at him, sat with her legs crossed under one of the skylights, the white beam surrounding her like sheer curtains. Bowing her head, she was barely visible.

Jacob, hanging there on his knees and wiping his face with dirty shirttails, found himself, as he often did, startled at the sound of his own voice and not knowing how he’d gotten there. Light or dark, inside or outside it didn’t matter. Him hanging and not knowing. But now clopping his boots on the slate floors, the bluestone walls echoing like a concert hall, his knees cracked. It was open space, the vaulted ceilings, a bedroom where the hayloft used to be, suede couches where the colts had weaned, bay windows cut in. “It’s like boiling water out there. Did you feel it?” He stood smeared and still rubbing at his heart. The air over the fields seemed calmer through the kitchen window. “It was unbelievable,” he said. “Like a sun storm.” He went to the wet bar and wiped off with a hand towel. “Must be record heat today. Record,” he said. “If the heat doesn’t kill me the digging will.”

Her eyes were closed.

Jacob’s heart thrumming, heave breathing, spread his arms out like wings and clopped toward her. “Magnificent, huh?” he said meaning the builders and himself, had turned the old barn into a castle. “A magnificent job. A goddamn horse stable fit for humans,” he said standing at the edge of her sunbeam. “You that cold?”
He let the anger get him, stomping out not bothering to shut the
door behind him. “Bitch.” The nursery dropped off ten trees every
afternoon. That was the plan, ten trees a day for thirty days, if she had
that long. “Goddamn heat stroke, that what she wants? Fine by me.
Turn the goddamn dead farm into a forest in a month if it kills me. She’ll
see.” Stabbing into the dirt he felt the urgency that had steered him
since he could remember, this time by anger, other times by the pleasure
he could only associate with good youth. Them tearing out of town on
her eighteenth birthday, checking the rearview, holding hands tight for a
hundred miles because if her dad found out he’d have gone that far.
Birth certificate? Social Security card? Five hundred miles, a thousand
to Sanibel but felt safe stopping in the Carolinas for the marriage, the
Blue Ridge Mountains and nothing could stop them then.

“Drought had to come this year, didn’t it?” Not when they’d bought
the place, not when he’d promised to give it life again, by himself. She
never said she didn’t think he’d do it. But he knew. He flung chunks of
clay, felt the sun was poking fingers at him. His work had been worth
something. That much he was sure of. Hassett Properties hadn’t paid
him for nothing.

He threw his fist at the sun, at the barn. “I’m dyin out here.” His
guts burned and he went back to the windbreak. What did she care?
Never stepped a foot outside after they moved in. He was trying.
Goddamn he was.

At four a.m. he knelt at the loft balcony and wiped at his eyes, the night letting bright blue inside. He allowed himself a minute to stare down at Marie curled up on the floor under her skylight. It was these times that the vastness of it all overtook him, where he’d slip into such a trance he would forget for a moment that he was awake. He thought of the hidden sun reflecting off the night sky, of the magnolias, hickories, spruce, and apple trees piling up on top of the dead soil. He’d planted what in two weeks? Eighty maybe? He’d had more fun drawing up the plans and ordering the trees. It was only the birth of things that excited him. It was the reason he couldn’t sleep. It was the reason, he assumed, babies cried first outside the womb. Birth, he’d come to think, was the idea. Shape, its death. He reached his hand into the stream of blue light, finger shadows touching Marie. She curled tighter, moved away from them.

In the bathroom he filled the sink with cold water and held his face under, shaking his head like a dog in it. He’d learned to freeze bottles of water overnight, to fill a bucket with ice and rags to tie over his head, to take deep breaths. By flashlight he carried them to the shed and put
them in the wheel barrow. How many trees not planted? How many more coming?

Pulling the trees into the holes wasn’t the hardest part. But breaking the damn soil. He kept the flashlight on him until the sky brightened, stabbing the ground, alternating the cold rags on his head, watching for her dim silhouette to pass in the windows.

He dug until his blood blistered up on his palms and then dragged the trees in—eight, ten, fifteen—filling around them with topsoil and peat, pounding and tying the stakes. His joints like stones. Jacob of young who could do anything. Jacob of his father’s rough voice and temper, of four squat woolly brothers knifing their iron grey eyes around, swatting at each other, making fistholes in the plaster walls, *Fuckin Goddammit Fuckin Motherfucker* and bleeding the hottest blood, waiting for heart attacks. Hearts exploding. Jacob fourteen years old face up on a blue striped mattress walking the earth’s rim when hit by lightning bolts. Charge! Came to him just like that. No hands blacked in axle grease for Jacob, no busted face bones for life. Leaving. Hell yeah leaving four hard years later learning school words, school walks, on a scholarship far away. Easy life. Big life walking from the cedar shingled house with nothing but a laundry sack of clothes rope-cutting his hands and shoulders. Good burns. Bus station two miles, hell yeah.
He stood just inside the doorway dripping a puddle. “A hundred down. Two hundred to go,” he said, not sure of the number.

She’d only moved with the sunlight, her body tracking a path through the dust. She didn’t look up, never looked up. Marie with fat eyes, belly eyes seemed always closed. Sleep closed. Dream closed, not leaving the womb because they can’t or don’t want to. He wasn’t sure which. *Are you there Marie? Are you there?*

It occurred to him now that he’d built her a tomb, that light off slate glows like rain. He went to her and crouched at the edge of the light. “Remember Sanibel?” he said. “When the sun set behind the Gulf it flashed green. Remember?”

For a split second everything a green flared place. Green sky, green sand, green water foam, wave caps. Remember? *Are you there?* He wanted to touch her, shake her by the shoulders but could he stop if he started? The boy of him already up and thumping and once the boy got thumping... Walking the marsh edge at dawn and the alligators’ pearl eyes riding the flat. ‘Let’s do this,’ her saying and turning away so their backs touched, then reaching his hand out to reeds. ‘No matter what you hear keep your eyes closed and stay in arm’s length of them,’ her barely a woman then, saying ‘Walk heel to toe and meet me on the other side.’

“I did it. Remember?”

“I remember.”
The whole way arm’s length heel to toe, never drifting, here and there peeking but how could you not? “Some honeymoon, huh?”

He’d been twenty-two and felt wrong about it, but what the hell? It was her that came up to him minding his own business in the park on his graduation day when he should’ve been hell drunk or hell hung-over like the rest of them. But his morning time better spent with his sketchpads redrawning ghost towns from out west like he studied. Making them live again was what it was, but not for tourists. The real thing where people could live lives there big or small as they wanted. The idea that he could change things both amazed, and consumed him.

“Reviving dead places,” he said because she asked, standing over him under the flower tree. Jacob on his belly on a blanket looking up at the girl with her black hair tied up in a black ribbon. He knew she was sixteen before he asked her later, still carrying pink chub in her cheeks, in her breasts swelled out like brand new and probably already had the cancer cells, but who’d have thought it then? “Kind of like they did with Las Vegas. But not quite.”

“Build your own towns? You can do that?” She laid next to him, propped up on her elbows running her finger over his pencil scrawls marked *townsquare, school house, church house, grocery, bakery.*

“I can draw up whatever you want. Just tell me.”
“Narnia,” she said.

She made his legs weak.

The sun was dropping away. He was hitting rock now, the clangs vibrating up his funny bone. He sat in the shed when the nursery came, watched the grubby man in the green hat pull a Weeping Birch off the flatbed every twenty feet or so, scratch something down on a notepad. His shirt sleeves were cut off. His arms glistened like copper.

Two years he waited for her. Two goddamn years her dad threatening to break his neck. Two years selling eighth-acre properties waiting for her to be legal. There was no money in that. He was a planner. A developer. But he waited. He goddamn waited, didn’t he?

What did she think? Narnia could be built in a day? How many thirty-year-old millionaires did she know anyway? It was his own fault, he supposed. “We’ll have our Narnia.” What the hell did it even mean? “A forest, right?”

Jacob on a blanket under the single Silver Maple in his backyard would already have the sketchpads laid out when she got there, a pitcher of black cherry tea.

“It should be a pine forest in the front so nobody knows we’re there,” she said. “Then wildflowers and flower trees and hydrangeas to
our mansion. And an apple orchard for the animals. And raspberry bushes. Oh yeah, and butterflies. What attracts butterflies?”

Jacob laughing, doing his best to speak in his adult voice. “We have to consider gas lines and water, hon’. And roads. We can’t have roots growing everywhere.”

Then one day the knock on the front door as he was taking his tie off and hadn’t even thrown the keys on the coffee table yet. He didn’t have a chance. Her dad must’ve had his fist cocked before the door opened. Jacob knew about angry Dads but not this throat choking, head snapping *Take. Pleasure. In. Watching. You. Die.* kind of angry. When the door slammed shut Jacob was flat-backed on the floor like the crucifix, not knowing if he was seeing or not seeing, not knowing if it was Marie’s distant shrieks *Why Daddy? Why Daddy?* Hearing himself groan but it was not himself groaning. Head side to side fish flopping, crack toothed, spitting sharp things. And his nose was crooked, twice.

A week later walking through the park at dawn with his sketchpad, his jaw wired shut and metal straps over his nose, he found a note wedged in the bark of the flower tree.

*I could die without you Jacob. What kind of stone for our walls?*

He lay chest down with it, held to his Adam’s apple. *Dying without you, Marie. Bluestone? Sandstone? Flagstone?*
Marie didn’t come to the window, sat bowed and moonwhite under the skylight. At night Jacob walked in circles around the barn holding the spade-fork on his shoulder, falling to his knees, pushing back up, laughter coming out of him in hisses. “Butterflies!” His heart pulmed on his sternum. The moon was hot. The trees had no leaves left by the time he got to them.

He swung the spadefork up and down at his side, letting the weight of it carry itself higher and higher, into circles. Faster, slicing a hole in the air. He let it go on the upswing and watched it sail like a spear. It came down how he wanted, forks down, crashing through the skylight. Metal and glass chiming on stone.

“Shit. Shit,” he’d said sucking down a Camel outside the Hassett’s redbrick offices, twisting the wedding ring around his finger. A pup then, talking his way into the world. He spat and smiled at the memory. Sitting on the ball of a Western Ash, he felt the morning heat rolling in. It was time to start digging again. He stepped into the trash barrel of cold water and squatted down, head under.

He remembered it by heart. “The new community? Hassett Dream Village,” he’d said laying out his sketchpads on the mahogany table that separated him from Harold and Benjamin Hassett. He was already showing sweat stains through his Oxford. They’d given him five minutes
for their own amusement as long as he promised to stop pestering their secretary for an interview. They didn’t say anything when he walked in, when he said “Hello gentlemen.” They wore black pinstriped suits with the coats buttoned, leaning back in velvet chairs. They looked sixtiesh and both wore three gold rings on their left hands. They were already laughing to themselves, exchanging looks.


Harold and Benjamin didn’t look at the sketches, looked to each other, at Jacob, chuckling.

“Wide sidewalks, brick and cobblestone. Flower trees and red maples, fir trees and blue spruce, every color foliage you can imagine lined up and down the streets. Statues and fountains in the orchards, on the street corners.” He cleared his throat. “Purples, reds, yellows. Golds. Make it look alive. Alive.” He repeated the words as he’d practiced them to Marie on their way back from Sanibel.

He dabbed at his forehead with a silk handkerchief, a gift from her, and felt that something in his gut was sucking his voice inward. He
heard himself from a distance, as though it came from someone else, a child believing dreams could be real in the same way he would believe in the boogeyman. He began pacing back and forth with his hands folded, tapping his thumbs. Louder. “Build the square first, and a block model homes. Let them touch it, see it, and smell it. Flowers, trees, townhouses, Cape Cods and bungalows of cobblestone, bluestone, flagstone. The scent of cut grass. Brick walks lined with reds, yellows, purples, greens. Blues they didn’t know existed. Gold. People will pay good money to live in a dream village.”

They didn’t look at the sketches. They hadn’t stopped laughing. Jacob ran his fingers through his hair, took a deep breath.

“I’ll design. I’ll advertise. And I’ll sell. All I ask is commission. Any lot sold for less than double what you’re making now, I won’t accept your money for.”

They hired him on the spot.

He didn’t go back inside the house, only stopping twice a day for hour-long breaks, wrapping his hands and feet in gauze for the blisters. He wheeled the trash barrel of water around, and a gallon milk jug with the top cut off, pouring two gallons for every tree, and over opened eyes and mouth, then flung the ground cover dry as bone, working his way toward the barn, the sideyards.
His skin and hair were the rust color of mulch. The soles of his boots split. When the sun dimmed he wrung his clothes out in the trash barrel and hung them on spindly Oaks. Huffing, he sat and saw flower petals fall, scurry in a dust breeze. Around him, a mustard sun on white soil. He could snip strands of apple blossom, he thought, put them in wine bottles.

He was in his boxers wrapping his hands and feet in ice water rags when the man in the green hat pulled up next to him with the Norway Spruce.

“You alright, man?” he said over the motor. “Need some help?”

Jacob squinted at him. “Just the trees.”

He hopped out, left the motor running. Up close, he was thick and hairy as a bear, his blue jeans browning. He laughed. “You sure? Look like you been in a brawl.” He chewed on the end of a pencil stub, looked around, at the barn. The trees were budding. He pointed to the trash barrel. “That how you’re waterin? Luggin that around?”

Jacob nodded.

“Be easier to move sprinklers around. They didn’t give you sprinklers?” He shaded his eyes toward the barn. “All this money, you’d think they’d give you sprinklers. And a crew. Think they’d let me use their bathroom?”

“They’re not home,” Jacob said. His head was getting heavy.
The man nodded, put his hands on his hips, the high-pitched sound of the sun surrounding him. “Shit,” he said, pointed to Jacob’s chest. “You can see your heart beat.”

No rain came. The thirty days passed. He bought sprinklers and hundreds of feet of hose. He had a mini-fridge delivered and ate mud smeared tomato and cheese sandwiches in the shed. The Bloodgood Maples came, and the Douglas Firs. He ordered raspberry bushes, sunflowers with trellises, Winter Jasmines, Devil’s Tears, Golden Hornets. Dwarf Pines and Dragon’s Claw Willows. Raccoons and possums showed up in his flashlight, nibbling on his thrown bread crusts. He flung stones at them. “Get!” His back needled.

She didn’t say anything when the Hassetts moved them to Indiana, or eighteen months later to Ohio, to Michigan, Missouri, and on. She didn’t say anything that Jacob worked weekends showing the houses, or that they sent him away without notice to survey land and pass out flyers. When they moved into their freshly white painted apartments with beige or blue carpeting she strung Christmas lights and shut the blinds and watched them blink their rainbows.

“Do something,” Jacob said. “You’re not an invalid. Take a class or something.”
He caught her once, in her cocktail dress lighting candles at the
dining room table. There was the scent of pot roast. He’d gotten in from
Des Moines when he said, but she looked like she hadn’t expected him,
the wide eyes, mouth frozen open not saying anything for the longest
time, until “Hey sweetie,” and giving him a kiss. When he was in the
bathroom he swore he heard her whispering, heard the phone beep off.

“Wastelands,” she said scrubbing the dishes, her eyeliner softening
in the steam. “You take me from one nowhere to another.”

Jacob leaned back at the table slugging down the Merlot he knew
wasn’t meant for him. “That’s the point,” he said. “Inhabiting
wastelands. Bringing life to dead places, in case you haven’t been paying
attention.”

“I’ve been paying attention. There’s no life here. Everyone’s in and
out. In and out. Two years. Just like you and me. You build hotels.
You know that? Hotels.”

“Well, why don’t you enjoy your stay? Take up tennis or
something. Does your boyfriend play tennis?”

She smiled at this. “My boyfriend works too much to play tennis.”

“You’re dying.” What was he supposed to say? The wine in his
head. Their tongues touching for the first time in—? ‘Nothing’s
changed,’ was all he’d said first, his nose in her hair. Nothing’s changed.
There’d been no reason to say it, no reason to stroke her face. The good violence came back, the pressing, the rubbing.

“Fuck me Jacob.”

Then the lump with his thumb—“what’s this?”—with his index finger. Circling and pinching and circling and pinching. Couldn’t be.

“What’s what?”

What do you say?

The barn was split gray beams when they pulled up, the farm dead and being sold for acreage. He pulled open the heavy doors to broken light and shadows.

“This is it,” he said throwing his arms up, letting them drop.

“What do you think, hon? Your dream house?” She stood in the doorway, holding her elbows tight in her hands and didn’t say anything, the first round of chemo taking her from the inside out.

“It’ll be different here,” he said as they walked away, his arm around her waist. “I told them no more travel. I told them I’m taking some time off when the barn’s finished. It’ll be a dream hon.”

“If I have that long.”
He found himself in the frontyard facedown on a bed of mulch, the sound of bees, sprinklers tat-tatting. He wasn’t wearing a shirt or boots. A milk jug of water next to him. He poured it over himself. He couldn’t feel his legs as he walked toward the barn, his skin tan toughened, feet and hands in wet black gauze. The apple trees were blooming, pale green and red leaves stretching their veins through the light. The sun had quieted.

Inside, the slate and bluestone, the suede couches, were coated in mulch dust. Marie sat in the broken glass in the white beam, not moving. The spadefork next to her. She was the color of black cherry tea.

He walked to her and knelt down, cupped his dripping hand on the back of her head. “It’s finished hon,” he said. “Come see?”
Small People Want a Big World

Greta Nash who never kicked in the womb, never filled out her clothes. Named for Garbo but like her in the wrong hermit ways. Greta who for as long as she can remember wakens from bad dreams that linger all day—a sudden shortness of breath, smiles caught in the throat. Greta in bad yellow skin, sitting in the dummy classes her whole life learning Valley Forge and long division in white trailers. Not learning them. The cold brick schools fifty feet away but further than that.

Once, in the white trailer with the mouth breathing boys who come and go every year, she wonders if they’ll take her, if they’d want to. Mr. Chudzinski with his pig arms and pig neck not looking up from the Readers, lulling out the black smears of words to them like a foreign language as the three boys tear at her, and who would know?

Greta everywhere in haunted houses.

On the night of her nineteenth birthday Greta decides to start a new life, intruding on her mom’s Gunsmoke to say some girls from work
are taking her out (though there are no girls at Equus Industries, just old women who see no point in junior college if it’s just gonna land you on a line cutting felt for horse saddles) and will be back by one or so, not to worry. And though Greta was never one to go out with anybody, and has unbuttoned her blouse to reveal the gap of her cleavage, and driven her shabby Mustang all the way out to McComb County Mall to buy herself the suede skirt, and spent nearly two hours trying to fix her face up into something other than ‘mousy,’ her mother only “hmph”s between bites of cold bacon.

Greta down Route 20 gone in the wide sky, the night clouds rumbling over like someone pulled a shade. Her engine reverberates off the pavement. Eighty. Ninety. She wonders where the sound dies out in the openness over the farms, pictures it spraying out in great arches like sparks and fizzling to the ground. Like something you could catch. Gone. You bet.

Walking into the Sheraton for the singles’ dance she thinks it might have been a mistake. That there are other ways, better ways, that her life isn’t so bad, just dull, and people do worse than dull, and it occurs to her right now what if she runs into someone she knows? But who goes into the city?
Halfway through her second Long Island she allows herself small talk with the bartender, even laughing with her palm at her breastbone when the plain man in the tweed sportcoat sits next to her like he’d chosen that moment, like he’d been waiting. There’s nothing striking about him, like a million apple-shaped faces she’s seen that only exist in her memory as a blurred audience from which she can’t distinguish the features. He’s older, fortyish, but clean shaven. He doesn’t smile.

“ Noticed you walk in,” he says. And he doesn’t blink either or move his beige eyes from hers. “ Did you see me?”

“ Maybe,” she says. “ Maybe I saw you.” And there’s a spot of red in his eye—at the edge of the cornea, or is it the iris? It must be the candle light, but the spot isn’t fluttering, isn’t moving. A bloodspot, is there such a thing?

A developer, or so he says, in town to sell his ideas on gated communities. “ To buy land,” he says.

And though she’s unfamiliar with it, she knows he’s playing his cards right, asking her questions about pommels and sheepskin numnahs, like cutting saddle gear in Dogwood, Ohio has never been so fascinating. He buys her drinks she doesn’t want or need, but she accepts and sips through the straw.

And she knows of course, had heard about, in “ school” maybe, these kinds of men, as though there were any other kind, who might, just
might only because they could. Or because they couldn’t help it. But there would be tricks because that’s what they do, what Bundy did—wearing a fake cast and *Could you help me carry this to my car ma’am?* And then a feeling that something was wrong but you wouldn’t know what. *Trust your instincts* they always said. *Run.* This much she remembers, twirling the straw and the bartender gone away.

But that she could be here. Doing this. That it is this easy allowing his hand on her knee. Reaching, touching her fingertips to his chest to say “It’s always been real estate. People forget.” That he doesn’t know Dumb Greta with eternal curtains of hair over sunken cheeks, in dark mornings waiting at the trailer door for Mr. Chudzinski, Mr. Braun, Mrs. Hohenbrink. The same middle-aged sad teacher jangling keyrings from the hip and smelling of Kool’s or Salem’s. Dumb Greta pretending to listen but drifting really to gray places—*Are you listening Greta? Are you with us? Greta?*

But of course there might be tricks like when he wants to take the stairs because elevators make him nervous and her playing along saying “me too” because, as the newspapers would say, she didn’t know any better. Six flights and not looking behind her, doesn’t need to from the clop of his shoes, but more doesn’t want to know—what exactly, or when.

In his room there are no lights and he’s aggressive, his hand up her skirt too soon and digging his fingers into her hips too hard, but she
doesn’t care. She isn’t here to fall in love, but wouldn’t that be something? What if? This heat for life. These fingers. Mom, I’m getting married. But no. No tricks. She’s aggressive back, grabbing at his shirttails, his belt buckle.

Early one morning before the sky’s been lit Greta sitting in her backyard before work waiting for the sweeplight after the stars flicker out. Blublack to melon to orange. It’s something breathing on her that pulls the skin tight across her forehead and tugs at the corners of her lips. Her eyes like hot glass. Greta seeing vast things she’s been dumb to and thinks, turning her head, he might be sitting behind her or standing by the old wooden wagon wheel at the corner of the house—the one she used to imagine steered some giant ship—in his tweed coat because he’d be the type to do that. To just show up, find you and not tell you he’s there, just wait for you to notice and if you didn’t… You could never be sure, guy like that (he knew where she worked), telling him to take it easy a little, that it hurts, and him pretending not to hear until the second time and then easing up and “sorry.” Never the first time though. Always taking twice making you wonder if in your gut it’s that feeling that something’s wrong, that you should tear away screaming and could you if you wanted? It’s more like one of the dreams than you think, when your muscles go weak and your breath’s gone.

But to be wanted so violently.
She doesn’t bother to tell her mom when she misses her period, figures she’ll put it together as her stomach grows and so long as the kid keeps to himself there’ll be no bother. She can’t resist garage sales for the crib and infant clothes, erector sets, chemistry sets, ant farms and world atlases. She puts her dresser in the closet to make room for the crib, clears the dust off her bookshelf for diapers and burp towels. She boxes up the framed black stallions clipped from National Geographics, the miniature silk heart pillows she spent a summer making. A life built in tunnels. She paints the walls bright white and stencils in letters and numbers in incoherent collages, makes the ceiling the sky, swabbing clouds in with wads of toilet paper. Mother Greta.

She takes to working Saturdays to help with the co-pays. She grows tired. Her feet swell. Her back aches.

And one night driving home from the community college there’s a construction site on the way, from the highway looks like duplexes, or their skeletons, and new roads carved in. What was his name? Gary? Greta pulling up to the empty sites thinking maybe he’s here, staying late, drawing things up, inspecting. In the wood smelling houses she’s conscious of the thuds of her feet, looking from the bottom up through floors and roofs and getting hot, going to the basement and the cool familiar scent of concrete. She lays on her back rubbing the life bloated
inside her. They’d say it was unlike her, that she was quiet and
reserved. She thinks now that it has all been worth it. All the solitude
and indifference of an anonymous life have built to this moment, this
motherhood. And her child would not be anonymous. “Ebenezer,” she
whispers. It sounds regal to her.

Two nights a week sits sideways in the cold metal desks through
*Intro to Astronomy*, and *World Geography*. Equus Industries. Bare
cement walls and chipboard tables. White haired women four to a table,
stacking yards of gray felt and fake sheepskin, running straight blades
along steel patterns for under the high cantles and forward-cut flaps.
“Who’s the father? Who’s gonna raise the kid?”

Greta opens her books on the table and studies as she works.
beans. Tex-tour. Cobo-cobean-textour. Columbia…” It’s a big world
kiddo.

He’s born. Tiny thing. As she holds him she has the thoughts.
President of the United States. Scientist. Astronaut. She touches his
forehead and thinks he looks like a mole come out of its hiding.

At first she doesn’t sleep, lays under the quilts straining to hear
his breath, thought he was supposed to cry all night. She wonders of
crib death, if he’s swallowed his own vomit, of frigid drafts through the windows (though she’d covered them with plastic) that would freeze his blood to ice and color him that death blue. What then? What kind of mother then?

Mornings she walks in the dark to the kitchen with her hand at the small of her back and gets the burner going, measures out two cups of milk into the pot with a pinch of sugar. The burner smells like bacon fat. The air stands still outside, blue snow sparkling its hard crystals. She yawns. Her neck pops. Her eyes are drawn to things she’d never paid much attention to, the water stained ceiling tiles, the silver naiheads sticking from the corner molds in uneven rows, a curl of painted-over tape behind the faucethead.

In her room she holds him in her lap like holding glass. Tiny thing with his hands and face webbed in red veins, taking the nipple in. She opens atlases in front of them and whispers the places. “An-tee-gwa. Saint Lu-sha.” Have to teach him about the big things, right? You have to want something in this life. You have to know what’s there for the taking. She runs his fingers over the constellations and strokes the velvety soft spot on his head thinking she could push a pin through it, but she never would of course.

Wouldn’t he want to know about his son? Does he? Standing behind the buckling window glass clutching his jacket at the collar—can she remember his face?—thinking *what a good mother.*
Holding his cradle at her waist she bites her bottom lip, takes a deep breath. She steps just inside the office door of Austin Kunckel—the foreman, a middle-aged chain smoker of Pall Malls, twice divorced and looked pregnant himself. Wears blue slacks and short-sleeve button downs, four pencils in his shirt pocket. Stands too close while looking over shoulders, would write on a clipboard, shaking his head. He looks up over the rim of his glasses.

“Greta,” he says, shows his large teeth.

Greta pouts her lips, says that she should have her own cutting table. That she could bring her son to work with her. “In the back somewhere,” she said. “Just for a little while. He won’t bother anybody,” she said.

Kunckel wrings his hands. He asks about daycare, relatives. Why didn’t she take care of this months ago? “Liability,” he says. “Inspections.” He looks down, looks up, smiles from large teeth.

“No,” she says. “It’s just me and Ebby.” And that daycare is expensive, that she doesn’t have the money yet. “Doctor bills,” she says. “Just until I pay them off.”

Kunckel smiles, shakes his head. “Bit off more than you could chew, didja?”
She bites her bottom lip and drops her head, smiles. Faces Ebby’s cradle away from the desk. “Maybe we could—arrange something.” She twirls her hair.

At her table in the corner she cuts rabbit heads and dogs from the scrap felt and squeezed his fingers around them, figured a way to work jell-o into a pin-holed pacifier to keep him quiet till break time.

Greta in her work denims, standing in her bedroom doorway with Ebby’s cradle at her waist taking deep breaths. The Evening News saying it’s gonna be another cold one.

Her mother, sitting in the recliner tapping the end of an unlit Pall Mall on her bare knee where her robe had opened, “hmph”s when Greta sets the cradle beside her. “I have to go to class.”

Her mother lights the Pall Mall, blows smoke, her colorless eyes sucked deep into her head look to the kid, to the TV. Her hair is the yellow of nicotine.

“He’s no bother really,” Greta says. “He mostly just sleeps.”

Her mother blows smoke, doesn’t look. Her voice is a whisper. “Not runnin daycare.”

“I already fed him. I’ll be back in a couple hours. I just need you to change him when he needs it. Can you change him?”

She blows smoke, nods. “Suppose.”
After work she takes him to the bathroom without a word and bathes him under the tub faucet. They eat in the bedroom. Her eyes sag. Diapers mound in the hamper. Empty food jars on the bookshelves. Ebby reaching for felt, for the flash of light off metal. While he sleeps she reads the atlases, that the universe was expanding, that part of California would break off and head northward, that Dogwood, Ohio isn’t on any map. She wakes with the reading lamp on hugging pictures of the universe to her chest.

In summer nights after she hears the TV click off and Ebby is in baby sleep she sneaks outside in kneesocks and a flannel robe and takes deep breaths in the crickets’ chimes.

In the beginning she stays by the window in case he cries, but eventually to the edge of the backyard with her toes touching the muddy field and tip-toes back to the window every few minutes or so. Then, stepping over the moundered rows of bean sprouts toward the wide sky, keeping the house in sight of course, and another step won’t hurt, or another, and seeing that it’s never really dark, that night is just another color. Sometimes she grows tired and only then remembers him and panic pounds at her chest and she runs and prays and tip-toes through the front door, through the silent house, whispering please God please God under heavy breaths until she’s standing over his crib and hears his baby gurgles. One night, she goes past the thicketed windbreak where the highway, her highway, becomes visible and she closes her eyes and
spreads her arms, feeling her way forward and backward listening for the distant whoosh of trucks, trying to catch the edge of sound, and keeps going.
Where the Light Drops Out

I.

In the yellow light of St. Vincent’s hospital he’s born six pounds no ounces and silent till slapped.

In the new darkness he twists his muscle eyes. His drip red pupils.

II.

At the factory dust webs hang from the rafters, from the cement walls. He swats at dangling plastic animals, at her shiny earloops, at light reflected off metal. He inhales felt dust, squeezes the soft grey shapes she cuts for him, pulls at her hair when the break siren sounds.

He gets ahold of a box cutter and slashes air ribbons. Bawls from a gashed hip, his throat a coiled snake.
III.

There is heat when his eyes turn brown. The car wind is cracked with yellow, with smashes of marvelous white. Then she in the silver water spray lashing soap over them, giving the rubber nipple. Words shape in the irises.

IV.

Him standing in the wooden crib mouthing the top rail. He watches her hair fan back and forth, the brisk motions of her elbows and shoulders, the box cutter tearing through the grey felt mats making round shapes in stacks, moon slivers falling around her. Sometimes she brings him a horsey, a flap-flap bird. He puts them in his mouth and sucks at dust. The vinyl mattress is scattered with them. He stomps his palms and knees on them, pushes them outside the rails. Him reaching for them.

When the siren sounds the first three times she lifts him, pats his diaper before she cleans him, and gives the nipple. The fourth time, she wraps him in a blanket, takes him into the yellow wind.

V.

Nights in their tiny bedroom he stares up at the sky painted ceiling, at the splotches of musty clouds she made. The sheets, the blankets, the piled up laundry, smell like factory webs. She opens the
giant blue Atlas on the bed and runs her fingers over the glossy pictures.


He beats his fists in the air, squeals.

VI.

Her, home from work, home from night school. Her night shadow outside the window when he pretends to sleep. She stays outside for long times, longer. The pillow is warm from her.

She smells like crickets when she lies down, the seethe of star pins. By nightlight, she reads to the window.

“Nebula...Umbr...Penumbra...” When he asks what they mean, she tells him to sleep.

Their backs touch, their dumb heels.

VII.

Her, standing on the back step of their new house with her fists on her hips. Two trees hang over the street, one dropping seed propellers into the oil stained puddles. The other, its white peels of bark. “Kinda worthless, I guess,” she says of the trees. “Thought they were bigger or something.” Twitches her nose at the unhitched gutters, the tar-shingle siding, the yard that barely holds the trees and two thin rows of whitestone for a driveway.
Him, like bent wire and thinking nothing is big, that the world has been pressed together by mute hands. In the box of three rooms she hangs a diploma in a wood frame. Him, eyes scrunched in his own bedroom, not daring to breathe.

**VIII.**

In the kindergarten he beats on cubes of clay. Smashing pancakes, smashing. Cuts construction paper into circles of faces and pastes birdwing eyes.

Key on a shoestring around his neck, he doesn’t go in yet. In the luminous grey of the afterstorm he takes his shoes off, slides on the wet grass and splashes around in puddles. Lifting his arms in the water air, he is invincible.

**IX.**

She is grey, cold, saggy eyed. Books spread on the kitchen table, she reads in her work denims.

He makes log cabins of his fishsticks and ketchup glue, watching the pages fling in her eyeglasses.

X.

He never makes it past five feet tall, a bird-bone ratface, ropy arms and elbow knots. White birch stick legs about to snap. He walks the school halls with his hands stuffed in his pockets glancing over his collar. Retreats to corners, backs of classrooms, takes to the library at lunch behind empty metal shelves where the books run out. He pretends to read, but dreaming really, the pages in front of him a smear of black.

He steps on the heads of shadows in the hallways, imagines. Big boys in snug sweatshirts make a pinball of him, circling and pushing around, around. He learns if he falls they stop. If he laughs they laugh with him. Not by accident, he knifes his shoulder into their soft bellies.

XI.

In his dreams there is white grass, a leaking moon.

He fills jelly jars with leaves, flower, and rock. Puts them on the window sill. At night he moves between sounds, the balls of his feet callused from rain.

XII.

In old age he would wear red satin pajamas and silver hair draped down his back, would stand at the water’s edge and watch the waking mallards slip their beaks from their wings, skirt themselves across the surface in walloping flaps. Off to the side of him the park, where his son
used to ruin the knees of his pants, sloping away from the water like slumped grass shoulders.

The low sun would carry the smell of the lake in its fumes which, he would think, is the red smell of boys.

XIII.

Her teachers and bosses, she would have them on the couch, tie them up and climb on top. Would use the breakfast syrup on them.

XIV.

First, she’s overnight across town. Then days, a week, elsewhere. Bringing him seashells, tee shirts, medicine bottles of sand, a lava rock.

Him in the tree umbrella taking himself in his hands, spraying himself out over the leaves.

XV.

He doesn’t know her when he leaves, a cold one-armed hug. A snapped wing. He’s eighteen and still knocking in the knees. In the rearview, she’s already walking inside.

He doesn’t think of her for long stretches of time. At work he wears a hairnet, chops up salad vegetables and whips potato flakes. He goes home to his one-bedroom apartment and eats spaghetti by the
window, overlooking the city lake. There is the night sound of water on rocks.

**XVI.**

There is Sharon whose eyes water, pounding chicken breasts with the wooden mallet and filling the kitchen with her sour smells. She’s a full head taller with bulging shoulders. She pulls gigantic cans of gravy from the top shelves for him and clacks them down in front of him. Her knuckles popping through the skin. She mentions no one. No one ever comes for her.

His throat uncoils. “Do you eat dinner?” he says.

**XVII.**

They marry on the lake in front of two witnesses they don’t know. He in a silver tux from the classifieds. She, body softened by pregnancy, in a brown dress that looks like she’s wrapped in an Ace bandage.

The wind comes heavy off the lake and pushes him to a slant, his toes pointed outward to keep from falling. He peels his lips back to taste the salt mist. His gums bleed.

**XVIII.**

He sucks too hard at her throat when they make love, thumbs her temples until she says to stop it. He stares at water and light, opens his
shirt and holds their naked son to his chest, whispers “breathe warm,” “skin silk,” “blood sweet.” Likes to take the velvety ears between his lips.


Their son bawls when she pries him away.

Him standing for a moment, considering his wife. Taps a fingernail to his teeth. “You know,” he says. “You’re not important to him.”

XIX.

They take to separate beds. Her saying “I need to spread out.”

His hair is uncombed and scraggled out down his shoulders, looks like a witch, his toes at the water’s dark edge. There are mallards floating in sleep, a dome of stars falling, water snakes poking their heads through rocks. They don’t move with the current, the ducks. He shares their feather bones.

XX.

His son in a clamdigger outfit, carrying a breadbag of crusts for the mallards. To wake them, they shout, wrestle, and roll in the grass. To be among them, they undress and, hand-in-hand, step into the cold water, wings beating over their heads. They fling crumbs out in front of them. Luring, luring.
XXI.

Sharon gives him the collection of porcelain ducks (figurines in mid-flight, salt and pepper shakers, a creamer, a butter tray, a fruit bowl), a copy of the restraining order.

He hadn’t thought about her. But now, the car slipping over the sparkling black roads, he remembers yellow light, silver flash. The universe moves around in him. The world, in a smaller way like sand blowing. Him, bent forward so his nose almost touches the steering wheel, thinking if it were any brighter he wouldn’t see the edge of the world coming. He drives until the lake is gone, drives into winter.

XXII.

Of ghosts he thinks, what’s the difference? So he refuses the sun and pales himself to chalk, takes a night job janitoring.

He used to pretend that there was a brother, that they had fangs together. He pretends now, in the dark slick hallways hide-n-seeking. There are no voices in these halls. There are no echoes.
Grady’s Rocks

For twenty years Ronnie Reed runs a feed store. For twenty years his lover Ebby helps him night-clerking and homemaking, chewing his nails over cowhide sales ledgers, over ground chicken gizzards and boiled cow tongues.

Days, on the dark oak counter top are the sales ledgers. On the skins of Ronnie’s eyes, in his mouth, are wet dead leaves, ferns, pheasant, and mule deer, his father spitting chaw from yellow teeth, tracking the worn pathways and nibbled brush. In the cigar box stuffed with I.O.U.’s is the winter woods taste of smoke and copper. Ronnie scrapes by he is not sure how.

In the spring of 1930 the feed store finally goes under and he decides he and Ebby should take their retirement in the woods a few years early. “To the wild parts,” he says. “To get back to the land.” And moreso, to stop having to pretend they’re brothers. “Just like we planned, Ebs. I’ll take care that we’re fine,” he says. “Took my turns protecting our Holsteins.” Remembers water-coffee, from his bedroom
window watching for coyotes by starlight, the blue sheened Winchester at his shoulder. “I’m not a stranger to things,” he says. Though they’ve never been into Grady’s Rocks Forest, he could teach Ebby everything.

Ebby busies himself among the bills of lading scribbled on tears of golden rod, chewing on the tips of his precious pink fingers, mumbling.

“Nothin to do about it now Ebs.”

Late into the forest summer Ronnie leaves their little tree house, which he’d built way up in the forks of one of the few surviving elms where the bears couldn’t get them, and never comes back. There’d been more trash and animal heads around than he’d thought, more hard-up people in their teepee tents and lean-to’s made from old shirts and scrap metal, hunting their food. There was the sound of shotguns, of Ebby moaning for apple wine.

Out for his early morning walk into where the pines took over from the river, he thinks he’ll go a little further, get away from things all over again (they were hungry, he was not the shot he used to be, nor the tracker his father was), and finds himself waist-high in wildgrass fingering the blue vine flowers and milkweed pods, thinking he might bring Ebby something back. He thinks better of it. “Can come see for his precious self.”
He’s sweat heavy, and ignores his joint pain. Goes where the landscape takes him, following dragonflies as the sun blooms over the pollen dust, the yellow-red bunched brush, the tangles of burrs and prickers, to where the meadow slopes down bottlenecked in the great pine hills, and opens up again to what looks like a sort of ancient coliseum dug into the earth, or a small lake had been there. Dark slabs of rock poking through like fractured bones, covered in ivy and moss, redfern, deer grazing at the bowl bottom. He eyes them up and makes to shoot them with his fingers. If he’d brought his gun, he thinks, he could take his pick.

Grady’s Rocks the sign says, scrawled from a buck knife on a slab of knotty pine. Ronnie reads on. Guy named Grady owned a stone quarry years back and when he retired left it as it was, so’s things can be heard again. It’s a way of life in stone. May be this place better left to wild.

“I’ll be,” Ronnie says. “Grady’s Rocks.” His scalp crawls backwards. His lungs heave. He makes his way down, grabbing the ivy to steady himself, until he finds a bench spot with a moss back to lean on. He stretches himself out, hands behind his head, and scans spots at the rim for a new house. He gives in to dreaming, could surprise Ebby, have a cabin built by November, no one out this far, and everyone heading for warmer ground come winter anyway.
His own sweat wakes him, his arid mouth. Miles further than he’d gone before, he figures he’ll turn back before all sense of direction leaves him (it had already left him), and thinks of the cold river waiting, that maybe Ebby’d caught some fish for dinner.

In the wildgrass he hears the snap, seems like, before he feels it. He knows the shinbone’s broken as he goes down, knows it’s a bear trap, had heard stories of the hunters coming into town in their splints of sticks and cloth ribbons. He bites his lip and presses on the release bars hard as he can, pounds them with the heels of his hands, with his old fists. He feels for sticks to pry it, beats until his hands bruise. As the sun sinks, he howls, howls.

~ ~ ~

Ebby has one white eye, one blue, walks at the river edge clutching his hood at the chin with one hand and holding a walking stick tall as him in the other. He rolls his blue eye across the river to the tree house, around. His cracked-sole boot leaves a deep imprint in the mudsand and pulls out with a sucking sound loud as the water.

Two months after Ronnie’d disappeared he’s still chewing his fingers up and down both sides of the river, trying to sleep close to home in case Ronnie comes back. Hunters take the tree house for their own camp while he’s gone, shoot at blowing leaves and steal their things, or take them back. Six beaver pelts, six coons, two bucks, the bamboo canepoles, the Winchester .12 gauge. (He’d had an inkling Ronnie’d stole
some of the skins, when he wouldn’t bring the meat back, the deer always looking “sick with yellow-tongue.”

There are no linens flapping up there, off the limbs no sheets browning in the river air. Everyone’s gone today like ambushed, or at night snuck away. Only the river moving, only that sound.

Ebby picks up a perfect rabbit head by the ears with its eyes still open. “New hunters,” Ronnie’d said. Always missing the head, ruining the pelt, filling the meat full of lead. He closes its eyes and tosses it in the river, watches it float, bounce over the waves.

There is no one to see over in the tree house. He bends at the knees and lays the flat of his hand on the river, digging his fingertips in, a new sound ripple.

The rocks are slippery, the water fast and grainy, blowing up his cracked boot from the toes. He knows not to lift his feet, to poke the stick out in front of him for balance, to dig it in. His hood blows off, strands of gray and black wind around his face and neck, stick there. He goes to his knees once from a loose rock, the waves at his throat, the river pushing on his feet but the stick doesn’t budge. He pulls up and keeps his breath low, faces the current and takes it sideways, his blue eye leading him.

Under the tree house he looks up through the floorboards. There are no voices or gunshots. The rope ladder’s down. He leans his walking stick against the trunk and tests his weight on the bottom rung. The
ropes creak. He hops it up, grabbing the rungs wet and pulling himself, dripping down must be twenty feet. A wind comes hard and blows him side to side, his knuckles scraping the trunk. Behind him the wind sloshes off the river, the currents working against each other.

If they left the ladder down they’ll be back soon. In the tree house there’s gnawed squirrel bones on a newspaper, and no skins. He grabs the bones and chews off the tendons, licking at blood stains.

He pokes around camp through dead leaves for scraps, dry socks, for things left behind, sniffs for dead flesh. His foot burns, a scent in the wind like leaf fire or deadwood. He takes up the path not knowing where it’ll go, following the burning scent hoping it’s Ronnie sending a signal, or somebody cooking up a stew (wild potatoes, mud-baked duck). His cracked boot is wet slop and splitting up the heel. It’ll fall away soon. There’s no noises on the path, winding up through. They were a favor, the boots, from an old doctor friend whose practice, along with the whole town of Jefferson, went under just after the feed store.

The forest with dark gray slabs of slate poking through pine needles. Slick paths slipping his walking stick. Ronnie’d sharpened the point and put a varnish on it that long since peeled away. “For bears.” Taught him to push it out point-first from the chest, to step into it, to go for the belly. Ebby pushes on, up.
He wakes up dream heavy and still cold in river soaked clothes. He still expects Ronnie there, leaning over him with some wild lie about a grizzly or a pack of wolves that must’ve made its way down from the Yukon.

Where the hell is he? Ebby aware of the pine needles and pushing himself up, brushing off and feels around for his walking stick. Ronnie’d told him never to go out before the sun, that everything hunts in dark. What did Ronnie know? Retire to the woods. Live off the land. The man sold feed for chicken gizzards. Out and got himself lost, killed maybe. Ebby decides the dark will hide him as well as it does anything else.

He points his shoulders sideways out of the forest and works against the wind toward the burning scent. The wildgrass is yellowed and bunched in rolling mounds. A place for pheasants, fox dens. There are no dandelions or grasshoppers to eat. He leans into the wind, knifing his shoulder into it, trying to injure it. If he could even be a pinprick and draw one drop of blood from this place he will have won something.

He makes his way across the pale blown meadow into more pines. Dreaming still? Could there be no sounds here? No crickets or gunfire? His foot burns. His boot split off he couldn’t be sure where, but figures the blue skin must’ve fused to the bone by now, a new leather. He kneels down and sheds his coat, his shirt. His chest freezing in the wind off the meadow. He rips at his shirt sleeves, tearing them off at the
shoulder seams, and ties them around his foot. When he stands, the
burning’s gone.
On Choices*

Up they went. Out his windows Coyotes were there, three of them prancing through the bunchgrass, the moonshadows making swords of their ears. “Solo,” he said. “They usually go solo.” He rolled down his window to smell their air, wondered if they heard the same wind rumble.

“Roll it up,” she said. “There’s bird flu here.”

Up they went, she wrenching the Escort into third. Her hands, fish-skinned from age, trembled on the stick. Didn’t he know about bird flu? Jesus Christ. He’ll be the death of her. She adjusted her wig. “Bird flu,” she said.

Cory, still carrying baby chub in his cheeks, thought she said “birds flew,” and rolled up the window picturing madhawks coming in for his belly. “There’s birds few here,” he said. Grandma was a mean God, seemed they should’ve been going down.

The leafless trees were mud-daubed skeletons. He remembered when Grandma was just Mother, no less a God, but not yet stained by
timeless sin. She was driving, her apron was still dusted with flour, the apple turnovers left in a rush on the counter already turning over in Rex’s upset stomach, the poor hound so afraid he’d get caught in the act and swatted with a rolled up Life magazine that he’d devoured them too fast to taste the sugar. Him in a grass stained baseball uniform, lap belt buckled over his stomach, looking at the matchstick trees. Mother’s young hands squeezed into white around the Studebaker’s aluminum steering wheel, her butterfly wing lips quivering. “It’s daddy. There’s been an accident.”

Now Grandma’s liverspotted hands held the Escort’s plastic wheel. Bird flu, she thought, preferring the hypothetical over the gastrointestinal cancer chomping its way through the wasted abdomen of Cory’s mom.

Fearsome, she thought, the way the cancer still goes, still swells and blackens the insides even after the rest dies. She thought of Cory’s mother packed in plastic in the trunk, thought of the three slugs it took to finally put her down—on account of her own shaky hands, the way the muscle memory of trigger squeezing had been lost. She thought of those last yellow death days and the viscosity of a rotting woman’s voice when it says “End it.” She thought of Cory and how he used to pull apart the bodies of the roadkill he found out on the Interstate, the way she once found him blood-faced and snarling, saying “Grandma I’m a coyote. I’m a scavenger.”
Up they went, and the coyotes gathered, tailed the Escort in a pack. Cory with his face against the window now, still saying “Solo. They don’t go in packs.” She didn’t have to touch the breaks, the incline was enough to stop them when she took her foot off the gas.

“Stay in the car,” she said, and Cory nodded still thinking of swarming birds, the sky dark with them. He reached his hand up, pressed flat with his palm on the stubborn lock button till he felt the give, heard the click. He watched Grandma step over nettles to the trunk, haul out the plastic packages he thought looked like presents.

“Ashes to ashes,” he heard her say as she dropped them to the ground. Dust rose up, settled on her apron. Around the prickly pear the coyotes gathered, still dark spots of shadow, green-yellow eyes.

Cory waited for the hatch to slam, for the thud sealing him in. The sun left a pale orange stripe between the blackening horizon and black sky. Is it night or did a mammoth flock of crows blot out the light? He reached to Grandma’s door and pressed it locked, the coyotes stepping closer.

Her face pressed up against the window smoothed her wrinkles. “Solo,” he mouthed. The wind over the bunchgrass rumbled through the air vents. He climbed over and shifted to neutral, remembering the leg bones of Mother’s lap, the cold plastic steering wheel as she would work the petals.

*Collaboratively written by Matt Haas, Steve Oberlechner, Ben Stein, and Matt VanderMeulen*
Marlo

Walking hand-in-hand through her parents’ garden Lawrence and Marlo take their pants to their knees and show each other, think they’re married from it. Lawrence remembers this later, the sunflowers leaning over them, the bees eating. He replays it in his head. She is beautiful now. She’d made him say he loved her.

The ride home is quiet and looming the way Sundays are, the Olds heading away from the sun, his dad listening to the White Sox through whining static, his mom with a tightened mouth. Lawrence is in the back seat raising his nose to the cherry wind, still unaware it had been his erection through his nylon shorts that made it a quiet and awkward good-bye.

His dad is a builder, complains of lower back pain. Lawrence isn’t sure what this means, thinks all men have lower back pain, has an image in his head, doesn’t know where it came from, of four men eating lunch on twelve inches of steel beam a mile above the world, doing, he imagines, what all men do.
The following Sunday they nibble on sweaty cheeses and drink cream sodas in the state park, their parents playing cards at a picnic table, and find a spot in the open grass to build stone and stick towers. He is boiling here, in his dumb body bursting he pounds the towers down, throws fistfuls of dirt over them.

Then Marlo moves across town and Sundays are tomato soup and a dusty living room. Lawrence stretches into awkward pink angles, head and nose elongated, bones outgrowing the skin. His eyes are dim green and slow to move, always looking like they just woke up. In school he is not interested and gets pills for it which make him fidgety. In sixth grade he learns to snap the bras of the girls who sit in front of him. He spends much time in detention. In math class, for no reason he can explain, he jabs the point of his compass into the neck of Lucy Lupica, and is expelled. His mom takes a job at the Jiffy Mart to help pay for psychologists.

“The boys got some things to get off his chest,” his dad says.

“There’s nothing on my chest. There’s nothing wrong with me,” Lawrence says. “Except people. I need people off my chest.”

Early one July night when he’s thirteen lying under red maples he’s trying to guess whether the smoke from the neighbor’s grill is steak or pork chops when a gameness fills him like fever. He rides to the park by his new Catholic school and there Marlo is on a rusted bike, rode in
from the east side. Her hair is thick brown mop to her shoulders and her jeans are frayed hand-me downs.

They recognize each other and ride wildly into the woods, flinging their bikes from side to side beneath them, crouching and jumping over tree roots. He will remember the sunlight spider-webbing through the trees, the faint scent of toads. He will remember a coyote crossing the path, its salt and pepper fur, its sharp black eyes. He will remember the path like powder, the sea-colored leaves, a soundless place letting him slip through. He will remember that she disappeared when the storm rolled in, the end of the path, the chain link fence around the construction site, the broken chunks of concrete and twisted metal rods. He will remember stems of lightning.

In high school he broadens early and learns to scowl behind unkempt hair and is not messed with. He goes to one football game and mostly stays under the bleachers eating popcorn. Across the field through shivering legs he sees Marlo cheerleading for the other team, her blue and white sweater hanging loose on her. She is out of sync with the other girls, drooping her head when they finish. Walking behind them down the sidelines with her poms brushing her thighs Bill Sumac from his Social Studies class dives for a pass and slams her to the turf. There is gasps and laughter. There is Marlo standing up, cupping her hands over her mouth.
The locker room smells like caked on sweat. Lawrence follows the sound of the water spray, almost trips over shoulder pads, an upturned helmet, the quiet falling behind him like dominoes. The boys’ chests still throb with adrenaline, their faces twisting at him as he passes. There is the marbled green of the sputtering showerheads, the steam slick skin. He will remember taking Bill Sumac by the neck, the throat gurgling in the crook of his elbow. He will remember being thrown to his knees, fists to the side of his head. “What the fuck! What the fuck!” The coach like a lumberjack dragging him out in a full nelson and slamming him through the metal doors. He lands on the heels of his hands, and is expelled. He cannot explain why he did it. He does not hear how Marlo is.

He is not sexually repressed as the doctors seemingly want. In actuality, his parents want him to date more. Or date at all really. “There’s some beautiful girls would like to talk to you,” his mother says, to which Lawrence scoffs and storms off. “What do you know about beautiful girls?”

He lives with his parents until he is twenty-three, delivers pizzas, watches movies in his bedroom, drives a forklift for his dad for six months and quits without notice, fails at his own lawn-mowing business, deals pot across the street from the high school until cop cars start parking there, drives a delivery truck for a corrugated box company until
he runs a red light and kills a mother and son. He sits in different psychologists’ offices pretending there are things to work out.

Then his dad standing in his bedroom doorway with his arms crossed over his chest, saying “You got one more month here. Then you’re out. You gotta support yourself now. Get yourself straight.”

Sewell Heights is a rough start but he makes a life of it there, cheap and far enough away. For twelve years he and his parents pretend to be happy about seeing each other over Thanksgiving and Christmas, until they die in the same year and Lawrence, without guilt, feels little for them.

For the next five years on the first Tuesday of spring Lawrence might call in sick and drive to town to feel a part of the living world. He might have his hair trimmed, a shampoo, maybe a barbershop shave. He might sit in the window of a coffee shop and watch the passersby through the late morning. If he is lucky he would feel the warm winds pushing winter from the streets. He would spread out with his red leather scrapbook, his magazines.

His face looks healed from punch holes. He is spread out in a window booth with his scrapbook and stack of twenty magazines. He is in a multi-colored hooded knit jacket and a red tee shirt. He will cut out a shadow from black construction paper for the picture he is determined to find, a hobby for the last five years – tracing around the perfect human figure with his pen knife, then repeating the form a quarter inch wider on
all sides, capturing their movements, the curves of their bodies. He does not name them, he is too old for that. He is not obsessed. He simply has a hobby, which are the people in his scrapbook.

He is already annoyed with her, waiting for her while she gets her third cup of coffee. He doesn’t watch her. She takes too long scanning the menu board, questioning the boy working. He didn’t recognize her at first, her fine burgundy hair, her pressed trench coat. This was not the kind of person who approached him, who knew his name.

“I’m not interrupting anything, I hope Lawrence.” She sits down, her coffee foam splashing to the rim. He had not been expecting this, this old friend on the first Tuesday of spring. He does not look up at her because she is perfect like his pictures and if he looks up he will have the thoughts he is not supposed to have. He continues leafing through his *McCall’s*, his scrapbook open to blank beige pages.

“No,” he says. “Just taking the day off.” In truth, she is interrupting. He is busy with the business of the people in his scrapbook. He had not thought of her much since childhood, since their family get-togethers on holidays. It was she who recognized him when she walked by, who seemed excited at their reunion. He takes his pen knife out, takes the lid off his paste because he has found what he has been looking for. This time it is a silver-haired woman who needs more iron in her diet. He knows she is the one but he does not know why. He only knows there is a place for her pale brown eyes, her age-rounded
shoulders, among the living. He places his middle finger on the chin of
the silver-haired woman, spiders his other fingers around the edges of
her and presses so his nails whiten to moons. He does not hate people,
he is not a sociopath. He is a collector of people, in truth. He likes to be
among the living. He simply does not like to be bothered when he is
busy with his business. “How are your parents?” he says.

“Fine,” she says. “Great. They moved to Florida last year. They
found this great little cottage on Sanibel. You should see it. There’s a
view of the lighthouse. It’s a beautiful thing. I’m completely in love with
it.” He doesn’t look up at her. He feels her eyes beam, her teeth. She is
happy to be here. Her large opal rings reflect the sharp sunlight, sting
his eyes. She brushes her blouse and brings the coffee mug to her lips.
She licks them, sucking her tongue back in with a snap. She shifts in
her seat, shakes her hair with her hands, crosses and uncrosses her
legs. “My parents will be so excited I ran into you. Tell me all about
yourself Lawrence. You live in the city now?”

“No. I’m out in Sewell Heights.” He becomes aware of the tear in
his knit jacket sleeve, his bloated unshaven cheeks, his hair falling
around in grease strings. Sewell Heights is not prosperous. He brushes
his hair behind his ear. “I run a day-care.” His tongue pokes out of the
corner of his mouth as he cuts around the shoulder of the silver-haired
woman. There is a pause, a stiffening of air between them.

“Really?” She says. “That’s great.”
“No,” he says. “But I’d like to. I actually work at the high school. I’m assistant principal. I was lying before.”


“And you?” he says.

She folds her hands around her coffee mug. “I own an antique shop in Lincoln Park. You should come see it some time. You’d love it.”

He looks up at her and reaches, rubs the knuckle of her ring finger. “Not married, I see?” His hand looks stuffed with foam next to hers. He pulls away. He lifts the body from the page with his pen knife and thumb, holds her up in the window light working his tongue around in his cheeks. He shows the proud smile of a father. He has spent months searching, his apartment floor littered with magazines and potato chip bags. He sets her on a sheet of black paper. He has, now, the thoughts he is not supposed to have, of sex, of killing. He has mostly stopped trying to control them. He would not act on them, he is too old for that. They are just thoughts, which are the nature of the living.

“No, not married,” Marlo says. “Not at the moment.” She scratches her ring finger, sits on her hands. “How are your parents, Lawrence?”

“I’m surprised you recognized me, Marlo. I’ve changed.”
She glances outside, squinting her eyes. She seems agitated, like this is not what she had hoped. "Come on. You haven't changed so much. I knew it was you right away. You look great." She checks her watch. "So how are your parents?"

"You don't have to lie. You look like you've been sculpted into middle age. I've ballooned. I'm used to it. And I don't work for the high school." He laughs. "I'm a cashier, and I'm working on my autobiography. That's the truth." She is not perfect, in truth. She has filled her pores with beige and pink powders. She is cracked at the eyes and mouth. She is perfect in this way, like the silver-haired woman.

While their parents played cards on their back porches, at picnic tables in the state parks, Lawrence and Marlo would nibble on sweaty cheeses and sausages and drink cream sodas, would find a spot in the grass and build stone towers. It is true that Lawrence has changed much. He is an adult and no longer has childish thoughts, as this is the nature of the living. He no longer builds stone towers, or is made to say he loves anyone.

She checks her watch again, takes a big gulp of coffee. "What are you working on there?"

"My parents died a long time ago, but they didn't tell anybody." He looks up at her and smiles. "I've been thinking about you, Marlo, about our times together."
She stares at him, her face coloring. “What do you mean? Your parents died?” She stares at him for a long time, her mouth cracked open. “I mean, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He laughs. “I’m just playing. You know, kid games. We could talk about it in the park. In the grass. I think there’s sunflowers there.” Wiping stripes of paste onto a page of the scrapbook he feels heat from her, radiating from her face. It is true though, his parents had died in the same year and by that time lost contact with most of their friends. He didn’t tell anyone because they never mentioned that he should tell anyone. He is living, in part, off the insurance money. “My parents are fine. You know, getting old though.”

Marlo looks outside. Her lips are closed. He sees in her profile the naïve little girl. “You do have an odd sense of humor,” she says, shifts in her seat. Her face has colored to mad red. “I don’t find it funny to tell me your parents died. You’re very rude.” She stands to leave. “I just thought we could talk, Lawrence.”

He does not look at her. He cannot take his eyes from his work. “I’m sorry Marlo,” he says. “You’ll have to forgive me. But please don’t go. We should talk. It’s been a long time.”

She sits. He becomes aware of her perfume in the wind from the door. It is cheap, or not perfume at all. A body cream, perhaps. “So what are you working on there? Is that your autobiography?” she says.
“Nothing really. Just a hobby. I guess it’s my autobiography. It’s pictures and their shadows.” It is not an obsession. It is not childish. It is his art. He does not speak to them, the people in his scrapbook. He simply speaks to himself with his scrapbooks open. He is aware that they are two-dimensional. “They’re just people I like. Listen Marlo, the time in your parents’ garden, in the sunflowers, remember? That meant something, right?”

She lays her hand on top of his. “Lawrence,” she says. “Are you okay? You seem, you know, a little preoccupied. Like you’re upset about something.”

It is true that he is preoccupied. He is not obsessed. He is not angry, though anger is the nature of the living. He simply does not like to be bothered when he is busy with his business. He grabs her wrist, pulls her toward him. “I’m not upset,” he says. “I am alive and I am working. You go tell your parents that.” He does not answer her and eventually she leaves again, saying it was good to see him though he knows it was not good to see him. It is true that he is a cashier and that he is working on his autobiography, but who isn’t? And who is not obsessed with it? It is the story of a life and who is not annoyed when their life is interrupted?

He is agitated that she has left, that she had not seen him in thirty years and has chosen now to go about her business.
Later, in a half dream, he has wandered north by foot to find her homey bar, though she hadn’t told him the name of it. It has been hours. He did not know the city got so dark, so quiet. He had pictured lights, had always read about city lights, but had always been home by sunset. He holds his scrapbook and magazines to his chest. Winter is pushing back at him, wind hardening the grease in his hair. He is sweating and it is cold. “She said Lincoln Park, right?” He says.

The people in his scrapbook, he sees their faces blowing around him, bending away from the wind. He likes this. It is an unconditional love between them. “I gotcha,” he says. “I gotcha.”

He meant to stay on Clark Street. A block in the wrong direction makes ghosts of you and he would like to stay among the living. “Lake’s always east,” he says. He cannot see the lake, does not know he is going away from it, does not know he is in Rodger’s Park. Glass breaks far away. There is the laughing of coyotes. He makes Marlo’s face in the windlight. “Not from you,” he says. “I won’t die from you.”

He thinks of the headline, of his obituary, of her claiming sympathy for it, claiming reason, of her getting to cry from him.
Confession at the Graveyard

I’d walked a long way from North Kedzie, over an hour certainly, to just back of the ‘yards. Your house on the corner of Peoria Street and Seventy-Fourth wasn’t far now, but my bones thinned with each step and my bulky frame grew weaker and weaker as I watched a stout Norwegian woman sweep off her wooden porch, welcome her leather-skinned family home with hot soup.

The snow in Chicago was never pretty and delicate, nor were many things near the stockyards, but city snow turned black on the ground and clouds turned the air dingey. Snow hadn’t a chance against the automobile exhaust and factory smoke. Meat-packers blew their pungence into the air and turned beautiful flakes into frozen volcanic ash. Just a light dusting of snow on this day in early December, I remember.

I could see the tops of the packing plants where immigrants worked, bloodied themselves in animal guts. My feet weren’t so cold, with my three pairs of socks, as the rest of my skin. My pants had worn
thin and my coat had a tear down the side seam and was not long past my waistline like a proper coat should have been. I hunched my shoulders to my earlobes and the strongest man in Chicago couldn’t have pried my hands from my pockets, nor my elbows from my ribcage.

I hadn’t seen you in over three months. I don’t remember why I decided to visit you on this day, probably because I’d nothing else to do, or maybe a little out of guilt. It was nineteen-seventeen and you’d caught the flu, that deadly flu, and quit your job at the motor truck company where we’d washed trucks together. I still washed there almost every day and your buddy, Nick, did too and kept me current on your condition. We weren’t the best of friends, you and I, just good work friends. We were pleasant to each other and laughed from the belly sometimes and I’d tell you about all the Mark Twain and Jack London stories I’d read. You loved that. We talked about pretty girls. You liked a girl named Rosie Zylstra.

But there was the one time the summer before you got sick when you asked me to go with you and Nick to Municipal Pier for an evening out and I said okay and got all worked up for it and met you at Jackson Park and you were standing there by yourself, just you, with your hands in your pockets leaning against a tree with this grin like you didn’t have a care in the world and you told me Nick couldn’t make it and it would just be the two of us. So we hopped on a streetcar and got to the Pier and there was a restaurant and a dance hall and people walking around
everywhere for no particular reason and they were all decked out, the men all wore their good hats and all the air smelled like perfume. We talked about work and made fun of Nick a little bit for not coming and all the girls were looking at you over their shoulders and you saw these two come out of the dance hall and you walked us over and introduced us to them and they were cute dark-haired girls and I said hi and that was the last thing I said. We were all laughing it up because you were imitating people as they walked by and saying everyone looked like a particular animal and that this one guy walking by looked like an ostrich and you told the girls they looked like fawns and we bought some roasted peanuts that were hot in the bag and we ate them and they tasted wonderful. You asked the girls if they wanted to take a boat ride back to Jackson Park since that’s where they were going and they said okay and I followed not saying a word and we got on the boat with about twenty other people and sat down with our legs hung over the edge and our arms on the bottom railing and I faced the warm wind as the boat took off and I didn’t have a care in the world as the lights from the city flashed in the black water and the air smelled new and of course the stars, the stars domed out over us big as baseballs and you could see them in the water too, and the sky and the lake looked like one big sheet of black so you couldn’t tell which was which and all the people trapped on the cement going by and getting further and further away watching us disappear into nowhere, and you and the girls were still laughing it up about something
and I just sat there with the lake air on my face going nowhere, not saying a word, and you never asked me to go anywhere with you again and I didn’t blame you and I never told you that it was the most beautiful time I’d ever had.

The thing about you was, you had purpose. If you skipped school it was to come to work because your family needed the money. You went to church because you believed. Girls were always looking at you over their shoulders. I felt sad for you and your flu so I put on my warmest clothes and made for the stockyards without a dime for a streetcar.

“Yes?” she said in a mild Dutch accent.

“I’m here to see Jake,” I said. “Did I come at a bad time?” I could feel the heat seeping from the cracked-open door and the smell of simmering meat.

“Who are you?” She looked me up and down. I’d seen her once before talking to you at work, your younger sister, Hattie. I remember thinking she had a wonderful giggle.

“I’m a friend of his from the motor truck company,” I said. Her face was straight and unimpressed. “We worked together.”

“You must not be a very good friend,” she said. “He’s been in bed for months. It’s gone to his heart now.”

I looked her up and down. She was broad beneath her dress and in her face, not unattractive, with dark wavy hair and biting eyes. These
weren’t the same eyes I’d seen in giggle at the motor truck company. These were colder. I stood with locked knees and nothing to say.

“You can see him for a little while, but he’s tired,” she said.

I gasped in the warm air and ran my fingers through my wet hair. I met your parents at the kitchen table. They didn’t speak much English, except for Hattie. Your mom felt sorry for me and made me a hot beef sandwich and some hot tea and Hattie took me upstairs to see you as I ate. I must admit I was envious of you. My mom died giving birth to me and my dad had taken off for Frisco two years prior and never came back. A Polish family down the street from us rented me a room above their deli, ran errands for them, washed dishes, the smell of kielbasa and kraut in my blankets and clothes. Never told you that.

I ducked my head under your low ceilings and followed Hattie. Our footsteps were hollow down the hallway and up the bare stairs and I chewed the delicious warm meat and slurped its juice and the soaking bread and the tea like a dog.

We came to your room and the door was open. Your heels hung over the end of the bed as mine did over my cot because we were tall. Your ghost skin just hung there on your bones, a twenty-two caliber rifle on the wall above you. You had a little oak dresser next to your bed with a lamp and a tiny hand-sized booklet on it. White curtains covered your window and brightened the gray light.
Your eyes lay open. You saw us come in and I knew you didn’t recognize me. Hattie walked over to you and I just stood in the doorway.

“A friend of yours is here to see you,” she said. “Alex, from the motor trucks.”

“It’s Strock, Jake,” I said and you lifted your head and managed a smile.

“Ssstrock,” you whispered. “Whuddaya know?”

Hattie left and I stood just inside the doorway and stared at your colorless face. Your cheeks and eyes were sunken, your blond hair matted on one side and slicked back on top. You’d always been slim, but not like this day. Your skin was loose, but still smooth and unblemished and your eyes, stone blue, cracked with blood and frosted, lay nothing less than striking in their hollow sockets. And me there lapping the last of the beef juice from the corners of my mouth and off my knuckles. I ran my fingers along my pitted face. Even cleanly shaven I felt gravelly. My hair liked to swing forward over one eye and my forehead was not a small oval like yours, but rather square. You were handsome, even in illness. I was more of an oaf, always ducking my head under doorways and trying not to trip over my own size thirteen feet.

“S’work?” you mumbled.

“Alright. Some days there’s plenty. Some days there’s nothin’.” I took a few steps closer. “That the twenty-two you were savin’ for?”
“Yeah.” You looked above and managed some pride in your smile. “She’s worth it. ‘vree penny.”

“She is a nice one.” I pretended to stare in awe and ignore the smell of illness in the room. “That your journal?” I pointed to the little booklet on the nightstand.

“Yeah,” you said. “Not much in there.”

“Oh,” I said with my eyes still on it. It was leather with gold print on the cover. *Sinclair & Co. 1917*, it said.

“Sssalesman gave that to me.”

“I remember. I was there,” I said. “There’s a map of the world in the middle of it, isn’t there?”

“Uh-huh. Ssmall one,” you yawned. “Can look at it f’ya want.”

Motor Truck Co. 420 N. Kedzie Ave. Worked there 16mo. 1 day.  29—
sick in bed all day.  30—still in bed.  Sept. 2—still in bed. Rosie was
here.  3—still in bed but improveing.  7—still in bed. Doctor was here.
Rosie came over.

Still in bed. Still in bed. Still sick in bed. The handwriting
became bigger and sloppier. Dec.1—Did not feel so well.

“Not very intresstin’, huh,” you said and began to doze off.

“Maybe I should let you sleep,” I said.

Your eyes peeled open. “S’nice uh you to sstop in. Ssorry uhm so
tired.”

“We can talk more some other time,” I said.

“Take care,” you whispered.

I held your hand to shake it, but you didn’t have much of a shake
left. “Take care, Jake.” I slid out and down the stairs and waved to your
family at the table. “Thanks for the sandwich.” I was two blocks into the
bluing cold before I realized I still had your journal in my hand. For
some reason I didn’t turn around. Maybe it was too cold. Maybe I
thought I’d see you again. Maybe it made me feel closer to you. After all,
it was your journal and you’d let me read it. I remember thinking I
should’ve brought you a book to read. That was just over seventy years
ago and I still have it. The pages are yellowed and your writing is faded
and smudged, but I still look at the maps, circled the places I’ve been,
bumming around with odd jobs and such, fake names, cooking on cruise ships, cleaning office buildings and schools, logging, keeping to myself.

I knew I would leave Chicago for sure when I saw the wind blow Rosie Zylstra right up off her feet outside of St. Mary’s before your funeral, though I thought the circumstances would be different. The wind took them right out from underneath her like an invisible lasso and planted her smack on her butt on the ice. Five more feet and she would’ve been walking up the steps and probably wound up in the hospital with a broken tailbone. But she just smacked down flat on the ice in front of God’s house and your mourners. I cupped my hands under her armpits and lifted her up and she said that she was alright. People stared in mock concern for a few seconds, but it was too cold to fake anything for very long and people went inside. She wrapped her wrist back inside my elbow and we walked like grandmas up the icy steps and into St. Mary’s.

I’d met Rosie on the way to St. Mary’s. January was rough on the body, especially the lungs. The air could freeze your toe-tips until they’d split wide open and rush right down through your mouth and ice-burn those lungs. Remember? I took a big huff of the bad wind as I turned onto Peoria Street and that’s when I noticed Rosie, in dress shoes and all, walking up next to me on the sidewalk. I looked right at her little face. She barely came up to my chest.
“Hi,” she said. Her nose was small and sharp and her lips looked warm and moist even in the ice cold.

“Hi,” I said.

“You don’t have a scarf.”

“No. I probably should.” I noticed her overcoat, tied tightly around her little waist. “Are you going to uh—“

“Jake’s funeral? Yes,” she said. “If I make it that far in these shoes.” She smiled at me. “I’m sorry, would you mind if I held onto your arm? I’ve been slippin’ and slidin’ all the way here.”

“No, that’s fine.” I stuck my elbow out for her. My insides bubbled warmth when she latched on. Bless the cold for having already chapped my face and ears red. We walked silently for about a block, our heads down, trying, I suppose, to think up proper conversation. My hands grew clammy underneath my gloves and I tried hard not to slip or stumble on those sidewalks in front of Rosie. She was very pretty.

“So what’s your name?” she asked.

“Uh, Alex. Alex Strock. What was yours?”

“Rosie Zylstra,” she said. “So, did you know Jake well?”

“Um, yeah, I suppose. Though maybe not real well. We worked together for a while,” I said. “And you?” As though I didn’t know.

“He was my boyfriend,” she said, stared at the sidewalk. “I didn’t see him much the last couple months, though. He was always sleeping.”

“Yeah,” I said. “He was a good person.”
“Did you work at the motor truck company?”


“He talked about work quite a bit,” she said.

“Did he ever mention me?” I wished I could’ve sucked this one back in. I didn’t know why I’d said it.

“I don’t remember,” she said. “Probably.” She looked up at me.

“We talked about a lot of things. I talked to him in a few months more than I talked to my family in seventeen years.” She clutched my elbow a little tighter and I must confess that it shot warm fluids through my veins all the way to my toes and fingertips. This girl I didn’t know. “I don’t think I’ll know anybody here except his family,” she said. “And they never really liked me.”

“I don’t think I’ll know many people either,” I said.

“It’s so sad. It really is.” She looked up to me again.

“Yes it is,” I said and that’s when the wind blew her feet out from under her.

When we stepped into the warmth and people began asking Rosie if she was alright I wondered how a God could flatten someone, especially someone as petite and pretty as Rosie Zylstra, right in front of his own house. Maybe he was trying to teach us a lesson about appreciating every moment because our moments on this earth could stop with the next gust of wind if somebody slaps their head off a rock or the corner of a handrail.
She was red-faced in the church as we offered our condolences to the family. Hattie glared at the two of us, looked away as I stuck my hand out to her. I didn’t know if she meant to do that or not.

Rosie told me that she was sure she was alright, but she didn’t think she could sit in the wooden pews for the mass, so we took our refuge in the velvet cushioned chairs by some confessional candles just outside the big wooden doors where the pews and everything else were. We could hear the reverend and I could see you in your casket, pale and dry with your slicked-back hair. I wondered if you were there.

The reverend: “Let us not remember Jake as ill and bed-ridden. Let us remember the God-fearing, hard-working young man. The oldest son who helped to support his family. The older brother, teacher to his siblings. The friend...”

Rosie and I sat closely and she leaned her shoulder onto mine and I put my arm around her to console her. That’s what I told myself and I smelled her black hair and sugar-white skin. Anyway, the one thing I don’t remember clearly is how it started. All I know is I kissed her on her forehead and then we started kissing and then running our hands lightly over each other and then harder and harder still and I wondered if you were there again but I couldn’t stop and her face was cold and naked and I brushed my thumb down her throat and she gasped and I slid my hand up her thigh and she did the same to me and it felt so good, my hands on her delicate little skin and her tongue in my mouth and I loved the taste
of her and I wanted to eat her up but it was awkward, the position we were in, I mean. Sitting in two separate chairs and we were grabbing and gasping and kissing all the while and I had her by the back of her head, pulling on her hair and I went to move her over the arms of the chairs toward me in some bungling lustful way and that’s when I felt her neck snap. Her limp weight slouching away from me and sliding out of her chair and my fingers sliding out of her and I shook her on the floor and smacked her, opened her eyelids to a white stare and I shook her again and told her “I’m sorry” at least two dozen times and I shook her some more, had her by the shoulders just shaking, shaking and I kissed her one more time on the mouth and ran out and disappeared. Were you watching? I swore I felt eyes on the back of my neck. It was your funeral on January fourth of nineteen-eighteen and it was awful.

If you’re here now, I’m sorry, Jake.