Stressors and Coping Behaviors of Female Peer Leaders Participating in College Club Sports

Leigh A. Bryant

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If They Are Holy They Are Pinned To It Like a Spear Through a Boar

John Bryant

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
2015

Keywords: Grace, Jesus, Violence
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ABSTRACT

If They Are Holy They Are Pinned To It Like a Spear Through a Boar

John Bryant

Following the tradition of Flannery O’Connor, Andre Dubus and Torgny Lindgren, this collection of eighteen short stories is a hunt for grace in a world of violence, greed and death. They are stories of supernatural intervention, of grace where it is least likely.
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Preface

The only important thing for my writing is the revelation of Jesus Christ in the world and in my life. I find the world charged with His presence and grace. It is hard to separate my fiction from my faith because my faith is the shape of the world I’m in, and the way by which I see and the things that I see. By that vision I see the supernatural in the natural, poverty and death and violence shot through with holy mystery and grace.

My primary purpose in my fiction is to see if there is a place where grace cannot go. I have found there isn’t. My characters are cruel and horrible in the way I am and I find even their cruelty and violence tinged with a desperate light. If they are good, if they turn to the good, if they are holy, it is because they have been pinned to it like a spear through a boar. By that I mean, all intervention and saving grace comes from outside themselves and most often against their will.

Supernatural interventions take many forms in my stories. It sometimes comes as fire, sometimes as an insane horse, a ticket to an art show, indigestion, a cup, most often as quiet. The intervention is always a radical assertion of value on that which previously had no value, where those who are lost are found, those who are worthless are priceless.

I credit three authors as primary influences. Flannery O’Connor for sureness and unblinking merciless grace, Andre Dubus for the simplicity of word and sound and the utter mystery with which ordinary people are seen, and Torgny Lindgren for his surreal risks, for the way he sees life and people touched by the insanity of the Holy Spirit.
My father was a pastor. He drove, his hand almost on the steering wheel. There were a lot of people who needed him and he could not hold them all inside a prayer so they were in his shoulders and in the way he drove. He closed his eyes in prayer and the dog was run over. He heard it taken under the car. He pulled off the road and looked back. It was a border collie, pointy ears, intestines reaching out of its brown coat. He slowed his hands, himself. He was so rarely guilty of anything that when he was he wanted to be in it like warm water. He knew if stood up, and looked at it, there would be quiet. He unbuckled his seat belt, opened the door to the wideness of the road, to see what he had done. I put my hand on his. I was crying. He’d forgotten my birthday. The sun was going down. He let the door go and put his hand in his pocket. He sat in the car and let me become nine.

He checked the tires with his foot, made his way to where the dog moved a little. He pulled up his pants and stood over the exploded border collie and I stood behind him. I didn’t know if I was allowed to be near something that wasn’t supposed to die. My dad waved his hand for me. I held his and we looked. His voice was tender because he was sad and it was not hot outside. In the summer, in the shade, you could look at something you’d run over and it had a soul.

The dog didn’t have a collar. My dad tried to think of a name that would’ve come between the dog and the car, a name so precious it would keep the dog in a house with food and people saying his name over and over. He said, “Buddy,” said it softly and said
it again until ache and sweat and smell was not there and there was quiet. The quiet held
the colon and the intestine out to us, dirt and wet, moving veins. I looked at it. I was not
mad that he had run over a dog, that my father had pulled over. I was mad that I’d seen
it, that it was allowed inside the day I was born. It knew more than how old I was. It
was an image that knew more than what could be said.

My hand slid off my fathers. I turned. There was its smell. My father swayed
like a branch. He looked at the colon and intestine until it made him a better father,
sweeter with where his gaze rested.

He bought me an ice cream cone, took me to football games. I could not see, in
the car with an ice cream, what I see now that I’ve started smoking outside gas stations,
when I take a drag, close my eyes, and spend my life with a dog who has just been run
over. I see it walk in the cool summer. I see something in it belly, pushing against it,
waiting for the belly to be split open. My father’s car runs over it, the belly opens, gives
the world not only its colon and intestine but a new father, restoration. A father who
spends time with his son and drives very, very carefully.

I wake up in a shirt where Jimmy Hendrix smiles. The AC is off. My eyes are
closed. The sun is in my room, then in my clothes, then with me. It pulls me out of the
electricity and I grow until I am my head and neck and shoulders and the sweat all over
my skin. I take off the covers. I roll onto the part of the bed where the sun is not. I wait
for the sun to let go of my shirt.
I put my fingers under the bed until I have old, tattered pornography in my hand. I pull it from my bed and open it and the sunlight finds a girl naked, her breasts held at everyone, at no one, like they are inevitable. Her eyes are dull and heavy with mascara so that her soul cannot get in. But I can find her soul. It is in her crooked tooth. She doesn’t know she has a crooked tooth, that is what saves her.

I pull Jimmy Hendrix over my belly, scratch the mozzarella off when I find it in the large mirror. I pull my fingernail over it and it is taken away. I put my hands in my hair and muss it up, put on aviators, adjust the look until the image in the mirror has a secret and knows what I do not. I was going to spend the day with my father, wash him, clean him. But the way I look asks me for a cigarette.

I go outside, into the yard. I am in the car that ran over the dog. My father is in the house. He opens the door, stands there. The wind is in his pajamas. He looks at me so he can understand why I’m getting in the car and if he can go too.

He moves the air conditioner away from him, so he can sweat. He closes his eyes and nods with the sun. I don’t know what it means—his eyes closed, the nod in the sun. But he has cancer now and a gesture, when he does one, lingers because there is no energy for the next. I don’t know what it means but the closest I get is that he is old and will never be mad because it is finished. Such a strange movement of the head and neck, so memorable. I almost didn’t look long enough to see it, and now all of his life will be this moment instead. I will looks at this moment until something begins in me.

I turn to my father. The sweat on his lips casts him from me. I press the faded button that will bring the radio into the car and get rid of us. The rock music is on, and I mouth, “I wanna rock.” When I say this I am in a language that will not let me put a
hand on his shoulder and tell him I love him. He does not put his finger in his ears. He 
stares into the speaker, sweetly.

He took me to footballs games with that same sweet look. Once, he forgot our ticket and we knew we could not get the ticket and come back with anything left to see. We walked around the tailgates, looking for where I could pee. I stood behind him when he talked to college kids, asked if they knew where a restroom was. There was rock music. He did not know they were making fun of him, beer down their baby fat, fingers pointed in wild different direction. He was not a pastor here, he was not his name. When they took his name from him they found out he was sweet. He stared sweetly at them. I peed my pants, urine down my jeans, a pool on the ground. I looked at their stillness, their sudden stop. I was not with them. I hated my father more than they ever could.

A cigarette out the window. We’re driving to a Mexican restaurant. I will look at him. Maybe he will hug me. I will close my eyes when we sit down. I will find him in my prayer, I will hide him from what he looks like--- smelly, thin, shaking in a Mexican restaurant.

I swerve from the path of a dog or deer or rabbit. Our car is in the ditch, a wheel talking to the air. There is a gap between what is and what is next. There is a phrase inside me that does not belong to me but to rock n roll. Rock n roll stands, invisible, over me, closer and closer, until it speaks through my open mouth.

“Fuck this shit.”
My father’s eyes close on me. I’ve brought him to a world where some things are impossible between us. He puts his smooth hand on my shoulder and asks, almost raising his voice, if he can get out and walk. I nod into the sun, not sure what this gesture will let him do. He ties his sneaker and pushes open the door eventually. He emerges from the car as a man who is not mad and will not talk to me.

Outside, the wind turns his pajamas against him. They twirl and dance around a man with bone cancer. He turns, looks, tries to decide why he is walking away from me and the cigarette in my hand. The wind lets him fall, lays him to rest on a patch of grass, near a beer can. Cancer has made him take his time with where he looks. Cancer has pulled his name from him left him on the side of the road where he can be sweet. He sits under a hill that dwarfs him, the hill holds him and the beer can as things equal.

The wind blows stronger. He looks at me in panic, gives me a thumbs up, slow, unsure. I cannot explain the gesture does not belong to him, stands outside him. I cannot explain how the gesture finds his unkempt hair, the stains on his pajamas, and condemns him.

My father is a great man. He raised me, took care of me. He is gracious. But the image—him in the grass, pajamas all around him—knows more than him and me and his life. It knows he is wretched.

I hear a tap on the glass, look up. It is him, wind in his pajamas, trying to get in.

I have felt myself wanting to slit his throat. It is a feeling not like temptation but like gravity pulling me to his throat. I know what would happen. My father would look at me, blankly, sweetly, his throat slit. The sadness of it is I would still not be cruel, would just be trying to prove I was. Blood down his throat, he would see way I held the
knife, shaking, hands still unsure. He would know that I am innocent, there is a
sweetness my body cannot get to and cannot get rid of.
A Sad Old Man Who Would Not Die

He stepped under a lamppost and it revealed he was seventy and was going to eat a cheeseburger. He stole the cheeseburger so it would replace his old age with the thrill of stealing a cheeseburger. He was bald and homeless but had a look on his face that said this was all according to plan. The police saw him steal the cheeseburger from a woman who brought it to her chin. He ran so slow they somehow all agreed it was too sad to chase him.

He stood under the lamppost, where the light noticed his small, dirty jacket. It was torn and dirty and faded because he’d stolen it several years ago and it was small because he’d stolen it from a child several years ago. He looked pinched at the waist. Other homeless people made fun of him with the look on their face but he was not smart enough to live in a world that could embarrass him.

He put the cheeseburger in his mouth, then looked up into the warm, electric light as if an old enemy had gently touched his face. He sat down, spread his legs, his head against the lamppost. He was tired. He took a deep breath and at the end of it he was bored. He could not move. He felt like his body was trying to make him become the act of reflection.

He did not reflect. Years of hard living had given him peace instead of wisdom, and sitting down, with slow dark eyes, it looked like he was about to die of something that would leave him a noble stuffed animal. He waited for it.
When he started feeling like his own death was apart from him, and not interesting, he turned himself into the look of agony so his death would have more ceremony. In the light, in his small dirty jacket, contorted face, he felt that old age was not something inside him but something he could hold out like a lantern to show everyone that elderliness was a wild ride.

People walked by without looking. One group of people were in a hurry but knew that he was old and weak. They wanted to stop and help but being late to a movie makes a world where the elderly die alone.

When they almost stopped, he saw he was not his body-- he was the look on their face. He was whatever would make them stay longer. He made his face become despair. When they left, he knew he was not alone. He would be with them in the guilt they felt for not taking him to the hospital. He closed his eyes because it felt like that was something.

He took a bite of the cheeseburger, looked at his watch, decided there was just enough time for something to hurt his feelings. He chose a memory that would make his as beautiful and simple as a plane crash.

He closed his eyes and stared at the large blue truck that almost ran over his daughter many years ago. It was a good memory. It was a large blue truck and when it drove into the edge of her dress it made the world new. That day he’d been hurrying to the grocery store with his daughter. She was singing and dancing and he was holding her hand too hard because he didn’t like her. The truck passed by and almost hit her. He let go of her hand and stared after the large blue truck and the world it left him in, a world
where his daughter was dead and there was nothing he could do. Though that world was
dark, it was more compelling than his ugly daughter and what he would cook for dinner
and the fact that she was fine.

The old man was simple back then. He dragged her home, did not cook dinner,
and tucked her in bed. Then he walked past the grocery store, into the local diner. Asked
for a cheeseburger. He put the burger in his mouth and began his slow fade into the
obese. He was there every night. Every night in the diner, head down, arms on the table,
mourning the death of a daughter who was still alive and he had no time for.

He left a tip for the waitress, every night he was in the diner. Since his wife had
left him, and in his simple heart his daughter was dead, there was no one left to take care
of and abuse, and grief had made him kind.

It was only when he stumbled home that he saw his daughter was ugly and safe.
One night he stumbled home, walked past her room, saw her sleeping, arms sprawled, in
unwashed sheets. He regretted hating her. The regret made him feel like he was
supposed to be someone he had never seen before. He went to shake her out of bed so he
would feel more like himself. But his obesity made so much noise she stirred gently
from her sleep. He saw her beautiful eyes staring out of the darkness that hid her ugly
face. He was surprised and wondered if she saw him, tip toed out of the room. He stayed
out later and later and never went to her room again. He was not complicated enough to
want to be a good father. But he did not want to be made unkind.

In time his daughter became as thin and vague as a ghost because there was no
one there to cook for her or give her life the shape and direction even hatred can give. As
she got older she wandered around the house with big breasts and no idea what they should do, and said nothing to him when he came home.

One night she opened the window and ran from the house into the arms of a man who touched her breasts. She stayed with him and called his names and looked in his mirror and almost touched it. When the day came he bought her mascara and a low cut top. When she put them on, she looked in the mirror and saw with both terror and relief that the mascara and top made every decision about what her life could include. When the man came in to the bathroom and smiled and touched her breasts she smiled too because she had never felt so specific and vivid, and it was almost like someone was holding her hand.

She became a prostitute because it was what people thought she was. But it was possible, whenever she would dance or sing, to see was a seven year old girl looking, searching for a way out of the shell of a twenty year old whore.

The old man did not know this. One night she came into the diner with her purse, an exhausted bosom, and friends. She looked at him. She didn’t know he would be here, and knew she never wanted to see him again. But she wanted to tell him he’d hurt her very much. He had his face down on a plate, eyes closed. She touched his hand and he looked and said No thanks. She took her purse and left without a word because he was not smart enough to live in a world where he had ruined someone.

The old man moved his feet a little under the lamppost, the wind lying down at his feet like a dog. He was relieved. He closed his eyes, put the burger in his mouth, and looked at his small dead daughter—run over—and how it made him feel. Now that he
was a sad person he could die narrowed to a point of feeling, have it push all the way through him and into his death.

Indigestion took her from him. He pulled his stolen burger from his mouth, opened his eyes and gasped. There was an empty city street, a small circle of light and no place to take a shit. He saw himself dying under the lamppost: his breathing shallow, eyes closing slowly, shit spraying everywhere. He shut his eyes and chose a sad memory to close his anus.

When he closed his eyes hard enough he saw his older brother. His older brother was always nine when he saw him. He was beautiful, with brown hair, big slow eyes that could not decide if you were interesting.

His older brother used to cross busy streets without looking back at him or telling him where he was going. The old man was 73 but he was always younger than his nine year old brother and he still in his heart wanted to know where his brother was going and if he could go too.

An artful, unchosen piece of human longing asked itself into his chest and spread from there. It relaxed him, pulled his butt cheeks apart. He could feel his shit begin. Terror brought his cheeks together. He bunched his eyebrows and pushed the longing into a dot of safe unbearable pain by remembering the day someone ran his brother over.

His nine year old brother was supposed to take him to basketball practice. But his brother let go of his hand so he could eat a cheeseburger with both hands without spilling the ingredients. He was about to cross the street. He decided the red convertible down the road was unimportant and took his step. The convertible ran into the burger, then into
him. In the street his brother was a bloody stump. Blood ran down the yellow dashes of the road, and he saw with both terror and relief that his brother still did not think the car was important, and was going to eat the air where there was not a cheeseburger. Before he could run in the street and be concerned he thought his brother was beautiful.

If his older brother would’ve died, they would’ve mourned the body and he would’ve been able to go to basketball practice. With a sense of melancholy that would’ve kept him away from loose women and led to a state championship.

But his older brother was only crippled and paralyzed and no one could do what they enjoyed because he had to be wiped and cleaned.

And the old man as a young boy become selfless and giving because he had to take his brother to the bathroom and feed him. And because he had to be become selfless and giving he had evil thoughts about his brother that he never would’ve had if he could’ve been a kid instead of a good person. He learned the tacky, loveless thing it is to take care of someone. And that his brother was not even a sad mystery. He saw his brother in his bed, slobbering, bored. And because he was simple he learned to hate his brother because he would not be beautiful or die.

The old man did not have words for this. The old man stood up slowly, under the lamplight, and pulled down his pants. Feces sang out of him. Head radiated out of his anus and pulled him from his childhood into the warmth of his body.
He fell on his feces when he sat back down. People turned their face from him and hurried, faster and faster, to the movies. He was embarrassed and tried to sleep. If he was asleep then he was not sad and covered in feces.

He woke up to the smell of himself. It was morning and a question rose in him. Who was he when he was covered and shit and would not die?

He looked at his feces on the ground, covered in drifts of snow, turned the burger over in his hand.

He got up, holding it, and went to find the police so he could confess to stealing it. Then he was would be a sinner and someone could at least tell him what happens next.

He went to the policemen. They sat in their squad car. The policemen held their nose and told him he was too dirty to have done anything wrong.
Safe Insects

Ben woke on a bus that lay on its side, a dead girl’s hair in his mouth. He pulled it out of his mouth and let it stay on his face. There was sun on the ends of her hair, and it was soft, and smelled of what she’d touched at the petting zoo, and what touched her. It came down into his mouth. Nothing in his life was the calm of when it laid on him. He felt the blood in his heart was bigger than this bus and its suffering. His blood stood over this bus, and was its shepherd.

Ben examined himself. His friend woke to a crooked piece of steel in his stomach and began to play with it, absently. But nothing in the world had touched Ben as softly as this bus falling off the road, when it landed on him as a lock of hair. He had good parents but they forgot to ever touch him this softly.

He saw her face between the lines of her hair, her head smashed through the window. She chose this crash as a sign of joy, her lips pulled back, eyebrows lifted as if there would be something else coming when it was all quiet, and she was listening for it. He knew he was to wait, and that only way to be quiet was to let her head fall on him.

When it was quiet, and her hair, in its length and shine and smell, was with him, the kingdom of God that began in his chest, his heart full of days he had not lived—he and this girl, their love, his marriage to this beautiful woman, growing old with her. His heart lived all the days his hands would not touch. He knew those days belonged to him especially if his body could not find them.
The rescuers found him under the girl, and when they lifted him out with strong arms her hair fell off him like water, and he hid the glory of her hair in the rise and fall of his chest.

He was a bad and loud boy. He used to pull his sister’s hair, but he walked out of the bus with no mark on his body and with a quiet that was his. The quiet filled the room where he lied down, his legs crossed on the hospital bed, until it was not the doctor’s room, or the nurse’s room. The room was his and when a nurse or doctor found themselves in his room they suddenly had nothing to do and found there was time to look around and hear everyone breathe. They thought it was the quiet after a bus falls off the road and kills children, but he knew, in his heart, it was the quiet after a beautiful girl rests her head on your shoulder and there is no one to tell. It was quiet. If he was still he could live all the days he would never touch.

His parents drank coffee with small hands and said his name voice smooth and low so he would know he’d finally done nothing wrong. He listened to the sound of his name and was in joy, because there was nothing that it meant, and there was nothing he was supposed to do other than have it. The sound of his name made his breath slow, and he could feel it slowly start to matter what he said. He let the quiet grow, until it seemed a shame to break it with what he had to say.

They asked him what happened.

It was wrong for there to be hair in his mouth, for the sun to play on the ends of her hair, for her head to fall on his and for it to be the simple good that it was. The moment was safe if it was the different way he breathed—slower now, more air going in and out. The moment was good and simple if he said nothing about it. It would not live
in words as the thing it was in his chest. He did not want to bring the air in his chest into words that ended.

They looked at him, bending down, and the glory of her hair was in the room as the quiet and the fact he would say nothing about it, and he liked this. The secret hung in this room as quiet, a still chandelier everything shined through and shined off. It shined on them, shined on him, changing things. They would touch him gently, interested in him.

His dad offered him a candy or a coke. He refused, thinking he could either eat or be where he was. Everything stood to life, the room, the people, and the air, pressed itself into a dot through his chest and pinned him to the bed like a safe insect. Food would move this moment from him.

His sister came out from behind their legs with a Twix and a look on her face. She shook the Twix shook in her hand. She was red and crying because she thought he was dead. It felt like the only way to be quiet was to reach his arm out to her. He thought it would mean something if he reached out for the Twix, and she reached it out to him. She was sad because she wanted to give it to him but she knew it was hers and she knew, above all else--from all her years with a wild, mean, brother--you cannot give something that is yours. It took all her strength to wipe the tears she’d made for his death, and move it from her heart, to look at him and say,

“It’s mine.”

When she spoke, the sounds of coughing, phones, and lights were suddenly brought in the room and everyone was who they were before.
The next day, when home under their feet, the TV on, his sister opened the glass door, and went outside. She spun around when it shut, began pounding on the door with her hands—though she could reach the handle easily, and knew it was unlocked. She pounded and pounded, louder and louder, and you could tell her hands were so much smaller than what had begun in her heart, and she cried to be let in, and cried until Ben got off the couch and opened the door for her. She stood in the foyer, and swayed. Then she opened the door with one hand, and went out. When it shut she turned around slowly, as if it all must happen this way, and threw herself at the door, crying to be let in. He would go up to the door, and say,

“Open it.”

She would cry and cry and the parents saw her from the recliner, and the sound of her voice was not the precious thing the TV was to them. They did not turn their face to her. Ben stared at her through the glass door. He waited for the tantrum to ride itself out of her arms and legs. When she stopped and held her breath, and he held his, the quiet was the quiet on the bus. He stared at her with that quiet. Its knowledge was in his eyes. She stared back at him with eyes that said she had decided a lot of things and he was too late. He could stare and stare and it would make nothing in her. He would always be outside what she knew in her heart.

He opened the door, and let her in, and she sat down with her parents and watched TV, blameless, and they finally held her. He stood in front of the TV. He thought it would mean something if they could hold this moment out in front like a scientist, just look at it, until it clarified itself, revealed itself to them. It was supposed to mean something, all of them together like this. He wanted it to be quiet because there was a
secret in it, he wanted the secret to be for them, it would not come from his mouth but from quiet that hung down on their heads like a chandelier.

Their refusal did not make sense with how old his heart was, when his father put his hand on his son and moved him, gently, out of the way of Wheel of Fortune. He was the son who almost died. He closed his eyes and focused to make sure he was the son who almost died. But little by little he was the son who was in front of the television, and his father stung his hands into his son’s armpits, lifted him and his sister set them down in the grass outside, and closed the door.

She picked up her tricycle, and started to ride. She was slow because she was learning, in loose circles getting bigger and bigger, then, suddenly, she was doing better than she ever had and it made her calm and start to think. Something about her success gave her clarity and made her start to cry. He stood inside the circles she made and held his feet to the ground and decided to look at her until she knew why she was crying.

When he walked by her, she stopped her tricycle as the front wheel pinned down leaves, looked at him, her feet poised over the pedals. She breathed hard, then quietly. There was something she had not decided about him.

He dodged her once, then again. She pointed her brow and the wheel of her tricycle into his life. He couldn’t decide if this was fun or good for them. He went across the street, where she would stop before the big black road and know better. She would circle back into herself. But she stood poised at the road, even as a car was about to cross. She set her brow against the car, and followed him into the street.
The car swerved to miss her, and hit an oncoming car, then flipped and spun and slid and landed pressed up against Ben like a warm chair, pressed up on him just enough to correct his posture.

Inside, a man’s face bloodied, hanging out of the car, ear buds in his ears. When the car stopped, Ben found quiet hung in and out of the wreckage in a spiral.

This quiet. Ben stood and looked. The car and the man illuminated by what he knew when a girl lays her head on his shoulder. All two tons seemed to lift with the knowledge he had, then seemed to nest in the grass. He knew, now and when the girl laid her head on his shoulder, that there was nothing that there was to do but be there. Everything was already there, in our hearts. Everything was already safe. He opened the car door. He pulled out the man’s earbuds and sat with him because he didn’t have any questions.
The boy was 15 or 16. He shot the man in the throat, though he almost asked him for directions and kept his hand in his pocket. He shot him in the throat because he knew he wouldn’t. He held the gun. He felt like he had become someone he had never seen in movies. The man unbuttoned his jacket, took a seat on the curb, made sure not sit on glass. Blood in his neck as slow as a question, then thick and sure and fast. It shined on the ground with what was left of the sun.

The boy did not turn or run or concentrate. The wind blew his shirt. The man on the curb letting his blood on the street was just one among many other things he could see. The man looked up from the blood in his lap like you would from a book you’d been reading, looked at the boy like it would change the boy’s shape, then with the motion of a hand asked the boy to sit.

It was not, to either, a crime. Through the shot they had found one another, and through the shot there was, finally, time to give someone a good, hard look. The boy sat, took a breath. He felt went further into his body. The man pulled a piece of gum from his pocket and put it in his mouth. Blood shot out of his neck when he chewed. He chewed fast so he would have all the flavor before he passed away.

He offered the boy a piece but the boy shook his head just enough for it to mean it was not the reason he was here. The gun lay behind him, embarrassed slightly.

The man asked him where he was from, his home life, what he wanted to be, but with less attention as he lost his blood. The boy answered with an increasing confidence.
and knowledge in himself. The man went for something in his coat—a gun or knife the boy didn’t know. The boy didn’t even move to get comfortable. He leaned in. He belonged, more than life and death, to what the man would do next. The man spent the few seconds before he died looking for something he found eventually—a ticket, bent on the ends. He gave it to the boy.

“Someone should go.”

The boy looked at it with the time it took to read. An art show on Charleston St. The boy tried to remember which was street that was. The man laid back on his elbows like he was on the beach, had a small new thought and plenty of time.

“This is not a free gift,” he said, his death making him cryptic and squinty, “You’re going to have to earn this.”

The boy turned to leave, almost running, then knowing he was safe. He felt the last of the man’s blood leave like we feel the TV on in another room. He turned from the faraway shape the man made on the ground. The gift was more than the ticket. It was how, like water to wine, a bullet in the throat was a way to get to know someone a little better and ask them a few questions.

The boy held the ticket. He set the gun on top of a can of soda in a pile of trash. He’d discovered everything he could with it.

The art gallery was three blocks down, on Charleston. He tried to tuck his t-shirt into his jeans. He gave the ticket to the fat man in the jacket outside the door. The man opened the door. The boy turned and asked for the ticket back. The man agreed with his double chin.
He passed another man in a jacket, then in a woman in a tight red dress, her hair beautiful in a way she seemed not to care about—piled hair, loose. He held the ticket his palm, loose but there so he could prove to anyone he was there because he was meant to be.

He walked around the curve of sculptures. The carpet pushed back on his shoes. He almost touched certain paintings. He squared himself in front of a painting, a mess of lines in shapes he could not identify, stared at it until people by brushed him with coats and sleeves. He was trying to find one that matched the shape of what had just happened, the shape of water to wine.

There was one painting—a man in a cloud, touching another man with the tip of a finger. He was to stare at the painting until he felt himself earn something.

Sirens, blue flashing light caught in moments of glass around the gallery. In the room, on the soft carpet, the report, hung from mouth to mouth, of a man shot and killed three blocks down, shot all the way in the throat.

He pulled the ticked into his pocket. People stirred to his left and right, some gathered their purses and their things while others still thought art was interesting. He heard the way they spoke, cold bloodling killing, random, murderer, some poor bastard. How dim a picture it was of him and the gentle man, his blood and the time they’d spent together. The world was not in the shape of facts, so he stared harder at art.

The woman in the tight red dress came up to his painting, stood just a bit further than she would have if she thought he wasn’t going to kill her. He turned to her, at eyes she would not give him. She turned with her hips, left him for another painting. There was not a painting that could hold him then.
He ate a cube of cheese and followed her out the door, stayed as far from her as she had from him. When he spotted an alley, he came to her, his momentum pulled them both into the alley, his hands on her hips. He pressed up to her chin and thigh. She was worn and tired but she struggled, wanted him to leave, to go, so bad it embarrassed him, made him feel he didn’t deserve any better than to rape and kill her. She said no to the weight of him. Then she touched his cheek, tried to fix his hair a little, and her touch on his wrist asked him to not be so impressed with his sins. It made his dick shrivel into the heart of his legs.

He looked for his knife, found he’d put it inside her belly to make her quiet, her loss of blood on his pants and shoes what made her so soft with him. He stabbed her again. It went in so easy he was embarrassed. He tried two or three times but couldn’t get the feeling right. He looked in her eyes for what she thought of him. He didn’t want to stab her. He would stab her until she said he wasn’t a murderer and said it like a free gift. She let go of herself. He guided her into a position she could present to the world.
It Had Already Descended upon the Gas Station

Ben and Paul are old and sit in recliners. Only Ben is close enough to the window to see through it. He sleeps but could see, if he chose, the hills and valleys the window has set on his lap.

Ben is 98 years old, with the strong line of his chin and the cut of his shoulders not diminished but surrounded by his weight. He looks, to the children and grandchildren who peak through the door, like a potato that could move. His rape and murder have not left the cars and alleys of the 20’s and 30’s and followed him into this room—a side room, almost a closet, where two men who have lived here all their life can die while the floor is swept. If the shadow of what he’s done in the 20’s and 30’s were to open the door and step quietly in, it would lean over and see Ben in that shape and know he is not more than his breath.

Paul wakes with the sun, reaches for it with his chin. His eyes open from prayer, the crust breaks from itself, and when they open he feels he does not have a body yet, not quite yet. He does not feel himself against his green pajamas—big, robing his crescent moon shape. He knows if he moves, just an inch, that his hunger will be here, and his cancer. Just an inch then his wife will have died 30 years ago. His hunger, cancer, her death, are not always true but must become true every day, waiting for him to break his stillness so they are. Paul turns his eyes to see what things are when cancer, hunger, and
death are not here yet. In the stillness, in the morning light, Paul is not his body or his ego. He is his soul and since his soul cannot look out the window his soul is looking right at Ben.

What it is like for Paul to be a soul is something he cannot explain, other than to say it was in this room, as a boy, that he first met that part of himself. When he was boy, he ran around the hall during the family holiday, in and around people and chairs, his Uncle Ben laughed with his mom and the woman he brought home. He ran, stopped in this room because of the smell of wood and dark that called him to it and set him apart. He peaked through boxes and lamps and found a window with dark blinds around it. He opened them to a wide expanse of sky, and though it was not beautiful, something about the dark he was in and the sudden leap to the bright world made him look at the hills and clouds and valleys and feel there was something in him as big as it. And this was also the feeling that there in the dark and sudden light he did not have a body, that his name was not Paul because he did not have a name, that there was no part of him that was young. He saw something that made him a soul when he was supposed to be a small child.

He turned around then, in the room, heard Uncle Ben laugh, his mother laugh. He felt this moment, the family laughing, children running, was already something gone, something he found a in a tomb that he could pick up and hold in his hand, look at from all sides and say what it was. For Paul a soul was the part of him that was already at the end, where the division between body and air and things was gone. What it was for Paul was a desolation that asked him to love.

His little brother, blonde, squirmed into the room like barbed wire, opened the door, moved in and through the dark room to get to him. He got to Paul and hit him in
the ribs, tried to jump on him. Paul did not feel close to his brother when his brother hit him. Paul felt the distance of when they married other people and were old and moved away and that distance trembled in his hand when he set it on his brother’s head, set it on his brother’s head not to bother him but to hold it there. He was only his hand on his brother’s head. His brother got out from under him like a bird and went back into Uncle Ben’s laughter.

His brother gone, he felt his body come back to him till he was the size of his arms and legs. He studied the horizon, hoped to memorize it so he could close his eyes and have its miles inside him in every direction and feel as big and open and nameless, he would open his eyes the horizon would be in his hand as he made eggs or petted his dog. His body gone he would only be his hand coming out of the sky.

Ben is not a man Paul has ever liked. Something in Paul, in the stillness of this room, will not let Ben be a rapist today. He is looking at Ben with an interest he would only have if Ben was a small stone he’d found. What Paul sees when Ben is not a rapist is Ben’s hair, wisps in all directions, smooth shield of forehead, cheeks like small rotten fruit. He feels like he is the light that could touch it, a hand on what is wrong with Ben’s head.

Ben looks out the window, expands a little as he receives the horizon and morning light. His breath leaves and sets him back in his chair. His eyes close to the horizon, casts its miles out of him and back into the yard.
Paul dips his head down, and listens. Air slides in Ben’s teeth, he listens for something other than air in his breath, something of him, something of rape, murder, or glory in his breath. Ben taps his foot, if you were closer you could almost hear him giggle. Paul leans for it, a hand out to catch the breath. His muscles, their ache, now a part of who he is again. There is somewhere quiet and open inside Ben where he is not a rapist, and the wretchedness and sins of the body cannot go, Paul wants to be there with him. But Paul is in the ache in his body. Paul moves now. He makes his arms belong to him, touches his wrist. His legs notice the recliner. There is not a quiet place inside him that goes on for miles in either direction. But this simple room looks back at him. And he looks at it, how small it is, its one window. He prays over how simple and earnest it is. He looks around, its lighting, a cobweb, a floorboard stuck up just an inch. These things stare at him out of his prayer. Earnest simple wonders. The room bends down, puts it hand on his head, send him off to sleep.

A young girl, someone’s granddaughter, peaks her head into the door to see if they smell, then cuts back into the noise in the living room.

Ben’s breath turns heavy and wet. His breath lifts him up off the chair and shakes him, breath so loud there is nothing in the room but itself. Paul wakes to it a widower with cancer, the truths as close as they can get, in the beat of his heart. He closes his eyes to find the quiet horizon, a small place inside where he cannot be furious and old. But there is nothing in his chest but cancer and Ben’s breath. And Paul shakes with it and his cancer and her death like maracas. He feels Ben breathe with rape and its satisfactions.

He throws the quilt off. He will get out, he can only be weak and furious here. He puts his hand on the arms of the chair, puts muscle and bone together, lifts. His hands
question his weight. The present tense springs at him, throw his dead wife and the pain in his hip on him. He falls. He makes a little home of himself on the floor, knees together.

The sound nudges Ben awake. His eyes burn open. Whatever Ben was looking at it in the dream is in the world as Ben’s eyes, open, earnest, swelling. Paul can hear Ben pick words out of the bottom of his throat. Ben says,

“I know you. She was a whore. She left you. I saw it. She left you. I was sitting here, I saw you two outside this window, saw her rip her hand from you. I was tired, it was the first time I was really tired. I would’ve taken her, do you know that, I would’ve held her there. She left you, you didn’t see her again. It was what she wanted.”

It was true—they were in their twenties. She said Paul was too earnest, too sensitive. She had said goodbye outside this window by her car. And she meant it, pulled her hand back. She would’ve meant it for the rest of her life. But he called her back, on the phone, begged, explained. She came back, they touched. They were married 40 years, no kids. She died in a hospital while he was on his way.

But he heard it in her voice when he called her back, that she almost said goodbye again, was just about to. The “No” already the shape of her throat, already in the way she breathed in over the phone. But her throat relaxed, the “No” went back down to live somewhere else in her, to be true somewhere else.

It was not always true they were married 40 years, that he got her back. It was mostly true. Sometimes, out of nowhere, it was true they broke up, had always broken up that day. A look from her, the withdrawal of her hand, would change the time they spent into the time they hadn’t. When he came home late and her at the dinner table, looking at him, hair in curls. And her look would last for minutes, hands under the table, until a
world grew out of that look, a world where they had always been apart. Forty years of heartbreak, being without her, right there, on the dinner table—all that food and no hands. Her cold back to him when he touched her shoulder at night, a way of saying, “I left that day, I got in the car, I didn’t come back, You’ve never had me, You’ve always been alone.”

Ben’s sense of himself drains from his eyes, slips back inside his body to hide. His body rocks, becomes sleep. The pain in Paul’s hip, the present tense loosens, Paul is left on the floor. It makes the room stand back, sad, objective, the sun dims with it. The shadow of all that time alone, all that time without her, steps in. It looks down. It recognizes him. Paul curls closer to his own body. He closes his eyes to see if he can be as small as the rise and fall in his chest so the shadow will pass over him.

He wakes over himself, sees himself curled like a baby who was dead before it was born. Knows himself with a kind of pity. He recognizes it as the shape his nephew took. Hands in its legs. He had no children but for three hours he was an uncle.

Thirty years ago his brother called him on the phone, told him to go to the hospital, that a baby was born. They hadn’t spoken in years. There was no distance in his voice, as close as his blood. On his way he was out of gas. He stopped at a gas station he’d always been to, dirty, dusty. No one knew he was an uncle, no one moved with it, but the joy of his nephew’s birth was already here. It had descended upon the gas station. The candy aisle now the place where light played off sealed packages, the cold drink aisle where you could put your hand on the frost the glass door and see the shape it took. He felt like he was only his hand. It touched things in wonder. A cashier with snaggle tooth,
a snaggle tooth he decided must be delighted in, that there should be a halo round. He thought he would stay longer, put his hand on hers out of the surprise and depth of his joy, something that would be mysterious to her and him. He said she was beautiful and she knew he meant it. It made her cry.

When he got to the hospital the baby struggled with its breath. He saw his nephew through the nurse’s window, saw his brother, still hard, strong, and his wife staring down at it. Somewhere during the time when Paul went to pick up a Styrofoam cup and put coffee in it the baby stopped breathing. Paul cried apart from them but there was a small part of him that didn’t know how to tell them the miracle of the baby’s birth was already here, could not be given back. It was true she was dead but it was not always true, it was already in the way he touched the cashier, and would be in the way she touched someone else. The nephews life would come true somewhere else. He didn’t know how to say he’d found a place where his nephew would be safe, that the death could not end the joy of the birth, that he’d hidden it in the way he touched the cashier. He was allowed in. He went up to the dead baby and touched it with its own life.

It is mystery how, curled up, Paul felt himself, briefly, an uncle and nothing else, and knew there were things to do, knew with his hands. And knew how to get up, tumbling, and find a place to hide the joy of his coming. Picking up the blanket, laying it on Ben, tucking him in, with all the love had for his nephew in the way he did it. And to put his hand on Ben and pray, stupidly, again, for anything.
Everything in the World from the Way She Looks at a Cup

The girl stands at the bottom of the stairs, where she does not disturb the plastic cup her father held to his mouth and drank from and left on the mantle with the sun and spit and water in it, that for three years held, and still holds, what it must have been for him to lay it only there.

Three years ago, he’d been accused of stealing a wrench at the shop, and it was believed and he was fired. They took the blue collared shirt that had his name on it. And when his name on the shirt was gone the horizon inside him gave way, and his actions came from a hole with no length or width that he could not describe. He felt this as power because though the house was small and the children thin and dirty, there was something inside him that that did not end. He could sit in a chair, cigarette on his lap, and stare in awe at what he might do. He began to rob, and steal, hang out with men who sang and smoke and fought under the light of the porch. They threw things everywhere. It was not that he was bad but that he was free, for the first time, to imagine, and evil was easier to imagine. He sang and drank, hit his kids with quick, slurred hands. Trains drove by their house and the men and their father whooped and hollered.

His children hid under floorboards, brother and sister together, dirt and rats. Their father wiped his sleeve, sat in a chair under the porch when he couldn’t find them, saw the dark outside the porch light, saw the world of his imagination was the same two or three evil things over and over, less the abyss than a small circle. The world of all he
could imagine was smaller than the world of obligation—of cooking, cleaning, and taking care. He realized this and the look in his eyes went all the way back to the nothing that began the world. He was tired. He went for a drink of water. It was three years ago now.

The father poured water in the cup from the sink, and took a sip, his teeth small and brown and private, until the coolness of the water was the sigh of his body. He took the cup from his mouth. Its cool water was heavy and he wanted to put the cup somewhere, anywhere. He walked to the living room, he looked out the window, he raised his arm, and the cup, to the mantle.

His arm thin in his sleeve, the cup loose in his hand. Why did it not fall from him to the floor. He laid it down slow on the mantle, laid it down gentle. Looked out of the window, saw all a window could hold without bursting, how much was in the world when you were not going to hit your children.

He looked, saw the way he laid the cup down like that, thoughtless and exact, on the edge, full and with no splash. It was not from him, was not his way. He looked out the window, the sun on hill, the railroad, smoke, a train on the way, and knew the way he laid down the cup did not come from him but from revelation, came from what is between a man and the sun going down on the hill that is not just air and distance but what is right and how to lay down a cup.

He knew his hand was just beyond who he was. He was not as old and kind as what his hands were doing. The way he laid down the cup was a way out of himself. His hand invited him into what he would do next. He took a step back from the window. It brought the horizon into the room, to warm his daughter. She lay on the couch at the end
of the room. The father saw her sleeping, a blanket pulled over the colors he’d made of her arms and legs. The horizon dug under her blanket and found her, warmed her, until she stirred. Her bruised arms poked out.

He took a step back, surprised. A glare fell on her hair and face. She could not see him or know that he was there or be scared. He saw the thoughtful and graceful way she stretched herself out and moved her head to the sun and this was who she was when he was not there. He felt he’d never been born and when she stretched it was her stretch that made him begin. He felt he was made from his mother but from the way his daughter lifted her hand to the sun, that he was finally standing, that she did not come from him but that he came from her.

And the father felt, looking at his daughter, at the cup, that this was the first day that came down and happened to him, that he was finally allowed into what things were.

He looked at the cup, how it barely stood at the edge of the mantle, balanced in water. He knew there was something of the man he’d never been in the way he laid the cup down—a man who wasn’t ignored, who grew up in the sun, who loved his children—that man was not a regret or a longing but had finally made it into the world if only in the way he laid down the cup.

He pulled the blanket back on her, asked her to go to sleep in a voice that was so unusual that she did. He tried to close the door all the way but couldn’t. He sat down on the railroad tracks just outside the shack they lived in, and pulled the shirt over his head so the sun wouldn’t bother him. He heard the train whistle blow. He let the train hit him and take the various parts of his body to where it was going. It was the way out of the
only day in his life. It was not despair it was willful denial of creation. It said even one
day was too much.

The girl gets to the bottom of the stairs after he has been dead three years. The
cup that is full of the sun and spit and water sits on the mantle and fills the room with
what she should do in it—she should not bring in cereal, she should walk quietly, and
stand in front of it. The girl stars at the cup so that it holds the universe back, takes on
clear lines and weights more than anything that can happen. The girl, who will not find a
picture of her mother or walk under the stars, lets it be the still point outside the way she
feels. She turns the world into its relationship to the cup. The cup says that the world
that steals and cheats and beats her weighs less than it.

Her father always threw things. He had done nothing gentle before. The mystery
of that cup, of why he laid it there--the only thing the girl cannot take into what grief can
make simple. The only thing sad about her father was not that he was hit by a train but
why he left it there.

Her brother is in the kitchen, his spoon full of milk and cereal. He is tired, he
works at the grocery store for both of them. Milk spills from his spoon to the bowl. He
does not look at the cup but at her---her eyes big, chin held toward it, dirty clothes loose
on her, in awe. The cup has found what she really looks like.

The brother knows what he sees is not the same as the word for it--she is not just
standing, looking. She is bringing something into the world with the time it takes to look.
She will sit down quieter for her time with that cup, and smile and look at him. He will
pour her cereal even though he never does. He will be nice to the fat guy at work. The
brother, tired, wants her to look at the cup. He is late for work, for this world. But everything in the world will come out of the way she looks at the cup.

He brings the way she looks at the cup into the way he holds his spoon, tenderly now. He does not let milk spill, he rest the spoon down gently, the bowl and spoon the only things that can be trusted to hold that new world. He puts his spoon down and feels revelation. There is a kindness, bigger and quieter that what he can do about it. It will not fit in the bowl. There is no way for it but through his hands. He shakes with it, grabs a box of cereal and tries to pour her something but it spills over the floor. This new world. The boy does not know how it should look and he cannot imagine it and is late for work. They’re out of milk. He shakes with tenderness and glory and his bowl spills on the floor. It will come into the world as wretchedness.

He is tired. He kicks the bowl to the side and yells at her that he is late and yanks her down and curses her with eyes that are not as big as hers. Hits her again, and again. The girl knows his hitting and cursing are a place of rest from the kindness she has made in him. The brother hits and hits and sees the horror of what he has done and knows the only way to stand outside the horror of what you’ve done is to keep doing it. The girl, hit and hit again, looks at him out of the eye he has not hit and has not made a decision about him.

She closes her eyes and holds up her arms to protect herself. She loves him but her body does not want to know him. He stops. She lays down, her eyes still closed. She holds the blood in her mouth. She pretends she is not bleeding and pretends she is asleep. She is hiding him from what he’s done.
She wakes up in a pool of blood that begins in her mouth, and touches how big and red and purple her faces is. She runs her hand over her face. She has no questions. She opens the door, blood trailing on the floor, and lets the sun take a good look at her.
Douglas got up to speak at his mother’s funeral but could hear the Pastor laugh from his pulpit. Douglas had taught school for three years and had heard the sound before—it was Pastor and Jesus at the back of class, sharing a joke at his mother’s expense.

“Hey! Watch it!” he said.

“Or what?” The Pastor set a gnarled finger on a verse, dimly aware he was too old to be blamed for anything, eyes young and bright like an orphan peeking though a door.

Their eyes met across an empty church. Douglas had put a balloon and sign out front, in orange and yellow and red, it told people who died and when they could look at her.

He looked at the Pastor, he was old--his body pulled him to the floor with life, skin hung from his skull like it wanted to leave but there was nowhere else to go. The Pastor could not live like this, he laughed instead of falling asleep.

Douglas looked the other way, walked to the open casket. He held the hand of the woman who’d hit him so often, open handed, across the head.

“Or what?” The pastor said it again, saw his echo walk across the room.

“Or,” Douglas closed his eyes, then opened them with the fingers of his mother’s hand. He squeezed the hand. “I’ll find the man who murdered my mother, and kill him!”
The Pastor lifted his hand from the pulpit and took a step back as if he had been hit softly with many things. He shut his eyes.

“No,” the Pastor held out his hands as if to levitate, “or you would lose something more precious than your nasty mother.” He pulled his hands together to pray—turned his head like he was close to Jesus’ bad breath. His black robe folded around him.

Douglas puts his mother’s hand into the casket, snug in her coat pocket so she wouldn’t look violent. He laughed like the Pastor, small, strong, windless. A laughter that seemed to open a small door onto all he was capable of. He closed his mouth. When the Pastor made you laugh you made sure it never happened again.

“Don’t think I won’t kill him.” Douglas rolled up his sleeves so he could be someone to believe in. “Don’t think I won’t kill him slowly.”

But when Douglas said the awful words he knew they belonged to someone else, someone who could grow a moustache and tell children to go away.

It was two days ago. He thought he’d pay his mother a visit and surprise her with a pack of cigarettes. Otherwise she wouldn’t open the door. When she didn’t yell and scream and open the door he nudged it open, surprised it was unlocked, and tiptoed through the hall so as not to wake her. He loved finding her asleep. It was like watching her body hide from her.

He could not hear the porn in the living room but he could see it in her broken glasses on the floor, small knitted arms and legs gathered in the lenses like a flame. He took another step in the living room. She sat in her chair, her face in a TV dinner. Half of it lost in the gravy, the other half sticking out like a new day.
He would’ve thought she was asleep if the murderer hadn’t been there, asking him questions.

“Have I done something wrong,” the man took a step out of the drape, his gloved finger pointing at Douglas’s mom, a ski mask wet with tears.

“What did you do?”

“I strangled her,” he took the tag off his black turtleneck. “I can pay you back for the glasses.”

Douglas looked at his mother, saw her face stuck in orgasm, gravy in her mouth like a river in a cave. He knew she was dead, in the underworld. He closed his eyes and imagined her taking the flame of lust with her to light her way in the unknown.

The murderer pushed something in his hand. Douglas opened his eyes and saw it as his mother’s necklace.

“It felt like I was supposed to take something.”

“I understand.”

The man looked up, eyes imploring, big, and wet, as if Douglas could lead him through the wilderness of a murderer’s heart.

When Douglas set down his toothpaste tomorrow and looked in the mirror he still wouldn’t know who he was and why he brushed his teeth. But he would know he’d lied so the man who murdered his mother wouldn’t feel all alone.

The murderer turned off the television for the sake of decency then walked over to the couch and made sure he wasn’t sitting on anything. He almost took his ski mask off but shook his head and remembered he was a murderer. Douglas thought of boys
from school who only needed someone who cared enough to tell them there was
something on their face.

“I’ve never done this before,” the murderer said. “I wouldn’t have murdered her if
I didn’t have the ski mask.” He pointed to it.

“I just wanted to confront her about something at work and I needed it.”

He straightened the mask a little so hair wouldn’t show through.

Wind swung through the open door into the room. It blew his mother’s hair
awake, scaring both of them.

The murderer sighed, picked the broken glasses off the floor. He tried to put them
back on her face just like he’d found them. Pushed them through the gravy. He took a
step back to see if anyone would notice.

He looked at Douglas.

“I picked the lock to her front door. I watched a movie to figure out how. She
stole TV dinners on my shift and said I did it. I just wanted her to say she was sorry. I
stood in front of her. But she wouldn’t talk to me until I gave her a cigarette. But I don’t
smoke. She knows that. Then she started calling me nasty things. She was just so smart,
you know? I could never keep up. And she knew that. She started to make me feel self-
conscious about my mask but she didn’t know how many hours I worked to pay for it.

Then she was bored with me and turn the porn back on, started rubbing herself so I could
see it. I turned the pornography and tried to get her attention but she kept rubbing herself
like I wasn’t even there and she was going to have a good time. I started shaking her
because I was still here and she needed to know that. And with the mask on she had no
way of knowing how embarrassed I was and that was the only way I could keep doing it. I kept holding her and shaking her but she never said she was sorry.”

He went to Douglas with his hands like he was going to show him how. Douglas faked a left and ran through the room, through the open door, into the wind. He called the cops with a phone in his pocket. They found black pants and black turtleneck at the crime scene. But no ski mask.

At the funeral Douglas kept an eye out for the murderer. He ran his hand along the casket. Maybe the balloon would lure him. He turned to her. He wanted to remember her as the great woman she was when she was asleep.

The Pastor finished his sermon. The Pastor had less to say when he was talking. He said more with laughter and staring. When he talked the meaning would drain from his big eyes and he would look down as if he’d spilled something. You could tell his body wanted to leave him alone, fall off him like old fruit.

He gave up near the end of the sermon. He finished slowly, tauntingly, like folding a letter from home in his pocket.

Douglass looked at his mother. The mortician had smoothed the orgasm out of her face. Douglas saw the flame of lust extinguished, imagined her lost in the underworld, humping the dark.

But she didn’t look asleep. Someone had pulled a scarf around her bruised and put her carefully in a business suit. Her hair finally looked like it had something to do, pulled into curls. She looked like she was closing her eyes for a business meeting. Douglas didn’t want to touch her, she looked busy.
She was never busy growing up. She was always there for him in the worst way. When he came home and told her kids at school said his mother was a whore, she turned off the TV and said they were exactly right. Sometimes she would walk him home from school, point at kids, and make him beat them up. He would hit them as hard as he could but he looked embarrassed when he reached into their pockets until there was enough money for her pack of cigarettes.

If there wasn’t enough, she would tuck him in that night and tell him the story of the time machine mothers built to go back and have abortions. But Douglas knew that time machines and happy women didn’t exist. It made him want to heal the sad, creative place her stories came from.

He remembered hiding and watching her smoke cigarettes. The smoke curled in her face like she was in a movie. She was beautiful if she didn’t know he was there. She had a beautiful soul if it had no idea where it was.

“I remember when I almost loved her,” Douglas said, scaring himself, just as the Pastor was about to shut the casket.

“When?” The Pastor held the casket open a little bit, daring him.

Douglas polished over the grave with dirt. The Pastor almost fell asleep, then laughed to himself. He looked at Douglas like he was something to eat. They went their separate ways.

Then the Pastor cut across the grave and went Douglas’s way.
“Wait!” Douglas saw the Pastor run, exhausted clown, the wind running its finger through his one lock of hair as if to mock him. He looked into Douglas’s eyes, giving, in everything, the appearance of man who has been run over by a car and has just enough energy to tell a secret.

“Wait!”

The Pastor chased him down the street, he looked over shoulder to see a desperate old man running, dark robes blooming round him, his face twisted in a panic of youth: that he was going to be late for school, that no one would sit with him at lunch. Douglas kept running.

He heard the Pastor’s footsteps dim, heard him fall on his robe, on himself. He turned to find a man naked except for his ski mask helping the Pastor up, whispering in his ear. Douglas ran to catch him. But the man lifted the Pastor against the wall, then disappeared into an alley like a superhero.

“He wears the mask so no one will know he’s embarrassed that he’s naked,” the Pastor said later. They shared coffee in a nearby diner.

“He was as naked as Adam.” The Pastor’s head dipped. “He’s been breaking into houses. He will stop at nothing. He will not stop killing women until he knows he’s forgiven.” His eyes closed on the worst that could possibly happen, and turned it around in his head like a nursery rhyme. Douglas laughed.

“We have to hunt him down,” the Pastor said, “and forgive him.”

Douglas laughed.

“There’s nothing funny.” The Pastor closed his eyes. “About that.”
The Pastor’s soul separated itself from his body, set the body in the chair like a sack of potatoes. His soul—on its way out—got stuck in the ceiling, made lights blink on and off.
Jonas and Caroline are small and vague and with their Uncle who grills hamburgers at the bottom of the apartment complex and there is nowhere for them to sit. Jonas pushes a hamburger into his mouth, busts the meat with his jaw. He opens his mouth and holds it out as a mess on his tongue and asks the wind to take its heat from him. He brings his open mouth to Caroline for her to see. But she does not like him and will not look and Jonas does not love her either.

There is wind in her hair, her hair is long and thick and wild and she will often, in the wind or rain, pull her hair into her hands so it will belong to her again. Today, in a blue dress she is bored and different than all she would usually do. She does not move and her hands are at her side, her hair lives life that is not hers. It whips around the apartment complex and the community grill and the cars and trees sink back a little in awe of it.

The Uncle tries to give her a hamburger with cheese. He is going to say her name but is fascinated, instead, with her hair as it rises to protect her stillness, rises to let her be without a name a little longer.

Caroline prefers to live in any of the many small room inside herself and not with her Uncle and Jonas in the apartment. She has never been this far inside herself--it does
not matter if her Uncle says her name or not. When she is this far down she does not
have a name and does not want a hot dog. She is hunting for the quiet there, she feels it
flitting between breaths, a small recess inside her. When she pushes down on it with the
narrow point of her attention she pulls through it like a needle and thread.

The wind leaves her hair. The quiet she saw flitting inside her is everything she
sees when she opens her eyes. It descends on all things. The pine tree and sky step
toward her in clear bold lines and begin to stare. Each nettle stabs itself into its own
small slot of air, clouds grow to her like balloons or stuffed animals. She knows to be
still is to restore the world to the bright thing it is. And stares back.

The tree and the sky allow the grill to step in front of them. The grill is huge
when it is quiet. Its smoke claims the sky. The quiet that was in her now passes over the
grill, its rust and dents, anoints it with a run of light.

The Uncle takes the hamburger back. When he went to the garage they told him
it was his day off. He drove home, kept on his uniform. He sat. Then walked to the
door, opened it. He held a plate of hot dogs and hamburger meat. The children were not
welcome but they were allowed to come.

He chews, rolls the piece around his tongue until he can hide from the wind and
the cold in the taste in his mouth. He is forty five and unborn, somehow. Something in
the curl of his shoulders is of a baby drifting in amniotic fluid and his eyes, when they
open, open slow. Everything in front of him, a car, a murder, a sunset, in his eyes as the
same small dot. Time is in his skin and crooked teeth but not in his eyes that are wider
and younger than the children’s, big and unknowing as saucers.
And this is comfort for Jonas, chewing. Because their mom and dad died in a crash. Jonas does not live in a room inside himself, a room where he can run and play and have friends and his parents aren’t dead. So he is on the couch, and his Uncle puts on a hoodie full of old grease and blood before he opens the door and drifts into bar fights. And Jonas stares at the door as the Uncle leaves. The Uncle knows their mother and father are dead and he does not hug him or encourage him but lets Jonas look in his eyes. And Jonas can see it does not matter how good or bad they are, how big or sad their life becomes. His Uncle can hold all of it, all that has been done and all they will do, as a small point of light in his eyes and blink it away. And Jonas, when he lives in the look in his Uncle’s eyes, does not feel ignored but feels he’s been made small enough to rest.

At the grill, the wind lifts the hem of Caroline’s dress and she lets it. The dress rides up and down her thin legs and the scandal of blue panties turn Jonas’s head to the long shadow cast by the pine tree beyond the grill. The Uncle doesn’t see them. Jonas waits for the wind to dress her appropriately. When the wind is calm and a bird lights on a branch he feels the scandal broken, turns to find she has pulled her hair and dress back into part of who she is. She slides her dress over her legs. She looks at the curve and puff of Jonas’s cheek as he eats. The cheeks begins to swell in the silence she’s made and points itself at her like a turret. Her eyes grow to take him in. And it thrills him.

It is a shock to Jonas. She never looks at him the way she looks inside herself, when her eyes open as before a horizon. His mother was the only one who was curious about him. He knows he is ugly and keeps a nervous vigil over his own body, forehead
wide, eyes set low. No eye will turn to him. Though he is hesitant by nature, he is wild and unplanned when no one will touch him or look at him.

He would go across the street to the playground, where the children are rougher and prettier. At first they would look at him, and make fun of him but as time went on they began to lose their sense of him as mysterious. And he would pick up mud, soft in his hands, and throw it at them, if only so they would look at him, and he had no plan, only that he wanted it to matter he was here. He was hesitant but he would go up to the biggest and pretties and put muddy hands all on them and pulls their shirts so they would go to the ground with him. They would fall on top with their firsts and hit him and him and he let them, and the pain cleared the world of all but his breath and his lack of surprise. His breath would move up and down until it was the rise and fall of their breath, until he was not made of his mother’s love or her death but of their anger, and their anger was the whip and curve of his own body as he fought back in joy.

The big, pretty children would grow scared that no one was stopping them when they beat Jonas, shrunk from knowing they could hit and no one would say get off or try to break it up. And the big children who hit him could feel they were not as old as what their hands were doing, and their hearts drifted slow and thoughtful behind their hands. The big, pretty children would look at Jonas, him quiet and still, and see this fight meant too much to him, made Jonas too old, thoughtful and satisfied. Their hands made Jonas look at them too closely. Sometimes they would stop right there because they knew if they kept fighting there would be no way out of the look in his eyes, they would be that moment of light running inside his eyes. And some could feel, as they hit and hit him, and got up and left, that the mystery of themselves was in the point of light in his eyes.
and not in their bodies. And some felt they were safer there, safer as that point of light than in their bodies, he would keep their grace and light for safe for them, as a prophet keeps the future safe, return them to themselves, doubled over, overflowing, when they were ready. When they got up, Jonas had in him a kindness with which his body could do nothing.

When he got home Caroline would lay upside down on the couch. Her long hair calmed the floor and she did not put her hands on the bruises on his face and arms and he did not know to ask her to. His hands ran along the carpet, she let him listen to her daydreams as she opened her eyes wide enough to take the world into her quiet, then closed her eyes, heavy lidded with sleep. The world was bigger when it was inside her, and the things in this world, the things she had seen, grew into what she had never seen, eight winged butterflies, bananas with arms and legs and children, dragons with socks. She spoke them, and her voice, to Jonas, was their breath and skin.

When she closed her mouth and turned from him to sleep, her voice was not in the room as sound but in the room as his body, his closed eyes, his loosened shoulders. He was where her voice was when her mouth was closed, where it rested, and her voice was his body that was not hurt and her voice the way he lay on the carpet with his arm hung out. She took a nap. When she woke, her voice was in her mouth, and his body was full of what angry children had done, and he was made of the loss of his parents and the fact that he was ugly.

At the grill Caroline has met the thing inside her that is not what she has seen or what has been made or where she has been. She has met the thing inside her that is older
and kinder than she is, this quiet. It is old and kind and there is nothing it needs because it was there before the world was. It has carried her out of herself and to the world. It has given her a graceful way of moving, not knowledge she wears inside her but smoke that pulls on the end of her skin, the way she reaches for the burger in Jonas’s hand now as if reaching for the favor of the Lord.

She takes the burger from his hand and chews as he chews. The Uncle takes a bit of his own. His facial scars are closer together when he chews. But the taste in his mouth is over. He puts his arms in the pocket of his hoodie. The jacket is old and worn and goes pasts his wrists, makes him look smaller. He got it at a thrift store when his son was a stillborn. He’d run his hand along the fabric and felt it was not made of what the world was made of, and when he put on the jacket his body was gone, when he closed it round him it pinched him of the earth like a cell dividing and he was not of the world but above it, around it, watching it like a passenger on a train.

When their parents died the Uncle did not so much take them in as allow them to drift around him and the jacket he wore.

He does not turn the grill off. Maybe he will cook some more. Maybe they are hungry.

Jonas lets Caroline touch his face with soft determined fingers. She has never been this curious on the subject of his face. She stares at the open sky of his cheek. He waits for her to say something because her voice will be him and how he should move.

The quiet inside her now the world she can walk into and touch on the cheek. She feels, suddenly, that the quiet is the world that is trembling, and rising, and she rising
with it, the crest of the rising wave is her voice. Her voice not the break from the quiet but the fullness of it. Her voice is a question for Jonas.

She feels the earth rise and shake in her question. The Uncle puts a hot dog on the grate just as the wind kicks the grill over and the hot dog spill on the patch of grass and fire, rising at the sound of her voice, finds her cotton dress and her body, snakes up her hair and legs until she is the heart of a great flame. Jonas can see that before her voice is pain it is the red and shining light all around here and in that light she is still just waiting for an answer. The joy in his heart is what cannot be said, the he only loves her when she is on fire, that the fire is the question she has for him and his place of rest. She is safe and beautiful when she is on fire.

She screams, and Jonas borrows his Uncle’s jacket, pushes her on the ground, beats back the flames in long, flaying arcs. The Uncle stands open mouth and unseeing and moves to where there would be a phone. Jonas beats the flame until the flame is not the burn on her skin but the whip and curve of his own body. He feels in his action, in his love for her that his body is no longer on trial by him, no longer ugly or skinny.

He is invited, suddenly, into the best thing about himself and stand in his own glory and sureness and kindness. He has always been waiting to be who he is when his sister is on fire.

The ambulance carts her off, in peace now, coughing up mucus. His Uncle looks at him across flashing lights, his eyes too round, don’t quiet make it to Jonas’s face. Jonas takes the jacket, folded over his arm, gives it back to his Uncle reverently, absently. His Uncle puts on the jacket and the heat from the fire is in the jacket and warms him from the wind and cold.
Jonas stares at the empty circle of air where there was fire. Thought it lives in history as ash the fire is hidden from death in him. Its heat, its arc over his head, its whip in the wind is safe. He can reach out and touch it. For Jonas, for the rest of his life, it is not that he remembers when his sister was no fire, it is that he has two bodies, one that walks and lives and grows old and knows the world is meaningless, and one that is seven and stands with his sister on fire. When he is seven she is on fire and there is no hospital, no pain for her or him, no parents they have lost. There is only this awe and this heat and this place of rest and her interest in him and he feels he is onto something.

II

Jonas sits in the hospital room chair. He is small and his shoes haunt the floor. His sister lies in the hospital bed, hands at her side, each hand lost in a ball of cotton. Jonas does not like her, does not know her, when she is not on fire. She seems, somehow, ungrateful.

And old black nurse opens the door, her name tag swings opposite the roll of her body, slapping old boobs. It says Laverne and she is slow and limps on one leg and every step is in her face as a kind of pain. She pushes the meal cart but will not lean on it for support because she is fond of the pain in her hip and holds it close as a friend who will tell what the world is and give her permission to be rude. When she is home and alone with her ham sandwich she will press the pain in her hip until the pain is bigger than the earth. And the earth a thin line on its end. She is in the pain, can walk through the world without having to look or ask or wonder.
She puts her hand on Caroline’s bandage and draws them from the goop on her face. There is brave thread of silk hanging between the bandage and her face and Caroline cries. Laverne does not remove them slower but pull until everyone in the room can look at what the great flame has asked her face to be. Jonas looks first.

Fire was brutal and careful, gave her hair to the sky as smoke and rolled her forehead like dough into a squint. So she looks serious. But it has burned opened her eyes and tightened the skin over her cheek so she is about to laugh. Jonas does not know what to make of that face until he sees her face is the question she was going to ask. It is stuck there.

The fire peeled off her skin and Jonas knows it was not taken for horror but for clarity, to take skin and fat off the curve of the bone. Everything not essential to the expression. Jonas feel the question will not only break the silence in the room in half but the silence of the sky.

Caroline looks at them, unseeing, and closes her eyes. When she closes her eyes the Uncle still feels like she is staring at him. The blisters are not things on her skin but a spirit moving toward him. Her lack of skin a different kind of air in the room, air moving toward him. A clean air, clean so it vanishes the distance between things. He feels her ooze crisp and right up on him. Her air in his breath and will not let him look away. In that moment the Uncle does not look through the world but turns from it.

“Wake up baby.” Laverne brings pudding to the mouth the flame has twisted.

Laverne draws near the face that is mystery. Her big steady face and hands. Drawing close to her changes the way she draws close. She drops her hands, loosens her hair from its clip and lets it fall. Pudding leaves her spoon for the floor and her eyes leap
out of her sudden escape of hair, big and bold and bright. Where there was only room for a squint there is now room for Caroline in the center of Laverne’s brown eyes.

Caroline arches her back, seems to rise into the smell and move of Laverne’s hair. Caroline opens her goopy eyes and feels Laverne’s eyes have made her too big. She tries to go to sleep to hide from how big she gets in Laverne’s eyes.

Laverne has never seen a flame search a person just so, leaving some things marred, some unmarred. But the lack of skin is not tragic, not when it has made her face this clear and open and searching. She wants to know how the face was made. She stares so she will know. But she only knows this tenderness in her breath and to forgive her father who beat her and her brother who watched, to go to them when work is done.

Laverne picks up her spoon again, dips it into the vanilla swirl, brings the pudding to Caroline’s mouth. Watches her take it in, it spill out of her twisted lips onto her gown in grateful brown piles. Sees her wait patiently for more.

Laverne tries again. The AC folds her loose hair. She holds a thrust of pudding, holds it in reverent and trembling answer to the question of Caroline’s face. If she holds her hand out to Caroline she holds her hand to the wind and the door of the abortion clinic 30 years ago and still wants to know if an abortion hurts. Her father and brother wait in the car. People look and their eyes make her older than when she is by herself, in the kitchen, in her room. The wind is in her hair and there is time for her to feel her clothes on her skin and this is a comfort in her heart and not the same as what to do. She wants the baby in the way she wants her bad drawings. She stands vigil over the way it rests in her stomach, moves. She wants it so she will know more about it.
If she holds her hand like this, spoon held near Caroline’s mouth, then she waits on the street for what she will do, hair in the wind. The abortion not in her body but behind the door.

She knows there is no thing such as time. There is only weight. That day, weight of the door in her hand, the wind in that day, smell of bread in it, weight of air in her mouth in her shirt and on her young hands, weight of blood in her heart—powerful, close to her. Far from her, tenuous, almost out of reach, is this day, what she touches with 50 year hold hands, cooking, cleaning, working, holding out spoons. It is the way a girl, spending all day in the day ocean lays still at night and feels, vaguely, yes, her arms and legs on the bed, but closer, darker and more powerfully, the roll and move of her arms and legs still in the waves. It does not matter if she cooks and clean and grows old. The blood in her heart, the in and out of her breath, is her waiting on the street. There is only this day. No way into the next thirty years.

She pauses on the street, holding the spoon in the hospital. It doesn’t feel like there is a way to get to the abortion from here. Doesn’t feel like what is next. Thirty years later she is still convinced she’s not going to do it. She feels in the wind, in the foot in her stomach, an undertow in her blood and body, that she belongs to the rest of the day. The rest of the day is not in through door. The rest of the day, her life as a mother, belongs to her even if she cannot find it. It will always be hers. She lets the door go, turns from the wind into what is next. And what is next, has always been next, is the silence of the hospital room. The stillness of the gesture as she holds the spoon out to Caroline.
She uses both hands now. The spoon is heavy. She lifts the spoon past the burns and into the mouth with a grace she does not usually have. It is from the day that belongs to her.

Her hands not vague and far from her now. She is her wrinkled hands, rests in the way they hold out the spoon. The spoon holds the world still so it can be looked at. Lights wink off the floor, picture frames turn to face her. She has done something at 19 that makes the world suddenly appear when she is 50. The hospital is weight and color and air. When she breathes in the world steps closer. She can feels as it steps closer that it kneels to Caroline. The air, the room, the color is breathing on her. It underlines her curled dead inquisitive face.

In every other moment the world is vague and she had the abortion. But in the stillness of this gesture she has not. In the quiet she has been a mother for thirty years. She finds herself in thirty years of motherhood like you would find yourself in a warm bath.

With each spoon, Caroline’s face digs into a kind of nausea. She opens her mouth, gives the pudding back to the world in a warm line down her gown. Laverne reaches her hand, her napkin, into the mess. Caroline turns to her, calm, open eyes, and gives all the pudding in her mouth to the look of motherhood on Laverne’s face.

Laverne’s puts a napkin on her own face, breathes in and gives up.

Jonas is not with the old black nurse and his sister who is eating. His eyes are closed and he is with the sister who is on fire. He likes her better. He lives in the surprise of the flame. The quiet that is old and kind and is on fire.
When the smell of vomit is in his breath he opens his eyes and sits up. When his eyes are open the fire is not in its heat and temperature but in Laverne and her stillness and her need. The fire is the world lit up with things to touch. A rush of awe and beauty in his knowing what to do. Does not know it with words but knows it with his borrowing his Uncle’s jacket, tugging on it till it is off, knows it with his walking over to wipe the mess on Laverne’s shirt. Know it with hands that seek out her shirt with a bold and serene curiosity.

Laverne is wiped by this ugly child and there is pain in her eyes. No way into the quiet where she is a mother. She turns to Caroline’s face covered in pudding. Will she speak the quiet that will let her be a mother. She shoos Jonas back into his chair, opens the door. Jonas pulls the jacket over himself to go to sleep.

III

Jonas takes the jacket and pulls it into his plan for sleep, and the Uncle puts his arms around himself because without the jacket he is not smoke but the flesh in the world, and is cold and quiet. The Uncle sits in the hospital room, elbows on knees, arms round himself and with no jacket he can only pay attention to her big, red and shining face and the quiet it has made in the room. The quiet is his breath, his weight in the chair. Her face, its red blister, rises in the quiet like dough. His attention has made her monstrous.
He liked his jacket, he liked going into bars. He would walk into bars and put on his jacket and his body was gone, he felt he could not be touched and he would grab someone in flannel and boots and push their head into the edge of a bar until it opened like fruit, his hands a dance and blur in front of him. And when another man hit him in his ribs he let him, again and again. He lied on the ground next to bottles. When he took a breath he was with the pain in his ribs and he looked out of the pain in his ribs with a huge and secret innocence. He would look to the split head, and its oozing, like a picture he’d never seen before. The violence was in the cracked head and on his jacket but it was not in his eyes or the way he got up and walked right out the door.

The sun goes down and darkness hides Caroline in itself. The Uncle is tired. At first sleep is a stone in him, holds his arms and legs to the chair, then sleep fans out above him, in a wide membrane over his head, and he wakes back into the silence of the room like breaking through the surface of water. He wakes into the quiet, but the quiet not his breath or his weight in the chair. Someone has it. He can see it, through shadow, quiet sits on the rise and fall of her chest, gathered on her like a snake. It makes it harder for her to breathe. She coughs a soft mucus and he can feel the quiet hold it, fondle it, extend and exaggerate it. He feels the quiet pull of mucus as a kind of condemnation.

He raises a hand to the door, to bring in light that will spread the quiet out evenly, get it off her chest. The light asks itself into the room in a long, thin triangle. He opens the door until the room is light and the light is fond of the room and her mucus nothing more than itself.

The light separates the darkness in halves and reveals, like curtain parting or jewelry box opening, his own wrinkled hand on his lap. The light finds his hand, the
quiet offer it to him as if on a platter—the lines and curves of bone. He can feel the weight of it on his knee, presses down on him with all the wisdom and honor that is not in his life but that now belongs to him, in the way a farm or a grandfather’s gun, suddenly, belongs to us. He feels his old age is not his blood but is a kind of trophy on his lap, and he the child staring at. He feels his old age not in his blood but in his crossed legs, his sitting in the chair for nothing in particular. His is finally old, and these are his hands. In the light a crescent moon of understanding begins in the Uncles eyes. A strand of grey hair falls off his head.

Now he is still he has his house. Years ago he had a house. It burned to the ground but it is bigger and untouched when it is inside him, that is where you could find wood and hallways and plumbing. Now he is still his insides open like a horizon, and there is that house on the end of the horizon, and he can walk up to it and live in it when he wants. He wanders in, puts his hand on wall, his foot on old floorboards. He is going to buy this house and it will not burn down. He feels his wife upstairs and when he looks for she is at the top of the stairs, her hand on the wall, and it is only now he can feel her weight against the house, hips, an undertow, her momentum in the room drawing him to her.

Her stomach swollen with their first child, a child that grew into history as a blue and sick corpse. His son dead but not when he can feel him under his hand, twisted in life, the thrum of his foot on her stomach. Not when he will hide his son from death under his hand. The world and its long pull of history will not find the small house where the Uncle still lives, and the room he can walk into when he wants, put his hand on his wife and feel the heart still beating.
If the Uncle is to move in the quiet his son will return to the dead. But if he is still, he can feel it and his wife’s hand on his, like a bird on a still branch. There is no death to get to from here. The only thing next, after putting his hand on her stomach is the quiet in this hospital room. And in the silence the room takes a step toward him.

If his son is dead, this room as flat as paper. If his son is under his hand, the room as large as what can be seen and touched. Caroline here to him now not in her ugliness but in her need of him, her bones folded and delicate, the dimple she makes on the bed. The miracle of her. All he knows to do is hold her hand like his wife held his, and so he squeezes her hand with all the honor and wisdom in his own, and it tears her burns and she screams. All the sweetness in him born into the world as what it is not. He is finally his hands, holds her harder, not knowing what to do with the burn on her skin and knowing he wouldn’t have touched her at all if he didn’t know she was precious, and this knowledge in his hands as they tighten and she screams and the silence not broken by the scream but swells with it in the way you hold back water with your hand until it comes gushing out.

IV

Caroline screams as her Uncle squeezes the raw meat of her hand. The pain shoots up through her arm and out of her gaping mouth. The Uncle feels the scream not as terror or pain but as sound that pushes gently on his skin.
The pain in her arm bigger than the world, the world the thin line on its edge.
Like all pain, the intimacy of being the only one it will acknowledge.

The quiet slips itself between her and the pain, holds it arm’s length from her.
She screams, veins popping, not to speak that pain but to keep with her. But the pain has left with the sound of her voice, and to see where it went she opens her eyes.

The scream fills the room with itself, curtain turned wistfully with it. The scream finds her brother under the jacket, turns him on his side so he can sleep better. The scream does not move the Uncle’s face into pain and fear, simply leaves no room for him here. He takes a careful step back as he would from a room crowded with people he does not want to interrupt. He straightens, his long scars shining with no jacket. Her pain follows him out the door and leaves her.

She cannot cry when it is this quiet. It is too quiet to have been on fire, too quiet for anything to have happened, and her past is a slow and good and empty field that narrows gently into this point, into this bed. Tragedy gone, not in her scream, or in snug cotton on her skin, in her Uncle’s face or her brother’s sleep. Nothing to invite her into the story of a little girl on fire. When her Uncle gets back, yes, with the pudding nurse, that’s when it will be sad, tragedy born in their faces.

She is trying to be angry with her brother. It would be a start. He let her stay on fire. She can feel the anger, a low chirp swallowed in cotton. Can feel it in her stomach. She tries to pick a line of thought and follow it to the anger in her stomach but her way to it is list, ends up in another thought, about chickens. She tries again but is running out of places to go inside her. Her insides are the warmth of cotton, no room inside herself to
climb into. She feels herself float up outside herself, on this bed, made to hover over her legs.

It is hard. The world is bigger when it is inside her. It grows into what it has never been, roads that move like serpents, mountains that walk, cities born upside down. If she is home from the rain it does not matter, she’s hidden a sunny day inside her, can walk through, touch the sun on its branches. And if she does not want to, all of her can fit into the beat of her heart.

She tilts her new bald head in the room, lays her attention on this moment, on the foot of her bead like a plate on table and asks the world to be as big as the one inside her. Sees this moment open like a flower, each second holds more of the room into itself, first just her legs, then the bed and walls and window and ceiling, then the window and all outside it. The second grows and reveals itself not as a unit of time but as glass jar with the world in it, holds the world permanent and still.

She feels then there is more of the world in a second of quiet than in a sad story. Wallpaper, trash piled high, the dance of light on the tile, scratch of dry sheets. Quiet is not an absence it is full of all that has been left out. How much is in the world when there is no sad story to hide it, when the world belongs shiny and anointed to itself, all tragedy dimmed to nothing by all that quiet could hold and know.

Her Uncle’s jacket on her brother. Her brother rubbing his face into the blood and pudding, getting to know it. Under her gaze the jacket becomes its nuances, its zipper, frayed ends, old splotches of blood. Seems to rest inches from her face, ready to push all the way through her.
The sleeve so stiff with blood and smoke and time it stands on its own, holds itself out to him, like a mother’s touch on the face. About to touch him with a tenderness that is not in his life, his cheek to receive. He is handsome, she sees, when it is that close to him. Not an accident, the way the boy and jacket rest in each other, anoint each other.

Ridiculous to say. Her brother the reason she stayed on fire, and she forgives him by looking at the way the jacket lays on him. She knows, then, there is a forgiveness that is the same as looking. She did not make the forgiveness but found herself in it like stepping into a warm bath.

Her attention anoints. What she anoints with her attention changes its surface. She looks at the meal tray. It grows, there is more of itself in the world, pulls against her and the spin of the earth. When there is more of it there is less of her, she is blotted out by it, feels herself fade toward it, admit to its gravy, bound and involved with the almost imperceptible pull it has on the rest of the world. Each new object a shining moon.

Each object a shiny piece of stillness jammed in the world. The bend in the sheets, the angle of light, the slant of the cushion, surgical instruments perched in cups without tipping, they are more than her and the world—the pillars the world stands on. Her eyes land on things, boiling them into moons, make it grow until each object is not perfect but strikes a perfect note, shines with it. The note does not die but is the buoyant warmth the room is held in, the way her shoulders roll back and diminish to receive that warmth. Each note growing into the next. Her attention will bring everything in the room into glory. She knows the glory is the shape of her mouth and the glory she will not speak.
The walls, tables, trash, chair, turn to face the rising sun in the window. The quiet
turns the objects over in its hand, they shine all the more. In peace, Caroline closes her
eyes to sleep, knows with a sadness and a kind of readiness when she wakes the earth will
move her into a smaller song. She will be an orphan, she will hate her brother, she will
have burns.

They walk into the room, the pudding nurse and her Uncle, and her tragedy is not
in their shoulders, in their walk, in their eyes, they will not bring it to her and lay it on her
charred legs. The come to the door, faces lost in and out of light, leaning in, elbows
almost touching.

They hold their hands behind their back, will not move or step. The room does
not belong to them but to what the fire has done. They do not look at her as Uncle and
nurse, but in the lost, satisfied way a child waits to be told what is next. They look at her
with their souls, like fish in a net, serene, gaping.

They will not stop looking at the body she forgot she had. He body grows under
their eyes, she can feel it, they confront her with it, its pain and scars, blot out the shining
room with her body. When they look she can feel herself breathe. When she was not on
fire she breathed until she filled up her skin and could feel her hair grow. But there is no
skin, no hair and she breathes until she fills the room with her breath and it pushes against
the walls. Her breathe the air they take into themselves, quiet they float in and out of.
Her skin that thin barrier but her lack of skin the whole room, the awe they hold toward
her. The quiet is the world’s pause over her.

She tries to move her jaw around and it is painful, the nurse and her Uncle move
to listen. She feels her mouth straining for the first syllable of words she will not speak.
They want her to speak the quiet they will live in. Her breath holds them, they stare at her in shining and arrogant and helpless need.

They are extraordinary and not careful and she cannot help them. The nurse, in love, shoving pudding in her face until she cannot breathe. Her Uncle in love, twisting the burns on her hands with small wet eyes. They will come again.

She lets go of the water inside her, the yellow stains bite into her wounds. She does not want to be a miracle, she wants to be as small as a girl in trouble.

V

Jonas woke into the smell of urine. The urine, its steaming notes on the floor, does not break the quiet but lifts it up to him, spreads it in a crown around his head. He turns to his Uncle and the nurse as the urine chooses its path along the floor. He does not hold his nose. The urine does not impress him. His eyes do not grow into the urine the way our eyes grow into a secret.

He is pale and tired and has not eaten and it is hard to close his eyes. When he closes them there is heat just behind his eyes that will not thin itself into sleep in his body. Fire will take him into itself, take hunger and sleep into itself the way her skin was taken.

He opens his eyes, slows himself, holds his breath, feel there is a grace inside us that is surprised by nothing and lives in the space between one breath and the next.
He goes to her urine, lays the jack on the pool so there is time for the jacket to soak the urine into itself. He puts on the jacket, an arm at time, his arm through its warm, damp scent. Then he feels the warmth is his, lets the jacket fall from him like a woman undressing. He breathes slowly, the warmth is his relaxed shoulders and what he must do.

He goes to her. There is more in his eyes than what he must do, warmth lights something on its edges. He leans into her breath. He knows she will attack him. They always attack him when he is close. The in and out of his breath, the beat in his heart is the violence of her hands. Already here, not here yet. Soon she too will be the violence in her hands.

When his hair is close she fills her fist with it, and yanks. The violence is in the clench of her fist before it is in her, the violence is the same as wondering if she can be violent. It was in his eyes first, gave her vivid direction.

Her brother knew this would happen. She can be as small as what has to happen, as small and inevitable as her hands. All the glory and attention committed into the shining point of her hands reaching for his hair, pulling, yanking, savage. She looks to her Uncle and the nurse and their eyes say she can pull his hair as long as she needs to.

Each pull is her curiosity, her heart not in it, her heart drifting behind each bull and bit and yank, slow, thoughtful. She is not sad or angry, but now is working, through his skin and blood, to the sadness she keeps in herself, the sadness that says she is a girl who has the right to be angry.

Then, she is in her anger, mad at him for letting her stay on fire, and the anger and pain is hers again to feel, all hers in warmth and sureness. The pain is in her arms and
wrist. The pain is in his blood and his smooth, opened skin. And the pain is not in his eyes.

Where is the pain in Jonas. When she pulls him her skin is off like wrapping paper. She screams for him and the scream is the loosening of his body, it relaxation. Hands tearing his bare arms. He can abide in her interest and in fire, the fire not its heat or temperature but her hands and the grace to stand till as he is torn apart.

She looks for herself in his eyes, says to him, “What are you doing?” a voice small as needle and thread.

She finds herself—a dot of light in his eyes. That dot of light so far away, she sees and knows, it does not matter what she does, or if she hurts him. All of it, all of their growing up, is in his eyes as that dot—as what has been done many years ago. She, and all the years of her life, are that point of light running inside the crust and yawn of his eyes, and she can hit and run and slap and she will never be outside them.

She tries to claw out the shine in his eyes, to claw herself out of them, but she is that dot, that light and grace in his eyes and her grace hangs in them, weak, smiling, unreachable. She lets go and they sit down and become children.
Disappear into the Size of Its Eyes

When he was seven his father lifted him toward light and onto a horse. He felt his face so close to the sun it could burn. Father balanced him on the horse then took off his hand and turned to the light like it was the point. He began to cry so his father would turn and see him. The father turned to him from the light, irises sucked into pinpricks. His hand rose out of an equation in the heart, and smacked the horse on its end, sending the boy into what would become of a wild horse in the field. The boy held its hair, put his head, ear and shoulder down as close to the horse, could feel all of north south east west bound its meat. Momentum chose its next step. He moved with its length. He fell off the horse like he was part of its body shorn off on its way to becoming light.

He grew up, never in contact with anything he was as sure of. His father more and more at the bar at end of the road with beer and peanuts and women who were tired, mother drifting toward the smell of herself in bowling alleys and cigarettes. He himself unsure, when it came to choosing and touching this life and its women--what to do with the time given to young men. It was only in his thirties he had a wife who didn’t have to choose him, that he reached out his hand at a bar for, and a job he could go to everyday and expect the door to open and close on his work with people and cars. A house on empty land, her cooking on a small stove with her hand on the stomach of her pregnancy.
He came home with a newborn horse, read about it in the newspaper. Born without oxygen, its eyes bulging for it, could have it for free at the farm across the county. It lay in the back of his truck, stuck full of Benadryl, breathing like sleep. His hand in his wife’s straw hair, an explanation, the door shut on him, a truck with a horse in it. He pulled the horse out, one leg at a time, like something he would reassemble.

He visited the horse in the garage, kept her full of grain, eyes bulged in the dark, working its own secrets. Its shit lay everywhere, on tricycles and bats donated from the toy drive. He built a fence, a stable with the time he had after work—fat narrowed to muscle. He cleared stones, all stones. Days where he heaved just one out of dirt, lifted, heaved, so the horse would not think there was anything under its feet. He came in late, splinters, sawdust, a sunburn he let peel. He got in bed next to his wife’s body, unwashed, dirty hand on her belly. Squeezed her belly like an egg.

The horse rammed its young head into the stable, into the fence, made itself numb, retarded. He spent everyday fixing the pieces his wife pointed to, a plank on grass, gate bent in half. His son learned to walk and put his hand on the window for him. He set down the hammer and put his hand up for his but his son had lost interest. He went in when the sun set. The horse grew into its wounds and its sense of things.

The horse let him touch him, threw its head and snout into his hands, he wrangled it with the wonder of birth, or catching a bird. The horse settled into what it could feel.

With the love he’d stolen, wrangled, from the horse he went inside for the day. His son played cars. He held him in his lap, gave him the time there was left, but nervous with it, eager, too hard. He scared the boy, knocked him with a pat on the back. The
wife said stop and he said the boy will learn with the love there is to give. He held the boy. The boy reached out for cars and screamed at its own hands.

He ignored them. Took his wife’s dinner out to the stable with him, mashed potatoes, green beans, meat, set it on the fence post. Never ate himself. Horse ate with knowing. Hand in his pocket, he watched it get bigger, less and less of him, more and more of it. On the horse he felt he was hardly there.

He jumped on the horse, thrown off, smiled at it, let things out of his mouth—blood, teeth. Wrangled it by its ears, brought its breath close to his, the stillness in a second of understanding. He got on the horse, shot off, out the stable, over empty land like kites. Its eyes bulged, running fast, him, hardly there, the horse running, running towards the trees, no way to stop, not afraid, looking down at horse, the world running at them would disappear into the size of its eyes.

He came home, dirty, wind pulling off skin. Took a shower, wife came in, said there could be another one, another boy, took off clothes like a cocoon, wrapped around him, said how bout it, how bout this. How bout this and not that, how bout this and not that. Felt his ribs, what’s left when the horse eats all the food.

The horse tamed, a saddle. Knew its owner by way he shut door to see him. Father took the boy out, three or four now. Boy reached for horse, father drew him back. The boy unsure. He put the boy on horse, guided him with hand. Horse bucked, boy fell, father could not catch. Boy under horse, hands in air like small insect. The horse reached its mouth down, bit him like he would now eat. Father reached in, scared, yanked so hard the child’s arm broke from the socket. The child stood, still, stronger than father thought. Arm hung from child like stick he’d found, moved in wind. Long
mark of teeth on his face, would heal but would always be there. Will keep the world from him, father thought, will make world look back at him. Marked—more sure, more definite. He took the child inside for its mother.

Mother came out as the sun went down. Child’s arm popped back in, done it herself, child rested, slept with Benadryl. Came out with long silver shotgun in hands, so sure, so ready for it it has already happened, like a dream he couldn’t stop. He pulled at her but she ate more, cared for the child, her strength was all in necessity.

She walked ahead, slow with what was predestined, fulfillment of ancient law. Aimed at horse. He picked up stone, a pile of them he swept from the foot of the horse. Knew its shape and feel, dug so far in earth, found groove he knew, hurled it at her it as his only clear and good decision. She reeled, fired into air. He took her inside, dragged her by legs, set her on bed, felt her breath on his hand. Felt so much him went in stone he threw. Only thing left was the part of him that was sure.

Wife woke up, grabbed a knife under a towel, went for him, but missed, so thin like light. Grabbed, held boy in both arms, both of them marked on their face, glowed with his mark, a long cut. He knew them perfectly. He helped. They piled up their things. He gave them money in the back of his pocket, they would be with family. She left before her eyes decided to kill him. Their marks shined in the sun when they turned out of the drive. They sped up as fast as cars speeds up.

The car broke down on edge of horizon, like another insect. He thought of coyotes, wolves, and waiting. Wife and boy got out of the car. He pinched the horse to his need, cradled himself in its back, like he was not there. It drove toward the car, night falling, falling. Horse drove, faster, faster, toward car. He heard his son whine, could not
see but heard. Tried to stop, so close, so close, tried to stop but the horse was sure; he was sure. Horse’s eyes bulged, seeing more than him, seeing all of light. Child screamed, wife screamed. The horse ran into wife and child, into their shining mark, as if they would disappear into size of its eyes.
A Wild, Pathetic Dance

I met him a year ago. I had just gotten out of a whoreshouse, a girl touched the hem of my shirt like she almost wanted me to stay. I crossed the street, took a step to the edge of the bridge. There was no water under it, only the appearance of shrubs. My shirt would ripple on the way down, my bones would snap in applause and I would begin to stink.

The wind leapt into my hair and played with it on the way down. I landed on dirt and grass, and turned on my side, coughed up teeth. Birds communicated and swam in the sun.

I crawled up through weeds. I was afraid of a snake in the tall grass, not that it would kill me but that it would bite me and I would do a wild, pathetic dance.

I took a break, rested myself in weeds. I looked up at him. He stood there, his car stalled on the bridge, a young man, overweight, curly hair, eyes set wide like a fish. The sun woke his hair. He looked like an amused minor god. I had never met him.

He waited for me to climb to the top, touch his car in a moment of rest. He pointed to me, and to the ledge, and shrugged into a point of quiet. I put my other hand on the car and breathed out. He pulled my shirt back over underwear.

His mom was in the hospital. Was I coming or not? He held a rosary. His words small as a needle and thread, I knew I was his. I belonged to whether or not he was late.
We got to the hospital. He walked fast, his fat rolled in his shirt, his jeans nearly ripped when all his weight moved with such decision. He thought she would be dead by the time he got there. But she wasn’t. She was angry at him for being late, and then she died. Someone had given her a small rosary. She held it. He moved to her breast, she held him like she would nurse him one last time. She moved around a little, and then she didn’t. I stood in the back next to framed picture of a lake.

On the way back he cried, and I, empty of everything but where I had been that day, told him what whorehouses meant to me. He drove me to my house and I put my hand on the steering wheel and told him there was a free couch if he didn’t want to go back to her death. He nodded. We settled into a kind of life. We lived together for a year before his arm hung on my toilet with his death. We weren’t gay but we were very close.

After his mom died he wouldn’t eat much but he would drink milk and close his eyes and sway. Then his eyes were like an open cornfield and he would say we were out of milk, and go to the whorehouse without me. Going to the whorehouse is wrong, but he stood there and swayed until it was like a prayer. He made it something very careful.

He worked the night shift at a gas station. After his mom died he was not good at his job. He never washed his shirt and the milk dried on it in big long lines. One night he got off work, opened the door to my house, pointed a big careful finger. He said he loved me, left his mouth open like a fish. He took a step toward me, mud on the carpet. He wiped the milk off his mouth so there was nothing between me and his soul. He said he ran over a dog. It was so quiet it was like a secret.
He said he ran over a dog on the way home and stopped and looked at it. Its body was spread across the road evenly. He said the dog licked its severed body and tried to bite him a little. He said his tears fell on the dog’s fur and didn’t do anything. He said he tried to give the dog a name that was bigger than the fact he ran him over.

“Sparky,” he said and the dog closed his eyes.

“Beloved,” he said and the dog moved his mouth to bite him.

He said the sun came up, shining on the mountains and the colon. And he saw from the cars passing that he was crazy.

He got closer to me and I smelled the sour milk on his shirt, the stubble that hung off the fat of his chin. He looked for something sad in me or in the way I sat. His closeness made me close my eyes and fall asleep. When I woke up there was a blanket over me and he had all my money.

One night he came home with no pants on, a deep red cut on the left side of his face. He told me what whorehouses meant to him. He tried to wipe off the deep cut, his eyes set big like a fish. A tear got in the cut on his face. He looked around the room for something to be grateful for. Then he hit me. He spoke softly between the rise and fall of each fist.

The next day he came down the stairs with a new pair of pants and a deep red cut on the left side of his face. He chugged all the milk, then, swollen, satisfied, like a bored and repentant cow, he came into the living room and touched the bruise on my face like a stone he’d found. He asked me if I would go to the whorehouse with him.

And I didn’t like how carelessly he said that. I didn’t like that his idea of forgiveness was to drag me into a vagina. If he took me to the whorehouse it would
finally be for a normal, shallow reason. And I would have to forgive him. I saw him through the shiny, gossamer veil of forgiveness. I saw him going up and down on a whore, eyes dull and satisfied, a slow indulgent whale, turning the bed next to him and checking on me, almost opening his mouth before falling asleep. And I knew through that shiny, gossamer veil we had less to say and he was not as interesting.

I said yes. We came home, and he drank a lot of milk, tipped the gallon over his mouth and waited for all of it.

He was in the bathroom. I found him in his milk and vomit, mouth and nose in it. His arm on the toilet, hand held out, balanced there like he was posed for a painting he could not understand. It was almost intimate, him and what held him like that. Milk in his nose and mouth, him still. I didn’t know if I was invited. His shoes poked out from the door and I nudged them back in, closed the door with my back, waited for him to rot and ascend.

He was Catholic when he died in my bathroom. I don’t know what he is now. But the smell gets worse and worse. He’s been in there three days, the smell is everywhere. It is all the places I go. I should probably tell someone. But there is a name for him that is bigger than the fact he drowned in milk.

I found the smell in my favorite shirt. When I found the smell in my shirt I tore it off at Walmart and watched it land, in a gentle arc, on a transformer action figure. A woman squinted and moved away. But one child smiled and understood. And when his parents held his hand and told him he couldn’t have an action figure, he tore off his Spiderman shirt and ran around the store, screaming, knocking down children. I would’ve joined him if he didn’t look ridiculous.
His parents didn’t pick up his shirt but they held him, squirming, in their arms and spanked him as his eyes pushed his soul right at them.
He was not upset the truck hit him. He told no one how it shot through him like mercy.

After he got hit by the truck it only left important things shining at him. His parents held him at his elbows when he re-learned to walk, but he stopped at stared at things—a cabinet door open, a cup on the end of the table—and would not move but would stare at it. They were already old, bent with the age of retirement, used to the shape of recliners they’d bought, and they shook with their hands under his elbows, and became cross with him in a blunt, exhausted way they had no control over and hadn’t heard or felt in themselves in 40 years. But he stared, and when they were cross he was even more still and sure, like he had—above all, to the point of having nothing else—faith they would hold them while things stared right through him. Things, he said, pinned him where he was like an insect.

They loved him and he began to walk again, but chose a different pace than even they could manage, faster than their own shuffle. They would go to Lowes and Walmart. He would walk past them, blind to their sound. Just as suddenly he would stop. He always found lumber and steel worth stopping for. He would stare at a cut of steel, a line of wire. The truck tilted the things inside him so the world came into him in shapes no one could understand. The parents would get the manager, the employees, but he was so
still, gentle, and focused that people didn’t know how to begin to touch or move him. It felt like moving art.

Soon his parents would only take him to church, even though he didn’t believe in God, he said, only in things. Took him to church where everyone already knew and prayed for him in the quiet of their homes and kept everything he did in church in a cone of polite reverent awe. The pastor, the deacons knew when and where to touch. They nudged him, gently, with the Spirit when he went up at communion and did not eat or drink but looked at the shape of the bread and the cup that held the wine. Looked at it too long. Felt it bore into him, inscrutable, unconcerned, all the way through him like a pin.

By the time his parents were too old to walk or take him anywhere, they slept, exhausted in their chairs, arms held out to the TV like water. By then he’d taught himself to walk and drive.

He walked to a dealership, found the exact make and model of the car that ran him over. He found it on the edge of the dealership. He stared at it twelve hours and bought it. He wanted to be inside the Message and not what the Message ran over. The car veered but on average held the center line and the speed the car caught and held made the world run by fast, the world a blur that couldn’t pin him to the ground with looking.

One day it rained, and he drove, through the small downtown, hitting a puddle and splashing, in a kind of perfect brown arc, a woman walking by in her purple raincoat. He stopped the car faster than it wanted to stop and it groaned, he threw open the doors on either side, and let the car hang there, traffic stuck behind it, like a kind of huge insect about to erupt into air. He walked to her with the movements he had fashioned for himself, sinew and motion he made in his own image, learning to walk not in God’s way
but his way. He walked like he’d been hit by a car. She stood in the rain for him, expectant, like there was now something they both believed in. He told her he was sorry. She pulled her raincoat to her with the new mud on it, like something she would like to keep now he’d apologized for it. He blocked her way. He told her he was sorry, stood there, traffic blaring, herself getting soaked, until he thought she believed it. He told her where he was going--to church because people knew enough to pray and let him look. She looked at him, his face. She chose this face, not because it was good but because if it was evil it wouldn’t know where to start.

She liked the way he drove because she didn’t know if they would get there or if they would not. She held his arm on the way up the church steps, and pulled him past the shoes and steps he stopped. She held one arm out of her raincoat like a witch does. She touched him and he moved with her and the suggestion of her touch. They sat on the back row, and the pastor, large and kind, began his sermon with his hand at rest in his pocket, then on the podium but not gripping it. There was an altar call, for those who needed prayer. And the man went up and the woman let him, her seat wet, crossing her legs, showing the veins on her ankles.

He walked up and the pastor moved to catch him with his touch. The pastor put his hand on his neck as the way God is revealed. He told him many things the pastor could not hear but chose to understand. Nodding. Pastor told him to close his eyes and with his hand mouth and eyes tried to guide him to the invisible but the man bent down, looked at the carpet, its triangle pattern, its reds and oranges, because the carpet looked into him, was coming for them. A line of people behind the man now, waiting for the touch of the invisible. The band starting up to signal that Christ will now move them to
the next part of the service, and the man still there, motioned to the pastor who to his credit bent his head down to be with the man and to be with what he saw in things. This carpet that looked right back, that comes for you, pushes right through you. The women leans forward to go up but chose to watch, pulled her dress up over her knee and leg so the deacons will look at her and her shape of things to come.

The music played soft while they both looked at the floor. Deacons moved to intercede, but the pastor waved them off. He was willing to be led by what was unusual in this man. The man went limp, as if his only faith was that someone would hold him while the carpet goes all the way through him. He laid at the pastor’s feet, holding his shoes.

The man stood up in his own slow way, almost falling. The pastor hugged him, whispered in his ear. The pastor went back to the podium, gripped the podium now, held the congregation to announcements without moving the hair in his face.

Deacons guided the man. The woman walked to meet them with hands that claimed him like she would ingredients. Guided him to car. She drove when she found keys in his pocket. Drove straight but swerved a little to see if it was something to live by. He let her drive, hands hung down inside his legs, glad someone was in charge even if it scared him.

She convinced him there was money in his pocket and she was hungry and when he looked in his wallet it was there. They went to the Burger King. When they ordered the manager held their tray out and the man stood there as if it would be years before he was ready for this. He reached out his hand to the burgers and fries, then stood there looking at them, a wrapper opened like a gun set in his face. The woman let him stand
there, the fry cook and manager paused over him. More people behind him. People grumbled. The woman was there now. She put her hand on his back, held him out to the beeping machines, the counter the floor and people, like a lantern or a signpost. She closed her muddy jacket. She snarled, almost soft and sexy, to anyone who passed and looked at him, like she would flirt with them or eat them.

The woman crossed her legs when she ate a fry. She pulled the muddy coat over herself. She looked down at the mud. She was happy with it. She closed her jacket so her figure would not shoot through him. She wanted this to be a discussion.

“What happens when things stare at you,”

“They push through, all the way through. Like they are real and I am not.”

She smiled. It made her feel like she understood.

“We should drive,” she said. “Fast.”

The people no longer looked at him oddly, but stayed away. It was no longer that there was something wrong with him but that they might kill someone. She clarified their dislike for him, when she leered, and pulled the jacket over her with mud like a slash of blood. He breathed, and spread out his legs, smiled now he understood his relationship to all the forces in his life.

They walked to the truck, and she stood a little behind, tried to mimic his walk, the food in a bag in her hand. She walked with her left leg drug behind like its own small dog, she laughed because she now looked pitiful. She stopped at the things he did to see if they bored into her, what it felt like. A trashcan, a cigarette, they were interesting yes, but standing there, dragging her leg, she couldn’t feel them push all the way through her, like a safety pin.
She got in the car, let him drive. He drove fast, but seemed to know just when to turn and avoid something, the world blurred by. She put her feet up on the air conditioner. He drove and she leaned the seat back and she was bored. She looked at him like she might open the door and jump out if things weren’t better.

A run down refrigerator in their way, fallen off the car a hundred yards in front of them. The refrigerator bigger and bigger, coming for them. He made to swerve, to make it curve or blur so it wouldn’t look at him, but she pinned his foot the accelerator at the knee, held the steering wheel straight, so they were a bullet toward it. He wanted to fight her but felt tangled up in purpose. They shot through, the refrigerator exploded itself into halves. He thought for a moment he saw the debris land all over her teeth.

“See, you’ve gone through it.” She let go, put her feet up on the air conditioner.

He looked back, and realized he could turn his head any direction, and the car was a bullet.

She drew near, kissed him. Her mud wiped off on him. He felt her lips mash all over his. The world flattened like paper. They passed the car that had the refrigerator. The family stood outside the car, looked at it ruined across the highway.

He stopped the car. He got out. He walked up to the family. He stood with them, would inherit their vision. The torn door. Metal in wire, wire in metal. He would not look at her. He would not see her, a hundred yards down, head leaning out of the door of his car. Threatening to kiss him.
The father bought a plot of land next to the woods. He worked hard, he kept his money in his jeans. He took his son out to see the land. The father leaned on the hood of the truck. His son ran slowly in the grass, around a tree, losing his footing on rocks—slow, small strides. The way his son ran, his shuffle, his lack of elegance, made the father feel the exact lack of the son he wanted. To his amazement, the exact lack of the son he wanted was briefly, suddenly, a son itself—born from the awkward way his real son ran. He was beautiful, handsome, swift, fully formed. The new son stood beside the father and looked at the sky. They planned a house together, spaced out its dimensions on the plot of land, his son gave him its length and width.

The new son was 9 or 10. The new son was there in the way the father relaxed his shoulders and laughed a little bit that day, the way he put his hands in his jacket, felt a little less weight on the arch of his feet. The way he held up his fingers and spaced out dimensions. He was so proud.

He didn’t speak to his real son in the truck, the boy was a reason to look the other way, at the sky. He never sped. But the truck was now a thing to drive fast. He could ignore the rust in the suspension. He’d bought a plot of land, his new son was the way he would build that house—his beauty and strength in its lines.

The boy lived in the house his father made, slept in its symmetry. His father was distant, friendly, let the boy stay home from school because he did not like to look at
him—his small crescent shape. But the boy’s mother was angry, imperious, because she still believed in her son. She squinted at his cough.

One day when he stayed home from school, he looked out the window of the house his father made. The sky was thick and swollen and bright. The sky puts its hand on the earth, lifted up chairs and toys and tree limbs and laid them down in pieces. The boy had a stomach ache. He put his hand on his belly. The sky shook the window to get his attention—the sun a blade through a cloud. The boy looked at the horizon until the knot in his stomached dulled and smoothed and parted, until his stomach was not there, and he was not there. His saw a tree bend with the sky, artful. The grace in it was the grace in his hand as he put it on the window frame, and pressed on the glass. The sky began something in him, made him the kind of boy who folds his mother’s quilt without the thought of it pleasing her, the boy pets the slow fur of the cat when he hates cats, who corrects the position of the couch. He looked at the sky, and looked around. He felt he was anointed and there was nothing to do.

He opened the door for more of it and more of what he could be. The sky that began something in him was now in the room, threw furniture and picture frames around as if it never knew him. When it was done, the sun shone through the open door—its perfect length and width. He stood in a room that was ruined. He was not disappointed. His jeans were wet. He was young, his eyes were open, and he could not imagine a world other than the one he was in.
His father walked in through door and the sun. He came home, tired, humbled from putting his hands on the parts of a car. He took an earned slow step through the door and saw what the storm said his house would be.

The father picked up a lamp, then set it gently on the floor where he had found it. His house was not his, his son its fault. He closed his eyes and a world where his son was handsome and kept doors closed, where the house stood against the sky, was born in his heart. His hand was heavy with it, hands clenched with it, it was the beat of his heart. A world no one could touch or feel. No place for it. Until the father put that world into his fist, and hit his son again, and again. The boy’s head snapped back, and snapped back again.

The boy opened his mouth and screamed. The father went upstairs to sleep and not remember. The boy stood in the sun and cried. No one was there when he spoke the world. The sun went down, took the hills and valley and sky with it, until the only thing left was the sound of his chest going up and down. The sun went down and brushed his cheek, glowed the scar his father left, the trace of a world that was not there.

That day is not with the father, it is only with the mark and bruise on the boy’s face. The father is cheerful, less distant now he was promoted to manager. He has a new pair of jeans. The house is set right. The mother, sullen, imperious, does not ground the boy for leaving the door opening. She thinks the lamp flew into his face.
The boy never stays home from school. He holds his stomach. That day is the slow way he walks. The day is not gone yet. It is safe inside what he says and does, things done slower now, things said softer, surer, elegant. That day changes the shape of this one, makes him notices bruises on others, makes people seem less friendly. People’s hands stand out to him.

Even on his best days, when dinner tastes good and his mom and dad are smiling, elbows on the table, passing salt, when there is almost nothing bad to remember, he still feels that day waiting inside him. Waiting for the rest of his life to happen so he can hold that day out into the sun like an oddly shaped rock and say what it is.

After school, sometimes, the boy does not run home but runs and runs until he is swift and fast, until the sweat is in his shirt and he feel that day has been misplaced, that he is glade he can’t find it. He runs faster, smoother, when he runs from it. He sits down, slowly, by a tree, sees that when that day is gone there is room for other things—the dust on his jeans, wind in chimes, the sun and its particular shadows, how ants move on him. The boy, in these moments, feels these small things anoint him but will not tell him what to do.

When he is too tired to even see these things he stays sitting, closes his eyes to spend his life in his chest going up and down. It is only then he can feel and not imagine the kingdom of God. He can feel it. When he stands up, he emerges against the sun, wanting it and wanting to fight.

When he is eighteen he is tall and tan and faster and his parents send him to college. They wave when he leaves from the house. He leaves his dorm at night, walks
to a trash can to throw a wrapper away  And something of the momentum of the errand
carries him out on the street, until he is at a bar, hears voice.  He hears, then moves until
it is sight.  A fight between four young mean.  One is hit, and hit again.  He stands on
one leg, the other just above.  He is far enough away, the night cold enough, the light on
them beautiful, that the fight is not horrible to him.  The boys head snaps back, then back
again.  Before the fight is anything to the boy it is familiar and what comforts him.  He
feels things align in him, knows what that day in him is.  He puts his other foot down,
feels it is on the world.

When he fails classes, comes home, the father puts the pot of soup down, an apron
on, hugs his son with all his strength.  It is not much.  She ties the father’s apron.  His
father is sick, she tells him coolly.  He has not seen him in two years.  It seems to the boy
those years have been whispering something to his father as they quietly pulled the flesh
off him.  He looks sick and blessed with secret knowledge.

His father tastes the soup in his spoon.  He holds his son’s gaze.  It is a slow gaze,
like lights on in a gym.  It stirs him, and suddenly the in and out of the father’s breath  is
that shining day.  The day he hit his son.  That day begins in his pulse, then it is the
change in his face, and his limbs shaking.  Soup is on the stove.  He sits down, carefully,
lets it burn.  If he hit his son that shining day then there is no soup to check, no reason to
stand up and go to the bathroom and love his wife.  All the years of the father’s life—
good, thoughtful years—now a small thing when held up the light of those few seconds.
He shrinks from it.
The mother turns the stove off, looks at the son and the father, knowing only the husband those years have given her. The years he’d mopped the floor and held her close and loved her moods into their opposite.

The boy says, with grace, as sure as ever, “You did hit me.”

She bristles at the boy, sweeping. She speaks to him as if he is brutal, that there is something ugly and wrong that begins with him. And her tone, and her choice of words, find a place in his heart that says she is not wrong. He feels known by it. He feels he knew what he should do.

She looks at him, slaps him on his cheek.

“Get out.”

She shoves him and he shoves her back, and she falls on the floor and yells. His father closes his eyes as his mother screams. He has not hit her. But her screams, the scream in her throat, welcome him into a world where he has. That awful scream has changed her. She is a victim now.

He tries to lift her up by her elbow. He is not slow, pale and considerate. He is his abusive. It is in the way he says he’s sorry, the way he shuts the door slowly and does not come back.

He begins to wander the streets. He eats pizza out of the trash. He meets other people around cigarettes and bowling. They became something together. They move their way into kicking things and knocking over trash, and he doesn’t feel he deserves any better than what they become. They pass an old man. They say why not hit him. The boy sees the sky, can feel the kingdom of God in his chest. But he cannot imagine it. He looks at his shoes. He can only say the things they say to each other. He does not
have a word or tone or phrase that will lead them into a world where they leave the old
man alone, where other things are true, like the way the wind feels or the grass turns, or
the way their clothes settle on them.

And when he hits the old man, the violence is as calm as what he has known, as
calm as what he can imagine. Hitting the man makes him better at hitting him so that he
does it again and again. The old man falls gradually onto the stoop, pulls his jacket
together. He looks up at them and smiles, weakly, and the boy sees, by the old man’s
smile that the old man is still welcoming them into a world where they have not. They
hit him again and again in the shines and shoulder. But it does not help. The old man’s
smile and soft looks says no matter what the boy does, the boy is still in a world where he
is good, where has not hit the old man. The old man’s eyes say this day is not here, will
not arrive, no matter what they do it will not be the look in his face. This day will come
nowhere near him, and if the boy believes, it will come nowhere near him either.
Now that her mom and dad were on a cruise, Leslie’s grandmother came to stay and slept in front of the TV with her long arms hung down. She gave a long, distilled look into all she had been told there was for Leslie to do—like it was a particular point on the floor. She looked at Leslie sadly, in her cleats and packed lunch, and said there were no lessons, recitals, or soccer practices if Leslie did not want them, and before Leslie could nod, her grandmother gave a vague look to the window and with a flourish of her hand a row of soccer fields, and instruments, and shoes, vanished into a horizon the grandmother did not deign to look at.

And the grandmother, seeing she had made something small and happy inside the girl, something almost like light, drew herself back into her chair as if exhausted at the act of creation. And turned back with a long, wide stare that owned what was on TV.

And so Leslie was free to go outside and knew she was free to be where she was until dark. And time—those four or five hours before dark—no longer hid itself or asked to be counted and measure like coins, or ran around and under her feet while she wasn’t looking, but stood still over her and all there was to see, let light into everything, to prepare a way for her.

She walked in and around forests and trees and mounds of dirt, jumping on and off of stones, until she met a girl there—saw her through a scratch of limbs—with purple
shorts, and a spine curved toward light like a dancer or a flower. She walked through branches with dainty legs that hesitated over the world and put as small a point of pressure on the earth as possible. And though Leslie was scared to see someone walk into the time she thought was her own, she asked her over with a hand that was her faith in what would happen. The girl came. Leslie was fatter, and sure, and asked this girl slow questions about her day. The girl answered with a face that questioned every word it heard itself say.

They ran and sat and played. And it seemed that they sat in the hours Leslie had to spare, and those hours had a special way of looking at this girl, they lifted her up, lifted up her curls to get a good look at her, regarded her as precious.

Leslie showed her how to balance over a fallen tree, how to plant your feet on good earth and know it. She turned back to see her do it after she did it herself. The girl was protected by the fact she’d never done it, something in clumsiness was also luck and guidance, something in the fact she never done it was the invisible hand that taught her how to.

They sat down on flowers when the girl asked if they could. She had something to say. It was then her gnarled jaw seemed to take her face from her, give it the look of an upset stone. She pulled grass out of the earth so it could be said. Her father had molested her, which was fine, she said, and she told her how, where it was done and where hands go, that it was not bad, and she liked it. But Leslie could tell, with words she did not have, there was a thick root in the girl she had to move by shaping her throat to the feel of it in her stomach.

She was done. They walked through the trees in step without heartache.
Leslie did not know what to do. The girl’s face, when she was done, relaxed, like saying it meant it was not there. But Leslie could feel it. She looked at the girl. The story was no longer tangled in the girl’s heart but was the new shape of trees. They kept out light and loomed over and reached for them.

There was another molestation story, long and arduous, but Leslie felt she could not listen to the story without participating in the evil of it, that she could not listen to the story without being the one who lets her own father touch her and being the one who enjoys it, that she could not listen to it without it being her father’s hands that she let do it. The story was not words it was her father’s hands in her jacket, where they should not be.

The world stood back from them when it knew what they enjoyed. It lost interest. The wind died, the sun went down, the afternoon turned its head to go, left the girl’s hair in her face as an ugly thin. She told the girl, as she hopped onto the thick grass that was her way home, that she liked her stories but didn’t like all of them.

Leslie waved and watched the girl walk off in the distance, saw her stomp on the ground with all the sureness she had claimed by telling a good story.

Leslie walked home. Time did not glide over in an slow arc it was the pressure on the small of her back. She ran and ran, over limbs, lengthening her small body over fences and stumps and when she was done she saw that by running she had given her body back to herself, she was aware of the push and tilt and groan of muscle and every inch that was hers, and she carried it herself like a stack of slippery dishes that might fall
over, as if it was her guilt, as intricate as being known, and if she slipped or fell it might spoil it.

She went home and the story she heard seemed to already be there as the thickness of the air. It leaned the house to the left. It had changed the shape of the house while she was gone so it was dim and it was smaller, it seemed less like a place you would go and more like a place you would not.

She approached it slowly, the porch, the doorstep, the story made her walk as slow as having never been there, and choose where and when and how she made her foot a place on the earth. She opened the door.

There was her grandmother, in the back by the window and the fire place. She owned everything in the world with the look on her face. Her grandmother fell asleep just as she walked in, as the sun was going down, and she sat and watched her grandmother. Sleep formed her into a shape she’d never been, her legs drawn up, wrinkled head sideways, sleep cradled and adored her, knew in what way her body should go, formed her at the angle that would not hurt her bones.

She let the sun fall on her grandmother, and sat as close as she could to the chair and the way sleep held her grandmother. Time was in the tick of the clock, it shook the small wooden clock and was nowhere else.
The sun lifted itself over the mountain and took a good look at her grandmother through the window.

Her grandmother woke, turning gently. There was blood in her eyes, bulging them to wake and suddenly Leslie, who had not slept, knew the blood was not her grandmother but was the blind, ancient thing that woke her and lit and carried her.

Her recliner rocked forward with a kindness and engagement in the world. Her blood seemed a larger presence than her, triumphed over her age.

Leslie moved closer to what moved her.

She pulled Leslie to her with the blood in her hand, touched her on the head with its knowledge, just before her blood left her and she would turn the television on.

Leslie trembled then. She no longer knew what adults were capable of, what her grandmother might do, how she might touch her. But she would take it all, she would let anything happen between her legs if it meant being touched on the head like this.

She went upstairs to bed, slept a few hours. She woke up and looked out the window. Her grandmother’s touch had changed the shape of the world while she slept.

The world decided it would be with her this day, that it knew her as itself. It shined at her.

She opened doors in the house, and poured the cereal for herself because her grandmother was lazy, and practiced that touch she had been given. It took longer to do things, but it seemed to make her cereal calmer when it poured, to make the door open and groan with pleasure. She felt, yes, she felt she knew with this touch how to keep the world open and calm in front of her, in front of her hand, how to ask light in everything, how to make it reveal itself as good. She touched the clock. With her hand she asked
time out of the rumble of the clock, asked it to stand still over the miles of sky and prepare a way for her, and it did.

She met the girl again, her shorts tangled in thorns, behind the scratch of dirt and limbs and trees. She came out like a question. And though she still did not know the girl, Leslie drew the girl to her and knew her with the shape of her hand on her back.

But the girl was not satisfied. She drew Leslie’s hand from her shoulder to her side. She said she’d thought about it, thought about it a long time, and she wanted to touch Leslie the way she had been touched, touch her all the way, though she wasn’t insistent on the point, and kicked dirt around aimlessly and poked leaves while Leslie thought about it. It was the only way it is not sad—if they did it themselves then it’s something people do, something they could do.

She took Leslie’s hand. Leslie remembered her own bloom of pleasure at hearing the story they day before, the way the story was not words but her father’s hands where they should not be, and, remembering that bloom of pleasure, shrunk from it.

The girl turned to go, looked left and right, raised her arms to ask the trees and thorns to touch her where no one would.

Before she could go Leslie reached for her. Leslie put her hand on her shoulder and not where she had asked. The girl was still, quiet, almost present in that touch. Leslie put her hand on her head. It was too desperate to be peace but it was mercy. And when she did the girl cried a little. Leslie was not done with mercy. She was not done with mercy, she had been invited into a larger sense of it. When she reached out her hand to the girl, Leslie invited herself to do anything for her. She would invite her to her house.
“You’re invited to our house,” she said. “If we wait for my grandmother to wake up she will touch you, it won’t be like that though, but she will touch you in the way it needs to be.”

They ran, they ran all the way.

They opened the door to the house. The girl stared without pleasure, then stood next to the grandmother, who smiled at her, and, without getting up, asked if she was hungry. They watched TV but did not laugh at the same things. Leslie brought everyone some crackers, and the crumbs fell on top of and under their clothes and shoes.

Grandmother fell asleep, a snore rode in and out her body. Leslie told the girl to wait, wait until the sun, wait for it to wake her up so she could receive the touch.

The girl wiped her hands on her dress, and the crumbs fell, and left dirt on them. She held her head closely to the breath of the grandmother, and she listened, then she dipped her hand as close as she could to the center between the grandmothers legs, and rode her hands into it. Leslie heard the girl mumbling to herself while she touched her grandmother.

Before Leslie’s grandmother woke, before she could swat at the child, move her hand from the place where curiosity touched her rest, she saw her grandmother shiver, and saw all of her, her wrinkles, her sense of time, her mannerism, the length of her bones, contract into a drop of pleasure.
She Fed Him Potatoes

She woke up this morning and rose to the window with the feeling she had lost more than there was to have. In her reflection on the window, she strengthened her hair by pulling on it.

She does not have regrets because she does not look at them. Why should she close her eyes and remember, so a car can speed up and almost kill her in her pigtails? So a teacher will lay a test on her desk she has not studied for? So she can reach a tiny hand out to the stove and the flame will strike? Memory in her heart was not what has been, but what is and is to come.

She walked by her teenage daughter at the table. Her daughter cried. She wiped one tear for her, and another, but the third she did not.

She went to the grocery store, walked to the dairy aisle, stared at the shape of bottles for something other than what was to come. The corner of her eye located a gang of boys, reckless, nearly handsome. There was one, in the front, who was, she could tell, encouraged by something no one else could see. He smiled at himself, at what was not there. And walked in jeans with holes in them. Something in him, some reality in him—she almost caught it on the end of his smile, the flick of a leg—was sovereign over the store, held everything in it toward him.
He, and they, begin to knock things off shelves, salt, Quaker oats. She walked up to them as they entered the milk aisle. It fell upon her, suddenly, to stop them.

He opened the door and concentrated. He drew out his knife and plunged it into the milk. It was concentration, she saw, not destruction. He was careful, did it so everything could be what it was in his head. She knew it was a crime, but no matter what he did, she could tell, something in the way he did it was a way for you to trust. There was a grace in each gesture that held him blameless.

“Stop it.” She heard herself say this.

He looked at her, offered her the knife in a way that asked her to trust. She took it with a lack of surprise in him or herself, plunged it into the milk. It gushed on her life. Her life was not tangled in her heart, but was out there, as the milk that poured. She felt, when she took out the knife, she had become someone she finally recognized. She knew if you stuck a knife in a gallon of milk it was because you were a criminal, but she felt herself rest above what she was as a kind of tremulous light.

The boy waited for what her words would bring him. She began to sweat against the light of the bread aisle.

“My daughter,” she said, “has down syndrome. They make fun of her at school. You are still in school.”

“Will you take care of it,” she said. With his nod, she knew it would be so.

Her daughter would be okay. She went home and told her daughter she would not have to worry anymore. And before the day was there, before it could happen, it was already so. Her daughter relaxed, and finally slept. When she opened the door that night
and looked at her daughter, asleep and burning with the life she’d given her, she felt she blew on a flame her daughter’s body was no container for.

The next day she was at work, her daughter at school. She managed a Dollar General. It was busy. She felt herself all over the room. She felt, with her voice, she could reach out and touch anything in the room, and it would move as her. When she was done, and sat in her car, she breathed, and rested, and felt she was, more and more, the glow over her own body.

She did not have a lot in common with her body since the milk. She had more in common with the feeling of light, the way the sun turns with things that shine. She no longer had regrets. She was not in memory as arms and legs but as a run of light playing over what she’d done, playing over the way she moved. She saw her body, those years ago. It moved as something that was almost her, lost in certainty, everything moved slow as predestination. Everything gilded with light and predestination.

Those memories cut off on both ends, anointed by the light of her attention, severed from what came before and what came after-- like cutting green beans. She couldn’t remember buying them, or what she cooked them for, but there she was in memory, cutting green beans. The cutting was a thing unto itself, the moment contracted like a rain drop, with no before and after, was with its own shining light, outside of cause and effect, or history, or story, she was the light that held it that way.

Her daughter was happy, and one day, while getting ready for work, she spied her daughter with a large belly that she protected. She walked with it like a giant egg. Her daughter was happy with it,, and mother knew and didn’t know what happened.
She went to the grocery store, with groceries in hand, sagging, and saw the boy outside. He came to her, slowly. He did not help with her things.

She did not want to talk to him. But he was gentle when he stepped in front of her.

“It’s me,” he said, “I did it.”

“There is a great light in her,” he said. “It makes people ashamed. That’s why they make fun of her. I had to give myself to her so I would not be ashamed.”

The mother cried and wanted to turn away.

“I felt for her. I did. I thought that is you do when you feel for someone. I was gentle, she led me with her hands. When I finished I realized it was not what I meant. I meant something I didn’t know how to say, that I couldn’t get to.”

He put his weight on his other leg.

“You can lay out all the facts and that’s still not what it was. The world is not in the shape of facts. You’re going to tell somebody, you’re going to turn me in. Go home, look at her. They’ll say rape, but how can that be what it was when she and the world are more beautiful for it.”

She did not believe him. It hurt not to. She left.

She went to her car. She saw him through the windshield. He hit another boy, hit him, hit him again, and when he lifted up his hand it shook. She could tell he was locked--suffering, trembling--in a frustrated kind of holiness. He hit the boy but it was not what he meant.

She went home, and looked at her daughter. Her daughter had been quieter, these months since the boy was in their life. She knew things more by touch. When she came
home from work, her daughter would touch her shoulder, and she seemed to know what pressure was in a touch for someone to feel known and cared for. Yes, she was more beautiful, and confident. And she never talked. It was as if before she belonged to this world, to her mom’s belly, she belonged to silence. She grew into it, like a flower, unhurried, and found all her real gestures there.

The mother told herself whatever had happened it was gentle, and let the rest be a mystery to the world and herself.

She took her daughter everywhere with her then. They saw him at the grocery store. He came up to her belly, with his jean jacket, and with holes in his shirt, and put his hand on her belly for a long time, as if it held and withheld permission. But he did not look at her.

He was there for the birth, and saw his daughter through the clear glass, and blew a flower of clean smoke against the glass as if it was supposed to mean something.

They wiped off the afterbirth, and she saw her daughter hold her baby with the same pleasant disinterest with which we look at flowers and people we don’t know.

The baby didn’t feel recognized, and it cried, and cried often. The crying could be heard, gently, faintly, outside the door of the house, calling, it seemed, to people who would come.

She took the baby and her daughter to the grocery store, and the baby’s scream held everyone away from them. The woman looked more and more tired. She didn’t know if she could lift the Quaker oats.

The baby cried with her, in her room, in a crib. One night he came through the window, the chain on his pocket jingling. He knocked on the window, and she didn’t
open it. Then he plucked out a cigarette, and started smoking, and knocked again, and she did.

He came to the crib, guided the smoke over the child like incense. The baby was still, and quiet.

He looked at the baby for a long time. Then he flicked the cigarette on the floor, where it singed a bit.

“I have three cigarettes,” he said. “I want to smoke them and look at him. Is that okay? When I look at him I am a prayer.” He looked at his torn knuckles. “Why do I do all this stuff when I know I am the exact weight of a prayer.”

It looked, at one point, as if he was going to bend down and pick up the baby like something he had left here on accident. She was going to say no. But he turned and stood up and realized at the same time he didn’t want to.

She took him to the kitchen, made something for him and he sat down and tapped his food with a fork in a rhythm. She cooked, fed him potatoes. She saw his sureness in everything, as he looked at a calendar, as he sat straight, and she wanted to strengthen that sureness, and give it purpose.

Her daughter comes into the room. He looked at her.
The Word Will Not Burn with Glory without Us

Her father was a pastor, she was raised in the Love that began the world and saw It when people rose up from chairs and smiled or put things in each other’s hand, and saw It once when she woke to her hand on Billy’s head at school, when he had allergies so bad he couldn’t see and lay his head on his desk and she stroked his hair even though she didn’t like him and maybe especially because she felt like she didn’t have to. When it was done her blood was full and soared over him like birds.

The town knew her father was a pastor, that her mother was going to die in bed. But children still thought she was ugly, and told her so from across the street. They gave her ugliness to her in loud words. When she held her skirt and said things back, as cruel and hateful as her heart could stand before it did not feel like itself, they pulled her hair and hit her with small, accurate fists. She took their hands into how she stood and fell and her blood was full and could have moved the earth.

She went home to see her father. He was about to go to a widow and lay hands on her son but he took the time to look at her. He studied her when his frock was on. Otherwise he made eggs or swept. He sat her on a chair, a small wet rag in his big hands, and made slow dashes on her skin.

“They hurt you. I know this.” He cleaned the edge of the cut of grass and dirt. “They hurt you and suddenly you know there is a soul that is yours because it pushes
through your body and wants itself. That’s blood.” His hands shook gently the folds of his robe. He did not speak loudly because they knew her mother was dying upstairs and to leave her to it.

He took a band aid off the table. He almost placed it correctly, just a little line of red still shining, and looked for more cuts.

“They have given you knowledge,” he wiped her other wounds with less attention. “Your blood is full, you know yourself as the burning thing God sees.”

“You know them as souls. You will not put hands on them,” he said. He looked at his hands like they were too big to explain this.

He wrapped her hands in a towel and rubbed them for a short time, gave them back to her. She almost felt clean. He took off her glasses and looked at her.

When they made fun of her in the grass or on the sidewalk, for her shoes and boots and the odd and unsurprised look on her face, it hurt her feelings, and she went up to them, to their jeans and blond hair, and suddenly felt there were questions in her mouth she would only ask if her feelings were not hurt, and she would ask them, quietly, seriously, if they liked their hair, or how their shoes felt, and suddenly she felt there was nothing she needed from them, neither revenge or justice. She felt she came to this moment naked and needing nothing, as if this moment came from nothing and would lead nowhere and was just shining at her, a question rising up from her like a huge gentle bubble. Sometimes they would listen, and they would answer, sway on their feet, and with every question she saw them revealed as what she had never seen before, and she took off her glasses and let her vision go and blur before her so they seemed like flames, all their wrinkles and weirdness and indecision swallowed in light. When they left her
for the playground or for home her blood leapt at them. This, she thought, was a way for things to be.

Her mom died while she was in a waiting room playing with her feet. Her dad came out before she passed, put her on his lap, and his hand on her shoulder. Before she could ask to see her, he shook his head so that she couldn’t.

“You would never forgive her for looking like that.” He was a kind man but that was what he said.

He got up, in his clumsy hands and straight pants, his robe, and left her not in the silence of the room, it seemed, but in the silence of the world, and the silence of the world stood at her back, ready for her to creep in and look in on the door, look in on her mother. She would open the door, and remove her glasses, so her mother could be taken into light.

She put her ear against the door, and her father heard her put her head against the door, and opened it slightly so she still couldn’t see, but could hear, and she felt her father’s breath, talking to her through the door, as if now was the time to teach. She could her mother’s small breathing.

“The blood and the body regard each other with suspicion. The blood knows more, knows and lives everything the body cannot not touch.”

Her mom coughed as if to draw him slowly back to her for her final moment, to prepare her for it.

“She will have to pray, it will be work. She is a believer, it is in her heart. Her body feels her crumbling on the bed, but her blood feels her exalted unto heaven.”
When he came out, and it was done, she saw he had been made a ghost by his time with her mother, like the disease was now mildly interested in him. He stooped to kiss his daughter, then closed the door, and told the nurse.

They went on walks, she and her father, after her mother died, and they walked from the church where he preached to their home in that small town. And often he tugged her hand so they wouldn’t go inside and they kept walking past the house. He turned to her and said,

“The world does something when we’re sad. It will not make itself known. We must walk. We must look.”

He held her hand, and began to sweat. He was tired. He looked at a bird for too long.

“Look at it until it changes into what it is. Look at it until there is enough glory for us to burn.”

And she felt the branches and dirt under her feet, and she tried, and she did. But her father walked slower and seemed to have stepped closer into his bones.

She walked to his church office one day, after school for him to walk her home, felt the give in the carpet. She sat in a chair outside his office, and saw a man walk in, close the door, and yell at her father. He called her father a liar, a coward. The man turned to leave and she saw the swing of her father’s robe before he closed the door.

“I’m going to forgive you. You will not leave until I do.”
The scuffle of chairs. A body thrown onto the church carpet.

“I have to forgive you for the world to be what it is. You will not keep the world from me. You will not keep her glory far from me.”

It was quiet. It sounded like her father was trying to look at him. She knew his blood was full. And his daughter felt it was not the silence of the room, but the silence of the world that pressed her close to door, that pressed her ear to the door.

“Forgive me. The world will not burn with glory without us.”

He banged the door with his fist, like a big pillow hitting, and she heard her father take the man into his big clumsy hands, and he shook him and shook him until the man said he was forgiven.

He left the man to sleep in the chair or look at a picture of Jesus on the wall.

Her father took her hand and his heart beat thick and fast with the fullness of his blood. She could feel it in his hands. His blood pulled the world closer. They walked together. The world was with them.

That night, in their house, he put her hair in his hands and began to braid it, dirt in his fingers. And prayed over her. And gave her back to the world with braids haunting and wrong, pulled to the side.

He was soon sick in the way the mother was sick. The congregation kept the father at home. He would not walk with her. She would make herself play, even though she was sad. She did it for him, to be in the world. She would run fast, slip and fall, scrape her knee to help the world make itself known to her.
When she came back home, all bloodied, he would sit her down, and mend it with slow large shaking hands.

Sometimes he looked at her, from head to toe, when she came back through the door all scraped up, put a big, pale hand up to her like he did not know who he was, or looked at her like she had been gone several years and he could barely know her, and didn’t know if there was much to recall. And sometimes he looked at her with open eyes, from his chair or from the dishes, or from a book, as if he would like a child one day.

But he always, eventually, coughed, rose his body out of the chair. Tended her. But he was slower.

He wiped the blood on her knee. “I knew, in my heart you would die when you were born, it was so complicated. I still know.”

He put a couple of band aids on her.

“I’m watching you grow up like watching a memory, I see your blood on your knee but don’t remember before or after.”

Her father would take off his apron and they would eat, good chicken and mashed potatoes they had been given.

Sometimes he sat in the chair after they had eaten, and wiped his mouth, and told her the story of when she was born. She would sit at his feet. The blood in heart still knows, he would say, she is not going to make it, the blood in his heart, he said, is still praying she will make it. And suddenly it was in his hands, too, the blood, the prayer, how they shook over her head. He knew with his hands she was about to be born. And
she could feel it when he puts his hand on her, could feel she was about to be born. And it gave her a kind of thrill.

And she said, almost pleasant, tired of being held, “I’m not dead, and I’m not born, I’m right here.”

He tugged on her braid sadly, as if there was something else she must know, and said, “Those things are nowhere but in the blood of the heart, and the heart doesn’t know the difference, doesn’t know the past as anything other than what is and is to come.”

She looked at him, and took off her shoes. He did not have a lot in common with his body, his body did not respect or regard him, made him stoop when he talked, hung his spirit down in weights, grew hair in ugly patches so that it made him wild, wrinkled him. His body seemed to sit idly by and know nothing but odor and death.

He had more in common, she saw, with the blood in his heart, that bulged in his eyes when they came alive with a story, blood knew what is and is to come—that he is a child and is reaching to the fire on the stove, that he can’t find his wife because she got on the wrong bus, that his wife will not say yes if he asks her on a date, blood knows his daughter dies in the womb, know his daughter is born and knows daughter is old.

And he told her a story of when her mother was a little girl, and rode a horse, and was being chased by the rain, by a storm, and the daughter was caught up listening to the story and wondered if her mother is going to make it out okay, and suddenly left her father, walked outside into the sun and trees and sky, and walked out not with the feeling her mother was dead but with the feeling her mother had won and had escaped. She knew it with her blood, and her blood stood over creation, and threw the light of her escape across the river and forest and mountains, and the world stood illuminated by it,
like a glare passing through a window. And she ran like all people run, to never fall down.
His wife died five years ago and he was not as sad as he would’ve liked. She went on a walk in the snow because she was mad. She usually went to the other room, with a lamp and a table and the bed (he built the room, this house, with his own two hands, and built it badly). But she left the other room, her face set against him and the snow, and a mile or two down the road, near the high school, a car ran into her, and left her on the snow with her hands out, her eyes turned to the sky as if to rethink a particular point.

Though her death was hard, they are in an argument, and the argument, like a womb, preserves her in the next room, where he can feel her sit on the bed and feel her shift the floor and the house toward her. That is where she usually is. His heart makes her rise into her original weight and she walks and closes the door and sits on the bed as he goes through his day, and when he walks into the room, to apologize, she is allowed to dissolve into what is not there, and the house shifts back onto its hind legs.

When they were fighting she would go into that room, with its table, and window, and wait for him to come in. And when he did, she would turn on the lamp and sit in his lap, not to seduce or apologize but, eyes wide, to be as close as possible to what was going to happen. She would breathe in, and he would set her apart from him, and wait until she was ready to hear all the hard things about herself. She did not know how she
felt until he told her, and when he did, her eyes would squint as if there was some small shiny thing on the floor that was gorgeous.

When the TV is on she sits in her urn. But when it is quiet, and he is home and can hear the snow fall, his heart lets her rise from the urn into her heavy step. She steps into the room and closes the door, where she is safe from time and decay and sits with her feet on the carpet and thinks about how mean he was to her.

One day he picks up a shovel and goes into the snow, to scrape it off the porch, but feels he cannot do so without still being in the house. He puts the shovel into the snow but feels he is mostly in the house, his feet on the carpet, about to talk to her. He sits down in the snow and there is the right kind of light, the right amount of quiet, and she and the room are as close as holding out his hands to receive it.

He knows, somewhere in him, she left him five years ago and died. But his heart has not let her out of the room and has kept the car from hitting her. He knows his wife left him five years ago but his heart has hidden it from him, until now, when it lays those few seconds in front of his hands. He reaches out his hand in the snow and touches her in the room five years ago, and he does not know what will happen. She is mad. She turns to him. Her skin soft because it is not for him. She is about to speak, he can see her throat shaping the world she will leave him in—a world where the house is ugly and she is gone and there is nothing beautiful he can do. The way she looks out the window, as if that world did not begin in her heart but was to arrive, inevitable, on a branch outside the window, and she was to rise to meet it. The line of her chin pointed toward to the snow. His heart lets her open her mouth and say:
“I didn’t want this house. I didn’t want to marry you.”

All her features settled as if the words helped her find her face. She rises five years ago and now and follows the line of her chin out into the snow to greet the new world and the car on its way to her. The line of her chin, when she walks out the door, five years ago and today, the way it sets itself against anything that could happen, the way it sets itself against the fact she is dead.

He runs out to her but finds himself in the long snow, with shovel in his hand, and the porch almost done. He feels his blood move the mountains, and the house, and the wind until they take the shape of her just leaving, the quiet she left him. A light dust of white comes in, gentler than it has to be. The quiet is the ugly shape of his house. He turns to it. The house leans on its foundation, the porch dips. Holes in the ceiling. The world as small as his craftsmanship and the snow on the porch.

He takes a shower with a bar of soap and goes to bed on the couch. He wakes up, hopes she’s been dead for five years. But the house is open and breathes as if it has just let go of the shape of her. And the house smiles at him in open, idiot angles.

One day he wakes up next to all the extra pillows and the fact she is dead. She is not often dead, but when she is he goes outside in his boots past the porch, far past the porch, the earth covered in a long single gesture of snow, bigger than what there is to think of, bigger than what it would be like to be sad. The world as open as the nothing there is to say. He finds an axe in his hand.

He breathes in, breathes out, for many miles, and chops wood for the sound of something other than himself. He goes up to a thick tree, raises the axe. He knows the
blade is dull, the tree will not fall, that his body will hold the echo. When he hits the tree, the tree moves into him. He hits again and again. He puts down the axe, feels the trunk in his chest, and wood instead of the beat of his heart.

His pulse not in him but over there, hung on the mountain. He is not always his body and not with it now, but with the mountains in the distance. He belongs to their thousands of years. He is asked to look at the insane man in the distance cutting wood. He watches himself, a speck, walk back to the cabin, until eventually he feels it is something close to himself that lifts his arms, and wipes his mouth on his sleeve.

He goes into his ugly home, lays down, and lets the snow in his jacket become the wet bed. He misses her when she is an urn. He wonders if she is anywhere else. He closes his eyes to find her, but, there is a new woman that rises to him on their wedding night ten years ago, a new woman that stirs a pot of chili when they first move in, his heart knows memory as what is and is to come--places he’s never been, things he has never done. He holds her on their wedding night and the thrill of it is new, as if he has never met her, and a new woman is there on the heart shaped bed, the same face, stirred now by darker forces, and she does not want it, any of this, and it excites him in a way it shouldn’t, excites him to think she doesn’t want to be there. He reaches for the heat in her on their wedding night and finds it when he puts his hands on himself. He puts himself in her, and his knowledge of her doubt makes her breasts bigger, body more supple, and he opens his eyes to the empty cabin. And the fact that he went back to his wedding night to rape his wife is all over the floor. He wipes his foot over the sperm so that it is the carpet. He tells himself he has not hurt her. But his heart saw him do it, saw him pin her down and take his wife when he knows the house is ugly and she does not
want to marry him. And he learns, then, there is no past, present, future, that they all converge into the beat of the heart. And if the heart saw it, it was done.

He reaches down under the bed for something to wipe himself off with, and finds behind the bed post, a calm pair of underwear, yellow panties, a gentle skid mark on them. He remembers how often her face would twist and she would go to the bathroom, and the sound of the house accommodating her step and urgency. He remembers how often that happened, the stifled sound. He wonders if it is grace for her to be here as all we are never asked to reveal of ourselves. When he puts the panties to his nose, she comes to him in wretchedness and need, and his heart lets her rise and sit on the toilet, with all of herself. The house shakes with her struggle in the bathroom, his heart sees her, her face is disorder, the line of her chin struggling with all she will not let him see that she is, the line of her chin struggling against the fact she is dead, and the fact her stomach hurts.

He wants to put his hands together outside-- so he can be a prayer and not a rapist or the smell of shit. He goes outside and the snow whips at him, and questions his sight. He reaches for the tree, holds it, finds the axe he left. He hits it, again and again, so he can be a prayer, so he can be the mountains in the distance that look at this insane man covered in snow. Unseeing, he brings the axe down on his knee and he sits down and all of his sin is rushing to him as the pain in his knee.

He waits, and the holy spirit comes to him as the ability to stand, as heat in the pool of blood instead of pain, and there is the high school in the distance built in taut, perfect lines and it is the holy spirit that he is able to see it. And then the snow is back. He walks to it.
He gets there a minute before halftime. A tall, red headed boy misses a shot and then there is the buzzer. There is a halftime game, half court shot—a free hot dog. They ask if anyone wants to try. The knowledge that she is dead is, suddenly, the raising of his hand. He walks down and it takes a while, with the blood in his leg, people looking, concerned.

A skinny student hands him the ball, and looks around to see if he was supposed to or if he was supposed to do something about the blood.

He puts the fact of her death into his grip on the ball. Grips it as hard as he can. Everything is his grip on the ball, and there is nothing that is him, it is floating, he is not there. The game is dumb, there is no prize. He sets the line of his chin against the joke of it. He feels a part of him is already the snow outside, barely pressing in on the windows, that he participates in his body as if from a thousand years away. Something that it is not him shoots, the wind that is him feels can barely touch the ball, and guide it, the ball hung in the air, poised at the coming of a new world.
He lived on a farm and he was very thin. He wouldn’t eat any of the animals that lived on the farm because he thought they lived quiet, miraculous lives. He looked at a horse or mule, and saw how a touch of quiet would set them off into the sureness of movement.

He would walk around the farm. You could tell the move of his arms and legs was wiser than the shape of his body—his body thin, odd, hunched. He had chores but there was a rabbit pen that was his. He walked by its hay and metal slowly, so as not to nudge their life in direction other than how it would form itself. He would open the cage very gently, so that he could consider himself almost a beam of light, and lay the food, carrots and beans, down in their cage before they knew what hands were.

There was a father and mother rabbit, and two children. He could guess how much they weighed. He knew when they moved how the fur would fold along their neck and legs.

One day, there was more sun than usual. The sun was not through the limbs of the tree but in the dirt, on his skin. When he stood barefoot he could feel it up through the ground. It licked off the tip of his finger. He was more than himself. He could withhold himself and he was still there. He was the move of the sun over the earth and
yard. He could see all things. He saw the line of trees, sharp line of fence, he saw the
father rabbit approach his daughter and have sex with her.

His knife was in his pocket. His father had given him a small knife, in case there
was ever a rope to cut, or box to open. The blade was rusty and dull but he’d gotten a
wet stone and made it as sharp as if it was not there. He’d kept the sharpness of the knife
to himself, he didn’t think it was in the order of things for it to be this sharp.

He stuck his hand into the pen, and asked his fingers onto the father bunny’s fur.
He picked up the father rabbit, and set him into his other hand. He liked its feel.

The rabbit was relaxed and still. It was the first thing that knew him as his hands.
His parents, when they saw him, would smile at him. They were good man and woman
but he could not remember a hug or touch from them, they did not know him as his touch.

He held rabbit still, hands wiser than their long awkward shape, and played the
knife close to its stillness. The knife was so sharp it asked into the flesh in a way almost
invisible to the bunny and himself, in a way, he noticed, that had little to do with will or
intention. Vessels in the bunny gathered against the cut, then blood let out against his
hand. It shined against the sun and his attention. He felt the rabbit struggle against the
direction its blood knew to go. Then the bunny, knife stuck in it like a tree in dirt, felt
itself the gift of a singular vision, saw something beyond, and knew with a sureness it
only had to move through the knife in its belly to get there. It surged, then, without
knowing whether or not it was close, gave itself to the shape of the boy’s hand.

The boy did not feel close to what he had done. He did not feel close to the God
his mother told lived further than what could be said or known and as close as his heart.
He felt he had stolen one of God’s intimacies with the world, that God saw the world
through its breath. There was no guilt in the boy but he was sure, then, he was not more
than his hands, he was as alone as what he did with a knife.

He opened the back door. His big mother, a hunk of thigh crossing the other,
snapped peas at the table. The bunny hung at the end of his finger. He told his mother he
had caught the bunny sinning against its daughter. His mother had raised him to know
sin. She looked at him from her chair and told him gentle things. But there was a long
sharp tooth in her mouth and that seemed to reframe the things she said until he shrunk
from them.

His mother made him touch the place where he cut it, showed him to rip the skin
off like a sock. She held the bunny over a skillet, and lit a flame. She handed him the
skillet. He set the bunny in the skillet and held the it over the flame until the room was
the smell of food. She looked at him, over the skillet, the flame, moving that sin into
meat. She leaned her shoulders back into the smell, and smiled with her tooth as if things
were finally what she always knew they were.

He did not know if he cooked the rabbit meat well, there was hair and spongy
strength to the meat. He gave it to the open mouth of the dog. The dog left bones on the
floor in a shape he did not recognize.

He went out to the rabbit pen more often. He went to the daughter rabbit. He
stood over the pen so that he was her shade. He mistook, in all her movements, how
important it was that she was alive. He followed her around, but eventually she came
into his shade, and sought it, and lay down in the bits of grass and wood. When his
mother called him in, he moved and felt his neck stiff and red from standing in the sun all day and not being a boy.

Neither her brothers or sister rabbits touched her, but she got bigger, and he saw her give birth to small babies in his shade. She pushed them out of his shade, for the sun to look at them, and when they crawled back to the shade and to her, she got nervous and ate them, one, and then the other. She ate them starting with the feet and ending with the eyes of the head, that peaked out of her mouth a little as she swallowed. And as her shade, the boy watched.

He picked her up, heavier than the other bunnies, her stomach squirming with them and their calories. She felt his hands as her shade, and seemed to lean into his fingers and sleep after the exhaustion of eating her young. He felt her stomach, as her breath lost track of itself. He asked the knife into her neck, and held her upside down so the blood would lip off her fur and spill on the ground in a line. He did not feel like a prophet, moving and speaking with something more than himself. He felt there was only his hands and the incision they’d made. He opened up her belly, and the spiraled tendons of her young fell out, one still alive, moving over a blade of grass, still feeling its birth. He took the pregnant bunny inside the house.

His mother peeled one small potato. She was friendly, she did not look or ask. His fingers found the place where he’d cut her. He peeled off her skin like a sock, and put her in a skillet and lit a flame.

He cooked her until she was a small meal, her belly huge, when he turned over the meat, a small torn baby spilled out, its fur began to singe on the skillet. It seemed it lived
briefly on top of the heat. The boy did not know what to do, let it dance on the skillet, then sets it blackenedness into the trashcan.

His mother left the sink running, a half cut potato in a bowl. She brought him a plate, and set it down, cleaned off a knife and fork with her apron, and set them by it. When he told her what the bunny had done, that the bunny had eaten her young, had sinned against them but most importantly had sinned against herself, he said the bunny was for the dog. She nodded, said the dog was old and was eating less and less and they would put him down one day, that the bunny was for the living. They were a poor family. Bunnies cost a lot. If he was old enough to kill them then when the breath was cooked out of the meat he would have to eat them. Their sins were their sins, but where there is fire they are meat, and there is no other way but that we eat meat.

He came to the bunny with the same tenderness with which he loved her and was her shade, but when he held the bunny she broke into silver pink strings of meat. He put it in his mouth, asked his teeth over the curved muscle.

He bit down slowly, then coughed so that it was back on the plate and wet.

His mother sat down with him because she was not cruel. She said before, she’d known hunger. She picked up a piece, and chewed, and smiled with the separation of the bunny in her mouth. Some of the rabbit was in her big tooth when she smiled at him. The boy knew this was supposed to mean they were together in some gentle way. He looked at her tooth. He wished all this was frightening instead of the gentle thing it was.

He ate the bunny slowly, then readily, when his mother put other things around it like mashed potatoes and green beans.
The next day, he woke up, ashamed that he was brightened by the calories. He looked in the mirror, looked at the way the bunny had shaped his body while he slept—his skin firmer, with more color, redness in his cheeks, the hint of a layer of muscle, a new strength in his hands. The bunny he ate held him in a new shape. They were slight things but he felt them. The breath which held it held him.

His mother sat and held the carrots she was cutting. He ran outside, faster than who he thought he was. He did his chores. He lifted hay. He picked up the rabbit pen and shook it in and out of the sun.
A Word or Two About Jesus

His friend met him at the park. They sat on the bench they wanted to sit on rather than the only one that was left. They sat on the bench that was next to the birds. They wiped little moments off their shirts and did not cross their legs. He lived in an apartment three flights up. There wasn’t a nursing home he should be in.

“I’m going to see my son today,” he said, “He is 65. He has begun to believe in Jesus.”

“Is he happy about it?” His friend peeled an orange he found in his pocket.

“I don’t think so.”

He waved his hand so the metal door would open and he could walk into the hospital. He left his cane at home so it was clear he chose to be here. He took the elevator to the third floor when he pressed a button. He went to his son’s room but held his breath and listened so it was not known he had come for him.

There was a nurse digging something into what was left of his son’s arm, a tube, he thought, another tucked in his legs. But set her face against the care and motion in her hands so her hands would not shape her into a new creation, into someone who cared. He came to them and lowered his open hands to the side. He hoped there wasn’t something on his shirt so they would trust him. They did, and they turned his son over roughly.
He sat in a chair with no arm rest so he crossed his legs and hung one big hand and the other on top of his knee. He watched his son spilled onto his side, then saw his son curve his own body so it took form of a pose, the shape of what was beautiful and predestined rather than what was callous and urgent. The nurses gave themselves to him with their hands and with the time there was left before they could stand up and smoke outside, and the father saw them all bent over, the pull and distortion of their body, and knew they were tired of what it meant, and would mean, to keep him breathing in sheets.

His son never ate, refused.

The nurses left into the sound of other things in other rooms. He pulled the chair close to his son, held his breath so the quiet in him was the quiet in the room, and when he let out his breath the room was small and he could feel the walls on his neck and back. His body did not like this chair, or his clothes. Now that he was old his body was a stranger and he could only control when his breath got in and out.

They both, without even the motion of eyes, acknowledged the father was sitting in a chair and his son was lying in bed and that was what things were. He pulled a book from his pocket and let his son sleep. He was not working through it; he liked to read at the place the book fell open. Sleep opened his son’s mouth by a soft inch, and breath followed itself in and out of what was left of his body.

The father felt his son’s old, tired hand on his knee because he had been asleep as well, and it meant they could go now, now they could go. His son almost made himself nod.

The father found a pair of pants in the drawer, fished out the sock that was the same as the brown one in his hand. He pulled the pants over his son’s legs, one leg at a
time, pulling hard when they got caught on knees or ankles. He took several breaks that did not embarrass him or his son but only made them more gentle with where they looked. The father stood up to let his body become itself and thought of nothing, no idea, that would declare itself to him, then went down to the small brown shoe, half on, half off his son’s foot.

He looked at his son, his hair was not what it should be, the hair, tough, long, strewn would not let this frail, worn body be his precious son. He took the hair into his hands, and dressed him in the image of what could be taken seriously.

The father was there ten years ago after the overdose, when his son had too much of drugs and everything in his arms, when nurses hooked him up to an IV and his son, his jaw open, eyes to the side, told them what he knew about men and women and bars, and the father listened and the nurses listened but the father knew, he saw the nurses and knew, his son’s words said less about the life of men and women and more about the insane way his son looked, his lack of sleep, his nervous way. They hushed him a little. They didn’t know how rarely he spoke.

The father made sure the socks were pulled up now even though no one would see. He wanted, if his son spoke, for words to be what they were and not how crazy he was.

If he got tired dressing his son he remembered there was nothing that the time they had left was supposed to mean, there was just a walk that it would be nice to go on, and he waited until there was tenderness and something near elegance in the move of his arms and the way he dressed him. His son said a word or two about Jesus. The father
gave himself to his son with his hands and the bend of his neck. He made no nod or sign that what he heard was what he understood.

He signed his son out with a pen he already had in his pocket. His hand on the end of the wheelchair made it easier to believe they would get somewhere eventually.

He was their only son. Their only son was smart, and the father always took a bit of awe with him, growing up, watched him when he moved or ran or lifted branches or walked out the door, or when he did something new like catch a pass. He was a natural, the world would balance on him, whatever new thing he did he would soon find himself, by miracle, doing it the only way it should be done, and the father looked on him as having been touched on the head and shoulder by something that was neither his nor his wife’s to give.

His son only spoke once. It just never came up that he should. The father never asked his son what he was thinking, what all that silence was for him. He did once. He did once, after a baseball game, and it seemed something in the room and in his son was lost by his asking, and his son gave him a look that said he would now have to start all over again.

His son left when it was okay that he leave. He would visit them, sit on the chair, eat slowly and hardly eat, just let the steam of macaroni or lasagna gather around the new look on his face. He was quiet. But they knew when he was gone he was wild and quiet, ran with wild women, operated on himself, lit his body into a flame with all the pleasures of this world, came home and never gave the flame his words.

He came back to them, back to their little house on the highway, every now and then, came back to them thinner, with different clothes, skin a different texture, a new
angle of the face he tilted at them. It made the father suffer to see him so thin and confident. There was no money, inheritance, for him. All there was to give him was the shape of their bodies—the family’s strong nose, shoulders, height and weight. But the father saw, putting meatloaf to his mouth once when his son was there and was pleasant with them but refused to eat, the father saw how drugs, booze, wild living had burned these things away, and now there was nothing that was his that was also his son’s. They said nothing to him about it. They always opened the door when they saw him getting out of the car.

The father couldn’t understand it, but the son came back to them year after year, backpack in hand, holes in jeans, came back thinner and thinner and more graceful, like the world had found a way to balance on him and his choice. As his body wasted, drew closer to itself, he seemed to be more considerate and holy and artful with what was left, knew more about how to dress and walk and hold his mother’s hand. He had a way of putting a cup on the table that would almost make the father cry. The father thought he would thin himself into a point of glory. And when the son came back, for a day or two, years and years at a time, it seemed he knew so much more about what he would never tell them. It made the father sit at the table when he came to visit, long after his wife had gone to bed and long after she’d died, and watch him and hope he would eat and the father would listen, more and more, for what his son would say or not say.

He felt, on one visit, sitting at the table, when his wife was dead and the son only stayed a few minutes, with his son’s legs shaking, his son’s face turning left and right, felt that if his son spoke, the world would correct itself where his words stood. The
father would nod in surprise and agreement and there would finally be a way that the two of them, working together, would never be wrong again.

The father sold his house and moved when his son was in intensive care. He ate oranges with his friend at the park and walked to the hospital to see his son and say nothing and take him on walks. The father felt, after all the years, a respect for the quiet that had become their way with each other. He felt, after so many hours sitting and watching and looking, that it was a way of honoring and preserving what each had found for himself in this world.

There was bump in the road as they made their way out the hospital door, and the son forgave him by the slight lifting of a hand. They left the door for the sidewalk.

He studied his breath in his son’s. They should die around the same time, and because death was so close to them both there was nothing of it they would share or gesture to, in the same way you would not introduce a stranger to someone you both know.

“I’m going to church,” the son said, his head pulled to the left as if talking to the sun. The son let his hands hang close to the wheels so he could feel himself almost touching them and the little things on them, dirt and rocks and what they picked up off the earth.

The father looked over the son’s creased pants, the regard that had been placed in his hair and in the length of his socks, and saw he had given his son the dignity with which to say the ridiculous, and peer over the world with it and make the world known to himself.
“I will take you,” the father said. He made sure to push and listen, but he suffered. His son, by turning to Jesus, had broken their agreement that they would die without having much to say. And it hurt, in a simpler way than that, that they would not, when they were dead and could not be found in their breaths, agree to meet somewhere and be quiet.

There was a wet plywood ramp up to a small Catholic church next to the bank and the hospital, and he used his knees to push his son up it. His son helped a little with his hands. There was a service inside, many, many people. He wheeled his son to the edge of the last pew, and sat himself on its end.

The church sang a song in words he did not know. He thought of what it would mean if his son sang, what it would mean if he heard it with the time there was left for both of them. He looked and saw his son did sing, his throat moving slowly. And the father listened for his voice, tried to hold and know it from the rest. He caught the edge of it before it belonged to the congregation. It was weaker and more painful than what was right, and when his son lifted his head for his voice to be louder, and when his neck struggled with something that was not art but a final blind desperate push, the father took a bit of awe with him, with his face and size and voice, that you could have pleasure with your wife and make someone who could lose so much.

There was a sermon and words. His son drew into himself, did not understand the things spoken, theology and politics and argument, but he understood the silence with which the bread and wine was held and kept and given to him, the quiet that was everyone walking to the front, a quiet that was kept like a swept floor.
The father rose and pushed his son to the front even before he felt his son’s tug on his sleeve. There was time to wait for what would happen. Two or three old women in front, then their turn. The father saw the priest move, and his son lift his hand and in the sync of their motion there was an understanding, that they both knew what silence was for. The priest held the cup to his son, and his son drank fast and long, shook the cup into his mouth until it was empty and the priest got more wine and brought it back and the son motioned to him with such gentle assurance that the priest brought more and the son drank more. There was a loaf of bread, and the son held the loaf and asked for more and more, and chewed them slow and long and fast. There was food and wine all over the careful way his father dressed him.

His son had finally eaten. The nurses were happy on their return.

He stayed with his son, in the room, in the chair, his big hand on his knee, letting his breath let his body live. And did not leave when the nurses came in to change the smell in his son’s pants. He saw them, how they wiped off body of Christ from the hole in his ass, so he could do it again.

His visited his son the week after, and as before they barely made their way to the church. His son was getting worse, only more and more slowly now that the bread and wine had come to him. He would hold the cup of life and get it everywhere, stains on stains, he would shake and drink and eat. And the father knew his son still would surely die, that the bread and wine had turned an elegant death into a tacky, ugly, voiceless striving. And his son would smile.